Baudelaire's Criminality and Its Consequences
Jessaka Bailey

Senior Thesis in the Honors Program
Dr. James Winchell, Advisor

Department of Foreign Languages and Literature
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"Government and art are a risky compound, and mixture can be safely achieved only with the most enlightened direction. Otherwise, the amalgam tends to make common that which is least common in essence."
-- Roger L. Williams

I. The History of Romanticism

In the publication of Préface de Cromwell (1827), Victor Hugo calls the Romantic movement an organism that "dans ce cadavre d'une civilisation décrépite dépose le germe de la civilisation moderne" [in the corpse of a rotting civilization deposits the seed of modern civilization]. Romanticism, for Hugo, constituted modernity itself. In his famous preface, he explains the literary lineage of French literature since the Enlightenment. There is, according to Hugo's "La Théorie des Trois Âges," a distinct progression from "Les Temps Primitifs" to "Les Temps Antiques," then onto "Les Temps Modernes," the period of the present in 1827.

Hugo says of the first category, "Voilà le premier homme, voilà le premier poète. Il est jeune, il est lyrique. La prière est toute sa religion : l'ode est toute sa poésie."

[Here is the first man, here is the first poet. He is young, and he is lyrical. The prayer is all his religion: the ode is all his poetry.] His second epoch represents the Classicists, who looked to Ancient Greek tragedies and Roman culture for inspiration. Hugo says of the Classicist, "La poésie reflète ces grands événements; des idées elle passe aux choses. Elle chante les siècles, les peuples, les empires."

\[2\] Ibid., 33.
from ideas it passes to things. It sings of centuries, peoples, empires.] For him, the
Classicists were overly fond of static structure, and tended to represent in art happenings
that would be common knowledge to the public, such as political or historical events.
The Classicists were fond of things that would be important to all; Their literary subjects,
for Victor Hugo, were safely conventional ones.

Hugo then explains how Romanticism would signal the age of the drama, the
“new” form reflecting the personal struggle, not the social one. Poets who focused first
on some personal struggle were therefore called Romantic, and because of this
description of personal turmoil, they were also usually criticized by classical critics as
iconoclasts and pessimists. They were so named because they seemed always to be
searching for happiness, or rather, the place where they might find complete contentment.
In most Early Romantic poetry, the poet’s search is foiled by the constraints placed on
him by society. These constraints will not allow him to be where he thinks he should,
which is an unknown site encompassing an indeterminate state of being described as the
“natural” place. Early Romantics were therefore proponents of the “natural,” or the place
where they might be free to enjoy themselves and their rights. These rights come from
what Jean-Jacques Rousseau called the “inalienable rights of man,” an idea that inspired
not only Romanticism, but also eighteenth century democracy as a whole.

To understand the dilemma of the Early Romantic poet, it is necessary to pursue
the historico-psychological possibility that after the French Revolution of 1789 and the
stormy events that followed, including the Terror and the reign of Napoleon, the French

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people were entitled to experience a kind of post-traumatic pessimism. However, human
nature usually overcomes loss and trauma through grieving. With time, the people of a
traumatized, terrorized or defeated nation can move forward with their lives toward some
hopeful future. The nation does not necessarily forget, but its citizens also do not live in
that terrible moment forever. The Early Romantic poets, however, did somehow continue
to live in and reflect upon the terrible moments. Poets such as Chateaubriand, Nerval,
Musset, and Lamartine reveled in their losses, searching for a mysterious, missing part
that society had taken away. In this way, their depression about their historical traumas
came to characterize the “mal du siècle,” or romantic melancholy.

As a second-generation romantic, Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) brought new
meaning to the romantic concept of the “natural.” Unlike his predecessors, Baudelaire
was convinced that to be natural did not necessarily mean to be good. He affirmed that he
would not necessarily search for the place where he might find the natural, where he
might exist with contentment. Rather, in the first part of his life, he attempted to bring
society to an understanding of a revised realm of the natural, as it existed in his view.
Like Rousseau, Baudelaire believed in the baseness and the corruptibility of society, as
did Hugo and the Early Romantics; unlike them, however, he did not believe in merely
trying to escape its corruption. Because of Baudelaire’s insight, he might be called the
first Modern Romantic, revising Victor Hugo’s progressist historiography to include
something truly novel. He at first tried to convert society by producing several works,
including the Salon de 1846 and the first edition of Les Fleurs du Mal, which would
attempt to bring society to the realization that they were a society of fools who obediently
endured the moral and social regulations imposed by their own worst moral and spiritual limitations. Afterwards, when Baudelaire had suffered through the rejection and public prosecution of his efforts, he took a different stance. He gave up on the notion that he would see change in his lifetime, and constructed for himself an innovative niche within a corrupt society, which can be seen in *Le Spleen de Paris* (published posthumously in 1869).

This evolution in French Romanticism occurred at the height of Napoleon III's reign, the period known as the Second Empire (1851-1870). Louis-Napoleon's views were divided at best, confused at worst, as he attempted to please every faction in an effort to sustain his artificially-imposed reign. He was widely supported: The Radicals thought him to be a Socialist, the Moderate Republicans thought him to be a Jacobin, the Orleanists supposed him to be a Liberal, and the Catholics were confident that he would defend the Faith against radical onslaught. Napoleon III generally decreed that with his reign, he would be the bearer of liberty. However, when the nation did not agree with his strict definition of liberty, the people started to become disillusioned. Auguste de Morny, the ruler's illegitimate half-brother, appeared as a grand supporter of Louis-Napoleon's in 1849, after his elevation to the presidency of the Second Republic in 1848. Morny was elected to the National Assembly, and henceforth became the driving force behind Napoleon III's quest for his strangely authoritarian notions of liberty.

Although Morny was in favor of a sort of liberalism, such as that established when he became the major concession-maker of a decree which permitted parliamentary

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5 Ibid., p. 51.
response to speech from the throne, his views on liberty were hardly valid outside the realm of politics. His ideas were often contradicted by the emperor himself, and so that even though the administration proclaimed itself to be the promoter of liberty, it was actually repressive where the arts were concerned. Morny’s effort to win the intelligentsia, the artists, the writers, and the students over to the “liberalism” of the Second Republic were widely scoffed.

Included in the Second Empire’s series of blows against the intelligentsia was the suspension of Ernest Renan’s controversial courses at the Collège de France in 1862, after the publication of his *Vie de Jésus* [Life of Jesus]. Just five years before, the Empress Eugénie had demanded the prosecution of Gustave Flaubert for *Madame Bovary*, claiming novel as an offense to public morality. Flaubert escaped conviction by eloquently convincing the court that he believed everything in the novel to be true and therefore good, and suggested that the “society which attacked him for printing what actually existed was in an immoral position.” Six months later, when Baudelaire was found guilty of the same offense, his sentencing included a fine, but no imprisonment. The principle of censorship, with the aim of keeping intact the false mores of the imperial-bourgeois society, remained in place.

Clearly, the official, state-promoted limits on expression in art and literature were anything but liberal at this time. Both Flaubert and Baudelaire’s prosecution provided a clue that these writers were on the right track, for the sector whom they attacked was so offended by the truth in their respective works that they both suffered the anguish and

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6 Ibid., p. 59.
7 Ibid., p. 60.
8 Ibid., p. 125.
expense of state-sponsored prosecution. A close look at the work of the Early Romantics, on the other hand, could show how the artists were not truly threatening to contemporary French society because they took their problems elsewhere, in search of an ideal place far away from actual society.

The Early Romantics were constantly searching for the place where their natural rights could never be infringed upon, and where they would not endure societal pressure or constraint. However, the problem that these poets faced was one to which they could not be given a definitive solution. As a consequence, their search never ended until death; they were therefore forever miserable and melancholy, doomed by the unhappy destiny embodied in the quest itself. The Early Romantics are so involved with blaming either society or "fate" for the injustice done to them, that they cannot see what society might have to offer to them. They see themselves as purely dysfunctional, existing somehow on the outside of society. Two striking examples of such attitudes might be found in works by Early Romantic poets Alphonse de Lamartine and François René de Chateaubriand. These two authors, in exemplary ways, succeed greatly in conveying to their readers their feelings of hopelessness and their discontent with the burdens of society.

From reading several works that typify the period, Early Romantic authors may be organized according to some typological categories. The term "byronian hero," for example, describes one of these characters, and is exemplified by the speaker in L'Isolément (1818) by Alphonse de Lamartine. Another romantic type might be called
the poet/visionary, who is best exemplified in Chateaubriand’s main character in the novel _Réne_ (1802-1805).

The byronian hero comes from nowhere, thinks that the world is grotesque and absurd, and considers himself among the living dead. Lamartine’s poetic persona fits these characteristics perfectly: in “L’Isolement,” his origin is not revealed, he detests the earth and all that nature has to offer, and he wishes that he could die: All this for what is presumed to be the loss of a loved one. This loss is depicted as the single event that has turned him toward irrecoverable melancholy, and made him become misanthropic because he can find no one else to replace this individual. The loss of a loved one is surely a valid reason to become pessimistic and distraught, but the narrator allows the rest of his life to be overshadowed by the “black sun” of this loss. Addressing his loved one, he wishes to be carried off “sur le char de l’Aurore ... m’élancer jusqu’à toi!” [in the chariot of the Aurora... to launch myself to you!] He feels that he cannot be brought back to life again because “le soleil des vivants n’échauffe plus les morts.” [the sun of the living no longer warms the dead] Lamartine says that the only way that he can be satisfied is to die, because only death would reunite him with the loved one that he has lost.

Also considered an Early Romantic, the eponymous hero Réne exemplifies the poet/visionary by cultivating the incomprehensible as his life’s mission. He consequently becomes the embodiment of the incomprehensible because of guilt over an incestuous relationship, even though not physically consummated, with his sister Amélie. Because

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10 “L’Isolement” line 20.
incest is taboo in virtually every society and is unthinkable to most people, the romantic hero’s destiny in this case enacts the incomprehensible and he feels utterly alone. His first perception of his sister as a romantic interest marks the single event that begins his life of torture. Thereafter, his guilt never goes away, and his thoughts build upon themselves into a self-crippling obsession.

Because of this transgression against taboo, he has been doomed never to see Amélie again because she, too, is stricken with grief over their unholy relationship. She sacrifices herself to a life in the convent, which she probably never would have done had their relationship been purely platonic. From this point forward, even though he cannot admit it to himself, he is looking for a place where incest might be accepted. He is able to allow himself only that he is searching for something, possibly happiness. The reader knows, however, that he cannot find it unless he can be with Amélie. Chateaubriand knows this as well, and most likely uses incest as the mode of transformation for the romantic poet because he knows that his character, “romantic” in the extreme, will never find solace elsewhere.

Both Chateaubriand and Lamartine depict a similar kind of grief over the eternal loss of the one that each of their romantic characters had loved. Both search endlessly for refuge in a world that cannot replace the person they miss. Amélie suggests that René fill the void with service to others, and Lamartine searches “ces vallons, ces palais, ces chaumières” [valleys, palaces, cottages], for another lover. Neither finds solace in these options. From this depth of despair, both arise to a sort of demi-god state, wherein

\[11\] “L’Isolement” line 25.
the earthly world cannot satisfy them. Of the sun, Lamartine says, "Je ne désire rien de tout ce qu'il éclaire..."12 [I desire nothing that it illuminates...] Of René, Amélie writes, "...la terre n'offre rien qui soit digne de vous."13 [. . .the earth offers nothing which is worthy of you.] Both feel that the world simply has nothing to offer them, yet short of death, they cannot escape their mortality.

These romantic heroes constantly bathe in the self-pity of their lost souls, citing the world as the cause for their unfortunate and undeserved demise. Lamartine knows where his refuge lies: he must wait until death takes him in order to get there. René, on the other hand, would love to live with Amélie for the rest of his life, without guilt. Society, and as a result his conscience, will not allow him to do so. Nonetheless, both feel that they have been treated unjustly. The Early Romantics moan about injustice, never allowing that they can be content with their fate. They never are quite strong enough to overcome their self-pity, and they never forgive a hostile society. In fact, the Early Romantics are so wounded by their self-pity and self-hatred that they never think to explore what the world might have to offer outside of the shadow of their melancholy and despair.

II. The Coming of Baudelaire's Modernity

As a direct heir to these writers, Charles Baudelaire changes the definition of Romanticism in the mid-nineteenth century. In his theoretical statements, he shows the

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12 "L'Isolément" line 35.
Early Romantics that they can still take solace from society, even without society realizing that it needs the Romantic poet or his version of the “natural.” Although Baudelaire was still definitely a worthy successor to Romantic thought, he chooses to explore a different role of society in his representations of the poet’s plight as a lost soul. In *Le Spleen de Paris*, published posthumously in 1869, Baudelaire describes his contact with the world through the new medium of the *poème en prose*, or prose poetry. Indeed, Baudelaire’s original development of prose poetry as a medium in itself says something about his relationship with society. Prose poetry is not conventional, but for Baudelaire it becomes the newly evolutionary form of choice in this volume of work. This prose medium can be deciphered as poetry by its readers: it does not conform to formal poetic constraints, but it is nonetheless understood poetically.

By beginning the study of Baudelaire’s concept of modernity with a close reading of three prose poems from *Le Spleen de Paris*, the contrast between the Modern Romanticism and the Early Romanticism can readily be established. I propose then to show that when Baudelaire wrote the prose poems in this volume, he had abandoned the belief that he might be able to convince society of its truly “natural” being, and had stopped the effort to bring them into his world by means of poetic “conversion.” When this boundary between Early Romanticism and Modern Romanticism has been well defined, I then propose to show that eleven years earlier, with the publication of his first volume of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, Baudelaire was still intent on convincing society of its “naturalness.” Hence, the poems in *Les Fleurs du Mal* became offensive to the Second Empire officials because of their intent to weaken the “public morality,” which
Baudelaire considered to be the basis of the detestable social structure underlying Second-Empire bourgeois society.

Baudelaire suffers from the same sense of loss as the Early Romantics, but unlike them, he knows that his life cannot be "cured." Like his predecessors, Baudelaire does overtly blame society for its oppression of the poet. Likewise, he accepts that he cannot acclimate his soul to his earthly surroundings, but unlike the eternally tortured romantics, he rather revels in his role as a dysfunctional "nonmember" of society. His resulting appreciation of dysfunction becomes, therefore, a fundamental statement of the Modern Romantic poet's new function in Second-Empire society: the positive side of melancholic negativity.

In "L'Etranger," the inaugural piece in Le Spleen de Paris, Baudelaire depicts the conversation that would take place upon the presumed foreigner's first contact with society. The poem recounts an anonymous conversation about the things that the foreigner holds dear, and it becomes clear that he does not hold family or material things in high esteem. Baudelaire seems to come even more clearly to terms with his "social misfit" personality in "Le Mauvais Vitrier," the ninth piece in a collection of fifty. He describes his and his friends' actions as acts performed by individuals who transcend the rationale of society. At the same time, however, in the performance of such acts he is making a connection, however bizarre, with society. Finally, in my reading of "Les Foules," which is the twelfth piece, I will attempt to show that Baudelaire comes to "positive" terms with the "negative" role that society can play in his life, and he learns how to use society and its peculiarities to make himself happy.
As the first poem of the series in *Le Spleen de Paris*, "L'Étranger" establishes the precise terms and parameters of the relationship between Baudelaire and society. First, the foreigner represents an unknown entity. The questioner (presumably a representative of conventional society) cannot understand his values. First he asks the foreigner, "Qu’aimes-tu le mieux... ton père, ta mère, ta sœur ou ton frère?" [Whom do you love the best... your father, your mother, your sister or your brother?]. The foreigner responds by saying that he has none of these relations, nor does he know the meaning of "tes amis" [your friends]. He knows not of patriotism, beauty, or gold. All of these responses by the foreigner say that he does not "belong" to anything or anyone. He does not have a family name, or a country to which he is loyal, nor does he have riches by which to give himself honor. This is why society, in the form of his interrogator, cannot grasp his identity or understand his mentality.

If he is not associated with any of these things, then what value might he have? Can he even exist? Baudelaire says yes: He can exist because he sees and loves the clouds. "J’aime les nuages... les merveilleux nuages!" [I love the clouds... the marvelous clouds!]. From the clouds, Baudelaire’s persona can fashion anything he pleases. He does not need the attributes of society to give him value because he sees all the beauty, gold, and comfort that he needs in the passing of the clouds. Despite this seeming idealism, however, he can also see the horror of the grotesque bourgeois society and its baseness.

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15 "L’Étranger" p.75.
As in Early Romanticism, these ideas actually come from within, and in this case Baudelaire uses the clouds as a medium for his expression of them. As he says in the *Salon de 1846*, referring to the search for beauty, “Ils l'ont cherché en dehors, et c'est en dedans qu'il était seulement possible de la trouver.”¹⁶ [They search on the outside, and it is on the inside that it is only possible to find it]. Here, then, he lays the basis for the change to what I call Modern Romanticism. Worldly things, and the comfort or retribution derived from society, cannot make the Romantic poet whole again. He will never have a part in “normal society,” but he can have peace from within and be content with whatever interaction with society that he can make for himself. This kind of self-empowerment represents a step forward in Romantic psychology.

Why does the stranger hold in contempt all worldly things? He does not say. If there is a reason, therefore, it probably no longer holds any bearing for him: its omission from the poem tells us as much. The stranger seems to value spiritual things, those things that the bourgeois society has forgotten; he is not necessarily religious, however. When asked if he likes gold, the stranger responds, “Je le hais comme vous haïssez Dieu.”[I hate it as much as you hate God]. The questioner responds, “Eh! qu'aimes-tu donc, extraordinaire étranger?” [Eh! What do you love then, extraordinary stranger?]. It is worth noting that the bourgeois questioner does not deny that he hates God, nor is he even offended enough to comment otherwise. This is not to say that Baudelaire is a great proponent of religion, nor that he hates society because it has lost some “true” religion. The question and its answer could point out, however, that religion is usually the only

spiritual practice that is common to all societies. For Baudelaire, it represents the last hope that keeps society above base material values. If this is true, then the modern poet has one more reason to find peace on the outer edges of society. He justifies his place on the margin because he feels that he exists not only on the outside of society, but also above it. The bourgeoisie is grotesque, and Baudelaire finds contentment in not being a part of it; but rather he interacts with it in his own “abnormal” way.

In “Le Mauvais Vitrier” [The Bad Window-Glazier] Baudelaire further strengthens his claim that contentment should come from within, even if society cannot justify or even comprehend it. In this prose poem, Baudelaire tells the story of his circle of friends, and their unexplainable need to do things that society would deem crazy or pointless. He says:

Il y a des natures purement contemplatives, et tout à fait impropre à l’action, qui cependant, sous une impulsion mystérieuse et inconnue, agissent quelquefois avec une rapidité dont elles se seraient crues elles-mêmes incapables. 17

[There are some purely contemplative natures, absolutely inappropriate to action, who nevertheless, under a mysterious and unknown impulse, take action sometimes with a rapidity of which they had believed themselves incapable].

Baudelaire then goes on to tell the story of a friend who lights a cigar beside a barrel of gunpowder in order to know the pleasures of anxiety and to tempt fate, among other unpredictable things. He tells of another friend who jumps around the neck of an old man in line for the theatre, to the amazement of the watching crowd. Then he tells the story of his own interaction with the “bad” window-glazier. The glass-seller is walking through

the streets with plain glass for sale, which is strapped to a frame on his back. The narrator calls the salesman up to his residence, the poor soul torturously climbs the narrow and winding stairs, and the narrator then rejects his glass because he has none that is beautifully colored. As the window-seller is on his way back down the narrow staircase, the narrator, because of one of these unknown impulses for which he is not to blame, drops a flowerpot down six stories onto the load carried by the “bad” window-glazier.

He cannot explain such an action, but he admits that it is “hystérique selon les médecins, satanique selon ceux qui pensent un peu mieux que les médecins. . .” \(18\) [hysterical according to physicians, satanic according to those who think a bit better than the physicians . . .]. To be hysteric, in a psychological sense, would be explainable. Therefore, he says, “Satanic” would be a better description for these impulsive acts, because their cause is not explainable, in a way comparable to the non-scientific existence of Satan.

Baudelaire tells this story without blame, however. The title “Le Mauvais Vitrier” indicates that the window seller is the bad person, and that the narrator who let the flowerpot fall is not “bad” because he is faultless. The glazier, who could represent a common but integral part of society, is actually to blame. This can be explained by Baudelaire’s ever-stronger contention that society should be blamed for some unknown injustice done to the poet. If there was never actually a single act of injustice (which has already been shown to be no longer inherently important, but merely a turning point for

\(18\) “Le Mauvais Vitrier” p.87.
his thought), then he calls the window glazier the bad person because he simply must have someone to blame. This would signal a projection of his own guilt onto the glass-merchant.

"La vie en beau!" [Life through beautifully-colored glass!]\(^{19}\) exclaims the narrator after he drops the flowerpot onto the window maker. Thus he interacts with the world, even though the metaphor figures a visual barrier separating him from phenomena. His ideal glass is colored to keep him from having to see "the real," which he knows exists; he also knows that it is the self-interested actions, the materialism, and the baseness of the bourgeoisie that would be "improved" by such a lens. He can still live in this world, but in order to do so he must look at the world in his own way, and therefore know that his way is superior to the ways of others.

In all, Baudelaire describes his interaction with society as valid, but nonetheless unexplainable. The fact that society cannot understand his rash actions does not bother him, nor does the fact that he cannot explain them himself. At the end of the poem he justifies his hurtful actions towards the window-glazier by saying, "Mais qu'importe l'éternité de la damnation à qui a trouvé dans une seconde l'infini de la jouissance?"\(^{20}\) [But what is important about an eternity of damnation to those who have found in one second an infinity of joy?]. In these brief moments during the unexplainable action, Baudelaire finds enough joy to justify his otherwise marginal interaction with society. As he says in *Salon de 1846* "Pour moi, le romantisme est l'expression la plus récente, la plus actuelle du beau"\(^{21}\) [For me, romanticism is the most recent, the most current,

\(^{19}\) "Le Mauvais Vitrier" p.88.

\(^{20}\) "Le Mauvais Vitrier" p.88.

\(^{21}\) Baudelaire, *Salon de 1846*, p.103-104.
expression of beauty]. For him, romanticism consists in finding beauty in what is most immediate. He has found it in his swift, brief, utterly unconventional and gratuitous interaction with society, which is unexplainable but all the more vivifying for its incomprehensibility.

In “Les Foules” (the twelfth piece in the collection) Baudelaire further theorizes and elaborates his solution to the problem that the Early Romantics could not solve. He has become happy because of his perverse function in society (his “dysfunction” by normal standards). Baudelaire likens his relationship to society to “mystérieuses ivresses.” This “mysterious drunkenness” becomes yet another symbol for the beautiful glass through which he would look at the world in “Le Mauvais Vitrier.” These things articulate symbols for the unspeakable, unexplainable way that the Modern Romantic poet can grapple specifically with life in a society that he systematically detests.

Baudelaire says that “le poète jouit de cet incomparable privilège, qu’il peut à sa guise être lui-même et autrui”22 [the poet plays with this incomparable privilege, which enables him, to his wishes, to be himself and others]. In the crowds, he can live the life of a normal member of society merely by watching. He calls this activity a form of “sainte prostitution”23 [holy prostitution]. He finds the bourgeoisie grotesque and absurd, and he revels in knowing these things because it gives him joy to be part of society, while at the same time standing apart from society. From his socio-aesthetic interactions, he says that he can populate the world with his works, which also makes him content. In all, he convinces the reader in “Les Foules” that the Modern poet is anything but lonely.

23 “Les Foules” p. 95.
Finding amusement in those who would pity him, he says that all who inhabit the margins
“doivent rire quelquefois de ceux qui les plaignent pour leur fortune si aiguite et pour leur
vie si chaste”24 [must laugh sometimes at those who pity them for their destinies so
disrupted, and for their lives so chaste].

Explaining this concept in the Salon de 1846, Baudelaire calls this realization “la
beauté double” [double beauty].25 He says that there is a place that the Modern Romantic
poet can find where he or she sees the eternal, ideal beauty even in the debased, material,
contemporary world. When the modern poet finds this place, he will no longer have to
suffer the futile, guilt-ridden search enacted by the Early Romantic poets. In other words,
the Modern Romantic poet has found here the essence of what he calls “modernity.” He
says that there is “un élément relatif, circonstanciel, qui sera, si l’on veut, tour à tour ou
tout ensemble, l’époque, la mode, la morale, la passion”26 [a relative, circumstantial
quality, which will be, if one so desires, in turn or all together, the era, the fashion,
morality, or passion].

That the Modern Romantic poet knows of this “élément relatif” is what
Baudelaire calls the modern poet’s “incomparable privilège.” The Modern Romantic
poet has found the aesthetic place where he can see the eternal passion and beauty in the
base, grotesque, bourgeois world of nineteenth-century France. That he can appreciate
and find contentment living in a world where he must forever look through beautifully
colored glass to be happy is the mark, therefore, of the Modern Romantic poet, whose
world is transformed not by action, but by aesthetics. He knows of the injustice that is

25 Baudelaire, Salon de 1846, p.455.
26 Ibid., p. 456.
inherent in his situation, but does not search for retribution or impossible justice as the Early Romantic poet had because he has accepted the melancholic truth that it does not exist. In this aesthetic acceptance, then, he finds a semblance of melancholy peace.

In his preface to the *Salon de 1846*, Baudelaire describes a time when the bourgeoisie will need the poet. He says that, “or vous avez besion d’art,” meaning that even though they may not know it yet, the bourgeoisie will some day need poetry. Baudelaire, even though he may be content with his discovery of “double beauty”, knows that eventually the bourgeoisie will lose its material comfort and its possessions. Then they will need something transcendental on which to survive.

This is when they will need Baudelaire, as a true representative of poetry and beauty. He is already greater than the bourgeois society, however, because he knows that poetry is the only sustenance that a human ultimately needs. “Vous pouvez vivre trois jours sans pain; -- sans poésie, jamais; et ceux d’entre vous qui disent le contraire se trompent: ils ne se connaissent pas” [You may be able to live three days without bread; -- without poetry, never; and those among you who say the contrary are wrong: they do not know themselves]. This and other statements from the *Salon de 1846*, including “Vous êtes la majorité . . . qui est la justice” [You are the majority. . . you are the justice], tell the bourgeoisie in an insincere and ironic way that they alone have the power to change their own blinding stupidity. The Modern Romantic poet, therefore, has freed himself from responsibility for social injustice by means of critique.

Ibid., p. 97.

Ibid., p. 98.
How soon would this change on the part of the bourgeoisie take place? As I have just shown, Baudelaire staunchly believed that the bourgeoisie would some day need the Romantic poet. It might be possible that he even hoped that these dreams would be realized in his lifetime. After the preceding discussion of Le Spleen de Paris, the contours of Baudelaire’s concept of Modern Romanticism have been clearly described. I would like to now move backward in Baudelaire’s literary life, through an examination of the six “Condemned Pieces,” wherein I will show that the first edition of Les Fleurs du Mal represents his last attempt to bring the general public into a full comprehension of his world of double beauty and modernity. This attempt is what so threatened the government that they prosecuted the poet and, by condemning them to excision and separate publication, effectively “imprisoned” the poems themselves. In this, an aesthetic of social critique provokes an aesthetic prosecution.

III. The Threat of Baudelaire’s Modernity

The first edition of Les Fleurs du Mal brought great attention to the poet because of his prosecution upon its publication in 1857. The public prosecutor, Pinard, brought suit against both Baudelaire and his publisher. The court condemned Baudelaire and required him to pay a fine and to remove six of his poems from succeeding editions. These six “condemned” poems are, “Le Léthé,” “Lesbos,” “Femmes Damnées,” “Les Métamorphoses du Vampire,” “A Celle Qui Est Trop Gaie,” and “Les Bijoux.” 29 The

fine was later reduced, and later editions would feature the six condemned poems in a separate section. All in all, the prosecution was hardly damning, succeeding more in attracting attention to the sale of the book of poetry than in denouncing it.

Why were these six poems so offensive to French officials that they thought prosecution was necessary? Included also in his first edition of *Les Fleurs du Mal* are several poems that could be considered at the least as offensive as these six. In “Une Martyre,” for example, a male figure cuts off the head of his female lover and places it on a chair, separate from her body.\(^{30}\) He does this because he thinks that in this form he can love her best. There are other tales of Satanism and lesbianism, which surely must have caught the attention of the officials who reviewed and criticized and censored the volume.

Why, however, were these six specific poems chosen for excision? It is possible that they represent a too-forceful denunciation of conventional society in its most obvious form. In fact, each of the six poems shows some facet of perversity that could, and probably does, exist in any given modern society. These perversities are so taboo that they have not even been addressed in the laws of society because they have been hypocritically assumed not to exist. Baudelaire uses the scandals of lesbianism, mutilation, vampirism and Satanism to show the moral and aesthetic breadth of modernity. He shows that if Beauty, found by the poet in both the transitory and the material, can also be located in these blamable acts, then a frank and self-conscious modernity might also be achieved. Furthermore, it is entirely possible to attain this

combination because these things can be found in the “everyday” world of experience, however bizarre, by delving into the crevices where “proper” members of society would not dare look.

I will now look more closely at these condemned poems in order to articulate in more detail my thesis: These six poems were particularly offensive to the government of the Second Empire because each poem contains either direct reference to the absence, or the smothering, of a conscience; or to the perversion of everyday objects into fetish. In some cases, both ideas appear. Furthermore, the depiction of these ideas finds expression through the depiction of sexual and/or criminal acts that were strictly prohibited by both social custom and Second-Empire hypocrisy. For even if the acts were not explicitly outlawed, their depictions were.

In “Les Bijoux” 31[The Jewels] the narrator’s lover is naked, wearing only her jewels, which make a jingling sound that he much enjoys. He watches his lover as she changes position on the couch where she is lying, all the while taking in the wonderful sounds of her jewels. Then, with her “Les yeux fixés sur moi, . . . la candeur unie à la lubricité / Donnait un charme neuf à ses métamorphoses”32 [eyes fixed on mine. . . the incorporation of candor into lust gave new charms to her metamorphoses], she had turned into the powerful one. Just as the poet says in the first quatrain, she had “. . . l’air vainqueur / Qu’ont dans leurs jours heureux les esclaves des Mores”33 [ . . . the conquering air / of a Moorish slave on days her master is pleased]. She has so much power over him that she seems determined “Pour troubler le repos où mon âme était mise,

32 Ibid., lines 15-16.
33 Ibid., lines 3-4.
/ Et pour la déranger du rocher de cristal..."  

[To undermine what peace I had achieved, dislodging my soul from its rock-crystal throne...]. He praises the color of her skin as it changes, and watches for quite some time, until "le foyer seul illuminait la chambre..." [dying coals made the only light in the room...]. The jewels that his lover are wearing please him; he says that these are "les choses où le son se mêle à la lumière" [objects whose sound is a synonym for light]. In ordinary circumstances, the jewels that a woman wears are part of the everyday, the common; here they become objects which are metamorphosed into symbols of light, illuminating the tawny skin of his lover as the poet possesses her. In the common realm, the narrator’s attention is caught by the sound of her clinking adornments; in the realm of perversity, however, his attention turns to the light that illuminates her skin as it is rouged by blood.

The jewels can be seen as a symbol of the material beauty of the age, and the poet transforms them into objects which illuminate the experience that he beholds. The experience is a strangely auto-voyeuristic encounter, wherein he detaches himself from emotion so completely that he seems to be watching someone else make love to her. Besides this obvious perversity, there is also a perversity that lies in the transformation of these jeweled, clinking objects into objects of mediated lust and desire. Because she is making love with someone "other" than the narrator, who adores her, the attraction that is connected with the jewels can be nothing but fetishistic. All the same, he finds beauty in the wearing of these jewels by this woman, and they are transformed into the illuminators which aid his auto-voyeurism. The direct connection between a woman’s everyday

34 Ibid., lines 22-23.
35 Ibid., line 30.
36 Ibid., line 8.
jewels and the poet’s lustful, fetishistic desire is a connection that Second-Empire society
would not readily like to make public. The power of the poet’s honesty here is
undeniable; the prosecution in 1857 found it irresistible.

In Baudelaire’s “A Celle Qui Est Trop Gaie,” the same tone is inherent, both
thematically and structurally. In the beginning of the poem, the poet describes his lover
as she would look during the day. He says:

Ta tête, ton geste, ton air
Sont beaux comme un beau paysage;
Le rire joue en ton visage
Comme un vent frais dans un ciel clair.37

[You tilt your head and smile--as if
across the countryside
a breeze had rippled through the grass
out of a brilliant sky].

He comments on “la santé / Qui jaillit comme une clarté / De tes bras et de tes
épaules”38 [the radiant health which aureoles / your shoulders and your arms].

Afterwards, he says that he has gone outdoors, to the park, in order that:

Le soleil déchirer mon sein;

Et le printemps et la verdure
Ont tant humilié mon cœur,
Que j’ai puni sur une fleur
L’insolence de la Nature.39

[. . . the sun like a rebuke
would lacerate my breast,

so deeply did the Spring’s new green
humiliate my heart
that I would punish in one rose
all Nature’s insolence. . .].

38 Ibid., lines 6-8.
39 Ibid., lines 20-24.
The sun, as a central embodiment and source of nature, has mutilated him, and he will take his revenge on one rose. The laceration produced by the sun on his breast is natural, and he feels that if the sun has the authority to do such harm, then so shall he upon nature.

He describes the harm that he will do to his lover by saying that he will “Pour meurtrir ton sein pardoné / Et faire à ton flanc étonné / Une blessure large et creuse”\(^{40}\) [. . . bruise your envied breasts. . . in your unsuspecting side to gash a gaping wound. . . ].

He then describes the ecstasy with which he will inject “mon venin”\(^{41}\) [my (his) venom] into her new wound. That the narrator of this poem found the idea for such a mutilation from something so common as the burning of the sun on human flesh is itself outlandish. Here again, the action of a common object, the sun, has produced a perverse reaction. He finds this reaction beautiful, because he describes the “vertigineuse douceur” [the final ecstasy] with which he says “T’infuser mon venin,. . .!”\(^{42}\) [I’ll inject my venom into you!]

This final promise stands out on the page like an impending truth. This particular poem was most likely an object of prosecution because of its too-frank illumination of the thought processes whereby one formulates the idea to perform such a heinous, criminal act upon another human being. The work is threatening to society because of this, and because of the exclamatory remark (I’ll inject my venom into you!) that reminds the reader that merely by reading this poem, he or she could also be subject to such an “injection”.

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\(^{40}\) Ibid., lines 30-32.
\(^{41}\) Ibid., line 36.
\(^{42}\) Ibid., line 35-36.
Evil is also present in the everyday in “Les Métamorphoses du Vampire” [Metamorphoses of the Vampire], where Baudelaire describes a voluptuous vampire woman who, during the night, “eut de mes os sucé toute la moelle” [sucked the marrow from my bones] but during the day resembled “des débris de squelette” [the wreckage of a skeleton]. It seems that this woman, perhaps a prostitute, endlessly boasts of her charms during the night, saying that “Les anges impuissants se damneraient pour moi!” [the impotent angels would be damned for me!] The narrator says, however, that when he opened his eyes in the light of day:

A mes côtes, au lieu du mannequin puissant... 

Tremblaient confusément des débris de squelette
Qui d’eux-mêmes rendaient le cri d’une girouette
Ou d’une enseigne, au bout d’une tringle de fer,
Que balance le vent pendant les nuits d’hiver. 

[Beside me, instead of that potent mannequin... 

there trembled the wreckage of a skeleton
which grated with the cry of a weathervane
or a rusty signboard hanging from a pole
battered by the wind on winter nights].

These are everyday sounds with which most people are familiar, and the poet’s comparison of her apparent snoring to these sounds is a relation which could be made on any common day. In the poet’s vision, however, these are actually the sounds of a female vampire, a fantastic creature both legendary and transcendental.

Most poignantly, the nighttime seductress says that “Moi, j’ai la lèvre humide, et je sais la science / De perdre au fond d’un lit l’antique conscience” [My lips are

44 Ibid., lines 23 and 25-28.
smooth, and with them I know how to smother conscience somewhere in these sheets].

Her promise that he will not feel guilty for the loveless act that he has just performed with this vampire is perhaps the greatest threat to the moral code of society, far more serious than the casual act itself. Besides the fact that he has come into close contact with a Satanic being, the night with her would be better than one spent with a normal prostitute because she (the vampire) will actually clear his conscience as well. How threatening would the mass publication of this work be to the bourgeois society? Very threatening indeed, for it carries with it the promise of the metamorphosis of an everyday woman into a Satanic being, with whom one’s acts will carry no moral or condemnatory consequences.

Likewise, the threat of guilt-free homosexuality to society is twofold in “Les Femmes Damnées”: Not only is the lesbian relationship between Delphine and Hippolyta evident and most likely considered immoral by the general population, but there also exists a threat to the heterosexual man with the publication and public consumption of this particular work. The poem tells of two women, one of whom is sexually inexperienced. Hippolyta, who is a virgin by male standards, has been seduced by Delphine. It seems that Hippolyta has been somehow discontented by the experience and Delphine adoringly says to her, “Comprends-tu maintenant qu’il ne faut pas offrir / L’holocauste sacré de tes premières roses / Aux souffles violents qui pourraient les flétrir?”[Surely you realize that you must not grant the holy sacrifice of your first bloom/ to cruel gales that would disfigure it]. Second-Empire society would say on the

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43 Ibid., lines 5-6.
contrary yes, one should be subject to the scrutiny of the moral majority, and the threat of a heterosexual woman being taken into this perversity would present an atrocious spectacle for public viewing.

Delphine actively denounces men, saying “Mes baisers sont légers... / Et ceux de ton amant creuseront leurs ornières / Comme des chariots ou des socs déchirants” [My kisses are... light... / his would trace their furrows on your flesh/ like the tongue of some lacerating plough]. Delphine assures Hippolyta that she does not in fact prefer “him,” but that instead the impending doom of paying for her sin has greatly troubled her. She is afraid of the consequence that will come to her for the sin of lust that she has committed. Delphine replies, “Qui donc devant l’amour ose parler d’enfer?” [Who in love’s name dares to speak of Hell?]. She cries furthermore, “Maudit soit à jamais le rêveur inutile / (qui) “S’éprenant d’un problème insoluble et stérile / Aux choses de l’amour mêler l’honnêteté!” [My curse forever on the dreaming fool/ who... / tried for all his folly to enlist love in the service of morality!]. With this, she denounces the majority’s belief that love would have a boundary, one that would condemn her to Hell for going beyond the line of acceptability. Delphine tells her to:

Va, si tu veux, chercher un fiancé stupide;  
Cours offrir un cœur vierge à ses cruels baisers;  
Et pleine de remords et d’horreur, et livide,  
Tu me rapporteras tes seins stigmatisés... 

[Go now-- go find yourself some stupid boy and give his lust your virgin heart to maul; then, filled with horror, livid with disgust, bring back to me your mutilated breasts...]

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47 Ibid., lines 29-32.  
48 Ibid., lines 60-64.  
49 Ibid., lines 69-72.
Directly following this, Delphine advises Hippolyta that "On ne peut ici-bas contenter qu’un seul maître!" [You cannot please two masters in this world!]. Here, Delphine seems to infer that one master might be Hippolyta herself, while the other would be God. This impending inference leads to the Satanic and self-empowering threat of this work, in my reading. Hippolyta does not deny to Delphine that their acts are sinful; rather, she insists that she must please herself. In a repressive social setting, such a "liberating" message may incur more blame than the homosexuality depicted in the poem itself.

Furthermore, Hippolyta infers that each woman should be the master of herself, making for herself the laws that govern the realm of sin and pleasure. Resembling in some ways the tone of the Early Romantics, Hippolyta cries out, "Je sens s’élargir dans mon être / Un abîme béant; cet abîme est mon cœur! / . . . Que nos rideaux fermés nous séparent du monde..." [There is emptiness inside me... Nothing will satiate this monster’s greed... O draw the curtains—leave the world outside]. She is hopeless, and she continues, "Loin des peuples vivants, errantes condamnées, / . . . Faites votre destin, âmes désordonnées, / Et fuyez l’infini que vous portez en vous!" [Wandering far from all mankind... pursue your fate, chaotic souls, and flee the infinite you bear within yourselves!]. Here, the advocacy of self-satisfaction is clear; self-satisfaction, however, does not necessarily have to entail greed or lust, but might instead define the dilemma in which a person becomes fulfilled as a result an attitude that the moral majority might deem sinful. That an innocent female virgin would encounter such a dilemma, and come

50 Ibid., line 73.
51 Ibid., lines 75-76, and 81.
52 Ibid., lines 101-104.
to the intense conclusion stated above in the last quotation, is itself a threat to the fiber of morality so energetically defended by the imperial prosecutor.

In “Lesbos,” Baudelaire clearly elaborates on the idea presented in “Les Femmes Damnées.” The work is a description of the isle of “Lesbos,” where women live without men, and the narrator exclaims that, “... Lesbos entre tous m’a choisi sur la terre / Pour chanter le secret de ses vierges en fleurs” [. . Lesbos has chosen me among all men / to sing the secrets of her budding grove] where he exults “... l’amour se rira de l’Enfer et du Ciel! / Que nous veulent les lois du juste et de l’injuste?” [. . love will laugh at Heaven as it laughs at Hell! / What use to us are the laws of right and wrong?] The narrator also describes the depurification of Sappho, who broke her vow:

... son beau corps la pâture suprême  
D’un brutal dont l’orgueil punit l’impiété  
... Et c’est depuis ce temps que Lesbos se lamentent  
Et malgré les honneurs que lui rend l’univers. . .

[. . her lovely body forfeit to a brute. . .  
And from that time to this, Lesbos laments.  
Heedless of the homage of the world. . .]

With this poem, Baudelaire looks beyond the righteous corruption of the virtuous Hippolyta, and delves straightaway into the corruption of the oppression of the rule of the majority. On this island, there are no laws that are set to be followed, and love seems to be the absolute law. Because the love they practice is not conventional by nineteenth century societal mores, this poem would understandably catch the attention of the critical reader. The tone of defiance throughout, coupled with the seemingly lurid scenes from an

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54 Ibid., lines 68-69 and 71.
enchanted island, could be enough to inspire any reader to question the decisions of those in power.

In “Le Léthé” the poet sumptuously describes the longing to smother his conscience, and to forget the pain of the world. It seems that the woman whom he addresses is dead, because he describes the smell of her is like that of “une fleur flétrie” [a decaying flower]. He longs to die also, because he says, “Je veux dormir! dormir plutôt que vivre! / Dans un sommeil aussi doux que la mort” [in drowsiness as sweet as death itself / . . . I want to sleep-- not live, but sleep]. He is asking for comfort, in death, from this dead woman, and in doing so he will forget the agonies of the world in which he lives.

This woman, whose name replicates that of the River of Forgetfulness in Hell, is pictured as a woman of mercy. She seems to comfort the narrator, making him forget, as he refers to the mythical river of forgetting in the phrase, “le Léthé coule dans tes baisers” [Lethe runs between your lips]. He begs her for mercy by saying:

A mon destin, désormais mon délice,
J’obérai comme un prédestiné;
Martyr docile, innocent condamné,
Dont la ferveur attise le supplice

[My destiny is my desire
which I obey as if foredoomed:
innocent martyr, eager prey
whose fervor hones his agony;].

56 Ibid., lines 9-10.
57 Ibid., line 16.
58 Ibid., lines 17-20.
He says furthermore:

Je sucerai, pour noyer ma rancœur,
Le népenthès et la bonne ciguë
Aux bout charmants de cette gorge aiguë
Qui n'a jamais emprisonné de cœur.  

[hemlock is sweet, nepenthe kind --
I'll suck enough to drown my spite
at those entrancing pointed breasts
which never have confined a heart].

The possible threats to authority in this poem include: the author's insistence that the dead woman is the bearer of pleasure and the advocate of suicide; this claim would figure because of the narrator's critical discontent with the world. Furthermore, he calls himself an "innocent martyr" because he feels that he is not at fault for his suffering. The insistence that necrophilia could be an unrealized fantasy for the common person, and that it also includes the advantage of allowing its practitioner to forget the troubles of the world, is in my reading, the offensive attitude here.

Baudelaire's modern sensibility, as revealed in the prosecutorial dynamic of these condemned poems, develops its critical power in the depiction of taboo: not least of which is the unwritten law prohibiting attitudes of difference, disinculpation and sensuous liberation.

IV. Conclusion

In Salon de 1846, Baudelaire thoughtfully explains his theory of "double beauty" as a means to understand his sense of "modernity." Baudelaire believes that there is an

59 Ibid., lines 21-24.
external, ideal facet of beauty, and there is also a material, historically contemporary facet of beauty. He explains that to find both of these facets in one object is to discover the complex synthesis modernity. In other words, if the reader can find this eternal ideal of beauty in everyday things, in the common objects that surround us, then they might glimpse the modern. In his six condemned poems, he challenges the reader to find, in these most shocking images, the essence of timelessness they invoke. He hopes to remind his readers that they have not risen above the very substance of flesh that makes the human race one of animals. And if the reader can find the beauty in this ideal, which is the concept that because we are all human and that we should enjoy the freedom that comes with creation, then Baudelaire has successfully proven the validity of his own tortured existence.

The title of the work, Les Fleurs du Mal, gives perfect meaning to this concept of "double beauty." The "Flowers of Evil," seemingly an oxymoronic combination, is explained by Jean-Paul Sartre as a perfectly reasonable title:

To do Evil for the sake of Evil is to do the exact opposite of what we continue to affirm is Good. It is to want what we do not want -- since we continue to abhor the powers of Evil -- and not to want what we want, for Good is always defined as the object and end of the deepest will. This was Baudelaire’s attitude. . . . In order for liberty to be complete it has to be offered the choice . . . of being infinitely wrong. It is therefore unique in this whole universe committed to Good, but it must adhere totally to Good, maintain it and strengthen it in order to be able to plunge into Evil. And he who damned himself acquires a solitude which is a feeble image of the great solitude of the truly free man. In a certain sense he creates. In a universe where each element sacrifices itself in order to converge in the greatness of the whole, he brings out the singularity, that is to say the rebelliousness of a fragment or a detail. thus something appears which did not exist before, which nothing can efface and which was in no way prepared by worldly materialism. It becomes a work of luxury, gratuitous and unpredictable. Let us observe the relation-
ship between Evil and poetry: when poetry goes as far as to take Evil as its object the two forms of creation, whose responsibility it essentially limited, meet and merge -- we possess a flower of Evil. But the deliberate creation of Evil -- that is to say, wrong -- is acceptance and recognition of Good. It pays homage to it and, by calling itself wicked, it admits that it relative and derivative--that it could not exist without Good.  

In this way, Sartre explains that Baudelaire, by writing the six “Pièces Condamnées” in Les Fleurs du Mal, did not actually intend to bring society into a world of Evil itself, but rather toward the Good. For society to realize its potential as a collection of ostensibly free humans, i.e., members of society who exercise their “inalienable rights,” they must realize that if they comprehend these poems, however evil their symbols may seem, that they are not surrendering themselves wholly to Evil. On the contrary, to understand these poems, according to Sartre, is to acknowledge and revere the existence of Good, by sheer force of opposition.

As I see it, the division between the forces of Good and Evil, with the requirement that one be fully acknowledged in order to understand the other, articulates the idea of the eternal. The contemporary, material component of this equation would then be the flower, which is normally a symbol of natural goodness. Hence, the Flower of Evil combines the two forms of creation into a title for the work that proposes the same task.

The task of the work as a whole, then, would be to use the dynamic of “double beauty” to bring Baudelaire’s readers into his world of redemption within the experience and knowledge of sin. He does so by shocking the reader with graphic

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images, horrid subjects, and lewd details, which the censorious reader judges horribly evil and worthy of prosecution. He uses the perverse relationships of human beings, with their perversion of common objects into the substances of fetish, and the suppression of the “good” conscience as the common, everyday facet of double beauty. To find the messages of Good in the pages of the six “Condemned Poems,” however, is to understand fully the concept of Modernity, according to Baudelaire’s theoretical statements. In essence, his message was one of inherent Good, tempered by the undeniable reality of Evil. As an heir to romanticism, he focused on the “inalienable rights of man,” which Baudelaire saw as the eternal, ideal of ephemeral beauty. Therefore, his equation concerning the concept of Modernity was fulfilled in his works. His prosecution in 1857 merely proved his vision of French society’s corruption and hypocrisy.
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