

Boris Kornev

Psyche's dance

Novel

York Publishing Services
2015

Kornev B. Psiche's dance.
ISBN

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Instead of Introduction

The school years in the first “French” school in Leningrad were dragging along. The form tutors were changing, some students were leaving, and some new students were arriving. Someone could not adjust to the foreign language, someone would move home and change the school. Most students lived nearby, in communal flats or houses built in the thirties of the 19th century by a huge factory, or in two-storey blocks with wooden stairs built by German prisoners straight after the war. Parents didn’t want their children to start some “French” school. They thought they would be sent abroad after it, to the hot Africa, Algeria or even worse – to France, straight to NATO.

By Year 7 we were proud of our school. Many of us were already fluent at French, we could use complicated Conditional sentences and Subjunctive mood. We were embarrassed to do it properly, with the right pronunciation, though. But if we dared to do it, we sounded beautiful, like the new French history and literature teacher. Everyone enjoyed his French speech, which sounded quite strange in our school. Even our Maths teacher was thrilled to hear it, never mind our girls. They all had a crush on the young teacher.

The new teacher used to tell us a lot about Paris where he had lived with his parents. He studied in Sorbonne. When his family came back to Russia, he worked in “Intourist”, then at school. At his lessons he would hand out small bright French pocket books “Le livre de poch”. Those were different authors, some of them famous, some

not. I remember one of them with a picture of the hanged on the cover and another one with a weird female profile – “Villon’s Poetry” and “The Flowers of Evil” by Baudelaire. 5

Once the teacher brought a huge map of Paris into the classroom. Similar to what you can find in Google today, you could see streets, architectural monuments and even houses. Every student was allocated a specific part of the map and we were supposed to learn everything by heart. Who and when built what, what was there now and how to get there. For instance, how to get from Place de la Bastille to the Louvre and then to the Triumphal Arch. But you had to avoid rue de Rivoli or the Champs Elysées! That was much more difficult! Or you had to get from the Vendome Column to the Gare d’Austerlitz. What column was erected in Place de la Concorde and in whose honour? There was a bridge nearby named the same as the square but on a different occasion... I got the Latin Quarter, or to be exact, the Fifth and Sixth Districts of Paris, everything that was on the left bank of the river Seine, opposite Cité, from the New Bridge to the Petit Pont, from Grand Augustin Quay along the most ancient street of Saint-Jacques, crossing Boulevard Saint-Germain and Rue de Ecoles, then the Sorbonne, the Lycée of Louis-le-Grand XIV... In the end there was the Jardin du Luxembourg. Even now I can’t help seeing that map with the streets, buildings, churches, institutions in my mind...

Reading the classics to us, the teacher used to say, “I know, you will try to find the original and translation to make your work easier. Don’t even try. There is no translation of Villon! To be honest, it’s time you start thinking and feeling in French. Listen to me...” In the classroom where we usually heard the female voices of the teachers, Villon’s poetry sounded soft in his gentle baritone. When he was reading, the teacher was transformed. His look was telling us, “Everything what is said about the poetry in text-books is just words. The poetry itself is this! You ought to be able to hear this!”

Every day lessons in French vocabulary and grammar were a torture! The same routine for seven years! Those Imperative, Conditional, Subjunctive Moods, nineteen tenses, five of them past tenses! In his lessons we enjoyed the beautiful French literature. Villon’s “Ballade for the Competition at Blois”, Cid’s monologue by Corneille, Appollinaire’s “Under the bridge of Mirabeau the Seine flows quiet-

- 6 ly..." Later on we tried to translate ourselves and asked who was better. We looked for the erotic scenes in "Splendeurs et Miseres des Courtisanes" by Balzac, "Bel Ami" by Maupassant, "Madame Bovary" by Flaubert, we enjoyed the six poems by Charles Baudelaire forbidden by the French Court. Now it was embarrassing to say something in French with the wrong pronunciation. We even wrote notes to the girls in French, with flourishes, like Dumas'.

When we listened to Villon's original "Ballade of Ladies of Former Times" or "Ballade for the Competition at Blois", the author would appear as alive in front of us, in the image of a new teacher, in the same faded blue jeans and baggy jumper... He had been an orphan, a student at 12 years old, a bachelor of arts at seventeen, then a bandit, a debauchee, a perpetual scholar, sliding along his life and successfully missing his convictions... Waiting for yet another execution, the 30-year old François, being an easy joker, left everything he had to his friends: his empty pockets, favourite pubs, dirty streets and doss-houses.

The teacher was right when he advised us not to look for François Villon's translations. Those, who really translated his poems, had either died or were in prison and their works had not been published or the published ones had been withdrawn. Nikolai Gumilyov was shot down in 1918. Single reprints of his translations were published in 1913 and even in the Soviet times, in 1938, signed by Osip Mandelstam, who was arrested shortly afterwards. In 1916 there were two loose translations by Vladimir Zhabotinsky. At the same time Ilya Erinburg also turned to Villon. Later on, together with Felix Mendelson, he also turned to his ballades, but that happened half a century later. Anthology "French poetry in Soviet translations" by Efim Etkind in 1964 was stopped early as page-proofs. Soon he was ordered out of the country. Living in Brazil, Valery Pereleshin couldn't help turning to Villon's poems and in 1973 he generously translated two of them. Sergey Petrov translated one in the nineties and Alexey Parin did three. Yury Kozhevnikov published his translations of many works of Villon. Later there would be Yury Korneev and his miniature book of all Villon's works including his ballades in thief jargon.

As for us, we didn't get to try any literary translations. In spite of our school being humanitarian, in the upper school we had to work

more on technical translations and our philological aspirations began to fade away. But our love towards French and literature didn't die. The teacher was great! He helped us to get out of the grammar routine. With his help, Villon got stuck in our memory and would remind of himself with his unforgettable poetry melody, his wise and exact words of life and death. He also reminded us of our favourite French literature teacher. 7

It has been nearly half a century since we finished school. Many things have changed in the world. We have changed ourselves. I often think of the latest decades and Villon's words of "the last year snow" sound as a refrain. They represent very accurately today's contradictory attitude to the tragic events in Russia in the 1990-s. In some ways they are remarkably in tune with the times of Charles IV, Louis XI and François Villon, who I would name a witness and a story-writer of that part of the epoch.

"He was born in 1431, in the year when the British burned Joan of Arc, he died after 1463 but before 1491..." Dreadful and strange lines! I felt like studying, figuring out, finding something to extend his biography, having caught a random fact. At first I was thinking of a fantasy and sending him to America. But that had been around forty years before it... Maybe, to England? But everyone was sick of it – they had been fighting for a hundred years! Enough! They had their own war there, anyway – between the White and the Red Roses. To Russia? The sixties of the XV century? There was Ivan III, strengthening of the autocracy and the unification of the country around Moscow. Sounds good! The same things were happening in France at the moment...

All of a sudden I thought about what Louis XI wanted... Surely he was thinking of something... To connect the different branches of the dynasty, the king wanted to marry his daughter Anna to Pierre de Beaujeu, the youngest son of his uncle Charles I of Bourbon. But he had already been engaged to Mary of Orleans, the daughter of another uncle – Charles I of Orleans. They would have to break the engagement. But how? Somehow I immediately remembered the harsh relationship of Louis and his first wife Margaret of Scotland, and the figure of the organizer of their engagement – a famous poet of the time, Alain Chartier. He was skinny, with straight long hair. So much like Villon!

8 So what about François Villon? Both Charles of Orleans and Jean, the son of Charles of Bourbon, knew and appreciated him as a poet. Even one of Louis XI's mistresses, Catherine de Vossel, was familiar with François Montcorbier, nicknamed Villon, she even hired men to kill the poor admirer and annoying poet and scholar. Surely all of them told the king something about the poor unlucky poet. And there was something else. Without bothering to learn the classics for their citation, Villon perfectly enjoyed the creativity of the very Chartier, and without further ado, he often borrowed large chunks of his poems.

It all fits! There is a question, though. So where did François Villon go after his expulsion from Paris on the 8th of January 1463? Did he go to Poitiers, where François Rabelais seemed to have traced him a hundred years later? Or to Bourbon, where once Villon's relatives lived? It is not far from Poitiers, actually!

He had three days to leave Paris and get far away. That was the only thing that was achieved on January 5, by Maître François de Montcorbier sentenced to death on the ground that he was found indirectly involved in one nasty case. So on the 8th of January, in the very beginning of the year which the famous French notary Jean de Rua tells us that it "was not marked by any one notable event", Villon disappeared from the History for ever...

* * *

The story "Psyche's Dance" is about two French poets, François Villon and Charles Baudelaire, who were the founders, or rather, the harbingers of the Renaissance and Symbolism in the French literature. But this book is not about their works. You will not find any wise words about "the strict rhythm of the verse", "prosody mechanism and structure of the stance", "special architectonic" ... A great number of wonderful works are about that. The poetry of Baudelaire has been written about by his fellow countrymen Sartre and Gauthier and our Mandelstam and Kozhevnikov have written about Villon. In this book the reader will meet some thoughts and feelings of the two poets of different epochs who found themselves in a spiritual crisis. Manner of life, internal contradictions, psychological complexes and painful efforts to overcome them – all this is interesting in itself, and is also important because it undoubtedly influenced the work of the two great artists.

Events, facts, specific thoughts and emotions, the characters and their individual phrases have been taken from the works of poets, their letters, memoirs of contemporaries and... court records preserved from the XV to XIX centuries. The narration is in first person. This person is Charles Baudelaire. 9

Why is it Baudelaire? The answer is, "I don't know!" Somehow it all formed a logical chain. This poet has an undoubted privilege – he lived after Villon, he knew and loved his oeuvre. But the main thing is why is it them?

Both Baudelaire and Villon as personalities are very complicated. They were both orphans, they studied in Paris, they were imbued with the spirit of student freedom, filling the Latin Quarter at all times. They surely had different fates, but hard at the same time. Dancing with each of them, Psyche* approaches them with a little smile or moves away from them with a scowl, giving some space for drama, tragedy or even death.

They both belong to the people who feel like floating without thinking about the goal. Of course, there is a goal! But you don't have to reach it! It is enough to have a goal. For those people every day is a discovery and the happiest in their life! How exactly Mandelstam said about the fate of Villon, "...it seems to be waiting to be fertilized with a chance whether it's evil or good..."

It is interesting that you wouldn't find any descriptions of the nature, moon, sunset, wind blowing in their poems... Perhaps this is a manifestation of fear of the unpredictable and untamed life. In its amorphousness and chance they felt the similarity with them and their attitude to their surroundings, and therefore they did not allow themselves to aggravate the chaos and uncertainty, which had long drawn-out them in its whirlpool. That caused Baudelaire's shocking love for all pretentious and invented by himself. Hence the masks, in which every now and then Villon dressed up! Masks of a pimp, a thug, a student in love... He wrote in first person. Many people were outraged, believing that the author really was the person in his poems. But it was only a method, a better way to show what his character saw and felt, and it was also a chance to hide himself.

* In ancient Greek mythology – the personification of the soul, presented in the form of a butterfly or a girl with butterfly wings.

- 10 Especially because they had not known themselves. They did try but they couldn't.

Sometimes it happens that two people in a spiritual crisis go through their life towards each other, without knowing it. They meet. There is a similarity of fate, similarity of characters that removes the pressure of life's contradictions... Gradually there is a wonderful sense of trust. The soul is awakened, freed from the bonds of affection... Their mind is gradually, with anguish, beginning to dampen depression, realizing its one-sidedness. Quite another feeling of festering opposites comes to the surface. It is already different from the division into black and white... And there comes healing. At least you want it to come.

* * *

Talking of these poets, one is struck by how similar our time is to the epochs which they lived in! In our minds the events seem to repeat, and then to fly from the Middle Ages to the Second Republic, and then to modern Europe. Everywhere there were coups, revolutions and a long and, at times, vain expectation of change for the better.

Since the late XIV century until the sixties of the XV century France had been, if you can say so, the period, "of five Charleses and a Louis", who were the representatives of the junior branch of the Capetian dynasty from the family of Valois (Angouleme, Orleans and Burgundy) from the family of the Bourbons. It was during the reign of minor King Charles VI, of Angouleme, the eldest of the family line of Valois, that the era of the undivided rampant personal ambition principles of blood started. In 1420 a nephew of King Philip III the Good of Burgundy, wanting to expand his possessions and become governor in all the defeated France, with the wife of Charles VI the Mad conspired with the British who were of opponents France in the Hundred Years' War. His son Charles the Victorious, the last of the line of Burgundy, went a step further. Dreaming of the imperial crown, he sought to become relatives with the Habsburg dynasty – the king of Germany and Holy Roman Emperor Frederick IV. A natural result of 42 years of the reign of Charles VI, first a young king, then sluggish and not interested in public affairs, and really "Mad", was the collapse of France as a unified state.

But then there was Joan of Arc. In 1429, having freed Orleans and pushed away the British troops, she brought to Reims a new

king of France Charles VII, the only son of Charles VI. In this small town just to the east of Paris, all the French kings were traditionally crowned. Only this time it was totally in violation of the treaty with Great Britain, signed in 1420 by Isabella of Bavaria, the mother of Charles VII. At that time, Paris belonged to the British, and the accession to the throne of France of the son of Charles VI was not legitimized by everyone in Europe. 11

The fourth Charles was the nephew of the first one from the first line of the younger Orleans family of Valois, Duke Charles I of Orleans. He was a knight! But as early as in 1415 at the Battle of Agincourt, he was captured by the British, and stayed in captivity for twenty-five years. Then something tricky was arranged. The Burgundies bought him. Apparently, they sensed who was winning the war.

Another Capetian family was Bourbons. At the time their duke was also Charles – Charles I of Bourbon. His father was captured by the British in 1415, the same as Charles of Orleans, and died in captivity in 1434. The elder son of Charles I of Bourbon was called Jean. Unlike his grandfather and uncle Charles of Orleans, the knight was lucky. Both Charles of Orleans and elder son of Charles of Bourbon were fond of poetry and knew Villon. Villon won the poetry tournament and when Jean became a duke, he gave him some money. Not a lot but the fact is important.

In 1461 Charles VII died and after so many years of waiting, his son Louis XI became king. The Hundred years' war had just finished, everywhere there was confusion and devastation, street fights and clashes with authorities... The new king was to finally banish the English, to curb the princes of the blood, who had become de facto independent states, to restore the centralized royal power. The era of subtle and tricky politics, intrigue and family units started.

So what happened to Baudelaire and his XIX century? There had passed eighteen years after the revolution of 1830. The reign of Louis-Philippe, the last monarch of France, who had the title of the king, led to the unprecedented growth of corruption and the return of the privileges of the nobility. The king's friends and relatives were everywhere, there was financial fraud and bribery. At all times, the result of such power is the same. The crowds of people take to the streets, build barricades and seize weapons... All this is followed by the authorities' attempts to disperse the rebels. Several

- 12 dozen people are killed, the government resigns, the king abdicates...

This is exactly what happened in February, 1848.

But the winners couldn't share something or did something wrong. There were riots again. But this time the new rulers felt the charm of power and brought their troops. There were several thousand dead people as a result!

That happened in June of the same year.

That was where you could see Baudelaire, the fighter for the liberal values and freedom of personality, at the barricades! There was much hope then!

Several months later there were national elections and unexpectedly Napoleon's nephew, 40-year old Louis Bonaparte, won. There was joy and hopes then. They thought the new president would look after the French people's freedom and needs, like his famous uncle had done!

It resembles today so much! Alas! All histories are like each other. But they are never the same. It is only the similarity of eras and difficult time of changes.

No doubt, the political developments, witnessed by our main characters, influenced their views and something brought together these two outstanding personalities, brought up the spirit of freedom and the student rebellion of the Latin Quarter.

Part 1

*One day we leave, with fire in the brain,
Heart great with rancor, bitter in its mood;
Outward we travel on the rolling main,
Lulling infinity in finitude.*

Baudelaire Ch. Voyaging
(translated by James McGowan)

1.

I have been renting a room in this ancient, short and narrow road in the Latin Quarter for several months. My room is on the first floor and steep creaking stairs are leading to it. The furniture is old and clumsy, the floor is dirty, the narrow windows are looking into the yard so it is always half dark here. I am sitting in front of the mirror. It is covered with dust and looks matt. The contours of the face seem fuzzy, the colour transitions are blurred, as in a bad watercolor portrait, instead of living sparkling eyes there are light brown spots with noticeable blue under the eyelids, the hair is dyed green, the jacket is also green, I am wearing light brown trousers and a huge chest silk bow. I admire my own reflection and trust it my secrets...

I am going to get up and go for a stroll in the Jardin du Luxembourg. I adore that place. There are sculptures everywhere there, stone sculptures of the soul. I will put on a black coat, take a cane and will proudly walk with my head raised, carefully stepping over

14 puddles. I will surely be recognized but I will casually try to show contempt for the pesky fans. Then I'll sit in a cafe in Rue de la Huchette, and with my monotone singsong magical voice I will recite verses from the stage. That's right, my voice is very unusual. Everyone says that. I'm not easy, and my poems fascinate, excite and even make men blush. There is no morality in them! There is only beautiful and ugly in them, two eternal opposites. They are together as well. An hour or two will pass. Walking home, I will stop at the house where Bonaparte used to live*, I will meditate there and suddenly I will lose my way taking that narrowest street of Paris. I will sit in front of the captivating mirror and stare at my disappearing and nearly invisible face...

Prosper Merimee, who obviously doesn't like me, once said that I was stupid and honest, as my poetry was mere pessimism. Being a deputy, he should know that my poems are just a product of our epoch. After the revolution of the last century and the Napoleonic wars, we have got nothing left, only a pitiful resemblance of order. Poverty of some people and corruption and depravity of others reach their peak. Why is it happening? They didn't get what they wanted in February of 1848, that's why! What happened after the coup extinguished their last hopes. Now over France there is the suffocating darkness of sadness and despair. Personalities disappear, and instead of them there appears a population of officials and vulgar and mediocre environment of increasingly wealthy middle class. Of course, talking about me, Prosper can't help believing in the bright future. Otherwise he would have been expelled from the Senate...

You will probably ask me, "Where do these ideas come from?" The answer is they are not ideas but just a reaction to fear the worst – the constant loss of the myself every single second. As soon as I feel this animal fear, my mind starts a devilish whirlwind.

But you can get used to everything, you learn to see the beautiful even in the strange. Wandering in this smoky spring evening in the town of rest, I feel with my whole body, that apart from that foolish bustle of our lives, there is yet another life in this part of Paris – a sea of spirituality, movement, love, adorable antiques. Its

* The house in Huchette street. Napoleon Bonaparte lived there for one year – from 1792 to 1793.

big grey eyes thoughtfully are staring blankly and thoughtfully at the new generation's tricks three hundred years ago the antics of Panurge* or the eternal student Villon's tricks and those of his friends were looked upon. 15

Sometimes I think this dreadful disappearance of the individual is beautiful in a way. It's like fading flickering of candles, a blurred image in the mirror, or a smoldering life. Well, if I were to stay in such trouble, I have to, I just must keep coming back to myself, and see encouraging results in the end. Meanwhile, in order to do it you just need to split into two, not more than that!

Sometimes I try and even am able to see my own hands, as though someone else's, to see life lines on my palms, I can feel myself and my soul... However, this soul disappears after looking into itself. And every time I am still trying to take the act of the self-splitting to its limit.

I have to inflame my mind all the time, and at first I was speaking in relation to myself only as a witness, but recently I have become my own executioner. What should I do? If I can't see myself, then at least I'll try to dig my own soul in the hope to reach the lurking depths. The executioner and the victim are increasingly merging into one parallel unit in myself. "I am the wound, and rapier! I am the cheek, I am the slap! I am the limbs, I am the rack, the prisoner, the torturer!"**

I will be sincere. Secretly I want a different thing. From time to time, coming to my senses, I interrupt that self-torment, playing host disarming spontaneity, and pretend to be impulsive at my motives. However, all this happens just because I want to look as a kind of unsolved subject one day. I feel like I am swimming, unsuccessfully chasing myself. "But the true voyagers set out to sea Just for the leaving's sake; hearts lift aloft, Nothing dissuades them from their destiny, Something beyond their knowing cries, 'We're off!'"*** That is why sometimes the heart is filled with sadness, feeling that in this voyage, it does not find a true friend. Then everything seems boring around: those narrow windows that have not been cleaned for ages,

* One of the heroes of the satirical novel by François Rabelais "Gargantua and Pantagruel".

** *Baudelaire Ch. The Flowers of Evil*. Oxford University Press. P. 157.

*** From poem "Voyaging" by Ch. Baudelaire" (translated by J. McGowan).

16 my room with its huge leather arm-chair of strange colour, that always smoking fire place and noise in the chimney and the sounds from the outside – the glazier's and newsboys' shouts.

In minutes like this I always remember my happy young years. I used to walk with my father in the Jardin du Luxembourg listening to his stories about artists and sculptures along the paths. I would run fast in front of the Parisians strolling and lifting my hand with a kite tied to it. I would stop to catch my breath and look up... But there was nothing in the sky, apart from the pitted clouds and the rainbow of the sweat drops stuck in my eye lashes...

Like the great and tragic Villon, I also try to understand myself or at least see myself from the outside. All my life is the history of failed attempts. This is why I can feel my uselessness. However, nowadays the idea of usefulness is losing its sense, especially for me, who has been creating my own rules of behaviour which I am trying to follow.

2.

My childhood was extremely happy. I was the only and long-awaited child of the parents with a big age gap. I was being spoilt. When I was five, my father died. It was not the early orphanhood but what followed it that became overwhelming for me. A year later my mother who I had always experienced feelings to beyond son's love, got married. I called that a betrayal and added that having a son like me she had no right to get married again. Feeling as both her husband and son, I used to arrange secret dates with her, make scenes of jealousy, write tender letters to her. Five years later they sent me to a boarding school.

Since the moment when my mother, my goddess, turned away from me, I have been feeling neglected in this strange world. Everything seems to be deceiving here, everything I want to touch is escaping from me. The real torture is that I can't believe any of my love impulse or sincere feeling. As a result, I am living under my own supervision and gazing incredulously into my every little feeling, depriving it of naturalness. It feels like a real theatre, a constant inner splitting into a spectator and an actor.

I have realized recently that my love for artsy clothes covering the natural body shapes, spicy food and female faces thickly covered

with blusher and powder are all various manifestations of my fear of 17
live, unpredictable and untamed life. In its accidental amorphous-
ness I feel something akin to chaos, and so I'm always trying to
throw an artificial bedspread, I have woven, on it. Hence the shock!
It is a rebellion against everything that surrounds me, against
the whole universe! It is a way to hide myself, to lead other people's
views on the wrong track, not allowing them to see the real me.
The brighter my clothes are, the more blatant my behavior is,
the more unbelievable the rumours about me are, the safer I am
hidden. I would tell them about being gay or being a secret police
agent and when they started blaming me, I used to laugh at them.
Villon also used to put a mask on, intentionally creating an ironic or
terrifying image of the author in his poems. A dissolute playboy,
a pimp, a thug, an executioner... Who else? I also like to break
the rules of good manners of the bad society with its stagnant aesthet-
ic canons. Expelled from the world of love, I began the sequence of
my own destruction. When I was fifteen, I intentionally caught syph-
ilis from the famous to the whole of Paris squint-eyed prostitute
Sara. The illness gave me a fantastic shiny gradual withering and
could always hide the reason of why I hated the process of physical
merger. I wouldn't say women don't attract me but the natural ani-
mal instinct always pushes me away. I hate this instinct. It takes my
power over myself. I prefer just to watch it. Feeling horror of all
natural, I always transmit the possession into the symbolic sphere.
I am the main symbolist! Didn't you know that? Everyone in Paris
thinks so if they have read any of my poems.

Covered in clothes, I would sit by a couple making love and watch
everything. Someone's hands are slowly sliding along the naked
hips, going higher and higher and making me shivering pleasantly.
My eyes are lust-lit, I absorb a woman's body, my nose smells her.
Breathing a woman in and looking at her, I merge with her and I can't
even say now whose body is pining with lust, whose arms and legs
are intertwined on a bed of love... – mine or that man's. Without
even touching her, with my lips I suddenly feel her eye lashes, the vel-
vet skin of her trembling breasts, her interrupting wet breath. All this
tickles me and inflames my imagination. At last the wonderful mo-
ment comes when all my nature, my thoughts and my vision disap-
pear somewhere and turn into one solid alloy – a resilient bunch of

18 nerves and flesh. Her palms embrace it, squeeze and let it go, squeeze it again... A slight touch of the tips of her fingers feels like touching beads and runs up and down the responsive body...

Anticipation of the approaching bliss would enchant everyone. But I am different! The closer I am to a woman, the more I feel like escaping leaving her just a mirage, making her see someone else when she looks at me. If I am looked at, comprehended, solved, then it is a nightmare!

The body of the naked woman is writhing in ecstasy but her eye is passionless and empty... Several years ago I saw this image and since then I can't forget it. It inspires and excites me, it follows me and wouldn't let me go day or night. I have been frantically looking for it in the real world. I seem to have found it! But no! The eyes are different, they look somewhere inside me and they look for something all the time...

What's that? It is the image of my mother that I defamed. Or is it thirst of contrasts? I possibly need this intrepid glance. Does it help to stop the dizziness or is it important that this woman's eyes look but don't see? Her eyes seem to satisfy my double will to be in the limelight and at the same time to be hidden from prying eyes? I always suffer looking for the right answer but can't find it. I probably need a partner, a friend, even if it is a woman. A man would be better, though. I need someone I can trust.

Would I be able to believe someone like I believe myself?! It must be mad...

Once in spring near the Opera I bumped into Honoré and dared to talk to him first. He, so huge, heavy-set, soft, was glad when he recognized me and he forced me to go with him to the place where in the middle of the hall on a pedestal there lay a woman I had been dreaming of. She was made of plaster. "Woman Bitten by a Snake" by Clésinger writhed in pain on a bed of flowers and drew thousands of eyes. The sculpture was accused of shameless and undisguised explicit eroticism. "Where is the model?" I kept asking Balzac.

The model turned out to be Apollonie Sabatier, a mistress of the literary and artistic salon near Montmartre. She agreed to have a cast made of her body, thereby committing an audacious act for our times.

Everyone in the neighborhood used to predict a career of an opera singer for this young and modest girl. No one could have imagined

that this fragile and transparent creature would leave everything, become a mistress of a patron and after some time turn into one of the most famous and most “respected” French courtesans. Slender, with regular delicate features and large hazel eyes, she looked dreamy, mischievous and carefree at the same time. It was not the external beauty, but something inexplicable that drew attention to her. It was either the movement of her hand, which was slight and hardly noticeable, as if she shrugged off someone’s molestation, or occasional low notes in her voice, such as smokers had, unexpected, with a pleasant velvet rasp. I liked her eyes sparkling from under her lashes, which was playful, affectionate and immodest. 19

Theophile Gautier said that Apollonie was superior to all other women because despite her beauty she did not require courting. She belongs to the rare class of women next to whom men feel themselves free intellectually and spiritually. Meanwhile, spinning in a circle of talent, Apollonie herself was becoming brighter.

3.

That is how I found myself in the life of Madame Sabatier. The initial mutual sympathy quickly grew into love and it was strange love: I was gloomy and distant from everyone and she was a cheerful and bubbly beauty. We kept our relationship under the cover for a long time. I used to write her letters not in my handwriting, to devote poems to her and sometimes I would come to her salon in Phroshot street. In spite of her beauty, Apollonie was still a woman made of flesh and blood and she suffered, hated and at the same time she wanted me. However, because of my low esteem, I was still approachless for her...

When I would come home, a flurry of emotions overwhelmed me, did not let go, unwinding my irrepressible imagination. Try to imagine my home suddenly becoming alive and transforming. The dusty and still air glowed with subtle colors and captivated spell-binding smells. My soul would sink and thrill in bliss, breathing in the aroma of desire. Over there, in bed she lay, my idol and queen of dreams...

But why is she here? Who has brought her here? It doesn’t really matter. For she is here and I have recognized her! Yes, those are her eyes! I recognized her piercing eyes as they made my blood creep.

20 They attract and captivate, they devour the views of the madman who looks at them. What we usually call a life has nothing to do with this happiness which I found then and absorbed slowly, minute after minute and second after second!

Then a day came when I could no longer wait and I told Apollonie of my feelings. She returned her love. This is what I received in a pale pink envelope a week later. You've got to listen to this! It is important! It was a verdict!

My mirror kept silence.

"I am the happiest woman in the world and I have never felt so clearly that I love you, you have never been so gorgeous, glorious and divine"*. I can understand that. I keep reading, "You can be proud if you are flattered but don't look in the mirror". Why is that? How does she know that I spend all my time in front of the mirror when I am indoors? "However hard you try, you won't have the same face expression you had then, and I saw it. Now whatever happens, I will always see you like I did then because that is the person I love; you can purse your mouth or frown as much as you like but I won't even look at you, I will just close my eyes and see what I saw last Thursday."

That's it! "You can purse your mouth or frown as much as you like..." She saw me surrendered, natural, with frank feelings in my eyes. That's my death!

At the same moment there was a blow, a terrible thud on the door... My room, my paradise – an enchanted fairy tale – disappeared, suddenly and roughly... The dreadful noise of the destruction filled my room. I understood with my whole essence that only escaping would save me from the damning revelation. Just a few days before she had been a goddess for me and it was so convenient, wonderful and indestructible. Now she was a woman! What if I got the right to be jealous? Just the thought of it horrified me. I felt the image adorned by me becoming too close and seductive. Apollonie might have understood her chains to keep me were awakening the destructive instinct in me. But her heart wouldn't listen to her

* From A. Sabatier's letter to Ch. Baudelaire. Here and further on quotes: Pishua K., Zigler Zh. Charles Baudelaire // Foreign Literature.2000. No. 4 (translated by V. Milchina).

mind. Her blind love made her believe in what she wanted to believe in. 21

Coming home from our dates, looking for understanding, I would stare at the hopelessly silent mirror... My hands felt like throwing a stone into it.

Soon my painful condition of a masochist, killing with his own hands the most wonderful feelings, was aggravated by another event. It struck me. In implementing the projects on reconstruction of Paris, Georges Haussmann completely demolished the church of Saint-Benoit-le-Bétourné with the cemetery and the grave of the great storyteller Charles Perrault. I adored the only church in Paris which was "turned the wrong way" and had been the only hope for the spiritual healing and the insane asylum for eight centuries. It had been burnt several times and reconstructed after the raids of the Huns and Normans. I used to go to Louis le Grand college next to it. Four centuries before Villon had lived near it. It was the fantastic François Villon, restless, absurd and contradictory, having to justify his own existence. How often had I imagined talking to him! The same as to my father, my favourite Edgar Poe, myself or my mirror. Now I had no favourite symbols: no icy Apollonie, no Villon's church, no Perrault's grave.

Like it happened in "Cinderella", the joy and pleasure disappeared at once, everything around me collapsed and returned to its former state. This room is a nasty home of the eternal bore. The furniture is dusty and clumsy, the floor is dirty, on the floor there is a puddle of the water I spilled from the jug, the windows with dusty glass are sad, there are streaks from the rain on them, and I want to smash the matt mirror. There are my scripts on the floor, most of them crossed out and unfinished...

4.

I keep the mystery of the birth of my poems to myself. No one has ever seen me working. If I am all on my own and fighting with the angel of the Lord, no one knows of my sufferings. Balzac can bear a third of a novel in one night, spending tons of coffee and ink. Picky and peevish, Flaubert rides his bike in the morning only to perfectly shout loudly a few lines from "Madame Bovary" he has written at night. Everyone knew that, believed and discussed excit-

22 edly. The torture of creations is fully mine! Like a pregnant woman, I have been carrying the idea of a short poem for months. This torture is both hell and unusual delight! Because in the end – I know – there will be a thought and then all of a sudden an idea will be born and a whole musical phrase. Then it will turn into a wonderful melody, my soul will feel nice and easy and I will start floating. This enchanting music sounds like the singing of the Sirens, attracts you, gradually pulling an unknown artist into a dark whirlpool of happiness. You plunge into it with your head and feel neither the time nor hunger or thirst. Only there, at the bottom of the abyss, you can see the vague outlines of what is so passionately sought.

However, before this happens, you have to suffer, you suffer continuously, when you are asleep and awake. You have to look for and not find, cry from the creative impotence, look for again, argue with yourself, with your invented character, with a tree and a stone... And God forbid to trust any friend, or even worse – a poet, writer or musician. The fragile structure will collapse and instantly evaporate from a careless touch of an amateur or a bright personality of an artist. Then it will just work. You will need to embody the blurred contours of the structure in the words, rhyme, and rhythm – the very music that has just appeared and filled all your heart.

To be honest, this is worth all your life! You can and must remake it dozens of times. For weeks I would wander on the disgusting side lanes, through a maze of gloomy, wet and dirty streets with curves, rotten houses, where suddenly some flower on a window sill or a young girl's head would light up my imagination. I could stay in the pubs all night to hear the only juicy and most necessary for me word uttered once by some sailor.

How long have I lived without writing a single line! If the struggle with myself was dragging too long, my brain began to inflame and a neurosis with its insomnia, suffering and painful whims started. It made me hot just to realize that fact. I would get up to cool down my face with the cold water from the jug and then look in the mirror which was getting cloudy of the heat radiating from me... Together with the mirror, my experiences gradually faded again and my mind woke up.

At that wonderful moment my charming ginger cat Alice would creep with her gentle velvet steps, rub against my leg, then gently

jump on the table and sit beside my manuscripts in her imperturbable sphinx pose. She would think together with me and look at me from the depth of her pupils with golden flecks, being sensibly tender and mysteriously penetrating. 23

Expressing myself in words, I always turn to someone, to a listener. Sometimes it is a mystic companion, a friend I have not met yet or a rare sweetheart... Sometimes it is my Alice. She is amazingly patient waiting for me to finish my work and she sounds like a woman on a bed of love with her dazzling rhythmic purring. I can't help comparing her to myself. I am as sensual as she is, with a mysterious walk, full in force but gentle in its flexibility. I have the same eye: free and magic, which it sometimes difficult to bear... But most often I am my own listener. This is exactly when I can reach the true split of my personality.

This year after the many years of hard work finally my poems are on sale. My friends and family got a feeling they had read an autobiography. They saw me on every page and nearly in every line: my passion for wandering and loneliness in the crowd, my prayers, my curse, my paradoxes, my frightening vision.

Just a month later two ferocious articles signed by an unknown relative of the newspaper head appeared in "Le Figaro" and a trial began. The Second Empire was not joking with morality. Hugo, Balzac, Flaubert... Who would be the next? The trouble was the judges could not learn the thoughts that were in the eyes of all fair connoisseurs. Everything that happened around them reflected and instantly bounced off them, like off lepers, failing to catch even on the edge of their brain. These disgusting ugly monsters, like Imperial Deputy Attorney Ernest Pinard, did not care about the inner meaning and the soul of the work, and the most important thing was the observance of the purely external conditions of purism. They said that in my poems "the vile was close to lewdness, and disgusting to the nasty..."

The court ordered a fine of three hundred francs and banned the publication of six poems. Newsboys smashed the news all over Paris at once. At the moment it seemed that even a glazier under my window was screaming about the same news.

A feeling of hopelessness and lack of understanding sometimes absorbs any person, especially a poet. For me, the worst thing is to

24 see how in this terrible, full of shocks existence the delightful poetic ability becomes useless and decays, the identity inevitably collapses and the meaning of life is lost. The desire to know is sinful and the desire to learn is irresistible. The original Christian dilemma is: I know that succumbing to the temptation of the devil, learning and revealing the beauty in the ugly, I shall find neither happiness nor peace. I could only find death there. That means my journey is doomed. My words "How grand the universe by light of lamps..."* give only an illusion of infinity, like an endless reflection of subjects located opposite each other in the mirrors ... It is sort of an abstract comparison of internal indefinitely with apparent finitude.

I just composed poems, made a mirror similar to the one I have in my room... And it reflected our sinister time. Of course, I was rejected. Well, it had happened before. Everything beautiful in this life is amoral, illegal or leads to obesity.

What about Apollonie? Being timid and lacking confidence in myself as a man, always made me look for a partner, in relation to who I could feel my superiority and not be embarrassed. Everyone knows my little Zhanne became that sort of woman for me, she was a supernumerary from a Parisian theatre. She was neither beautiful, nor clever or talented, she was always asking me for money and she was unfaithful. However, she suited me. But I met someone worthy of adoration and worship at last. Then there was a sweet moment – a week of love... Then there was a fright! No, I had not changed, I was the same! And the result was the same: a forced heart-to-heart talk and a break-up.

That year was definitely tragic in my life. It was full of the most important events cracking my memory, my consciousness and my soul. The start of the year brought the death of my general-stepfather. I had dreamed of it, I had demanded it on the barricades of the July revolution! Now it happened and gave me hope to unite with my mother. But it never happened...

At the end of the year my favourite church was demolished and Villon was taken away from me.

I should have got drunk. But I went to get familiar ghostly happiness which was bought at a pharmacy and taken away in a waist-

* From poem "Voyaging" by Ch. Baudelaire" (translated by J. McGowan).

coat pocket. One spoon of greenish “jam” with tea – and the head 25 starts to spin, you get overwhelmed with daydreaming... With this remedy, every joy takes enormous dimensions and overshadows the sorrows and worries.

Most ordinary notions, the simplest words quickly acquired some new, very strange colour. After a few minutes, the connection between the concepts became so elusive that no one was able to understand me... I was overcome by absurd and invincible risibilities. As if I were a child with my parents and went to a suburb of Paris, wandered into an old barn, and for fun was rolling in freshly mown alfalfa. And in the bright doorway there was the bright blue sky, green grass and... a little girl. She was smiling, dancing and calling me...

S.

Being in love with Paris and its Latin Quarter, in its eternal youth student noisy life, its brilliance and dirt, luxury and poverty, I suddenly felt an aversion to it. I can see unusual curves of the narrow streets, their pavements under the shoes of people are full of sucking mud and stinking mass which the slops and the dregs are transformed into. They are slightly covered with snow. Stumbling, people bypass the heaps hardened in the frost.

Two young men are clumsily dragging a huge piece of smoked meat... It seems as if all this is happening to me. But it is definitely not me. Surely it is the students of the Sorbonne who are skipping their classes and are carrying their prey somewhere in the direction of the Jardin du Luxembourg, which is at the end of the Latin Quarter. Apparently, there is going to be a feast and a game of poker in the place where there used to be wasteland of Luko* in the old days... They were walking and talking loudly about how they would listen to the latest ballades of their friend, rescued for the third time from the gallows and exiled from Paris for the long ten years...

Suddenly I woke up. I am back in my room, lying on the floor, touching the wrinkled sheets with poems. My face broke into a wide,

* The place of modern location of the Luxembourg Gardens. During the Roman Empire and the Middle Ages, when Paris was called Lutetia, it was called Lukotitius. In memory of those times, many Parisians name Luko Luxembourg Gardens.

26 almost idiotic smile, the flow of visions has stopped. "What does Villon have to do with it?" I ask myself. "I know! He is as foolish as I am, he is always in uncertainty, he knows everything but himself. He is the same agitated soul that is waiting for a sign of affection or a stroke of fate all the time.

There is the same old cobweb hanging down from the ceiling in front of me. "It has been nearly ten years after the revolution died away but the traces of the sticky cobweb of power are still here!" I suddenly thought. My heart ached, I felt dizzy and I fell asleep...

Suddenly the wooden ceiling of my room shook. First to the left, then to the right. It felt like being on a ship on the waves. Something crashed into it with a loud roar. A huge black hole with jagged edges appeared in the middle. The fresh air got into the room raising the dust and blowing down the hanging cobweb... The draught quickly leafed through my feelings and sudden thoughts... The hole was becoming blue, then pale blue, then the bright sun appeared and I felt being taken somewhere up with a wave...

The sun was not very high and was not illuminating the houses where I found myself. Not a single window was shining. Countless jagged silhouettes of chimneys, small lines of thousands of houses were gradually erasing, merging with multistorey buildings and lofts of the infinite city. A moment later I felt strange transitions. The sounds, like the colours of the rainbow, were colouring in everything around and the colours sounded like glamorous music...

Hiding from someone, I am standing in the unlighted corner and looking into the dark.

Goodness me! It is an underground prison. There is a hole in the floor and I can see a cage there. There is a prisoner in it. It is François Villon! I recognize him! His long slim face, cut upper lip, thin nose, long dirty hair and eternally mischievous sparks in his eyes. He wears a green coat with a big white bow on his chest. Exhausted, he is squatting... "Damn! Is it him or me? I can't understand. Where am I? Am I here, behind the corner, or over there, in the hole?" Two guards are dragging me somewhere. They are dragging me along the dirty floor of the narrow dark corridor. I can see my shoes get off and my light beige trousers get dirty with slops...

An old man in episcopal vestments is interrogating someone and calls him Ki-Tabari. I know him, he is Villon's mate and an acciden-

tal accomplice in the theft of Navarre College. What a fool, he blabbed 27
to the first comer, and is now trying to wriggle out of imminent disaster. His shirt has been ripped off, his hands are tied behind with a rope and the rope is thrown over a beam anchored at the top near the ceiling. His legs are tied with a leather strap...

Like an alchemist conjures with solutions, I mix myself with external objects, becoming the bar on the rack and a rope on the hands of Ki-Tabari, and float under the stone arches of the prison... One executioner stepped on the strap, pulling it as much as possible, the other pulled the rope. Ki-Tabari's arms fell out of joints with a crunch and now, holding only on the skin and the muscles of the dislocated shoulders, they pulled up and are touching his head. His throat has disappeared. His head is hidden in the formed emptiness. After that the poor man's back was whipped. Now pieces of his skin are hanging down from it, it looks like a big belt has been cut out of his skin...

I can hear the prisoner saying the name of the accomplice... Now it is my turn. They want me to confess, then my choice would be either two-storey gallows in Montpellier or the same in Montfaucon...

Probably because of the impossibility of perceiving the reality, or feeling the torture, the terrible vision disappeared... Now I could see the familiar to me *Norrectional Nourt* room of the Seine, the Sixth Chamber session of Criminal Cases. There they are telling someone off... This nonsense is going on for ages: formidable phrases of Ernest Pinard and a ranting judge, accustomed to quarrels between the drunks, shouting onlookers and shiny black coats, filling the room, poems read aloud and reddened with shame young ladies... It reminded me of a prostitute who reddened when she got into the hall of the Dutch painting in the Louvre...

Then a moment of enlightenment came. The patterns of shadows on the ceiling of the room, decorated with grey cobwebs, suddenly begin to live an amazing life. I can see the clear water flowing through the green meadow or the smelly waste streams rushing through the streets, forcing people to slip and fall, and wagons to collide. In the midst of the incredible noise, shouting, laughing and crying, my ear perceives the most elusive sounds. The external objects acquire monstrous shapes. They come in unknown forms, and then gradually lose these forms and finally get into my being.

28 With all my body, I felt I could climb through the thickness of the compressed time and no material hedges were able to resist me. Reality and fiction became indistinguishable. But deep hoarse gasp burst from my chest, as if the former essence was no longer able to endure the severity of my new nature. As if in a dim mirror, I can see getting old right before my eyes taking over the years coming. My face is getting covered with deep wrinkles, my sunken mouth is getting some bilious, sarcastic expression, my bare forehead is becoming even heavier and higher. My eyes are looking from under the eyebrows. In a shrill and evil way...

I can see a little girl in front of myself. She is saying nothing, she is just happily dancing, coming closer and closer to me. She is dancing and calling me...

6.

The foul bishop's castle, the courtroom, straight Paris Haussmann perspectives and multi-storey buildings have disappeared somewhere... It is winter now. Paris. It is snowing. It is cold. "When wolves eat wind..."* Church Mass, colorful processions of citizens to the church of their parish. Tomorrow it will be the feast of the Epiphany**. The dirty streets are slightly covered with the snow, the slops are being thrown from the windows. The taverns are being filled with people who are eating, drinking and singing songs. There is shouting, joy and bustle everywhere. It smells of fried food everywhere. This smell is stronger than all the others.

The conversation is about everything and about nothing. The war, which the six French generations turned out to witness, was over, but no one can say with certainty, what it was called, and whether it is over at all. They are talking about the rehabilitation of the Virgin of Orleans, about the price of cabbage and onions, and the weather contributing to or interfering with the future harvest. Students are flirting with innkeepers – they have no money on prostitutes...

I found myself on the Ile de la Cité, near the north tower of Notre Dame. They roared and buzzed there in the hangout with a sign "Brothel of Macon."

* From poem "The Legacy of François Villon" (translated by Beram Saklatvala).

** This refers to the night of 5 to 6 January 1463.

I thought to myself, “This is a convenient place, some sort of Elysium* with the spring all the year round and everyone enjoying themselves, it’s a brothel at the tavern! A place to eat and to sleep...” 29
A happy company slipped past me, opened the door and barged inside the house. I followed them. A strong smell of urine and sweat nearly knocked me down. I closed my eyes, grabbed the edge of my perfumed bow with my teeth and began to check the room to find a warm place and settle down comfortably. On the tables, on window sills, on the floor, and everywhere else there are uncleared food debris, and on the benches here and there are torn, abandoned and neglected women’s clothes left in a hurry. In the centre, at the huge tables with big dishes of steaming chunks of lamb, there are bright violet and burgundy cloaks with fur lining. They must belong to the traders from the right bank. In the corners there are mostly grey cloaks of the students and bachelors from the Latin Quarter. The windows are covered with heavy dirty curtains and everyone now and then wipe their greasy hands on them. A lot of noise would not allow to snatch a word from the terrible air flow of swearing and interjections.

The door opens wide again and a witch turns up! It is a decrepit old woman with grey hair which is dirty, but curled, she is wearing a few different coloured skirts. The eye catches her silver belt with gold-plated hooks, a buckle and fasteners, which covers her long-absent waist.

“Sweet girl who makes sausages and pies, and who in the dance goes skillfully...” *** – in the depths of the room someone very tall got up and loudly uttered the famous poems, then began to call the old woman to his table.

All, as if on cue, turned towards the door and then came the incredible roar – everyone recognized the Old Margo. Everyone considered it an honor to invite her to their table and treat her with a mug of wine. Everyone knew – a student, a merchant or an official from the Chatelet – it was good to have Margo as a friend. I also

* In ancient mythology – part of the underworld. It is opposed to Hades, where mortals suffer eternal torment.

** From poem by F. Villon “Ballade of the Old Prostitute to the Daughters of Joy” (translated by Beram Saklatvala).

30 knew it from my rich experience of dealing with brothels keepers. If you have ever treated her to a meal and a drink you can always rely on her offering you some fresh product instead of hiding it from you. How could it be otherwise?

The old woman, rocking from side to side, barely shifting her ill legs, hidden under the skirts, floated to the center, directly to the table of wealthy merchants. With her husky voice, smiling with her toothless mouth, as if reviewing a password, she said to the tall man, continuing Villon's ballade, "For your shop-window must shuttered be, when you are old and withered and wan..."** Margo was respectfully seated and given a plate of meat, which had not cooled down, and a mug of wine.

Someone at the next table said, "Listen. Margo, take the belt off. You know you are not allowed to have it. The new official will not tolerate confusion. He will confiscate it in favour of the king..."*** Everyone knew the man who had said it was jealous it was not him who was treating the famous pimp that day.

"The king, the king..." the old woman said in her drunken voice. "Today Biche came, the royal rogue, he led off the cream of my brood. Guess who they were for?" Margo wanted to show the people in the tavern, that she and the king had long been settled, and tomorrow, despite his decrees, she would certainly pull the coral beads and anything else of jewellery of noble ladies from the right bank.

"He is not a knight, really," someone interrupted the old woman's story of the king. "When he was young I remember him hacking the English prisoners with his sword. I saw him!"

"He wouldn't hold his sword now," Margo's neighbour added. "He is not young anymore."

"Unless it is a two-handed sword,"*** a merchant in a black cloak, sitting opposite her, grinned, referring to the new king's habit of mixing with the girls of the Parisian brothels. Everyone laughed.

* From poem by F. Villon "Ballade of the Old Prostitute to the Daughters of Joy" (translated by Beram Saklatvala).

** According to the king's decrees, everyone should look like who he is. If a woman wears gilded silver and expensive furs, it means that it is decent. To deceive the society was considered a serious sin.

*** The French title of the weapons (le blanc) had a second, obscene meaning during F. Villon's time.

The old woman was used to all sorts of seedy jokes and she calmly continued, "You can understand him. He had been a dauphin for a long time. He didn't see his mother, he hated his father. His father's lover brought him up. What can you get from that?" 31

"They say he often walks around Paris with this Biche," sitting down near Margo, her neighbour said. He was obviously a foreigner. Sipping the wine from a mug, the old woman was silent.

"He is looking for women," the man sitting opposite her said confidently, looking like a genuine connoisseur of the royal court. "He wants to hurt them."

"Why is that?" the fat neighbour still could not understand why the new king of France behaved that way.

"Margo did tell you! Don't you understand?" the talkative merchant in the black cloak got angry. "His father is bad, so is his mother, his father's mistresses are terrible, his wife is the worst. He even raped her when she was about ten. No morals at all! That's why... He's got all the girls from Margo's. Is this enough for you?"

The old woman looked like she was occupied with her dinner and wouldn't say a word, she had already said enough. The students, merchants and officials seemed to understand the uselessness and danger of those rumours and suddenly calmed down, then they started shouting, swearing, banging their mugs on the table, calling the local girls, demanding the tavern owner and his wife to come out to them...

7.

I didn't quite understand why I was there. God knows what was happening. But my impressions were bright. I understood they couldn't see me. I could see and hear them all but they couldn't. This brought some intrigue and let me move from table to table listening to the visitors chatting. The main thing was not to bump into anyone or not to knock down a mug or a plate off the table. However, very soon I could not stand staying in the room where the smell of urine was so strong and I decided to find a more decent company. My curiosity won. I thought I might hear something else about the politics, the king or Villon...

I crossed the river and found myself on the left bank, close to students. Near the monastery of Cordeliers on a high two-storey

32 building there hung a sign “The Pine Cone”. I got inside. First I stopped near the three people who were sitting near the entrance. Here now and then they would say the clichés like “he mercilessly castigates”, “he rips off the veils”, “a bright painting”... That was not interesting!

In the far corner of the tavern some decent-dressed young people, sitting comfortably on a long bench near the wall, gradually took a large mug of copper alloy, sipped their wine and then ate cheese. Its carelessly mangled yellowish lumps with blue veins of mould were piled on the tin plates. They had been keeping silence for a long time and I was about to go somewhere else when one of them, in a bright yellow velvet jacket, put his heavy mug on the table, sighed, stretched and suddenly announced loudly, “I’ll tell you what – Burgundians are not fools!”

“What are you talking about, Jean?” another one said with a surprise in his voice. “Why are you talking about them? They are enemies!”

“They are skunks!” the third man added confidently. “They still can’t forget how well they lived when the minor grandfather of our Louis was the king.”*

“That was some good life!” the second one added dreamily. “The whole country was pilfered!” This companion was quite a plump man. His dark violet cloak didn’t have any lining but still did not converge even on his neck. He was constantly eating, sometimes even forgetting to drink his wine.

“They got Joan and gave her to the English,” the third man said in an angry breaking voice and he banged his fist clumsily on the table. His bright red hat nearly got off his head, it was like a clown hat but without bells. His bright red hair, the same colour as his huge wine mug, was sticking from under the hat.

“I wonder,” Jean said again, “what it was that they gave for their daughter Mary when foisted her as the wife to our hero Charles of Orleans.”

“What do you mean – foisted? I wouldn’t mind having her...” the red-haired student in the red hat said.

I didn’t quite understand what the students were talking about so loudly but I thought, “My God! The war and death change everyone!

¹⁶ This refers to the era of the absolute power of Charles’ uncles (1380–1388).

Or, to be exact, makes everyone equal. You wouldn't have even dreamt of blaspheming before! No way! It's the royal family they are talking about! The duke's family! But now... this ignorant student is dreaming of sleeping with her." 33

"Well, I can see you are bursting down below! You, Rousseau, probably confused the institutions." Jean jerked his head towards the window. "You should be heading towards 'Perretta's Den'. They will find something for you there!" When the malicious thoughts of his friend faded, Jean continued, "My dear colleagues, this is what I have found out. When the trouble started and the British started running away, those bastards of Burgundy immediately decided to get into the royal alignment. But how? Simple! They decided to marry their little daughter to the Duke of Orleans. "

"He did marry her," the gobbler added quickly without raising his head and looking up from the food, "even though she is a Burgundy!"

"He had no choice!" Jean went on confidently, "Did the Duke of Burgundy pay the British the ransom for Charles? He did! And he foisted his sister's daughter to him. The daughter is about thirty years younger than him..."

"Not bad!" the Red Hat concluded.

"What's not bad? It's all rubbish! The further the better!" Jean paused and went on. "That was considered as a dowry for their little daughter! Is that clear? Where did they get the money? From the dowry of the duke's third wife. That's it!" The gobbler was struck with the scope of affairs of the family of Burgundy, stopped swallowing the chunks of cheese and hummed through the mouthful of food, "Blimey!" then he swallowed his food and looking at the red-haired man's face, which changed from the excessive cynicism of the Duke, or from distrust to Jean, he blurted out, "Dream on – sleeping with her!"

I was listening to them attentively and was glad at the finding. Of course, you wouldn't find such a fruity history textbook in our time in the Latin Quarter! Having got nearer them, I was listening to every word, every phrase of the drunk students. Mind you, I didn't feel that well, I was feeling dizzy, everything seemed to disappear in front of my eyes now and again. I had to look for companions I liked.

The three students seemed to have calmed down. But Jean didn't calm down. He had a fountain of knowledge he wanted to share.

34 It was obvious – he had collected a lot of facts and gossip and now he was craving for glory. He wanted his colleagues' astonishment and amazement.

"Listen to me, certified men, and remember everything I say. I am going to tell you some sedition. According to the law, our Louis is not a king at all..." Anticipating the reaction of his neighbours at the table, Jean asked, "Why not? Because his father was also a problem. How could he have been crowned if the British signed an agreement with his mother on the succession to the throne after they captured Paris? There was nothing for him, the Burgundy were becoming vicegerents. Forget the British! His own mother recognized him illegitimate."

"That means he was able..."

"Don't start again!" Jean even got angry and said quietly, "Ginger idiot..."

Jean definitely said, "Ginger idiot." I could hear that well and I have just realized that it was the surname of the ginger guy in the red hat "Ginger idiot", which was "rou so". In our days, before the revolution, there was a romantic thinker, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. He dreamed of the people controlling the state. Everyone called him by his surname, not his first name.

"I am telling you again," Jean explained. Joan d'Arc just returned Orleans to us, and then directly from Chinon through the land captured by the British, brought Charles to Reims. He was quickly crowned there. As Charles VII."

"If they crowned him, he is the king," Rousseau couldn't stop.

"Yes, he is the king. What's the matter with you? You've got to remember. If the father became a king not quite legally, it means his son, Louis XI, is at issue. Say something happens to the king or his son... that's it! The children of Charles of Orleans and Mary of Cleves will quickly go up the hill. Did you get that? It's called politics."

"I know Charles VII wanted to make friends with the Burgundy," the gobbler uttered. "They used to stir up trouble for the king..."

"We'll talk later about him," Jean stopped the gobbler. He suddenly got quiet as if he remembered something important, then he smiled showing his yellow snagged teeth. He took the mug with some wine still left from the gobbler, then from the ginger guy and put those polished copper containers right into their plates with

the rest of the cheese chunks. Satisfied with the masterpiece of the created still life, Jean went on talking, pointing first at one plate, then at the other one. "To start with, sort out the Orleans plate and the Bourbon plate. To be short, this is what it's like." 35

The most active of the students started describing a plan in detail. According to it, you could tie the Orleans to the king, and the Bourbons as well. He used both daughters of Louis XI in that project. One was supposed to get married now the minor son of the duke of Orleans and the other one – one of the sons of the duke of Bourbons. Later on the duke on Bourbons would give up himself... Saying this, Jean moved a chunk of cheese from each of the Orleans and Bourbons plate into the third one, to "Louis XI".

The gobbler was watching the clever manipulations of Jean and got upset because quite a big chunk of cheese from his plate had moved into another one. However, a minute later he had a crazy idea which returned him into benign state. He lazily stretched, got his cheese and immediately put it into his mouth. Chewing it, he pronounced distinctly, "Everyone knows Marie of Orleans* has been long engaged to Pierre de Beaujeu of the Bourbon branch. He is the only single one there."

"They can always break off the engagement!" Jean shouted confidently. "That's simple. You are a lawyer, you know. It's not marriage."

"It's easy to say – to break off," the ginger man said. "He is like a family for the duke of Orleans, they even live together in Blois."

"Do you know why he is like a family to them? Because Charles of Orleans didn't have any children for sixteen years after he got married. So he took care of Pierre de Beaujeu of Bourbon. And now try to remember!" Jean was gradually developing his thought. "Do you remember the gossip going around when the Orleans had Marie at last? There were rumours she was not the duke's daughter. Remember? They were saying after the captivity the old man was not able to... So everything went well. One can always convince Jeanne de Bourbon of Orleans, Pierre's elder brother, that Marie was illegitimate. The elder one will influence the younger one so he could rush and ask Louis XI to ask to be his daughter Anna the French's

¹⁷ The daughter of Charles of Orleans and Mary of Cleves.

36 husband.” Jean carefully took another piece of cheese with his two fingers from the gobbler’s plate and solemnly put it into his plate.

“This mystery is worthy of a big rascal,” Rousseau agreed at last. “Only who will the king get to do that?”

“This is a task for us,” Jean concluded looking as if the whole conversation had built specifically for this. “We’ll try to get into big politics. How about that?”

He had a look at his companions and probably for the first time he regretted he had told them of his plan. They were sitting with their faces dump and staring at their plates. There was no single thought in their faces!

“Our Louis’ father commissioned a similar case to a poet in his time,” the gobbler said sticking out his chest proudly. “It was Alain Chartier. I do not know for what skills and for what money. They married the Dauphin and the nine-year old Margaret of Scotland!”

“Exactly!” Rousseau added cheerfully. “She soon snuffed it either because of her life – she was mad about poetry – or because of her husband, who was eager for female flesh.”

“Why do you think the king will be interested in this nonsense? “ the gobbler was in doubt, “he has got his power and army...”

“Are you mad? Firstly, he has not got an army, it’s just some army of spies. “ Jean was talking confidently, as if he had been at court all the time. “Secondly, it is not nonsense! This is how he will be doing his politics. I bet! You just need to find some poet like that Chartier and send him to someone as quick as possible...”

They were choosing the candidates of possible poets, marriages, engagement breaks off and sudden deaths. I got tired listening to all that and understood one thing. Louis XI was exactly the same man he was taught to us in college. To unite the country, he would act exactly the way this guy – an unqualified lawyer – had told. But when and with whom? It would be difficult to find such a bounder!

8.

It was a hangover morning. I can’t remember where I slept and where the students from the tavern went. Like all the men awake, yawning after a sleepless party night, through the habit I join the stream flowing down to the Place de Greve. I could hear someone saying there would be a show today where they were going to

boil a counterfeiter. The people had been waiting for a long time 37 when she would be executed but every time that was postponed. And it was definitely going to happen now because they were going to punish a city patrol officer for not obeying the university rector and daring to lay hands on students.

The convict was on his knees, he put his hand on the block, turning his palm up. The executioner chopped it off with one blow of the axe. The hand slammed into the side. Everyone hooted: it was too fast and boring. Although they executed every day, and in Montpellier and Montfaucon there were up to forty hanged men swinging in the wind, theft did not disappear.

I found myself on the right bank of the Seine, under the walls of the Grand Chatelet, which was the fortress built under Louis the Fat. "Oh, I can remember this! It was his grandson Philip II Augustus who became the first king of France and not francs," I remembered the learned facts. "After this the dynasty got so strong that the great-grandson of Louis the Fat did not even need a special coronation and anointing to the kingdom, as was the custom in all the Capets. Ugh, damn, some weird things come into my mind! What do I need all that for? But what's happening? I do know there should be a square with two theatres and the Palm fountains in the middle in this place... I was there yesterday with Honoré. What's happening with the time?" I could suddenly smell the smoked meat, I gulped and immediately stopped the exercise of getting historical facts from my memory. There was a slaughterhouse here and in the morning it was probably meat trading. Next to the slaughterhouse there stretched single-storey buildings with a dozen of curved chimneys on the roof. That was where the enticing smell was coming from. It could seduce anyone! But not those two. Where do I know them from? Oh, yes! I have already seen them. Each of them had nameplates "Toma Kriko" and "Valet Robert" on their chests... What are they for? Nonsense!

Flying high under the ceiling over all the barrels of the smoke-house, I can see these two young men directly below me. I can see them sneaking and looking around. They know what they are doing! Villon wrote that smug and rich Valet's father was a high official of Chatelet. His son would be the first person to know everything near his parent's work! Skipping the classes at university, the guy

38 used to wander through the corridors of the fortress, waiting for his parent there, he learned a lot, particularly a scanty loophole – a secret way out, into the meat rows and the smokehouse. Valet had already tried this crack in the wall, he could easily climb through it and accurately locate where in the smokehouse garlic sausages, brisket in brine or ham were made. You wouldn't be able to sort everything out immediately there. Everything is hanging on the hooks in big oak barrels, under the barrels there are stones and oak or aspen chips. The best thing would be to come across the peach and juniper timber. It is brownish-orange and the smoke smells of spices...

I thought, "If you find yourself here, you won't be able to quickly find what you need at the temperature of 30 degrees. What if it is not continuous smoking today but just for 20 minutes or so!" It is impossible to see the meat colour and its readiness. Under the beamed ceiling there flocked continually heaving clouds of steam. The heat was becoming unbearable and I got down insensibly... The lantern light from the left, through the tall windows, was brightening the creeping, swirling vapour in the tender opal, greyish-pink and blue-grey tones.

Toma Kriko was sweaty and pulling his head all the time to remove his wet locks from his forehead. Moving from window to window, he closed the thick curtains. Only the experience and the butcher's habits were of great help here. Taking turns in pulling the ham, they went into the corner room with sausages. Without saying a word, Kriko quickly grabbed half a sack of the garlic treat and hid it under his shirt stuck to his stomach. I was following him and couldn't help grabbing a few rounds of sausage as well...

The outside air was freezing my lungs although it was not that cold; the snowflakes were big, wet and sticky. The horses were snorting, the passers-by were rushing to finish all their business and sit close to the fire. The students got to the Seine quickly. From here it was particularly scary to look at the visible symbols of royal power at the time. I could see the Bastille, still untouched by the people, the huge walls of another prison, Chatelet, against the backdrop of blackened shacks, and already on the island de la Cité – the tower of the Conciergerie. Nearby there was the Notre Dame. Many of its niches were completely clogged with snow, the heads of the stat-

ues were covered with high snow caps. Usually when I came here, 39
I would hold back to watch the huge cathedral, but now I did not
even slow down, I was rushing to keep up with the thieves. They
crossed the Little Bridge crowded with the houses to the left bank.

“Why is it so dark? It’s just the beginning of a new day,” I thought,
“and it’s already dark! Why am I following them anyway?..” It was
getting dark, the dank mist was filling the narrow streets. The walls
and roofs of the houses, figures of the passers-by were merging
into indistinct dark grey silhouettes. The night seemed to be swal-
lowing everything with its bottomless gut and the life continued only
where the dim streetlight reflections were dancing on the walls and
where the golden lights of tallow candles were shining through
the windows of houses... There was not a single star looking through
the thick clouds and the wind was blowing over the roofs making
the rusty weather vanes creak.

It struck ten. Past the wasteland of Luko the city guards patrol
passed with lanterns and halberds, patting their gloves. “What am
I wearing? And I am not cold! If they see me I am going to be arrest-
ed,” I tried to look at my light beige trousers stained in the bishop’s
castle, and my green jacket but I didn’t see anything, I stretched my
arm and couldn’t see it either. “Am I invisible again? It’s so amus-
ing.” The worst thing was everything got mixed up in my head: was
it Vale carrying the meat on his shoulder or was it my piece of ham?

I remember it being light when the young thieves got out of
the smokehouse. First they rushed to the Great Bridge. Then to
the Cité Island, the Little Bridge and now the Hill of St Germain
piled with haphazardly narrow streets, the eternal bustle and laughter
of scholars... I remembered, “Oh, yes, they were talking about Vil-
lon and walking to the wasteland Luko, to that same place...” Now
the orchards and gardens were already at hand. It was up Rue Saint-
Jacques and up the hill. Exactly – up the hill. That meant they would
fall many times slipping on the thick layer of the viscous mess of
slop and excrement covering the road. “The good thing is,” I thought,
“that the wet snow doesn’t let the stench rise and the cold turned
some of all that into the hard dirt.”

The journey to Luko lasted the whole day. The same place in
Paris, where the two were passing, was like a *deja vu*, and repeat-
ed several times. The student Street Fuaro would turn up most of-

40 ten before my eyes. It was something close to me. It must have been drawing me. It looked more like a brothels centre than a faculty of ten schools. Everyone in Paris knew the students had busters there on weekends. The school looked like both a brothel and a public loo last night. Sensible people tried to keep away from it. Later on the truants returned to the right bank several times and went to see the Place de Greve. The thieves seemed to clarify if they were doing the right things or something went wrong. This place was clearly telling everyone what was good and what wasn't. However, people killed, stole and cheated everywhere. The war must have taught them to live that way and no threats could get rid of that. The friends enthusiastically did about their business just a hundred meters from the Place de Greve, and everything turned out well!

The other pair were also lucky. They were Ki-Tabari and Jean Rentier. I knew them. Villon described all of them in his Legacy. I saw one of them recently on the rack in the castle Meung-sur-Loire. So he had survived! Or maybe everything got confused again in my mind and time? The second one was the son of the royal cook, a creepy drunk and a loud rowdy. They also had nameplates. They looked like they had put them around their necks before the gallows, not with the scratched out words "cheater", "thief", "counterfeiter" but with their names. Horrible! They had a barrel of wine with them – they had nicked it from the pier in the Rue Saint-Jacques and were now rolling it up the hill, not on the soft slops but along the hard of the frost pavement. I thought, "So handy, the barrel will not bang on the house walls. They have a good chance of not breaking it and completing their dinner of smoked ham with." Only Tabari was probably agonized with other problems. He was hoping Ratier would not be tempted to drink ahead of time. Why is he laughing loudly all the time? Without any reason at all. And there is one more thing. God forbid that Marion is in the barrel, the nastiest potion throughout France!

They have already passed the junction of Rue Saint-Jean and Ecole. Both pairs of student thieves must have arranged to meet there, near Saint-Benoit le Betourne. As usual, there were crowds of bonkers in the hope of healing, and their friend, master of arts François used to live there.

I can see the students becoming alarmed. It turns out, they knew master Chirac was reading a lecture to students of their faculty di-

rectly from the balcony of the house with the sign “At the baker 41
Julien’s” at that time of the day. “We need to pass this dangerous
place as soon as possible,” Jean Rentier shouted. “If they see us,
we’ll get into trouble!”

Having passed the natural audience of master Chirac, the four
truants are rolling the barrel towards the apiary of the churchmen in
Luko, joking and laughing. Robert, the one who was carrying
the smoked beef leg on his shoulder, slipped on the crap and fell
noisily with his precious load. A fat woman with blonde curls looked
out of the window and breaking the king’s decree, threw the slops
out of the window and drenched the fallen man with them. As if
nothing had happened, Robert shook himself, laughed, picked up
the soiled meat and stumbled on.

I also got my share of the crap and clearly felt the viscous, sticky
liquid creeping behind the bow and shirt collar and causing nau-
sea...

Part 2

*These curses, blasphemies, these maledictions, groans
These ecstasies, these pleas, cries of Te Deum, tears
Echo respoken by a thousand labyrinths, –
An opium divine for hungry mortals' hearts!*

Baudelaire Ch. The Beacons
(translated by James McGowan)

1.

François ran into some yard, jumped over the fence and found himself in the familiar wasteland. Exhausted and heavily breathing, with his mouth bleeding, trembling from the terrible excitement, he hastily pushed the whippy branches of the bushes and stepped onto the uneven path, covered with broken yellow stone. His heart was beating fast, noisily hitting his chest. Breathing in deeply several times, he felt his body get weak. His legs were shaking and ears humming. Above his head there hung a swarm of bees. François tried to make a few steps carefully, not to frighten the bees, and he heavily lowered on the ground. He sat there for a few seconds looking at the place in the bushes where he had just got out of. Then he turned. He saw an alley of the green bushes and an apiary of bee-hives... He had to think of something. A little away from him out of the land there was sticking out a low building without a roof made of the same yellow stone that was lying on the path. Inside the building there was a huge manhole with something like steps...

That morning the sun was shining brightly and the air was fresh and clear. The twenty-three year old Maître François Montcorbie was sitting on the doorstep of his home in the Rue Saint-Jacques, directly under the clock of the church of Saint-Benoit le Bétourné where his adoptive father was a chaplain. To breathe in the fresh air, to talk to his friends, to compose poems for his girl or just to look around was the best rest for a respectable townsman. 43

Rare passers-by were walking past him, smiling and talking, pleased with the recent noisy celebration. Rose and cherry petals, remaining after the festive procession, stuck to the wet cobblestones and their aroma hovered in the air...

Suddenly the infuriated priest Sermuaz accompanied by two or three people ran to François and shouted, "Swear to God! I found you!", after which he started a quarrel. Maître Montcorbie tried to calm him down, but Sermuaz was getting angrier and he finally drew his dagger and wounded François' face and cut his lip. Defending himself, the latter then poked his dagger in Sermuaz's groin, and fled. The priest didn't feel the wound and tried to follow him but didn't catch him and two days later he died.

After that tragic event Montcorbie had to hide in anticipation of the just court decision for the first time in his life. At the same time, he met an extraordinary man who seemed to understand and always wait for him. Soon their friendship will have been seven years. He is a friend! No, to be exact – a partner. He either managed to live in a dilapidated building in the apiary of Luko, or he guessed when to find himself there, in the place where they had quarried stones for Parisian pavements. He is probably a student. He must be. Why hasn't François still asked him? He would run here every time he was in difficulty or a danger, when he needed a warm word, care or attention. This student, a friend, a partner... Only now Maître Montcorbie realized he didn't even know his name! So, his devoted admirer touched his heart. He would recite his poems, he counted all thirty-seven characters in his Legacy who he gave forty-three items to, he knew exactly how many lines had been written for one person and how many for another. Being an eternal debater, he always wanted to change something in his poems, and sometimes he would announce of his great discovery – he, François Montcorbie, had copied something from Alain Chartier's works and he was

44 nearly his double! So, what can you say? He was in love with the “great poet” (as he probably named François), as much as one can be with your idol.

How old is he? It is hard to say. He is a student but that doesn’t mean anything. François is also a student... Being a student is not an age, it is a way of life. Such a wonderful time! Freedom, yielding to any influence, fresh impressions, gaining seductive experience, previously thought to be a taboo. The time slows down and it seems you have so much of it... Anyway, one day this boy – they were over thirty by now – declared his love to the maître and François accepted it more favorably than he would normally do.

It has happened many times. One night or another, trying to hide from the people. Montcorbie would remember he had an admirer, a friend and would beg him to give him a shelter for a night or two, telling him some merry and amusing adventure as an excuse. The important thing was that it was that day that his admirer was waiting for him. How was that possible?! It was a miracle! To thank the burrow’s host for his hospitality, he would charm him with his stories, seduce him with the shine of his wit and irrepressible immorality. Apparently, François’ sensual feminine nature excited the admirer of his talent. And the “great poet” was captivated by his friend’s temper, impulsiveness and enthusiasm. As a true descendant of the Romans, he was libertine and entirely dependent on an incident, the eternal student lived each day as he liked. Mostly, in poverty. But as they said, “Poverty is not a vice”. Besides, he was a poet! So by his very nature he was an asexual creature. During the internal dialogue it was capable of innumerable splitting... He could become a pimp and a tavern owner’s wife, a student and a prostitute, a trader on the bridge, and a poet, a duke, a bandit, and an executioner... God knows who else!

The morning would come and before leaving he could accept a gift from the gracious host as a sign of friendship and love. Silver spoons or a wine cup with some stones on the glass stand – that was so good!

“When everything around you does not obey you,” François thought, “this cute creature close to me is a good defense from fear. If suddenly I get a feeling of guilt – for I do break the law sometimes – he is to blame, not me: he didn’t stop me and didn’t warn

me!” Maitre Montcorbie even smiled, pleased by this thought. “Really I should respect and even protect him as a brother, so loved and close to me. Especially when he is so complicated, weird and helpless, he always has a mask on his face. He hides his feelings. He’s scared. Scared to show his soul because he thinks people will surely spit into it. He must have suffered in his childhood. Like me! Only I can survive and will always think of something but he won’t! He probably got a bigger blow in his childhood. That’s why his secrecy is mad. He is quite weird in everything: his behavior, words and clothes. He believes only me. I am like an escape for him, a sacred creature that will not offend his mangled and vulnerable soul...” 45

In regard to his friend, François always maintained some kind of virtue. Living far from the city center, away from the street noise, on the edge of the Latin Quarter, the fan probably had no idea of the many tricks of his idol, the maître Montcorbie. “Actually, what tricks?” François would ask himself. “I am sitting here, all nice and calm, dry and black, with no brows, slim like Chimera, with my head looking like a peeled and roasted nut, I am hiding my sword in my half-female student clothing... What tricks? I can steal a barrel of wine or some ham. Yes, I can! So what? I would do it to survive another day and share it with my friends... Have I killed mad Sermuaz? Serves him right! It was an accident anyway: I was protecting myself. I just happened to be there. Someone stole something and I was caught. It has happened again recently but this time I was just on the lookout... By the way, I have been forgiven for everything,” François even stood up straight, being so proud of himself. “First one king forgave me, then the next one did as soon as he put the crown on. It looks like they have a ritual of forgiving! And they keep it for some reason... I also remember – they were taking the three-year-old daughter of the Duke of Orleans. In honour of that event they forgave me. I even fell in love with her... And yesterday the Parliament forgave me. They did kick me out of Paris. I only have three days. I am sure God will also forgive my sins, both past and future.”

* * *

It was interesting to watch them talk. Sometimes, not very often, the admirer would recite something from his poems... Some words

46 were not familiar to the maître but he felt the poetry strength and music and they made him feel the beautiful. Even in the crap! “Great! Nearly as great as mine!” François liked to say.

Their conversations were not limited to poetry. There were questions and answers expressing very complicated thoughts. They seemed to be flared, printing on a grey sheet of consciousness and they illuminated the dark and obscure, concerning the question, with their unusual light. Reading François’ ballades, his friend would suddenly stop, look down modestly and quietly say which was the best way to write this or that... Such excessive modesty did not get along well with the fanciful appearance and clothing of the fan. When they were reading together “A Ballade for the Competition at Blois”, he insisted on changing the words “When lying down, of falls I have great fright”, into “When lying on the ground, I am scared of falling down”.

“Actually, it is better,” François would agree, “for you can still fall off the bed if you tried really hard... But what’s the difference? It’s like the last year’s snow – the tournament finished, the curtain is down. I have won anyway!” François’ friend would find unnecessary repetitions in his poems, wrong quotations, he knew if he had cheated and who he had copied. “What a bastard!” the “great poet” would think but he didn’t take offence and repeated, “My friend has no idea we have canons in everything! You’ve got to know how to depict popes and emperors, merchants and monks, young men and girls, old men and women, the handsome and ugly... Also... it is only talent which copies. Geniuses steal!”

The process of their communication fascinated, cured, and then enthralled them to action.

“I am living in Paris like a squirrel in a wheel, without a moment of peace,” Montcorbie would say about himself. “The movement is above all! I even endow the death with these properties, even here I manage to show love to the rhythm... I show the wind rocking the bodies of the miserable hanged hither and thither... I reckon the crime attracts me with its dynamics, and not its demonism. In general, I’m probably the only poet free of any illusions. Going on a life journey, I just do not take on board such fragile cargo. I just take what I can see and feel, there is no imagination, nature with its moon, green grass or breath of spring”. François paused thinking of something.

Sometimes two people, being in a spiritual crisis, walk through 47
life towards each other without realizing it. Then they meet. The similarity of fate and characters that removes the pressure of life's contradictions... Gradually there appears a wonderful sense of trust. And inside this naked world is a special environment of love, friendship and mutual dependence. The soul is awakened, freed from the bonds of affection, gets amazingly free of lulling exposure of habits... The mind gradually begins to extinguish the anguish depression, "realizing" its one-sidedness. Quite a different feeling of tormenting opposites comes to the surface. It is now different from the division into black and white...

* * *

I startled. Suddenly, like in my childhood, right before my eyes on the background of the blue sky there appeared again a happy dancing girl with butterfly wings... "Why is she following me?" the question got stuck in my brain and couldn't find the answer. "Or is it me who wants to see her? But why?..."

Both friends were sincerely happy with the unity of their souls. But the biggest pleasure was the awareness of the fact that they were willing to swim forever in the process, even if the result caused only troubles. François loved to say, "You know, it's much better to drink good wine, to steal and to love than a hangover, a sweaty shirt of fear or an accidental pregnancy..."

The admirer of the maître agreed and, like a wise old man, continued the idea he liked, "Life is doing such things to each of us, and we make a lot of mistakes... However, it's normal. Everyone is travelling in life with a sack full of resentment and frustration. We are looking for the goal, we strive for it, and reaching, we get disappointed, realizing that this is not what we dreamed of. People often make mistakes..."

"So how do we determine the true goal?"

"I think if you aspire to the goal, then this is it. But the expectation of the result is different, it is the mother of all disappointments. Probably, it is necessary to have such an internal engine that never stops. You say that movement is everything for you! Even in death, even in crime... For me it is the world of painting."

I could not help remembering my father and our walks through the Latin Quarter. When I was a child, my father managed to give me all

48 those walks... It was a magic place, I would say a divine place – Luko. For us it was the Luxembourg Gardens, with its sculptures! It embodies the whole of human civilization... François was silent, he was looking into my eyes with an interest as if he was feeling and aware of the power of many centuries of time layers. Like in his “Ballade of Ladies of Former Times”... “But then it was not enough for me just to be a spectator. I felt like jumping in the mirror and starting to create, to tell people my vision of life. It just happened so – my poems were being born. That was so exciting. I was ready to sacrifice everything: my time, money, comfort, connections – for the sake of the new born beautiful, and through all this I wanted to understand myself, to see myself from the outside for a moment... I was obsessed with this process. And over the years I realized that success was not how much, or what I had written, but that I had not lost my dream. Today nothing has changed. I still have this engine. Do you get it? I have got the same passion I had when I was a child.”

François’ friend had been talking for a long time without stopping, as if he had torn off the invisible cocoon, which used to paralyze him and would not allow to show his sincere feelings. He’d felt deeply before and worried about what was happening around, but something always prevented him from expressing it...

“The main thing is not to think just of the results,” I continued confidently. “Those are different layers of your life: glory, comfort, money... Sometimes they touch each other and, like clouds, they fly in different directions by the will of the fate wind. If you personify the embodiment of your dreams, all the rest will come. It will surely do. The worst enemy of success is impatience. It doesn’t matter whether it is poetry, painting or love... You need to wait!”

“Actually, life is a process, too,” François said wistfully, “there are only two real tragedies in it. One is when you don’t get what you want and the other one is when you get it.”

“It turns out, whatever the result is, it won’t make you happy. Only constant movement towards the target will do!” I suddenly thought the true swimmers were the ones who were swimming without a goal... But I didn’t say that aloud. Deep generalization charge stopped the flow of the thoughts and words.

Being on the road or in the free swimming is always wonderful and mysterious! Wanderers or sailors feel volatile, like spirits, even

to themselves. "Is this really happening to me?" they repeat time and again, leaving their environment, the usual communication and soaring into the heavens. At the same time they avoid commitments, evade responsibility, float away, escape and disappear. 49

Both poets had long stood motionless and silent like the white marble statues in the Luxembourg Gardens, looking into each other's eyes, and their satisfaction energy healed their wounded souls.

2.

The four student thieves in muddy coats and torn jackets, with a barrel of wine and ham got back to the place and got through the hole at last. Further on there were long galleries carved in stone, and in the end of them there was a cave. In the narrow niche in the yellow limestone cracks there were fixed three torches. A big pile of red-hot coals was glowing and breathing with scorching heat. But the heat was disappearing fast in the dark stone lanes. Two people were sitting on the old empty barrels. They were playing cards and one of them was trying to scratch his feather pen on a sheet of parchment. The third man was stirring the coals in the fire. Those who were playing, were talking at the same time. Why is their quarter in Paris called so? Is it a result of the clumsy Latin language? Or not? Who knows contemporary poets they could extract something about ancient works from? Maybe, there are some anecdotes and short ballads... They couldn't read the ancient text, really! I trudged the last effort in the tracks of the student thieves. The charge of the "machine of time" must have been finishing. Finding myself in the stone dwelling and hearing its occupants chatting, I thought, "My god! The world is not changing. Four hundred years later students are still looking for an easy way of getting knowledge not bothering to read the authors in the original language."

When they saw the food-getters, the card players got happy and bustled, preparing a makeshift table for the feast. A minute later they all began to eat, merrily but thoroughly discussing where else they could easily steal a good drink.

"Why have you got a knife?" interrupting the general hubbub, the eldest of them suddenly asked, pointing to the sheath hanging on an old leather belt of Ki-Tabari and demonstrating his extraordinary knowledge of colour jargon, continued, "Be warned, next time

50 wardens will nick you for armed robbery. It's ok if you get away with a slammer*, but you could end up dancing on nothing**. In Montpellier and Monsokone... how many of them are hanging out on two floors!"

I recognized François Montcorbier's voice at once and decided to wait. "It's a shame he is not on his own... But at least I can listen to his friends... That's interesting!"

"Well, you're like Macrobius!"*** the guy who was sitting to the right from François said, breaking away from the game. He was slim, wearing a grey canvas shirt and his hair was cut short. "Stop talking in peddler's French****. I don't want you to invite disaster. By the way, tell me, food-getters," the man turned to Robert, "Have you seen anyone in Greve?"

Valet Robert mumbled, "Well, they were boiling a woman, why? Well, what's her name?.." Vale looked at Toma Kriko asking for his support.

"Margarita Grimme... for the sale of three fake thalers," Toma said quickly.

Robert waved his arm and continued, "Yeah! Then, whatsit... they chopped off a warden's wrist. Remember? The one that tried to get us two years ago..."

"For the first theft it's an ear, the second one – the other ear, and for the third is a rope or a fire. It effects everyone who doesn't understand: don't be malicious to anyone..."

"The world is fair, after all!" Toma Kriko pronounced solemnly. "Of course. We are students and don't touch us! He has been told so, but he ignored. Now if he doesn't get retired, he will have to ride a horse with a hook instead of his hand."

"He shouldn't," the judicial official's son said with the knowledge of the case. "No one wants to work there. He'll definitely stay there and we'll meet him again." After a pause Valet raised his index finger and pointedly continued, "Look, we're always right! He got into other people's business and received what he deserved." Robert

* A jail.

** Gallows.

*** A Roman emperor.

**** To speak in the thieves' slang.

suddenly remembered the fight of François and Sermuaz because of Catherine de Vossel and continued with his irony to poems, "Our great poet did kill that... Served him right, shouldn't have started! And that woman, as well! Shouldn't have hired bullies and killers!" 51

"Why don't you remember anyone?" Ki remarked. "You must have done too much studies."

Robert continued without taking notice of the insult. Out of all people, he was the one who knew for sure he had never been hard-working.

"That was so horrible! The loop was shining, it definitely was! Another piece of luck – the duke's daughter was passing by. Here we go! Amnesty! You can live like that! Sometimes I think..."

"Wow! You only think sometimes," Ki-Tabari edged in again.

"What?!" Robert got offended. "I just think that under us there is some big truth... It's stronger than the king or God."

"I am not interfering," the one who was squatting on the left and stirring the live coals suddenly said. He looked like a monk with a black hood on his head, "it's none of my business. But I would be very careful..."

"Don't take God's name in vain! How can you think!" François interrupted the "monk" as if he couldn't hear him at all and turning to Robert, he continued, "Your father! That's the truth! Otherwise we would be hanging... They don't take them off for long. All the eyes would have been pecked out... Those... Whatsit?" François smiled, winked, and in retaliation for Robert's irony of the great poet, he parodied his forgetfulness.

The conversation died down. François and the slim guy in the grey shirt continued to play cards. With that, the maître, who had just talked moralizingly about the knife, wardens and supreme justice, was slowly sipping the stolen wine from a huge mug. The rest of them were watching the players. No one was surprised at the fact that their old friend François Montcorbier, just sentenced to banishment from Paris for ten years, was sitting with them, eating and drinking, and not complaining. And Ki-Tabari, a year ago nearly exhausted to death by Bishop Thibault d'Ossini, was alive and happy, his flat nose and slobbering mouth were the sign of his good mood.

But then the skinny one passed the cards, and I felt that the players crashed into... I saw François fidget impatiently on the barrel. And

52 in his grey, fast, and fun-loving eyes I saw mischief again. As if nothing had happened to him recently.

"It's my birthday soon, why am I still here?" the one dealing the cards whispered slowly, pretending he was bored with the game. However hard he tried, no one paid attention to his words. Everyone was busy with their own things. François quietly squinted in the direction of the one who was sitting by the fire on his haunches making sure he wasn't spying. Ribo would cut piece after piece from the meat, dip it into the wine and throwing his head up, reverently he sent it into his mouth. Valet, hearing the players' conversation about the Latin Quarter at the cave entrance, now started talking about the spirituality of the student quarter in Paris as a real educated scholar. His words turned clumsy and he was lisping, through which you could more or less distinctly hear something about the Goths, about Mary Magdalene, about the church and even Abelard. Apparently the name of the scientist and one of the first teachers of the University of Paris, known for his love relationship with a student, had been heard.

"Why do you have no women here?" Ki-Tibari asked loudly.

"You know," Ribo answered expressively, moving closer to the torch and admiring the sparkling drops of the wine on the juicy piece of meat, "it's much better like this." Everyone burst out laughing. A moment later Ki returned to the eternal subject, "Why are you laughing? After these words I don't even feel like..."

"Here we go!" Robert interrupted his muttering about the Latin Quarter and got into the dispute with Ki-Tibari. "You are the one who is clever. Nearly as clever as François... You can't help longing for... Happiness... And happiness is when I can eat!" Robert was surprised with his own eloquence and he carried on, "There is more happiness if I can eat a lot... And women..." he didn't finish and just shrugged his shoulders with a grin.

"I can understand everything," Ki justified seeing that no one supported him, "but..."

I could see every movement of these truants and each of their face expressions. I could see and hear every word of the eldest of them, François. I believe I could see their cards as if they opened them to me all together, even though it was dark in the cave. "They are not playing the fool," I thought, "that's something different. Oh

yes! It's poker! That's when it appeared in Paris. 52 cards, four jokers, they suit any combination and I bet they were marked in Monpino near the castle in Meung-sur-Loire, where Ki-Tabari was tortured." 53

The slim player was called Junot. That's what it said on his name plate. He was also a famous offspring. A university teacher's son. Quite stupid. François wrote that people like him couldn't be changed. Whether he would read or not, listen to lectures or not – all the same! The father and son were like capped communicating vessels. Everything on one side and nothing on the other!

My hand reaches for the familiar parchment sheets of paper scattered on the rocks, but finds nothing. At this time, Junot took five cards, put them in a pack, then leaned somewhere aside and whispering something under his breath, began to "suck in": pushing the cards slowly, seeing only the top right corner. The eight of spades appeared. "Hmm! Not that good," I got it. "Another eight. Now of diamonds. A pair on a full pack when dealing to two – it's impressive. It has never happened in Apollonie's salon." Junot got his breath and casually looking at the pieces of dirty meat, smelling of fresh slops, pretending not to look at his cards, said, "People, you are so clumsy! I can see you've plunged into the shit... Try to step on the stones, like the ladies in long skirts from the right bank do," finishing his lecture, he fixed his eyes on his little slightly open pack of five cards. The third card was something like the four. "Who cares!" the quick thought passed my mind. The gambler's fingers did not obey of excitement, he moved the three top cards a little bit more... The red sign of the hearts appeared and just halves of two circularities... "That's it! I won!" the player heard in his mind, "Three eights! I won't bother looking at the last card."

I wouldn't do that, either – it's too hard. I haven't got enough breath... When did they play like that? Oh, yes, with Flaubert! That was when he pretended to be bored with the game and told everyone he would ride his bike in the morning and shout the text he had written the night before. Why did he shout? To check all the words poured gently and smoothly, without unnecessary repetitions and pauses.

At that very time, François just picked up and put two cards, then he dropped three, and from the deck he bought three new cards. It did not go unnoticed. "That means he's got a pair. Ha! And I've got three!" Junot was dreaming. The maître also folded his cards in

54 a pile and slowly pushed it. His face looked unusually stone, like a monument. So did his eyes. The slim guy broke down and looked at the fifth card. Good God! Joker! Quads!" As calmly as possible, he threw the extra four and, emphasizing the ease of movements, he took the top card from the common pack. He didn't even hide it, he just raised it to his eyes... Very close to his eyes. All the nerves of the planet seemed to have built in his body. A charge as strong as that could smash the walls of the Chatelet and the Louvre all together. Why, the new cathedral in Cité would be in trouble. The eight of clubs! Listen, how did it happen?

Francois saw the slim player change his card and decided he had a koller* and he was drawing a card of the needed suit. What else could happen? There could also be two pairs and he would want to turn one of them into a three. Or a street. That was when you have all the straight cards. A rare mess! But still...

So François was lucky again! Ki got two jacks, a queen and a king. He changed three last cards for two hacks and a joker... It's better not to say what happened next. It was a misfortune for Junot! The horror of his life... For François it was a usual soul state: luck in cards, luck in life... But not in love!

I covered my face with my hands and tried not to look at the unfolding tragedy, failing to realize what the gamblers were actually playing for.

3.

"What's that one doing here?" I asked myself. In the corner there was sitting on something invisible a dandy with a bow on the chest, leaning against the rough stone wall. I could see by his face he liked it to sit like that and surprise everyone with his look. "However," I thought, "all this time no one has noticed him. No one apart from me..."

"Open your eyes!" the invisible man said in a very familiar voice. "You are not the only one who got here because of your love to Montcorbier," the dandy got up slowly, made two steps, leaning on an elegant cane with a shiny knob: he must have pondered how to take a man in a suit of an idiot, unusual for these places. In turn,

* Five cards of the same suit.

I slowly began to think. "That means that at least someone can see 55 me or hear me." This fact both pleased and alerted me. A second later the dandy with a bow disappeared as if he had never been there. Someone followed him in the dark gallery. He slipped into the darkness, like a moth by a bright flame and that was it...

A sharp cry broke the vision. That was François who noticed Toma Kriko sticking the smoked sausages between the stones. "Sooner or later our proud class will reject you. Being eternal students, we steal to survive, not to get richer."

"You are so ignorant, do you doubt in our professionalism?" Val-et was staring at his partner Ribo, and unable to bear such an insult to the skilled thief's soul, he shouted as the last argument, "I will nick another piece of meat from that butcher tomorrow... Or maybe two or three! I wondered why you gathered all those sausages, the whole bag of them..."

"Hey, my friend!" Montcorbier suddenly said walking in my direction. "What brought you to our humble abode? I can't help thinking you're trying to nick something nice from us: either meat or wine. Don't you want to say something?"

With my head down, I shifted awkwardly from foot to foot, scared to open up to the friends of François.

"Why do I get the feeling," François went on, "that you are one of those idiots who are always crowding at Saint-Benoit-le-Tour? They dressed you up and kicked you here to us. So you are standing in the corner, restless and lonely..."

Montcorbie quietly asked Tibari, pointing at me, "Look, Ki, who is hiding there?" But he just shrugged his shoulders, gave him a wry smile and said nothing. François probably thought that he didn't see, didn't care after the pits in the bishop's castle in Ossini Meung-sur-Loire.

"First of all, hello, dear François," I said knocking the cane on the stone floor and looking around for the dandy, "I have been waiting for you. But I can see you are with your friends now. I didn't know that would be for long..."

"Damn! I didn't recognize you, my friend! You are wearing this stupid bow again!"

"I quickly looked at my chest, "Oh, no! That damned bow! It's those transformations again! Before this I thought I saw written

56 sheets of parchment, wanted to raise them from the stone floor but could not, or I didn't see my own hands..."

"I have never asked you your name. All these years..."

"That's right. You haven't got it in your Legacy or in the records of trials. If there is no my name there, there is no name in real life... For us there have always been more important things, haven't there, François? Something does not add up today. Can't really talk..."

The light spot flashed in the darkness again, and I rushed there...

Montcorbier watched his admirer and just smiled. There was nobody next to him now. All his friends had disappeared. The fire died and on the stone there were lying written sheets of parchment with greasy fingerprints on them...

4.

I was sitting in the armchair with my eyes on the little smoldering fire and stirring the coals in the fireplace with a poker. It felt good! I had no single thought! Then I got one, started stirring and creating an idea outline, but without success. I added a couple of logs. They were swallowed by the flames at once. The firewood crackled nicely. I lit the bronze table lamp with a thin sliver from which the black plume of smoke stretched out and the burning oil of beechnuts filled the room with its pungent smell. It gave a wonderful aroma to the white cloud hanging over my hot cup of fresh "tea".

A few moments passed and after breathing in the healing aroma, I "left" my room in Cat Angler street again and found myself next to François.

"I am glad you haven't been here," Montcorbier whispered, he was obviously up to something. His weary eyes were shining with dim lights again, exactly the same way they did when he had played cards.

"Have I not been here?"

"You went somewhere. You just got up and went without saying a word. And that scarecrow wouldn't have come to me if I had not been on my own. Guillaume Biche was here and has recently left."

"Who is that? I have heard this name..."

Instead of the answer François just shrugged. He started from afar.

"You probably think why I am sitting here after deportation, eating, drinking and playing cards, as if nothing has happened, as if my life has not taught me anything..."

"You know the best, François, you do... You are great, aren't you?" 57

"Firstly, I still have two days. Secondly... In short... Louis was here yesterday..."

"Who? The king? On his own? Why? What do you mean – yesterday?"

"Not on his own, of course. This bastard Biche came with him. He was here and talked to me. Just like that!" François pointed the way the king had stood next to him.

I was silent, waiting for the details. After a pause, Montcorbier went on.

"First of all, Biche turned up. As if he had waited for you to go." François began to list the events of the last night, flavoring them with funny remarks. "Last night the king secretly left his residence and accompanied by his nasty pimp, he walked around the hot spots in the most doubtful parts of the city. Apparently, the king had quite a few mistresses every day. Their names are well known. As you can understand, none of them became his official mistress. Apparently, Louis, having suffered a lot at the time of the presence of Agnes Sorel at his father's court, was too scared of women and their influence on the politics. But for Catherine de Vossel to be his woman for a night!"

"Is that the Catherine you told me about?"

"Yes, it's her."

"Do you still love her?"

"God forbid! Between François the lady's man and Montcorbier the poet denying love there is a distance of several years, a few women and a few disappointments."

"Did she dump you or did you?"

"No one did! But I loved her and was deceived from the very beginning..."

"But you loved her! That's the main thing! That's the only love I know. For many years I was just worshipping the image. I came up with it myself and loved it. Just to think that it can be real was enough for me. It was similar with the knight by the name of Don Quixote."

"I don't know him."

"Hmm".

"Who is he?"

58 "Well, he was Spanish... You know, as soon as love becomes mutual, I leave. Not because I am a lady's man. You won't believe but I am just scared. I am scared that one day love will leave me as my mother did when I was a child."

François missed the words about my mother but having heard about the Spaniard, he remembered something and said ruefully, "Oh, what a shame, I've never been to Spain. My street Saint-Jacques is the beginning of an ancient Roman road towards there..." After a pause he continued without paying any attention to the love maxims of his admirer. Of course, I was obnoxious, and I interfered in what didn't concern me. As a result, I was kicked out and even beaten up. I saw Catherine as a different person. And I didn't know what she was like when she didn't pretend to be listening to me. If only I could know..."

When François started to talk about women abstractly, his words were always bitter. He vividly described the merry maidens of the numerous Parisian brothels, their tight dresses or naked boobs to attract clients, surcoats* of obscenely bright colours or such narrow tunics that they might just as well do without them. As for the tricks of the professional women, François snidely remarked that female beauty was a temporary phenomenon. While they can do so, they should catch the moment! On the one hand, maître Montcorbie of course was right, I did not want to argue with him. After all, it wasn't he who came up with the idea that time flies, or discovered that however magnificently the spring blossoms, sooner or later it will be replaced by the summer heat, and then the cold rainy autumn will come...

I could have long reasoned with myself about Montcorbie's women but I suddenly remembered the words of François about the king and asked impatiently again, "What was after that?"

"Then there was Martha," the subject must have touched François' nerve and he could not stop talking about his adventures. "She was of good service to me: she introduced and recommended me to Charles of Orleans, the prince of lovers. Five years later I returned to Paris. What do you think happened? Catherine had always seen me as a tramp, let alone now, when I was shivering and badly battered after the prison**. I found out she was giving the rich Etienne

²³ An overcoat of free cut.

²⁴ In 1460 Villon was imprisoned in the town of Meung-sur Loire, under the jurisdiction of the severe bishop of Orleans Thibault d'Ossini.

Marchand what she used to refuse to the poor scholar. By the way, 59
Marchand is the insider at the court of the new king Louis XI's younger brother."

"You could now use all this confusion. I mean the king's brother, the Duke of Orleans and her, who doesn't appreciate her fate..."

"That's exactly what happened, my friend. Both Louis' brother and Catherine told the king about me. Probably in their own ways. Before that Charles of Orleans and Jean de Bourbon had as well..."

"Don't drag the time!"

"The result was..."

"Were you invited to the court?"

"I have never in all my life served anyone! Neither aristocracy nor bandits! That's why I probably see the world from the outside... Listen to what I have learned from the king. Not from him personally but from Biche. The king appeared here, in the cave, late at night for a couple of minutes, he came up to me, looked fastidiously, said something to his man, nodded his head, said something nasty about Alain Chartier and poets in general, about his first wife and left."

S.

"Late last night," François looked like he was going to talk about the events of the night before, "when you left so suddenly, in the very corner of the cave, near the torch, there appeared an old short disgusting person with a long nose wearing a short cloak with a hood. He came up to me quietly and whispered something in my ear. Taken by surprise, I was scared at first, but then tried to listen, however, I could only understand part of what had been said, "You must follow him everywhere," the old man kept whispering, "every step, every movement is important to us. These people are rich, they can speak many languages and dialects. They are adventurous and can do anything... Now about you, my friend. We will forgive you, of course. But we can't do it forever! There is limit to everything. I will secretly tell you – you will end badly... Unless, of course... Anyway, the Bourbons are our main goal! I am being frank with you... I have been watching you for a while here. I have heard you chatting to your friends, then to some idiot with a bow on his chest."

François realized the old man had been squatting by the fire, keeping silent and did not turn in their direction while they were

60 eating, drinking and playing cards. Now Biche was talking to him in an insinuating voice, now and again he would suddenly remember something, straighten up as much as he could with his height and pronounce loudly, "One must not kill! It's not good to steal! Do you agree with me?" Without waiting for my reply, he would continue, "I repeat, my dearest friend, everything will be gone. You will be famous... You are known to many people now. Especially to students... Well, I have been reported to me... But later on, in tens of years, everyone will know the outstanding hero of France who served to unite France. Well, a poet, too... You won't find it difficult. You even have something in common with them..."

François stopped talking as if he was thinking who he had something in common with. A couple of minutes later he went on, "Do you know what he told me?"

"That's a silly question!"

"You are a writer! A poet! You should to be in harmony with the power! You have been cared for... You are a pleasant and nice person for us, we can always catch... respect you."

"Here we go! What do you think about me being a spy?"

Having received no answer, François continued, but without much interest, "Biche was telling me about the twists and turns in the relations of members of the Bourbon and Orleans. He named Marie of Orleans a few times and reminded me of my commendatory poems of her. Then he talked of Charles, her father, and the Bourbon brothers... But I still could not understand what he wanted from me. He must have needed something but Biche was careful and didn't talk openly. What did he mean? Who knows! Anyway, he is mad!" François blurted finishing his story – all that time I didn't get a chance to say a word.

"But the king has been here..." I whispered and in my words there was either a question or a doubt or maybe even fear to frighten away something important. I remembered the students' conversation in the tavern... I looked at François. From the beginning of today's meeting his eyes were either lit with determination, or got covered with languishing doubt. He seemed to wish to shift his responsibility and was asking me, "What shall I do? They will come again, I know – and I won't get rid of them!" Then, without waiting for my reply, he suddenly gave me a hug, put his head on my chest

in a childish way, as if saying goodbye, looked at me quickly and mischievously and smiled... 61

"Unfortunately, the king has been here," he said wistfully and disappeared.

I didn't see him anymore.

I am in my room in the narrowest street of the Latin Quarter again. I have got the same dusty and clumsy furniture, dirty floor, sad windows with dusty windows with the rain streaks on them and foggy mirror. The contours of the face look blurred in the mirror, so does the colour... Fire is shining in the eyes of my reflection through the gloomy haze...

Something is rhythmically tapping on the window. I got up and turned around. A thin acacia was growing to the left of the window. One of its branches with the young leaves was stretching high. Touching the window, it was trembling in the light morning wind and seemed to be calling me somewhere with its whisper...

* * *

In a short time, Paris would be sucked again in the cycle of everyday life, the pure words, wishes and promises would be forgotten but the fleck of the festive lights would remain in my heart as a sign of something the time has no power of... I gazed on an old woman, who was walking towards me. Crooked and poorly dressed, from a distance she looked very ugly. We caught up and I saw her toothless face shine with happiness.

"Another Epiphany," she said speaking to no one in particular and smiled at the sky.

Epilogue

Baudelaire continued rotating in the circle of his problems. However, this whirlpool was not as sinister as before. His new collection “Paris Spleen” was published three years later and then the second edition of “The Flowers of Evil” a year after that. Like François Villon, he left Paris and his favourite Latin Quarter. There they sparkled like real artists, but it was there where their tortured souls burned.

After the memorable meeting of the two poets, something shifted in the psyche of Baudelaire. The happy moments of childhood were able to break through the hard shell of mental complexes, destroy it and bring in the healing and air of happiness and love. The need to bring their quirks to surprise the society disappeared. At the same time, the passionate love for the mother revived, so did the desire in any way to live down the grief he caused in her life...

But the Time! It was running faster than he wanted it to. There was hardly any of it left. There was just its devilish pack: Memories, Regrets, Fears and Longing.

* * *

Exiled from Paris, François Villon went to the Duchy of Bourbonnais, whence his ancestors had derived from. At least three things attracted him there. The first was: since 1456 the lover of Villon's poetry, Jean II, had become the Duke of Bourbon. The second was: that very Jean was the elder brother of Pierre de Beaujeu, whom

the king wanted to marry his daughter Anna. And another thing. 63
Jean II was called Kind. Maybe, for a good reason...

Charles of Orleans died in 1465, two years after François Montcorbie left Paris. At the head of the funeral procession was little Marie of Orleans's fiancé – famous Señor de Beaujeu Pierre Bourbon. A year later someone tried really hard, and the 27-year-old Pierre de Beaujeu was engaged to the 5-year-old Anna French, the daughter of the French king Louis XI. Her younger sister Jeanne was married to Louis, the youngest offspring of Charles of Orleans.

The affairs of Duke Charles the Bold of Burgundy each year went from bad to worse. He suffered several defeats by the Swiss and soon in 1477 was killed. Five years later his 3-year old granddaughter was engaged to the son of Louis XI, the future king of France Charles VII. The extensive lands of the last Duke of Burgundy: Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, Lorraine, Alsace – were divided between France and the Habsburgs, which led to their confrontation, lasting the next few centuries, and determining the balance of power in Europe until the middle of the XVIII century.

So a year before his death, Louis XI reached the main goal of his policy. He managed to collect nearly all biggest feudal lands into one country.

And in 1490, when the Dauphin of France was the son of Louis XI and regents Anna the French and Pierre de Bourbon from the family of Bourbon ruled the country, printing was invented. The first book was the book of poems by François Montcorbie – François Villon.

Charles Baudelaire's Poems

THE FLOWERS OF EVIL TO THE READER

Folly and error, stinginess and sin
Possess our spirits and fatigue our flesh.
And like a pet we feed our tame remorse
As beggars take to nourishing their lice.

Our sins are stubborn, our contrition lax;
We offer lavishly our vows of faith
And turn back gladly to the path of filth,
Thinking mean tears will wash away our stains.

On evil's pillow lies the alchemist
Satan Thrice-Great, who lulls our captive soul,
And all the richest metal of our will
Is vaporized by his hermetic arts.

Truly the Devil pulls all our strings!
In most repugnant objects we find charms;
Each day we're one step further into Hell,
Content to move across the stinking pit.

As a poor libertine will suck and kiss
The sad, tormented tit of some old whore,
We steal a furtive pleasure as we pass,
A shriveled orange that we squeeze and press.

Close, swarming, like a million writhing worms,
 A demon nation riots in our brains,
 And, when we breathe, death flows into our lungs,
 A secret stream of dull, lamenting cries.

If slaughter, of if arson, poison, rape
 Have not yet adorned our fine designs,
 The banal canvas of our woeful fates,
 It's only that our spirit lacks the nerve.

But there with all the jackals, panthers, hounds,
 The monkeys, scorpions, the vultures, snakes,
 Those howling, yelping, grunting, crawling brutes,
 The infamous menagerie of vice,

One creature only is most foul and false!
 Though making no grand gestures, nor great cries,
 He willingly would devastate the earth
 And in one yawning swallow all the world;

He is Ennui! – with tear-filled eye he dreams
 Of scaffolds, as he puffs his water-pipe.
 Reader, you know this dainty monster too;
 – Hypocrite reader, – fellowman, – my twin!

VOYAGING

I

The wide-eyed child in love with maps and plans
 Finds the world equal to his appetite.
 How grand the universe by light of lamps,
 How petty in the memory's clear sight.

One day we leave, with fire in the brain,
 Heart great with rancor, bitter in its mood;
 Outward we travel on the rolling main,
 Lulling infinity in finitude:

Some gladly flee their homelands gripped in vice,
 Some, horrors of their childhood, others still –

Astrologers lost in a woman's eyes –
Some perfumed Circe with a tyrant's will.

Not to become a beast, each desperate one
Makes himself drunk on space and blazing sun
The gnawing ice, the copper-burning sun
Efface the scars of kisses and of lies.

But the true voyagers set out to sea
Just for the leaving's sake; hearts lift aloft,
Nothing dissuades them from their destiny,
Something beyond their knowing cries, 'We're off!'

These, then, whose ecstasies are wide as air
As conscripts dream of cannons, have their dreams
Of luxuries beyond what man can bear,
Such as the soul has neither named nor seen.

//

Our actions are grotesque – in leaps and bounds
We waltz like balls or tops; when day is done
Our curiosity rolls us around
As if a cruel Angel lashed the sun.

Strange thing it is, to chase a shifting fake –
A goal that's nowhere at all!
Man, whose anticipation stays awake,
To find his rest goes racing like a fool!

Our soul's three-master seeks the blessed isle:
A voice on deck shouts 'Ho there, have a look!'
Some crow's-nest spy cries in romantic style
"Love... glory...happiness!" Damn just a rock!

Each isle is named the long-awaited sight,
The Eldorado of our Destiny;
Fancy, that grows us orgies in the night,
Breaks on a reef in morning's clarity.

Oh, the inebriate of distant lands,
This sot who sees Americas at will,

Must he be chained, abandoned on the sands,
Whose visions make the gulf more bitter still?

So the old tramp who shuffles in the filth
Dreams of a paradise and lifts his head –
In his wild eyes, Capua and her wealth
Wherever candle glow lights up a shed.

III

Fabulous voyagers! What histories
Are there behind your deep and distant stare!
Show us the treasures of your memories,
Those jewels and riches made of stars and air.

We are travelers afraid of steam and sail!
Here in our prison every day's the same
Oh, paint across the canvas of our souls
Your memoirs, with horizon as their frame.

Tell us, what have you seen?

IV

'We've seen the stars
And waves, and we have seen the sandy shores;
Despite disasters, all our jolts and jars,
On sea, on land we find that we are boed.

The glorious sun across the violet sea,
Great sunlit cities dreaming as they lie,
Made our heart yearn with fierce intensity
To plunge towards those reflections in the sky.

Rich cities, and the grandest mountain spires
Somehow could never hold the same allure
As shifting clouds, the shape of our desires,
Which left us unfulfilled and insecure.

– Surely enjoyment quickens passion's spark.
Desire, old tree, that fattens on delight,
As you grow older, toughening your bark,
You want to see the sun from nearer height!

Do you grow always taller, grandest tree,
Older than cypress? – Still, we have with care
Brought sketch-book pieces from across the sea
For brothers who love all that's strange and rare!

Idols with trunks we've greeted in our time;
Great palaces enwrought with filigree
And jeweled thrones in luminous design,
To send your brokers dreams of bankruptcy;

Scant costumes that can stupefy the gaze
On painted women, every nail and tooth,
And subtle jugglers, wise in serpents' ways.'

✓

And then, and then what more?

✓

'O childish dupes!
You want the truth? We'll tell you without fail –
We never thought to search it out, but saw
From heights to depths, through all the mortal scale
The numbing spectacle of human flaw.

Woman, vile slave, proud in stupidity,
Tasteless and humourless in self-conceit;
Man, greedy tyrant, lustful, slovenly,
Slave of the slave, a sewer in the street;

The hangman jokes, the martyr sobs and faints,
The feast of blood is seasoned perfectly;
Poison of power drains a tyrant's strength,
Whose subjects love the whip's brutality.

Religions like our own in most details
Climb skyward on their saints, who it is said
Indulge their lusts with hairshirts, or with nails,
As dainty fops sprawl on a feather bed.

Drunk on her genius, Humanity,
Mad now as she had always been, or worse,

Cries to her God in raging agony:
 “Master, my image, damn you with this curse!”

Not quite so foolish, bold demented ones
 Flee from the feeding lot that holds the herd;
 Their boundless shelter is in opium.
 – From all the world, suck always is the word.’

VII

How bitter, what we learn from voyaging!
 The small and tedious world gives us to see
 Now, always, the real horror of the thing,
 Ourselves – that sad oasis in ennui!

Must one depart? Or stay? Stand it and stay,
 Leave if you must. One runs, one finds a space
 To hide and cheat the deadly enemy
 Called Time. Alas, some run a constant race –

The twelve apostles, or the Wandering Jew –
 For them no ship avails, no ways or means
 To flee that gladiator; others know
 From infancy how to defeat the fiend.

Finally, though, his boot is on our chest;
 Then may we hope, and call out ‘Onward ho!’
 Even as once we set out for the East,
 Our eyes fixed widely, hair blown to and fro,

Now sailing on the sea of shades we go,
 With all the plans of passengers well-pleased
 To hear the voice, funereal and low,
 That sings: ‘This way! Come here and take your ease

And eat the Lotus! Here we gather in
 These fruits for hearts that yearn for strange delights;
 Intoxicate yourselves on alien
 Enjoyment through these days without a night.’

We understand the phantom’s friendly part,
 That Pylades who reaches out to tease:

'Swim towards Electra now, to ease your heart!'
She cries, and long ago we kissed her knees.

VIII

O Death, old captain, time to make our trip!
This country bores us, Death! Lets' get away!
Even if sky and sea are black as pitch
You know our hearts are full of sunny rays!

Serve us your poison, sir, to treat us well!
Minds burning, we know what we have to do,
And plunge to depth of Heaven or of Hell,
To fathom the Unknown, and find the *new*!

François Villon's poems

A BALLADE OF GOOD ADVICE

You men who've lapsed, and are deprived of reason,
Your nature lost, and out of knowledge far,
Deprived of sense, and broken by unreason,
Deluded, foolish – ignorance your share –
Against your fate, why do you strive and dare,
Putting yourselves in danger of death's pride,
Through cowardice? Can no remorse now hide
The horror of shame, which leads you on again?
Can you not see how many young men have died
By sin, and stealing wealth from other men?

Each man sees in himself his own misprision;
No vengeance must we take, but patience bear.
We know that all the world is but a prison,
Even for good men, of impatience clear.
It is but ignorance to quarrel here;
Rape, theft and murder are to sin allied.
He God ignores, and turns from truth aside,
Who spends his youth among such actions. Then
He'll wring his hands – thus sorrow shall provide
By sin, and stealing wealth from other men!

What worth are swindles, flattery or treason,
To cheat, to live, or without faith to swear,

To trick, deceive, to manufacture poison,
 To live in sin, and still to sleep with fear,
 Mistrustful of your neighbours who live near?
 So I conclude: for good, be all things tried!
 Take heart, for comfort does in God reside.
 Each day and week lies far beyond our ken.
 Our evils harshly on our parents ride,
 By sin, and stealing wealth from other men!

Virtuous live, let discord be defied!
 In old and young be peace, both side by side,
 Laws require it, and Paul's holy pen
 Lays this down, and does it still ordain.
 Order and state we need to be our guide.
 Note all these points, nor our true fate deride
 By sin, and stealing wealth from other men!

VILLON'S EPITAPH FOR HIMSELF, BEING A BALLADE OF THE HANGED

Brother men, who after us shall stay,
 Let not your hearts against us hardened be;
 For if you pity us poor lads today,
 Then God will pity you more speedily.
 You see us hanging here, some two or three –
 As for the flesh we too much satisfied,
 Now it's all eaten away putrefied;
 Our very bones to dust and ashes fall.
 Don't laugh at our sad bodies, sorely tried,
 But pray to God that He'll absolve us all.

I call you brothers – yet do not, I pray,
 Scorn us because we bore the penalty
 Of justice. For, you know, not all men may
 Be of good sense nor yet act prudently.
 Pray for our grace, who've sinned so dreadfully,
 To Mary's Son, for pardon to abide.
 Let not to us His mercy be denied,
 Upon our souls let not Hell's lightning fall.
 Now that we're dead, don't harry us beside,
 But pray to God that He'll absolve us all.

The rain has washed and scrubbed us day by day;
 The sun has dried and blackened us piteously.
 Magpies and crows have pecked our eyes away,
 Torn out our beards and eyebrows painfully.
 We cannot sit, but swing perpetually.
 As the wind varies, blown from side to side.
 As the wind's pleasure, constantly we ride,
 Pricked by birds' beaks, like a tailor's fingerstall.
 Don't join our brotherhood whate'er betide,
 But pray to God that He'll absolve us all.

Prince Jesus, you have mastery far and wide:
 Against Hell's Lordship be our guard and guide.
 We would not pay Hell's due, nor be its thrall.
 Men – here's no place to mock us in your pride,
 But pray to God that He'll absolve us all.

A BALLADE FOR THE COMPETITION AT BLOIS

Though near the fountain, yet of thirst I die;
 I'm hot as flame, my teeth are chattering.
 At home, I seem to wander distantly.
 Near to a fire, I'm scorched yet shivering.
 Bare as the worms, yet to fine clothes I cling.
 With tears I laugh, await no hope's delight.
 Despair alone brings comfort to my sight.
 When I rejoice, I GET NO PLEASURE STILL.
 I'm powerful, yet I lack all power and might.
 I'm welcomed, but by all men treated ill!

I've nothing sure save in uncertainty,
 No darkness save in every plainest thing.
 I have no doubts except in certainty.
 A sudden accident will knowledge bring.
 I always win, yet I lose everything.
 At dawn I say: 'God give you all goodnight!'
 When lying down, of falls I have great fright,
 And I have nothing though I have my fill.
 I'm no man's heir, yet still await my right.
 I'm welcomed, but by all men treated ill.

I care for nothing, yet act carefully,
 (Though I've no claim), for wealth's rich gathering.
 He riles me most who speaks most happily.
 He is most true who lies in everything.
 He is my friend, who tells me that the wing
 Of some black crow is a fair swan's so white.
 Who harms me, helps me to his power's height.
 Now they're all one – the truth and liar's skill.
 I remember all, conceive no things aright.
 I'm welcomed, but by all men treated ill.

Merciful Prince, I pray you learn my plight.
 I learn so much, and yet my sense is slight.
 I'm headstrong yet submissive to law's will.
 What's more to do? My pledges bring to light?
 I'm welcomed, but by all men treated ill!

THE LEGACY OF FRANÇOIS VILLON

I

IN FOURTEEN hundred and fifty-six,
 I, François Villon, scholar, declare
 My mind is sound! The thought I fix,
 (Bit between teeth, and hauling fair),
 That one should judge one's works with care,
 As old Vegetius has said,
 (A Roman wise, and counsellor rare),
 Or otherwise, a man's misled.

II

On the date mentioned herebefore,
 At Christmas – dead time of the year –
 When wolves eat wind, and nothing more,
 And when we stay indoors for fear
 Of frost, and to the fire draw near,
 Desire came to me then to take
 Leave of Love's prison, harsh yet dear,
 Which once did make my poor heart break.

III

And this I did in such a way
 As kept her still before my eye,
 Consenting to my disarray
 Though she no happier lived thereby.
 I mourn and rail against the sky
 For vengeance on her. Now I move
 All the gods of love on high,
 Praying they'll ease the grief of love.

IV

And though I counted in my favour
 Her sweet regard, her seeming fair,
 With every fine deceiving savour,
 Tricking myself as I declare –
 The promise was false, and left me there,
 In my great need was I left sole.
 Some other plans must I prepare,
 And knock within some other hole!

V

That look of hers did capture me;
 Cruel and harsh, she brought me woe.
 In nothing I acted evilly,
 But she ordained me to undergo
 Death – and cease to be! And so
 I see no help now but to flee.
 The soldier of life she would break through,
 Not hear me crying piteously.

VI

So to avoid this dangerous part,
 I know my best course is to flee.
 Farewell! To Angers I depart,
 Since she will not accord to me
 Her grace – not even sparingly.
 Stout limbed, I die for her. I prove
 A martyred lover, finally
 Numbered among the Saints of Love!

VII

Although it's hard to take my leave,
 Now far away must I be gone.
 As my poor senses do conceive
 She favours now some other one.
 Never salt herring from Boulogne
 Brought me such thirst as now I bear!
 So pitiful my case has grown,
 May God at last my clamour hear!

VIII

Since to depart I must begin,
 And to return I am not sure –
 (I'm not a man who's free of sin;
 I'm no more steel than others are;
 Life among men is still unsure
 There are no stages after death,
 I go now to a land that's far) –
 This legacy I now bequeath!

IX

First, in the name of God the Father,
 Of Son and Holy Ghost the same –
 And of God's most glorious Mother,
 Whose grace saves all from death and shame,
 I leave, by God's good grace, my fame
 To Master William Villon,
 Who's known by the honour of his name,
 With my tents and my pavilion.

X

Item: to her I've just depicted,
 Who's hunted me so cruelly,
 That I from joy am interdicted,
 (She drove me from joy relentlessly)
 My heart – encased in reliquary –
 I leave – pale, dead and pitiful.
 Though sorrow she pictured for me,
 May God to her be merciful!

XI

Item: On Ythier Marchant now,
 Whom I feel much beholden to,
 My sharp steel sword I do bestow,
 And on Master John le Cornu,
 It lies in pawn as many do;
 Eight coppers was its value deemed.
 My will is, without more ado,
 That it's given them, when it's redeemed!

XII

Item: to Saint-Amant I give
 The *White Horse* Inn as well as *The Mule*;
 To Blaru my diamond I bequeath,
 And *The Striped Donkey*, intractable,
 And the decree which says in full
Omnis Utriusque Sexus,*
 Against the Carmelite's own Bull,
 I leave to priests, to enforce it thus!

XIII

To Master Robert Vallée I send –
 (Poor Clerk of Parliament is he,
 Valley nor hill can he comprehend) –
 First I ordain that there should be
 Given to him, not liberally,
 My breeches (in *The Greave* they are),
 In order to dress more fittingly
 Jeanne de Millièrès, his lady fair !

XIV

Because he's a man of some position,
 He must the better rewarded be,
 As the Holy Ghost gives admonition,
 (Although he behaves quite stupidly).
 So I've decided, thoughtfully,
 Since he's bare of sense as a cupboard is –
 The 'Art of Memory', let it be his!

XV

Item: to provide a living
 For Master Robert I now declare,
 (Be not envious of my giving),
 My parents must sell the mail I wear
 And the money (at least the greater share)
 Must all be spent by Eastertide
 To buy this man (a puppet rare!)
 A shop, St James's church beside.

XVI

Item: as gift I give and send
 Silk gloves and hood, both wide and loose,
 To Jack Cardon who is my friend,
 With willow-acorns for his use;
 And every day a fine plump goose,
 As well as a capon, good and fat,
 Wine white as chalk – ten barrels to choose,
 And two lawsuits, lest he grow too fat!

XVII

Item: to that lord I give,
 (Regnier de Montigny), good dogs three.
 To John Raguier the sum I leave
 Of a hundred francs from my property.
 Moreover, as I the matter see,
 It can't be increased – and there's an end!
 A man should not take too generously,
 Nor ask too much from my friend.

XVIII

Item: now to the Lord of Grigny
 Let Nijon's stout defence belong,
 With six dogs more than to Montigny,
 And Vicétre's castle and donjon strong.
 And to that changeling, full of wrong,
 Mouton – who sued him evilly –
 I leave three strokes of a leather thong;
 In peace, in fetters, may he lie!

XIX

To Jack Raguier, I leave something big;
Popin's Trough, to be his own,
 Peaches, pears, some sugar, a fig,
 He may have choice of every one.
 Also the Inn of *The Old Pine Cone*,
 Close and snug, to sit by the fire,
 Wrapped in a Jacopin friar's gown –
 Let any sneer who may desire!

XX

Item: to Master John Mautaint, this –
 And to Peter Basanier, given free –
 That Lord's kindness whose task it is
 To sentence and fine relentlessly!
 For my lawyer Fournier there shall be
 A small cap and embroidered hose
 Cut by my shoemaker, skillfully,
 For him to wear, during ice and snows.

XXI

Butcher John Trouvé shall have, I say
The Sheep Inn, tender and fat as well.
 And a whip to keep the flies away
 From *the Crowned Bull* – which they want to sell –
 And from *The Cow* – may he catch and quell
 The knave who carries her – on the sign!
 If he won't yield her, I foretell
 He'll hang in her halter, high and fine!

XXII

Item: the Knight of the Watch* shall have
The Helmet Inn to hold and keep;
 And, to his soldiers stout and brave,
 Through markets groping, while men sleep,
 The harvest of two thefts to reap,
 With *The Lamp* in the street of Pierre-au-Let;
 But in *The Three Lilies* I'll lie deep,
 When I'm prisoned in the Chatelet.

XXIII

Item: now, on Perrenet Marchant,
 (Who's called the Bastard de la Barre),
 Since he's such an excellent merchant,
 Three bales of straw do I confer,
 To spread on the ground both wide and far,
 Whereon to ply his amorous trade.
 Or he'll have to go where beggars are –
 For indeed he knows no other trade!

XXIV

Item: to Loup and Cholet too
 I leave a duck (to each a part),
 Caught near the walls as we used to do,
 By the moat when daylight does depart!
 And to each a coat both long and smart,
 Down to their feet like a friar's gown,
 With peas and bacon, coal on a cart,
 And my top-boots, with the uppers gone!

XXV

I start afresh, and leave, for pity,
 To three small children, naked and bare,
 Who're named within this present treaty,
 Poor orphans, for whom none takes care;
 Unclothed, barefoot, they wander there,
 Naked as worms within the mould –
 I with them to be provided for,
 At least against this winter's cold!

XXVI

First of all, to Colin Laurens,
 Girart Gossouin and John Marceau,
 Deprived of riches and of parents,
 Not a bucket handle they have! And so
 To each a third of my wealth shall go;
 Or, if they wish, four coins to hold.
 The roots of dandelions they'll chew,
 These poor children, when I'm old.

XXVII

Item: my place and nomination,
Which I hold from University,
I leave and give by resignation,
As warrant against adversity,
To the poor clerks of this same city,
As in this Deed I now declare.
I'm moved to this act by charity,
And kindness, seeing them poor and bare.

XXVIII

I give to Master William Cotin,
Also to Master Thibaut de Victry,
Two poor clerks who both speak Latin,
They quarrel not, but live peaceably,
At the lectern they chant with humility –
To them the rent I now do leave
On the mansion of Guillot Gueuldry,
Until more money they may receive.

XXIX

Item: the *Crosier Inn* I bequeath
Which in St Anthony's Street stands plain,
Or a billiard cue, to play therewith,
With a pot of water from the Seine,
To those poor pigeons who suffer pain,
Locked in prison, a sorrowful life –
My fair bright mirror I ordain,
And the mercy of the jailer's wife!

XXX

Item: I leave to the hospitals
My windows, cobweb-curtained high;
And those who sleep under market stalls
Shall have, each one, a punch in the eye,
Trembling, frowning fearfully,
Unshaven, snotty-nosed and thin,
Short breeches, and clothes torn dreadfully,
Frozen, beaten, and soaked to the skin!

XXXI

Item: my barber now I give
 All of the clippings of my hair,
 Which freely with no bar I leave.
 To the cobbler my shoes – the ancient pair;
 The rag-and-bone man my clothes shall share,
 Such as they are, when I put them by,
 Worth less than when they were new and fair –
 I leave them this to charity!

XXXII

Item: I leave to the begging Friars,
 To Beguines, nuns, and such as they,
 Titbits and sweets for their desires,
 Capons, fat fowls, and pies so gay,
 Then *The Fifteen Signs* to preach away,
 Into their hands to bring some bread.
 Monks mount our neighbours' wives all day,
 But that's not important, when all is sad!

XXXIII

Item: *The Golden Mortar* I leave
 To John the grocer, John de la Garde.
 A crutch of St Mor I also give
 As a pestle for mustard, strong and hard.
 To him who marched in the leading guard,
 And with great grief has me oppressed –
 May he by St Anthony be charred!
 And I'll make him no other bequest!

XXXIV

Item: to Marbœuf now I give,
 And Nicholas de Louvieux, to hold,
 To each an eggshell now I leave,
 Filled with francs and coins so old.
 To the guard of Gouvieux, stout and bold,
 Peter de Rousseville I give – that so
 His understanding may better unfold –
 Such coins as the Prince of Fools might throw!

XXXV

Finally, as I was writing,
 Tonight, alone, and feeling fine,
 This same Legacy inditing,
 I heard the Sorbonne bell's clear sign,
 Which every evening sounds at nine
 The grace which an angel did impart.
 I paused and ended this work of mine,
 To say a prayer within my heart.

XXXVI

My mind most troubled then I found,
 The wine had not done this to me;
 It was as if my soul were bound.
 Then did I sense Dame Memory
 Place, in her cupboard carefully,
 All her species collateral,
 With judgement false and, finally,
 All other things intellectual.

XXXVII

And even the sense of judgement too,
 Through which comes gift of prophecies,
 With Simile, Metaphor – wherethrough
 It often happens, because of these,
 That a man, through their adversities,
 Each month a mad lunatic will grow.
 If I remember, I've read all this
 In Aristotle, some time ago.

XXXVIII

Then Sensitivity awoke,
 Waking Fantasy, no less,
 And every other organ woke.
 The sovereign part then, in duress
 Was held, as if in death's distress,
 By Oblivion then, on every side,
 Which filled me, and did me oppress
 To show with Sense it was allied.

XXXIX

My senses then did reach repose,
 My thoughts were disentangled clear,
 And so I thought my task I'd close,
 But found my ink was frozen here.
 My taper's light did disappear;
 No other light could I then find.
 All muffled up I slept, I fear,
 And I could not otherwise make an end.

XL

Given on the aforesaid date,
 By that most famous man Villon –
 He who eats neither fig nor date,
 Black as a broom with dirt thereon.
 He's neither tent nor pavilion,
 But what he's left to every friend.
 Scant very soon shall reach an end.

BALLADE

In arsenic ore, that lies in rocky vein,
 In orpiment, saltpeter, quicklime dry,
 In boiling lead that eats all things amain,
 In pitch and soot – that has been soaked in lye
 Made of the piss of Jews with dung thereby;
 In water where lepers' legs have been washed through;
 In scrapings from a foot or an old shoe,
 In blood of asps, in drugs most venomous,
 In gall of wolf, of fox and badger too,
 May those tongues fry that once did trouble us!

In brain of cat that does from fish refrain,
 An old black cat, whose gums hang toothlessly;
 In an old mastiff's spit, of equal gain,
 In froth from mule's mouth, breathing windily,
 Cut up with scissors, small and tidily;
 In water through which rats their muzzles drew,
 With frogs and toads, and beasts as dangerous,
 With lizards, snakes, and other fine birds too,
 May those tongues fry that once did trouble us!

In sublimate that's dangerous and gives pain,
 In a live serpent's navel, horribly;
 In blood that's put in bowls to dry and drain,
 In barbers' shops, when the full moon is high,
 Some green as chives, some black when they are dry;
 In boils and chancres – tubs where nurses go
 To wash their filthy nappies in a row;
 In those small baths of women amorous,
 (Who'll understand must first the brothels know),
 May those tongues fry that once did trouble us!

Prince! Take these dainty morsels. Pass them through
 Muslin; but if you've none then you should do
 Your best with breeches, foul and verminous.
 But first in pig's dung, gathered fresh and new
 May those tongues fry that once did trouble us!

A BALLADE FOR THE WOMEN OF PARIS

Although their chatter is pretty fair,
 Florentine girls and Venetians,
 Enough for a message to send or bear –
 And even among such ancient clans
 As Lombardy women and Roman ones –
 In Genoa the talk trips on and varies,
 In Savoy and Piedmont the talk still runs,
 But the loudest mouths are found in Paris!

They say that there's a Professor's Chair
 In talk, among Neapolitans.
 And they're very good cacklers too, I hear,
 The Germans and Prussians all at once.
 Yet be they Greeks or Egyptians,
 Or from Hungary, or a land that far is –
 Spanish ladies, Castilians,
 But the loudest mouths are found in Paris!

Bretons and Swiss are hardly aware.
 As for Gascony girls and Toulousians,
 Two fishwives from Paris, I do declare,
 Would silence them all, with Lorraine at once!

In England and Calais, the babble stuns –
 Many a name my song now carries –
 With Picardy girls from Valenciennes,
 But the loudest mouths are found in Paris!

Prince, now to these Parisians
 Give the prize for talk that never tarries.
 Say what you will of Italians –
 But the loudest mouths are found in Paris!

THE BALLADE OF FAT MARGOT

I love and serve my fair one happily.
 Think you I'm just a fool in this affair?
 Within herself all wished-for good does lie.
 I for her love both shield and dagger bear.
 I seize a jug when customers appear;
 Off to the wine I hasten silently,
 Fruit, water, bread and cheese serve generously.
 If they pay well, I tell them: '*Bene stat.*
 When you are next in rut, come speedily
 Within this brothel where we keep our state.'

But afterwards comes discord, angrily
 When Margot's moneyless at bed-time there.
 I can't abide her – hate her mortally –
 I snatch her belt, her dress, her coat so fair,
 To serve instead of money – so I swear!
 With hands on hip, 'You Antichrist!' says she,
 And swears by Jesus' death most horribly
 That I'll not have them! Club in fist, my hate
 I write upon her nose most dreadfully,
 Within this brothel where we keep our state!

Soon we make peace, and she farts large and free,
 Like a dung beetle swollen, I declare.
 Then, with her fist, my head raps laughingly;
 'Come!' she cried, and slaps my thighs all bear.
 Both of us drunk, the soundest sleep we share.

We wake, her belly rumbling amorously.
 Then, not to waste her fruit, she mounts on me.
 Beneath her weight than board I'm pressed more flat.
 So by her lust I'm cursed thus savagely
 Within this brothel where we keep out state!

A BALLADE OF MERCY

From Celestine monks, Carthusians grey,
 From begging Friars and from the devout;
 From idle men and dandies gay;
 From servants; from each pretty slut
 In a fair long gown and handsome coat;
 From smart lads, loving fervently.
 Who feel no pain in the tightest boot –
 From all these folk I mercy cry!

From girls who their bare breasts display,
 To bring them customers of note;
 From cheats, inciters of affray;
 From men with dancing monkeys mute;
 From men and women who fool and plot,
 Who, six abreast, go whistling by,
 From jesters' bladders and bells – the lot –
 From all these folk I mercy cry!

Not from those mongrel jailers – they
 Who gave hard crusts, as all my lot,
 To chew each night and every day!
 I fear them less than dung of goat.
 Farts and belches I'd give them – but
 I'm sitting, so I cannot try –
 Yet to end all riot and angry shout,
 From all these folk I mercy cry!

May someone give their ribs a clout,
 With heavy hammers, swinging high,
 Or with balls of lead, some weapon stout
 From all these folk I mercy cry.

The call of hearts in the destiny labyrinths

Having read Boris Kornev's novel "Psyche's Dance", one can decide there are two main characters in it – two great French poets, Charles Baudelaire and François Villon.

However, there are three characters.

The first and the main character of the story is its author.

I would love to tell a few words about the author, a few grateful words of the reader who is familiar with the main works of the writer and who appreciates his paradoxical mind and keen eye (those are the qualities, rarely combining with each other), his extremely capacious – lapidary and at the same time inclusive style... I would love to talk of all that but will do later, not now. Now I will talk of his story, of Psyche's dance.

That is it – without the quotes – of the dance of Psyche.

Psyche is a personification of the soul, or the Soul itself. Whose soul? Nobody's, it is free, or at least it is free until her dance started. When dancing, Psyche becomes the soul of the person who she decided to dance with. Not everyone gets chosen by her, and yet the range of dancers is quite wide; for many thousands of years of human existence, it absorbed a fair amount of the favourites of the goddess.

These are people of different ages, different nations and different ideas about life. But they are vaguely similar in something. Each of the dancers merges with his neighbour and is poured into him, like the water in the communicating vessels, he is illuminated with the joint light, and obeys the same dance rhythm – the rhythm, given by Psyche.

Boris Kornev describes this in his own way, *"Sometimes it happens that two people in a spiritual crisis go through their life towards each other, without knowing it. They meet. There is a similarity of fate, similarity of*

characters that removes the pressure of life's contradictions... Gradually there is a wonderful sense of trust. The soul is awakened, freed from the bonds of affection... Their mind is gradually, with anguish, beginning to dampen depression, realizing its one-sidedness. Quite another feeling of festering opposites comes to the surface. It is already different from the division into black and white... And there comes healing." 89

That's it!

There is only one, very minor detail that can be missed by a person reading these words. And that detail is: the meeting the author is talking about is not necessarily taking place among the contemporaries. Sometimes there are years, decades or centuries between the people but they still meet and with cheerful surprise they watch their profound similarity and close connection.

Actually, it is such a meeting that is the main focus of attention in the story "Psyche's Dance".

If we try to retell the story in short, we've got the following:

Before us is Charles Baudelaire himself, the "damned poet" and the author of "The Flowers of Evil". He is endlessly tormented with the mismatch with the world; in his despair he multiplies those mismatches of his own free will, he turns his happy love into misery and his happy life into oppressive stagnation; he is infected with syphilis; he deliberately makes himself an addict. In short, he deliberately pulls himself out of the hated everyday life into out-of-limit areas. So, one day he breaks the irreversibility of the time flow and meets his fellow writer with similar fate, François Villon. He can see Paris of the XV century, he slips on the stones of its richly manured streets, he watches the adventures of the thieves and petty politicians... And the main thing is he talks to Villon and discovers the mystery of his unexplainable disappearance in January, 1463. (Boris Kornev has his own ideas about this mystery and we won't talk of them now – why would we unlock all the author's secrets?..)

Such is the plot of the story in general, and at first glance.

However, the situation is more complicated than it seems to a superficial reader.

Firstly, it drew the attention that the author has quite an unusual approach to the creation of a biographical piece. I can't remember any of the honest workers of the genre – whether it was Maurois, Stone or anyone else – writing their books in the first person ("I am thinking of the great poet and find that..."), or a narrative person as a fictional observer ("I met the Great poet today and we talked of..."). No, B. Kornev writes his story on behalf of Charles Baudelaire.

"I am going to get up and go for a stroll in the Jardin du Luxembourg. I adore that place..."

90 "My childhood was extremely happy. I was the only and long-awaited child..."

"Expelled from the world of love, I began the sequence of my own destruction... I wouldn't say women don't attract me but the natural animal instinct always pushes me away..."

The author feels very confident in the dark soul of his fictional hero. The painful and unnatural manifestations of Baudelaire genius suddenly become part of some coherent, consistent picture: according to Kornev, the poet is motivated not by a passion for self-destruction, but by the hatred of the lazy one-way flow of time and sedate march towards death. You cannot get out of the march, out of this stream by legal methods, and you have to resort to what the inhabitants of the everyday consider illegal.

The break through the time, the meeting of Baudelaire and Villon in this picture look very logical; this breakthrough is quite natural and harmonious in the literary space.

Here I cannot help but notice the way that the notorious topic of "finding yourself" started by Mark Twain and his "Yankee in King Arthur's Court", in our time has grown to impropriety, creating a whole literary(??) movement, which I would name "Finding Yourself". The essence of it is known: a character for no apparent reason (here the authors usually do not bother explaining) falls out of our time and finds himself in some remote epoch, and then either reshapes it in his own way or modestly watches historical events. You can say what you like, but every fashion should reflect some underlying trends, if even really serious writers (Boris Kornev has always had a sharp and deep vision of modern times) consciously or unconsciously begin to explore the world of "finding yourself", then something is going on in the atmosphere of the first quarter of the XXI century, that makes people dream about breaking through the era and the immediate presence in the bygone. Perhaps the time circle finally closes and the past becomes the future?

Or maybe the dimensional and smooth dance of Psyche became more vivid and hot?

After all, no matter how reasoned we try to be, it was not Charles Baudelaire, but Boris Kornev who managed to get through the thickness of years and get face to face first with the author of "The Flowers of Evil", then with the author of "Ballade of the Old Prostitute to the Daughters of Joy". It was he, Boris Kornev, who was fascinated with the dance of the goddess, found his brothers in this dance and got a chance to see them from the inside. The narration in the first person, the very idea of such a literary device cannot be born of the sedate academic study of the classic's biography: to write this book, you have to feel a deep affinity with its character, a community of election. You need to make yourself a character of the narration.

So, there are three characters in this book, not two.

It is no coincidence the author prefaced his narration with a fairly lengthy introduction filled not with abstract theorizing on the chosen topic, but with purely personal, precious memories to him.

The question is: why does a reader of the biographical book about Charles Baudelaire need to know what school the author of the text went to, who his teachers and friends were and so on?..

But the logic of the story “Psyche’s Dance” is that without this introduction – so personal and confidential – the circle is not full, the thought is hanging in the air, the images lose their volume and living breath.

“Once the teacher brought a huge map of Paris into the classroom. Similar to what you can find in Google today, you could see streets, architectural monuments and even houses. Every student was allocated a specific part of the map and we were supposed to learn everything by heart. Who and when built what, what was there now and how to get there. For instance, how to get from Place de la Bastille to the Louvre and then to the Triumphal Arch. But you had to avoid rue de Rivoli or the Champs Elysées! That was much more difficult! Or you had to get from the Vendôme Column to the Gare d’Austerlitz. What column was erected in Place de la Concorde and in whose honour? There was a bridge nearby named the same as the square but on a different occasion... I got the Latin Quarter, or to be exact, the Fifth and Sixth Districts of Paris, everything that was on the left bank of the river Seine, opposite Cité, from the New Bridge to the Petit Pont, from Grand Augustin Quay along the most ancient street of Saint-Jacques, crossing Boulevard Saint-Germain and Rue de Ecoles, then the Sorbonne, the Lycée of Louis-le-Grand XIV... In the end there was the Jardin du Luxembourg...”

The quarters of Paris, that schoolboy Kornev got – the left bank of the Seine up to the Luxembourg Gardens – was a space of life of François Villon, his home, his oecumene. Here, in spite of the hundreds of reconstructions, everything is still permeated with its spirit. Cité, the New Bridge, the Sorbonne... These names seem to tell us about Villon, having pronounced them, you can’t help feeling the wind coming from the medieval Paris. All this with just pronouncing them!.. And if you are wandering along the map long and thoughtfully, repeating the sacred names, if you get used to this world, if you try to mentally penetrate into it... Such mental exercise can lead to unexpected results!

“*Why is it Baudelaire?*” Boris Kornev asks in a sly way. And he gives a sly answer, “*The answer is, “I don’t know!” Somehow it all formed a logical chain...*”

However, there is no logical chain here at all. There is a chain but it is different, it is illogical, bypassing everyday common sense.

92 Really: why is it Baudelaire? He was not the only damned poet. Would Paul Verlaine or Arthur Rimbaud be poor guides in Villon's world? Or, say, Lautreamont – a figure no less mysterious than the medieval ballads writer.

Is it because Villon's oecumene also belonged to Baudelaire? Living in the map of the left bank of the Seine, and saturating the spirit of Villon, was it impossible to avoid the influence of the author of "The Flowers of Evil"? Rimbaud who came to Paris from a French province or Lautreamont, a native of South America, are not Parisians and Verlaine, in all his glory, is a poet of a different spirit.

But why bother to use the services of a guide? Why can't you talk to Villon directly? Why not write the story on behalf of Villon?

There is only one answer to this question: to get into the beyond world, you necessarily need a guide, and this guide must be a person of the mighty creative spirit; no wonder it was Virgil who helped Dante, and not Mr Anyone. Meditating over the map of Paris and pushing the veil of time, one inevitably finds himself in the XIX century first of all, and then in more distant epochs. And between Baudelaire and Villon there is no poet related to both of them.

So hand in hand with Baudelaire, let's hit the road against the flow of Time. After all, it was Baudelaire who wrote the words, premised as an epigraph to the first part of the story,

*One day we leave, with fire in the brain,
Heart great with rancor, bitter in its mood;
Outward we travel on the rolling main,
Lulling infinity in finitude.*

The poet very clearly stated the basic contradiction that burns all his life: the inability of the world to satisfy the universal human hunger.

Interestingly, Baudelaire, meeting on the pages of the novel with Villon, loses his shocking, provocative look, turns from the arrogant Damned poet into a shy Admirer, who lives quietly in his corner, and only at night talks with the Maitre about poetry, love and fate... Why did that happen? It would be expected that joint drinking, violent walks in merry neighborhoods, noisy disgrace are all an inevitable consequence of the meeting of the two great foundation shakers... Any personality of "finding yourself" would build his narration this way if he started writing on this theme.

But not Boris Kornev. He can feel a certain subtlety, elusive to many others: shaking the foundations, slaps to the public taste, voluntary marginality – all that is necessary to the poet only as long as he feels honed in a cage of everyday life. He rebels, trying to escape from captivity. But if the cell has collapsed, if the daily routine has been overcome, the cause for rebellion is gone. What is left is a quiet friendly conversation of two

brothers, getting to each other through the centuries, the union of souls, 93
a dance of Psyche.

“In a short time, Paris would be sucked again in the cycle of everyday life, the pure words, wishes and promises would be forgotten but the fleck of the festive lights would remain in my heart as a sign of something the time has no power of...”

These are the words “Psyche’s Dance” ends with.

Or maybe not. The book ends with a collection of poems by Baudelaire and Villon. Baudelaire’s poems are presented in translation by James McGowan and Villon’s – by Beram Saklatvala. Although these translations were published as separate books, here they are presented as a natural part of the story. Here we can read the symbol of the poet’s faith, trapped in a whirlpool of Psyche’s dance.

*With tears I laugh, await no hope’s delight.
Despair alone brings comfort to my sight.
When I rejoice, I get no pleasure still.
I’m powerful, yet I lack all power and might.
I’m welcomed, but by all men treated ill!*

*He is my friend, who tells me that the wing
Of some black crow is a fair swan’s so white.
Who harms me, helps me to his power’s height.
Now they’re all one – the truth and liar’s skill.
I remember all, conceive no things aright.
I’m welcomed, but by all men treated ill.*

(from F. Villon “A Ballade for the Competition at Blois”.
Translated by Beram Saklatvala)

Sergey Olkhovetsky

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About the author

Kornev Boris Fyodorovich was born and studied in Leningrad, he had been involved in the implementation of the crisis projects in various cities of Russia and Europe for over twenty years. He is a member of the International Association of Management Consulting.

He is the author of publications in the field of management in the conditions of uncertainty, popular scientific, fictional, artistic and journalistic publications. The most known to the reader are "To Wait Immediately: Crisis Project – Relationship and Changing Expectations Management" (2009), stories "Colour Blind: Not All Eyes Can See the Enemy" (2010), "The Real Four" (2011) and "One for All..." (2013), novel "Tandem" (2012), collection of stories "Providence Bay" (2013), and essays and short stories in the collection "The Game of Tetris" (2011), in "Nevsky Publicist" and "The North Flowers" Almanacs (2012–2013).

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The books of Boris Kornev have been translated into English, French, Spanish and German.

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