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“CONSCIOUSNESS IN EVIL”:
CHARLES BAUDELAIRE
AND THE QUESTION OF GOD

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The academic term “essay” will germanely fit this reflection, no doubt, since the following pages form my first direct *attempt* at a philosophical dissertation on the theme of God – or, rather, of the divine, of religion or of the religious (“fact” or “phenomenon”), depending on the hazardous expressions against which the vigilant mind will want to take precautions (quite superfluously, maybe, since these different words are obviously pointing at the same thing, or the same enigma – otherwise all discussion about this theme would be impossible –, even though the uncertainty of the form, the possibility or the existence of what they are pointing at is taken for granted).

After the manner of what Richard Kearney, borrowing this neologism from the Irish philosopher William Desmond, calls “metaxology” in the introduction of his work *The God Who May Be*,¹ we also do not but *try* (« *essayer* ») here a “middle way”² (Greek, *metaxy*) to get onto the religious question, “between the extremes of absolutism and relativism”³, while watching that this “third channel”⁴ does not either conceal again one or the other of both these extremes from which it intends to free itself.

The notion of “essay” on which I opened this work is not only a wink to the collegial context out of which it comes: it is also the prudence principle (some might even say humility) at work in the metaxological approach that we have just presented. In other words, an essay goes beyond relativism, because, inevitably, it takes a channel and offers suggestions, i.e., after all, *chooses*; but in its choice, an essay remains aware that, having fired, it still might have miscalculated its target or missed its aim, so that it is the awareness of this risk which, besides preventing it from the danger of absolutism and ensuring its prudence as regards its statements, also engages it into a hermeneutic circle open to discussion and progress.

Such progress is termed by Ricoeur a “surplus of meaning” coming from the “interanimation”⁵ of hermeneutic interpretations – thoughts, texts, speeches, images, etc. – forming this dynamic that Richard Kearney, in another formula, calls “metaphorology”⁶, and in which we would also like to include our views. Thus, this “hesitant and provisional”⁷ language, trying to “say the unsayable”⁸ or to represent the unrepresentable, must itself continuously receive other thoughts, other texts, other speeches, other images, etc., under pain of being exhausted. If it stops being supplied, this interpretive circle really risks operating unproductively, and to spin its wheels; to become tautological, or even totalitarian.

¹ Richard Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2001

² Ibid., p. 6

³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Le Temps et l'autre*, Arthaud, Paris, 1984, p. 185

⁴ Richard Kearney, *ibid.*, p. 8

⁵ Ibid., p. 7

⁶ Idem.

⁷ Idem.

⁸ Idem.

Charles Baudelaire is the man we would like to invite to the discussion table, not so that he would eclipse the speeches about God of the different contributors, nor to strike out or irradiate the images that are not his, but because to the question “where do you speak from?” (« *d’où parlez-vous ?* »), which the philosopher or the wonderer will certainly ask me, I must answer that my current thoughts are still impregnated with recent research¹⁰ on the author of the *Flowers of Evil*, and that I could not get onto the course on phenomenology of religion¹¹ in whose framework I am writing these lines without making the poet and thinker conversing with the new materials assimilated thanks to Richard Kearney. It seems to us that the suggestive force of Baudelaire has all its place in this essay to comprehend the difficulty of the human, philosophical or religious approach to God; that this hermeneutic mediation can give rise to a fructuous exchange with some of the main figures evoked during the “phenomenology and religion” seminar; and that it is even incumbent upon us, in the name of this “dynamatology”¹² of the possible, not to deny the God of Baudelaire this hospitality (some might even say this generosity) within our metaphorical, eidetic and hermeneutic variations on the theme of this seminar, with which we are now dealing.

The specific thesis that we want to construe through Baudelaire is that God, for the poet, the philosopher or the religious, as for every man, can be envisaged “only by taking the ways that discover evil.”¹³

Let us start off with God’s name, quoted but not explained since the beginning of our reflection, and about which Saint Augustine tells us that it contains everything we hope for; let us start off, in other words, with this resisting question of the Unnamable named “God”, always burning in the image of the biblical bush in Moses’s gaze,¹⁴ and about which Baudelaire, unintentionally parodying Saint Augustine, answers in *Mon Cœur mis à nu* this well-known provocation:

The most prostituted being, that is the being par excellence, that is God, for he is the supreme friend for every individual.

⁹ Ibid., p. 5

¹⁰ See my *mémoire de maîtrise: La Critique artistique, littéraire et musicale chez Baudelaire* (<http://www.guillaumedelaby.com/prose/ baudelaire.pdf>)

¹¹ Given by professor Richard Kearney in University College Dublin (Ireland), in April 2006

¹² Richard Kearney, *ibid.*, p. 6

¹³ Pierre Jean Jouve, *Le Tombeau de Baudelaire*, Seuil, Paris, 1958; quoted by Dominique Rincé, *Baudelaire et la modernité poétique*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1996 (4th revised edition), pp. 63-64

¹⁴ Exodus 3, v. 2: “The angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush: and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed.”

(« L'être le plus prostitué, c'est l'être par excellence, c'est Dieu, puisqu'il est l'ami suprême pour chaque individu, puisqu'il est le réservoir commun, inépuisable de l'amour.¹⁵ »)

This medley-God, almost inevitably made polytheistic (« démonothésisé ») inasmuch as he receives the most diverse and divergent metaphors or qualifications, is thus said in so many ways that our human understanding seems to lack criteria to separate the wheat from the chaff:

God and his profoundness.

One cannot lack spirituality and seek in God the accomplice and the friend¹⁶ who are always missing. God is the eternal confidant in this tragedy of which everyone is the hero. Perhaps there are some usurers and murderers who say to God: "My Lord, let me succeed in my next operation!"

(« Dieu et sa profondeur.

On ne peut pas manquer d'esprit et chercher dans Dieu le complice et l'ami qui manquent toujours. Dieu est l'éternel confident dans cette tragédie dont chacun est le héros. Il y a peut-être des usuriers et des assassins qui disent à Dieu : « Seigneur, faites que ma prochaine opération réussisse !¹⁷ »)

This criteriological difficulty, limit-experience of hermeneutists and source of the tohu-bohu of theological and philosophical controversies raging for centuries, first reflects, according to Baudelaire's last two notes, the fatal duplicity of human nature which he sums up in this other clear-cut formula:

There is in every man, all the time, two simultaneous postulations, one toward God, the other toward Satan. The invocation of God, or spirituality, is a desire to get ahead; the one of Satan, or animality, is a joy to descend.

(« Il y a dans tout homme, à toute heure, deux postulations simultanées, l'une vers Dieu, l'autre vers Satan. L'invocation à Dieu, ou spiritualité, est un désir de monter en grade; celle de Satan, ou animalité, est une joie de descendre¹⁸. »)

Quite obviously, the idea of a "prostitute" God resounds just like a blasphemy, but Baudelaire barely ever provokes aimlessly, so that we shall try to ponder his sentence. Our interpretation is that such a judgment is a paradoxical mélange of irony and charity, in the image, perhaps, of the God he sets his sights on. Should there be a prostitute God, this hypothesis primarily

¹⁵ Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes* (tome I), Gallimard (NRF, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), Paris, 1975-1976, « Mon Cœur mis à nu », XXV, p. 692

¹⁶ About the theme of the ever missing friend, and in particular those whom Baudelaire calls "our dead friends", whose God is after all the highest paradigm, see my *mémoire de maîtrise* p. 80 and pp. 92-94

¹⁷ Charles Baudelaire, *ibid.*, « Mon Cœur mis à nu », XLIII, fragment n°78, p. 705

¹⁸ Charles Baudelaire, *ibid.*, « Mon Cœur mis à nu », XI, fragment n°19, p. 682

implies that men themselves are fully taking part in this prostitution: this is likely Baudelaire's key point as well as the irony of his note making God "the supreme friend for every individual." This irony works at two mutually implicating levels: 1°/ he who states that God is prostituted (or corrupt, or corruptible, etc.) at the same time reveals himself and recognizes himself as being blasphemous; 2°/ consequently, this self-referential irony cannot eschew anymore the broader possibility that all judgment about God, all denomination, qualification, representation, conception, invocation, etc. – even when postulating a good God – be contaminated in some way (or in all) by "Evil", whose temptation remains present in every man. This is why Baudelaire creates the didactic hyperbole of the murderer praying God to make sure that he will succeed in his crime. But, no doubt, there is a more charitable aspect, and more subtly paradoxical, in Baudelaire's judgement: for the murderer's imposture to be possible (in the image of that of every man, very likely, in his addresses to God or about God, as well as in his acts), the help of God is required, i.e. of a God *good* enough to bring to fruition (« *pour mener à bien* ») the (good or bad) intention or (good or bad) project with which he is associated. This need, which may be that of the saint as well as that of the criminal, is therefore marked by a paradoxical aspiration for the good, going astray in the second case, indeed, but maybe never fully honored in the first one either.¹⁹ And yet this "common"²⁰ need, object of the poet's pity, is the limit-aspiration of "every man", mark of his finitude, horizon of his hope – down to evil.

These "two simultaneous postulations, one toward God, the other toward Satan", out of which Sartre adequately made "the two poles of [Baudelaire's] rêverie"²¹, crystallise our entire phenomenological problematic: how to be sure to postulate well about God, or to postulate, if necessary, the "good" God? "How can we tell the difference between true and false prophets? Between gods and ghosts", between idols, monsters and demons? "Between messiahs and madmen?"²² Baudelaire's need for "this radical and systematic pseudo-diagnosis"²³, this caricatural manichaeism, should not be understood literally. Rather than a theological dualism, dogmatic and inflexible (to which he has sometimes been confined,

¹⁹ As Saint Paul puts it, in one of the most extreme judgments: "As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one." (Romans 3, v. 10-12)

²⁰ Charles Baudelaire, *ibid.*, « Mon Cœur mis à nu », XXXIII, fragment n°61, p. 698: "Advice to the non-communists: Everything is common, even God." (« *Avis aux non-communistes : Tout est commun, même Dieu.* »)

²¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Baudelaire*, Gallimard (Folio/Essais), Paris, 1947 (reprinted in 1975)

²² Collective work (Jeffrey Bloechl, Stanislas Breton, Patrick Burke, John D. Caputo, Jacques Derrida, William Desmond, Jean Greisch, Kevin Hart, Mark P. Hederman, Dominique Janicaud, Richard Kearney, Catherine Keller, John P. Manoussakis, Sallie McFague, Jean-Luc Marion, Craig Nichols, Joseph S. O'Leary, James Olthuis, Felix Ó Murchadha, B. Keith Putt, David Tracy, Brian Treanor, Merold Westphal), *After God, Richard Kearney and the Religious Turn in Continental Philosophy*, Fordham University Press, New York, 2006, Part Three: Recapitulations, "Desire of God: An Exchange" (J. Derrida, J.D. Caputo, and R. Kearney), p. 301

²³ Dominique Rincé, *ibid.*, p. 37

whether made a profound Christian or an infamous blasphemer), it is for him, doubtless, not only a matter of hermeneutic, and even ethical, vigilance, but also a poetic requirement of comprehension of men in the truth (i.e. also in the variety and contradictions) of their possibles, including in their relationship with God: to name and confront these “contraries which rend human nature till it becomes powerless and intolerable”²⁴, to reflect its profound duplicity, its instability, its uncertainty, its errancy – due, all in all, to its difficulty to be strictly good or strictly bad –, pushing this bipolarity till it seems simplistic, perhaps, but always counter-balanced by itself (and thereby fertile and not stigmatizing), enables Baudelaire, however, to suggest a constellation of tensions, irreducible to one or the other poles of human nature but always threatening to vary around one by the more or less heavy attraction of the other. It is not sure that this “homo duplex” be the irreducible plan, the scheme which is the least able to decipher the infinite variants of the complexity of the human heart. “To the postmodern dilemma of undecidability”²⁵, reflected by the urgent questions formulated in the lead of this paragraph, the poet thus offers a criterion which is not one, i.e. a true criterion in the sense that it keeps asking questions without settling them, or rather gives to judge without forcing the result of the judgment, helps elucidate, evaluate, while avoiding on the one hand “a certain madness of decision”²⁶ at the time of judgment (about God, as well as about our own actions or intentions, whether they be placed under the watch of God or, on the contrary, in the atheistic refusal of such a surveillance), and on the other hand a judgment which would not but be the conclusion of a mechanical logic, and thereby precontained, preestablished, or even always already decided, within the tenets of its premises. This Baudelairean criterion is “consciousness in Evil.”²⁷

“How enlightening!”, the cynical and the impatient will protest. And yet this consciousness, in our opinion, is a path that the philosopher must pass through. This simultaneity of aspirations so apparently contrary, “one toward God, the other toward Satan”, or, more

²⁴ Idem.

²⁵ Collective work, idem.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 303 (R. Kearney) : “There is a certain madness of decision, a holy madness, [...] which is so difficult and so terrifying and so risky that it needs the counterbalancing gesture of prudence, of law, of reading.” (« *Il y a une certaine folie de la décision, une sainte folie, qui est si difficile, si terrifiante et si risquée, qu'elle requiert le contre-balancement de la prudence, de la loi, de la lecture.* ») Borrowing this famous formula from Kierkegaard, Derrida also asserts that “the instant of decision is a madness”, where the “madness” suggests not the lack but the impossibility of cognitive reference in the decision. (See Jacques Derrida, “The Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority”, translated by Mary Quaintance, in Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld and David Gray Carlson, *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, Routledge, 1993, p. 26)

²⁷ Charles Baudelaire, poem n°XXXIV of the *Flowers of Evil*, “The Irremediable”:

An ironic, infernal beacon,
A torch of satanic graces,
Unique solace and glory,
- Consciousness in Evil!

accurately, the shock or the bewilderment triggered by the affirmation of this simultaneity, which even seems to designate sometimes a quasi similitude, has as a first merit to suspect the legitimacy of all postulation about God, not by the absolutist assertion of the dogma of the original sin, but by the mere rising in consciousness of the *question* of evil.

Jacques Derrida, in *Given Time. I. Counterfeit Money*,²⁸ develops an analysis of the prose poem n°XXVIII of the *Spleen de Paris*²⁹, which will guide our attempt – inspired by Baudelaire and what he calls “consciousness in Evil”³⁰ – to answer to these criteriological difficulties as well as to the ones already mentioned; for, quite obviously, this parable of the “Counterfeit Money” applies itself to our relation toward “the other as such”³¹ and thereby also to any human predication on God’s account. Derrida diagnoses what we may call the double hazard of charity, which directly threatens, from a hermeneutic and philosophical point of view, “the problem of hospitality”³² as regards the « tout autre³³ » (which, by an ancient convenience, is named “God”).

The first hazard is quite obvious: as well as there may be a self-interested calculation (on behalf of the “false donor”), i.e. a self-interested charity and, consequently, a false one, there is always the possibility of a similar lack of disinterestedness in the speech of he who would enmesh in the angelicizing messianism of a good God while automatically refusing “the

²⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Given Time. I. Counterfeit money*, translated by Peggy Kamuf, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1992, pp. 71-172

²⁹ Charles Baudelaire, *ibid.*, *Le Spleen de Paris*, poem n°XXVIII, “Counterfeit Money”, pp. 323-324 (The reader will find this text at the end of the present essay.)

³⁰ The transcription of this line from “The Irremediable”, already quoted earlier, into the prose poem of the “Counterfeit Money” is situated in the very last sentence of the text: “One is never excused for being evil, but **there is some merit in knowing that one is** – and the most irreparable of vices is to do evil through stupidity.” (« *On n’est jamais excusable d’être méchant, mais il y a quelque mérite à savoir qu’on l’est; et le plus irréparable des vices est de faire le mal par bêtise.* ») Rousseau says somewhere (in *The Confessions*) that it is more shameful to confess a stupidity than a big crime: indeed, stupidity is doubtless the evil of the worst kind because it is done without consciousness, or rather with this diminutive consciousness which belittles the gravity of the evil committed right at the moment when it could be avoided (Hannah Arendt would very likely share this view – see *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*); it is quite easy not to be a big criminal, but the micro-malignity of stupidity is the most underhand, the most widespread, the most pullulating, i.e. also the most difficult to eradicate – precisely because consciousness consents to minimize evil. It is far more probable, on the contrary, that a big criminal would know he is a big criminal – which, of course, does not excuse him more, but this consciousness could well save him; whereas he who commits evil through stupidity will shut his eyes a thousand times a day, and maybe till the day he dies, to the numberless occasions of good deeds that he pushes aside by carelessness – and yet, this perpetual denial of conscience may cause his loss, while the diehard criminal may paradoxically treat himself, by the weightiness of his crime, to a greater clarity of consciousness about his own evil – a consciousness that, once again, may well save him, unlike he who does harm and evil through stupidity and will never get out of it.

³¹ Collective work, *ibid.*, pp. 304-305 (J. Derrida) : “If I want to have an available criterion to distinguish between the good immigrant and the bad immigrant, then I would have no relation to the other as such.” (« *Si je cherche à obtenir un critère pour distinguer le bon immigrant du mauvais / méchant immigrant, alors je n’aurais pas de relation à l’autre en tant que tel.* »)

³² *Ibid.*, p. 304 (J. Derrida)

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 307 (J. Derrida)

openness to a possible monstrosity and to [the potential] evil”³⁴ of this God. Those who rush on the representation of a good God and rejoice about the perspective of Redemption without deigning to confront a God so radically Other, “so unfamiliar and ineffable as to be traumatic – that is *horrible*”³⁵, unjust, vengeful, terrifying, or even “the primordial violent thing”³⁶ or “a master of the ‘literature of horror’”³⁷³⁸, those, about whom Baudelaire would say ironically that “the Devil convinced them to trust *their kindheartedness*” (« *le Diable [les] a persuadé[s] de se fier à [leur] bon cœur*³⁹ »), these “abolishers of *hell* [...] [would] definitely have *full many an incentive* to do so” (« *[ces] abolisseurs d’enfer [...] y [seraient] à coup sûr intéressés*⁴⁰ »). As Derrida summarizes it, disclosing in the gift of counterfeit money a perverted charity and, thereby, in the Baudelairean parable, a preventing parody of Christian sacrifice:

In the salary promised in Heaven by the Father who sees in secret and will pay it back, [Baudelaire’s satire] “The Pagan School”⁴¹ can always unmask a sort of sublime and secret calculation, that of he who seeks to “win paradise economically” as the narrator of “Counterfeit Money” puts it.⁴²

This first hazard of self-interested charity seems unable to dupe anybody, and yet: what would be the true danger of a vengeful God,⁴³ or a God whose sole revenge may *just* (and, maybe, in a just way) consist in not being – and therefore, according to Baudelaire’s formula, in “not even [needing] to exist [...] in order to reign”⁴⁴? Would not the main danger consist,

³⁴ Ibid., p. 305 (J. Derrida)

³⁵ Richard Kearney, *ibid.*, pp. 33-34

³⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief*, Routledge, London, 2001; quoted by par Richard Kearney, *ibid.*, p. 34

³⁷ Simon Critchley, *Very Little... Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*, Routledge, London, 1997, p. 80

³⁸ Richard Kearney, *ibid.*, p. 34

³⁹ Charles Baudelaire, *ibid.*, « Mon Cœur mis à nu », XVII, fragment n°27 (« Le Diable et George Sand »), pp. 686-687

⁴⁰ Charles Baudelaire, *ibid.*, « Mon Cœur mis à nu », XIV, fragment n°23, pp. 684-685

⁴¹ Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes* (tome II), Gallimard (NRF, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), Paris, 1975-1976, “The Pagan School”, pp. 44-49. In the slightly confined five-thousand word space allotted to us, we cannot linger over an amusing suggestion sparked by our recent rereading of some well-known passages in Baudelaire and Derrida. Let us just notice that there is a “khorological” hygiene in Derrida’s deconstructionism like there is an irony in the evocation of the god Crepitus in Baudelaire’s essay “The Pagan School”, both acting as powerful idol hunters, the first one through the absolute indeterminability of *khora*, the latter through the “ventilating” faculty, so to speak, of a flatulent god, i.e. a god whose very idea suffices to ridicule (to “blow up”) all that men may grotesquely attribute to God or to their gods (Baudelaire’s intention being, there again, to show that we are always more inclined to concoct for ourselves handy, multifunction, submissive, in short, flattering gods, favoring and understanding all our deficiencies, rather than thinking first of our own sins. The vengeful – or even simply nonexistent – God whom Baudelaire prefers to depict has the merit of sending us back to the consciousness of the Evil that we are doing, rather than masking it with a thousand pagan idols arranged to our liking, or thanks to a complacently *kindhearted* God).

⁴² Jacques Derrida, *ibid.*

⁴³ See footnote n°40

⁴⁴ Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes* (tome I), « Fusées », I, fragment n°1, p. 649

rather than in attributing to this “God without being [...] an alterity so ‘other’ that it [would become] impossible to distinguish it from monstrosity – mystical or sublime”⁴⁵, in seeing such a God leaving us in the unbearable and pure immanence of our Evil, indifferent to our attempts to coax or tame him? After all, the danger cannot lie in itself in the postulation of a vengeful God whose just “revenge” may consist in not being, but rather in the way we ourselves negotiate such a God within our conscience: if we attribute to him revenge, violence, monstrosity, etc., isn’t it clear that the accusation may also come from our own resentment in the first place and that, thereby, it is our fault?⁴⁶ And if, on the other hand, we consider him vengeful in the paradoxical mode of his nonexistence, may this not be, on the contrary, the sign of a postulation, not necessarily purely victorious over this first hazard of self-interested charity (for such a victory is quite unlikely, as we will try to show it in the following three paragraphs), but at least more unsuspectable of being marked by hatred, anger or resentment, for, aiming but at a God reigning without existing, such postulation consequently cannot by any means commit the fault of accusing him (since he *is* not) but much rather envisages his paradoxical justice (indeed, this God would reign and make his justice reign without being, i.e. without being able to lavish grace or reward, and thus doing justice by throwing self-interested charity back to its own vanity) and at the same time sends man to judge for himself and in his own conscience about good and evil?

Derrida’s analysis should help us consider now the second hazard of charity, whose comprehension seems at the core of the philosophical problem of hospitality⁴⁷ (vis-à-vis God, the neighbour, or the « tout autre »). For this, let us go back to the Baudelairian parable of the “Counterfeit Money.” More and more explicitly, Derrida gives to think that false charity is likely not to be found only in the “false donor.”⁴⁸ « Another – *inverse* – hypothesis is authorized, but one which is included in the preceding one”⁴⁹:

It is also possible – we will never know and there is no sense in wondering about it *in literature* – that [the friend of the narrator] gave real money and then boasted to his friend that he gave a “counterfeit coin” so as to produce a certain effect, not on the beggar but on the narrator.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Richard Kearney, *ibid.*, p. 34

⁴⁶ This question does not either, on the contrary, aim at stigmatizing unduly the victims of a gratuitously vengeful God – but rather at raising suspicions about the self-victimization of those who would accuse God even before having tried to examine profoundly their own culpability.

⁴⁷ Charity – hospitality – gift – pardon – abandonment: see Jacques Caputo’s and Derrida’s response (Collective work, *ibid.*, pp. 302-307) to Richard Kearney’s question as regards these “three calls of God: *donne, pardonne, abandonne*” [Collective work, *ibid.*, p. 302 (R. Kearney)].

⁴⁸ Jacques Derrida, *ibid.*, p. 150

⁴⁹ *Idem.*

⁵⁰ Jacques Derrida, *ibid.*, p. 150

With this hypothesis in which the narrator would find himself “in the position or the place of the beggar”⁵¹ (engaging more broadly the question of the “*credit*” granted to the written or read text) a hyperbolic suspicion is also formed: he who was believed charitable (the narrator, *credited a priori*) may not only have been duped by his friend, but may also well be, after all, the one who, of the two, most lacked charity, in assuming evil and stupidity in his friend’s act (the gift) – in an unjustified, unjust manner, according to the scenario fructuously suggested by Derrida. This hypothesis can either turn the tables (the false donor is, as in the first hypothesis, “pure of any mastery that a donating consciousness might have secured for him”⁵² and the narrator, as far as he is concerned, is both spiteful as regards his friend and all the more falsely charitable as he affected a clear conscience in his narrative by denouncing false charity); or this second hypothesis henceforth raises a full-scale doubt over the intentions of the two protagonists and the veracity of each of their discourses.

We hold that these two “hazards of charity” enhanced thanks to Baudelaire and Derrida in the episode of the “Counterfeit Money” are applicable to the problem of decidability facing the question of God – or the « tout autre »; and first because this question being that *of God*, his existence, his essence, his possibility, his impossibility, his nonexistence or his death, it thereby, and above all, aims at a *relation* toward God or the « tout autre » which cannot not be marked by our *desire to grasp*⁵³, to comprehend, to domesticate, including through a reflection of a philosophical nature, even though this would work in the paradoxical mode of “vigilance”⁵⁴, “patience”⁵⁵ or “humility.”⁵⁶ The single term “question” (whose Latin etymology *quaestio*, besides the quest or the search, also defines the interested violence of torture) conveys this will to mastery, possession, controlled postulation, calculated attribution or gift, or even extortion; and thereby suffices, not to make these three talents of vigilance, patience and humility (out of which Richard Kearney makes the virtue of the Derridean deconstruction) automatically impracticable, especially in the domain of philosophy, but well and truly to maintain the exigency of a permanent self-surveillance and self-questioning of these talents, so as to prevent the question (of God or the « tout autre ») from becoming, according to its *temptation*, violence and superimposition, and the hermeneutic and phenomenological exercise of the “eidetic variations” and the play of possibilizations from becoming mere probability and interest calculations, etc. Along with Baudelaire, we call this *quaestio quaestionis* (this self-questioning question), “consciousness in Evil.”

⁵¹ Idem.

⁵² Idem.

⁵³ Nobody and nothing can dodge this human trait par excellence that Aristotle coined, maybe forever, in the *Metaphysics* (in A, 1, 980 a 21 precisely), according to which “all men by nature desire to know.”

⁵⁴ Richard Kearney, *ibid.*, p. 99 (“The indispensable lessons to be learned from deconstruction are vigilance, patience, and humility.”)

⁵⁵ Idem.

⁵⁶ Idem.

It seems to us that one cannot escape to the double hazard of charity (or hospitality, gift, forgiveness, abandonment, etc. – depending on the wording chosen to evoke the question of the poetic, philosophical or religious relation toward God or the « tout autre »). There will always be the threat of the first hazard, which consists in keeping up a self-interested or calculated relation toward this charity or hospitality, either in the will to possess an intellectual (philosophical, ideological, etc.) *mastery* of this question,⁵⁷ or in that of securing for ourselves the (ethical, messianic, prophetic, etc.) *monopoly* of a fixed value system in accordance with our (theistic or atheistic) way of negotiating or even resolving this question. Between the Devil and the deep blue sea (« *Tombant de Charybde en Scylla* »), there will always be the threat of the second hazard as well, which, in short, consists in believing ourselves cleared of the first one on account of having denounced it, and, quite often, in letting ourselves sink into it even more insidiously. For fostering “vigilance, patience and humility”, according to the Paulinian model enacted in 1 Thessalonians 5 (“Let us watch and be sober”), is absolutely not a manner to dominate one or the other of these hazards (as the narrator of the poem of the “Counterfeit Money” may believe it against his will, according to Derrida’s second hypothesis), but to know that we are inevitably attracted to them. Hence, the second hazard is this tendency to call for prudence and humility at the expense of true prudence and true humility... which, for Baudelaire, who does not dissent from Saint Paul on that score, lie precisely in the paradoxical consciousness of their quasi impossibility. As already quoted earlier,⁵⁸ Saint Paul warns us that “there is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one.” (Romans 3, v. 10-12). Baudelaire, whom Proust called in 1913 “the most desolated prophet since the prophets of Israel” (« *le prophète le plus désolé depuis les prophètes d’Israël*⁵⁹ »), “reversely catholic” (« *catholique à rebours* »), according to the very apt image of Léon Bloy,⁶⁰ Sadian, Maistrian, Paulinian still, only sees, as far as he is concerned, the least worst safeguard – the sole “beacon”, the unique “torch” of “consciousness in Evil.”

Enmeshed by this consciousness into the two hazards impossibilizing almost all just hospitality or charity as regards God or the « tout autre », how then can one envisage a non-calculated relation toward this God (God of Being, God without being, possible, impossible, nonexistent, dead, indifferent God, etc.) or toward the « tout autre »? How can one not be of

⁵⁷ In short, the philosophical game itself is always susceptible to be marked by greediness, the desire to possess, to master – i.e. by “the ‘desire of the proper’ operating within a thematics of identity and possession.” (Richard Kearney, *ibid.*, p. 71). And yet it is not obvious that philosophy will ever be able to transcend this “desire to have, to know, to see (*avoir, savoir, voir*)” (Idem.).

⁵⁸ See footnote n°19

⁵⁹ Marcel Proust, *Correspondance* (tome XII), Plon, Paris, 1984, p. 280

⁶⁰ Léon Bloy, *Un Brelan d’excommuniés* (1889), in *Belluaires et porchers* (1905); *Œuvres* (tome II), Mercure de France, Paris, 1964, p.

God or the « tout autre » the false donor, the inevitable “counterfeiter”? These questions re-expose, quite obviously, that of the criteriology of gift, to which Derrida gives the following answer:

The gift, if there is any, will always be *without* border. [...] A gift that does not run over its borders, a gift that would let itself be contained in determination and limited by the indivisibility of an identifiable *trait* would not be a gift. As soon as it delimits itself, a gift is prey to calculation and measure. The gift, if there is any,⁶¹ should overrun the border, to be sure, toward the measureless and the excessive; but it should also suspend its relation to the border and even its transgressive relation to the separable line or *trait*⁶² of a border. [...] Wherever there is [...] rationality of the border [...], there is no gift or even a possible problematic of the gift.⁶³

How does “consciousness in Evil” cope with these criteriological problems? It seems to us that it is above all a guideline, but not in the sense of a rational separable line, for it is only an “unfounded foundation” (« un “*fondement sans fondement*” »), to repeat Sartre’s expression about freedom. It is not a regulative idea: no norm, no criterion relative to the *eschaton* could be deduced from it. From this point of view, it is void of meaning. However, what is the pertinence of this idea? And then, how can this unfounded foundation of “consciousness in Evil”, irrational in a way, be stated without being absolutist?

Our answer is that “consciousness in Evil” does not assert anything dogmatically (which distinguishes it, we will see how, from the Christian dogma of the original sin, without nevertheless contradicting it radically). It is actually nothing else than a *question* (of moral value, indeed), i.e. always an interrogation, and never only a judgment, a position or an affirmation. Baudelaire himself notices that this question may be *condemned* (such is the irony that confirms it) to remain open to itself forever, torn apart as a sign of its pain, never able to be solved or saved by a single answer or a redeeming sentence: “To abandon oneself to Satan, what is it?” (« *Se livrer à Satan, qu’est-ce que c’est ?*⁶⁴ ») In the wound always left gaping by this interrogation swarms the eternal legion⁶⁵ of the “Spleen”... Because thus it

⁶¹ The repetition of “if there is any” recalls inevitably Saint Paul’s insistent suspicion: “There is none, no, not one”... (See footnote n°19)

⁶² About the transposition of this problem of the separable line into the debate over hospitality and, in particular, the desertification or the desertion of God, see Derrida’s intervention in Collective work, *ibid.*, p. 305: “There is no line. As soon as you look for a line, a clear line between an authentic God and a false God or false prophet, as soon as you look for this – and you cannot help looking for this – but as soon as you rely on this desire, or as soon as you think you have gotten your criterion, that is the end of faith. You can be sure that God has left.” (« *Il n’y a point de ligne. Dès que vous cherchez une ligne, une ligne nette entre Dieu authentique et faux Dieu ou faux prophète, dès que vous cherchez cela – et vous ne pouvez vous empêcher de chercher cela –, mais dès que vous vous fiez à ce désir, ou dès que vous pensez avoir trouvé votre critère, c’est la fin de la foi. Vous pouvez être sûrs que Dieu n’est plus là.* »)

⁶³ Jacques Derrida, *ibid.*, p. 91

⁶⁴ Charles Baudelaire, *ibid.*, « Fusées », XIV, fragment n°21, p. 663

⁶⁵ We are choosing this term intentionally: see Marc 5, v.9 (“And [Jesus] asked him, What is thy name? And he answered, saying, My name is Legion: for we are many.”)

eschews the extreme of dogmatic absolutism, “consciousness in Evil” is therefore faithful to the metaxological intention announced in our introduction; and, because it is nevertheless fundamentally inquisitorial (« *arraisonnable* »), forcing to doubt about the good, to scrutinize evil in all we say, do, judge, think, desire, etc., and, after all, to choose, this consciousness, thereby, also avoids relativism (which is *absence* of choice, *errancy* of choice), whereas “consciousness in Evil” is *force* of choice (though always questioning, vigilant, etc.).

But, one may ask, what are the fruits⁶⁶ of this “consciousness in Evil”? Will it guide us in any way in the question of God or the « tout autre »? What kind of a decidability can it favor (for the philosopher, the poet, the religious, as well as any man)? Some may say that we are dealing with a mere reaffirmation of the Christian dogma of the original sin, but even though, as already acknowledged, it actually does not contradict it totally, for even though it interacts with the question of peccability in a similar way, it clearly distinguishes itself from it. Far from being an *a priori* condemnation of all attempts of hospitality as regards God or the « tout autre » (a condemnation of the potential malignity of these attempts, as analysed thanks to Derrida in what we called the two hazards of charity), this consciousness does not consist in spotting evil everywhere (in the thrall of religious fundamentalism or an ill-fated psychosis), but in *questioning* systematically the good everywhere,⁶⁷ by a sustained effort of intelligence and sensitivity. It is true that it comes down to expose ourselves systematically to the encounter of Evil, but each time as by a misfortune giving way to affliction, which carries with it a vague sentiment of remorse or lassitude, or a contradictory sentiment, in other words an ardor, a desire of justice, “linked to an ever-returning bitterness, as if the result of privation or despair.”⁶⁸ Its proper mystery and a certain dynamic nostalgia are also

⁶⁶ As far as Baudelaire is concerned, he chose the “flowers” of Evil, not its fruits. He chose what one cannot consume or appropriate, but what is merely displayed, contemplated, exhaling and breathed. Is Evil only bearing *bad* fruits? Is there beauty, or even kindness, in the *Flowers of Evil* only?

⁶⁷ This reminds us of Critchley’s questions about Levinas (in *Very Little... Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*, Routledge, London, 1997, p. 80): “Is it not in the excessive experience of evil and horror that the ethical subject first assumes its shape? Does this not begin to explain why the royal road to ethical metaphysics must begin by making Levinas a master of the literature of horror? But if this is the case, why is radical otherness goodness? Why is alterity ethical? Why is it not rather evil or an-ethical or neutral?” (« *N’est-ce pas à travers l’épreuve excessive du mal et de l’horreur que le sujet éthique se forme en premier ? Et n’est-ce pas là une première explication du fait que la voie royale de la métaphysique éthique doit commencer par faire de Levinas un maître de la littérature d’horreur ? Mais si tel est bien le cas, pourquoi l’altérité radicale serait-elle bonté ? Et pourquoi l’altérité serait-elle éthique, plutôt que maléfique, a-éthique ou neutre ?* ») These questions meet the problematic raised at the beginning of our reflection, that is whether the question of God can be envisaged without taking the ways that discover Evil. In this paragraph, we hold that the question of God or alterity is essentially ethical: Critchley’s question asking “Why is alterity ethical? Why is it not rather evil or an-ethical or neutral?” (« *Pourquoi l’altérité serait-elle éthique, plutôt que maléfique, a-éthique ou neutre ?* ») is actually the ethical question par excellence, regardless its final answer. (As far as we are concerned, we want to show with Baudelaire that “consciousness in Evil” thoroughly realizes – though painfully and never absolutely – this inescapable ethicality, precisely because it remains *questioning*.)

⁶⁸ See Charles Baudelaire, *ibid.*, « Fusées », X, fragment n°16, p. 657

characteristics of “consciousness in Evil.” Encountering Evil in the avenues of this consciousness is the result of an uncertain tracking, where the tracked one has no Identikit; tracking Evil consists in *exposing* oneself to it much rather than *posing* it (dogmatically or criteriologically); it consists in trying to chase it almost gropingly... and then, encountering it, i.e., first, undergoing it, suffering it – and also, quite often, falling upon oneself only as this endless tracking goes by; finding oneself, as another,⁶⁹ at the source of Evil; finding oneself face to face, distressingly, with one’s own faults.

Hence, “consciousness in Evil” will never provide a “guide for the perplexed”⁷⁰: it will always remain questioning, in the tormenting mode of the *quaestio* in the Latin sense. But also – and above all, it will be the unconditional quest (or inquiry, according to the extended metaphor of the previous paragraph) of the good. What does “unconditional” mean here? A conditioned, “calculated”, “measured” quest, according to Derrida’s wording, would not be a quest, but a question always already solved by its conditions of possibility – i.e. a false question. So we have to do our best to discriminate the conditional and discriminating criteria (even though we cannot help looking for them, and even though it is impossible for us to abolish them), so that the question of the alterity would remain a true question. So we have to consent to “resist this resistance to [the] openness to a possible monstrosity and to [the] evil”⁷¹ of the « tout autre » [as well as to its possible kindness (« *bonté* ») or charity].

⁶⁹ Saint Paul, in Romans VII, v.19-24, certainly offers the most exemplary analysis of this paradoxical self-alterity (« *cette altérité paradoxale de soi à soi* ») in sin (paradoxical since I am actively guilty and consciously responsible for the evil that I really do not want): “For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do. Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?”

⁷⁰ Richard Kearney, *ibid.*, p. 77

⁷¹ See footnote n°34

“Consciousness in Evil” continuously rediscovers the grief of these contrary tensions always interplaying, God being doubled by Satan, and Satan by God,⁷² as in the “Litanies of Satan”⁷³:

Oh you, the wisest and the most beautiful of Angels,
God betrayed by fate and deprived of praises,

Oh Satan, take pity on my long misery!

Oh Prince of exile, you who were wronged
And who, defeated, always return stronger,

Oh Satan, take pity on my long misery!

You who know all, great king of subterranean things,
Familiar healer of human anguish,

Oh Satan, take pity on my long misery!

What the poet dangerously mixes up always runs the risk of provoking in the philosopher, whose rationalizing thought will always be in search of distinctions and criteria, an excessive reaction, willing at all costs to unravel the “confusions” of the poet. But, exaggerated to excess, especially on account of this reaction, the criteriological desire is at the same time likely to miss what the *mélanges* of the poet could have got right, although apparently confusing. Thus, too radical a separation between the concepts of good and evil, for instance, may lose sight of the numberless evils nestled in a too isolated conception of the good; on the contrary, there might be some good in not despising or not disparaging (« *discréditer* ») evil

⁷² This mutual pounding of good and evil, whose « *mixité* » (duplicity, diversity, complexity) is lucidly and implacably discerned but that no discernment will ever be able to extricate entirely, seems to produce the worst abjections and to distort all moral values. And yet, insofar as consciousness always experiences and gives to see this mysterious mixture, as in these Baudelairean litanies, one must admit both that this consciousness does not confuse good and evil and that it may also well be the only one able to produce the paragon of good that man is capable of: is not charity the love of the unfortunate because of his misfortune, and of the sinner suffering more or less consciously in (and from) his sin? So one must be quite careful in order to avoid the risk of blaspheming too promptly against the blasphemer. As Rilke writes it so admirably: “Perhaps all the dragons in our lives are princesses who are only waiting to see us act, just once, with beauty and courage. Perhaps everything that frightens us is, in its deepest essence, something helpless that wants our love.” [*Letters To A Young Poet* (Letter Eight, August 12, 1904)]. Doubtless there is some justice in condemning a Charles Manson, but perhaps we are also condemning a part of ourselves in condemning him (there, we disagree with J. Caputo’s allusion in *Collective work*, *ibid.*, p. 302). See also the passage in my *mémoire de maîtrise* about the figures of the “Parisian Prowler” (« *Le Rôdeur Parisien* » – the title Baudelaire had originally, and tellingly, chosen for the *Little Prose Poems*), the lycanthrope and the Wandering Jew – all three personifying the call for pity that comes from any experience (participation and / or contemplation) of damnation (*La Critique artistique, littéraire et musicale chez Baudelaire*, <http://www.guillaumedelaby.com/prose/ baudelaire.pdf>, p. 106).

⁷³ Charles Baudelaire, poem n°CXX of the *Flowers of Evil*

and in seeking in it the good of which it may not merely be the shadow, but also, herewith, the reflector...

So “consciousness in Evil” does not produce fruits. It simply shimmers between two blind spots, God and Satan, the « Idéal » and the « Spleen », giving to see the one and the other in the mutual aspiration which always makes the one fall into the other, in an infernal, infinite play. From it, we will never draw the winnings of any wager, according as we would have more or less well bidden: to bet, to probabilize, to possibilize, to dice is always to try to delude and, thereby, to elude ourselves (« *c’est toujours essayer de tromper et donc se tromper soi-même* »); it is to throw oneself into the hopeless hope to prevail, not to be defeated by the Other – or by the other of this Other which would be the nothingness.

Life, Baudelaire writes, has only one true charm; it is the charm of Playing. But if it is indifferent for us to win or to lose?

(« *La vie, écrit Baudelaire, n’a qu’un charme vrai; c’est le charme du Jeu. Mais s’il nous est indifférent de gagner ou de perdre ?*⁷⁴ »)

There is a ferocious and ravenous will – oh how agreeable and fathomable! – which urges full many a poor man to make any move rather than to bid on *nothing* – this living other half of death. Aiming at the good or aiming at evil, “Heaven or Hell, what matter?”⁷⁵ Because it is not fructuous, because it itself aborts the least escape it would try to accord to itself, because it is always forced to withdraw into itself, as if by rage, on account of its inability to *grasp* the « tout autre » in the hope to “find something *new*”⁷⁶, this “consciousness in Evil” precipitates itself toward its extreme limit – toward God, toward Satan –, mysterious doors of the Infinite with which it collides before taking out its frustration and its despair, its furious consolation, on its own expression – out of which Baudelaire made his *Flowers of Evil*.

“Consciousness in Evil” does not offer God as a reward, and the disappointed reader will likely see in this essay no more than a vain philosophization. At best we may have simply exposed that the question of Alterity (of God, of the « tout autre » or of nothingness) fatally made the problem of hospitality go beyond the exclusive frame of philosophy. Not by a leap into the undecidable or into faith, but in virtue of the abyss into which it plunges the entire being. The experience of Evil (undergone or caused, and almost always undergone because caused and caused because undergone) affects intelligence to the root, the philosophical art of distinction tearing apart the concepts in presence – good, evil, etc. – till they become

⁷⁴ Charles Baudelaire, *ibid.*, « Fusées », VI, fragment n°8, p. 654

⁷⁵ Charles Baudelaire, poem n°CXXVI of the *Flowers of Evil*, “The Voyage”

⁷⁶ *Idem.*, v. 144

incomprehensible.⁷⁷ The abuse of intellect, in this sense, equals the folly of religion. “The creation of one of both these supremacies engenders stupidity, hardness of heart and an immensity of pride and egoism.” (« *La création d’une de ces deux suprématies engendre la sottise, la dureté du cœur et une immensité d’orgueil et d’égoïsme*⁷⁸. ») This is why in the philosophical reasoning, as well as in the time when reflection slides simply into the stream of life, “consciousness in Evil” must nevertheless maintain this vigilance by which Evil – we may even say sin – seems to us not always already and dogmatically originated or original (according to the classical theological conception), but rather persistently (and responsibly) originating itself or, more exactly, able anytime to originate itself. Consequently, there is no indelibility of sin, but rather permanence of the tendency for sin,⁷⁹ so that, as there may be a microeschatology⁸⁰ (an openness of every instant toward the possible epiphany of God or the « tout autre »), there must be a counterbalancing “microhamartiology”⁸¹ (a consciousness in every instant of the possibility to commit Evil).

“Consciousness in Evil” is never solely a moral question that we must inflict upon ourselves in order to criticize ourselves constantly and watch the quality of our hospitality, our charity as regards the « tout autre », God, the Other, Satan or even nothingness.⁸² It is also, for Baudelaire, the “charm of Playing”, i.e. the disinterestedness about the stake of life. And yet this disinterestedness is not uninterested at all, it is even, doubtless, the supreme interest – that which, “indifferent to win or to lose” (not eager to win, not eager to lose), indifferent to harvest *fruits* (and thus all the more fructuous), only wants to be a fair player for itself – “a saint for oneself” (« *un saint pour soi-même*⁸³ ») –, trying to make the possibility of the impossible⁸⁴ flourish across and beyond ourselves.

⁷⁷ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, VI, 420 [442]: “It is dangerous to make man see too clearly his equality with the beasts without showing him his greatness. It is also dangerous to make him see his greatness too clearly, apart from his vileness. It is still more dangerous to leave him in ignorance of both. But it is very advantageous to show him both. If he exalt himself, I humble him; if he humble himself, I exalt him; and I always contradict him, till he understands that he is **an incomprehensible monster**.”

⁷⁸ Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes* (tome II), “The Pagan School”, p. 49

⁷⁹ In me, there is not the sin of Adam, but only the peccability of Adam, i.e. the possibility of sin, not the original stain of his fall.

⁸⁰ See Collective work, *ibid.*, “Epiphanies of the Everyday: Toward a Micro-Eschatology” (R. Kearney), pp. 3-20

⁸¹ We coin this word according to the Greek *hamartia* (the “fault,” the “sin”).

⁸² « Ô Mort, vieux capitaine »... (Charles Baudelaire, poem n°CXXVI of the *Flowers of Evil*, v. 137) Yes, there is also a hospitality, a fraternal loyalty necessary as regards our proper annihilation. For, “Even if God did not exist, religion would still be Holy and *Divine*.” (« *Quand même Dieu n’existerait pas, la Religion serait encore Sainte et Divine* ») [Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes* (tome I), « Fusées », I, fragment n°1, p. 649], and even more, maybe, for Holiness, Kindness would have been without stake, expecting *Nothing* – for themselves exclusively (and, thereby, also by pure generosity toward the others).

⁸³ Charles Baudelaire, *ibid.*, « Mon Cœur mis à nu », XXIV, fragment n°42, p. 691: such is also, no doubt, the highest vow of the poet, the artist, the “great man” (« *grand homme* »): being sublime without self-interest, simply for the sake of this part of oneself that loves, reflects and sustains the most profound intimacy (abyss of sufferings, hopes, comforts, desperations ...) of *all* other fellow humans.

⁸⁴ “To make the impossible that bit more possible.” (Richard Kearney, *ibid.*, p. 111) Read also Derrida about this theme of the possible-impossible, characteristic of *gift*, *pardon* and *abandonment*. For the Christians, the “cry” of Christ on the cross (Matthew 27, v. 50) is

undoubtedly the most disheartening expression of this impossible gift, this abandonment to which the abandoned one gives oneself up: it is also the most profound, the most primordial form of prayer. (The prayer, like poetry, does not wager. It realizes “consciousness in Evil” to the most disheartening degree, in a supremely generous, despaired – and divine – gesture, – even if Heaven is empty or solely filled with the cry of expiring grief –, which was for us at the core of this essay.)

ANNEX

28. La Fausse Monnaie

Comme nous nous éloignons du bureau de tabac, mon ami fit un soigneux triage de sa monnaie; dans la poche gauche de son gilet il glissa de petites pièces d'or; dans la droite, de petites pièces d'argent; dans la poche gauche de sa culotte, une masse de gros sols, et enfin, dans la droite, une pièce d'argent de deux francs qu'il avait particulièrement examinée.

« Singulière et minutieuse répartition ! » me dis-je en moi-même.

Nous fîmes la rencontre d'un pauvre qui nous tendit sa casquette en tremblant. -- Je ne connais rien de plus inquiétant que l'éloquence muette de ces yeux suppliants, qui contiennent à la fois, pour l'homme sensible qui sait y lire, tant d'humilité, tant de reproches. Il y trouve quelque chose approchant cette profondeur de sentiment compliqué, dans les yeux larmoyants des chiens qu'on fouette.

L'offrande de mon ami fut beaucoup plus considérable que la mienne, et je lui dis : « Vous avez raison; après le plaisir d'être étonné, il n'en est pas de plus grand que celui de causer une surprise. -- C'était la pièce fausse », me répondit-il tranquillement, comme pour se justifier de sa prodigalité.

Mais dans mon misérable cerveau, toujours occupé à chercher midi à quatorze heures (de quelle fatigante faculté la nature m'a fait cadeau !) entra soudainement cette idée qu'une pareille conduite, de la part de mon ami, n'était excusable que par le désir de créer un événement dans la vie de ce pauvre diable, peut-être même de connaître les conséquences diverses, funestes ou autres, que peut engendrer une pièce fausse dans la main d'un mendiant. Ne pouvait-elle pas se multiplier en pièces vraies ? ne pouvait-elle pas aussi le conduire en prison ? Un cabaretier, un boulanger, par exemple, allait peut-être le faire arrêter comme faux monnayeur ou comme propagateur de fausse monnaie. Tout aussi bien la pièce fausse serait peut-être, pour un pauvre petit spéculateur, le germe d'une richesse de quelques jours. Et ainsi ma fantaisie allait son train, prêtant des ailes à l'esprit de mon ami et tirant toutes les déductions possibles de toutes les hypothèses possibles.

Mais celui-ci rompit brusquement ma rêverie en reprenant mes propres paroles : « Oui, vous avez raison; il n'est pas de plaisir plus doux que de surprendre un homme en lui donnant plus qu'il n'espère. »

Je le regardai dans le blanc des yeux, et je fus épouvanté de voir que ses yeux brillaient d'une incontestable candeur. Je vis alors clairement qu'il avait voulu faire à la fois la charité et une bonne affaire; gagner quarante sols et le cœur de Dieu; emporter le paradis économiquement; enfin attraper gratis un brevet d'homme charitable. Je lui aurais presque pardonné le désir de la criminelle jouissance dont je le supposais tout à l'heure capable; j'aurais trouvé curieux, singulier, qu'il s'amusât à compromettre les pauvres; mais je ne lui pardonnerai jamais l'ineptie de son calcul. On n'est jamais excusable d'être méchant, mais il y a quelque mérite à savoir qu'on l'est; et le plus irréparable des vices est de faire le mal par bêtise.

28. Counterfeit Money

As we were walking away from a tobacconist's, my friend carefully sorted out his change: into his left vest pocket he slipped the small gold coins, into his right vest pocket the small silver coins; into the left pocket of his pants, a handful of large copper coins, and finally into his right pant's pocket, a two franc silver piece he had examined with particular attention.

"A singular and meticulous division!," I said to myself.

We encountered a poor man who tremblingly held out his hat to us. -- I know nothing more disquieting than the mute eloquence of those supplicating eyes, which contain at one and the same time so much humility and so many reproaches, at least for the sensitive man who knows how to read them. He finds something approaching these depths of complicated emotion in the tearful eyes of dogs being beaten.

My friend's offering was much larger than my own, and I said to him: "You are right: next to the pleasure of being astonished, there is none greater than causing surprise." "It was the counterfeit coin," he replied tranquilly, as if to justify his prodigality.

But into my miserable brain, always missing the obvious (what a tiresome faculty nature made me a gift of!), entered suddenly the idea that such conduct on the part of my friend was only excusable on the grounds of a desire to create an event in the life of that poor devil, perhaps even to learn the diverse consequences, whether deadly or otherwise, that a counterfeit coin might produce in the hands of a beggar. Might it not be converted into real coins? Might it not also lead him into prison? A publican or a baker might, for example, have him arrested as a counterfeiter or as a passer of counterfeit coins. But the counterfeit coin might also just as well serve as the seed for several day's wealth, in the hands of a poor, small-scale speculator. And so my fancy played itself out, lending wings to the spirit of my friend and drawing all possible deductions from all possible hypotheses.

But he brusquely broke my reverie by repeating my very words: "Yes, you are right: there is no pleasure sweeter than surprising a man by giving him more than he had hoped for."

I gazed into the whites of his eyes, and I was appalled to see that his eyes were shining with an incontestable candor. I then saw clearly that he had wanted to both perform a charitable act and make a good deal at the same time -- to gain forty sous and the heart of God; to get into paradise economically; finally, to earn for free the badge of a charitable man. I might almost have pardoned him for the desire for criminal enjoyment of which I had just recently supposed him capable. I would have found it curious and singular that he amused himself by compromising the poor, but I could never pardon him for the ineptness of this calculation. One is never excused for being evil, but there is some merit in knowing that one is -- and the most irreparable of vices is to do evil through stupidity.

