

## Child's Play: Baudelaire's *Morale du joujou*

by

Philippe Bonnefis

I don't know if someone committed a blunder, the day the fairies distributed gifts to the new-born, but the fact is that the future author of *Le Spleen de Paris* ended up with an extremely unusual, cumbersome gift, quite a burden for the boy. The event forms the subject-matter of a private letter addressed by young Charles, no more than twelve at the time, to his half-brother Alphonse, in which he lists and describes, for the latter's benefit, all the gifts his recent successes in school have earned him: a beautiful knife, a copy of Juvenal, and, now, from 'papa' a *phé-na-kis-ti-cope*.

Ce mot est aussi bizarre que l'invention. Tu dois savoir ce que c'est, toi qui es à Paris. Car il [y] en [a] déjà beaucoup. Quoique je pense que tu saches ce que c'est, je t'en vais faire la description, pour que tu ne puisses pas dire: 'Que m'importe le phénakistoscope, si je ne sais pas ce que c'est!' C'est un cartonnage dans lequel il y a une petite glace que l'on met sur une table entre deux bougies. On y trouve aussi un manche auquel on adapte un rond de carton percé tout autour de petits trous. Par-dessus on ajoute un autre carton dessiné, le dessin tourné vers la glace. Puis on fait tourner, et on regarde par les petits trous dans la glace où l'on voit de fort jolis dessins. Mes pensées sont-elles suivies, au moins? Bien des choses à ma soeur. Je t'embrasse, bonsoir.

Carlos.

*Correspondance*<sup>1</sup>

In Baudelaire's case, this phenakistoscope, if I'm not mistaken, embodies the caprice of fate – this 'magic game', as the maker's advertisement boasted, soon after the first Restoration.

The device dazzling the child, an ingenious mechanism aimed at procuring the illusion of movement, is, along with the praxinoscope, Marey's zootrope or Edison's kinoscope, the ancestor of more serious inventions that would soon exploit its properties; this, today, is a statement of the obvious. As such it has little to teach us. We must indeed forget the cinema, which could not at that time in any way be anticipated. We should not miss, on the other hand, one conjunction that the aforementioned device did favour: namely, the oculistic science of the XIXth century and concupiscence. The same one the Church condemned under the name *concupiscentia oculorum* ...

It does require a mirror to function properly, doesn't it? Looking-glass or mirror, eternal interlocutors of the coquette as of the dandy. All the more so if it's on a table between two candles, a habit spread far and wide, not so long before, by the fashion of powder tables, dressing tables and all such little flying furniture; mirrors embedded or mounted on pivots, offering their polished surfaces to the flames of girandolas; burning mirrors gathering all the meditative depth of those interior scenes with which minor masters, in painting, were long so prodigal. Of those light scenes, those genre paintings in which we see a woman at her toilette, in which we see the wigmaker preparing the beard or the hair of the prince... No sooner is the eye brought up to the slit, than the imagination goes wild!

At least it is with the firm intention of being guided by it that I would like, in turn, to spin the little cardboard disks of the fatal machine two or three times. For the beauty of the gesture, but also to set my mind at rest, and rid myself of the nagging doubt that I might have failed, the first time, to settle this business.<sup>2</sup>

But back to the phenakisticope.

The phenakisticope, very scrupulously examined by the child, who even attaches explanatory sketches to his meticulous description, so deeply apprehensive is he of not being followed in his demonstrations. Unfortunately these sketches are missing in Claude Pichois' Pléiade edition of Baudelaire's *Correspondance*, where they are replaced with the following commentary:

Charles a écrit une première fois ce mot bizarre, l'a rayé, pour le récrire ensuite sous une forme fautive: phénakistoscope. Le phénakistoscope ou phénakisticope (la première graphie est donnée par le *Grand Dictionnaire Universel du XIXe siècle* de P. Larousse; la seconde par le *Dictionnaire général* de Hatzfeld, Darmesteter et Thomas) est un appareil d'optique bien décrit ci-dessus par Baudelaire, à l'aide de trois dessins dignes d'intéresser un psychanalyste, et accompagnés, dans la marge, de cette note: 'je pourrais ne pas bien m'exprimer.' p.701

The phenakisticope is probably not just a phenakisticope: subtle connoisseur of Baudelaire that he is, and as his best biographer, the commentator certainly suspects this is the case. Even if he refuses to let his suspicions show, or only as little as possible, finally leaving it up to those more learned than him to tell us more. Yet the knowledge implicitly invoked here is not real knowledge. Call it psychoanalysis or call it whatever, it is never anything but a knowledge of oneself, intransmissible knowledge, so close to non-knowledge as to merge easily with it. All the more keen, then, is our regret at not having available the famous sketches the child took the trouble to draw, which clearly exceeded their technical pretensions. There is, on young

Charles' part, such a desire to understand and to explain *comment ça marche*, along with such a fear of not understanding it, or of understanding it all too well, that there must necessarily be something suspicious going on.

One might perhaps judge that I am attaching too much importance to what is only, after all, a toy. To which it would be easy to retort that this is simply granting the toy the same interest as Baudelaire himself did, and throughout his life. A powerful enough interest, in any case, to make him write and publish in a respected review, a text exemplarily titled *Morale du joujou*; and an unusual text it is indeed; surprising even, in many respects, and one of the most audacious, perhaps, that Baudelaire ever wrote. So audacious that I don't know a more disconcerting one, even for the author himself. In his desire to reprint it, expressed on many occasions and without the least ambiguity, he nonetheless seemed constantly embarrassed by it, to the point of giving us the impression that he had to push it in front of him, like Sisyphus his rock, as he keeps reworking the outline of his collected works: allocating it, for instance, to the 'Beaux-arts' section of his *Réflexions sur quelques-uns de mes contemporains*, in 1865, to then inserting it, in 1866, between *Quelques caricaturistes français* and *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*, and then immediately afterwards reassigning it to the position it was to keep after 1869, between *L'Art philosophique* and *Théophile Gautier*.

Between the art of ideas, which lacks art, and art for art's sake, which lacks ideas. But art, in any case. *Morale du joujou* forms an integral part of his aesthetic discourse, except for never finding its proper place within it. It remained bound to it as one of its most intrinsic arguments, while paradoxically manifesting its unclassifiable nature.

Can there be, all things considered, a more astonishing paradox than the one which holds that an ethics, ethics of this or ethics of that, must remain so utterly foreign to the body of doctrines of which it is not only the foundation, but also the final cause; both the first principle, and as it were the blind spot?

It is true that there is something abhorrent in the idea, or rather the necessity imposed upon us of placing an optical device at the blind point of the entire system. But a fact before which we are required to bow with humility, all through this atypical text in which the word *joujou* is systematically put in for *phenakistiscope*. It is possible not to see this: nothing formally points to it; nothing, in any case, until the end. But, if we don't see it, it is also because the word is held back, and through it the thing eluding us. Because only a long burial could prepare its Lazarus return. The entire pomp, the funereal trappings of recollection, which a mind like that of Malraux would have probably followed with a sort of frozen fervor, in the hope of catching, by some

sign, a memory of the 'attentive and contained gesture' with which the mothers of Ancient Egypt 'posaient les jouets dans les tombeaux des enfants'.<sup>3</sup>

Il y a bien des années, – combien? je n'en sais rien; cela remonte aux temps nébuleux de la première enfance, – je fus emmené par ma mère, en visite chez une dame Panckoucke. Était-ce la mère, la femme, la belle-soeur du Panckoucke actuel? Je l'ignore. Je me souviens que c'était dans un hôtel très calme, un de ces hôtels où l'herbe verdit les coins de la cour, dans une rue silencieuse, la rue des Poitevins. [ ... ] Je me rappelle très distinctement que cette dame était habillée de velours et de fourrure. Au bout de quelque temps, elle dit: 'Voici un petit garçon à qui je veux donner quelque chose, afin qu'il se souvienne de moi.' Elle me prit par la main, et nous traversâmes plusieurs pièces; puis elle ouvrit la porte d'une chambre où s'offrait un spectacle extraordinaire et vraiment féérique. Les murs ne se voyaient pas, tellement ils étaient revêtus de joujoux. Le plafond disparaissait sous une floraison de joujoux qui pendaient comme des stalactites merveilleuses. Le plancher offrait à peine un étroit sentier où poser les pieds. Il y avait là un monde de jouets de toute espèce, depuis les plus chers jusqu'aux plus modestes, depuis les plus simples jusqu'aux plus compliqués.

'Voici, dit-elle, le trésor des enfants. J'ai un petit budget qui leur est consacré, et quand un gentil petit garçon vient me voir, je l'amène ici, afin qu'il emporte un souvenir de moi. Choisissez.'

Avec cette admirable et lumineuse promptitude qui caractérise les enfants, chez qui le désir, la délibération et l'action ne font, pour ainsi dire, qu'une seule faculté, par laquelle ils se distinguent des hommes dégénérés, en qui, au contraire, la délibération mange presque tout le temps, – je m'emparai immédiatement du plus beau, du plus cher, du plus voyant, du plus frais, du plus bizarre des joujoux. Ma mère se récria sur mon indiscrétion et s'opposa obstinément à ce que je l'emportasse. Elle voulait que je me contentasse d'un objet infiniment médiocre. Mais je ne pouvais y consentir, et, pour tout accorder, je me résignai à un *juste milieu*. *Morale du joujou*, pp.581-82.<sup>4</sup>

For the fable of the gift, Baudelaire has just substituted another one. Though the question, fundamentally, remains the same, namely to know who is giving. In the letter to Alphonse, it was 'papa', nothing but a verbal ghost, given that he was a father in name only, without the power to give, and yet one who still gave. And what is worse, his gift was real, and actually valuable, a genuine gift. But a gift without a giver.

Gifts without givers are, by far, the most awkward; the ones that put you in the most debt, and for the longest time. They accept no return; they accept no salary

or any retribution whatsoever. To whom can you feel indebted, when, obviously, there is no one to whom you owe? Neither another, nor the law, nor anything approaching. Unless you can imagine some expedient, God knows what, a creation of the mind, a fiction, – someone, basically, where there was no one. Which is what we see Baudelaire attempting in the lines we have just read. The invention of the giver. The story is one of origins.

A story, as such, that has come a long way – one whose elaboration took more than twenty years. The letter to Alphonse was written in 1833; *Morale du joujou*, in 1853. Twenty years, during which the supposed giver changed sex, from Aupick to Panckoucke. A Lady Panckoucke, we are told. But 'lady', that's going too quickly. It especially fails to take into account the occlusive and its echo. The *koucke* that is in Panckoucke, at the same place as the *pick* in Aupick. Papa pick, mama koucke...

Better to change the subject. Move on to our story, which is a pretty story... But not without having first pointed out how the uncertainty as to the individual's social status (mother, wife or sister-in-law?) contributed to reinforcing the uncertainty, that the text had already plunged us into, in relation to her sex. One could raise the objection of the fur, and the Venus in Furs. The obstacle is that Baudelaire hasn't read Sacher-Masoch, couldn't have read him. It is true, on the other hand, that this is a minor obstacle. After all, no one waited for Sacher-Masoch in order to become a masochist. And Baudelaire's masochism, furthermore, is well-known. Always mortifying himself, asking to be disciplined, and even in his pleasures; crucifying himself between the thighs of whores; 'se débaucher comme martyr et aliment à remords, et pour se maintenir en état de crucifixion', as Laforgue writes.<sup>3</sup> It will take all the blindness of a tribunal to dare find something uncatholic in Baudelaire's work. A more catholic work I do not have the pleasure to know. Nor, therefore, more masochistic.

The proof here is that the pleasure of the toy is immediately complicated by frustration. I wanted the most beautiful, I had to resign myself to the most mediocre: a *happy medium* toy. Politics of desire. It's one thing for them to be repressive politics. But what is more they seek to reform. It's not just a question of punishing; one must at the same time be giving a lesson in taste. Don't rush, my son, straight for the showiest things. It isn't done in polite society...

The truth also forces us to admit that his mother doesn't know much about the Fine Arts – painting and she are two separate things!

I recall, in this connection, the praise with which Baudelaire, in the *Salon de 1845*, greeted the painting of a certain Haussoullier; the reason for the superiority

he acknowledged was precisely the same as the one for which the mother, earlier, had condemned her child's choice of a toy. 'Cette peinture,' he declared, 'a selon nous une qualité très importante [ ... ] – elle est très voyante. – Il n'y a pas moyen de ne pas la voir.'<sup>6</sup>

It follows therefore that a beautiful painting is like a beautiful toy: a painting that catches the eye, that shines and dazzles, a painting that forces you to notice it. *Morale du joujou* brings us back to the genesis of aesthetic emotion. This much, at least, we should no longer doubt, if we ever did.

To love painting is to love what is showy; and, for instance, it means preferring Delacroix to Ingres, because he is more violent, flashy in a way, despotic, less civilized. There lingers, even in our curiosity concerning the masterpieces of art, a hint of savagery, as it were. To deny it, to protest that it isn't so, would be the best way not to understand the first thing about the work of as accomplished an artist as the American George Catlin, with his Indians, his savages, grimacing under their warpaint. 'La couleur de M. Catlin, [ ... ] est terrible,' we can read in the *Salon de 1846*.<sup>7</sup> Appalling, and thus enviable. The reds, above all, are absolutely irresistible: 'la couleur du sang, la couleur de la vie,' and which 'abondait tellement dans ce sombre musée, que c'était une ivresse...' (p.446). Strong words, flying in the face of public opinion. After this sally, there was nothing left for Baudelaire but to cap his perversities by maliciously inviting the reader to admire how 'les tatouages et colorriages' of these Redskins obeyed 'les gammes naturelles et harmoniques'.

Is this an innate sense of art, or a cruel testimony of the troubled and obscure origins in which art is rooted? What is certain is that the refined connoisseur, the critic with such delicate taste, such sure judgement, that Baudelaire is about to become, is indeed the brother of the little barbarian who, obeying his first impulse, in the treasure room of Lady Panckoucke, rashly grabbed the most beautiful, the most showy, the most bizarre of the toys.

Herein *voyant* and *bizarre* are commentaries on *beau* and even explain it – and in doing so throw worrisome glimmers of light on the old archaic depths, on the turbulent waters of the spring where the aesthete's emotions are quenched.

We must not hesitate in believing Baudelaire, when, in a page of *Mon coeur mis à nu*, he sets against the love of God, the imperious feeling that lifts us up towards Him, the call of the abyss that breaks our momentum and, in spite of ourselves, immediately fills us with satanic joy. Spirituality, animality: the combat never ceases; it is a relentless struggle, and a struggle for which art offers the perfect theatre; art which, in itself, 'n'a aucune vertu réconciliatrice, aucun pouvoir d'apaisement',<sup>8</sup> but

rather the dangerous property of liberating the demonic forces whose plaything man all too naturally is; of thus revealing him to himself in all the inhumanity of his nature, torn between 'le désir de monter en grade', and the narcissistic fascination, the naive and nearly puerile attraction, that he feels at being reminded of his indignity. So that if I myself rate *Morale du joujou* so highly, it is in proportion to how it dares sink so low, and corrupt its reader to the point of infantilizing him in turn, to the point of bringing him, at least, to recognize the share of childhood and inhumanity which in art forms the heart of the matter, and which, as Jean-Michel Rey reminds us, 'ne saurait être abolie ou dépassée' (p.20). Should he indeed take the trouble to think about it, the reader of *Morale du joujou* rapidly finds himself forced to put the lover of painting in the uncomfortable position of the *puer aeternus*, Rimbaud's 'enfant gêneur', 'la si sottie bête',<sup>9</sup> the fearful little being who lives in terror of reprimands, who is so sure of receiving a good clout that he is already rubbing his cheek in anticipation, who is always worrying about the spanking of which the name of Panckoucke awakens a stinging memory. In the sharp crack of its first syllable and the Gothic exuberance – how ambiguous! – of its final consonants. There is no end to the puns and the bad jokes that have been made or that can be made on this name.

A name, in itself, that at first doesn't seem all that unfortunate, and might even appear good-natured. Doesn't the Dutch *pannekoek* (the modern variation of *pankoecke*), translating the English *pancake*, immediately transport us to the palace of the Sugarplum Fairy? *In Luilekkerland zijn de huizen met pannekoeken gedekt ...* In the Land of Plenty the houses are covered in pancakes.<sup>10</sup> In the Land of Plenty, where the ladies themselves are all sugar, all honey. Oh! the pretty little boy ... Aren't they cute, at that age! Come here, my sweet, and you will see what you have never seen. What a pretty toy! How happy he will be, the darling, and how well he will later love his mummy! A whole seduction scene, with inevitable, and perhaps secretly desired punishment coming at the end.

Inflicted by the very person responsible for the sin, that Lady Panckoucke 'habillée de velours et de fourrure ...' For we are far from done with the fur yet. Nor Baudelaire either, who, on top of a passing allusion to it in a letter sent to his editor on April 23, 1860,<sup>11</sup> returns to it, this time a little bit like the murderer to the scene of his crime, with a line in *Fusées*. A simple line, true, a laconic line, but one which, for all that – let us not be fooled – goes straight to the point: 'Le goût précoce des femmes. Je confondais l'odeur de la fourrure avec l'odeur de la femme. Je me souviens ...'<sup>12</sup> He remembers, dot dot dot. But what? What does he remember?

Things, apparently, that cannot be written; things, however, that can be read between the lines. No need for him to spell it out. We can do it just as well ourselves. Even if we were, in so doing, to defy decency and offend the master's modesty, which

was highly delicate. To the point that when a Valéry Larbaud, who greatly admired *Les Fleurs du mal*, strove to make a verb meaning *édulcorer* from the author's name, and as an ironic homage to Baudelaire's reputedly anglican spirituality, pronounced with a British accent the English word 'bowdlerized'. He was writing for instance to Charles du Bos about a translation of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*: 'Les mots "choquants", sans doute, peuvent être "bowdlérisés"'.<sup>13</sup> It's all in the diphthong, yes, all of Baudelaire, dandified, the letters of his name repainted in the colours of the two great vices of prudish Albion, which are, according to Stendhal, 'le *cant* et la *bashfulness*'.<sup>14</sup> Meaning the hypocritical jargon and the excessive restraint of a society that affected the appearance of high moral severity. But appearances, thank God! are deceptive. Translated from the English, and thus into good French prose, into the most French French there is, say the French of Céline, a man who wouldn't have parted with the work of Baudelaire for anything in the world, save perhaps an Olympic swimmer, – the sentence 'Je confondais l'odeur de la fourrure avec l'odeur de la femme' means 'la fourrure me faisait bander'.

It's as easy as that. And no need to ask any longer just what this toy is, nor why it is so showy, why it is so bizarre, why it is so expensive ... The answer to our question, the key to the riddle, we've put our finger on it. Or at least we would have done, if one could put one's finger on it. But this cannot be, for it must not be. You can't play with your toy. Thus declares all-powerful parental law, the authority that has claimed full powers over the thing, and that regulates its use in such a restrictive manner that the immediate consequence of the simple ownership of a toy is the interdiction to enjoy it. And thus we have the antepenultimate paragraph of our text, the archaeology of the toy, and, through it, the archaeology of the works of our painters, which borrow from the toy the characteristic of being both precious objects and taboo objects, crashing into the rock, the granite tables set at the foundations of the edifices of art, of its temples and their living pillars.

Il y a [des] parents qui considèrent les joujoux comme des objets d'adoration muette; il y a des habits qu'il est au moins permis de mettre le dimanche; mais les joujoux doivent se ménager bien autrement! Aussi à peine l'ami de la maison a-t-il déposé son offrande dans le tablier de l'enfant, que la mère féroce et économe se précipite dessus, le met dans une armoire, et dit: C'est trop beau pour ton âge; tu t'en serviras quand tu seras grand! Un de mes amis m'avoua qu'il n'avait jamais pu jouir de ses joujoux. – Et quand je suis devenu grand, ajoutait-il, j'avais autre chose à faire. – Du reste, il y a des enfants qui font d'eux-mêmes la même chose: ils n'usent pas de leurs joujoux, ils les économisent, ils les mettent en ordre, en font des bibliothèques et des musées, et les montrent de temps à autre à leurs petits amis en les priant de ne pas toucher. *Morale du joujou*, p.586

We had to translate earlier. It's barely necessary now. *Morale du joujou* is a bilingual text in which the italics, obliquely, are slanting characters, betraying what the roman conceals beneath its impressive appearance, all the evil thoughts the author is ruminating in his corner and that we certainly can, between grown-ups, voice out loud.

Don't touch your toy! You'll use it when you grow up. Or else: Hey! You want to see my toy? But be careful. You're allowed to look, but not to touch. From the expression of the interdiction to its interiorization.

Nothing is ever given for good, we were wondering when we started. Given, we mean, without any reticence, fair and square. But how can we still wonder at it, if the gift must only be, ultimately, a form of refusal! Gift of the toy, gift of the painting or of the poem, I don't know any that take more out of you. Between the gift and the owed, there is now room for all kinds of oedipal resentments and narcissistic wounds. Hence as a rule with Baudelaire, the idea of possession cannot be considered without its inevitable procession of frustrations; in fact, without the constant thought of castration.

A child's thought, here, at least, is both adorned by the graces of childhood and plagued by its fears. In *Morale du joujou*, castration, dismissed from the painting salons, from the reading rooms that are the true theatre of its exploits and from the stage on which it can strut, gives supporting roles a try, playing the Wicked Witch of the West. But, under its disguise, how impatiently it fidgets! You can see it biting its nails and sharpening its teeth, right in the middle of the work.

Sur une route, derrière la grille d'un beau jardin, au bout duquel apparaissait un joli château, se tenait un enfant beau et frais, habillé de ces vêtements de campagne pleins de coquetterie. Le luxe, l'insouciance et le spectacle habituel de la richesse rendent ces enfants-là si jolis qu'on ne les croirait pas faits de la même pâte que les enfants de la médiocrité ou de la pauvreté. A côté de lui gisait sur l'herbe un joujou splendide aussi frais que son maître, verni, doré, avec une belle robe, et couvert de plumets et de verroterie. Mais l'enfant ne s'occupait pas de son joujou, et voici ce qu'il regardait: de l'autre côté de la grille, sur la route, entre les chardons et les orties, il y avait un autre enfant, sale, assez chétif, un de ces marmots sur lesquels la morve se fraye lentement un chemin dans la crasse et la poussière. A travers ces barreaux de fer symboliques, l'enfant pauvre montrait à l'enfant riche son joujou, que celui-ci examinait avidement comme un objet rare et inconnu. Or ce

joujou que le petit souillon agaçait, agitait et secouait dans une boîte grillée, était un rat vivant! *Morale du joujou*, pp.584-85

Child's play isn't for nice boys ... let us call a rat a rat, and that is the way to read the page I have just quoted. As the story, even if it takes the more benign form of indecent exposure, of sexual assault ... On one side of the gate, a little gentleman dressed to the nines, clean as a whistle, and who is the happy owner of a magnificent toy. A marvel of a toy, but the proper toy, the well-behaved toy, dare I say. Not a toy to drop its trousers, no! The toy that shows nothing, whose 'belle robe' no sacrilegious hand has lifted, and which is abandoned, precisely, because on the other side of the gate, past the enclosure of the family circle, a toy is baring it all, in its full obscenity of dirty, fecal object. After *Les Misérables*, there has been no need to demonstrate a rat's anality, since Victor Hugo went down into the sewers. Baudelaire, with an imperturbable pen, more English than an Englishman, and even more Yankee than English,<sup>15</sup> writes in *Mon coeur mis à nu* (p.688): 'nous ne pouvons faire l'amour qu'avec des organes excrémentiels.'

No doubt that the rat in our little fable figures there as one of these organs: a 'joujou vivant', the parents, 'par économie' – and the expression sends shivers up our spines – 'ayant tiré le joujou de la vie elle-même.'

Terrible thriftiness indeed, which, under the pretext of sparing expenses, is in reality but the application of censorship. Is it not clear that to show one's sexual organ immediately brings a threat of castration to bear on it? The rat, in this respect, is worthy of the hungry worm to which Baudelaire destines all his defunct loves. And not so much the rat, probably, of Freud's bestiary – question of appropriateness – as the rat embarked upon the ark of *Les Misérables*. The rat of the little ones, that troubles their sleep, and to which we owe the following marvellous dialogue, echoed from the immense belly of the elephant that still stood, on the eve of the Days of July, 'cadavre grandiose d'une idée de Napoléon', in the middle of the Place de la Bastille:

Monsieur?  
 Hein?' fit Gavroche qui venait de fermer les paupières.  
 'Qu'est-ce que c'est donc que ça?'  
 'C'est les rats,' répondit Gavroche.  
 Et il remit sa tête sur la natte. [ ... ]  
 Cependant le petit ne s'endormait pas:  
 'Monsieur,' reprit-il.  
 'Hein?' fit Gavroche.  
 'Qu'est-ce que c'est donc que les rats?'  
 'C'est des souris.'

Cette explication rassura un peu l'enfant. Il avait vu dans la vie des souris blanches et il n'en avait pas eu peur. Pourtant il éleva encore la voix:

'Monsieur?'

'Hein?' refit Gavroche.

'Pourquoi n'avez-vous pas un chat?'

'J'en ai eu un,' répondit Gavroche, 'j'en ai apporté un, mais ils me l'ont mangé.'

Cette seconde explication défit l'oeuvre de la première, et le petit recommença à trembler.

Le dialogue entre lui et Gavroche reprit pour la quatrième fois.

'Monsieur?'

'Hein?'

'Qui ça qui a mangé le chat?'

'Les rats.'

'Les souris?'

'Oui, les rats.'

L'enfant consterné de ces souris qui mangent les chats, poursuivit:

'Monsieur, est-ce qu'elles nous mangeraient, ces souris-là?'

'Pardi!' fit Gavroche.

*Les Misérables*, Livre de Poche, Vol. 2, p.545

The little darling won't be eaten, because Gavroche has stretched a mesh fence between the nest, where the children sleep, and the claws and teeth, the living black spots (as Hugo also says) who can smell what Perrault calls 'fresh flesh'. The fact remains that the rats are on the other side, – on the other stage, psychoanalysis would say. And, on the other stage, no matter what you say, no matter what you do, – on the other stage, it's always the rats, it's always the mice that eat the cat.

Baudelaire is quite prepared to accept this. Without any transition, as if he were moving on to something else, he remarks *in petto* 'Je crois que généralement les enfants agissent sur leurs joujoux, en d'autres termes, que leur choix est dirigé par des dispositions et des désirs, vagues, il est vrai, non pas formulés, mais très réels' (p.585). It seems to me beyond doubt that the fear of the rat and the delicious distress aroused in us by the startling spectacle of the interesting, the oh-so-interesting castration, add to the *charm* exerted by 'l'objet rare et inconnu' over the little gentleman standing on the right side of the gate, on the other side of the bars, and thus figure heavily in the unformulated but very real desires that direct our little ones in the choice of their toys. And, later on, the grown man, in his interest for the things of art. For let us not forget that what is at stake in the text I am examining is, as a working hypothesis, the question of art. And let it be added that I am not at all examining this text in order to denounce, in principle – at the foundations of the religion of the Beautiful that Baudelaire will

have devoted his entire work to spreading – God knows what hoax. My purpose is not in fact to show that the King is naked, but rather to underline the rigorously aporetic dimension of art, as this dimension manifests itself, if not in Baudelaire's highest conception of art, at least in a text such as this one, which is a risky text, a text that is playing with fire. A text whose status, incidentally, worried Baudelaire enough that he was very concerned with its place in the general system sometimes referred to, wrongly, as his aesthetics, in which he long dreamed of including it, as if it could be in a theory's – any theory's! – power to form a system around an aporia.

An aporia cannot be alleviated. Because it offers no issue to thought, because it is a logical dead-end; because, in its immense upwards movement – which is undeniable: art is a leap to the stars – the mind finds itself confronted by the necessity I have described of a gigantic movement of retreat. For such is indeed the contradiction, that as you fall you must here rise. To the point that, without even pushing the text, I could now give *Morale du joujou* a reading that would be the exact opposite of this one. A reading that would be carried out, if you like, the other way, the way, for instance, of idealization, but that would have been impossible to attempt at the time, without immediately ruining the framework of the commentary. Not that this framework is artificial, which I do not believe, but for reasons essentially related to the nature of the text I am analyzing. Because of the double and contradictory exigency that pulls it in both directions at once and carries it both towards the rat and the star.

A Hugolian antithesis – without Hugo to arrange it! But the word antithesis itself is insufficient. It would probably be more exact, here, to speak of an antinomy or of an internal contradiction; or better still, along with Valéry, of a latent discord,<sup>16</sup> and thus of a division inherent in the subject itself, a division that regularly pushes it to fall back into what it had thought it had gone beyond. There is certainly, with Baudelaire – how can it be denied? – an idealism of the toy, – whether, presenting itself to him as a version that is 'plus colorée, nettoyée et luisante que la vie réelle' (p.582), the toy offers a copy of it that then appears more finished than the original; or whether, on the contrary, only proposing a highly imperfect imitation of it, the toy thus proves the unequalled superiority of the child's imaginative faculties over the artist's – but it's an idealism at whose level Baudelaire can never maintain himself for long. All the harder is the fall that inexorably awaits him at the end of his finest flights.

And it is the end of *Morale du joujou*, the moral also of this *morale*: incontestable summit of the text, were it not also, for its author, in the image of the Tarpeian Rock. Baudelaire has just stated that it would hardly be surprising if a child, 'à qui ses parents donneraient principalement des théâtres pour qu'il pût continuer seul le plaisir du spectacle et des marionnettes, s'accoutumât déjà à considérer le théâtre comme la forme la plus délicieuse du beau' (p.585). Having thus

maintained, as a general proposition, the thesis of the determinant influence of the toy on artistic vocation, he is at the end of his troubles. He simply has to deal now with the practical applications of the idea. In a moment it will be done. For we are no longer speculating on what might be the foundations of an anthropology of the toy, if such was ever the ambition of Baudelaire, whose preoccupations in this regard are after all not the same as those of a Roger Caillois, which they neither anticipate nor prepare. Whether one should distinguish between games of chance, of vertigo, of simulacra or of competition is not really the concern of Baudelaire, whom we could very well imagine, on the other hand, asserting that charades or the hot cockles are the preludes to less innocent games, but who would be a man, above all, to study knucklebones with secret anxiety. Predestination, indeed, is the true subject of *Morale du joujou*. And how it shows 'précocement le bout de son nez'<sup>17</sup>, how, with no regard for age, it declares itself on such futile pretexts as a gift. A spinning top, a whipping top, a hoop, and the deed is done, damnation accomplished.

Neither hoop nor top in the case of Baudelaire, who was spared, it seems, such an easy outlet. But spared only in favour of what would turn out to be, alas, a far more certain instrument of perdition. I have already said what a trap of destiny the phenakistoscope was for him. *Morale du joujou*, in the end, will find itself caught in the same trap. The same one *fatalement*, and Baudelaire – on the rather tendentious grounds that science, in turn, was claiming its due – then develops a new description, but with a wealth of details that nothing there could justify, except for the consideration of the importance he could attribute to it in the history of his own formation.

Il est une espèce de joujou qui tend à se multiplier depuis quelque temps, et dont je n'ai à dire ni bien ni mal. Je veux parler du joujou scientifique. Le principal défaut de ces joujoux est d'être chers. Mais ils peuvent amuser longtemps, et développer dans le cerveau de l'enfant des effets merveilleux et surprenants. Le stéréoscope, qui donne en ronde bosse une image plane, est de ce nombre. Il date maintenant de quelques années. Le phénakistoscope, plus ancien, est moins connu. Supposez un mouvement quelconque, par exemple un exercice de danseur ou de jongleur, divisé et décomposé en un certain nombre de mouvements; supposez que chacun de ces mouvements, – au nombre de vingt, si vous voulez, – soit représenté par une figure entière du jongleur ou du danseur, et qu'ils soient tous dessinés autour d'un cercle de carton. Ajustez ce cercle, ainsi qu'un autre cercle troué, à distances égales, de vingt petites fenêtres, à un pivot au bout d'un manche que vous tenez comme on tient un écran devant le feu. Les vingt petites figures, représentant le mouvement décomposé d'une seule figure, se reflètent dans une glace située en face de vous. Appliquez votre oeil à la hauteur des petites fenêtres, et faites tourner rapidement les cercles.

La rapidité de la rotation transforme les vingt ouvertures en une seule circulaire, à travers laquelle vous voyez se réfléchir dans la glace vingt figures dansantes, exactement semblables et exécutant les mêmes mouvements avec une précision fantastique. Chaque petite figure a bénéficié des dix-neuf autres. Sur le cercle, elle tourne, et sa rapidité la rend invisible; dans la glace, vue à travers la fenêtre tournante, elle est immobile, exécutant en place tous les mouvements distribués entre les vingt figures. Le nombre des tableaux qu'on peut créer ainsi est infini.  
*Morale du joujou*, pp.585-86

Twenty years separate *Morale du joujou* from the letter to Alphonse. And, in twenty years, no matter how little, the techniques have evolved. The phenakistoscope of the beginning of the Second Empire is no longer quite the phenakistoscope of the July Monarchy ... But Baudelaire is visibly unaware of these nuances. Even had he noted them, they could never, in any case, have accounted for the differences, differences of point of view, differences of treatment, between the two texts. In 1833, Baudelaire is writing with the object in front of him; in 1853, he is writing from memory, at a distance from the object. With the added complication that the relations of proximity and distance, with Baudelaire, always tend to be inverted. It is even for operating such reversals that operations of the mind are simply given the name of *operations*. In such a manner, in any case, that in spite of the years Baudelaire will never have been so close to the thing. Nor so close to espousing its cause, to making it the seat of the principle animating him. To the point that he no longer describes it as a simple machine, but according to his brain's mode of functioning. As it functions, at least, under certain conditions known to him alone. Those dancing figures, twenty images leaping all at once, those spinning wheels, those coloured disks, and all those flames, real or assumed, that come to exalt the picturesque faculties of the soul, and the great clarity that falls on all this ... so many signs offered to whomsoever knows how to read them. And to whomsoever, for instance, will remember that between 1833 and 1853 several events concerning the moral life of Charles Baudelaire took place, notably the experience referred to as the *fantasias* of the hotel Pimodan. Look again at his experiment with hashish.

So he will only have left the hell of sexuality for the hell of drugs, Icarus overcome by the weight of his wings. He who tries to play the angel ... And since I am invoking angels, allow me, before draping the veil of oblivion back over them, to ask of the treasures of Lady Panckoucke the all-too-famous question addressed by Lamartine to the toys of his age.

*Objets inanimés, avez-vous donc une âme?*

This is not merely a formal question, since the answer is given, *and in those very terms*, in the last lines of Baudelaire's text.

La plupart des marmots veulent surtout *voir l'âme*, les uns au bout de quelque temps d'exercice, les autres *tout de suite*. C'est la plus ou moins rapide invasion de ce désir qui fait la plus ou moins grande longévité du joujou. Je ne me sens pas le courage de blâmer cette manie enfantine: c'est une première tendance métaphysique. Quand ce désir s'est fiché dans la moelle cérébrale de l'enfant, il remplit ses doigts et ses ongles d'une agilité et d'une force singulières. L'enfant tourne, retourne son joujou, il le gratte, il le secoue, le cogne contre les murs, le jette par terre. De temps en temps il lui fait recommencer ses mouvements mécaniques, quelquefois en sens inverse. La vie merveilleuse s'arrête. L'enfant, comme le peuple qui assiege les Tuileries, fait un suprême effort; enfin il l'entr'ouvre, il est le plus fort, Mais où est l'âme? C'est ici que commencent l'hébétement et la tristesse. *Morale du joujou*, p.587

And here too begin the painting salons; here, Baudelaire's 'aesthetics', whose principles are stated in the tone of a *post coitum triste* that these pages have no other ambition but to make the reader's hearing more sensitive.

### Notes

1. *Correspondance*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Volume I, 1973, p.22.
2. *Mesures de l'Ombre*, PUL, Collection 'Objet', 1987, pp.111-52.
3. *Le Miroir des limbes*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, p.49.
4. *Morale du joujou*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Volume 1, 1975, pp.581-82.
5. Daniel Grojnowski (ed.). *Voix magiques: Baudelaire, Cros, Hugo, Rimbaud, Mallarmé*, Fata Morgana, 1992, p.46.
6. *Oeuvres complètes*, Volume II, p.360.
7. *ibid.*, p.425.
8. Jean-Michel Rey. *Paul Valéry: L'Aventure d'une oeuvre*, Seuil, Collection 'La Librairie du XXe siècle', 1991, pp.19-20.

## 9. [ ... ] l'enfant

Gêneur, la si sottè bête,  
 Ne doit cesser un instant  
 De ruser et d'être traître  
 Comme un chat des Monts-Rocheux.  
 ('Honte', in *Vers nouveaux*)

10. Source: P. J. Harrebomée, *Spreekwoordenboek der Nederlandsche taal*, Amsterdam: Van Hoeve, 1980. (Facsimile of the original edition in three volumes published in Utrecht by Kemink en Zoom, 1856-70.)

11. 'Qu'est-ce que l'enfant aime si passionnément dans sa mère, dans sa bonne, dans sa soeur aînée? Est-ce simplement l'être qui le nourrit, le peigne, le lave et le berce? C'est aussi la caresse et la volupté sensuelle. Pour l'enfant, cette caresse s'exprime à l'insu de la femme, par toutes les grâces de la femme. Il aime donc sa mère, sa soeur, sa nourrice, pour le chatouillement agréable du satin et de la fourrure; pour le parfum de la gorge et des cheveux, pour le cliquetis des bijoux, pour le jeu des rubans, etc.' *Correspondance*, Volume II, pp.30-31.

12. *Oeuvres complètes*, Volume I, p.661.

13. Valéry Larbaud. *Lettres d'un retiré*, La Table ronde, p.165.

14. *De l'amour*, Garnier-Flammarion, p.167.

15. To refer once again to Laforgue's judgement: 'Baudelaire/ chat, hindou, yankee, épiscopal alchimiste / sa façon de dire "ma chère" dans ce morceau solennel qui s'ouvre par "Sois sage, ô ma Douleur" / Yankee ses "très-" devant un adjectif / ses paysages cassants – et ce vers / *Mon esprit, tu te meux avec agilité.* / que les initiés détaillent d'une voix métallique.' op. cit., p.53.

16. 'La Politique de l'esprit', in *Oeuvres*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Volume I, p.1018.

17. *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*, Volume II, p.691.