

Sexual (In?)difference: Baudelaire's *Le Spleen de Paris*

by
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Plus l'homme cultive les
arts, moins il bande.¹

Baudelaire's writing self-consciously proclaims its binary structures and philosophical organization which are, according to Hélène Cixous, traditionally associated with male and patriarchal binary thought. These provide us, the readers, with an easy but deceptive access to his universe as we go about recognizing the tensions and polarities: ideal/spleen, heaven/hell, life/death, ecstasy/horror, spiritual 'jouissance'/physical 'plaisir', self/others, man/woman. Baudelaire rivals Hugo in the construction of a manichean word-world, a never-ending succession of related binaries. With Baudelaire, however, much more than with Hugo, the reader's pleasure derives from the manner in which the traditional hierarchies are reversed or subverted in their open-ended textual play: the active/passive, positive/negative, good/bad classifications are no longer clear-cut or obvious, and, as absolute terms of distinction and opposition, of approval and disapproval, they collapse.

From the structured verse poems of *Les Fleurs du Mal* with their purported 'architecture secrète', to the randomly assembled prose poems of *Le Spleen de Paris* which has 'ni queue (tail or prick?) ni tête', it may be argued that Baudelaire's obsessive binary representations of the world in language are organizational strategies, less in evidence in non-poetic writings such as the *Journaux intimes*. In Lacanian terms, the symbolic order, which creates coherence and rationality, and produces subject identity, based on difference and similarity, is tentative and unstable. It is as if the process of transcribing perceptions and experiences necessitates a provisional black and white categorization in order later to subvert it. And herein lies, in Barthes' terms, the general pleasure of the Baudelairean text as it confounds and exceeds its transparent meanings, however much these are blatantly and explicitly stated in moral terms at the end of many of the prose poems.

What I intend questioning and examining in this essay is the manner in which this posited collapsing of the binary system playfully underlies and informs sexual and gender representations of male/female, man/woman, masculine/feminine, with reference to two *topoi* – jouissance and prostitution – in Baudelaire's prose poems. I do not intend either to rehearse or to defend the poet's traditionally accepted misogynistic 'boutades' (to be found especially in the *Journaux intimes*) about 'natural

woman', woman's stupidity and lack of artistic sensibility and spirituality, nor her paradoxical function of dumb inspiration within the creative process ('Tais-toi et sois belle'), expressed most explicitly in the essay 'La Femme' in *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*, and illustrated throughout the so-called love poems of *Les Fleurs du Mal*; nor the sado-masochistic sexuality suggested by much of Baudelaire's writing, nor finally, a Freudian analysis of childhood.

Before I turn to the two *topoi*, I would like to make three preliminary observations. The first concerns the nature of the prose poems as a kind of fantasy scenario. Elsewhere I have examined the prose poems in terms of miniature dramas, borrowing from Barthes' insistence on the poet's essential 'théatralité'.² These miniature dramas are often, but not always, organized around a conversation or situation between a man and a woman, or a husband and a wife. At a most simple and overt narrative level, many, such as 'La Femme sauvage et la Petite Maîtresse', 'L'Horloge' and 'Les Yeux des pauvres', are enactments of sadist humiliation of the female by an avenging and aggressive male. Yet the apparent misogyny does not seem to place a major obstacle between the nineteenth-century poet and a late twentieth-century female readership.

My second observation is that, at its most elementary level, the binary man/woman, male/female, is modified as it escalates into an ever-shifting process of further divisions and qualifications: and the most important of all these subdivisions is that which divides man/male/masculine into artist and non-artist. Man as non-artist represents or belongs to patriarchy, the family, material values and (re)production, property and gifts as a means of appropriation, and for whom pleasure is some form of gratification of the body. In contrast, the artist does not participate in patriarchal power, is outside the reproductive family system ('Je n'ai ni père, ni mère, ni soeur, ni frère'), and despises the gold of bourgeois materialism, commerce and exchange. He prefers the golden riches of his artistic product or imaginative vision which he gives beneficently to a hostile or anonymous public often ignorant or contemptuous of his very existence or gift. Likewise the traditional classification of woman as Madonna – object of spiritual worship – and Eve – object of sexual desire or embodiment of sexual libido – is abandoned or, rather, amalgamated into a complex one, in which woman becomes for the artist 'sa chère, sa délicieuse, son exécrable femme, son inévitable et impitoyable Muse' ('Le Galant Tireur'), still object, still Other, but with whom the artist frequently assumes the passive position as *object* of her powerful, active gaze (as in 'La Chambre double' or 'Le Fou et la Vénus').

My third concern is the playful ambiguity in Baudelaire's representations which involves the complex nature of voice and unstable subject positions in these ironic miniature dramas. Just as Jean Starobinski demonstrated the division of the

Baudelairian voice and persona into three – narrator, prince and mime in 'Une Mort héroïque' – so Peggy Kamuf, more recently, in her paper 'Baudelaire au féminin', examines a 'mixed voice, a middle voice or even a double or undecidable voice, a voice which both is and is not the Poet's own, which both is and is not the voice of an addressee, destinataire or interlocutor.'³¹ This middle or double voice, which both is and is not the Poet's own, shapes and is shaped by the ambiguous gender positions and sexuality, and it characterizes the nature of *jouissance*, which is avowedly sexual and yet located outside of physical sexuality. It also informs the elaboration of the notion of prostitution, wherein the standard exchange transacted between the purchasing male and the purchased female is subverted and obscured.

Jouissance

Mais qu'importe l'éternité de la damnation à qui a trouvé dans une seconde l'infini de la jouissance? 'Le Mauvais vitrier'

Chaque homme porte en lui sa dose d'opium naturel, incessamment sécrétée et renouvelée, et de la naissance à la mort, combien comptons-nous d'heures remplies par la jouissance positive, par l'action réussie et décidée? 'L'Invitation au voyage'

Et à quoi bon exécuter des projets, puisque le projet est en lui-même une jouissance suffisante? 'Les Projets'

Many of the fifty prose poems depict, explicitly, the experience of, and failure to maintain, a state of 'jouissance', a kind of transcendent state profoundly sexual (especially orgasmic), yet bracketing out the body and physical sexuality, blurring subject and object positions, and located outside language. These include, notably, 'Le "Confiteor" de l'artiste', 'Une Chambre double', 'Enivrez-vous', and 'Déjà'. No reader of the first poem mentioned can fail to mistake the erotic imagery 'pénétrantes ... sensations délicieuses ... pointe acérée ... l'énergie dans la volupté ... nerfs trop tendus ... vibrations criardes et douloureuses ... cesse de tenter mes désirs ... vaincu' – as the poem progresses from the subject's arousal, as he gazes mesmerized by a sail on the horizon during a warm autumnal afternoon, to orgasm and then to post-coital defeat at the hands of great, all-powerful mother nature. Recognition of the sexual imagery does not lead to easy interpretation. Does the poem's erotic conceit constitute a metaphor of the artist's compulsively repeated attempts at creation? Is it simply another version of the traditional equation of artistic and sexual desire and (re)production? Or does it in fact proclaim their mutual exclusiveness, or substitution?

Il se fait un divorce de plus en plus sensible entre l'esprit et la brute. La brute seule bande bien, et la fouterie est le lyrisme du peuple. Foutre, c'est aspirer à entrer dans un autre, et l'artiste ne sort jamais de lui-même. *Mon coeur mis à nu*⁴

'Le "Confiteor" de l'artiste' in fact depicts the collapse of male/female, active/passive distinctions. Though it begins with male sexual images – 'pénétrantes', 'pointe acérée' – the subject-artist increasingly occupies the passive position, with loss of will and control, operated on by an active female – nature – in which the dysfunctional 'poet's' identity is subjugated and obliterated: 'Toutes ces choses pensent par moi, ou je pense par elles. Car dans la grandeur de la rêverie, le moi se perd vite.' In a state of *jouissance*, the lyric *je*, identity, self-consciousness, are dissolved, vaporized, and with them, all sense of gender. The 'artiste jouissant' becomes identified, fetishistically, with the 'petite voile frissonnante' on the horizon. The sail may be perceived, by the poet or the reader, as some objectified phallic symbol, but it is nonetheless one that is dwarfed and swallowed by vast conquering mother nature.

This loss of identity and consciousness in *jouissance* can be interpreted in many ways. For example, in crude Freudian terms, the ultimate desired state according to the pleasure principle is death, and the poet's lament at his inability to sustain a state of *jouissance* results from his return to consciousness of reality and patriarchal order in which he has no place or power: this is the essential theme of many prose poems, most notably 'Une Chambre double'. There is also a deliberate fusion or confusion of what Freud calls sexual object and sexual aim. The woman (presumably the sexual object) is identified with an idealized or imaginary landscape ('L'Invitation au voyage') which then becomes the desired *place*, and the sexual aim, which is *jouissance*, becomes displaced, transferred to, and associated with, an imagined landscape or project as in 'Les Projets'. The reverse is the case in the epilogue to the prose poems, in which Paris is likened to 'une vieille catin', with the artist functioning as 'un vieux paillard', seeking pleasures through and from her body.

Equally suggestive is the notion of the Lacanian imaginary and the symbolic order, with the state of *jouissance* resembling the former, with its absence of a sense of separate identity, pre- or un-gendered, at one with the universe, unconscious; before language; difference and the symbolic order of patriarchy have intervened to allow gendered identity and consciousness of separation of subject and object. The rule of the pleasure principle is overturned by the return or emergence of the reality principle in which the father's intervention represses the desire for the mother, leading to an identification with the father and a masculine position. However the artist, who has bracketed out sexuality, the family structure and reproductive heterosexual activity,

does not identify with the father and patriarchal rule, but sees art as a continuous lament for the lost nirvana, the womb, imaginary order.

Paradoxically for the artist who desires to return to, or recapture, the imaginary and whose stock-in-trade is words and language, the state of *jouissance* is outside or beyond language:

Solitude, silence ... toutes ces choses pensent par moi, ou je pense par elles (car dans la grandeur de la rêverie, le moi se perd vite!); elles pensent, dis-je, mais musicalement et pittoresquement.

Likewise in the paradise room of 'Une Chambre double' with the poet, 'entouré de mystère, de silence, de paix et de parfum', there is only a silent harmony of signifying language, signified objects:

Les étoffes parlent une langue muette comme les fleurs, comme les ciels, comme les soleils couchants.

The problem is not the essential inadequacy of words, but an aspiration to a beyond-language state, to a backwards shift from the symbolic to the imaginary.

Just as the paradoxical aspiration of the poet is one of silence, beyond language, so the sexual aim is one which seems to combine a-sexuality, bisexuality and hermaphroditism: the poet's *jouissance* does not derive from some triumphant male heterosexuality and desire; it combines in some way the two sexes, but not of subject and object. It becomes a neither/nor, either/or, both/and, which neutralizes sexual difference as a binary oppositional pair. In Hélène Cixous' terms, a poet's writing is bisexual, an amalgam of male and female, masculine and feminine, which even the intellectual or analyst, viewing calculatingly from the outside, cannot disentangle, a theory clearly expressed in 'Le Thyrsé':

Le bâton, c'est votre volonté, droite, ferme et inébranlable; les fleurs, c'est la promenade de votre fantaisie autour de votre volonté; c'est l'élément féminin exécutant autour du mâle ses prestigieuses pirouettes. Ligne droite et ligne arabesque, intention et expression, roideur de la volonté, sinuosité du verbe, unité du but, variété des moyens, amalgame tout puissant et indivisible du génie, quel analyste aura le détestable courage de vous diviser et de vous séparer? 'Le Thyrsé'

Amusingly, Baudelaire has here attempted to tease out the gender stereotypes, with the masculine comprising the following qualities:

volonté droite, ferme et inébranlable ... ligne droite ... intention ...
roideur de la volonté ... unité du but.

and the feminine comprising:

les fleurs ... la promenade de votre fantaisie ... ses prestigieuses
pirouettes ... ligne arabesque ... expression ... sinuosité du verbe.

But these traditional masculine and feminine features are now amalgamated into a new unity, a bisexual hermaphroditism which is also illustrated by the first of the devils – Eros – in 'Les Tentations ou Eros, Plutus et la Gloire':

Le visage du premier Satan était d'un sexe ambigu, et il y avait aussi,
dans les lignes de son corps, la mollesse des anciens Bacchus ...

Similarly it has been a commonplace observation that in Baudelaire the poet's sympathy for and with woman is limited to those whose sexual function is denied or extinct, with the result that they acquire a certain hermaphroditic or a-sexual status which mirrors the martyred beyond-sexuality of the artist:

Il m'est arrivé une fois de suivre pendant de longues heures une vieille
de cette espèce; celle-là roide, droite, sous un petit châle usé, portait
dans tout son être une fierté de stoïcienne. Elle était évidemment
condamnée, par une absolue solitude, à des habitudes de *vieux
célibataire* (Baudelaire's emphasis), et le caractère masculin de ses
mœurs ajoutait un piquant mystérieux à leur austérité. 'Les Veuves'

Just as in 'Le Désespoir de la Vieille' the destiny of the baby and the old woman mirror or reflect each other, so, here, the post-sexual phase which is so attractive to the poet resembles in fact a pre-sexual and pre-gendered phase of harmony and unity.

The fullest and most interesting descriptions and analyses of *jouissance* are to be found in *Du Vin et du Hachish*, for example in the description of the *kief*:

C'est le bonheur absolu. [...] C'est une béatitude calme et immobile.
Tous les problèmes philosophiques sont résolus. Toutes les questions
ardues contre lesquelles s'escriment les théologiens et qui font le
désespoir de l'humanité raisonnable, sont limpides et claires. Toute
contradiction est devenue unité. L'homme est *passé* dieu.⁵

But ultimately drugs are condemned as a means of achieving *jouissance* on the grounds that 'c'est la volonté qui est attaquée, et c'est l'organe le plus précieux'. And in 'Le Thyrsé', 'masculine' will is the first ingredient mentioned in Baudelaire's aesthetic.

Baudelaire's *jouissance* is concerned with the relationship between consciousness of self, an identifiable but shifting, chameleon-like subject position, with its spate of mirroring analogies on the one hand, and the unconscious loss of self-identity in which sexual difference becomes redundant and is vaporized. The constant 'bath' images – *bain de ténèbres*, *bain de paresse*, *bain de multitude*, *bain du soir* – reveal a body which desires to disappear, deny its (sexual, male) identity, merge itself in the (feminine) water, become one with it again, in a state of total pleasure and (alas, temporary) self-annihilation.

Fantasized Prostitution

L'amour, c'est le goût de la prostitution. Qu'est-ce que l'art?
Prostitution. L'être le plus prostitué, c'est Dieu.⁶

If love, art and religion are all manifestations of some kind of prostitution, as the three quotations above from *Fusées*, the first part of the *Journaux intimes*, would indicate, it is obvious that Baudelaire's evolving notion of prostitution is far-reaching, universal in its multiple manifestations and the way it encompasses and defines all relationships – that between two lovers, the various ones of art: artist and the production of his art, artist and public, or the public's consumption of art, and, finally, that between man and God. At its most basic level, Baudelaire seems to label prostitution the using of *others* (a lover, a book, God) to procure pleasure. And herein lies the problem for the artist, whose *jouissance* is distinct from the banal 'plaisir' (physical, a commodity) of others, which seems to be simultaneously protection and denial of the sense of self.

Celui-là qui épouse facilement la foule connaît des jouissances fiévreuses, dont seront éternellement privés l'égoïste, fermé comme un coffre, et le paresseux, interné comme un mollusque. Il adopte comme siennes toutes les professions, toutes les joies et toutes les misères que la circonstance lui présente. Ce que les hommes nomment amour est bien petit, bien restreint et bien faible, comparé à cette ineffable orgie, à cette sainte prostitution de l'âme qui se donne tout entière, poésie et charité, à l'imprévu qui se montre, à l'inconnu qui passe. 'Les Foules'

The deviation in terms of grammar and meaning in this formulation concerns the two parenthetical nouns – *poésie* et *charité* – which define the nature of the artist's spiritual prostitution, which is poetic (that is, metaphoric) and charitable (that is, free from normal commerce). 'Les Foules', like 'Le "Confiteur" de l'artiste', is one of those strange aesthetic statements of principle, a miniature 'ars poetica', in which the artist grapples with the universality/uniqueness of the use of the crowd:

Il n'est pas donné à chacun ... jouir de la foule est un art ... celui-là seul peut faire ... le poète jouit de cet incomparable privilège ... le promeneur solitaire et pensif ...

This same relationship between crowd and artist is again formulated explicitly in 'La Solitude':

'Presque tous nos malheurs nous viennent de n'avoir pas su rester dans notre chambre', dit un autre sage, Pascal, je crois, rappelant ainsi dans la cellule du recueillement tous ces affolés qui cherchent le bonheur dans le mouvement et dans une prostitution que je pourrais appeler *fraternitaire*, si je voulais parler la belle langue de mon siècle. La Solitude'

The apparent paradox is perhaps explained in another formulation in the *Journaux intimes* where the artist contrasts different prostitutions for artist and non-artist:

Goût invincible de la prostitution dans le coeur de l'homme, d'où naît son horreur de la solitude. Il veut être deux. L'homme de génie veut être un, donc solitaire. La gloire c'est rester un, et se prostituer d'une manière particulière. C'est cette horreur de la solitude, le besoin d'oublier son moi dans la chair extérieure, que l'homme appelle noblement besoin d'aimer. *Mon coeur mis à nu*

'Les Foules' therefore seeks to proclaim the artist's 'special way of prostituting himself', whilst remaining one and intact. This art of prostitution involves all the binaries of unstable, shifting relationships: artist and non-artist, solitude and multitude, self and others, body and soul. The basic theme of the poem is primarily concerned with distinguishing between banal happiness and 'bonheur supérieur' or jouissance, using sexual and erotic language only to negate physical sexuality. Thus Baudelaire's theory of prostitution is far removed from the traditional one with its four ingredients of money, sex, the pursuit of pleasure and the use of another person. Only the pursuit of pleasure survives. Yet it feeds on the stereotypical version of the economic exchange between the active using male and the passive used female, on whom the male spends his money/sperm for his own pleasure.

A traditional representation of female prostitution is certainly not absent from *Le Spleen de Paris*, and two poems in particular describe prostitutes: 'La Belle Dorothée' and 'Mademoiselle Bistouri', both of which have provoked diverse readings. For example Anne-Marie Brinsmead, in a study entitled 'A trading of souls: commerce as poetic practice in the *Petits Poèmes en Prose*', comments on the former:

The poetic substitution ('prostitute' for 'lover') and revelation of Dorothée's true identity uncover a denigrated, 'deflated' form of love in the urban world.⁷

However, Brinsmead's thesis is concerned with commercial exchange, beginning with the metaphor of gold: gold as symbol of bourgeois materialism (e.g. in 'L'Etranger') and gold as symbol of the riches of the artist's imagination ('Tu m'as donné de la boue, et j'en ai fait de l'or'), moving on to the idea of the poet-prostitute selling his art in the market place, and martyring himself to achieve glory. It is not until her conclusion that she points to the reading of prostitution which is relevant to the present thesis:

On the simplest level, the motif of exchange involves comparison between the materialistic values of a mercantile society and the spiritual and sacrificial values associated with art. But the principle of exchange, as an often ironic mode of substitution, also lies at the heart of poetic experience itself. The poet-figures in the prose poems may be partially contaminated by the commercial system in which they live, but they are also involved in a quite different process of exchange: that of trading one soul for another, of prostituting and sacrificing oneself for the martyrdom and glory of artistic achievement. With Baudelairean poet-subjects attracted to voluntary suicides, they are forever in search of a new identity, 'comme ces âmes errantes qui cherchent un corps' (*Les Foules*). The self-annihilation of the poet, as the victim of a hostile, consumer-oriented civilization, is perhaps one form of suicide, but there is also another, a means of metempsychosis which is presented as an inherent part of the creative process, and which is in some ways similar to 'ivresse'. Brinsmead, pp. 464-65

This notion of metempsychosis combined with 'ivresse' approximates what Baudelaire calls the 'sainte prostitution de l'âme', though the idea of exchange is not so clear as it is with the poet-prostitute (male) selling himself on the marketplace of bourgeois consumer values and taste and the prostitute (female) of 'La Belle Dorothée' working to earn money to buy her sister out of slavery and 'Mademoiselle Bistouri', an innocent (that is, lacking consciousness of her 'evil') monster whose monstrosity is presumably her sexual obsession for surgeons, doctors and medical students. In this latter poem, the poet disguises his fascination with her, behind a psychologist's curiosity: 'Peux-tu te souvenir de l'époque et de l'occasion où est née en toi cette passion si particulière?' But her answer is simply 'Je ne sais pas ... je ne me souviens pas.' The final lines of the poem reinforce his analyst's baffled curiosity about 'pourquoi ils [des fous et des folles] existent, comment ils se sont faits et comment ils auraient pu ne pas se faire.' It might well be argued that the appeal of the portrait of and encounter with Mademoiselle Bistouri does not lie in her as an object of the poet-psychologist's enquiry, and

certainly not of desire, but as a mirror of his own fate: she is a monster who has created her own fantasy world, one which she, unlike the poet, is able to sustain. She even recounts one of her fantasies concerning 'un petit interne, qui est joli comme un ange':

Je voudrais qu'il me vînt me voir avec sa trousse et son tablier, même avec un peu de sang dessus! Elle dit cela d'un air candide, comme un homme sensible dirait à une comédienne qu'il aimerait: 'Je veux vous voir vêtue du costume que vous portiez dans ce fameux rôle que vous avez créé.'

In the obvious reference-echo to the actress-heroine of *La Fanfarlo*, Baudelaire is now equating the prostitute's desire with that of the artist's love of fantasy and artifice. She becomes both the object of curiosity and mirror of the imaginative artist, whilst actually occupying the degraded role of prostitute, and elevated role of artist.

The other way in which 'Mademoiselle Bistouri' differs from many of the other poems is that the poet actually meets and speaks with the object-mirror. Elsewhere, for example in 'Les Veuves' and 'Le Vieux Saltimbanque', the poet remains apart, solitary, protecting his solitary oneness and preferring his own imagined 'légendes' of his subjects, having simply projected onto others his own desires and sufferings, and not wanting to know whether his 'readings' are correct or not, as he exclaims at the end of 'Les Fenêtres':

Et je me couche, fier d'avoir vécu et souffert dans d'autres que moi-même. Et peut-être me direz-vous: 'Es-tu sûr que cette légende soit la vraie?' Qu'importe ce que peut être la réalité placée hors de moi, si elle m'a aidé à vivre, à sentir que je suis et ce que je suis? 'Les Fenêtres'

The paradox which Baudelaire is clearly trying to resolve in his idea of prostitution concerns the notion of 'oneness': 'L'homme de génie veut être *un*, donc solitaire. La gloire, c'est rester *un*, et se prostituer d'une manière particulière.' What then can this 'special way of prostituting oneself' and remaining one be? It is clearly to be distinguished from 'le besoin d'oublier son *moi* dans la chair extérieure' which 'ivresse' and jouissance point to. What 'Les Foules' seems to advocate and applaud is the imaginative artist's ability to conjure up other universes of people and living and suffering through becoming and being them, as opposed to himself. It is as though he wishes to 'sortir de soi' – the negative, escape from the body – , and multiply the possibilities of self, be an actor, endowed as he is with 'le goût du masque et du travestissement', assuming other identities and occupying other bodies – the positive, enrichment of life. However, this reading of 'Les Foules' is not wholly reconcilable with 'remaining one, prostituting oneself in a special way'. In 'Mademoiselle Bistouri'

the role of the poet-narrator is one of detached fascination, not that of a potential sexual client; he initially resists the approach of the prostitute, but then succumbs:

J'aime passionnément le mystère, parce que j'ai toujours l'espoir de le débrouiller. Je me laissai donc entraîner par cette compagne, ou plutôt par cette énigme inespérée.

In this encounter sexual desire is one-sided, and in no way does the poet admit to feeling towards her anything other than a desire to 'débrouiller le mystère'. In fact she is one of 'les éclopés de la vie' ('Les Veuves'), whose fate in some strange manner mirrors that of the self-regarding poet-narrator, the difference being that the poet poses as philosopher and artist, conscious of, and curious about, degradation and evil, whereas the 'innocent monsters' and 'éclopés' are not.

In appropriating these social failures, the persona of the artist remains in a sense intact, one, and is never really appropriated by the other, even when overwhelmed by a sense of 'ivresse' or jouissance. L'artiste ne sort jamais de lui-même.' This mirror-fodder, provided by chance encounters in the streets and parks, knows no distinction in gender, though much more often it is a male. In 'Le Désespoir de la Vieille', 'Les Veuves', 'Les Fenêtres', the poet appropriates the story and image of women. Even in a poem which purports to be a portrait of a woman, like 'Un Cheval de race', she is in some respects the purveyor of attributes and abstractions which mirror the artist, his art and his vision of the world:

Elle est bien laide. Elle est délicieuse pourtant. [...] Elle est fourmi, araignée, si vous voulez, squelette mais elle est aussi breuvage, magistère, sorcellerie! en somme, elle est exquise. [...] Usée peut-être, mais non fatiguée, elle fait penser à ces chevaux de race ...

The poet feeds on her – she is part of the 'pâture certaine' to be found in streets and parks by the imaginative poet: she is 'breuvage', but in so doing, he does not renounce himself. She does not appropriate him, but he her.

When the poet proclaims in 'Les Foules' the 'sainte prostitution de l'âme qui se donne tout entière, poésie et charité, à l'imprévu qui se montre, à l'inconnu qui passe', the gift of his soul is a strange one in which he alone is conscious, and of which he alone is the beneficiary in which payment or gift is contemplated then deemed unnecessary:

N'est-ce pas, Madame, que voici un madrigal vraiment méritoire, et aussi emphatique que vous-même? En vérité, j'ai eu tant de plaisir à

broder cette prétentieuse galanterie, que je ne vous demanderai rien en échange. L'Horloge'

This poem, like 'Le Galant Tireur', appears to subscribe merely to the clichéd formula of using woman in the process of creating a work of art, a banal interpretation of the idea of prostitution in which the arrogant artist uses, in a non-sexual manner, the contemplation or encounter with a woman, with clear-cut gender difference and role.

Even here what is significant is that there is a definite renunciation of the traditional sexuality associated with prostitution. Being an artist represents a loss or transference of sexual desire. One might assume that the function of the artist in the crowd (invented or real) is one of voyeurism, with the shadowy poet following widows and showmen, anonymously, satisfying furtively prurient desires, but always the real object of his secret observations is himself. And in terms of sexual difference what is important is that the gender position adopted by the artist is often that assumed to be considered feminine: power and agency are transferred to the female, whilst the male narrator-poet adopts a passive, supine role, as in 'Le "Confiteur" de l'artiste', 'Le Fou et la Vénus' and 'La Chambre double'.

'Jouir de la foule est un art', and 'l'artiste ne sort jamais de lui-même' appear to point in different directions, one proclaiming the artist's ability to become others, in some mysterious process of total identification in which the male artist's soul penetrates and occupies the randomly encountered non-artist's – male or female – body, with a role-reversal of the *âme/anima* becoming the powerful, active force, and instead of giving itself up, renouncing itself, it appropriates the occupied body of the other, having rejected and despised its own.

Jouissance with its emphasis on the 'oneness' of the poet, and prostitution, with its emphasis on the pseudo-sexual encounter with another, are not mutually exclusive, but overlap as a kind of spiritual and aesthetic *masturbatio per vaginam* combining oneness and sexual partner, or 'multitude, solitude: termes égaux et convertibles pour le poète actif et fécond', whose activity and fertility are not wasted on others, but are directed to himself, for the production of his own works or fantasies. So despite these aggressive scenarios about destroying the woman, pushing her down a well, imagining her as a caged beast, and deploring her stupidity in not understanding the poet's contemplation of the clouds, sexual difference in Baudelaire is not as clear-cut, binary, oppositional as the surface narratives might imply. The poet adopts an openness to the world, sensation, traditionally associated with a feminine stance, and a consequent loss of masculine will and control. In the desired states of jouissance and prostitution 'of a special kind', gender distinctions of the binary divide are either dissolved, or fused, with the subject-artist often adopting a position of passivity, non-

agency, occupying a world in which patriarchal structures and order are exploited only to become redundant or transcended.

Notes

1. Charles Baudelaire. *Oeuvres complètes*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1975 edition, Volume 1, p.702.
2. R S King. 'The style of dramaticity in Baudelaire's prose poetry,' *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, Volume 7, 1978-79, pp. 50-59.
3. Jean Starobinski. 'Sur quelques répondeants allégoriques du poète,' *Revue d'Histoire littéraire de la France*, Volume 67, 1967, pp. 402-12. Peggy Kamuf. 'Baudelaire au féminin,' *Paragraph*, special number on feminism, Volume 8, 1986, pp. 75-93.
4. Baudelaire, *ibid* p.702.
5. *Du Vin et du Hachish*, *op. cit.* p.394.
6. *Fusées*, p.649.
7. Anne-Marie Brinsmead. 'A trading of souls: commerce as poetic practice in the *Petits Poèmes en prose*,' *Romanic Review*, Volume 79, 1988, pp.452-65.