

## BAUDELAIRE'S "LE JET D'EAU": VERBAL-VISUAL INQUIRY AND THE ILLUSTRATED BOOK

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### Abstract

A single text illustrated by several artists presents a unique opportunity for image-text inquiry. This is indeed the case with the illustrators of Baudelaire's "Le jet d'eau" from his celebrated *Fleurs du mal*. As each illustrator renders the text into images that represent a unique "reading" of it, our understanding of the poetic gesture is frequently enriched by the graphic gesture. Novel critical points of view which may generate a substantial rethinking of the aesthetic contours of the textual entity thus come into focus. The traditional function of illustration as shedding light onto the word, or of actually extending its meaning to transcend habitual mimetic approaches, evolves with the advent of Modernity as modes of representation espouse fresh contours. "Le jet d'eau" has had a prolific career in the twentieth-century livre d'artiste. Offering a rich terrain of interpretative possibilities, this poem has enticed an array of artists to picture it often unexpected ways. Our point of departure will consider both poetic and graphic universes as écritures whose intersections propose uncommon thresholds beyond which are poised new ideas. This notion is central to our concerns. Similarly, the dynamics of IMAGinING ideas, the interfacing of verbal and visual planes, and the move from representation to abstraction are germane to this investigation. Thus, this discussion of how twentieth-century artists have represented this nineteenth-century text will at once re-frame and re-figure the intrinsic value of illustration as interpretation.

### Résumé

L'illustration d'un seul texte par plusieurs artistes présente une occasion remarquable d'étudier les rapports texte/image. C'est ce que nous offre l'étude des illustrateurs du poème de Baudelaire, « Le jet d'eau », extrait des *Fleurs du mal*. Chaque illustrateur apporte sa « lecture » particulière du poème, et notre compréhension de

l'œuvre s'en trouve modifiée. Des éléments critiques nouveaux nous apparaissent et nous conduisent à repenser les contours esthétiques du document. La fonction traditionnelle de l'illustration qui consiste à éclairer le texte, ou à en élargir la portée pour aller au-delà des approches mimétiques, a évolué avec l'avènement de la Modernité. « Le jet d'eau » a inspiré de nombreux livres d'artistes. En raison de ses multiples niveaux d'interprétation, le poème a suscité des illustrations très variées et parfois inattendues. Nous postulons que les univers poétique et graphique sont chacun des écritures à l'intersection desquelles de nouvelles idées peuvent prendre leur essor. C'est ce qui nous semble central. De même, la manière d'IMAGInER les idées, les ponts entre le visuel et le verbal, et le passage de la représentation à l'abstraction accompagnent notre étude. Ainsi, la façon dont les artistes du vingtième siècle ont représenté le poète du dix-neuvième siècle nous permet de re-cadrer et re-figurer la valeur intrinsèque de l'illustration comme représentation.

A single text illustrated by several artists presents a unique opportunity for verbal-visual inquiry. Such is the case for “Le Jet d’eau,” “The Fountain,” composed shortly before 1853 and included in the third edition of Charles Baudelaire’s iconic *Fleurs du mal*. The very visual nature of this poem has attracted an array of book artists. As each illustrator has transposed the text into images that represent a unique “reading” of it, our understanding of the verbal entity has been, in one way or another, affected by the graphic gesture. The traditional function of illustration as shedding light onto the word, or of actually extending its meaning to transcend habitual mimetic practices, has evolved with the advent of Modernity as modes of representation have often espoused fresh contours. Indeed, the time frame of the illustrators considered here spans eight decades, from 1916 to 1985, and thus coincides with the 20<sup>th</sup>-century’s break from customary modes of illustrating text, in general, and of picturing poetry, in particular, as both literary and artistic interpretation have shifted from representation to abstraction.<sup>13</sup>

“Le Jet d’eau” is fundamentally a descriptive text. Rich in its poetic contours, lush in its languid dialectics, it lends itself readily to re-inscription via graphic modes. The action is restrained, the timbre is subtle, the atmosphere is sensual, and the mood is quietly erotic. The poet describes the essential configurations of his lover in her “pose nonchalante” while, in an adjacent courtyard, a fountain plays into the night. The poem’s form, three stanzas separated by three refrains, and its subject immediately bring to mind Baudelaire’s prodigious “Invitation au Voyage.” In both, the female is the object of the poet’s gaze; she remains pictorially passive while he is verbally aggressive. The result of this “aggression” is, of course, the poem.

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<sup>13</sup> For further information on Baudelaire and illustration as they relate to image-text inquiry, please see HASKELL.

The narrator's object of desire is introduced to the reader by her "beaux yeux," her "beautiful eyes." With no little insistence, he entreats her to keep them closed in order to perpetuate the dream-like state that has been induced by "le plaisir," or "pleasure," presumably the result of their love making. Closed eyes, insists the narrator, will serve as a way of retaining nocturnal modes of dream while refusing diurnal lapses back into reality. The poet likens this preferred state to the fountain which possesses the ability to retain ecstasy:

Le jet d'eau qui jase  
Et qui ne se tait ni nuit ni jour,  
Entretient doucement l'extase  
Où ce soir m'a plongé l'amour.

The poet even assigns a language to the fountain as the verb "jaser," or gossip, is employed to indicate what emanates incessantly from the water's spray in order to assure retention of the text's ecstatic aura. Throughout the poem, the five senses are evoked in a series of images that constantly conjure up a melancholic symphony whose tonalities are echoed in the sobbing sonorities -- "sangloter" is the poet's verb choice -- of the playing fountain. Melancholy is, after all, the principle tenant of Baudelairian spleen. Thus, the unity of the poem is derived from the association of sensual pleasures with falling water, the latter echoing the former into an infinity, which encapsulates the pristine representation of the poem's "miroir de mon amour," "the mirror of my love."

Maggie Monier's illustration of "Le Jet d'eau" (fig. 1) contains the textual directives in a straightforward visual recounting of Baudelaire's



**Fig. 1:** Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du mal*, illustrations by Maggie Monier, pseud. for Madeleine Mounier, Paris: Librairie Nilsson, Collection Lotus, 1926.

poem. Published in 1926,<sup>14</sup> this watercolor, printed on tracing paper, sums up the mildly erotic content of the text. The horizontality of female figure is juxtaposed with the verticality of the fountain. Sumptuous interior and exterior scapes are separated only by a large, black curtain and a line of cushions, on which her body reposes. This theatricality conjures up an opulent stage set, which responds to the textual reverie and evokes an orientalist exoticism in all of its lavish splendor. Appropriately, the female's eyes are closed. The universe she inhabits is that proscribed by the narrator. However, Monier's image remains essentially static. Other than a slight tilt of the head in the direction of the fountain, this Art Deco odalisque remains fundamentally decorative. As such, she "decorates" the text but does little more

than please the eye of the beholder. In sum, this is representational illustration in the most traditional sense of the term. There is no attempt on the part of the artist to extend the meaning of the text onto the graphic plane or to transcend mimesis.



**Fig 2:** Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du mal*, illustrations by Émile Bernard, Paris: Ambrose Vollard, éditeur; l'Imprimerie Nationale, 1916. (First illustration.)

Along the same lines as Monier's illustration, Émile Bernard's 1916 wood engraving for "Le Jet d'eau"<sup>15</sup> (fig. 2) juxtaposes the woman with the fountain. However, Bernard presents a darker version of the same scene in which sensual tonalities suddenly become overtly sexual. In this more daring rendition, we see into the very soul of the reposing female figure who responds graphically to Baudelaire's textual indications:

Ainsi ton âme qu'incendie

L'éclair brûlant des voluptés

S'élance rapide et hardie.

More symbolically-charged in its appeal is Bernard's second illustration, an in-text image for "Le Jet d'eau" (fig. 3). Here, within a very small frame, the artist has limited his graphic gesture to an almost

<sup>14</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du mal*, illustrations by Maggie Monier, pseud. for Madeleine Mounier, Paris: Librairie Nilsson, Collection Lotus, 1926.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du mal*, illustrations by Émile Bernard, Paris: Ambrose Vollard, éditeur; l'Imprimerie Nationale, 1916.

minimalist image. The two essential elements – the woman and the fountain – reign supreme in this illustration. Again, the eyes of the beloved are closed, but as a suggestion of her dream-like state, she appears to be floating slightly above the horizon line of the image. To accentuate the link between woman and water, the reader-viewer is obliged to gaze through the fountain to see her. Cleverly, Bernard has superimposed the two in order to demonstrate the inextricable link that binds them

together in Baudelaire's text. Left to the viewer's imagination is the rest of the decor in this image. What interests the artist is the relationship between the poem's major players as they are synthesized into a single entity of desire, his sole focus. In this way, Bernard's imagery extrapolates upon the text and provides a way of approaching it with added insight.



**Fig. 3:** Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du mal*, illustrations by Émile Bernard, Paris: Ambrose Vollard, éditeur; l'Imprimerie Nationale, 1916. (Second illustration.)

If Bernard's two illustrations for "Le Jet d'eau" proposed a transition from the sensual to the sexual, the image created by Jacob Epstein in 1940<sup>16</sup> rapidly evolves into explicit eroticism (fig. 4). With the addition of the narrator to the graphic plane, the woman-fountain duo assimilates into a trio. At the base of the fountain, the two lovers, facing one another, are pictured rising from the fountain's bowl. Then suddenly, their bodies are projected into the air by the force of the gushing water, presented here in two distinct arcs that effectively echo the duality of the lovers. Now, having been thrown aloft in their larger forms, one is poised directly above the other in a sort of symphonic suspension. With their closed eyes, both take part in the poem's dreamscape, which has seamlessly shifted from exotic to ecstatic. In sum, the poet's indication has been faithfully

<sup>16</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du mal*, illustrations by Jacob Epstein, London: The Fanfare Press, 1940.



interpreted by the artist's rendering, which responds to the narrator's notion of prolonging the ecstasy: "Entretient doucement l'extase." Epstein extrapolates upon the text, pushing it beyond its borders to provide the reader-viewer with what just might be the narrator's ultimate aspiration.

Not all illustrators add to a given text. Pausing for a moment to consider an example of such a case can help us understand that illumination of textual essence is not necessarily achieved by all artists. A case in point is Édouard Goerg's 1944 lithographic illustration for "Le Jeu d'eau"<sup>17</sup> (fig. 5). In the first two-page spread of the three-page ensemble, the female figure is portrayed in a vertical position. At the uppermost part of the image, we can just make out the top of the fountain, which resembles a few palm fronds emanating from her head. This doubling up of both woman and fountain on the vertical plane, along with the wide-open eyes of the woman, does little to enhance either the dreamscape or the text. Unlike the classically draped female in Monier's illustration or the nude figures in the other images treated until now, Goerg's woman, dressed as she is in a provocative gown, suggests vulgarity. The female in Baudelaire's text may indeed be sensual, sexual or even erotic, but vulgarity has no place in his elegy of her beauty. Facing the woman on the opposite margin is Goerg's second rendition of the fountain. Like the first, it lacks grace. In truth, both the woman and the fountain are rather clumsy graphic rendering, ill-suited to portray the grace and refinement expressed so eloquently in the text.



**Fig. 4:** Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du mal*, illustrations by Jacob Epstein, London : The Fanfare Press, 1940.

<sup>17</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du mal*, illustrations by Édouard Goerg, Paris, Marcel Sautier, 1952.

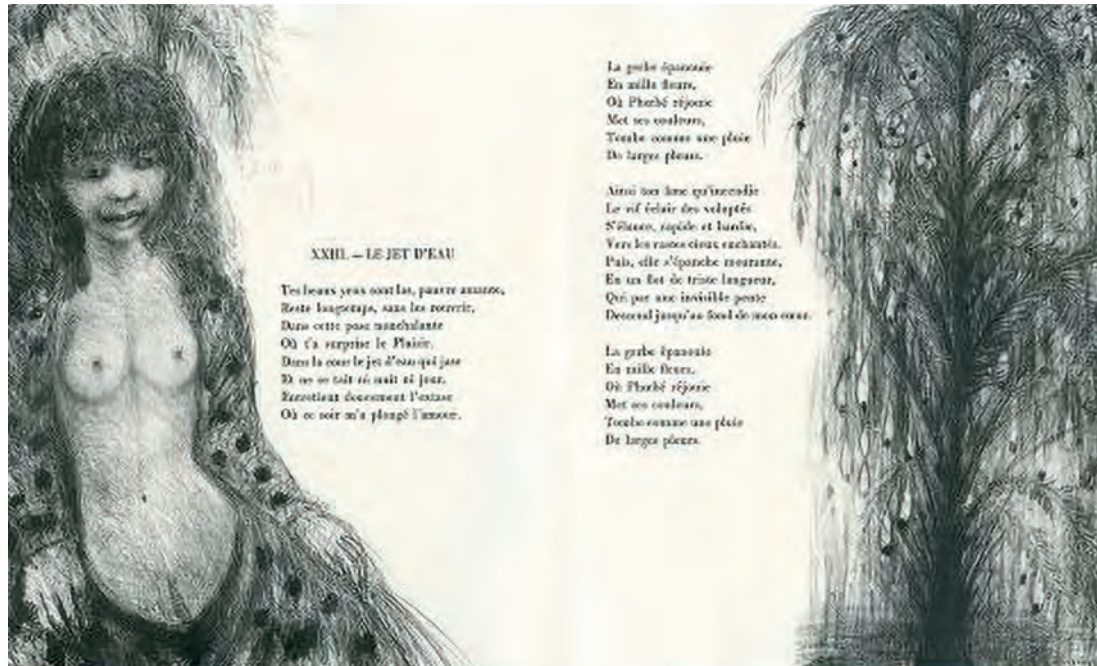


Fig. 5: Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du mal*, illustrations by Édouard Goerg, Paris, Marcel Sautier, 1952. (First two of three- page spread.)

With the turning of the page, we have a second illustration of the female entity, now appearing – for no reason at all -- almost virginal in relation to her first portrayal (fig. 6). How this represents the text in any way, shape or form is unfathomable. Goerg's illustration seems almost at odds with Baudelaire's poem. Instead of shedding light upon the text, this image frankly detracts from it, demonstrating that an illustration does not always add force to or even sustain a verbal-visual ensemble.

Goerg singled out the fountain on the second page of his three-page spread. Roger Bezombes, in his 1985 collage illustration for "Le Jet d'eau,"<sup>18</sup> choses to focus entirely upon it (fig. 7). The

<sup>18</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du mal*, illustrations by Roger Bezombes, Paris: Les Bibliophiles de l'Est, 1985.

accordion-format of the book opens to a three-page spread. At its center, with text flanking it on both sides, a single bouquet dominates the visual plane. From the dour blacks of Goerg's graphism, Bezombe's colorific configuration explodes onto the page against a bright orange backdrop. A few petals are featured here, but the bouquet is principally composed of antique doll heads whose glass eyes stare out, lending a quazi-Surrealistic tone to the image. A pair of cat heads join in the collage to accentuate the feline qualities associated with the feminine idol. But clearly, female and fountain are combined in what is literally a *grebe de fleurs*, rather than the anticipated *grebe d'eau* from the poem's refrain. In doing so, the artist skillfully insinuates that *Les Fleurs du mal*, are at the forefront of the author's intensions.

A closer look at the illustration may help clarify this idea. At first, nothing here seems to address the melancholic tone of the text. And yet, upon further inspection, the stem of the flower appears to be that of a thistle. Furthermore, the doll heads, intermingled as they are with thorns, are set against a black background. Is this the artist's subtle indication that the ecstatic interlude, so aptly captured in the text, cannot be maintained ("entretenir" is Baudelaire's verb choice) past the poetic universe in which it is situated? Is this also a reminder that all flowers eventually wither and die? And, finally, is this why "La grebe épanouie / En mille fleurs" of the refrain eventually falls into the base of the fountain in "larges pleurs" or large tears? Bezombes choses to picture a single element from Baudelaire's text, but his articulation of it proposes a glass through which the entire poetic gesture comes into focus. In doing so, the artist moves beyond mimesis. He brings to the text a visual scape that "reads" it in new ways and thus offers far more than rote reproduction of textual information. Rather than resigning itself to a secondary role of sedentary slavery to the poem, Bezombes' pictorial



**Fig. 6:** Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du mal*, illustrations by Édouard Goerg, Paris, Marcel Sautier, 1952. Third illustration of three-page spread.)





Fig. 7: Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du mal*, illustrations by Roger Bezombes, Paris: Les Bibliophiles de l'Est, 1985.

frame extends the textual meaning and allows the reader to muse about the infinite possibilities of the verbal-visual intersections presented here.

Bezombes is the only illustrator of "Le Jet d'eau" to extend his artistic influence directly back onto the Baudelairean text. The refrain's "mille fleurs" is printed in red, and its "couleurs" appears in blue. Such typographical adjustments are rare. In Bezombes case, however, they serve as a textual prefiguration of the graphic gesture. After all, his focus is entirely devoted to the floral entity and his treatment of it is fervently set on the use of color to distinguish his rendition of the bouquet. In sum, the introduction of color onto the typographical plane is yet another way in which the artist moves beyond the traditional boundaries of illustration.

The final artist for our consideration is André Domin whose pochoir illustration for "Le Jet d'eau"<sup>19</sup> appeared in 1926 (fig. 8). This inquiry opened with Maggie Monier's image which was

<sup>19</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du mal*, illustrations by André Domin, Paris: Editions René Kieffer, 1920.

clearly rooted in the Art Deco aesthetic. Such is the case with Domin's. However, as we shall see, the two artists differ vastly in their ways of portraying the poem. Whereas Monier was set on transcribing all of the textual information into a single frame, in which description was the sole goal, Domin seeks to capture the contours of the poem's essence rather than its precise elements. In this way, his interpretation more skillfully articulates the Symbolist tonalities of Baudelaire's text than Monier's replication of the poem's specifics. Rather than simply imaging the text, Domin imagines it.

An azurine backdrop reminiscent of *A Thousand and One Nights* serves as Domin's setting. A stylized fountain gracefully emerges from the center bottom, ascends to the center top, then descends back to its base. Pochoired in gold, the fountain is the epitome of elegance as it reigns at the center of the image. Importantly, we do not see the base of the fountain, nor do we see the top. Both extend past the upper and lower frames of the image. In doing so, the fountain inhabits a space larger than the illustration *per se*, just as it does in the text by virtue of its repeated refrains. The female body appears as a vision to the right. Again, with neither of her feet attached to the ground, she appears to float in the air much in the same way that the water spray gently rises and descends. The two share the poem's fluidity; both inhabit the same dreamscape.

In this illustration, the female presence is felt through a series of simple strokes outlining her form. They are more easily visible in the initial version of the poem prior to the addition of the pochoir



**Fig. 8:** Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du mal*, illustrations by André Domin, Paris: Editions René Kieffer, 1920.

coloring. With eyes closed and her head turned down toward the fountain's source, suggestion rather than precision is achieved. As with Matisse's cut-outs, the viewer is given the opportunity to imagine the precise elements of her beauty. Once the color is added to the illustration, it takes on a whole other dimension in which the nocturnal eclipses the diurnal and the oneiric triumphs. The contours of the demure stance of the female presence suffice for us to fill in the blanks as we share the narrator's space in which suggestion allows the imagination to flourish in much the same way that the poem's "grebe" springs forth from the refrain into a floral entity. It is interesting to note that what made "Le Jet d'eau" so popular was not its appearance in the third edition of *Les Fleurs du mal*, but rather its transcription into tonal poems by Debussy and a host of other composers. More than in any other graphic illustration of the poem, Domin's azur dreamatorium, highlighted in gold, seems to possess a subtle musicality in its eloquent and refined harmonies that accentuate Baudelaire's poetic intentionality. In doing so, the text is transposed onto a whole new plane of "luxe, calme et volupté," where suggestion and even abstraction extend its meaning beyond mere representation.

In conclusion, these six artists have each created a sort of graphic "écriture" whose goal has been to present, in one way or another, a visual snapshot of Baudelaire's poem. As we have seen, their creations define a vast array of ways in which texts can be pictured, from the purely representational or figurative to the insinuated and the abstract. If the function of book illustration has routinely been to retell, recast or replicate information provided by the author, artists such as Bernard, Epstein and Domin seek, in a Modernist mode, to extend the textual plane into the graphic frame, bringing new interpretive perspectives to the written word. These novel terrains of the illustrative function remind us of the potential riches of verbal-visual inquiry as it relates to the illustrated book. They also bring to mind the often profound and always intriguing implications of picturing ideas. In sum, this discussion of how twentieth-century artists have represented this nineteenth-century text once again re-frames and re-figures the intrinsic value of illustration as interpretation.

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