

# The Written Gaze

*Une voix retentit sur le port: 'Ouvre l'oeil!'*

*'Le Voyage'*

Later chapters on **Scopophilia**, **Panopticism** and **Myopia** will show, respectively, how the poems explore dynamics of visual desire, of visual omnipotence and of short-sightedness. But first, this opening chapter on **Written Gazes** will examine the specificities of reading and writing the gaze in poetry, as opposed to in any other medium like prose, drama or the plastic arts. In the section below on **The gaze in verse**, it will ask whether the act of writing the gaze into verse involves any particular constraints on or opportunities for the act of looking. Then a section on **Critical works on the gaze in the text** will consider the existing bibliography on the gaze in *Les Fleurs du Mal* to see to what extent the gazes that Baudelaire inscribed into the poems have in turn been written about by the critics.

## The gaze in verse

So to begin, what of the specific *poetics of gazing*? For instance, will gazes appear and function differently when implanted into poetic language rather than in prose? We shall find that in verse, complex drives and issues around gazing can easily get disguised, without for all that being any less present. And in verse, those drives can also be overlaid with a special grid of permissions and limits that is peculiar to poetry.

In a sense, verse may well offer more of a *disguise* or an alibi than prose does for the writer's and reader's own personal gazes, a sort of *cloak of permissions* that can surround poetry-reading as opposed to other forms of reading. The gaze can seem disguised in mid-nineteenth century French alexandrine verse. The linguistic medium itself is so contrived and so dense - it seems to stand so plastically on its own - that the language itself may almost seem to be the lens that is doing the looking. So to the literate, habitual reader of poetry, it can feel like verse-poetry has a life or a gaze of its own, opening its own eyes onto the world in a particular, familiar, ritualised way.<sup>1</sup> In prose, by contrast, the gaze is no longer 'carried' by or inset into this very artificial trellis of metre and rhyme, so it may be more difficult for the personal biases of the writer's gaze to be disguised or disowned.

Clearly one must be wary of generalisations in distinguishing prose from poetry, especially in a writer as fiendishly skilful as Baudelaire. The two genres' qualities can invert and exchange in quite dialectical ways. But nonetheless the textual gazer in prose probably stands more exposed. In the more limpid, dilute medium of prose, it can be more difficult for the tensions that the gaze can carry - tensions like voyeurism, prejudice, desire, repulsion and so on - to be folded impersonally into the fibre of the text, as they can be in densely versified poetry.

This concept of verse-poetry being more impersonal than prose may seem contrary to popular ideas about the lyric's much-touted qualities of personal expression, sentimental perspective, passionate feeling and so on. But here too is it not the lyric *per se* - the trellis of contrived metre and rhyme - that is *as a genre* seen as emotive? The lyric often foregrounds the effusions of a formulaic, genre-bound *je* or self. But ironically, that very convention may well be protecting the actual writer and reader from having the gazes that they each send into the poem exposed.

Also folded into the metrical fibre of the transaction between the reader and writer are issues around poetry's particular modes of representation and readership, and around that readership's particular expectations of the poetic genre. This involves, among other things, the degrees of licence that verse is allowed in particular areas. For instance, like the nude painting, poetry as a cultural medium can tend to allow, or even enshrine

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<sup>1</sup> A more extreme analogy might be today's television-watcher, who is trained to consider the entity called 'TV' as having its own distinctive *gaze*, as if TV's gaze somehow existed independently of the numerous technicians, camera-men and editors who construct it.

and exalt, a lot of permission for erotic gazing - for depicting, describing, perusing and reacting to the erotic body.<sup>2</sup>

In this sense the verse-poem as a cultural moment may seem closely to resemble the status of the nude painting. But they are sharply distinguished by the more emphatic *privacy* that surrounds poetry. Although in much earlier eras and cultures poetry had at times been a publicly performed medium, already by the nineteenth century an expectation of intense readerly privacy surrounded the act of reading poetry. A core function of the nude painting or sculpture is to be *looked at collectively* and simultaneously by a multitude of gazers in a semi-public exhibition-space. But the poem is to be looked at and internalised alone, by a solitary reader in their own private, mental reading-space.

However despite these permissions that are traditional to the lyric gaze, there were also in the nineteenth century many genre-bound constraints on that gaze. Granted verse was allowed - even expected - to enumerate and peruse attractive female body-parts. But it is easy for us to forget that in the mid-nineteenth century there were nonetheless whole realms of imagery and vocabulary that were still expected to be rigorously excluded from the gaze and lexicon of French verse. The critic De Dubay Rifelj has explored these contradictions inherent in the fact that, despite what she calls the resolutely "venal, capitalistic society" of the time, the banal texture and language of everyday life was nonetheless *expected* to be kept absent from poetry.

A genteel depressiveness and a conventional, formulaic use of gothic images were permissible. But she points out that the willful "degeneration in both image and language" that is characteristic of some of *Les Fleurs du Mal* - with their transfixed gazes onto rotting foods, vomitings and nausea, greasy financial transactions and so on - was definitely an erosion of the lyric mould.<sup>3</sup> Of course with the famous banning and confiscation of some of his published poems, Baudelaire paid the price for his genuinely provocative stretching of the lyric genre.

In fact, mid-nineteenth century French culture in general became a site for intensive investigations of the aesthetic, sexual and social politics of gazing. Refracted, mirroring transpositions of the act of gazing were being passed from poetry to the diverse visual arts and even - through the medium of Baudelaire's gaze - on to prose criticism. It was as if the genres were relentlessly interrogating each other's way of looking at their subjects. As Christopher Prendergast explains rather grandly in relation to this intense reflexivity in mid-nineteenth century French poetry: "the pictorial *framing* of the object of desire duplicates and repeats, at yet another level, the process of figuration itself. It accordingly inserts a distance between the appropriating gestures of the poem, and its knowledge of the *artificial* means whereby that appropriation is accomplished".<sup>4</sup>

But apart from the constraints of convention, what are the other particular constraints and opportunities provided to the gaze when it is encoded into rhyming metrical verse-forms? First of all, from the outset verse-poetry by definition appropriates to itself a visual status as an object to be gazed at. Not just strophic poetry, but also *vers libre* and the pictographic 'concrete poetry' of the turn of the twentieth century - all these have to be printed on the page in a very precise typography of their own design.

At this level, in the claims it makes as a visual object on the page, poetry has more in common with works of graphic art than with novels, short stories, plays, essays or journals. As an immutable visual form, the stanzaic poem borrows at least some of the self-contained, totemic quality of the ornamental object. The chosen stanzaic form of a given poem and the lattice of its metre and rhyme sculpt the text into a sort of vertical, visual corset that runs down the page, demarcating the length, width and density of the inked stanzas against the white margins around them.

We shall see *Les Fleurs du Mal* making much use of such typographical and stanzaic sculpting. Making a double provision for the reader's gaze, some poems in *Les Fleurs du Mal* impact on the reader instantly and visually even before the reading of the poem can begin. And their graphic layout often reinforces the text's meaning once the reading does begin. This keen engagement with the reader's gaze is particularly vivid in 'Le Jet d'Eau', for instance.<sup>5</sup> On the page the poem makes a sculptural imitation of tiered basins stacked above

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<sup>2</sup> Scott, *Pictorialist Poetics*, p.6

<sup>3</sup> Carol de Dubay Rifelj, *Word and Figure: The Language of Nineteenth Century French Poetry* (Columbus, Ohio University Press, 1987), p. 87

<sup>4</sup> Prendergast, Christopher, *Nineteenth Century French Poetry* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1993), p. 147

<sup>5</sup> Other examples are the wave-like stanzas of 'Le Beau Navire' and the typographic mimetism of the poignant, falling chords in 'La Musique'.

each other in a courtyard fountain. Like the tinkling water-drops of the fountain, the poem's vocabulary drips mimetically down through this structure with an aquatic *mièvrerie*:

Dans la cour, le jet d'eau qui jase  
Et ne se tait ni nuit ni jour [...]

La gerbe épanouie  
En mille fleurs,  
Tombe comme une pluie  
De larges pleurs [...]

D'écouter la plainte éternelle  
Qui sanglote dans les bassins!

Just to leaf through *Les Fleurs du Mal* is to have one's gaze constantly diverted by mutating graphic structures of this sort. Yet on top of this lattice of form, poetic language still has many other layers of visual resources to arrange and exploit. For example, the apparently banal tool of punctuation has in fact been described as the main sculptural tool of poetry, chiselling poetic syntax both within and between the verse-lines.<sup>6</sup>

Whether incising a slightly shifted caesura within a line, or removing the line-stop to run over in effects of *enjambement* and *rejet*, or even cutting a sudden dash or break into an otherwise streamlined stanza, the visual punctuation of verse is free to 'paint' onto the page either independently of, or in order to reflect and emphasise, the verse's meaning. As an example that is *both* visually and sonorously mimetic, the punctuation of 'Les Aveugles', for instance, hacks some of the poem's lines into broken, jumping segments that design a limping, hobbled syntax. With their urgent command "Vois!", the lines convey not only to the reader's ears but also directly to his gaze the sense of watching a crippled gait flail across an inner darkness:

Contemple-les, mon âme; ils sont vraiment affreux!  
Pareils aux mannequins; vaguement ridicules; [...]

Vois! je me traîne aussi, mais plus qu'eux hébété,  
Je dis: Que cherchent-ils au Ciel, tous ces aveugles?

In 'A une Passante' it is visually, through the stretching, rending and speeding of the punctuation, that the reader is first hit by the central experience of the poem. With points of ellipsis, an exclamation mark and a dash, the punctuation sculpturally *etches* the poignant, head-swinging moment of sudden attachment in the street, before the meaning of that moment can then go on to be more logically assimilated later by the half-blinded observer:

Un éclair...puis la nuit! - Fugitive beauté  
Dont le regard m'a fait soudainement renaître

In fact, this issue of the sequential assimilation of visual information in verse-poems is one of the biggest distinctions between the visual potentials of language and of more directly graphic media like painting or photography.<sup>7</sup> Language (whether prose or poetry), in order to describe any visual corpus or scene, must necessarily dissect and enumerate *separately* that body's visual qualities. By contrast, more graphic media like painting or sculpture can show bodies integrally in a single visual 'snap-shot'. And verse-language in particular imposes these effects of dissection and parcellisation even more palpably than does prose.

This is because the chopped, stacked lines of verse necessarily appropriate and cut through the gaze, repeatedly truncating or interrupting it into a column of partial, cumulative *aperçus*. But note that in *Les Fleurs du Mal* in particular, these 'chopped' lines can also deliberately help the gaze to itself become a

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<sup>6</sup> Clive Scott, *The Poetics of French Verse: Studies in Reading* (Oxford, Clarendon, 1998), p.10

<sup>7</sup> In 2005, in his 'Translating Baudelaire' in *The Cambridge Companion to Baudelaire*, ed. Lloyd, Rosemary (Cambridge, Cambridge U.P., 2005), Clive Scott gave an appreciation of some of these technical resources as they are exploited by Baudelaire.

dissector and appropriator. These representational constraints in short verse-lines can allow or even push the gaze to 'cut up' the body, albeit for aesthetic or appreciative purposes. Whether in a genteel, associative reverie about body-parts like 'Le Serpent Qui Danse' or in the more sadistic, murderous incisions of poems like 'Une Martyre' and 'A Celle Qui Est Trop Gaie', *Les Fleurs du Mal* make extremely sophisticated play with verse's tendency to sequentially enumerate body-parts. As one commentator puts it: "with a kind of synecdochic fury, this body is captured and contemplated through its severed hands, its beating heart, its lost meshes of hair".<sup>8</sup>

Across our study, we will often uncover the lyric gazer being reflexively excited, and at times even invaded, by the intensity and complexity of his own gazing. As a result, many of the poems have a driving, questioning self-consciousness about looking that was relatively new to the lyrical gaze. But if this edgy modernity in some of Baudelaire's versified gazes brings a newly reflexive self-awareness to the tradition of the lyric gazer, it also necessarily destabilises the traditional lyric self. In *Les Fleurs du Mal*, the textual 'je' does constantly assert both his own gaze and certain degrees of self-consciousness around that gaze. But we shall see that the elements of mastery and appropriation that he can achieve in his gazing tend constantly to teeter towards their opposites too, ready to collapse into a very modern crisis of visual disappropriation.

So rather than reading *Les Fleurs du Mal* for a steadily gazing or coherent lyric 'self', our study will instead trace the shifting, alternating powers and fragilities of the textual gazer. The multiplicity and complexity of these gazes show just how challenging it was for the traditionally centralising, containing power of the lyric to engage with the sheer vivacity and instability of modern gazing.<sup>9</sup>

In any era, we know that the ordinary social gaze is heightened in and around aesthetic works and cultural artefacts. The aesthetic products of a society - its poems, paintings, sculptures - often tend to frame and highlight or concatenate that society's gazing dynamics in a particularly intense way. Depending on whether an art-work is counter-cultural or is collaborative with mainstream values, it will tend either to offer typical instances of the society's gazes or to interrupt, challenge and disruptively question those gazes. Our study will show that with a sort of polyvalent insouciance, the gazes in *Les Fleurs du Mal* do both, at times collaborating with the gazing hegemonies of their day and at times subverting them.

But the insights of critic Richard Terdiman on counter-cultural discourse remind us that sophisticated cultural works do very often do both. They may aim to be reflexively aware of and transcend the surrounding society's values and gaze-dynamics. But Terdiman points out that cultural products almost always collaborate with and reproduce those dynamics, even if only unconsciously. This is because of the great difficulty involved in genuinely breaking out of the limits of collective ways of perceiving and valuing.

For instance, 'A une Mendiante Rousse' and 'Parfum Exotique' vaunt their ability to see through and to dispel the scene presented by the immediate environment, and to construct an alternative *seen* that is *differently* valued. But Terdiman would remind us that this supposedly reconstructed seen is also itself just another of those visual clichés that make up the collective gaze-repertoire of the era. In other words, for 'A une Mendiante Rousse' to re-envision the ragged beggar-girl as a little princess redolent with erotic potential was in itself a banality of the Victorian imagination. And in 'Parfum Exotique', the act of *looking away* from the immediate, urban environment to fantasise seeing exotic other places (another staple of the *Fleurs du Mal* visual repertoire) was of course a standard cameo of Romanticism.

So our reading will insist from the outset that *Les Fleurs du Mal* are little concerned with developing a coherent counter-cultural programme. However we will show that the poems engage with and explore such a heterogenous tangle of different gazes that *Les Fleurs du Mal* as a book ultimately comes to operate as a sort of 'gaze-metropolis'.

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<sup>8</sup> Deborah Harter, *Bodies in Pieces: Fantastic Narrative and the Poetics of the Fragment* (California, Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 3. See also E.F. Dalmolin's *Cutting the Body: Representing woman in Baudelaire's poetry, Truffaut's cinema and Freud's psychoanalysis* (Michigan, Michigan UP, 2000).

<sup>9</sup> In 2004 Sophie Boyer looked at this dialectic between modernity and lyric verse in *La femme chez Heinrich Heine et Charles Baudelaire: le langage moderne de l'amour* (Paris, L'Harmattan, 2004)