Love, the Intoxicating Mirage: Baudelaire’s Quest for Communion in “Le Vin des amants,” “La Chevelure,” and “Harmonie du soir”

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A mirage: a beautiful illusion, an unrealizable hope, an oasis, a vision incorporating desire and its fulfillment; promise, purity, perfection. But a mirage also portends disappointment, insubstantiality, unreality; a vision that fades, vanishes, a dream. Still, the memory of the mirage remains, revives, reanimates the hope. Unreal, the mirage cannot be touched, reached, grasped. And yet it continues to allure, entice, and refresh, in its own particular way, the weary, thirsty desert traveler. This traveler knows, even as he doggedly continues his desperate quest, that his longed-for vision will eventually disappoint him, deceive him, desert him. Attraction to the mirage—for the quester knows that it is a mirage—implies hope and despair; prayer and damnation; fulfillment and emptiness; momentary ecstasy coupled with painful, poignant, irremediable loneliness; the blessing and the burden of consciousness of self, of others, and of time.

Love in Baudelaire’s poetry often takes the form of such a mirage. It is a vision that intoxicates him. Such is the case, for example, in “Le Vin des amants.”

Le Vin des amants
Aujourd’hui l’espace est splendide!
Sans mors, sans éperons, sans bride,
Partons à cheval sur le vin
Pour un ciel féérique et divin!
Comme deux anges que torture
Une implacable calenture,
Dans le bleu cristal du matin
Suivons le mirage lointain!
Mollement balancés sur l’aile
Du tourbillon intelligent,
Dans un délire parallèle,
Ma sœur, côte à côte nageant,
Nous fuirons sans repos ni trêves
Vers le paradis de mes rêves!
Lovers’ Wine

Space today is exquisite!
Without spurs, or bridle, or a bit,
Let’s gallop now away on wine
For a sky fairylike and divine!

Like two angels in the throes of torture
Of an implacable calenture,
Let’s follow into the crystal blue
Of morning the mirage in distant view!

Softly balanced upon the wing of some
Intelligent whirlwind for a ride,
In a parallel delirium,

My sister, swimming side by side,
We’ll flee without rest unceasingly
Towards the paradise of my reveries!²

The lovers here are intoxicated with love, with wine, with intoxication itself. Their frantic flight toward the “mirage lointain” is at once full of hope and full of despair.

Space for these lovers is exquisite: it expands, opens into the heavens. But even in the first stanza the intoxications envisioned offer not a reality, but a mirage, an image that simultaneously creates and negates itself. For while the sky promises something religious, “divin,” some kind of exalted experience, nevertheless it also contains something that is merely from the realm of make-believe, of fantasy, since it is “féerique.” Transcendence, however, is actively sought in this poem through a quasi-religious communion involving wine, a communion that will enable the intoxicated lovers to “gallop” toward their cherished goal.

What is their goal, if not the tantalizing “mirage lointain” of love depicted in the second stanza? By means of this image the poet reveals his lucid consciousness of the lovers’ flight toward escape in unreality and his consciousness, as well, of their inevitable failure. Here surfaces the poet’s ironic vision of lovers, of the intoxication of wine, and even, perhaps, of intoxication itself. “Angels,” he calls these intoxicated lovers, a word that in this context evokes both purity and its opposite; for how often, one may ask, do heaven’s angels become drunk on wine? And the angelic-demonic lovers here are propelled not by love, but rather by disease, those fevers called calentures, caused by exposure to great heat. These lovers are not merely propelled: they are “tortured.” Does the torturing heat arise from the passion of their love, or from the wine they have imbibed, or from their frantic desire to escape from reality? All of these are possible. The wine has been transformed not into the blood of Christ, the divine transubstantiation, offering the ultimate experience of communion with love, but rather into fevers, disease, in the lovers’ blood. In contrast with their fever looms the coolness, the “crystal blue” of the morning, with its gleaming far-off
mirage. Following that “fairylike and divine” mirage, then, is for these intoxicated lovers an experience that combines ecstatic vision with torture. And so there is despair, and there is hope. For Baudelaire, after all, degradation and torture may open the path to purity and redemption: blessing and spiritual truth.

The tercets highlight the dizziness, the delirium, the constant motion (“tourbillon,” “délire,” “nageant,” “Nous fuirons sans repos ni trêves”) that must be experienced by the intoxicated lovers in their flight toward the mirage. The poet here balances opposites in his description of this quest, which, by its nature, embodies contraries: gentleness with passion, reason with delirium, delicate balance with a whirlwind. The reader here is caught up in the poet’s words, swirling along with the lovers in their dizzying flight. Their voyage is desperate, driven, “sans repos ni trêves.” The words recall Baudelaire’s splendid prose poem “Enivrez-vous” in which the reader is told about the desperate, determined nature of his undertaking: “il faut vous enivrer sans trêve.”

Is each lover in “Le Vin des amants” intoxicated with the other? This question is not answered in the poem. Certainly communion—through wine, through love, through action in common—is sought. The woman is called tenderly (as she is at times in other places in Baudelaire’s poetry) “ma sœur,” which at once distances her from her lover (by insinuating an idea of incest) and yet brings her closer to him spiritually, as a sister-spirit. But the mirage toward which they flee, he says ecstatically, is “le paradis de mes rêves!” Are they her dreams as well? Perhaps, since she may be his spiritual sister, but one can hardly forget Baudelaire’s numerous ironic descriptions of the fundamental lack of communion, even of communication, between two lovers.

The metaphor for the lovers’ motion changes in the final stanza from the figure of galloping in the opening quatrain. Now the figure used describes swimming (“côte à côte nageant”), suggesting an immersion in their intoxication, in the intoxication that will allow them to flee toward the experience of divinity, toward the “paradise” of the lover’s dreams. Communion in this poem, then, is frantically sought through love, through wine, through intoxication, through a goal that will necessarily delight and deceive: a wonderful and terrible mirage.

The lover’s quest in this poem helps explain two of Baudelaire’s most beautiful lyrics about love: the gloriously erotic but strangely rational “La Chevelure,” written for Jeanne Duval; and the dizzying, dazzling, supremely spiritual but nevertheless compellingly sensuous “Harmonie du soir,” inspired by Mme Sabatier. Instead of enchanting the poet in the future, however, the mirage of love looms in these two poems as an intoxicating image from his past, or rather from his memory, which recreates the past.

La Chevelure

O toison, moutonnant jusque sur l’encolure!
O boucles! O parfum chargé de nonchaloir!
Extase! Pour peupler ce soir l'alcôve obscure
Des souvenirs dormant dans cette chevelure,
Je la veux agiter dans l'air comme un mouchoir!

La langoureuse Asie et la brûlante Afrique,
Tout un monde lointain, absent, presque défunt,
Vit dans tes profondeurs, forêt aromatique!
Comme d'autres esprits voguent sur la musique,
Le mien, ô mon amour! nage sur ton parfum.

J'irai là-bas où l'arbre et l'homme, pleins de sève,
Se pâment longuement sous l'ardeur des climats;
Fortes tresses, soyez la houle qui m'enlève!
Tu contiens, mer d'ébène, un éblouissant rêve
De voiles, de rameurs, de flammes et de mâts:

Un port retentissant où mon âme peut boire
A grands flots le parfum, le son et la couleur;
Où les vaisseaux, glissant dans l'or et dans la moire,
Ouvrent leurs vastes bras pour embrasser la gloire
D'un ciel pur où frémit l'éternelle chaleur.

Je plongerai ma tête amoureuse d'ivresse
Dans ce noir océan où l'autre est enfermé;
Et mon esprit subtil que le roulis caresse
Saura vous retrouver, ô féconde paresse!
Infinis bercements du loisir embaumé!

Cheveux bleus, pavillon de ténèbres tendues,
Vous me rendez l'azur du ciel immense et rond;
Sur les bords duvetés de vos mèches tordues
Je m'enivre ardemment des senteurs confondues
De l'huile de coco, du musc et du goudron.

Longtemps! toujours! ma main dans ta crinière lourde
Sêmera le rubis, la perle et le saphir,
Afin qu'à mon désir tu ne sois jamais sourde!
N'es-tu pas l'oasis où je rêve, et la gourde
Où je hème à longs traits le vin du souvenir?

Head of Hair

O fleece, foaming down upon the neck! O curly Locks! O scent filled with nonchalance! Ecstasy!
To people tonight the alcove's obscurity
With memories sleeping in this hair I wish
To wave it in the air like a handkerchief!

Asia languorous and Africa ardent,
A whole world distant, absent, almost dead,
Lives, aromatic forest, blent
In your depths! Just as other spirits sail ahead
On music, mine, O my love! swims on your scent.

I'll go over there where, full of sap, man and tree,
Slowly swoon beneath the climates' ardor; be,
Strong tresses, the surge that carries me. You contain
A dazzling dream, O sea of ebony,
Of sails, and rowers, pennants, masts and flames:
A resounding port where my soul may drink odors sweet,
Sound and color in great streams; a port where the
Large ships, gliding into the gold and the moire of the sea
And the air, open their vast arms to embrace the glory
Of a pure sky where quivers eternal heat.

I'll plunge my head in love with drunkenness
Into this black ocean where the other is enclosed;
And my subtle spirit which the rollings caress
Will know how to find you again, ô fecund laziness!
Infinite cradlings of perfumed leisure composed!

Blue hair, pavilion of outstretched night, you unbar
Once more the azure of the vast, round sky for me;
On the downy shores of your hair coiled twistingly
I become intoxicated ardently
With mixed scents of musk, and coconut oil and tar.

Long! forever! my hand in your heavy mane will sow ruby,
Pearl and sapphire, so that never to my
Desire may you be deaf! Are you not the
Oasis where I dream, and the gourd where I
Suck in long, slow drafts the wine of memory?

The poet’s quest in “La Chevelure” is impassioned, intoxicated, spiritual: he
craves communion with his vision, with his inebriation, his exaltation. He
seeks immersion in his mirage.

In the first stanza he evokes a sea voyage upon his mistress’s “foaming” hair.
He exults in the ecstasy her hair holds for him and in the memories it contains.
As in “Le Vin des amants,” Baudelaire balances opposites here. The first two
lines portray the fleecelike hair foaming down upon Jeanne’s neck. They create
a vision of billowing, curling waves. The exclamatory words are sensual,
animal, primitive, barbarous—and suddenly: detached, indifferent, cool, re­
moved, since the “parfum” of her hair is “charge de nonchaloir!” This is a state
the poet revels in (“Extase!”). But it also symbolizes the lovers’ detachment
from each other. The exclamation “Extase!”, which comes right after its
contrast, “nonchaloir!”, highlights the poet’s transport, or desire for transport,
outside of himself. In order to awaken the memories sleeping in Jeanne’s hair
he now wishes to wave it in the air “comme un mouchoir!” But what a change in
imagery from the first two lines where Jeanne’s hair evoked an ocean! From the
grandiose, the sublime, to something so delicate, almost pathetic—from a
curling, coiling ocean to a fluttering handkerchief. The poet seems rather
pitiable, weak here. Still, his desperate desire is to achieve a fertile state, to
“people” the evening with the “memories” that Jeanne’s head of hair holds for
him, and to try to create thereby the “Ecstasy!” for which he longs.
The sensuous and richly suggestive lines opening the second stanza create a whole world out of the poet’s image of his mulatto mistress. She combines for him erotic languor and ardor, physical and spiritual passion, the Orient and Africa, a world almost dead that miraculously springs to life in her hair—“Vit . . . !” in the exclamation beginning the third line. Her hair, with its “profondeurs,” a “forêt aromatique,” now suggests the rich correspondences of Baudelaire’s famous sonnet. And now the poet-traveler plunges into the depths of this ocean—“forest of symbols”: “Comme d’autres esprits voguent sur la musique, / Le mien, ô mon amour! nage sur ton parfum.” The verb “nager” recalls the intoxicated lovers’ flight toward the mirage in “Le Vin des amants,” but here the flight seems ecstatic rather than frantic. Immersed in her scent, which will transport him, the poet is at once supremely sensuous and supremely spiritual. His “esprit,” his spirit-mind, he says (not his body), swims on her scent. The comparison with other “esprits” that sail along on music seems to highlight the intended spirituality, or sublimated sensuality. The woman is addressed as “his love!”—or is she? Is he in love with his mistress or with love itself, “ô mon amour!”? In stanza five, after all, the poet will reveal that his head is “in love with drunkenness.”

Stanzas three and four climax as the dreaming poet becomes a boat and Jeanne’s hair, an ocean that transports him to an ideal country, the image of his love. A voluptuous, spiritual harmony characterizes this land where man and tree, “pleins de sève,” resemble each other both internally and externally as they swoon beneath the “climates’ ardor.” Sap suggests the life force, the blood of life. This is a harmonious state during which the same liquid flows in both man and nature. The swooning recalls the poet’s “esprit” in “Élévation” “qui se pâme dans l’onde / . . . / Avec une indicible et mâle volupté.” After the images uniting man and nature in “La Chevelure,” the poet suddenly apostrophizes Jeanne’s hair, calling it “Fortes tresses.” Her hair is portrayed as powerful; there is even perhaps wordplay suggesting “forteresses.” And he begs her “Fortes tresses” to carry him, to uplift him, toward the sky, toward his dream. Darkness and light contrast in her black hair, that “sea of ebony,” which contains for the lover “a dazzling dream” of ships, and parts of ships, and rowers and flames, “flammes” evoking both pennants and flames: the voyage, passion, and destruction. And then, with stanza four, we enter further into the lover’s dream.

Here, as in several other privileged places in Baudelaire’s poetry, we penetrate the temple of nature where “de longs échos . . . de loin se confondent / Dans une ténébreuse et profonde unité”; here, sublimely, divinely: “Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent.” Sensuousness is intensified, made sacred in this “port retentissant” as the poet’s soul drinks in great streams “le parfum, le son et la couleur.” The ships gliding into the gold and the moire of the surrounding sea and atmosphere are personified as they “ouvrent leurs
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The poet, after all, had become a ship in the preceding stanza where he begged Jeanne’s “fortes tresses” to carry him. The personified ships are also spiritualized as they embrace “la gloire / D’un ciel pur où frémit l’éternelle chaleur.” The last two lines of this stanza flow together, carrying the reader along in this experience of glory suggesting purity, the quivering of intense light and intense love, divine love and transcendence. Eros is simultaneously evoked, kept present, and surpassed in this dazzling display of embracing, in a passionate but also ethereal gesture, pure illumination.

The next stanza, the fifth, is pivotal in this poem, and pivotal, I believe, in an understanding of Baudelaire’s quest for love. His search is a “plunge” into the depths (“Plonger au fond du gouffre . . .!” he will exclaim later in “Le Voyage”). Here he will plunge into the “noir océan” of Jeanne’s hair, which, he reveals, contains within it the ocean of his dreams, the sea that will carry him to that “resounding port.” His plunge is at once a physical and a cerebral act: “Je plongerai ma tête amoureuse d’ivresse / Dans ce noir océan où l’autre est enfermé.” His quest is not for communion or communication with the beloved, but rather for the ecstasy of intoxication itself. It is the poet’s voyage into the depths within himself. The ocean is “enfermé” within his own mind, spirit, and soul. He yearns to commune with himself, not with another human being: his vision is internal. He will clearly depict it as such in “Harmonie du soir,” but his quest in “La Chevelure,” a poem ostensibly occasioned by his mistress’s head of hair, is an internal one as well.

As the poet continues in stanza five of “La Chevelure,” the voluptuous, the spiritual, and the intellectual are combined. The poet’s spirit-mind that the rolling waves “caress” will “know how to find . . . again” what he seeks: “ô féconde paresse!”, a fertile and yet inactive state that recalls the poet’s contrasting “nonchalair” and volition (“Je . . . veux . . .!”) to people “l’alcôve obscure” with memories in the first stanza. It is important, too, that the poet uses the verb “retrouver” (“mon esprit . . . / Saura vous retrouver . . .”): he yearns to find something, or recreate something, from his past. In the last line of stanza five, sexual, sensuous images, as well as an image suggesting the innocence of a child’s cradle, combine to create the erotic and spiritual pleasures of the poet’s sought-for transcendence through intoxication. The senses commingle dizzyingly as mind and body are transported: “Infinis berce­ments du loisir embaumé!”

The last two stanzas of the poem continue the study of the poet’s intoxica­tion. Jeanne’s hair, “blue” or black, evokes in its elaborate array a “pavillon de ténèbres tendues.” In the present her hair, which he once compared to an ocean, opens once more for him the sky, an expansion into immensity: “Cheveux bleus . . . / Vous me rendez l’azur du ciel immense et rond.” Once again the past is the poet’s present preoccupation. Now her hair evokes water, as the poet becomes inebriated on the “shores” of her “mèches tordues.” The words
“tordues” and “tendues” suggest tension, artificiality, perhaps even intoxication in a “paradis artificiel.” The poet labors “ardemment” at his intoxication—passionately, burningly. He is driven, and he drives himself. His is a desire, a desperation. The scents with which he becomes “intoxicated ardently” (“des senteurs confondues / De l’huile de coco, du musc et du goudron”) suggest the tropics, heat, and blackness, as well as evil, the infinite, and the rapture of mind-spirit and body. Significantly, musk is in “Correspondances” one of the “parfums” that are “corrompus, riches et triomphants, / Ayant l’expansion des choses infinies, / . . . / Qui chantent le transport de l’esprit et des sens.”

Uniting past, present, and future in the final stanza (“Longtemps! toujours!”), the poet pathetically says that he will try to bribe his mistress, buy her, with jewels that he will “sow” in her hair so that she may never be deaf to his “désir.” Her hair now evokes a horse’s mane (“ta crinière”), echoing the suggestion of animality that appeared in the first stanza. The word “desire” is at once erotic and intellectual. Does the poet desire to love the woman, or does he desire instead to pursue his own state of intoxication? The last two lines are beautiful and frightening as they simultaneously open and close the world of the poet’s love: “N’es-tu pas l’oasis où je rêve, et la gourde / Où je hume à longs traits le vin du souvenir?” They ask a rhetorical question. But is the woman satisfied with being not a companion, not a person to commune with or even to talk to, but merely an occasion for the poet’s fertile dreaming? She is the poet’s “oasis,” the verdant place in the desert of his life, a fecund place for his dreams, for his communion with the intoxicating vision. The sublimely erotic final words create a vision of sensuality and transform it into an intoxicating spirituality. The ambiance, the oasis in the desert where he sucks in “long, slow drafts the wine of memory,” recalls the atmosphere in stanza three, where “l’arbre et l’homme, pleins de sève, / Se pâment longuement sous l’ardeur des climats.” The wine of the final stanza echoes the sap-blood of stanza three, suggesting here, too, the possibility of transubstantiation, a holy vision, perfect harmony between man and nature. With his head “in love with drunkenness,” the poet in “La Chevelure” celebrates what P. M. Pasinetti calls in Baudelaire’s poems to Jeanne a “ritual of recollection.” The poet savors ultimately the intoxicating dream, the intoxicating memory, the intoxicating oasis-mirage of love. With all these, created out of his own mind and emotions, he craves to commune.

“Harmonie du soir” is a very different type of love lyric. Still, in some ways, it sheds light on “La Chevelure.” In addition, it helps deepen an understanding of the poet’s quest for communion with his image of love. In both “La Chevelure” and “Harmonie du soir,” dizziness, dream-memory, an idealized vision of the beloved, sensuousness and spirituality, and images of communion—or longed-for communion—permeate the atmosphere.
Harmonie du soir
Voici venir les temps où vibrant sur sa tige
Chaque fleur s'évapore ainsi qu'un encensoir;
Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir;
Valse mélancolique et langoureux vertige!
Chaque fleur s'évapore ainsi qu'un encensoir;
Le violon frémit comme un cœur qu'on afflige;
Valse mélancolique et langoureux vertige!
Le ciel est triste et beau comme un grand reposoir.
Le violon frémit comme un cœur qu'on afflige,
Un cœur tendre, qui hait le néant vaste et noir;
Le ciel est triste et beau comme un grand reposoir;
Le soleil s'est noyé dans son sang qui se fige.
Un cœur tendre, qui hait le néant vaste et noir,
Du passé lumineux recueille tout vestige!
Le soleil s'est noyé dans son sang qui se fige . . .
Ton souvenir en moi luit comme un ostensoir!

Evening Harmony
Here come the times when swaying on its stem's crest
Each flower like a censer exhales its fragrancy;
Sounds and scents revolve in the evening's obscurity;
Melancholy waltz and languid dizziness!
Each flower like a censer exhales its fragrancy;
The violin quivers like a heart in distress;
Melancholy waltz and languid dizziness!
The sky like a lofty altar is sad and lovely.
The violin quivers like a heart in distress,
A tender heart, which hates vast black nihility!
The sky like a lofty altar is sad and lovely;
The sun has drowned in its blood that is clotting yet.
A tender heart, which hates vast black nihility,
Is gathering every trace of past luminousness!
The sun has drowned in its blood that is clotting yet . . .
Your memory, like a monstrance, shines in me!

Here, through his portrayal of nature as a temple, the poet creates his vision, at once sensuous and spiritual, beautiful and sad, of the woman loved. Because of the poem's structure, based on the Malayan pantoum form (the second and fourth lines of each stanza become the first and third of the following stanza), the poem has only two rhymes, which are repeated in the "rimes embrassées" of each quatrain. This construction, along with the limited echoing rhymes, contributes to the poem's dizzy, intoxicating effect. When the lines are repeated, they modify and intensify their meanings.

The vibrating v sounds of the first stanza place the reader directly in the
vertiginous atmosphere that evokes and recreates the poet's feelings about his love. Nature is a vast church in which each flower seems a censer, and the censer-flower seems to become spiritualized as it "s'évapore." The vibrating motions of the first two lines become swirling movements in the following two lines, where sounds and scents revolve in the darkening air of evening, creating sensations of elegant dancing, delicious dizziness, pleasurable sadness, and sought-for languor: "Valse mélancolique et langoureux vertige!" The exclamation seems a cry of ecstasy. The sensuous and spiritual evening is ever so appealing to this poet who loves sadness, languor, and the dizziness of intoxication.

The second stanza intensifies and elaborates upon the feelings of sadness mentioned only once in the first stanza, for now three lines vividly portray sadness or suffering. Each flower's exhalation in the new context evokes an idea of death, and the last line of the quatrain bears the image of death itself. The sky now seems to depict the sadness and beauty of the "reposoir," the altar upon which the Host is carried in procession: it is at once the image of death and divinity. And so, in this temple of nature, the sky suddenly becomes the altar itself. The violin that might accompany the "valse mélancolique" is personified and compared to a heart being tortured. The sounds ("comme un cœur qu'on afflige") seem to echo the disruption, the torture, the anguish. Here is the first suggestion of the poet's heart, the lover's heart: the lover's quivering, tormented heart. The melancholy dance, the dizziness and the languor of the first stanza are now more frightening as the third line of the second stanza. Through its imagery and echoing sounds this stanza suggests the torments of love; its sensuous pleasures and pains; and its deathlike, but also exalting, qualities.

Whereas evening was evoked in the opening stanza, darkness descends upon the physical, emotional, and spiritual ambiance of the third stanza. The lover's tortured, sensitive, "tender" heart is now described more fully: "Un cœur tendre, qui hait le néant vaste et noir!" The "néant" implies night, death, loneliness, emptiness, a "néant" that seems all-encompassing, blinding in its blackness "vaste et noir." It is noteworthy that nowhere in this poem about love (or at least occasioned by the poet's memory of love) does the narrator use the word love. But he does use the word hate here, summoning by its opposite what he loves, craves: light, love, transcendence, all of which he will call upon in the final stanza. The altar-sky shocks, becomes vibrant, blood-tinged in lines three and four of stanza three: "Le soleil s'est noyé dans son sang qui se fige." The altar, the sky, blood, death, drowning, congealing blood: these figures, while portraying the sunset, also intimate sacrifice, the crucifixion, the blood-wine of communion—blood sacrifice that will reveal spiritual truth, darkness that prepares the way for dazzling light.

The suffering lover, the "cœur tendre." at last becomes an active agent in the final stanza, where the darkness suddenly gives way to a spiritual illumination.
The light the lover gathers for himself, surrounded as he is by the vast, black nothingness of night, which he hates—a night both real and symbolic, dark and devoid of love—is from the “passé lumineux.” Contrasted and combined with the image of the sun that has “drowned in its blood that is clotting,” a figure suggesting the wine of communion, is the poet’s final line, addressed to the beloved: “Ton souvenir en moi luit comme un ostensoir!” Janine N. Wickers has perceptively written about this poem: “The ‘ostensoir’ contains the consecrated Host, the body which corresponds to the blood of the sun, so that both elements of the Communion are present. Thus, in a sense, the poem becomes a musical celebration of the Mass in memory of the beloved.”

The Host was already introduced in stanzas two and three of the poem with the word “reposoir”: there it appeared exterior to the poet, in the image of the sky. But now the “monstrance,” the receptacle in which the consecrated Host is exposed for adoration, appears within the poet as the image of his love. From the intoxicating, swirling sensuousness of the first stanza, the poet has moved through torture, blood, and darkness to images of Holy Communion, a mass, and light. The figures of sacrifice in the poem (“chaque fleur s’évapore,” “reposoir,” “Le soleil s’est noyé dans son sang,” “ostensoir”) all lead finally toward the poet-lover’s vision of spiritual truth: love that is enshrined in his memory. The evening “harmony” is sensuous on the outside and spiritualized within as the poet retreats from reality into his own vision, or memory, or recreation of love, or love.

In all three poems—“Le Vin des amants,” “La Chevelure,” and “Harmonie du soir”—the poet-lover seeks transcendence, the exalting vision. Marvelous images of intoxication and craved-for communion permeate these poems. But the communion imagery is ironic in a way because Baudelaire never really communed with, or even communicated well with, his mistresses, or, for that matter, anyone. The last lines of these three poems about craved-for communion actually highlight the lover’s isolation, his loneliness. He will flee “towards the paradise” of his own “reveries” in “Le Vin des amants.” He will “dream” at the woman-“oasis” where, voluptuously, he will suck in “the wine of memory” in “La Chevelure.” And in “Harmonie du soir” he will be comforted, in the face of darkness and death, by the divine “memory” of the woman, who is present only in this way in the poem. In Baudelaire’s love poetry the “delight most often sung is that of solitariness,” notes Henri Peyre in his excellent essay “Baudelaire as a Love Poet.” And so Baudelaire seeks, in the future of reverie or in the past of dreams and memory, communion not with the woman but rather with his own dream, with his own vision of love. It is a lonely vision full of longing.

While these lyrics occasioned by love explore Baudelaire’s quest for communion on a personal level, revealing thereby the poet’s isolation, they also
approach communion in a religious sense. The images of wine, blood, agony, and ecstasy all point to love as a kind of sacrifice that may reveal spiritual truth. At certain points in the poems, in fact, a kind of transubstantiation seems to be suggested, opening the door to divine light. Spiritual truth here is revealed in terms of the flesh as the poet transcends erotic love through sensuality itself. In this state of transcendent ecstasy, the poet loses sight of terrestrial things and is joined with the infinite: "Cheveux bleus . . ./ Vous me rendez l'azur du ciel immense et rond," he tells Jeanne’s hair. The poet cherishes these moments of transcendence, even though he knows that they do not, cannot, last. They belong, after all, to the realm of the mirage. But they make life more agreeable, tolerable, and so he accepts—even begs for—the lie. This he implies in the last stanza of "La Chevelure," where he says he will sow gems in Jeanne’s hair so that she may never be deaf to his desire. And this he says directly in "Semper eadem," the first poem in Les Fleurs du mal inspired by Mme Sabatier:

Laissez, laissez mon cœur s'enivrer d'un mensonge,  
Plonger dans vos beaux yeux comme dans un beau songe,  
Et sommeiller longtemps à l'ombre de vos cils!

Baudelaire’s quest for communion—physical, emotional, spiritual, at times quasi-religious—in these lyrics occasioned by love reveals his desperate, driven, and yet lucid desire to commune with what he knows is actually the intoxicating mirage of love: an image rising out of his own dreams and desires. That vision is at once exalting and evanescent, divine and diabolical. It promises truth and is sure to deceive. But it is gloriously redeeming in the moments of transcendence it affords the poet’s mind, imagination, and memory.

3. This translation was first published in the special issue of Sou’wester, 6 (1978) devoted to French symbolist poetry.
6. One cannot forget Baudelaire’s "définition du Beau,—de mon Beau. C’est quelque chose d’ardent et de triste, quelque chose d’un peu vague . . ./ qui fait rêver à la fois,—mais d’une manière confuse,—de volupté et de tristesse" (Fêtes, p. 1255).
8. For example, these frightening words from *Mon Cœur mis à nu*: "Dans l’amour comme dans presque toutes les affaires humaines, l’entente cordiale est le résultat d’un malentendu. Ce malentendu, c’est le plaisir. L’homme crie: ‘Oh! mon ange!’ La femme roucoule: ‘Maman! maman!’ Et ces deux imbéciles sont persuadés qu’ils pensent de concert. —Le gouffre infranchissable, qui fait l’incommunicabilité, reste infranchi" (pp. 1289–90).

