

CHAPTER 3

SARTRE AND BAUDELAIRE

Sartre's intention in his preface to the *Ecrits intimes* was to give a picture of Baudelaire as a totality, a unique and unified whole, consistent even within apparent inconsistency, because motivated by an original choice rather than determined by chance events over which he had no control. Sartre wished therefore to make use of the biographical data, not in the disparate and haphazard way of previous critics, but rather in order to draw from it clues to Baudelaire's basic option, and verification of that option once it was discovered. In this sense his analysis already follows the broad lines of the *méthode progressive-régressive* which was later to be outlined in *Question de méthode*. In 1946 the work created a double scandal: in the first place it was seen as concentrating on the moral quality of Baudelaire's life rather than on his poetry; and secondly its psycho-analytic method was not that of Freudian analysis, still resented by many critics (as is witnessed by the wary reception of René Laforgue's *L'Échec de Baudelaire* in 1931) but at least relatively familiar: Sartre's existential approach had not been seen in practice before in a full-scale account of a major writer, and its very novelty proved unacceptable and disorientating. We shall be examining Sartre's relations with Freudianism in detail in a later chapter, but must point out here that whilst Sartre agrees with Freud that all human behaviour is 'significant', he totally rejects the suggestion that its source is the unconscious, and rather propounds a demanding theory of total responsibility which, at least as he conceived it in the 1940s, allows no possibility of special pleading.

Sartre describes Baudelaire as living in a permanent state of *mauvaise foi*, hiding from himself the absurdity of life which he glimpsed but was afraid to recognize. He desired above all a security and justification possible only in an ordered and theocratic universe, and his life was a constant attempt to give himself fixity through the eyes of the Other: God, other people, or even himself. Sartre sees this attempt in terms of the analysis of human relations contained in *L'Être et le Néant*. The degree of divergence from the Freudian analyses of Laforgue and later Blin (*Le Sadisme de Baudelaire*, 1948) can be seen for example in Sartre's attempt to reinterpret Baudelaire's sado-masochism in terms not of unconscious motives, but of the 'metaphysical' desire to become an object ratified by *l'Autre*. But Baudelaire also wants to feel free; he rebels against the established order whilst at the same

time depending on it as a secure framework which he does not really wish to overthrow. Baudelaire's horror of nature, his cult of sterility, his dandyism and his poetry itself are seen to depend ultimately on his refusal to accept the possibility of creating his own values. Baudelaire sets evil and artifice up against God and nature, though the former depend on the latter for their very existence. He wants to scandalize, but to be at the same time in control of the impression he creates on other people. These are for Sartre all elements of Baudelaire's particular way of living out the fundamental human project: the 'passion inutile', the desire to be and to exist at the same time, to have an essence whilst still remaining free. Finally Sartre relates the recurrent symbols of Baudelaire's poetry to his project: they express the poet's aspiration towards what he calls the 'spirituel': a fusion of being and existence best symbolized by evanescent sensations such as certain perfumes or impressions of twilight which are, so to speak, matter in its least solid form, and therefore stand as metaphors of an impossible synthesis.

Baudelaire's Satanism is then, for Sartre, simply a way of reaffirming a wavering belief in a theocratic universe: he sees Baudelaire as inauthentic in a broadly religious sense: as alienating his own freedom to absolute ideas of Good and Evil. Sartre's contention is that Baudelaire's project is a form of parasitism. His rebellion against the theocratic world-order represented concretely by his family, Ancelle, and bourgeois society in general, is half-hearted. At one stage Sartre seems on the point of allowing Baudelaire some vestige of dignity: he is described as identifying with Satan who, though defeated by God, is nevertheless superior to him by reason of 'cette flamme d'insatisfaction triste qui, dans le moment même où il consent à cet écrasement, brille comme un reproche inexpiable. A ce jeu de "qui perd gagne" c'est le vaincu qui, *en tant que vaincu*, remporte la victoire.'¹ But this is instantly withdrawn for Satan and Baudelaire are compared to 'des enfants désobéissants et boudeurs',² and any suggestion of a truly Promethean revolt is nullified. Baudelaire's poetic works which exploit the themes of 'frigidité, impuissance, stérilité, absence de générosité, refus de servir, péché',³ are described by Sartre as symbols of suicide: inauthentic suicide because Baudelaire is not truly aspiring towards 'le néant absolu';⁴ he desires the death of his natural self simply in order that he should be free to survive in a more essential way. 'Pour jouir des résultats de son suicide, il faut de toute évidence qu'il y survive'.⁵

The half-heartedness of Baudelaire's revolt and 'suicide' means of course that he cannot profit from the inverted success which attends the 'qui perd gagne' schema referred to briefly in the previous chapter. In the *Baudelaire* itself, Sartre is concerned primarily with Baudelaire's *échec* in the moral sphere. If we turn to *Situations II*, a couple of years later, we find 'moral' failure connected with the idea of poetry as failure of communication, and through this a change of emphasis is already apparent. In a footnote of 'Qu'est-ce qu'écrire?' Sartre is talking of 'la poésie contemporaine', not strictly in the sense of twentieth-century poetry but in the sense of a modern ideal deriving from Symbolism: and Baudelaire is

included by implication and allusion when Sartre writes of 'le poète authentique': 'Ce guignon . . . cette malédiction dont il se réclame toujours et qu'il attribue toujours à une intervention de l'extérieur, alors que c'est son choix le plus profond, non pas la conséquence mais la source de sa poésie.'⁶ The kind of poetry which fails to communicate meanings only to succeed in communicating in a non-conceptual manner is here seen to originate in the kind of moral failure which became part of the Romantic/Symbolist myth of the artist, and at the same time it is implied that the failure/success of poetry converts the moral failure of the 'poète maudit' into a 'higher' kind of success. Briefly Sartre's argument is that failure frees us from our alienation to utilitarian ends and therefore restores our dignity as human beings: 'L'échec seul, en arrêtant comme un écran la série infinie de ses projets, rend [l'homme] à lui-même, dans sa pureté.'⁷ Within a bourgeois utilitarian society, Sartre suggests, the poet is still attempting to assert human values, to 'créer le mythe de l'homme',⁸ but he can only do so by passing from 'la magie blanche' (the kind of art which, like the statue of Jupiter in *Les Mouches*, attempts to impose belief in a theocratic world) to 'la magie noire' or the art of the nihilist: of Flaubert and Mallarmé for example and, as we shall see, to a limited extent of Baudelaire himself.

But the rehabilitation of Baudelaire is in *Situations II* only implicit, and the relation between moral and poetic success/failure only briefly indicated. We have to wait until *L'Idiot de la famille* to see more clearly how the two aspects are interdependent. It is part of the thesis of the *Idiot* (and indeed of the *Genet*) that rejection of bourgeois society implies abnormal relations with the language of that society. In this context Baudelaire's half-hearted revolt in the moral sphere implies a similarly incomplete attempt to subvert the normal usage of language, to replace the use of language for communication by the poetic use of language as the 'suggestion de l'incommunicable'.⁹ in other words to inaugurate the poetic ideal of Symbolism. In the terms of *Situations II* then, Baudelaire's poetics too are an instance of 'qui perd gagne', but Baudelaire is afraid (and indeed this is the thesis of the *Baudelaire* itself) to break completely with the world of meaning. He is a rhetorician who might have been a terrorist if he had followed through his own intuitions and practised what he preached; but lacking the courage to 'perdre jusqu'à mourir'¹⁰ he does not profit fully from the success attendant upon failure.

In fact in the *Idiot* Sartre never quite manages to make up his mind about the degree of Baudelaire's success through failure. At one point he suggests that a fundamental inconsistency underlies even Baudelaire's best poetry:

Profondément individualiste, Baudelaire trouve sa solution dans le bouleversement de la poésie. Il n'a pas, cependant, la claire conscience de ce qu'il fait; c'est ce qui explique qu'on trouve chez un des plus grands poètes du siècle et, pratiquement, dans tous ses poèmes, tant de mauvais vers que Delille eût pu écrire: il oscille sans cesse entre la signification et le sens.¹¹

Baudelaire is described as not recognizing fully the implications of his own poetic ideal as the creation of 'surcommunications silencieuses'.¹² Elsewhere in the *Idiot* however Sartre speaks of Flaubert and Baudelaire as the only two men in 1839 'à pressentir et à forger la littérature moderne',¹³ and groups Baudelaire with Mallarmé and Flaubert in his discussion of the 'poète maudit'. Indeed in volume three he appears to reverse his opinion as to the degree of self-consciousness Baudelaire has of his own aims: no longer asserting that Baudelaire 'n'a pas . . . la claire conscience de ce qu'il fait', he implies rather a considerable lucidity when he states: 'Encore Baudelaire se console-t-il en pensant que le langage, véhicule de la communication, peut exister *par soi* dès qu'on le détermine comme porteur de l'incommunicable.'¹⁴ Sartre interprets a stanza from 'Le Guignon':

Mainte fleur épanche à regret
 Son parfum doux comme un secret
 Dans les solitudes profondes.

as expressing the idea that 'le vrai poème est par essence un incommunicable', and as thereby defining what he calls 'la poésie nouvelle'.¹⁵

Sartre then is uncertain whether to attribute what he sees as the 'prosaic' lines of Baudelaire's poetry to his insufficiently self-conscious aesthetic stance or to his inability to radicalize his own intuitions. It is nonetheless clear that although Sartre has never entirely overcome his ambivalent feelings about the poet, his originally stringent criticisms have given way to an acceptance of Baudelaire's art as a partially if not totally authentic instance of *l'art échec*, exemplified more fully by Flaubert, and which we shall be examining in more detail in a later chapter. Baudelaire too then has profited from the later modification and increased flexibility of Sartre's critical criteria. He is no longer criticized for his moral inauthenticity, but rather seen within the wider context of French literary and social history. Sartre is today less interested in bringing a moral judgement to bear on the quality of Baudelaire's life, than in describing as objectively as possible the poet's aesthetic activities and intuitions.

Moreover this interest is based in effect upon profound similarities between the aesthetics of the two writers which need to be made clear. The most common criticism of Sartre's study of Baudelaire is that it is reductionist: Sartre has been accused of neglecting Baudelaire's poetry and of interpreting Baudelaire himself in terms of a philosophy of life alien to the poet. In the first place of course, this view denies Sartre the right to define his own aim which is to reconstruct the project of Baudelaire starting for the most part from the evidence of the *Journaux intimes*. It has resulted moreover in attention being focussed on the differences between Sartre and Baudelaire at the expense of Sartre's empathetic understanding of 'le fait poétique baudelairien'. An examination of Sartre's view of Baudelaire within the wider context of *L'Être et le Néant* and of Sartre's theory of art reveals, despite their totally opposed philosophical assumptions, close affinities between the

aesthetics and even the 'metaphysics' of the two writers. Sartre's analysis remains closer to Baudelaire's own terms of reference than is usually the case with criticism that aims at a general reinterpretation of a writer in terms of the critic's own philosophy.

Sartre emphasizes, as the most typical aspect of Baudelaire's poetic ideal, the creation of fugitive poetic states which give the illusion of combining the material and the immaterial. Poets like Baudelaire create, Sartre says,

Par des signes de certaines natures ambiguës, chatoisement d'existence et d'être qui les satisfont doublement: à la fois parce qu'elles sont des essences objectives et qu'ils peuvent les contempler et parce qu'elles procèdent d'eux et qu'ils peuvent s'y retrouver. L'objet que Baudelaire a créé par une émanation perpétuelle dans ses poèmes et, tout aussi bien, par les actes de sa vie, c'est ce qu'il a nommé, et que nous nommerons après lui, le *spirituel* . . . il se caractérise par une manière d'absence, il n'est jamais tout à fait là, ni tout à fait visible, il reste en suspens entre le néant et l'être.¹⁶

As I have already indicated, Sartre sees symbols of this fusion in the typically Baudelairean themes of perfumes, twilight, lamplight etc.: 'Nous nommerons donc *spirituel*, avec lui, l'être qui se laisse saisir par les sens et qui ressemble le plus à la conscience.'¹⁷ He also interprets in this light Baudelaire's ideal of the suggestiveness of beauty: 'La beauté . . . est suggestion, c'est-à-dire qu'elle est ce type étrange et forgé de réalité, où l'être et l'existence se confondent, où l'existence est objectivée et solidifiée par l'être, où l'être est allégé par l'existence.'¹⁸

Despite the aggressively critical approach of the *Baudelaire* there is an underlying correspondence between Baudelaire's poetic ideal and Sartre's own way of feeling about the relationship of mind and nature. Sartre is fascinated, as Wardman¹⁹ has pointed out, by Baudelaire's notion of art as 'le spirituel', in the sense that it creates a coalescence of mind and world, or subject and object to use Baudelaire's own terms: 'Qu'est-ce que l'art pur suivant la conception moderne? C'est créer une magie suggestive contenant à la fois l'objet et le sujet, le monde extérieur à l'artiste et l'artiste lui-même.'²⁰ For example painting creates this fusion for Baudelaire in so far as it is 'la symbolique innée d'idées innées, et au même instant':²¹ that is in so far as it externalizes, through the representation of nature, aspects of the artist's consciousness which cannot be expressed as intellectual statement. Sartre too describes the artist as fusing self and world: 'Par la figuration de l'être du dehors, [le peintre] présente aux autres l'être du dedans, sa chair, la leur'.²² But the ideal of coalescence is for Sartre an illusion: there can be no moment of real fusion and the truth of the situation is that the work of art, as soon as it is created, becomes detached from me, turned, like my past actions, into an indifferent *en-soi*: 'L'œuvre d'art [a] . . . un rapport d'émanation figée à l'esprit. L'esprit la produit continuellement et cependant elle se tient tout seule et comme dans l'indifférence par rapport à cette production.'²³ In the terms of *L'Être et le Néant* creation and possession are interrelated ways in which we try to realize the impossible human

desire to become *en-soi-pour-soi*:

En tant, en effet, que la possession est création continuée, je saisis l'objet possédé comme fondé par moi dans son être; mais en tant, d'une part que la création est émanation, cet objet se résorbe en moi, il n'est que moi, et en tant, d'autre part, qu'il est originellement en-soi, il est non-moi, il est moi en face de moi, objectif, en soi, permanent, impénétrable, existant par rapport à moi dans le rapport d'extériorité, d'indifférence. Ainsi, je suis fondement de moi en tant que j'existe comme indifférent et en-soi par rapport à moi. Or, c'est précisément le projet même de l'en-soi-pour-soi.²⁴

The idea of art as a mediating emanation arises then out of the desire to escape the tragic dichotomy of matter irreducible to mind. In Baudelaire's diaries, when the poet is writing for himself and has largely abandoned the myth of the mystical poet, Sartre would have found cryptic expressions of a radical scepticism similar to his own. Art is seen by the dandy as 'prostitution', in the sense of giving the illusion of a relationship with something outside oneself, but in reality entailing a 'déperdition'²⁵ of self, an alienation of oneself to an external object, a 'vaporisation . . . du *Moi*',²⁶ rejected, momentarily at least, in the name of an alternative ideal which is that of 'centralisation', or self-possession through self-knowledge. For Sartre too art involves, in a sense, an inevitable degradation of man's relations with himself and the external world: 'Ainsi, à travers une dégradation continue, le lien de création est maintenue entre le sujet et l'objet.'²⁷

The affinities with Baudelaire are then first of all in terms of a frustrated idealism of the sensibility: they are also in terms of particular insights and judgements about art. In this sense the parallels are clearest between Sartre and the Baudelaire of the *Journaux intimes*, the *Salon de 1859*, and the critical essays of the early 1860s, when Baudelaire came closest to a definitive understanding of his own ideal of art. Both writers start from a sense of the antagonism of consciousness and world, and both see the imagination as that which frees us from the *en-soi* of nature and enables us to recreate the world as a humanized totality:

Mystérieuse faculté que cette reine des facultés! Elle touche à toutes les autres; elle les excite, elle les envoie au combat . . . Elle est l'analyse, elle est la synthèse . . . Elle décompose toute la création et, avec les matériaux amassés et disposés suivant des règles dont on ne peut trouver l'origine que dans le plus profond de l'âme, elle crée un monde nouveau, elle produit la sensation du neuf. Comme elle a créé le monde . . . il est juste qu'elle le gouverne.²⁸

Imagination, for Baudelaire as for Sartre, plays a major role in the constitution of the aesthetic object. In his essay on Wagner, for example, Baudelaire writes: 'Dans la musique, comme dans la peinture et même dans la parole écrite, qui est cependant le plus positif des arts, il y a toujours une lacune complétée par l'imagination de l'auditeur.'²⁹ It is in fact this conception of the aesthetic object as 'imaginary' which determines not only the unease both critics feel with respect to so-called 'natural beauty', but also a hierarchy of preferences within art itself.

For Baudelaire, music and painting come at the top of the hierarchy in so far as both appeal directly to the imagination via the senses. In the case of painting Baudelaire talks of its 'prétentions immenses', and its 'nature paradoxale et abstraite'.³⁰ The preference accorded to painting over sculpture is, on the whole, Baudelaire believes, a feature of advanced civilization: it requires a more sophisticated imagination to constitute the colours and shapes on a few square feet of canvas into the image of a landscape or historical scene etc. Literature comes further down the hierarchy: it is more 'positif' in the sense that the spontaneity of our imagining is inhibited by the finite determinate meanings built into language grammatically structured. At the bottom of the hierarchy (even in 1859) is sculpture which remains for Baudelaire too close to the objects of nature, incapable for the most part of expressing moods or movement except in relatively simple though powerful forms, resistant to the imagination of the spectator because three-dimensional, denying the spectator the simple 'point de vue' from which the aesthetic object may be constituted in its entirety.

If we view Sartre's implicit hierarchy of the arts from the point of view of his ideal of commitment, then of course literature appears at the top of the list; but we have seen that from the point of view of pure art (that is when he is trying to determine the nature and properties of the aesthetic object proper) a different scale of values is apparent. It is the 'non-significant' arts (at least music and painting) which provide him, like Baudelaire, with the clearest illustrations of the nature of the aesthetic object as an imaginary reality. Literature occupies a problematical position precisely because of its ability to direct and control the reader's response through conceptual meaning. Sculpture comes clearly at the bottom of the list: Sartre dislikes the solidity and immobility of traditional sculpture. His admiration for Giacometti is the exception which proves the rule. In Giacometti's sculptures the 'matière' of the figures is reduced to a minimum, it is 'suggéré[e], esquissé[e], signifié[e], mais non donné[e]',³¹ and moreover Giacometti succeeds in introducing into his work the *imaginary* distance of painting: 'A ses personnages de plâtre il confère une *distance absolue* comme le peintre aux habitants de sa toile . . . Du coup, la voilà [i.e. la figure] qui saute dans l'irréel, puisque son rapport à vous ne dépend plus de votre rapport au bloc de plâtre: l'art est libéré.'³²

In their aesthetic writings then both Sartre and Baudelaire are concerned with isolating that element in art which constitutes *pure* art. Neither has any patience with the 'fameuse doctrine le l'indissolubilité du Beau, du Vrai et du Bien'³³ in so far as this is equatable with the 'hérésie de l'enseignement'.³⁴ But on the other hand both instinctively reject the doctrine of art-for-art's-sake as untrue to the complexity and unity of human experience. Both are convinced that, even if a moral end is not directly intended by the artist, a moral effect is nonetheless inevitable: it is in this sense that Baudelaire claims that 'La poésie est essentiellement philosophique; mais comme elle est avant tout *fatale*, elle doit être involontairement philosophique',³⁵ and that 'tout poème, tout objet d'art *bien fait* suggère naturellement et forcément

une *morale*, c'est l'affaire du lecteur'.³⁶ Here the parallel with Sartre is of course particularly close. Intellectual, aesthetic and moral judgements must be kept distinct in terms of our intentions. They are nonetheless linked on a more fundamental level:

L'Intellect pur vise à la Vérité, le Goût nous montre la Beauté, et le Sens Moral nous enseigne le Devoir. Il est vrai que le sens du milieu a d'intimes connexions avec les deux extrêmes, et il n'est séparé du Sens Moral que par une si légère différence qu'Aristote n'a pas hésité à ranger parmi les vertus quelques-unes de ses délicates opérations.³⁷

For all his intellectual fastidiousness, there is Baudelaire a profound recognition of the fact that we cannot ever escape the reality of moral responsibility, which in turn implies the political social and historical realities of our situation. The ivory-tower conceptions of art-for-art's-sake result in art being cut off from its source in life and therefore from its very materials. Following Stendhal Baudelaire claims: 'Il y a autant de beautés qu'il y a de manières habituelles de chercher le bonheur'.³⁸ Something more than a simple parallel is being implied. Baudelaire states elsewhere: 'Congédier la passion et la raison, c'est tuer la littérature. Renier les efforts de la société précédente, chrétienne et philosophique, c'est se suicider . . . Il faut que la littérature aille retremper ses forces dans une atmosphère meilleure'.³⁹ Art is one form of human aspiration towards an 'atmosphère meilleure', and as such is linked at a fundamental level to other forms of aspiration which can broadly be termed moral. Moreover, Baudelaire argues, moral values are inevitably part of the aesthetic experience itself:

Le beau est fait d'un élément éternel, invariable, dont la quantité est excessivement difficile à déterminer, et d'un élément relatif circonstanciel, qui sera, si l'on veut, tour à tour ou tout ensemble, l'époque, la mode, la morale, la passion. Sans ce second élément, qui est comme l'enveloppe amusante, titillante, apéritive, du divin gâteau, le premier élément serait indigestible, inappréciable, non adapté et non approprié à la nature humaine.⁴⁰

One must distinguish in art between two elements: one relative which makes the work of art this particular work and none other, created by a particular artist belonging to a particular society and epoch; the other universal, which it shares with every other work of art and which may be thought of either as an abstraction or as a real universal. Nevertheless the second can only be known through the first: both are given to us in a single experience. Baudelaire is on the whole inclined to talk in terms of individual *ideals* of beauty rather than of an abstract, ideal beauty, at least in the neo-Classical sense.⁴¹ And our individual ideal of beauty is part of a *goût* which is a matter of our individual sensibility, conditioned in turn by the sensibility of our age and historical moment. The *naïveté* recommended in the *Salon de 1846* includes a recognition of historical relativism and by the same token of the artist's historical dependence: the great artist, like anyone else,

cannot exist in isolation and cannot successfully create or communicate outside a set of conventions and general assumptions which must however remain open to continuous modification.⁴²

The artist then for Baudelaire as for Sartre is *in the world* in the fullest sense of the expression: and the same is true of the critic. For Baudelaire the critic starts from the standpoint of 'l'individualisme bien entendu': 'La critique doit être partielle, passionnée, politique, c'est-à-dire faite à un point de vue exclusif, mais au point de vue qui ouvre le plus d'horizons.'⁴³ The remarks of 'A quoi bon la critique?' are designed to puzzle by an accumulation of semi-facetious paradoxes, but the real sense of Baudelaire's remarks becomes apparent in the general context of the *Salons*. The *naïveté* of the artist and the *naïveté* of the critic are not arbitrarily confronted: both imply world-views which are interrelated in many ways. Like Sartre, Baudelaire considers that the job of the critic is to penetrate by empathy through to the world-view implicit in the work of art, and to convey this to the reader. In Sartre's terms: 'Une technique romanesque renvoie toujours à la métaphysique du romancier. La tâche du critique est de dégager celle-ci avant d'apprécier celle-là.'⁴⁴

This empathy does not mean the avoidance of value-judgements which are part of the critics own commitment in the broadest sense ('Enfin, il faut parier', urges Sartre, 'le livre est-il bon? est-il mauvais?')⁴⁵ but it does mean a sensitivity to the 'philosophy' indirectly expressed in both its historical and its metaphysical dimensions: 'Comme [tous les arts] sont toujours le beau exprimé par le sentiment, la passion et la rêverie de chacun, c'est-à-dire la variété dans l'unité, ou les faces diverses de l'absolu—la critique touche à chaque instant à la métaphysique.'⁴⁶

Sensitivity to Romantic metaphysics and aesthetics is one of the most striking features of Sartre's criticism. His conception of works of art as the expression of a historical moment will grow in importance and complexity from *Situations II* and *Saint Genet to the Idiot de la famille*.