

MODERN LANGUAGES & LINGUISTICS

A very strange poet

Joanna Richardson and Eugene Holland's books on the *poète maudit* have in common a great attention to detail, but very little else. One could almost be reading about two different authors. Even the accompanying publicity sheets seem to parody the genres, being, respectively, commercial-illiterate and academic-dot-matrixed.

Baudelaire was the archetypal over-late-Romantic pre-postmodern misfit. His mother was orphaned at the age of seven within days of first arrival in France and thenceforth suffered from a nervous disposition. His father was an ex-priest, an administrator and a cultivated gentleman, 61 years older than Charles. His stepfather was a general, ambassador, occasional writer of atlases and an unshamed crawler to each successive régime.

From the beginning of his 45 years on earth, Charles alternated: between scholastic success and idle rebellion, precocious poems and expulsion from Louis-le-Grand, idealism and degradation, madonnas and whores, drink and drugs, ethereal writings and squalid hotel rooms. While the over-severe general was still alive, there were increasing family disagreements, and years with no contact. After the general's death, the balance of power was reversed. Out of ten promises to visit his over-protective mother in Honfleur, Baudelaire would keep one. Out of all his visits, one in a lifetime lasted more than a couple of days (some lasted hours). And yet the poet's letters to his mother show more intimacy than with anyone — certainly more than with the other women in his life.

Despite his private income, about half of Baudelaire's corre-

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BAUDELAIRE

BY JOANNA RICHARDSON
John Murray, 602pp, £30.00
ISBN 0 7195 4183 6

BAUDELAIRE AND SCHIZOANALYSIS: THE SOCIOPOETICS OF MODERNISM

BY EUGENE W. HOLLAND
Cambridge University Press
306pp, £35.00.
ISBN 0 521 41980 8

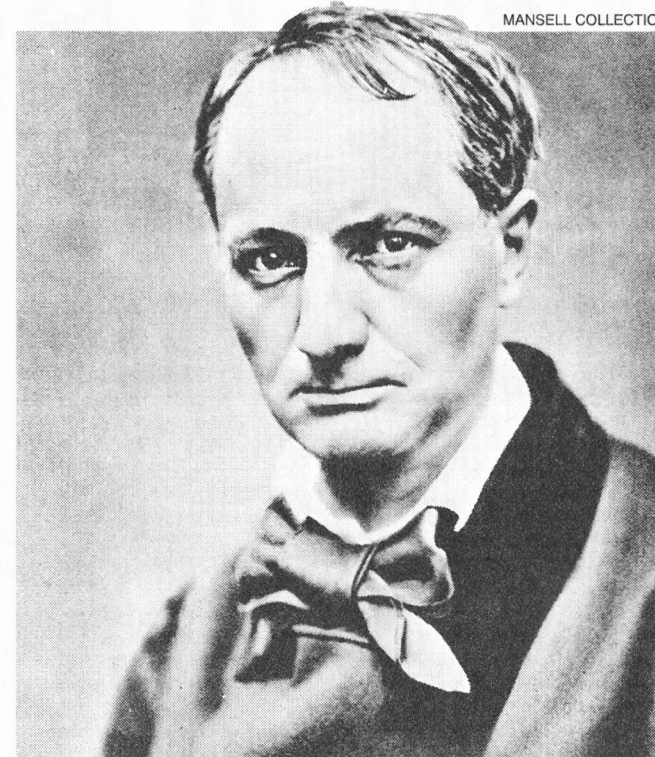
spondence in fact consists of requests for loans. Family, friends, lawyers, hoteliers and even publishers were tormented by the promises to repay, invariably broken unless a larger loan was in view. The rhetoric ranges from overemphasis — all underlining and block capitals — to insincere flattery, then to humiliating demands, and finally to emotional blackmail and threats of suicide. Eventually, the poet sold many of his works two or three times over, even "borrowing" unpublished manuscripts back from one publisher to give to another. He ended up lying, cheating and stealing.

What is a Life for? The cynic will say that it is literary criticism without the literature, the only narrative these days to have a beginning, middle and end. Certainly, biographies sell well. In trying to write for both specialist and general audiences, Joanna Richardson faces some tough dilemmas between exhaustiveness or interest, Anglo-Saxon facts or Gallic

empathy and surmising, familiar ground or new discoveries, unreliable but important beginnings or documented but boring adulthood. And how to cover Baudelaire's final period in Belgium and in the nursing home, when, irony of ironies, the writer suffered from total aphasia?

Baudelaire steers a median course, and generally provides a complete and objective account of the poet's life. Inevitably perhaps, some questions will remain. Might the transmissibility of Baudelaire's syphilis — apparently contracted on his first sexual relationship — have been the reason he avoided further sex? What were his translations of Edgar Allan Poe really like? Could he (and his mistresses) have managed to live off his income? How deep did his Catholicism go? It would also have been useful to have had a list of Baudelaire's translations, art criticism and other works — and of the works in the jealously guarded trunk. Victor Hugo and Sainte-Beuve come out of this study rather badly; but weren't they in fact entitled to think Baudelaire self-deluding, self-serving and self-destructive? Even his loyal friend Malassis deplored his "procrastination, his obstinacy and his drivel". In sum, a great poet but a deeply flawed human being.

Baudelaire and Schizoanalysis: the Sociopoetics of Modernism could hardly be more dissimilar. Eugene Holland's book is Lacanian, anti-aestheticist and self-proclaimedly feminist and environmentalist. Such luminaries as Gilles Deleuze and Michel de Certeau are quoted as having sup-



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ported the endeavour; and the bibliography reads like a postmodernist hall of fame (Lacan and Ross Chambers lead: the rest nowhere). The preface is a first-person Marxist condemnation of high and late authoritarian capitalism. Schizoanalysis is therein defined as the intersection of the psychoanalytical and the socio-historical approaches: "schizo", because there exist no fixed rules and the objects of desire are randomly chosen. Then the introduction surveys

Russian formalist-inspired defamiliarisation, Walter Benjamin, Georg Lukacs, exchange-value depersonalisation, de-narrativisation, de-naturalisation, consumerism, individualisation, decoding and recoding, and much else.

When, on the sixtieth page, we get down to the texts, Holland avoids mere paraphrasing. He gives the poems instead a very close reading, working through each phrase, painstakingly building

up his arguments. He insists that Baudelaire switches progressively from metaphor to metonymy. His closely argued conclusions, in very rapid summary, are: that contemporary poetics have to be post-structuralist because of the absence of any stable signifying structure; that Baudelaire remains ambivalently modern; and that the poet is the creature of the market forces surrounding him.

Holland is very good, ironically, at summarising the traditional critics and theorists. He is magisterial, intelligent, coherent and knowledgeable. But even postgraduate students will find him hard going. Recommended, therefore, if you want to know more about Baudelaire and contemporary critical methods. Not for deconstructing in the tub(e), though.

Where does all this biographical and critical effort leave poor Baudelaire himself? Both critics have an ambiguous attitude to the influential but uninspiring *Petits poèmes en prose. Les fleurs du mal* have lost much of their power to shock — many of the phrases have become cultural stereotypes. But its poetry still mesmerises. Its self-conscious espousal of evil and sado-masochism and foregrounding of the alienated poet in his urban isolation remains ideal for an age with few taboos and an unconscious which insists on rudely exposing itself. Baudelaire's *correspondances* — the interplay of the senses — still haunt us. What continues to matter in *Les fleurs du mal* is the pure, unadulterated poetry, the sensual power of evocation and hallucination. Richardson and Holland contribute to our understanding of the strange poet.

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