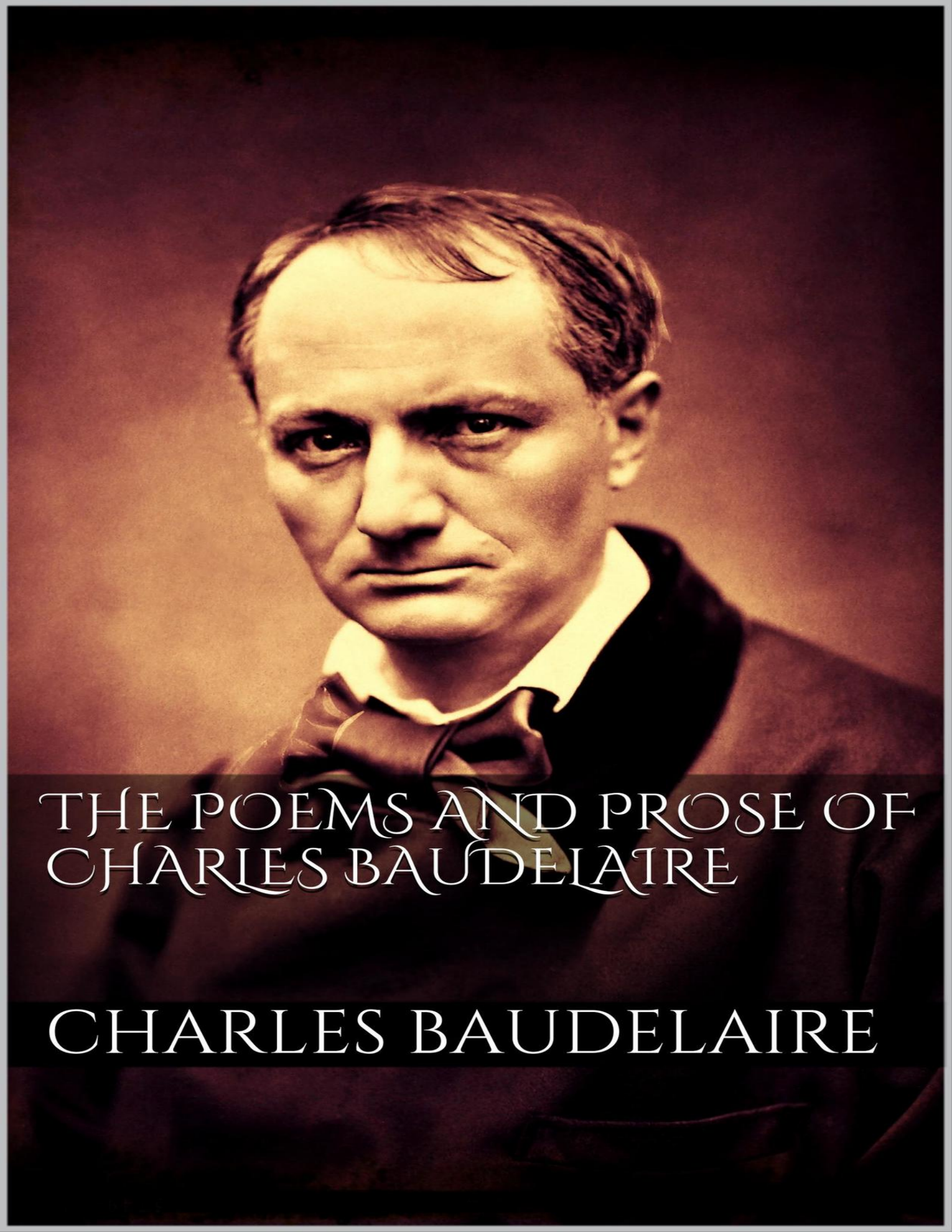
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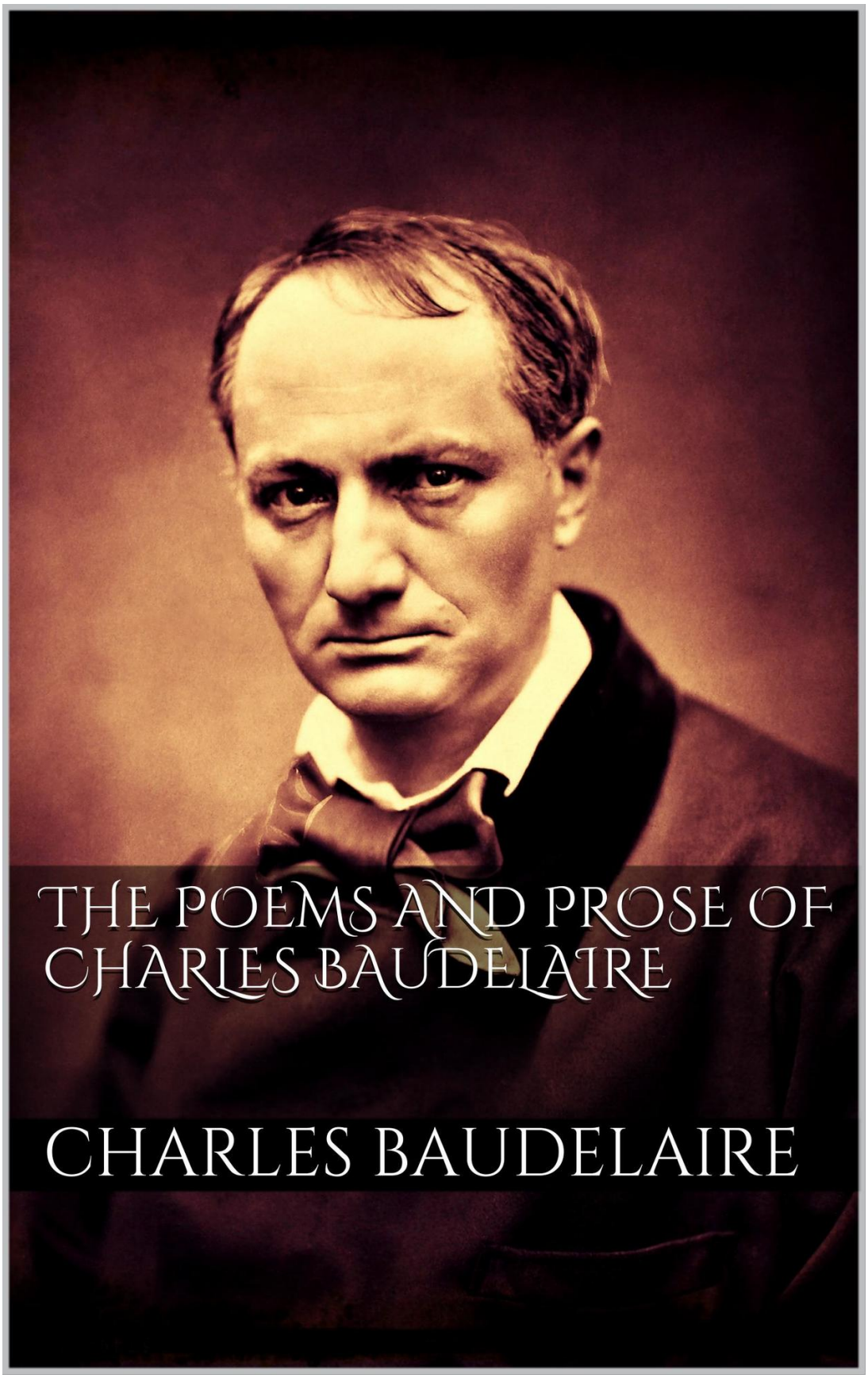
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*Charles Baudelaire*

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# CHARLES BAUDELAIRE.

# I

For the sentimental no greater foe exists than the iconoclast who dissipates literary legends. And he is abroad nowadays. Those golden times when they gossiped of De Quincey's enormous opium consumption, of the gin absorbed by gentle Charles Lamb, of Coleridge's dark ways, Byron's escapades, and Shelley's atheism—alas! into what faded limbo have they vanished. Poe, too, whom we saw in fancy reeling from Richmond to Baltimore, Baltimore to Philadelphia, Philadelphia to New York. Those familiar fascinating anecdotes have gone the way of all such jerry-built spooks. We now know Poe to have been a man suffering at the time of his death from cerebral lesion, a man who drank at intervals and little. Dr. Guerrier of Paris has exploded a darling superstition about De Quincey's opium-eating. He has demonstrated that no man could have lived so long—De Quincey was nearly seventy-five at his death—and worked so hard, if he had consumed twelve thousand drops of laudanum as often as he said he

did. Furthermore, the English essayist's description of the drug's effects is inexact. He was seldom sleepy—a sure sign, asserts Dr. Guerrier, that he was not altogether enslaved by the drug habit. Sprightly in old age, his powers of labour were prolonged until past three-score and ten. His imagination needed little opium to produce the famous Confessions. Even Gautier's revolutionary red waistcoat worn at the première of Hernani was, according to Gautier, a pink doublet. And Rousseau has been whitewashed. So they are disappearing, those literary legends, until, disheartened, we cry out: Spare us our dear, old-fashioned, disreputable men of genius!

But the legend of Charles Baudelaire is seemingly indestructible. This French poet has suffered more from the friendly malignant biographer and chroniclers than did Poe. Who shall keep the curs out of the cemetery? asked Baudelaire after he had read Griswold on Poe. A few years later his own cemetery was invaded and the world was put into possession of the Baudelaire legend; that legend of the atrabilious, irritable poet, dandy, maniac, his hair dyed green, spouting blasphemies; that grim, despairing image of a diabolic, a libertine, saint, and drunkard. Maxime du Camp was much to blame for the promulgation of these tales—witness his Souvenirs littéraires. However, it may be confessed that part of the

Baudelaire legend was created by Charles Baudelaire. In the history of literature it is difficult to parallel such a deliberate piece of self-stultification. Not Villon, who preceded him, not Verlaine, who imitated him, drew for the astonishment or disedification of the world a like unflattering portrait. Mystifier as he was, he must have suffered at times from acute cortical irritation. And, notwithstanding his desperate effort to realize Poe's idea, he only proved Poe correct, who had said that no man can bare his heart quite naked; there always will be something held back, something false ostentatiously thrust forward. The grimace, the attitude, the pomp of rhetoric are so many buffers between the soul of man and the sharp reality of published confessions. Baudelaire was no more exception to this rule than St. Augustine, Bunyan, Rousseau, or Huysmans; though he was as frank as any of them, as we may see in the printed diary, Mon cœur mis à nu (Posthumous Works, Société du Mercure de France); and in the Journal, Fusées, Letters, and other fragments exhumed by devoted Baudelarians.

To smash legends, Eugène Crépet's biographical study, first printed in 1887, has been republished with new notes by his son, Jacques Crépet. This is an exceedingly valuable contribution to Baudelaire lore; a dispassionate

life, however, has yet to be written, a noble task for some young poet who will disentangle the conflicting lies originated by Baudelaire—that tragic comedian—from the truth and thus save him from himself. The Crépet volume is really but a series of notes; there are some letters addressed to the poet by the distinguished men of his day, supplementing the rather disappointing volume of Letters, 1841-1866, published in 1908. There are also documents in the legal prosecution of Baudelaire, with memories of him by Charles Asselineau, Léon Cladel, Camille Lemonnier, and others.

In November, 1850, Maxime du Camp and Gustave Flaubert found themselves at the French Ambassador's, Constantinople. The two friends had taken a trip in the Orient which later bore fruit in Salammbô. General Aupick, the representative of the French Government, cordially the young men received; they were presented to his wife, Madame Aupick. She was the mother of Charles Baudelaire, and inquired rather anxiously of Du Camp: "My son has talent, has he not?" Unhappy because her second marriage, a brilliant one, had set her son against her, the poor woman welcomed from such a source confirmation of her eccentric boy's gifts. Du Camp tells the much-discussed story of a quarrel between the youthful Charles and his stepfather, a

quarrel that began at table. There were guests present. After some words Charles bounded at the General's throat and sought to strangle him. He was promptly boxed on the ears and succumbed to a nervous spasm. A delightful anecdote, one that fills with joy psychiatrists in search of a theory of genius and degeneration. Charles was given some money and put on board a ship sailing to East India. He became a cattle-dealer in the British army, and returned to France years afterward with a Vénus noire, to whom he addressed extravagant poems! All this according to Du Camp. Here is another tale, a comical one. Baudelaire visited Du Camp in Paris, and his hair was violently green. Du Camp said nothing. Angered by this indifference, Baudelaire asked: "You find nothing abnormal about me?" "No," was the answer. "But my hair —it is green!" "That is not singular, mon cher Baudelaire; every one has hair more or less green in Paris." Disappointed in not creating a sensation, Baudelaire went to a café, gulped down two large bottles of Burgundy, and asked the waiter to remove the water, as water was a disagreeable sight; then he went away in a rage. It is a pity to doubt this green hair legend; presently a man of genius will not be able to enjoy an epileptic fit in peace— as does a banker or a beggar. We are told that St. Paul, Mahomet, Handel, Napoleon, Flaubert, Dostoiëvsky were epileptoids; yet we do not encounter men of this rare kind among the inmates of asylums. Even Baudelaire had

his sane moments.

The joke of the green hair has been disposed of by Crépet. Baudelaire's hair thinning after an illness, he had his head shaved and painted with salve of a green hue, hoping thereby to escape baldness. At the time when he had embarked for Calcutta (May, 1841), he was not seventeen, but twenty years of age. Du Camp said he was seventeen when he attacked General Aupick. The dinner could not have taken place at Lyons because the Aupick family had left that city six years before the date given by Du Camp. Charles was provided with five thousand francs for his expenses, instead of twenty—Du Camp's version—and he never was a beef-drover in the British army, for a good reason—he never reached India. Instead, he disembarked at the Isle of Bourbon, and after a short stay suffered from homesickness and returned to France, after being absent about ten months. But, like Flaubert, on his return home Baudelaire was seized with the nostalgia of the East; over there he had yearned for Paris. Jules Claretie recalls Baudelaire saying to him with a grimace: "I love Wagner; but the music I prefer is that of a cat hung up by his tail outside of a window, and trying to stick to the panes of glass with its claws. There is an odd grating on the glass which I find at the same time strange, irritating, and singularly harmonious." Is it

necessary to add that Baudelaire, notorious in Paris for his love of cats, dedicating poems to cats, would never have perpetrated such revolting cruelty?

Another misconception, a critical one, is the case of Poe and Baudelaire. The young Frenchman first became infatuated with Poe's writings in 1846 or 1847—he gave these two dates, though several stories of Poe had been translated into French as early as 1841 or 1842; L'Orang-Outang was the first, which we know as The Murders in the Rue Morgue; Madame Meunier also adapted several Poe stories for the reviews. Baudelaire's labours as a translator lasted over ten years. That he assimilated Poe, that he idolized Poe, is a commonplace of literary gossip. But that Poe had overwhelming influence in the formation of his poetic genius is not the truth. Yet we find such an acute critic as the late Edmund Clarence Stedman writing, "Poe's chief influence upon Baudelaire's own production relates to poetry." It is precisely the reverse. Poe's influence affected Baudelaire's prose, notably in the disjointed confessions, Mon cœur mis à nu, which vaguely recall the American writer's Marginalia. The bulk in the poetry in Les Fleurs du Mal was written before Baudelaire had read Poe, though not published in book form until 1857. But in 1855 some of the poems saw the light in the Revue des deux Mondes,

while many of them had been put forth a decade or fifteen years before as fugitive verse in various magazines. Stedman was not the first to make this mistake. In Bayard Taylor's The Echo Club we find on page 24 this criticism: "There was a congenital twist about Poe ... Baudelaire and Swinburne after him have been trying to surpass him by increasing the dose; but his muse is the natural Pythia inheriting her convulsions, while they eat all sorts of insane roots to produce theirs." This must have been written about 1872, and after reading it one would fancy that Poe and Baudelaire were rhapsodic wrigglers on the poetic tripod, whereas their poetry is often reserved, even glacial. Baudelaire, like Poe, sometimes "built his nests with the birds of Night," and that was enough to condemn the work of both men by critics of the didactic school.

Once, when Baudelaire heard that an American man of letters(?) was in Paris, he secured an introduction and called on him. Eagerly inquiring after Poe, he learned that he was not considered a genteel person in America, Baudelaire withdrew, muttering maledictions. Enthusiastic poet! Charming literary person! Yet the American, whoever he was, represented public opinion at the time. To-day criticisms of Poe are vitiated by the desire to make him an angel. It is to be doubted whether

without his barren environment and hard fortunes we should have had Poe at all. He had to dig down deep into the pit of his personality to reach the central core of his music. But every ardent young soul entering "literature" begins by a vindication of Poe's character. Poe was a man, and he is now a classic. He was a half-charlatan as was Baudelaire. In both the sublime and the sickly were never far asunder. The pair loved to mystify, to play pranks on their contemporaries. Both were implacable pessimists. Both were educated in affluence, and both had to face unprepared the hardships of life. The hastiest comparison of their poetic work will show that their only common ideal was the worship of an exotic beauty. Their artistic methods of expression were totally dissimilar. Baudelaire, like Poe, had a harp-like temperament which vibrated in the presence of strange subjects. Above all, he was obsessed by sex. Women, as angel of destruction, is the keynote of his poems. Poe was almost sexless. His aerial creatures never footed the dusty highways of the world. His lovely lines, "Helen, thy beauty is to me," could never have been written by Baudelaire; while Poe would never have pardoned the "fulgurant" grandeur, the Beethoven-like harmonies, the Dantesque horrors of that "deep wide music of lost souls" in "Femmes Damnées":

"Descendes, descendes, lamentable victimes."

Or this, which might serve as a text for one of John Martin's vast sinister mezzotints:

J'ai vu parfois au fond d'un théâtre banal
Qu'enflammait l'orchestre sonore,
Une fée allumer dans un ciel infernal
Une miraculeuse aurore;

J'ai vu parfois au fond d'un théâtre banal
Un être, qui n'était que lumière, or et gaze,
Terrasser rénorme Satan;
Mais mon cœur que jamais ne visite l'extase,
Est un théâtre où l'on attend
Toujours, toujours en vain l'Etre aux ailes de gaze.

George Saintsbury thus sums up the differences between Poe and Baudelaire: "Both authors—Poe and De Quincey—fell short of Baudelaire himself as regards depth and fulness of passion, but both have a superficial likeness to him in eccentricity of temperameut and affection for a certain peculiar mixture of grotesque and horror." Poe is without passion, except a passion for the macabre; what Huysmans calls "The October of the sensations"; whereas, there is a gulf of despair and terror and humanity in

Baudelaire, which shakes your nerves, yet stimulates the imagination. However, profounder as a poet, he was no match for Poe in what might be termed intellectual prestidigitation. The mathematical Poe, the Poe of the ingenious detective tales, tales extraordinary, the Poe of the swift flights into the cosmic blue, the Poe the prophet and mystic—in these the American was more versatile than his French translator. That Baudelaire said, "Evil be thou my good," is doubtless true. He proved all things and found them vanity. He is the poet of original sin, a worshipper of Satan for the sake of paradox; his Litanies to Satan ring childish to us—in his heart he was a believer. His was "an infinite reverse aspiration," and mixed up with his pose was a disgust for vice, for life itself. He was the last of the Romanticists; Sainte-Beuve called him the Kamchatka of Romanticism; its remotest hyperborean peak. Romanticism is dead to-day, as dead as Naturalism; but Baudelaire is alive, and read. His glistening phosphorescent trail is over French poetry and he is the begetter of a school:—Verlaine, Villiers de l'Isle Adam, Carducci, Arthur Rimbaud, Jules Laforgue, Gabriel D'Annunzio, Aubrey Beardsley, Verhaeren, and many of the youthful crew. He affected Swinburne, and in Huysmans, who was not a poet, his splenetic spirit lives. Baudelaire's motto might be the obverse of Browning's lines: "The Devil is in heaven. All's wrong with the world."

When Goethe said of Hugo and the Romanticists that they came from Chateaubriand, he should have substituted the name of Rousseau—"Romanticism, it is Rousseau," exclaims Pierre Lasserre. But there is more of Byron and Petrus Borel—a forgotten half-mad poet—in Baudelaire; though, for a brief period, in 1848, he became a Rousseau reactionary, sported the workingman's blouse, cut his hair, shouldered a musket, went to the barricades, wrote inflammatory editorials calling the proletarian "Brother!" (oh, Baudelaire!) and, as the Goncourts recorded in their diary, had the head of a maniac. How seriously we may take this swing of the pendulum is to be noted in a speech of the poet's at the time of the Revolution: "Come," he said, "let us go shoot General Aupick!" It was his stepfather that he thought of, not the eternal principles of Liberty. This may be a false anecdote; many such were foisted upon Baudelaire. For example, his exclamations at cafés or in public places, such as: "Have you ever eaten a baby? I find it pleasing to the palate!" or, "The night I killed my father!" Naturally, people stared and Baudelaire was happy—he had startled a bourgeois. The cannibalistic idea he may have borrowed from Swift's amusing pamphlet, for this French poet knew English literature.

Gautier compares the poems to a certain tale of Hawthorne's in which there is a garden of poisoned flowers. But Hawthorne worked in his laboratory of evil wearing mask and gloves; he never descended into the mud and sin of the street. Baudelaire ruined his health, smudged his soul, yet remained withal, as Anatole France says, "a divine poet." How childish, yet how touching is his resolution—he wrote in his diary of prayer's dynamic force—when he was penniless, in debt, threatened with imprisonment, sick, nauseated with sin: "To make every morning my prayer to God, the reservoir of all force, and all justice; to my father, to Mariette, and to Poe as intercessors." (Evidently, Maurice Barrès encountered here his theory of Intercessors.) Baudelaire loved the memory of his father as much as Stendhal hated his own. He became reconciled with his mother after the death of General Aupick, in 1857. He felt in 1862 that his own intellectual eclipse was approaching, for he wrote: "I have cultivated my hysteria with joy and terror. To-day imbecility's wing fanned me as it passed." The sense of the vertiginous gulf was abiding with him; read his poem, "Pascal avait son gouffre."

In preferring the Baudelaire translations of Poe to the original—and they give the impression of being original