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Translating with the Devil: A Fresh Look at Baudelaire Selections from Les Fleurs du Mal

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Translating with the Devil: A Fresh Look at Baudelaire
Selections from Les Fleurs du Mal

Levi Rowland

Translator's Preface

Baudelaire is a favorite among readers and his masterpiece, *The Flowers of Evil*, still remains a staple for the Francophile's bookshelf. His pieces attract many for the shock value they might engender: litanies to the devil himself, paeans to murder and sloth, sexually ambiguous lines that hint to a sleek bisexual sheen. All of this comes together in the work (with a heavy dose of Catholic guilt) to create the macabre world that is Baudelaire's garden of evil flowers. The poems contained within fluctuate wildly, like an emotional rollercoaster of an unstable person. Perhaps that is exactly what they are. Whatever they are, the poems are sharp and inviting in their immediacy. The themes may be shocking but the writing is just as shocking. The allusions and clichés and metaphors of Baudelaire are not the languid affairs that one might expect from the image we have of Baudelaire: soaked in absinthe in a debauched bed, writing on strewn papers. They are instead charged with intensity and there is brightness, almost springy in its qualities, which we can see in these poems. As if to emphasize the immediacy of these poems even more, Baudelaire sprinkles many of his pieces with a number of exclamation points that almost reaches the ridiculous. This is why we need a new translation of Baudelaire. The immediacy, the sharpness, the crisp quality of his work needs to be brought out and explored.

This feat can only be accomplished with a heavy dose of modernistic approach. The rhyming nature of Baudelaire's pieces adds to their immediacy in the original French where they create the cadence and beat of his word. This does not so easily carry over into the English. The translations in English of Baudelaire's work tend to try and keep the rhyming schemes. This is a noble act and there is something to the argument that a poet

like Baudelaire only makes sense in the structured style of his poetry. There is not, however, an easy way to translate this rhyming cadence into English without either sacrificing the flow or the work and sound or severely damaging the meaning behind each strophe. I have decided to sacrifice the structure of his rhymes to focus, instead, heavily on the intended meaning of each poem. This is really a game of chance and guessing where the intended meaning of a structured poem can change in the flowing modernist lines of a free-thought piece. I have attempted to guard the original meaning of the French as closely as possible while also letting the style of each piece guide my choices.

This style and its influence on the translation are central. I have chosen to use style as my mark. If a very literal translation would muddy the nature of the piece than I have changed the course and let style be the trump card. For a quick example: the classicism of Baudelaire is evident in almost every poem in this work. This classicism, however, is empty for most modern readers who cannot easily recall references to Hellenistic Greek poetry and Latin literature of the Roman Empire. I have taken these classical references and reworked them into what I believe to be modern equivalents that still speak to what Baudelaire is saying.

In the end, every translation is a reinterpretation. There is no way to alter the language of a piece without altering meaning and content to a certain degree. The French often say “*Traduire, c’est trahir.*” Perhaps that is true, but there is still a need to bring works such as Baudelaire’s to the modern English speaking reader without muddying them with an academic visage that makes them unattainable and dull. The exciting immediacy of a writer such as this demands a translation that opens up the piece to new

audiences and allows them to explore the pieces with the same level of ability that a native speaker of French can do. I have tried to, at the very least, provide a sampling of Baudelaire's poems in English that speak to this need for a new, immediate interpretation of the pieces.

To the Reader

Stupidity, error, sin, and frivolity
fill our minds and wreck our flesh.
And we feed our pathetic remorse like
street trash feed their vermin.

Oh, but our sin is stubborn, our repentance weak.
We pat ourselves on the back for having confessed
and head back down the muddy path,
thinking our pathetic fears have washed us clean.

Satan, thrice-great Satan, lounges on the pillow of evil,
nourishing our ensorcelled minds for so long.
He, that great chemist, vaporizes the
rich metal of our will.

It's the devil who jerks our puppet strings!
We long for that which disgusts us;
each day we take another step towards Hell,
fearlessly crossing the putrid darkness.

Like some filthy, ruined man, sucking and biting
the tortured breasts of some bygone whore,
we get our kicks anyway we can!
We press these to ourselves like hidden treats.

Tight and swarming like maggots and worms,
a gaggle of demons writhes in our heads,
and when we exhale, the death we breathe
comes flowing out, thick and mournful.

If rape, poison, knives, and fires have
not decorated the boring fabric of our
lives than that must be due to our
weak and pitiful souls.

Among the jackals, the panthers, the lice,
the apes, the scorpions, the vultures, the snakes,
the shrieking, creeping, moaning monstrosities
within the infamous menagerie of our own sins,

There is one uglier, crueller, more revolting!
But he is a quieter, more subdued kind of evil.
He would willingly turn the world to dust
and swallow up the earth like nothing.

It's boredom!--Eyes filled with unwanted tears,
smoking his hookah and dreaming of death.
You know him, reader, this fabulous monster,
--Hypocrite reader,--my double,--my own flesh and blood!

The Litanies of Satan

You--most beautiful and cultured of angels,
a god betrayed by fate, denied your praise.

Save me, Satan, from my misery!

A prince in exile; you've been cheated
but, vanquished, you come back stronger.

Save me, Satan, from my misery!

You know it all, King of everything underfoot--
friendly nurse to human sufferings.

Save me, Satan, from my misery!

Even to lepers and damned outcasts
you teach, ever so kindly, the tastes of heaven.

Save me, Satan, from my misery!

With death, your old lover so strong,
you will father hope--a loveable little fuck-up.

Save me, Satan, from my misery!

You give the cursed that calm and haughty look
that damns the spectators who watch them die.

Save me, Satan, from my misery!

You know so well the hidden cracks of this earth
where a jealous God hid his silver and gold.

Save me, Satan, from my misery!

Your clear eyes can see those arsenals
where metal beings sleep unbothered.

Save me, Satan, from my misery!

Your strong hands hide the edges of buildings
from lost and wandering sleepwalkers.

Save me, Satan, from my misery!

You use your black magic to soften the
bones of drunks, trampled by horses.

Save me, Satan, from my misery!

To console fragile and suffering men you
teach the chemistry of sulfur and gunpowder.

Save me, Satan, from my misery!

You put your mark, sly accomplice, on
the head of Croesus--base and pitiless.

Save me, Satan, from my misery!

You put into the hearts and eyes of whores
a worship of pustules and a love for tatters.

Save me, Satan, from my misery!

Guiding staff of exiles, light of invention,
chaplain to hanged men and conspirators.

Save me, Satan, from my misery!

For the ones that God, in black-hearted fury,
threw from Eden--you are a new father.

Save me, Satan, from my misery!

Prayer:

Glory and praise to Satan, from the heights
of heaven where you reigned to the depths
of hell where, vanquished, you dream so sweetly.
Grant that one day, my Satan, I can relax with you
beneath the tree of knowledge which will
grow above us like a new and glorious temple!

Dance of Death

-To Ernest Christophe

Proud, as if alive, a haughty stature,
with her big bouquet, her tissues and her gloves;
she has the same carefree way as
a flirting slut who tries too hard.

Have you ever seen a thinner waist?
Dressed like a queen, over-the-top,
all the way to her tight little shoes
with the flowery pompoms--so pretty.

She has such deathly charms that
draw out cat calls and jeers. For
protection, a swarm of bees dances
on her collar like a stream of lust.

Those deep eyes are made of nothing--of shadows;
her skull is coiffed with flowers (how artistic) and it
turns half-heartedly on that weak little backbone.
Nothingness arrayed such as this can be so beautiful.

Some people--those intoxicated by carnality--
Would call you a joke. They don't get it,
the human frame is gorgeous and your
Bone-made body turns me on.

So are you coming, dear, with that horrible face
to ruin life's little party? Or is it that some other
old flame has perked you up to come looking
For the holy days of pure desire?

With violins playing and candlelight flickering around us,
do you come to chase away this mocking nightmare or
perhaps to use these midnight orgies as a silencer
for the new spark of life, smoldering in your heart?

Endless well of stupidity and sin!
Distilling those ancient miseries!
Winding in-between the trellis of your ribs
I can see that old insatiable snake still writhing.

I must say that your little game will get you
nowhere. What weak man could

ever understand this ridicule? This kind of joke
is only funny to the truly strong.

The empty sockets of your eyes, full of wicked thoughts,
exhale a nasty vertigo and wise dancers could
not watch your thirty-two teeth smile
without wanting, in some way, to vomit.

However, who has not embraced a skeleton?
Who has not filled his stomach from the grave?
Who cares about the perfume, the dress, the look?
People who get sick so easily think they're beautiful.

Oh noseless dancer and irresistible little slut,
tell those offended dancers:
"Despite your pretty makeup, you stink of death!
Nothing but skeletons bathed in cologne!"

Withered faggots and pretty-boys with smooth faces,
varnished cadavers and hoary beaux,
the universal dance of death will take
you off to places you've never even heard of!

From the cold piers of the Seine to the burning Ganges shore,
the human race skips and swoons, blind to the
hole in the sky where the angel sounds that old
trumpet--black as the barrel of a gun.

In every corner of this world, death watches you lovingly.
You act the fool and she laughs.
Every now and then, she makes herself up pretty--like you,
mixing her own ironic cruelty with your madness!

Destruction

The demon floats around me,
swimming in a miasma, encircling my body.
I swallow and feel the burning in my lungs,
filling up, as they are, with an eternal and guilty desire.

Sometimes it takes the form of a seductress
(knowing my great love of art). Under
the countless pretexts of a spy, it
readies my lips for a love-potion.

It takes me far way from the prying eyes of God
and I am fatigued, left among the
plains from which the boredom of nothingness arises.
Profound, deserted, it opens my eyes,

so full of confusion, to see the filthy clothes
and open wounds of destruction--
that bloody apparition!

Lesbos

Mother of Roman sport and Greek sex,
Lesbos! Where the kisses, pining or celebratory,
are hot as the sun and fresh as summer melon.
They beatify the night and make the day so glorious.
Mother of Roman sport and Greek sex,

Lesbos! Where the kisses are like waterfalls
that pour into boundless chasms and run
in maniacal fits of sobbing and wild laughter.
Tempestuous and secret, miniscule and profound,
Lesbos! Where the kisses are like waterfalls!

Lesbos, where the slaves lust for one another,
where a single sigh can always hear its echo.
It is the equal of Cyprus where the stars yearn for you,
where even a love-goddess has every right to envy Sappho!
Lesbos, where the slaves lust for one another.

Lesbos, land of hot and languid nights. There,
girls stare into the mirror and lust
for their own flesh, delighting in and caressing
the ripe fruits of their own nubile bodies.
Lesbos, land of hot and languid nights.

Let that old fool Plato judge you with scolding eye.
Your penance shall be a multitude of kisses. Queen
of this gentle empire, upright and perfect land, queen
of these endless refinements of love.
Let that old fool Plato judge you with scolding eye.

You are pardoned by immortal martyrdom,
which inflicts itself on ambitious hearts and
pulls us apart with radiant smiles that may
only be seen on the shores of other skies.
You are pardoned by immortal martyrdom.

What god, Lesbos, would dare judge you?
Or damn your pretty head, grown pale and exhausted,
if his golden scale had not weighed the flood
of tears your brooks have leaked into the sea?
What god, Lesbos, would dare judge you?

What do we care of just or unjust laws?
Virgins with sublime hearts, honorable among these isles,

your religion is just as holy as any other.
Love will laugh mockingly at heaven and hell.
What do we care of just or unjust laws?

For Lesbos chose me above all others,
to sing of her flowering virgins
because, since childhood, I have witnessed
the macabre mystery of tears mingling with laughter.
For Lesbos chose me above all others!

And ever since I watch from her mountain's summit,
like a sentinel with a stark and piercing eye,
for ships of all kind on the horizon with
their sails and forms flickering amongst the blue.
And ever since I watch from her mountain's summit

to discover if the sea is truly kind and merciful.
There I am, searching among the tears that lap on rocks,
searching for the answer: Will, one night, the sea return to
us the worshipped carcass of our Sappho who left
to discover if the sea is truly kind and merciful?

Masculine Sappho, lover and poet,
pale, wrecked and more beautiful than Venus!
Blue eyes conquered by black eyes that
tortuously encircle the shadow-struck sockets of
masculine Sappho, lover and poet.

More beautiful than Venus, showing herself,
pouring the treasures of her serenity
and the glories of her bright, golden youth,
upon an old ocean--proud of his daughter!
more beautiful than Venus, showing herself.

Sappho, who died the day she blasphemed,
scorned the rites of that religion and
let her flesh be ruined by some brute
who would wreck her body, she, that woman,
Sappho, who died the day she blasphemed!

Since then, Lesbos mourns.
Even with the world bowing before her,
she stays drunk on storm clouds and winds
watching the night skies because
since then, Lesbos mourns.

The Murderer's Wine

My wife is dead and I'm finally free!
I can drink as much as I want;
her screaming drove me fucking crazy
whenever I came home broke.

I'm as happy as a king;
the sky is beautiful, the air is clean...
We had a summer like this once,
The summer we fell in love!

To quench this horrible thirst
that fills me completely,
I would have to drink enough wine
to fill her grave--which is quite a lot.

I threw her down a well! The blocks
came tumbling after to
ensure her life would end.
I'm trying hard to forget her!

In the name of those tender moments
which will never release us,
and to better cement our relationship,
in that rapture we felt long ago,

I asked her to meet me,
out on a hidden road.
and the stupid cow did!
I guess we're all a bit crazy.

She was still so beautiful,
even though she was tired and I
loved her more than ever.
Which is why she had to go.

No one will ever understand me.
Has a single drunken idiot in this crowd
ever once, in a dark night, thought to make a
shroud from wine?

This ignorant crowd,
numb as an iron machine,
has never once known the
true meaning of love---

with its dark witchcraft
and its infernal alarms surrounding
its poisonous concoctions, tears and
rattling bones in irons.

I'm alone and I'm free!
I'll get wasted tonight, of course,
and I won't regret a single thing.
I'll lay down on the dirt

And sleep like a baby.
A passing vehicle, weighed
down in the mud might
even come across me

and crush my guilty head,
or slice me in two. I don't
give a shit about that, or about God,
the devil or their works.

The Metamorphosis of the Vampire

Meanwhile the woman with the strawberry mouth,
writhing like a snake on hot coals, and pressing
her breasts against that iron corset
let flow these words, so full of music:
--- "I have moist lips and I know the secret science
of ancient wisdom, lost within a bed.
I dry all tears with my triumphant tits
and cause old men to giggle like children.
For those who see me nude, uncovered,
I replace the sun, the moon and the stars!
I am, dear scholar, so learned in matters of the flesh
that when I smother a man with my redoubtable arms
or let him bite the soft pillowy cushions of my breasts,
shy but licentious, meek but strong,
then the very angels of heaven would suffer
Hell for what happens on these sheets."

After she had sucked my bones clean of marrow
I turned, languidly, towards her
to kiss her, deep and lovingly. She was gone! Something
of sticky pustules, oozing filth remained!
I shut both eyes, frozen in terror,
and when I reopened them to clear reality,
it was not that great and powerful doll
at my side, with her command of the blood,
but instead trembling bones and ashes,
creaking like a weathercock or a
wind-beaten iron sign at night.

Poison

Wine can redress the ugliest dives
with a miraculous luxury,
and call forth fabulous porticoes
in the gold of its red vapors,
like a setting sun in a cloudy sky.

Opium unbounds the boundless,
elongates the endless,
deepens time, digs into sensuality,
and with dark and baleful pleasures
fills the soul beyond the breaking point.

None of it can touch the poison that pours
from your eyes, your green eyes,
lakes where my soul trembles, reversed...
my dreams crowd in
to quench their thirst on these bitter chasms.

None of it can touch the terrible marvel
of your biting spit,
which throws my remorseless soul into nothingness
and, dizzy and lost,
casts it onto the shores of death.

The Ghost

Like an angel with the eyes of a wild cat,
I'll return to your bedroom
and slide towards you without a sound
with the shadows of the night;

and I will give you, my dark-haired
beauty, kisses cold as the moon and
the same caresses that a snake gives
the grave.

When livid morning comes,
I'll be gone,
leaving my place cold until the night.

Others rule you with kindness, so
tender. I wish to rule your life
and youth through fear alone.

The Fountain of Blood

I think my blood runs in waves,
like the rhythmic sobbing of a fountain.
I hear it escaping me in long murmurs,
but I never seem to find the wound.

Across the city, like in a tournament field,
it runs in rivulets to make the paving stones islands,
quenching the thirst of every creature it meets
and coloring all of nature crimson.

And so I begged from wine
to lull me to sleep, respite for one night,
but no--wine only sharpens the senses.

I looked to love for sleepy forgetfulness;
but love is just a bed of needles
made to draw drink out for these cruel whores!

The Death of the Poor

Death is the great comforter (it's true) and the one that makes us live.
It's the point of existence and the single hope
that, like a nice medicine, enlivens us
and gives us the heart to make it till nightfall.

Through the storm and the snow and the frost,
it is the vibrant clarity on our black horizon;
it's a famous hotel we all know,
where one can eat, sleep--rest.

It is an angel who takes, between magnetic fingertips,
the rest and gift of these ecstatic dreams,
and that makes the bed for the poor and naked.

It's the glory of gods, the hidden attic,
the poor man's wallet and his old fatherland,
an open door to unknown skies!

Sympathetic Horror

What thoughts, libertine, pour
into your empty soul from the
bizarre and thrashing skies,
tormented as your destiny? Answer me.

--Insatiably avid
for the unknown and the obscure,
I will not whine like Ovid
chased out of a Latin paradise.

Skies torn like seashores,
in you my fat pride is reflected;
your vast, mourning clouds

Are the hearses of my dreams,
and your glowing light reflects
the hell in which I delight.

To a Madonna

Ex-Voto in the Spanish Style

I want to build for you Madonna, my mistress,
an underground altar in the depth of my woe,
and dig a hole in the darkest recess of my heart,
far from worldly desire and mockery,
all of gold and fine enamel,
where you can stand and be marveled.
With polished verses, studded with
crystal like starlight, I shall make for your
head a grand crown and
in my jealousy, oh so human Madonna,
I will learn to tailor a jacket in a style
so barbaric--heavy and stiff--doubled with suspicion,
which, like a sentry-box, will shut away your charms,
not with pearls but with every tear I shed!
Your dress shall be my desire, quivering,
sinuous, my desire which rises and falls,
balancing at the heights, finding respite in the valleys;
it will clothe your white and pink flesh with a kiss.
With my own respect will I make your satin
shoes, humiliated by your divine feet,
imprisoned in a gentle hold,
keeping the mold of those feet so perfectly.
If I still can't, despite my diligent artisanship,
make a moon of silver for you to stand upon
then I will take the serpent eating my guts,
made of hatred and spittle,
and cast him under your feet for you to trample,
victorious queen, so fertile with payback.
You will see my thoughts set out like votives
on the flowered altar of the Virgin Queen,
reflecting stars onto the blue ceiling
and watching you with eyes on fire;
and since my whole being adores and cherishes you,
all becomes frankincense, balms and myrrh,
and unceasingly the vapors of my stormy soul
go up before your cloudy white summit.

Finally, to complete your role as Mary,
and to mix together love and inhumanity,
dark pleasure! With the seven deadly sins
regretful executioner, I will make seven knives
sharpened well, and like a circus freak,

taking your profound love for a target,
I'll shove them into your breathless heart,
in your bleeding heart, in your sobbing heart!

The Clock

The Clock! Sinister god, horrible and unblinking,
who shakes a finger and screams "*Remember!*"
The trembling woes in your heart of dread
will soon be buried like a target shot.

Ephemeral pleasure will flee to the horizon
like a fae creature disappears from the scene;
every moment devours the joy that is given
a person for just one lifetime.

Three thousand six hundred times an hour, the second
whispers: "*Remember!*" --shrill chirp of an
insect, it now says I am bygone days, and
I have sucked you dry with a dirty needle!

Remember! Souviens-toi! Esto memor!
(My metallic throat cries out in every language.)
The minutes, foolish mortal, are like ore which
must never be thrown out until sifted for gold!

Remember that time plays and wins without
needing to cheat, every hand! It's the law.
day wanes, the night is coming; *Remember!*
The abyss is thirsty; the hour-glass empties.

Soon will be the hour of divine chance
where your ever-virgin wife, Virtue,
where even absolution (the last resting place!)
where everything, in fact will
cry out: Die! You old coward! It's too late.

The Possessed

The sun had been covered with a veil. Like him,
oh, moon of my life! Swaddle yourself in shadow,
and jump, whole body, into the abyss of boredom!

I love you thus! However, if you wish today,
like an eclipsed star leaving a feeble light,
to prance around in the places encumbered by madness
that's fine! Charming dagger, jump from your sheath!

Let the dancing lights of chandeliers illuminate your pupils!
Let the looks of the uncouth illuminate desire!
You are all pleasure to me; morbid or petulant;

Be what you will, black night, red dawn;
there isn't a fiber in my trembling being that does
not cry out: Dear Satan, I love you!

Cain and Abel

I

Race of Abel, eat drink and sleep;
God smiles on you, complacent.

Race of Cain, crawl in the muck
and die a miserable death.

Race of Abel, your sacrifice
delights the noses of angels.

Race of Cain, I wonder if your
punishment will ever end?

Race of Abel, see your sowing and
cattle come to fruition.

Race of Cain, your bellies growl
like hungry old dogs.

Race of Abel, warm your bodies at
your fatherly fires.

Race of Cain, tremble in your holes
like freezing jackals!

Race of Abel, love and multiply!
Even your gold begets children.

Race of Cain, with your burning heart,
beware your appetites.

Race of Abel, you grow and move
about like woodlice.

Race of Cain, you'll drag your poor
family down the highways.

II

Ah! Race of Abel, your rotting carcass
will fertilize the steaming soil!

Race of Cain, your job

is not yet done.

Race of Abel, here is your shame:
iron swords shattered by spears.

Race of Cain, go up to heaven
and cast God down to earth!

Sorrows of the Moon

Tonight the moon dreams with more listless apathy
than a beautiful woman, on her many cushions,
lightly and absentmindedly stroking her
breasts before falling asleep.

On the satin backs of pillowy avalanches,
she gives herself over to long swoons
while watching white visions
swelling in the blue like unfolding blooms.

Occasionally, in her idle lethargy, she
drops a tear on this globe and a pious
poet, the enemy of sleep,

catches, in his hand, this pale tear,
opalescent, and hides it away in his
heart--away from the eyes of the sun.