

## The Poet in the Gymnasium: Baudelaire and Gustave Le Vavas seur

Rosemary Lloyd, *University of Cambridge, England*

Baudelaire's review of the poet Le Vavas seur allowed him to explore his image of the ideal artist, one who is an intellectual gymnast, aware that poetry demands a firm effort of mind and will, and constant manipulation of language and of verse forms. In presenting the poet as saltimbank, moreover, Baudelaire not only draws on a *topos* favoured by nineteenth-century writers in general and himself in particular, but he also points to the role of the audience as a debasing devourer of artistic talent. He also establishes various parallels between himself and Le Vavas seur, using the latter's work as a basis less for conventional criticism than for a prose poem conveying the essence of the poet's skill.

Cabrioles et culbutes  
Étaient mes jeux favoris,  
Et j'aimais toutes les luttes,  
Jusqu'à celles des esprits.

Throughout his career as a literary critic Baudelaire was eager, whatever the ostensible subject of his reviews, to explore and refine his own response to literature and his image of the artist. The brief but beautifully shaped and shaded article on Gustave Le Vavas seur, written in 1860 for Crépet's anthology of French poets, is a rewarding example of his constant efforts to 'transformer [sa] volupté en connaissance,' yet one which has received little close attention.<sup>1</sup> In contrast to the reviews devoted to such highly considered contemporaries as Victor Hugo and Auguste Barbier, in contrast, too, to those who seemed unjustly neglected, like Pétrus Borel and Marceline Desbordes-Valmore, here Baudelaire's former close friendship with Le Vavas seur allows him to extoll less the poet than the man, less his achievements than his goals, and in doing so he adds to the increasingly rich and subtle portrait of the ideal artist that has gradually been building up in the literary articles.

Binding together the two paragraphs that form this study, like the 'bâton' of the thyrsus around which Baudelaire's imagination winds its 'prestigeuses pirouettes' (I, 336), is the concept of the poet as gymnast, both literally and

metaphorically. The idea is not new to Baudelaire's theoretical writing: he stresses that Edgar Poe 's'était fort distingué à tous les exercices d'adresse et de force' and adds 'cela rentrait un peu dans son talent: calculs et problèmes' (II, 268).<sup>2</sup> In addition he notes in *Fusées* that 'l'homme de lettres remue des capitaux et donne le goût de la gymnastique intellectuelle' (I, 652) and the analysis of Banville emphasizes the 'mille gymnastiques que les vrais amoureux de la Muse peuvent seuls apprécier à leur juste valeur' (II, 163). Moreover, one of his principal bones of contention with the 'jeunesse littéraire' taken to task in the preface to Cladel's *Martyrs ridicules* is that 'de son absolue confiance dans le génie et l'inspiration, elle tire le droit de ne se soumettre à aucune gymnastique' (II, 183), and Baudelaire adds, using a simile tautening the resemblances with his assertions in the *Le Vasseur* article: 'elle ignore que le génie [...] doit, comme le saltimbanque apprenti, risquer de se rompre mille fois les os en secret avant de danser devant le public' (II, 183). Indeed, so resolutely did Baudelaire emphasize this image of the artist that Alphonse Duchesne, in his 'Lettre franche à M. Charles Baudelaire' printed in *Le Figaro* in May 1861, took up the reference, asserting:

Je pourrais citer par leurs noms de tout jeunes écrivains qui, rompus, dès leurs essais, à la gymnastique des mots, en remontreraient aux maîtres eux-mêmes, si la poésie n'était considérée que comme un tour de force et de souplesse, et les poètes comme les léotards du style<sup>3</sup>.

Elsewhere, Baudelaire has presented the artist as saltimbank, actor or swordsman: only here, however, does he draw these varied images together to throw into relief the element all have in common:

je me souvins que beaucoup d'hommes, d'une nature aussi rare et élevée que la sienne, avaient éprouvé des jalousies semblables à l'égard du torero, du comédien et de tous ceux qui, faisant de leur personne une glorieuse pâture publique, soulèvent l'enthousiasme du cirque et du théâtre (II, 180).

The typically alimentary metaphor of the 'pâture publique' only partly disguises the dangerous ambivalence dominating Baudelaire's attitude towards his public. His first essay on Gautier, for example, asserts that 'le condiment que Théophile Gautier jette dans ses oeuvres, qui, pour les amateurs d'art, est du choix le plus exquis et du sel le plus ardent, n'a que peu ou point d'action sur le palais de la foule' (II, 106). The prose poem 'Le Chien et le flacon' slightly changes the image:

«— Ah! misérable chien, si je vous avais offert un paquet d'excréments, vous l'auriez flairé avec délices et peut-être dévoré. Ainsi, vous-même, indigne compa-

gnon de ma triste vie, vous ressemblez au public, à qui il ne faut jamais présenter des parfums délicats qui l'exaspèrent, mais des ordures soigneusement choisies» (I, 284).

Equally revealing, however, is the envy Baudelaire suggests the poet feels for those who can arouse 'l'enthousiasme du cirque et du théâtre.' For the scorn Baudelaire directs at the uncomprehending public is balanced by a longing to wrest applause from that very audience: 'Une mort héroïque' with its evocation of the 'voluptés multipliées que donne la vue d'un chef-d'oeuvre d'art vivant' (I, 322) also stresses the audience's 'explosions de la joie et de l'admiration.'

So deeply did Le Vavasseur share this desire to provoke public acclaim, Baudelaire tells us, that he even attempted to imitate the physical prowess of the admired performing gymnasts. As with several other reviews, Baudelaire uses his personal memories of the poet both to act as a springboard and to set the tone for his article<sup>4</sup>, here above all one of friendship and amused sympathy. Our first glimpse of the poet in Baudelaire's review is of him 'presque nu, se tenant dangeureusement en équilibre sur un échafaudage de chaises' (II; 180). The reason for this apparently strange behaviour is that 'il se sentait jaloux de tous les exploits de force et d'adresse, et qu'il avait quelquefois connu le bonheur de se prouver qu'il n'était pas incapable *d'en faire autant*' (II, 180). The italicized phrase has a familiar ring, recalling a letter written to Michel Lévy, probably in August or September 1862, in which Baudelaire mentions rather sardonically his plan to write 'une grande préface où j'expliquerai mes trucs et ma méthode et où j'enseignerai à chacun *l'art d'en faire autant*.'<sup>5</sup> It is reminiscent, too, of the acid tones of 'A une heure du matin': 'Seigneur mon Dieu! accordez-moi la grâce de produire quelques beaux vers qui me prouvent à moi-même que je ne suis pas [...] inférieur à ceux que je méprise' (I, 288).

But while Baudelaire might mock such tendencies in himself he is quick to exonerate Le Vavasseur from any hint of ridicule or blame: 'je l'aurais plutôt loué pour sa franchise et pour sa fidélité à sa propre nature' (II, 180). Here he touches on one of the themes running through all his criticism, that of the central need for an artist to develop his own personality, regardless of artistic trends or public pressure. Even in the very early review of Chennevières' tales Baudelaire insists: 'pendant que tous les auteurs s'attachent aujourd'hui à se faire un tempérament et une âme d'emprunt, [Chennevières] a donné la sienne, la sienne vraie' (II, 3). Most importantly, the *Salon de*

1846 defines *naïveté* as 'la domination du tempérament dans la manière' (II, 491).<sup>6</sup>

Above all, Baudelaire suggests a vital link between Le Vavas seur's gymnastic exploits and his poetic gifts, the transition between the two paragraphs, and the movement from the physical to the spiritual level of the image, being achieved through a strongly physical metaphor, accentuating Baudelaire's own sense of intense delight in creative endeavour: 'Gustave Le Vavas seur a toujours aimé passionnément les tours de force. Une difficulté a pour lui toutes les séductions d'une nymphe.' The sense of *enivrement*, of *ravissement*, of a pleasure almost erotic in its intensity and nature is one that Baudelaire often emphasizes and that offers us a sudden glimpse into his own personality, illuminating, too, perhaps, the fascination intoxicants exerted over him as a possibility of achieving similar joy. In Le Vavas seur's case, this pleasure, according to Baudelaire, derives above all from the challenge of mastering language, producing the pithy epigramme or creating the play on words that marks the linguistic gymnast. It stems too from dominating a complex rhyme scheme: 'il n'y a pas de musique qui lui soit plus agréable que celle de la rime triplée, quadruplée, multipliée'. Here Le Vavas seur approaches the most idealized of Baudelaire's poets, Edgar Poe; the American 'fait souvent un usage heureux [...] des rimes redoublées et triplées, et aussi d'un genre de rime qui introduit dans la poésie moderne [...] les surprises du vers léonin' (II, 336). Elsewhere, in regard to Poe, Baudelaire also chooses to underline the intense joy that can be provoked by such technical devices when he speaks of translations as suffering from the 'voluptés absentes du rythme et de la rime' (II, 347). Indeed, throughout this brief assessment of Le Vavas seur as poet Baudelaire throws into relief those aspects that also characterize the poets he most admires or those aims he himself cherishes. Thus Le Vavas seur's admiration for 'la pointe faisant résumé et éclatant come une fleur pyrotechnique' (II, 180) is described as 'bizarre,' recalling one of the key words in the Borel review, but just as Borel's *bizarrierie* gives him 'une saveur *sui generis*' (II, 156) so is Le Vavas seur's 'goût candidement bizarre,' *candidement* taking up the implications of '*naïvement compliqué*,' to reinforce the vital importance of developing one's own character. Moreover, if this taste for the 'pointe faisant résumé' is bizarre, it is also very much part of Baudelaire's nature, as his *Journaux intimes* as well as numerous examples in the literary criticism bear witness: thus we find the cruel caricature of Musset: 'à l'heure où, avec les dandinements de commis voyageur, un cigare

au bec, il s'échappe d'un dîner à l'ambassade pour aller à la maison de jeu' (II, 183); or Hugo described as 'académicien avant de naître' (II, 431); or the well-known judgement of *Les Liaisons dangereuses*: 'ce livre, s'il brûle, ne peut brûler qu'à la manière de la glace' (II, 67). Indeed, the very choice of the adjective 'pyrotechnique' suggests Baudelaire's choice of the title *Fusées* for his own collection of *pointes*. Another aspect that connects Le Vavasieur with other poets Baudelaire admired lies in the way in which his poems are described as being 'd'une sonorité et d'un reflet si métalliques' (II, 180), while of Gautier Baudelaire asks:

rapellerai-je encore cette série de petits poèmes de quelques strophes, qui sont des intermèdes galants ou rêveurs et qui ressemblent, les uns à des sculptures, les autres à des fleurs, d'autres à des bijoux, [...] et tous d'une coupe plus pure et plus décidée que des objets de marbre ou de cristal? (II, 126)

However, one has a slight sense of unease here, an awareness that Baudelaire's admiration is limited, a feeling that the stress lies on the surface appearance, not on the content of these works. And the uneasiness increases if we think of the many *Fleurs du mal* in which metals, for all their beauty, possess only a 'froide majesté.' Moreover, while the critic Fleury likewise noted Le Vavasieur's skill 'à faire manoeuvrer des escadrons de rimes et de petits vers' and the way in which he 'se délecte en des rythmes rares et mélodieux,'<sup>7</sup> the few other critics of the time who wrote on Le Vavasieur also placed particular emphasis on the suppleness of his verse and the mastery of form and rhythm, but almost invariably concluded by suggesting that formal virtuosity merely veiled intellectual vacuity.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, Baudelaire's final sentence, with its ternary rhythms and its careful nuances, links together 'la souplesse de son esprit' with 'celle de son corps,' implying that Baudelaire at least saw rather more in Le Vavasieur than did his contemporaries: for him, Le Vavasieur's conversation, if not his poetry, was 'solide, nourissante, suggestive.' The last of these adjectives is particularly revelatory: of *Madame Bovary* Baudelaire wrote: 'ce livre, essentiellement suggestif, pourrait souffler un volume d'observations' (II, 84) and he frequently implies and at times indeed asserts that the value of a work of art is often to be measured in terms of its ability to suggest ideas, images, emotions to its audience. Certainly one of Baudelaire's most constant centres of interest was his pre-occupation with the way in which art affected and stimulated the human mind. Yet there is something oddly repetitive here: so often does he use the adjectives 'solide' and 'nourissante' to refer to

conversation – an art, it must be stressed, that he greatly valued<sup>9</sup> – and particularly to the conversation of someone he admires, that one suspects that the friend of Baudelaire's youth is merging into the ideal artist. This suspicion is strengthened by the affirmation that Le Vavas seur's suppleness 'lui permet de tout comprendre, de tout apprécier, de tout sentir, même ce qui a l'air, à première vue, le plus éloigné de sa nature' (II, 181). This assertion is very close to Baudelaire's conviction that the great artist possessed a form of intellectual and aesthetic cosmopolitanism, the ability that allowed Gautier to 'britanniser son génie' in assessing the paintings of the English school (II, 123), and both Gautier and Leconte de Lisle to 'habiller leur pensée des modes variables que le temps éparpille dans l'éternité' (II, 177).

In part, then, this review is an attempt to recreate the nature of a man whom Baudelaire associated with far happier days than those in which he now lived. He makes no exaggerated claims for Le Vavas seur's poetry: *Vire et les Virois* is described as a *chef-d'oeuvre*, true, but the adjective 'petit' places the work in its true perspective and the phrase 'les ruses de l'escrime' together with the insistence on technical virtuosity offers warning to the perceptive. Moreover, Baudelaire foresees potential criticisms: the poems, he insists, 'n'exclu[ent] pas, comme aucuns le pourraient croire, on le voit, la rêverie et la balancement de la mélodie' (II, 180). Above all, however, 'Gustave Le Vavas seur' is less a piece of conventional criticism than a prose poem in which Baudelaire's aim is not to judge or to assess but merely to convey 'la ressemblance de ce poète.'

#### NOTES

1. For a detailed survey of the main studies of Baudelaire's literary criticism see the introduction to my *Baudelaire's Literary Criticism* (Cambridge, University Press, 1981), in which, for reasons of space, there is no assessment of this review. Quotations are taken from the Pléiade edition of Baudelaire's *Œuvres complètes*, edited by C. Pichois: I (Paris, 1975), abbreviated as I; II (Paris, 1976), abbreviated as II.
2. The second of these comments is Baudelaire's own addition to his American source: see W. T. Bandy, *Edgar Allan Poe* (Toronto, University Press, 1973).
3. A. Duchesne, 'Lettres franches', *Le Figaro*, 2 May 1861. On the image of the saltimbank see J. Starobinski, *Portrait de l'artiste en saltimbanque* (Genève, Skira, 1970).
4. Compare II, 103, 107, 129.
5. See Baudelaire, *Correspondance*, edited C. Pichois, II (Paris, Pléiade, 1973), 257, 787.

6. On 'naïveté' see also D. Kelley, *Le Salon de 1846* (Oxford, University Press, 1975).
7. J. Fleury, 'Poésies fugitives', *La Démocratie pacifique*, 26 May 1847.
8. See for example A. Durantin, 'Vers', *L'Echo de la littérature et des beaux-arts*, August 1843, 235–7; and 'Poésies fugitives', *ibid.*, August 1846, 387–9; Prarond, *De quelques écrivains nouveaux* (Paris, Michel Lèvy Frères, 1852), 15–49; Sainte-Beuve, *Nouveaux lundis*, X (Paris, Garnier Frères, 1868), 125.
9. See I, 558; II, 107, 109, 181, 611, 692, 759, 764.

Rosemary Lloyd. Born 1949. M.A., Ph.D. Lecturer at the University of Cambridge and is a fellow of New Hall. Major publications: *Baudelaire et Hoffmann: affinités et influences* (Cambridge, University Press, 1979) and *Baudelaire's Literary Criticism* (Cambridge, University Press, 1981).