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Describing poetic structures: Two approaches to Baudelaire's *les Chats*

Poetry is language, but it produces effects that language in everyday speech does not consistently produce; a reasonable assumption is that the linguistic analysis of a poem should turn up specific features, and that there is a causal relationship between the presence of these features in the text and our empirical feeling that we have before us a poem. The act of communication — the sending of a message from speaker to addressee — is conditioned by the need it fills: the verbal structure of the message depends upon which factor of communication is focused on. In everyday language, used for practical purposes, the focus is usually upon the situational context, the mental or physical reality referred to; sometimes the focus is upon the code used in transmitting the message, that is, upon language itself, if there seems to be some block in the addressee's understanding, and so forth. In the case of verbal art, the focus is upon the message as an end in itself, not just as a means, upon its form as a permanent, unchangeable monument, forever independent of external conditions. The naked eye attributes this enduring, attention-getting quality to a higher unity and more intricate texture: the poem follows more rules (e.g. meter, lexical restrictions, etc.) and displays more conspicuous interrelationships between its constitutive elements than do casual utterances.

For these features Roman Jakobson has proposed a general formula. Selection and combination are the two basic ordering principles of speech. Selection is based upon equivalence (metaphoric relationship), either similarity or dissimilarity; the speaker designates his topic (subject) by choosing one among various available synonyms and then says what he has to say about it (predicate) by another selection from another set of interchangeable words (paradigm). The combining of these words, that is, their contiguity, produces a sentence. Jakobson defines a poetic structure as one characterized by the projection of the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection to the axis of combination.¹ For instance, words

¹"Linguistics and Poetics," *Style in Language*, ed. T. A. Sebek (New York: 1960), esp. pp. 358 ss.

are combined into rhythmic, alliterative, and rhymic sequences because of their equivalence in sound, and this inevitably establishes semantic equations between these words; their respective meanings are consequently perceived as related by similarity (hence a metaphor or simile) or dissimilarity (hence an antithesis).

Which is to say that the recurrence of equivalent forms, *parallelism*, is the basic relationship underlying poetry. Of course, since language is a system made up of several levels superimposed one on top of the other (phonetic, phonological, syntactical, semantic, etc.), parallelism manifests itself on any level: so then, a poem is a verbal sequence wherein the same relations between constituents are repeated at various levels and the same story is told in several ways at the same time and at several times in the same way. This can be usefully restated in structural terms once we have called to mind basic definitions: a structure is a system made up of several elements, none of which can undergo a change without effecting changes in all the other elements; thus the system is what mathematicians call an invariant; transformations within it produce a group of models of the same type (that is, mechanically interconvertible shapes), or variants. The invariant, of course, is an abstraction arrived at by defining what remains intact in the face of these conversions; therefore we are able to observe a structure only in the shape of one or another variant. We are now ready to agree with Cl. Lévi-Strauss that a poem is a structure containing within itself its variants ordered on the vertical axis of the different linguistic levels. It is thus possible to describe the poem in isolation, so that we need not explain its singularity by dragging in hard-to-define concepts like non-grammaticalness or departure from the norm. Comparison of variants, prerequisite to analysis, is accomplished by simply scanning the text at its various linguistic levels one after the other.

Such is the approach tried out by Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss on "Les Chats," a sonnet of Baudelaire's, and with extraordinary thoroughness.² They modestly declare that they are interested only in

²Jakobson (Roman), Lévi-Strauss (Claude) "Les Chats de Charles Baudelaire", *L'Homme*, 2 (1962), 5-21.

describing what the poem is made of. Never the less they do draw conclusions as to the meaning of the poem and try to relate it to the esthetics and even the psyche of the poet, purlieu of literary scholars. This raises a question: how are we to pass from description to judgment — that is, from a study of the text to a study of its effect upon the reader? The sonnet is a good occasion for such discussion, for critics generally downgrade the poem (*Fleurs du Mal*, LXVI), a product of Baudelaire's early period (1847), and find it less Baudelairean than most of the others. But the poet did not feel that way about it: he thought it good enough to publish in the feuilleton of a friend, in hopes of drumming up some interest; then he selected it for a preview of his abortive *Limbes* (1851); finally, he thought it worth keeping in the editions of the *Fleurs* that he was able to prepare himself. If structuralism can help determine who is right here, we shall have tested its practical workability in matters of literary criticism.

Far more important, however, is the question as to whether unmodified structural linguistics is relevant at all to the analysis of poetry. The authors' method is based on the assumption that any structural system they are able to define in the poem is necessarily a poetic structure. Can we not suppose, on the contrary, that the poem may contain certain structures that play no part in its function and effect as a literary work of art, and that there may be no way for structural linguistics to distinguish between these unmarked structures and those that are literarily active? Conversely, there may well be strictly poetic structures that cannot be recognized as such by an analysis not geared to the specificity of poetic language.

Les Chats

- 1 Les amoureux fervents et les savants austères
- 2 Aiment également, dans leur mûre saison,
- 3 Les chats puissants et doux, orgueil de la maison,
- 4 Qui comme eux sont frileux et comme eux sédentaires.
- 5 Amis de la science et de la volupté,

- 6 Ils cherchent le silence et l'horreur des ténèbres;
7 L'Erèbe les eût pris pour ses coursiers funèbres,
8 S'ils pouvaient au servage incliner leur fierté.
- 9 Ils prennent en songeant les nobles attitudes
10 Des grands sphinx allongés au fond des solitudes,
11 Qui semblent s'endormir dans un rêve sans fin;
- 12 Leurs reins féconds sont pleins d'étincelles magiques,
13 Et des parcelles d'or, ainsi qu'un sable fin,
14 Etoilent vaguement leurs prunelles mystiques.

Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss submit the text to scannings of its meter, sound texture, grammar, and meaning; they are thus able to collect several sets of the equivalent signs that actualize the sonnet's structure. Let me describe briefly the systems thus obtained, with a sampling of the variants comparatively studied in order to establish these systems. My aim here is only to show how the authors' analysis is carried through. The most significant of their arguments omitted here will be taken up in my discussion of the validity of their approach.

Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss recognize the following complementary or intersecting structures:

1) a *tripartite division* into: *quatrain I*, which represents the cats as passive creatures, observed by outsiders, lovers and scholars; *quatrain II*, where the cats are active but, again, seen as such from the outside, by the powers of darkness; the latter, also seen from outside, are active: they have designs on the cats and are frustrated by the independence of the little beasts; *sestet*, which gives us an inside view of the cat life-style: their attitude may be passive, but they assume that attitude actively. Thus is the active-passive opposition reconciled, or perhaps nullified, and the circle of the sonnet closes.

This tripartite structure is defined by two equivalent models: one grammatical, formed by three complex "sentences" delimited by periods, and further defined by an arithmetic progression in the number of their independent clauses and personal verbal forms (as distinct from forms in the infinitive or participle); one metric (the

rhyme systems unify the tercets into a sestet while separating it from the quatrains). These two models are further bound together by the relationship between rhyme and categories: every feminine rhyme coincides with a plural ending, every masculine one with a singular.

2) a *bipartite division* that opposes the octet and the sestet. In the *octet* the cats are seen from an outside observer's point of view and are imprisoned within time and space (²*saison* and ³*maison*, which rhyme and meaning make equivalent). In the *sestet* both view-point and space-time limits drop away: the desert bursts the house wide open; the eternity of ¹¹*dans un rêve sans fin* annuls ²*dans leur mûre saison*: in this case the equivalence is an antinomy and is formally established by the parallelism of the *dans* constructions, the only two in the poem). This overall opposition combines with two secondary ones: *quatrain I tercet I* (³*maison*: ¹⁰*solitudes* :: ²*saison*: ¹¹*sans fin*) and *quatrain II tercet II* (cats in darkness vs. cats radiating light).

To take only one of these secondary oppositions: in *quatrain II tercet II*, on the one hand, ¹²*Leurs reins féconds sont pleins* is synonymous with ⁵*Amis . . . de la volupté* (p. 16), and one of the subjects in the quatrain and three subjects in the tercet all alike designate inanimate things; on the other hand, the antinomy of darkness and light is backed up by corresponding sets of equatable items: ⁷*Erèbe* and ⁶*ténèbres* echo each other in meaning and in sound, as do ¹²*étinCELLES*, ¹³*parCELLES d'or* and ¹⁴*prunELLES*.

3) a *chiasma-like division* linking quatrain I and tercet II, where the cats function as objects (³*chats*, ^{12,14}*Leurs*) and, on the other hand, quatrain II and tercet I, where they are subjects. The *quatrain I-tercet II* coupling, to which I shall limit this summary, contains the following formal equivalences: both stanzas have more adjectives than the internal strophes; the first and last verbs are both modified by rhyming adverbs (²*aiment également*; ¹⁴*étoilent vaguement*); these are the only two stanzas made up of sentences with two subjects for one verb and one object, each subject and object being modified by one adjective, etc. A semantic relationship underlies these formal features: in *quatrain I* a metonymic relationship between the animals

and their worshippers (i.e. cats and people live in the same house) generates a metaphoric similarity (⁴*comme eux* twice repeated); the same thing in *tercet II*, where a synecdochic (*pars pro toto*) description of the cats, using different parts of their body, permits their metaphoric identification with the cosmos, or so say the two analysts.

These three systems fit one inside the other and together make of the sonnet a “closed” structure, but they coexist with a *fourth system* that makes the poem an open-ended structure which develops dynamically from the first line to the last: two equal *sestets* (1. 1-6 and 9-14), separated by a *distich*. Of the four structures, this last is the one most at variance with the stanza and rhyme architecture that defines the sonnet as a genre: the aberrant distich presents features that do not occur anywhere else, against a background of features that occur only elsewhere in the poem, some of them related to those of the distich by antonymy (every single subject-verb group is plural except for ⁷*L’Erèbe les eût pris*; against the rule followed throughout the rest of the poem, ⁷*funèbres*-⁸*fiercé* alliterate, etc.). Now Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss regard this distich as a transition: the pseudo-sestet describes objectively a factual situation of the real world; two opposite human categories, sensual and intellectual, are reconciled through their identification with the animal endowed with the diametric traits of both types of men; these traits in turn explain the cats’ love for silence and darkness — a predilection that exposes them to temptation. Erebus threatens to confine them to their animal nature by taming them; we are relieved to see him fail. This episode, translated in terms of parallelism, should be seen not just as another antonymy but as “l’unique équivalence rejetée” (p. 14).

Never the less, this rejection has its positive effect: an equivalence with the sphinx can substitute for it. The sphinx, with a human head on an animal body, transposes into myth the identification between real cats and people. Also, the monsters’ motionless daydreaming and the cats’ sedentariness (likewise characteristic of the human types they symbolize) are synonymous; and the way the cats ape the sphinxes is a new equivalence stated simultaneously at the grammatical level, in the narrative (it is ⁹*en songeant* that they look like the

¹⁰*sphinx allongés*), at the morphological level (*allongés* and *songeant* are the only participles in the text) and at the sound level the two verbs are related by paronomasia. The second *sestet* is devoted to the deepening mystery of this *miracle des chats* (p. 15). Tercet I still sustains the ambiguity: it is difficult to decide whether cats and sphinxes are linked merely to magnify the image of the cats stylistically, or whether we have here the description of actual similarity, the racial bond between the household sphinx and the desert cat. In tercet II, however, substitution of parts of his body for the whole cat dissolves the beast into particles of matter, and the final identification associates these particles with desert sands and transmutes them into stars: the fusion of cats and cosmos has been accomplished. This apotheosis to infinity does not exclude a circular structure from the text. The authors believe there is a parallelism between tercet II and line 1, the myth being seen as a variant on a universal scale of the “constricting” union, inward-turning, when the lover folds his love into his arms, and of the expansive union, outward-turning, when the scholar takes the universe in his embrace; similarly, cats either interiorize the universe, or else they spread themselves out beyond the bounds of time and space (p. 20).

From all the foregoing, we can at least draw the conclusion that these mutually combinatory and complementary structures interplay in a way unique. The poem is like a microcosm, with its own system of references and analogies. We have an absolutely convincing demonstration of the extraordinary concatenation of correspondences that holds together the parts of speech.

The irrelevance of grammar

But there is no telling which of these systems of correspondences contribute to the poetry of the text. And there is much to be said about the systems that do not.

The divisions proposed explain a good deal of the tension between symmetrical and asymmetrical rhymes and the grammar arrangements upon which the composition of the sonnet rests. The first

division is beyond criticism; the second is well substantiated, since it hinges on an articulation (the octet-sestet boundary) which corresponds to a change so sharp that it prompted postulation of the fourth division. Divisions three and four, especially the last, make use of constituents that cannot possibly be perceived by the reader; these constituents must therefore remain alien to the poetic structure, which is supposed to emphasize the form of the message, to make it more “visible,” more compelling.

Equivalences established on the basis of purely syntactic similarities would seem particularly dubious — for instance, the parallelism pointed to between the relative clauses of lines 4 and 11: this last allegedly draws the “contour of an imaginary quatrain, a make-believe homologue of the first quatrain” (p. 13). At most, this might be conceivable if the clauses appeared against an empty or uniform context; not in an actual sonnet, whose continual variation of verbal shapes makes a marked contrast necessary in order to impose perception. Even there, the parallelism from one line to another can be superseded by a stronger relation within one of the two lines involved. This happens in the case of the equation urged by Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss between ⁴*Qui comme eux sont frileux* and ¹²*Leurs reins féconds sont pleins*, on account of their syntactic parallelism and their internal rhymes. In context the difference outweighs the similarities: an internal rhyme like ⁵*science*-⁶*silence* is obvious, and so is *eux-frileux*, because identical stresses “confirm” them; but a natural reading of line 12 will have to take into account the tight unity of *leurs reins féconds*, which demands a pause after *féconds*, the normal caesura disappearing almost because *pleins* cannot be severed from *d’étincelles*; *pleins* is enclitic, which practically cancels out the rhyme. Suppose we read without regard for meaning or grammar: the rhyme resuscitates, but any responson to the rhyme in line 4 still appears purely theoretical, for *comme eux sont frileux* is homologous only to *comme eux sédentaires* and is not free to connect elsewhere. For the significant rhyme system, the one that organizes the rhythm and “illustrates” the meaning, is the homophony under equal stress of *comme eux* repeated twice. The *frileux* rhyme is a secondary modula-

tion: it “makes believe” that the line ends at the caesura,³ thus getting the rhythm off to a fresh start and making the “unexpected” repetition all the more striking; the fact that it rhymes with *comme eux* lays emphasis upon *sédentaires* by contrast — a second *comme eux* led the reader’s subconscious sense of balance to expect a second rhyme, and the expectation is beautifully frustrated. We did find a parallelism anyway, but the remoter one has lost the contest, and this suffices to make homologue-collecting an unreliable tool. Extensive similarities at one level are no proof of correspondence: a parallelism is seen between quatrain I and tercet II, based upon the equivalence of two subjects (¹*Les amoureux fervents, les savants austères*/¹³*des parcelles d’or, un sable fin*), one verb with rhyming adverb (²*Aiment également*/¹⁴*Etoient vaguement*), one adjective-noun object (³*Les chats puissants et doux*/¹⁴*leurs prunelles mystiques*) in identical sequence (p. 9). But, in any verse structure, I do not see how two variants can be equivalent if the positions of their components are not homologous: meter lends significance to the space occupied by the sentence. The relation of object to verb in line 14 is not the same as in quatrain I, since the quatrain keeps them apart with parentheses and enjambement, whereas the tercet unites them. Hence inevitably a difference in emphasis and a shift in respective positions within the line. Furthermore, the equation of the subjects is all askew: the components are alike, and we could link *amoureux fervents* vertically with *parcelles d’or* or diagonally with *sable fin*; but the systems they enter are not comparable, for *sable fin* does not stand in the same relation to *parcelles d’or* as *savants* does to *amoureux*. These last two are opposite equals, and their contiguity expresses their polarity; but the contiguity of *parcelles* and *sable* simply repeats twice the same meaning, *ainsi que* indicating a metaphorical relation. *Ainsi que* and *et* may have the same virtual function in language and be classified alike: but not here, where they are neither synonymous nor antonymous. The parallelism suggested by grammar remains virtual because it has no homologue in the meter or in the semantic system.

³This structural role of the break is well documented: Malherbe condemned internal rhymes precisely because they had such effects.

No segmentation can be pertinent that yields, indifferently, units which *are* part of the poetic structure, and neutral ones that are not. The weak point of the method is indeed the categories used. There is a revealing instance where Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss take literally the technical meaning of *feminine* as used in metrics and grammar and endow the formal feminine categories with esthetic and even ethical values. They are trying to prove a sexual ambiguity in the poem, the motif of the androgyne, and they find some evidence in the “paradoxical choice of feminine substantives as masculine rhymes” (p.21). True, the gender of French nouns does orient the associations they trigger: this kind of effect is conceivable with words that signify concrete objects or even abstract concepts, as long as they can be humanized or personified — for example, ⁵*volupté*, which is more female than *plaisir* would be. It hardly holds, however, in the case of purely technical terminology, where *masculine* means merely “ending on a fully pronounced syllable” and *feminine* merely “ending on an unstressed syllable” (especially where one need not even be aware of these conventions in order to perceive an alternance). By stretching this to the limit, we may discover cases where the feminine rhyme does evoke some such associations because it coincides with the specific feminine gender ending; it is altogether unlikely with masculine rhymes, which do not offer any similar concurrence. Only technicians would think of it (they have thought of it); metalinguistic rationalization of this sort betrays how easily the wariest of analysts slips into a belief in the intrinsic explanatory worth of purely descriptive terms.

The two critics obviously assume that the definition of categories used to collect data is also valid to explain their function in the poetic structure — that linguistic oppositions, for example, automatically entail stylistic differences. The role of liquid phonemes in the sonnet’s sound texture, for example, is declared to be significant: quatrain II is certainly characterized by noticeable variations, since this is a stanza where the phonetic dominance shifts from nasal vowels (only 3) to liquid consonants (24); extreme variations cannot fail of their effect. There is, however, a linguistic opposition between /l/ and /r/, particularly marked in French, and this is frequently exploited in poetry

in a manner consistent with the phonetic nature of the opposing features. A slight regression of /r/ before /l/ in the tercets is interpreted as “eloquently accompanying the passage from the empirical feline to his mythic transfigurations” (p. 12). But no one is likely to believe that there is any significance in a difference as imperceptible as that between fourteen /l/ and eleven /r/, especially when tercet II, with /l/ enjoying a majority of two, begins with a /r/ cluster (*Leurs reins*) which will surely catch the eye and ear sooner than an inequality attenuated by distribution along the lines. If we look only for sharp changes, then the drop in the number of liquids from quatrain II to tercet I affects both contenders equally, /l/ ending on top by one point; the one smashing victory of /l/ over /r/ — three to nothing — occurs in line 5 *before* the transfiguration; in quatrain II, which is also the only place where brutal variations can be found, the liquids go hand in hand for the whole stanza, rejoicing at the peak of their power. Since liquids as a group do appear significant, the authors assume that every essential linguistic feature of the group must also be significant. The fact is, however, that it does not work out that way: the liquids are significant only as a group; their oppositions, *within* the group, though they are actualized and play their part in the linguistic structure, are not actualized in the style.

Conversely, the analytical categories applied can pull together under one label phenomena which are in fact totally different from one another in the poetic structure. A case in point is the plural. Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss rightly note its high frequency and its concurrence with important elements. Because a single grammatical category is applicable to every line of the poem, they see it as a key to the understanding of the sonnet; they quote a pronouncement of the poet that seems to give symbolic meaning to the plural: *Multitude, solitude: termes égaux et convertibles par le poète actif et fécond*. Better still, the authors see this mutual “convertibility” symbolized in ¹⁰*solitudes*, where “solitude” as the word itself and “multitude” as the morpheme -s enjoy togetherness. This argument recalls their confusion of femaleness and feminine gender; they seem to assume that there is always a basic relationship between actual plurality (and what

it symbolizes in Baudelaire's eyes) and plural morphemes. Needless to say, there are many exceptions to that general rule — and what is more, one of them occurs right here: *6ténèbres* is a conventional, meaningless plural; let us skip it, and also its rhyme companion *7funèbres*. We should probably discount all descriptive plurals, since they are dictated by nature and not the poet's choice: *mystiques* would drop out, cats having two *prunelles*, and also *reins*. We can keep *chats* and their human counterparts: collective singulars being available for groups, the plural may well have meaning. But *solitudes*, the pretext for this philosophical foray, will have to go: it is no paradox at all, just a hyperbole, a cliché where *solitudes* means “desert” — an emphatic plural stemming from the Latin. Baudelaire's quotation may apply elsewhere, certainly not here, and no interpretation of the sonnet can be drawn from it. The authors' mistake is understandable. In their search for a plural structure, they needed a unifying factor. The text yielded no sign that the data could be related, yet their common label demanded that they be so related. Faced with this dilemma, the authors must have gladly seized upon the coincidence between *solitudes* and Baudelaire's aphorism: the poet's mental obsession provided just the invariant required. Had all plural forms not been brought under the one label, there would have been no compulsion to find, at all costs, an equivalence value for every plural form.

But among these data lumped together because of their morphological similarity, there is a group of plurals set apart from the others because of their distribution: that is the plural feminine rhymes. These do form a stylistic structure, because their *-s* endings make the rhyme “richer” for the eye by increasing the number of its repeated components. In ^{1,4}*austères-sédentaires*, for instance, the *s* reinforces the visual similarity and offsets the spelling vagaries that spoil the transcription of /ε/. The way in which the *-s* is related to and functions in the rhyme system has nothing to do with its simultaneous function in the singular-plural opposition, where it carries a meaning: in the rhyme it works only as an eye-catcher. The interrelations of the *-s* rhymes within the conventional rhyme system are

what gives them significance. Poetic convention demands, first, that the rhymes of the sonnet should form an invariable pattern alternating feminine and masculine rhymes; second, that this invariant alternation be combined with sound variants within each alternating series. The visual and aural implementation of the variant is constantly reinforced and constantly compels attention, thus strongly individualizing each stanza; this depends entirely upon the poet's creative fancy. The implementation of the invariant, on the contrary, is normally limited to the compulsory masculine-feminine alternation. By adding *-s* to the *-e*, Baudelaire personalizes, so to speak, what was an automatism, reemphasizes the opposition for the eye. A second constant element in the system of the sonnet as a whole gives more weight to the unifying factor in the rhymes, which more effectively countervails the centrifugal tendencies of each stanza to form an independent unit. Every line affected by this addition is thereby made to look longer, and the fact that such a line ends the sonnet contributes to its unity by emphasizing the final item and therefore the reader's consciousness of a terminal accord; since the word thus underlined happens to be *mystiques*, the combination of meaning and visual emphasis, accompanying it like an upbeat, make the end of the poem a point of departure for reverie and wonder. Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss point out that the feminine rhyme is orally actualized, despite the total disappearance of the unstressed end syllable in modern pronunciation, by the presence of a postvocalic sounded consonant in the rhyming syllable, and they remark, indeed, that this coincides with plural morphemes (pp. 7, 11); but they see the plural as a parallel to the postvocalic consonant, that is, reinforcing each rhyme pair, separately, since that consonant varies and therefore structures only the stanza in which it occurs (/r, br, d, k/). In fact, the invariable *-s* creates a frame that tightens the whole sonnet. This structure would not be overlooked if the term chosen did not also cover forms that are grammatically identical but stylistically foreign to these *-s* rhymes; ¹*amoureux*, ³*doux*, ¹⁰*sphinx* would not further obscure the operation of the *-s* ending; grammatical equivalence would not be equated with stylistic equivalence.

What I have just said should not be construed as a rejection of the principle of equivalence: similarity in dissimilarity, dissimilarity in similarity, are apparent at all levels. But it seems evident that its pertinence cannot be shown by using grammatical terminology, or any preconceived, aprioristic frame. R. Jakobson chose grammar units to make this exegesis and many others because grammar is the natural geometry of language which superimposes abstract, relational systems upon the concrete, lexical material: hence grammar furnishes the analyst with ready-made structural units. All parts of speech, in fact, may function in parallelism and contrasts; the importance of pronouns, long neglected by style analysts — pronouns are, precisely, typical relational units — comes out clearly in the first division of the poem. Jakobson seems to think that any reiteration and contrast of a grammatical concept makes it a poetic device, that the interrelationship of meter, morphological classes and syntactic construction actualizes the structure and creates the poetic effect.⁴ There is no doubt that a linguistic actualization does take place, but the question remains: are the linguistic and poetic actualizations coextensive?

The sonnet is rebuilt by the two critics into a “superpoem”, inaccessible to the normal reader, and yet the structures described do not explain what establishes contact between poetry and reader. No grammatical analysis of a poem can give us more than the grammar of the poem.

The poem as response

The literary scholar, especially of the humanist stripe, has always assumed that grammar failed because it was incomplete, that the narrow, rigorous methods of the *esprit de géométrie* could never catch the subtle, indefinable *je ne sais quoi* that poetry is supposed to be made of. In fact the opposite is true: the linguist sees all the data, and that is precisely the reason he was prone, especially in pre-structuralist times, to define a poetic utterance as abnormal, as language plus something else. The whole idea of structure, of course, is that

⁴R. Jakobson, “Poetry of Grammar and Grammar of Poetry” (in Russian), *Poetics, Poetyka* (Warsaw: 1961), pp. 398 ss, esp. 403, 408-9.

within the body of the text all parts are bound together and that stylistically neutral components and active ones are interrelated in the same way as the marked and unmarked poles of any opposition. Our only solution is to observe and rearrange the data from a different angle. A proper consideration of the nature of the poetic phenomenon will give us the vantage point required.

First of all, the poetic phenomenon, being linguistic, is not simply the message, the poem, but the whole act of communication. This is a very special act, however, for the speaker — the poet — is not present; any attempt to bring him back only produces interference, because what we know of him we know from history, it is knowledge external to the message, or else we have found it out by rationalizing and distorting the message. The message and the addressee — the reader — are indeed the only factors involved in this communication whose presence is necessary. As for the other factors — language (code), non-verbal context, means of keeping open the channel —, the appropriate language of reference is selected from the message, the context is reconstituted from the message, contact is assured by the control the message has over the reader's attention, and depends upon the degree of that control. These special duties, and the esthetic emphasis characteristic of poetry demand that the message possess features corresponding to those functions. The characteristic common to such devices must be that they are designed to draw responses from the reader — despite any wanderings of his attention, despite the evolution of the code, despite the changes in esthetic fashion.

The pertinent segmentation of the poem must therefore be based on these responses: they pinpoint in the verbal sequence the location of the devices that trigger them. Since literary criticism aims at informing and improving such responses, we seem to have a vicious circle. It is only apparent, however, for what is blurred in a response is its content, the subjective interpretation of that response, which depends on elements exterior to the act of communication. The response itself testifies objectively to the actuality of a contact. Thus two precautions absolutely must be taken: 1) empty the response of its content; I can then use all forms of reaction to the text — idiosyncrasy-

oriented responses (positive or negative according to the reader's culture, era, esthetics, personality) and goal-oriented responses (those of the reader with non-literary intent, who may be using the poem as a historical document, for purposes of linguistic analysis, etc.: such a reader will rationalize his responses to fit into his sphere of interest and its technical terminology); 2) multiply the response, to guard against physical interference with contact, such as the reader's fatigue or the evolving of the language since the time the poem was encoded.

This tool of analysis, this "superreader" in no way distorts the special act of communication under study: It simply explores that act more thoroughly by performing it over and over again. It has the enormous advantage of following exactly the normal reading process, of perceiving the poem as its linguistic shape dictates, along the sentence, starting at the beginning (whereas many critics use the end to comment on the start, and so destroy suspense; or else they use diagrams that modify the balance of the text's natural emphasis system — the chiasma-like division in the Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss analysis, or what they call diagonal or vertical correspondences); it has the advantage of screening pertinent structures and only pertinent structures. My "superreader" for "Les Chats" is composed of: to a limited extent, Baudelaire (correction of line 8, placing the sonnet in the ensemble of the collection); Gautier (his long paraphrasis of the sonnet, in his preface to the third edition of the *Fleurs*), and Laforgue (some echoes in *Sanglot de la Terre*, "La Première Nuit"); the translations of W. Fowlie, F. L. Freedman and F. Duke; as many critics as I could find, the more useful being those whose reason for picking out a line had nothing to do with the sonnet; Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss for those points in the text where they deviate from their method (when they are being faithful, their analysis scans everything with even hand and is therefore misleading); Larousse's *Dictionnaire du XIXème Siècle* for the entries which quote the sonnet; philological or textbook footnotes; informants such as students of mine and other souls whom fate has thrown my way.

Each point of the text that holds up the superreader is tentatively considered a component of the poetic structure. Experience indicates

that such units are always pointed out by a number of informants who usually give divergent rationalizations. These units consist of lexical elements of the sentence interrelated by their contrasting characteristics. They also appear to be linked to one another by relations of opposition. The contrasts they create is what forces them upon the reader's attention; these contrasts result from their unpredictability within the context. This unpredictability is made possible by the fact that at every point in a sentence, the grammatical restrictions limiting the choice of the next word permit a certain degree of predictability. Predictability increases as the number of levels involved and the number of restrictions increase, which happens with any kind of recurrence, like parallelism in general and meter in particular — and where predictability increases, so does the effect of an unpredicted element.

Units of this kind and the systems they constitute form the basis of the following analysis.

Analysis

Title: The definite article and the plural lead us to expect a precise and concrete description: against such a backdrop, the spiritualization of the cats will be more arresting. Structurally the title focuses our expectations upon the first recurrence of *chats* in the text, which helps to unify the poem: every pronoun henceforth refers back unequivocally to that word, the only noun thus singled out.

Quatrain I: Coming as it does right after the terse title, the contrasting first line gives an even greater sense of plenitude. Twice the slot left empty next to *chats* is filled up with an adjective; this fullness of the nominal group is emphasized by the parallel word order — a symmetry reinforced on another level by the stresses and by the fact that phrases and hemistichs are coterminal. Of course the internal rhyme *fervents-savants* contributes to unification of the line: the similarity between the rhyme fellows (underlined, perhaps, by the contrast of their grammatical dissimilarity) makes up for the caesura and culminates the intonational curve. The enjambement stresses *aiment*, of course, at grammar level because the reader will compensate for the metric and rhythmic stop by an increased awareness of

the grammatical relationship between verb and subjects. But at prosody level it also stresses the end of the line, where the meaning seems to be suspended for a fleeting moment. Thus the line as a whole looks almost like a subtitle, an anticipatory comment on the deep relatedness of *chats*, *amoureux* and *savants* (this impression will be confirmed every time we come across a pair of nominal phrases; for nowhere in the text is the model Noun-Adjective so symmetrically actualized).

Now this serves to stress the link between the two phrases bound by *et*, as would an equation. Yet scholars and lovers are diametrical opposites, as far apart as Venus Urania and carnal Aphrodite. Here is an archetypal representation of mankind: imagination links lovers and scholars as two kinds of men who can be defined by their opposition. The scholar stricken in his scholariness, despoiled of his wisdom, the ruined scholar is the scholar in love; the contradiction is as absurd or moving as that of another stereotype, the amorous greybeard. From Aristotle on all fours, bridled, saddled, and mounted by his courtesan, to Professor Delteil besotted by the conflict between love and lexicography in the *Contes d'été* (1852) of Champfleury, Baudelaire's bosom companion, lover and scholar dwell incompatible within the same individual. It is not by chance that Balzac regards chastity as one of the fundamental traits of the man of science; and it is not by chance that in his erotic "Lesbos" Baudelaire resorts to an antithesis between the lascivious spectacle provided by the reprobates, and Plato's *oeil austère* indignantly upon it.

Now this opposition is part of a whole psychological structure, the archetypal representation of mankind divided into various classes of men. Yet the opposition is still further strengthened by the fact that its two poles are hyperbolic statements. *Amoureux* and *fervents* are like synonyms repeating each other, since love and fervor are often associated, and *ferveur* is a frequent metonymy for *amour*; *fervent* makes explicit an already obvious quality and implication of the noun and thereby stresses the noun; *fervent* works as would an *épithète de nature* in classical style, the adjective invariably linked to a given noun. *Austère* (or its synonyms) plays the same role in

modifying *savant*: it conveys the mood of the meditative scholar as he is conceived in the popular imagination: Hugo's *Mages* are *les sévères artistes* . . . *Les savants, les inventeurs tristes, les pisseurs d'ombre* (*Contemplations* 3.30.383. 391-4). Thus *fervent* is to *amoureux* and *austères* to *savants* what "noble" is to "lord" or "unsolved" is to "mystery". Scholars and lovers are the standard exemplars of each genus, which means that their relation to each other is also exemplary, and their polarity more widely distanced. Add to this the fact that *fervent* is etymologically related to fire (in "Le Léthé," the lover's fervor fans the fiery pain of unrequited love); *austère* can be associated with cold (e.g. the "austere coldness" of the monastery, in "Le Mauvais Moine").

This context makes for the striking contrast of *aiment également* . . . *Les chats puissants et doux*; this oneness of feeling, this consensus so unexpected, contrasts the two mutually opposing subjects, an effect increased by *également*. The impact of *également* is further stressed on the semantic level because it superimposes a synonymy upon the antonymy of the first line; it is stressed at the same time by the disjunction, since the verb demands an object which is not yet forthcoming; and the disjunction actualizes the caesura — so that in oral reading the meter will give strong support.

The importance of the adverb has another effect: it is a first hint that lovers and scholars have much in common and that the very qualities that mark their separateness also join them. A possible analogy can now be perceived — the analogy that permits Baudelaire to declare that Beauty's lovers *Consumeront leurs jours en d'austères études* . . . ("La Beauté"), the analogy that makes passion a common metaphor for the pursuit of knowledge. As we read along, the importance of *également* grows, since its meaning is confirmed by two more resumptions of the theme that there is a profound similarity between cats, lovers and scholars — but from the viewpoint of the cats (lines 4 and 5): scholars and lovers love cats, cats love science and love.

A similar flashback effect (the word being reinforced by repeating the title) helps to contrast ³*les chats* with what precedes; the

contrast consists in the distance separating the subjects from the object on the plane of reality: this choice among possibilities offered by the connotations of *chat* is oriented, on the verbal plane, by the disjunction as a suspensive or delaying device, and by the disjunction as meaning, since it leads the reader to expect a mature attachment to a commensurate object, not a mere fondness, almost childish, for pets.

Whatever the orientation, the emphasis is undergirded by ³*puissants et doux*. The dual adjectival group itself is set off by the contrast with its homologues, the adjectives in the first line (their positions are identical, their meanings equally positive, but the ratio one to two) and by the inner contrast that makes *doux* an odd combination with *puissants*. This last contrast is so strong that it has become a cliché — about which more will be said later. The expressiveness of the opposition created by *orgueil* is brought out by its contiguity to the pair of adjectives, whose meaning it reinforces. This powerful combination coincides with the descending curve of the sentence: it seems to have run its course, after stating unequivocally that the most widely differing people imaginable will agree at least in their love for cats. The *puissants-doux* opposition now symbolizes the cat's ambivalence, which explains why two antithetical types of men can both love the cat with equal love: each type in its own way has the same combination of power and serenity; the cat mirrors them in the animal world — here, no doubt, one of the correspondences between mankind and the rest of Nature.

The implicit similitude (implicit because it is our own deduction, we have reasoned it from the love of cats) is now made explicit in line 4: the repetition of *comme eux*, with *eux* encompassing both lovers and scholars, knocks out any interpretation that might try to assign the adjectives separately to the two groups (Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss, [p. 15] see a paronomasia — to my mind very far-fetched — linking *fervent* and *frileux*: lovers and scholars are equally shivery and sedentary); hence the inescapable conclusion that they are identical, since they not only love equally, but equally resemble the cats, their *tertium comparationis*. The initial apparent opposition discloses

a deeper identity. Line 4 is a departure from the context: I have shown earlier how strong is the unity of the line and how it brings out the adjectives, especially *sédentaires*; this line is structured so differently from the first three that the coincidence between this contrast and the pattern at the end of the stanza results in a veritable rhythmic clausula. The parallel relative clauses constitute an addition to the *aiment* clause: the momentum of the sound sequence, carried in one breath to the caesura in line 3 and then continued despite the pause, is now all spent; the intonational curve thus also helps make the first stanza a natural unit, not just a conventional one fused in a sestet, as Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss would have it.

At this point, however, the importance of *frileux* and *sédentaires* gives by flashback a new orientation to our sense of the quatrain. The repeated identification *comme eux . . . comme eux* clinches the demonstration of identity between cats and their human counterparts. In this culminating phrase we might have expected adjectives in keeping with those that preceded, all laudatory; we might even have expected a climaxing allusion to certain glorious qualities common to both parties. Instead we get the mediocrity of *frileux* and *sédentaires* — a comic letdown; all the more galling because these are every bit as true as the preceding adjectives, though they ruin the image that has been built up. *Frileux* is fussy and oldmaidish; Baudelaire used it effectively in a parodic self-portrait, the satirical “Spleen I”: *d’un fantôme frileux*. *Sédentaire* conjures up the image of the constipated stay-at-home, epitome of the unwholesome bourgeois. The reader takes in this surprise but has in mind the whole quatrain, so that *orgueil de la maison* still sounds complimentary, with perhaps a touch of parody in the *maison*, which narrowly limits the sphere of the fame, the scope of the glory: even thus does La Fontaine’s fox cut his blandishments to the measure of the crow when he crowns him *phénix de ces bois* — but keeps the eyrie of the immortal bird in the neighborhood. Similarly, *mûre saison*, a conventional poetic substitute for *l’âge mûr*, may now be felt as a bit too elegiac, whereas without the twist in line 4 it would simply be the expected ornamental phrase

needed to beautify everyday reality. Scholars, in the context and on the level of *amoureux*, are in danger of losing their dignity: their austere mien no longer impresses us, now that we see them as chilly homebodies. *Amoureux* is not, like *amants*, confined to serious or tragic contexts: the shock wave from line 4 destroys the synonymy with *amants* and actualizes the depreciatory or condescending connotations: nineteenth-century dictionaries rank *amoureux* below *amants*; *amoureux*, not *amants*, is the core of many mocking phrases like *amoureux transi*; and Baudelaire uses it elsewhere only to deride lovers (in the burlesque “La Lune offensée” their silly irresponsibility *sur leurs grabats prospères*; in “Hymne à la Beauté” where the irony is all his, as a comparison with the source makes clear their ungainly bed gymnastics: *L’amoureux pantelant incliné sur sa belle*; whereas his *amants* are never equivocal, always poetic).

Quatrain II: The formal singularity of line 5 clearly marks the beginning of a new stanza, just as the character of line 4, more than its mere final position, makes it the ending of the first quatrain. The element of unexpectedness is provided by the apposition, which gives *Amis* a commanding post, while *science* and *volupté* are each in turn spotlighted by the contrast with the comparatively empty *de la* (whose repetition performs the same unifying, characterizing function, for line 5, as did *comme eux* for line 4). Whereas ³*orgueil*, also an apposition, followed explicit mention of its referent, *Les chats*, here the apposition precedes its referent, ⁶*Ils*. Hence a momentary suspension while the reader’s mind hesitates over whether to interpret *amis* as cats or as their admirers or as all of them together. Shortlived it may be, but the ambiguity is enough to emphasize the line, and when line 6 brings the solution, line 5 is sensed as homologous to lines 1-3 and in contrast to them, reversing them, so to say (this becomes more apparent if we rewrite 1-3: **la volupté et la science sont amies des chats*). The contrast between line 5 and the context of 1 is confirmed by the homologous relations of the two other elements in the spotlight: *amoureux-savants*, *science-volupté*.

The equivalence twice verified from people to cat to people, in-

dicates plainly that their metonymic relationship is so close as to make them interchangeable: it becomes metaphoric, the cats symbolize something common to love and science.

The focus upon *Amis de la science et de la volupté* isolates it — and this isolation is intensified by its typographical concentration, which makes it quite visibly the shortest line of the sonnet. It is so isolated, in fact, that we are made aware of the cliché: the phrase is like *les amis des lettres* for “intelligentsia,” or *les amis de la vérité*, generally for “the opposition” (it seems that Cicero coined it), or *ami de la bouteille*, “drunkard.” With the added salt of personification, it has become the poetic stereotype for any habitual contiguity or affinity, the relation between “things that seem to have a sympathy for one another,” as the dictionary of the Academy puts it in the 1835 edition, citing *Le vin est ami du coeur, il y a des odeurs qui sont amies du cerveau*, etc. Baudelaire follows suit with *le soir charmant, ami du criminel* (“Le Crépuscule du soir”).

It is in the whole second quatrain, that irony is amplified. Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss are blinded by irrelevant parallelisms and do not see this. Other critics reject it because the poet’s infatuation with cats makes irony less than likely. Informants, not so well versed in literary biography, *always perceive it*. Martin Turnell is the rare critic who does catch it, but he explains it away as we do an irony in real life: for him it is an “ironical” situation for scholars and lovers, who are supposed to hunt their prey, to be instead engaged in sedentary occupation (significantly, Turnell sees no irony in *frileux*, since it fits in with his exaggerated translation of *mûre saison* as “elderly”); again, for him the second quatrain is in “mock heroic style” because of the discrepancy between the cats’ ludicrous ordinariness and high-sounding verse (*Baudelaire: A Study of His Poetry*, p. 262, 241). His argument is not to the point: a lover of cats would find no discrepancy — Gautier, for one, does not. Irony in literature must be a verbal structure, lest it vary with different readers’ opinions as to what is exaggerated or “not really meant.” The text must contain some signal that what is being said is not intended to be taken

seriously, or that there is some double meaning. The first such structure is the contrast between a pattern of laudative adjectives and the *comparatively* unfavorable connotations of *frileux* and *sédentaires* (without the praise pattern, *frileux* at least looks “serious” or even poetic: Lebrun-Pindare speaks of *la frileuse hirondelle*). With this first structure as its context, a second structure is now built up in reverse: against the connotative pattern of line 4, the elevated tone of line 5, which would be appropriate to glorify the Medici, actually creates a *verbal* discrepancy which is inescapable, no matter what the reader’s personal views on cats may be.

Informants unanimously ignore ⁶*Ils cherchent le silence*. Undoubtedly *cherchent* is the poetic or high-tone substitute for *rechercher* or *aimer*, but this is no more than the normal transformation of prose into verse: the device marks genre, as do verse and stanza, setting the context apart from everyday contexts. It is expected and not surprising. ⁶*Horreur des ténèbres*, on the contrary, draws the attention of every reader: this, of course, is because it contrasts with the first hemistich — a leap from factual-poetic to affective-poetic, and a semantic contrast between a desire and its undesirable object, as in Racine’s *chercher la malédiction*; it is also because its inner structure, independent of context, brings out the powerful meaning of the group’s components, thanks to an analytical subordination that separates *horreur* from its cause, thereby emphasizing twice over the concept of darkness. Moreover, *horreur des ténèbres* is a cliché: a reader of the 1850s would remember it from Racine or Delille as well. The cliché is objectionable only from the esthetic viewpoint that makes novelty the sole criterion of beauty. It may well be hackneyed, but its stereotyped form keeps it from wearing out: the inclusion of this particular cliché as an example in the *Larousse du XIXème siècle* must testify to its continued effectiveness.⁵ Now if your reader is uncultivated, the cliché will strike him because of its intrinsic expressiveness; if he is well read, he will recognize it

⁵*Horreur* attracts *ténèbres* so powerfully that it once caused Hugo to write *horreur ténébreuse*, without any connection with what he meant (*Dieu, L’Océan d’en haut*, v. 2465).

as a literary allusion, at any rate a literary form. Hence a deepening of darkness: here is no mere absence of light but an asylum for the secret life, a privileged abode for meditation, a sanctuary.

The distich (if we follow the division made by Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss) is the apex of both irony and emphasis on darkness. The attention-forcing features are, first, *L'Erèbe*, because it is a mythological allusion, because of its form (the only word in /rɛb/, aside from one name for ornithologists alone), and because it is a personification. Then *coursiers funèbres*, because it completes the mythological picture of a divine charioteer: but what may be conventional in the image is compensated for by ⁷*funèbres*, which is effective both because of its meaning and because it repeats its homologue ⁶*ténèbres*, first as a stereotyped rhyme and then as a moral transposition of the concept of darkness. And then ⁸*servage* and ⁸*fierté*, because these are concretized abstractions, as in line 5, and because the line contains a word order inversion within a clause (*au servage*, stressed in its aberrant position by the caesura). Naturally, the discrepancy we felt between ⁵*Amis de la science . . .* and the preceding line is now even wider: Baudelaire invokes Erebus, son of Chaos, potent brother and husband of Night herself, father of Styx and of the Parcae and of Sleep — and states that tomcats like it in the dark. This is like La Fontaine calling a gardener a priest of Flora and Pomona; clearly this climaxes the second irony structure. But it also gives most effective expression to the essential theme: *Erèbe* is the most evocative word of three connected by their sounds (*Erèbe*, *ténèbres*, *funèbres*) it summarizes them phonetically. Semantically too, since Erebus means “darkness.” (Nodier goes so far as to use it as a common noun in that sense.) We may now say that the concept of darkness has been expressed, in turn, by the appropriate noun, literal but picked from the top of the ladder of expressivity, whose bottom rung might be *obscurité*; and by a metonymy (*horreur*), a metaphor (*funèbre*), a proper noun that that is both metonymic as a person and metaphoric as the symbolic value of that person. Thus a paradigm of four synonyms has been transposed on to the axis of combination. These several variables (let us add the phonetic

one that links three key words) represent the invariant “darkness.” This, in turn, is part of a system that embraces the cats and science and love: since cats symbolize something common to love and science, this symbol tells us that love and science thrive in darkness.

So that the last two lines of the quatrain are not a separate unit: their many formal differences simply flow from the complexity of a hyperbolic image, and are needed to cap the demonstration. The dramatic temptation imagined by Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss is quite exaggerated. All we have, of course, is a statement that cats and darkness are closely associated, and then the mock hypothesis; in common parlance, I fancy it might go something like this: “They sure love the dark. Gee! — they could be the black horses of Hell, except that, etc. . . .”

Upon this note end the two quatrains and the irony — the reason being that irony has fulfilled its purpose. Intertwined with “serious” statements, irony lends them support. This is not an irony of content, that destroys; it is an irony of style, a way of saying things with tongue in cheek that attracts attention to what is being said. Irony as style is commonly used in the nineteenth century, in monographs or books of vulgarization as a way of establishing contact with the reader. I find it in Toussenel’s *L’Esprit des Bêtes* (1848), the first volume of his *Zoologie passionnelle*, inspired by Fourier (we know that Baudelaire read at least the second volume), where the cat is described as the “lover of Night,” or in a paper published by the same Toussenel in *l’Ecole normale*, where he celebrates the cat as the chemist, physicist, physician, etc. of the animal kingdom — in short, a friend of science. Irony and theme are the same in E. T. A. Hoffmann’s *Chat Murr*.

Where Baudelaire utilizes the techniques of conventional poetry, as here, to embellish a lowly subject, his irony warns the reader, at the same time, that this is just a game, indeed, a mere convention, whose limitations he well knows. The praise of cats enables them to embody human qualities and makes their night something more than a time for backfence yowling. This “poetization” of the metaphoric vehicle allows for an ironic contrast, which in turn permits yet higher

praise; and this finally prepares the way for a magnification of the cats into sphinxes through the comparison with mythical horses. Irony, by making such grandeur more acceptable to the sceptic and by underscoring it, further aids a shift in emphasis from superficial similarities (*frileux*) to an esoteric sympathy. It is now clear that the polarity of lovers and scholars defined the extreme examples of the class of men who seek the silence and the dark: these are necessary to the success of their respective strivings, so like each other — toward a life fully lived through *volupté*, toward a universe fully explored through science.

First Tercet: The domestic cat's mythologization becomes more specific and to the point. First of all, it is a new sublimation of the cat, this one based upon traditional association, perhaps because cats had their niche in the Pantheon of Egypt and surely because cats are enigmatic. This image is conveyed less by the hardly noticeable ¹⁰*grands* than by the cliché ⁹*nobles attitudes* (the fact that the *Larousse du XIXème siècle* quotes the line under *attitude* is sufficient proof of its effectiveness.) It is vague, since *attitude* offers us nothing to *see* and is hardly more than a prop on which to hang some adjective like “noble,” “great,” “grave” that may be needed to give a description its moral meaning. On the one hand, *attitudes* reduces the plastic or visual evocation to a pose — especially for Baudelaire's contemporaries, who still regarded it as a painter's word — but a meaningful pose; for instance, in “Incompatibilité,” *attitude* describes the attentive posture of mountains listening to some mysterious message; in “La Beauté” the word lends a monumental majesty to Beauty, who *trône dans l'azur comme un sphinx incompris*; it is motionlessness wherever that symbolizes contemplation. On the other hand, *attitudes* also functions as a screen that filters the complex reality of the cat, eliminates his daintiness, his nimble gait, anything that smacks of *volupté*; what is retained is the immobility, and the watchful gaze from under sleepy lids: in short, whatever makes the cat a domestic sphinx. In turn, the image of the original Sphinx is altered: there is no hint here of the details — breasts, claws, etc. — found in the sphinxes of Empire architecture and furniture, in

Gautier's "Sphinx" or in the mean catwoman in Gustave Moreau's *Oedipe* — these are all too tangible. ¹⁰*Allongés* is not exact enough to eliminate vagueness, nor is it incompatible with nobility, as is the pose of another of Gautier's sphinxes, *accroupi dans les sables brûlants* ("Le Lion du cirque"). The sphinx is like the "stone ghost," the statue that commands passersby to think upon the things *qui ne sont pas de la terre* (*Salon de 1859*, IX, ed. Pléiade, p. 1086).

Thus ⁹*nobles attitudes*, stereotype though it is, sums up a meaning in Baudelaire's own symbolic code — "meditation upon things metaphysical" — which is stated again in common language: *songeant, rêve sans fin* — an elevation to eternity.

Sphinx adds to the mimesis of "contemplation" its archetypal (esoterism. A context of ordinary words sets in relief the foreignness of *sphinx*; the name alone suffices to evoke, like Flaubert's sphinx, contemplativeness: *mon regard, que rien ne peut dévier, demeure tendu à travers les choses sur un horizon inaccessible* (*La Tentation de Saint Antoine* VII, ed. R. Dumesnil, p. 199).

¹⁰*Solitudes* keeps the reader from substituting the OEdipean sphinx for this brooder: reinforced by *au fond* and again by the plural, it makes clear that desert has been chosen not for the sake of its connotations of barrenness but for what it means to man as a privileged place of meditation: the poet makes a revealing joke about the working of his imagination being founded upon *la Thébàide que mon cerveau s'est faite* (*Salon de 1859*, VII, p. 1071). The interpretation given by Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss is based on the semantic field of "desert:" "the fear of cold, which brings chilly cats and hot lovers close to one another . . . finds a suitable climate in the solitude (as austere as the scholars themselves) of the desert (as hot as the lovers) that surrounds the sphinxes" (p. 15). The procedure is obvious: in accordance with the principle of equivalence, *solitudes* is transformed into *désert* as defined by the dictionary; equivalences are then deduced: from "desert" as a limitless expanse, they draw the opposition *maison* — *solitudes*; from "desert" as opposed to "oasis," the equation with *austères*; from "desert" as "burning sands," the opposition to *frileux* and the equation with *fervents*. Unfortunately,

this system is not actualized in the poem and therefore cannot be applied. And that for the simple reason that the text says not *désert* but *solitudes*; which is in reality synonymous with *silence* and *ténèbres*, since, like them, it makes contemplation possible (the three are interchangeable: in “Le Gouffre” they describe the universe contemplated by the poet. It may be argued that *sphinx* identifies *solitudes* with white-hot Egypt: but the sonnet does not actualize in words any such image. Even where a poem does contain a precise geographical description of a desert, this is not enough to impose upon the reader associations not verbally actualized as well. In “Spleen II,” for instance, the desert is a geographical reality: it is named, and there are allusions to the pyramids and to the Sphinx. Yet the associative system organized around *désert* in the language is supplanted by the symbolic function of the word in the text (that wasteland is boredom), and only where reality is relevant to that symbol do “natural” associations operate (e.g. the pyramid symbolizes dead memories); but the physical climate of the desert yields in the face of meteorological similes whose sole justification is that they express “spleen:” *les lourds flocons des neigeuses années*, and the symbolic mist that shrouds the sphinx *Assoupi dans le fond d’un Sahara brumeux*. “Contemplative life, ataraxy” — the inscape of *solitudes* has no need to conjure up, and in fact excludes an arid African landscape.⁶

Second Tercet: The two tercets are more than conventionally separated by the difference in clause construction between lines 11 and 12: the abundance of nasals, twice as many as in any other line coinciding with their position, emphasizes their role as stanza boundaries (12, with a sequence of /ε/, contrasts with the /ã/ pattern of 11).

So long as the cats’ “spiritualization” had not been achieved, no physical detail was given that might drag them back down to reality (except in line 4, and this, paradoxically, was just a way of elevating them by comparison). Now that they are a symbol, the poet refers to their physical realities. But each realistic detail is but a springboard

⁶Cf. Wm. Y. Tindall, *The Literary Symbol* (1955), pp. 130-3. — The whole tercet is quite frequently quoted in its entirety, and by critics of all feathers; this effectiveness is probably attributable to the archetypes as much as to the form.

to unreality, for an adjective transposes it and makes it a signpost towards surreality. Every one of these adjectives could apply to the sphinx: thus the creature constitutes a transition from mythic to mystic, and because it stands for esoterism, it is the key to the code the adjectives set up.

“Reality” is imposed upon the reader by ¹²*Leurs reins féconds*: the group is striking at every level. The harsh juncture (/r + r/) signalizes it as a beginning and sharpens the rupture with the first tercet. Since that pattern was simplification, abstraction, its rupture must be concrete detail: hence a shift from pronouns that only allude to real subjects (*ils, qui*) to descriptive nouns that invite sensory perception. The context indicates that *reins* is a metonymy for “back;” but *féconds* suggest that it is a metaphor, “loins,” for sexual potency. Then the ambiguity contaminates *étincelles*. On the one hand, *étincelles* describes the sparks (from this viewpoint, *magiques* is hyperbolic); on the other hand, it symbolizes vital parts (*magiques* then being the literal expression of the mystery of life-giving). *Pleins* belongs to colloquial style (compare *terre . . . pleine d’escargots* in “Le Mort joyeux,” *ventre plein d’exhalaisons* in “Une Charogne,” etc.), and therein it contrasts with the conventional style of *reins féconds*. But at the metaphoric level, it makes *reins* still more concrete. In either case it provides an animal ground that brightens the contrast of *étincelles*, a word we associate with the archetypes of fire and light. These archetypes exerted more power over the imagination in an era when electricity was still untamed and Mesmer still far from forgotten, as attested by the frequency of metaphors based upon galvanism. ¹²*Magiques*, however, is the ingredient that keeps the archetype alive forever in the text, even for the rationalistic reader: it exteriorizes a response that the reader made wise by science now represses in his subconscious, the immemorial surprise at a fire that does not burn (poetic themes like the salamander and the lightning bug obviously took their origin from some such feeling). Perhaps this tips the scales in favor of an interpretation of *reins* as a sexual image, since fire and semen, sparks and life, are often metaphorically associated.⁷ Most

⁷Line 12 exemplifies Bachelard’s Novalis complex (*Psychanalyse du feu*, pp. 47 ss, 87 ss).

important, the group *étincelles magiques* declares the existence of a second level of reality beneath appearances. Even if there were no archetypes behind it, the group would still suggest them: *étincelles* and *magiques* do not simply add their poetic potentialities to say something like “the sparks have a magical effect;” in a context now dominated by *sphinx* and previously by *ténèbres* and *science*, *magiques* must be interpreted as a substitute for an actual esoteric reference; the sparks are fire but also meaning. The symbolism of the text has moved from darkness and dream to light in darkness.

The last two lines owe their effectiveness to their structure as a suspense narrative (the enjambement, and the severance of the verb *étoilent* from its subject). The description stresses a physical beauty whose significance is withheld until the reader discovers, at the same time, that all this is about the eyes of the cat, and that those eyes are supernatural.

At the outset, a vision of gold is summoned up, at once to exploit its archetypal symbolism and to transform it into a symbol of light. ¹³*Parcelles d'or* is the agent of this alchemy: significantly, *Larousse du XIXème siècle* quotes this whole tercet under *parcelles*. In a “gold” context, *parcelles* actualizes the highly poetic antithesis of infinite value in infinitesimal room. In other words, a hyperbolic rendering of the cats’ yellow-flecked eyes: this stylistic sublimation of the color is carried on by the second hemistich, where even the conjunction has been touched by Midas: *ainsi que* is to *comme* what *or* is to *jaune*. *Sable*, semantically related to *parcelles* by metonymy is now its metaphoric substitute, as if all the sand in the placer had turned to gold dust. *Fin* in a “sand” context lays emphasis upon what makes sand more pleasing to the eye and to the naked foot, but in the parallel structure of the line, *fin* is also in a “gold” context and its suggestiveness is therefore oriented by the jeweler’s technical phrase *or fin*. Furthermore, *parcelles d'or* irresistibly calls forth the compound *paillettes d'or* frequently used in descriptions of eyes — *deux yeux de chats, phosphorescents, pailletés d'or*.⁸ Their semantic

⁸Zola, *Nana*, I (éd. Mitterand, 2, p. 1120). Tears cannot dampen their fire: *Votre prunelle, ou brille une humide paillette*, writes Gautier (*Poésie diverses* 1833-1838, “A deux beaux yeux”).

equivalence and their quasi-homophony make *parcelles d'or* expressive as a modification of the more common compound — the same stylistic mechanism as in the renewal of a cliché, the adaptation of a quotation or the distortion of a word. Coming immediately after *étincelles*, *parcelles* works as a variation on the motif of sparkling light — a golden fire. At the peak of the rhythmic build-up of two lines unified by one sentence ¹⁴*étoilent* all alone would have grandeur. The verb itself, with archetype for a root, and normally in the past participle, is as conventional as “star-spangled” in English. But its use in any other mode explodes the stereotype, renews the rapport with the semantic field of *étoile*, and stresses the image of light in darkness; for instance, this line of Hugo: *Nul regard n'étoilait la noirceur de leurs yeux* (*Les Quatre Vents de l'esprit*, 4.3.3.) Not much is needed for such a verb to take on a suggestiveness of the unknown. This is precisely the effect attained by *vaguement*: the adverb seems to annul exactly what differentiates *étoiler* from other verbs of light — its scintillation. Literally taken, the group would be meaningless, but *vaguement* is more like a blanket negation of reality: it gives it the appearance of the unreal. The adverb functions as a device to orient the reader towards a mystical interpretation. Without *vaguement*, a smile *Entrevu vaguement au bord des autres cieux* is only the dream of an exotic idyl with some “Malabaraise.” The adverb transmutes it into a yearning for eternity (“Lesbos”). As a matter of fact, this function of *vaguement* dovetails so perfectly with the esoteric connotations of *étoiler* that their grouping became a feature of Hugo’s metaphysical or fantastic style: in a picture of dawn, for instance — *l’âpre obscurité . . . s'étoilait au loin de vagues auréoles* — they give the reader warning that this light in darkness is not of the day but of God, a sign to the *voyant*.⁹

In the tercet the group exercises a final dominion over the reader’s imagination by gathering up the sparks in the eyes, where they must have significance, and transposing that significance on to

⁹*Dieu*, “L’Esprit humain”, v. 235. In *Contemplations*, “A celle qui est restée en France”, 352-4, the group appears significantly in a passage that seems to list the key words of the Hugolian contemplation.

an esoteric level. Thus we escape any temptation to downgrade *mystiques* to “mysterious.” The full sense of the adjective was borrowed by Baudelaire from theology, “allegorical of a spiritual truth” — which explains why the nouns it modifies must be concrete: e.g. *le grenier mystique* (“La Mort des Pauvres”), that is, Death, the Barn where the poor will find stored for their afterlife the rewards that misery harvests for them. Without such a contrast, *mystiques* would be tautological. The contrast here is provided by the precise *prunelles*. This conventional metonymy ceases to be a mere ornament: it emphasizes the gaze, symbol of a questing mind. Both Gautier’s and Laforgue’s reaction testify to the effect of these two words together: they both tried to emulate it. The rhythmic structure of the tercet shows clearly that the poem is ending. Their meaning and the space occupied by the last two lines develop line 12, and this relation is underscored by ¹³*Et*. The *ets* of the quatrain bound together phrases of equal length and comparable value, all of them parts of a clause (1, 2, 3, 5) or of a sentence (4): ¹³*Et* standing out against a pattern of six lines without similar coordination, links two sentences, the second twice as long as the first. The tercet seems to fan out in a final image: *et* launches the ascending portion of the sentence, the first one in the sonnet that takes a whole last line to descend uninterrupted. Such an ample intonational curve provides the poem with a rhythm unequivocally terminal, and yet its resounding amplitude echoes the meaning of *mystiques*.

The poem as a whole: Obviously should be read as both a *blason*, an encomiastic description, a *laus cattorum*, and as a symbolic poem — the cats are at once cats and the hieroglyph of something else. The concluding word, *mystiques*, which is in effect a metalinguistic comment on the image of the cat, implies two meanings and invites us to a new examination of his image in that light. When the reading is over, a global, summative apprehension of the text through rereading and remembering is certainly part of the literary act of communication. Then, the total of all data and knowledge of the ending surges back to modify what we perceived at the beginning (such an effect was observable in the irony of the quatrains). Several dif-

ferent images can be seen as the variants of a single semantic structure — as symbols.

The fact that attentive critics are not aware of any symbolism and see in “Les Chats” a pre-Parnassian work whose “precise” imagery reflects an esthetics of the picturesque¹⁰ may be laid to the title (“poème animalier”) and to the absence of the kind of obvious explanatory statement found in most allegorical poems (*Les Hiboux*, with a similar title, *are* explained as allegory); perhaps, as well, to the necessity for finding in Baudelaire examples that support the favored idea of his development: something Parnassian was needed.

In each instance where the cats are equivalent to something else (men, mythological figures, and a surreal or supernatural image of themselves), they resemble not the appearance of these equivalents but what the latter stand for. The relationship between cats as pets and men as their masters is but an image of the cats’ love for science itself and *volupté*. This link between Science and Pleasure is the symbol of the *raison d’être* that Faust and Don Juan have in common — an unending search of the absolute. (Baudelaire is unequivocal: his “Femmes damnées” are *chercheuses d’infini*; poetry, art are *la soif insatiable de tout ce qui est au delà* (*Nouvelles histoires extraordinaires*, Conard, p. xx-xxi.) Now there are two roads to the absolute: there is the quest for the Grail, *le voyage*; and there is the quest within, that is, meditation. *Mûre saison, doux, maison, frileux, sédentaire* repeat insistently that adventure is forsaken: the cats’ meditativeness represents the chosen way.

That such is their meaning is confirmed by their relationship to Erebus, an image of their love for silence and the dark; and their relationship to the Sphinx, an image of immobile mystic contemplation.

The sonnet structure can thus be described as a sequence of synonymous images, all of them variations on the symbolism of the cat as representative of the contemplative life. The Sphinx simile duplicates the equivalence by making the cat a symbol of this symbol

¹⁰M. A. Ruff, *L’Esprit du mal et l’esthétique baudelairienne* (1955) pp. 245, 304; R. B. Chérix, *Commentaire des Fleurs du Mal* (1949) p. 247.

of mystic contemplation. The last stanza reduplicates this by making him a symbol also of the *object* of contemplation: he merges in himself the gaze of the contemplator and the light in darkness that reveals just enough of the hidden treasure to encourage the *chercheur d'absolu* — a combination of enticement and denial common to many symbols of esoterism (cf the frequent image of light behind a veil). Thus, beneath this repetitive continuity lies an antithesis that opposes the natural cat, symbol of contemplation, to the supernatural cat, symbol of the contemplated, of the occult truth.

The foregoing interpretation, it seems to me, covers every aspect of the text without contradiction. The antithesis just outlined has the advantage over the exegesis of Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss that it explains the transfiguration of the cats. The poem gives not a “reason” in the world why we should see this transfiguration as a “cosmic” one. The range of their metamorphosis is not that wide: at most, they become like Cheshire-Cats with only their phosphorescence left. And this, we can explain if we take them to symbolize the contemplative mind and to represent its poles in turn, being first the eye as gaze and then the eye as mirror. A description of the familiar feline postures suffices to make them acceptable as symbols of the contemplators; but if we are to be made to see the cat as a being related to the supernatural, a *parti-pris* is required to inform his physical features with a significance; the transfiguration is then the consequence of a stylistic shift of the description from an animal vocabulary with limited connotations (*frileux, sédentaires*, etc.) to a metaphysical one (*magiques, mystiques*) with a boundless power of suggestion.

Comparative Structuralism

Any lingering doubt as to the symbolism of the sonnet will vanish once we find other texts, unquestionably symbolic, which are variants of the structure our sonnet actualizes.

Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss conduct such a comparative study in an effort to relate “Les Chats” to the other *Flowers* and to the poet’s psychology. Here again their procedure raises the question of perti-

nence to the literary phenomenon at hand. In my opinion comparative structuralism as they practise it requires a radical readjustment. Their entire commentary emphasized the cats' identification with the cosmos. Another interpretation, a sexual one, was limited to their affinity with *amoureux*. Now, as a sort of afterthought, sexuality takes the spotlight: we are told that in Baudelaire's mind the image of the cat is the image of a woman and that our sonnet has a female-male ambiguity. Hence the bold conclusion: the cat's image symbolizes the poet. The sublimation of the cat symbolizes love cleansed of feminine impurity and knowledge freed of its coldness. The poet is thus ready for a mystic communion with the universe. Now I am not sure I have this quite straight,¹¹ but I am sure that a chasm has opened up between an almost pedestrian process of analysis and these philosophical fireworks.

These assertions are put forward as proof: 1) the use of feminine words for masculine rhymes suggests androgyny: in my discussion of metalanguage I tried to show that this could not be; 2) the words *³puissants et doux* amount to a description of cats as women: the sole evidence for this is a line of Brizeux where women are celebrated as *êtres puissants et doux*. Which is not convincing because, as I said before, this is a cliché (a stereotype structure linking *doux* and any adjective incompatible with "sweetness" or "softness"). The cliché corresponds, I believe, to the archetype of the hero strong enough to be kind, from Homer's Hector to Rimbaud's Héraklès whose brow is *terrible et doux* ("Soleil et Chair"). The cliché is in no way used for amazons only. The only time I found it with female connotations, it described not womanhood, but motherhood,¹² which does not apply to *these* cats. 3) Androgyny is again implied by certain ambiguities in the description of the cats; and the cats in "Les Chats," being the same as those in the two poems entitled "Le Chat,"

¹¹p. 21, "De la constellation initiale du poème, formée par les amoureux et les savants, les chats permettent par leur médiation d'éliminer la femme, laissant face à face — sinon même confondus — le "poète des Chats", libéré de l'amour . . . , et l'univers, délivré de l'austérité du savant."

¹²A. France, *L'Anneau d'améthyste*, III (p. 126). Abbé Guitrel calls his affection for a young man "maternelle, pour mieux exprimer ce qu'elle contient à la fois de force et de douceur".

must therefore represent Woman. These last two contentions can be best answered by the comparative method.

The principle of comparative structural analysis is quite simple: given several sets of data, no comparison may be drawn between empirical data pertinent to those sets, but solely between the systems within which they occur. Just because they do have common components, one system cannot be used to explain another: they must be isomorphic.

If we now compare texts, we find no correspondences enabling us to see “Les Chats” as equivalent to a “female” structure. There are, to be sure, homologies between the descriptive structures here and those in “Le Chat” (*Fleurs*, LI): the animal is, at the same time, *fort et doux*; his domain is a house too (*C’est l’esprit familier du lieu*), although the house is located in the poet’s inner universe (*Dans ma cervelle*); the creature’s gaze has a sphinx-like fixity, and his nature is mystic (*chat mystérieux, chat séraphique, chat étrange*); finally, the relationship between the cat and the poet is much the same as that between our cats and their composite counterpart in “Les Chats.” The magic motif is here, but treated differently: stroked, the fur emits a magic fragrance instead of sparks. One feature prominent here is not mentioned in our sonnet, the meow — but this is actually another device to suggest the supernatural (the mewling is compared to poetry, to a philter, and so forth), and a variant of the darkness motif (*sa voix, qui parle . . . Dans mon fonds le plus ténébreux*). I trust I have made the parallelism as convincing as our exegetes could wish. Now for my retort: there is nothing in *Le Chat* that imposes upon the reader the image of a woman. The descriptive details claimed for femininity apply as aptly to felinity; all the passages that might be alluding to love can be taken just as satisfactorily as mystical (in fact, some of these ambiguities have verbal or content homologues in “La Beauté” and “Hymne à la Beauté”). I am well aware that critics nearly always assume this cat is a girl — one line is even read as pandering to the reader’s prurience. Yet all such conclusions lean upon biographical data which is by no means certainly applicable here. And even if the poet *was* inspired by some love affair, the point

is that such content is *concealed* by the form or else translated to a distinctly spiritual level; *volupté* is not described in terms of Woman but is interiorized in a reverie about a symbolic cat.

As for “Le Chat” (*Fleurs*, XXXIV), it does conjure up a woman, though only by simile, and it should be noted that the description of the cat in itself does not bring to mind a woman so long as the comparison is not made formal and explicit (*Je vois ma femme en esprit*). But then the structure is entirely different from that of *Les Chats* except for the eyes and the sparks; and these are here given unrelated functions: the sparks are purely descriptive, without spiritual connotation; the eyes do not invite entry into their secret world, they are instead turned outwards, directed against the observer. So are the claws and even the *dangereux parfum*.

Lastly, in a prose poem that Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss do not mention, “L’Horloge,” Baudelaire compares a mistress with a cat; he seeks eternity in her eyes. Thus cat and woman are identified, and there is some of the spiritual atmosphere of “Les Chats.” But form and emphasis are completely different: in fact, the structure of our sonnet seems to be pointedly avoided. Spiritual connotations are dissociated from the “natural” cat-woman likeness: an ironic comment by the poet dismisses them as the far-fetched metaphor of a madrigal in the Gongora (or Samuel Cramer) vein; the mystic élan is negated, as it were, by the “realistic,” prosaic style of the traveler telling tales of Chinese superstition. It is the woman who resembles the cat, rather than the other way around, and even that link is broken as soon as it is formed. As space and eternity are visioned in the woman’s eyes, they vanish from the cat’s lightless eyeballs (*le blanc des yeux*); as felinity invades the woman (*la belle Féline, la si bien nommée*), it deserts the cat (*un fort gros chat*).

Of course Baudelaire is perfectly capable of perceiving the cat in the woman, the woman in the cat. He occasionally uses the one as a metaphor of the other. But not always. Whatever the role of the cat in his private erotic imagery, it was not such as to make him write *chat* instinctively when he meant *femme*: whenever he does, we have seen that he feels obliged to provide the reader with an ex-

planation. If *chat* means something besides the little beast, its dual value entails a selection among the descriptive features of the cat's image, the only traits retained being those common to both the animal and what he represents. This selection, in any given instance, must be our reference for interpreting that instance.

Once we have got rid of our false rapprochements, nothing in "Les Chats" calls up Woman. I am not ready to agree that ¹²*reins féconds* is ambiguous: like *aine*, it is a euphemism reserved to the male procreative power, whereas *ventre* or *sein* would be used for female fertility. *Chats* and *sphinx* may be androgynous for lexicographers: but in context the masculine gender of *chats* is repeatedly underlined by *ils* and *eux*, by *coursiers* and *amis*. The mythological sphinx was indeed half or one-third female, but French, significantly, shifted from *la* to *le sphinx* during the eighteenth century; Romantic travelers to the Orient and writers of esoteric bent virtually abandoned the Greek female-bosomed monster in favor of the *grand sphinx* of the Pyramids. *Volupté* is not one way or the other (note, however, that the *chat voluptueux* of "La Géante" is definitely a tomcat), but a context containing *savants*, *science*, *silence*, *horreur des ténèbres* and *funèbres* rather flatly excludes any female presence. The analysts' misreading is due, I believe, to the choice of data exterior to the poems. Since *chats* is the key word, and since Baudelaire's love for cats is well attested, it was logical for our authors to assume that this is a case of obsession, which triggers the word's recurrence. This causal relationship does not, however, extend to any structure: there is no evidence that a stylistic structure corresponds to the psychological one. All that can be said with certainty is that a psychological structure may well "activate" or "sensitize" a word, and that this word will then come easy to the poet, will play a role in a number of structures that have nothing to do with its source within his mind. *Solitudes* and *chats* demonstrate that the semantic structure, the virtual system of representations centered around a word, does not remain present behind every actualization of that word.

Comparative structuralism, if consistently adhered to, should at

least rid literary criticism of one great plague: the proclivity to assume that a key word or verbal obsession must always have the same meaning for the author once the obsession has set in. Semantic permanence *is* to be observed among the variants of one structure; but a verbal obsession may serve several structures. Let us give the name *code* to the lexical components that actualize a variant of a structure. We can say that in “Les Chats” three symbolic structures (semantic, but in actual texts only, not in language) representing mystery and two modes of contemplation have been implemented with a *cat-code* (*sphinx* is only a specialization of *chat*, a sub-code). If the structures determined from the data of the sonnet are correct, there should be other codes actualizing them.

The contemplative-life structure subcoded in *sphinx* can be readily verified: I find it in “La Chambre double,” where *Les meubles ont des formes allongées, prostrées, alanguies. Les meubles ont l'air de rêver; on les dirait doués d'une vie somnambulique.* The relational elements are the same: *allongés rêve*, wakefulness under the appearance of sleep; the bed is occupied, but hardly by a woman — like the cats, the “queen of dreams” has been virtually reduced to eyes, instrument of contemplation. Her eyes have the same ambiguity as the eyes of cats: they watch, they demand to be watched; they too are like stars, and these *étoiles noires*, in a symbolic synthesis, explicitly achieve the simultaneity of darkness and light; and so does everything else in the room: *ici, tout a la suffisante clarté et la délicieuse obscurité de l'harmonie.* To cast out any possible doubt, the “translation” is given: this room looks like a dream (it *is* a dream), its true nature is *véritablement spirituelle*. The code is made up of the stock of images evoked by “bedroom,” but the fundamental theme is still the same beatitude represented by the cats, the sphinxes and their human counterparts: contemplation abolishes time and plunges you into blissful eternity.

Another variant of the structure provides a regular commentary on the second tercet: in “Les Yeux de Berthe,” there are dark eyes the description of which is synonymous with our sonnet:

arcanes adorés,
 Vous ressemblez beaucoup à ces grottes *magiques*
 Où, derrière l'amas des ombres léthargiques
Scintillent vaguement des trésors ignorés

Arcanes and *trésors ignorés* develop ¹⁴*mystiques*: these eyes are like the eyes of the Queen of Sheba in Flaubert's *Tentation — de grands yeux noirs, plus sombres que les cavernes mystiques*¹³ — at the very moment she proclaims that she is no woman but a universe, a “succession of mysteries.” The motif of treasure shining in the dark is repeated in the mystic antithesis of night as a font of light:

des yeux obscurs, profonds et vastes,
 Comme toi, Nuit immense, éclairés comme toi!

and then the translation is given:

Leurs feux sont ces pensers d'Amour, mêlés de Foi,
 Qui pétillent au fond, voluptueux ou chastes.

Thus is the symbolism of the eyes demonstrated: they are certainly not the eyes of Baudelaire's mulatto paramour as most critics choose to think. The poet gazes into these eyes and for him they are like intercessors in his contemplation.

This act of intercession by eyes, we find again in “Le Chat” (*Fleurs*, LI), whose genuinely symbolic character I have hinted at before; at the end of the poem the eyes move to where the Church Fathers and the mystics after them set the *oculi animae*. When the poet looks within himself, he finds the eyes interiorized, looking at him from out of the depths of his soul. These eyes of the spirit mirroring the eyes of the body are a definite allusion to the language of esoterism, wherein reciprocity is a metaphor for secret “correspondences.” Baudelaire himself refers to this in the prose version of “L'Invitation au Voyage:” he invites an allegorical flower to *se mirer*,

¹³Ch. II, ed. Dumesnil, p. 42. The passage was published in *L'Artiste* of Dec. 21, 1856, and reviewed by Baudelaire one year later.

pour parler comme les mystiques, dans sa propre correspondance. Finally, the parallelism between *Amour* and *amoureux*, and between *Foi* and *savants* demonstrates the metaphysical nature of their symbolism.

Our comparisons supply us with a tool for evaluating the components of Baudelaire's imagery and their role: "eyes," for instance, are not part of a code; they appear invariably and are therefore essential to a structure symbolic of infinity — whose invariant is a relation *fascinating light + darkness*. In fact, Baudelaire might almost be giving us a demonstrative outline when he describes how make-up transforms a face into the mysterious mask of a priestess, how that mask represents supernatural life, how mascara, *ce cadre noir, rend le regard plus profond . . . donne à l'œil une apparence . . . de fenêtre ouverte sur l'infini*.¹⁴ Certain texts in which we find the eyes, such as "A une Passante," may seem very different at first sight, but we can now classify them as permutation groups of the "fascinating light" variants. In that sonnet a glance from a woman encountered by chance on the street — lightning, then night — sets off a mystic dream: the difference, a shift from a gaze-code to a glance-code, is in the frustrating briefness of this illumination. The prose poem "Le Désir de peindre," usually associated by critics with "A une Passante" because of the lightning in the eyes of the female character, belongs, on the contrary, in the main group: among other parallelisms it offers *deux antres où scintille vaguement le mystère* — note the adverb — a variant of the "fascinating light" structure, complete with translation. This comparative approach also explains why "Les Chats" are inseparable from "Les Hiboux." Both cats and owls stare into darkness, their eyes are phosphorescent, they are philosophic and come to the same moral conclusion as the unmoving sphinx: happiness is in sedentariness. The two poems are variants of the same structure, and they differ only in style — "Les Hiboux" are like a fable or an apologue.

A description of *Les Fleurs du Mal* based on this method should

¹⁴*Le peintre de la vie moderne*, XI, "Eloge du maquillage" (Pléiade, p. 1185).

be an improvement upon the usual enumerations of images arranged by vehicles, that is, according to the codes, to the interchangeable words — these cannot lead anywhere, nor can they account for the variations of meaning in the symbolism of such words — and perhaps there is some justification for this approach to be found in Baudelaire's structuralist definition of the symbol: *la forme moulée sur l'idée*.