

Baudelaire

also by Sartre:

The Wall (Intimacy) (*short stories*)

Nausea (*novel*)

Jean-Paul Sartre

Baudelaire

Translated from the French by
Martin Turnell

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FOREWORD

'THE READER,' writes M. Sartre towards the end of his essay, 'will have looked in vain for some explanation of the very particular form of Beauty which the poet chose and which makes his poems inimitable. For many people, indeed, Baudelaire is rightly, purely and simply the author of the *Fleurs du mal*; and they regard any form of research as useless which does not increase our appreciation and understanding of Baudelaire's poetry.'

French critics were quick to accept the challenge. Some of them complained that in fact he tells us very little about Baudelaire's poetry; and in a foreword to the second French edition, M. Michel Leiris remarked bluntly that for a person who on his own admission is such a stranger to poetry as M. Sartre to write about Baudelaire at all was a bold undertaking.

The essay was originally written as an introduction to M. Sartre's own selections from Baudelaire's diaries and letters. It will be apparent from the first page that it is an Existentialist study, and it occupies a special place in its author's work. In his purely philosophical writings like *l'Être et le néant* M. Sartre discusses Man in general terms. The two essays on Descartes are examinations of the Cartesian system from the point of view of a different

philosophy. In the novels and plays he invents concrete characters who are endowed with the qualities which he analysed in his philosophical works. In his *Baudelaire* he has attempted something fresh. He has applied the Existentialist analysis to an historical character as revealed primarily in his intimate personal writings.

The results are in many ways surprising, and the reader may feel that the being whose 'portrait' is drawn in M. Sartre's pages is more like one of the characters from *les Chemins de la liberté* than the historic Baudelaire or the Baudelaire of more orthodox biographers. I think that he will also find it stimulating. 'Criticism,' said Baudelaire himself, 'should be partial, passionate and political, that is to say, written from an exclusive point of view but from the point of view which opens up the widest horizons.' We may leave the width of the horizon for the moment and consider the exclusive point of view. When a critic approaches his subject from a dogmatic standpoint, as one feels that M. Sartre does, the 'portrait' which emerges is necessarily partial and incomplete because in spite of the writer's evident 'good faith' rebellious material is bound to be interpreted in a manner which fits in with his general thesis. And there are undoubtedly pages in the present essay which will only convince those who accept M. Sartre's philosophical premises. Yet the exclusive point of view clearly has its compensations. For in so far as a system contains elements of truth, it does isolate aspects of the poet which have previously escaped notice or received insufficient attention. Emphasis and accent may sometimes appear at fault; undue importance may be attached to part of

the poet's work, but in the end something new emerges. That is the justification of the critic and, indeed, of all criticism. It is not the critic's business to do 'the common reader's' work for him. His business is to stimulate him to make his own discoveries, to provide fresh insights which will send the reader back to his texts to test their validity. In so far as he is a competent reader he will profit from these insights and relate them to what seems 'true' in his own conception of the poet. Criticism is essentially a collective work which goes on from one age to another. No single critic can tell the whole truth about a great writer or speak with the same sureness all the time, and no age ever has the last word. The critic can only interpret an author in the light of his own age. His successors will add something to his portrait, but they will also remove what no longer appears true. The individual critic therefore can only make a contribution to a portrait which in the nature of things must remain unfinished.

M. Sartre's book is an essay in what he himself has called 'Existential psycho-analysis,' and it possesses the virtues and defects of the psycho-analytical approach.¹ Now psycho-analysis is primarily a method of diagnosing and treating certain mental and nervous disorders, but it differs from ordinary medicine in that it can never be strictly scientific. It depends directly on the personality of the man who employs it. For behind the technique there is always what, for want of a better word, we must call a 'philosophy' or at least philosophical assumptions. For some of its critics the weakness of the Freudian sys-

¹ See *l'Être et le néant*, pp. 643-63.

tem lies in the fact that it is based on determinism. M. Sartre employs the psycho-analytical technique, but in his case it is based not on determinism but on his own philosophy.

The psycho-analytical critic claims that by examining the peculiarities of a writer's personality he is in a better position to interpret his work, that he can show that particular words, phrases and images have a special significance for the poet. This approach has one very obvious danger. Concentration on the *man* tends to distract us from his *work* or alternatively it treats the work as a mere 'case-book' in the study of a diseased, or supposedly diseased personality. It follows from this that if psycho-analytical criticism is to be of use in the interpretation of poetry, there must be a double movement. The critic moves from the work to the man, but it is essential that he should make the return journey from the man back to the work. It is the merit of M. Sartre's study that though he sometimes uses Baudelaire's poetry to build up a picture of the Existential man engaged in the attempt to achieve 'the impossible synthesis of existence and being,' he does make the return journey more frequently and more effectively than most other psycho-analytical critics. In spite of his disparaging references to 'depth psychology,' he makes liberal use of the Freudian symbols. His study of Baudelaire's sexual peculiarities enables him to present a highly novel interpretation of the poem called *Une nuit que j'étais près d'une affreuse Juive*; his emphasis on Baudelaire's preoccupation with sterility gives us a fresh appreciation of the function of metal and stone in his poetry; and there is a fascinating