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THE BATTLE OF CHARLES BAUDELAIRE’S ‘LES CHATS’*

In 1962, Roman Jakobson and Claude Lévi-Strauss published an analysis of “Les Chats,” the sonnet by Charles Baudelaire, and their purpose was to illustrate how linguistics could be used for the explication of a literary text. I may be mistaken, but I suspect that both scholars considered their article an incidental and marginal contribution. In the context of their collected works, this essay has the same status that a cream-puff has when served at an elaborate eight or nine course dinner for gastronomes, the master chefs of France for example.

Indeed, I can well imagine that the gourmets of the early sixties present at my hypothetical dinner were tired with the overdone classical dishes of the period, the salmon mousse, the lobster bisque, the Beef Wellington, the duchess potatoes, and that a light experimental dish combining new ideas with established culinary techniques, a carrot cream-puff let us say, might have provoked each of the guests present to take a stand towards this ‘nouvelle cuisine’. In a sense such is the spirit of the history of the initial essay. It was published at a time when we were bored with Beef Wellington. It was a very complicated dish to prepare, and although it was the culmination of classical tradition, we were in the mood for something else. And just as my imaginary carrot cream-puff or some other such dish became the ‘nouvelle cuisine’, so the Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss incursion into literary criticism changed the study of literature in the academy. This anthology, “Les Chats” de Baudelaire/Une Confrontation de méthodes, edited by Maurice Delcroix and Walter Geerts, is an anthology of the various responses and counter responses to what was in 1962 a novel approach. It constitutes a record and a synthesis of the various continental approaches to textual analysis of the last twenty years.

Enough time has elapsed so that we can try to understand why so many of us who came of age in the late fifties and early sixties believed it was essential to approach a text from a formal perspective in order to consider issues of form, structure, and meaning in a rigorous way.

The analogy between criticism and cuisine may seem frivolous, and perhaps the coincidence between the decline of Beef Wellington and certain styles of literary theory may be fortuitous: I for one never liked

Beef Wellington because I don't eat liver. My generation, a generation who completed its formal schooling before the age of Structuralism, simply disliked 'impressionistic' criticism. If we were French we nourished ourselves with Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Valéry, and Jean Paulhan, a tradition in which language itself was the focus of textual analysis. We knew that a revolution in what are commonly termed creative works — beginning with Baudelaire and Flaubert — had been going on for almost a century. By the end of the 1950's it was obvious that there was an enormous gap between the writers themselves and many French critics who wrote about them. I have specified 'French' criticism because the situation was quite different in America where many new critics centered their studies on the stuff of language itself.

What was novel about the Roman Jakobson and Claude Lévi-Strauss approach? First, there was the interdisciplinary aspect of their endeavor. Anthropology and linguistics, two sciences, or rather two social sciences were brought to bear on the study of literature. Lévi-Strauss intended applying to poetry the same structuralism that served him for the interpretation of myths. Showing what a myth of a primitive society has in common with a sonnet by one of the most refined dandies of the 19th century is a seductive enterprise indeed. The structure of a myth, you will recall, is found by comparing and contrasting its variants. It might therefore seem to follow that the structure of any literary genre should be determined by considering all the texts of this literary genre as one text and each specific work would be but a variant of that structure. In a sense this is just what Vladimir Propp did when he examined the morphology of Russian fairy tales. If we were to imitate him, all Baudelaire sonnets would be taken as a single sonnet structure of which each sonnet would be a mutation.

But Lévi-Strauss opts for another solution for the problem of how to apply his structural approach. His position is that a poem is like a myth insofar as its structure is also constituted by its variants. The variants of a poem are contained within the poem itself, and these variants are defined by its syntactic, prosodic, phonological and semantic levels. In the joint essay, Jakobson is left to deal with these various levels, and to cut up and manipulate various fragments of "Les chats".

In fact, only one essay of this collection, Walter Geerts's "Pour une herméneutique structurale," takes Lévi-Strauss's analogy literally. He actually compares the Baudelaire sonnet to a myth, and for his demonstration he has chosen a Tukuna myth analyzed in Volume 3 of MYTHOLOGIQUES. Categories of one genre are found in the other: binary and in thirds, — even and odd would be more appropriate — passive and active, exogenous and endogamous, human and animal, movement and immobility, darkness and light, magic and mystic, void and plenitude, earth and sky, open and close. This careful comparison
almost convinces us that we have at hand two versions of the same sensory material.

But we can place any syntagmatic segment in some category or other. Just because two items may be included in a given category — an unfinished symphony, an unfinished painting, or an unfinished sonnet — doesn’t mean that these items have anything else in common. Monsieur Jourdain needed a philosophy teacher to tell him that all that is not verse is prose, and that all that is not prose is verse, but this didn’t lead him very far. I am reminded of one of the last surrealist games played by André Breton and his friend, “l’un dans l’autre,” one into the other. The value of such a game was that it led to surprising combinations and the actual associative mechanisms were more important than the final product. And so it is with Geert’s essay: we are dazzled by the brilliant connections, but we cannot vouch at all for the accuracy of the solution.

I should have liked to read more essays incorporating Lévi-Strauss’s approach. But although the anthropologist may be the better known of the two authors, the pages that were probably written by Jakobson have had a much stronger impact on recent approaches to the study of literature and language.

The general principle governing the linguist’s scrutiny of “Les chats” is that French rules of prosody determining rhyming schemes confirm the close link between rhymes and grammar that are evident in the sonnet’s structure. All the levels of the poem reinforce each other, compelling the totality to assume the character of an “absolute object.” The various phenomena of structural distribution are meticulously spelled out: the setting is localized, ‘la maison’, and generalized, ‘fond des solitudes’; the illumination is daylight, ‘étincelles’ and ‘parcelles d’or’, and darkness, ‘ténèbres’. The progression is from extrinsic to intrinsic, from empirical to mythological, and from the real to the unreal, and then to the surreal. The topoi then may be a relation between cat, learned man, and lovers; and this topoi is in turn object and subject. All the effects of the poem and all the stylistic devices it brings into play lead to the insight that for Baudelaire, the image of the cat is closely linked to the image of the woman. This is explicitly shown in two other poems of the same collection, in “Le Chat,” the sonnet beginning with the verse: “Viens, mon beau chat, sur mon coeur amoureux”, a poem that contains the striking verse: “Je vois ma femme en esprit”, and the poem: “Dans ma cervelle se promène ... /Un beau chat, fort doux”.

The oscillations characteristic of the various tropes and grammatical features have an objective correlative in the vacillation between male and female that underlies “Les Chats”. It reveals itself both in intentional ambiguities: ‘Les amoureux’... ‘Aiment... ’‘Les chats puissants et doux... ’ and ‘Leurs reins féconds;’ and in unintentional ambiguities, for example, the paradoxical choices of feminine substantives for masculine rhymes and feminine rhymes for masculine substantives. According to
Georges Mounin, this specifically poetic significance of the poem is Lévi-Strauss's other contribution to the analysis, but the interpretation that results is completely independent of the formal characteristics described by his collaborator.

While there are many subtle distinctions between the various sides of the cat debate, two major divisions stand out: the quarrel between members of the same family, relatives as it were, and the quarrel between the family and persons outside the clan.

Michael Riffaterre is a member of the family. Avowed structuralist, exceptional philologist, and expert stylistician that he is, he certainly approves a method that prescribes minute scrutiny of a literary artefact. It is revealing that when Jakobson chose to answer his critics, he directed his most vitriolic comments toward him. The general rule is that those closest to us can hurt us the most, and my sense is that Riffaterre's charges scored a serious hit. Two theoretical questions are troubling to the Columbia professor's way of thinking, and are at the heart of this book and most of its essays: How can the description of a text lead to an aesthetic judgement about the text? Can structural linguistics discriminate between literary structures and nonliterary structures?

The weakness of the method practised by the two eminent social scientists is that the characteristics of poetic structures are incorrectly determined. For example, the labels 'feminine' and 'masculine' to describe French rhymes ending or not ending in a mute e do not actually refer to sex and gender, but are part of the technical nomenclature of prosody. The fact that the word 'la volupté' is a feminine word but a masculine rhyme has no more significance than the fact that 'le vertige' is a masculine word and a feminine rhyme. Choosing grammatical units, i.e. masculine vs. feminine, establishing a semantic identity of the same two words used in a different context, the context of French versification, thereby creating a structural system that acquires the markers of literarity, leads to what I should like to call a circular fallacy. Repetition or insistence on grammatical traits do not per se define a literary structure. In Riffaterre's words: "No grammatical analysis of a poem can give us anything more than the grammar of the poem. (p. 48)" The structures that are described by Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss's microexamination fail to explain why the reader finds poetry in the poem.

Most modern stylisticians have been unable to define rigorous rules that can determine under what conditions traits are perceived to be style markers. Riffaterre believes that each reader defines the poetic element for himself, according to his or her response. One of the objections to such a process is that each reader may bring to the text certain idiosyncrasies that may utterly distort it. I might after all decide that "Les Chats" was a hidden topological guide to the 'Rue Chauchat'. Since 'Chauchat' was also the maiden name of one of my great grandmothers I might make a case for a secret message between me and the poem in question.
Hardly anyone at all in the world — or so I like to think — is bound to interpret this poem in such a radical narcissistic way. But in any case Riffaterre has foreseen such an implausible eventuality by formulating his concept of the 'super reader'.

This 'super reader' is a general reader embodying the sample of all the virtual readers in the world who have provided Riffaterre with information about their perceptions of "Les Chats," Baudelaire scholars, translators, and students. The 'super reader' prompts Riffaterre to shape what must surely be one of the very best 'explication de texte' in print today. Many 'Baudelairiens' in these pages and elsewhere have summarized the intricate connections, the remarkable style analysis about devices such as irony, antithesis, metaphor, metonymy, not to speak of the intertextual weavings with the language of Gautier, Hugo, Zola, Flaubert, Murger, and Balzac. Paul Valéry's phrase: La poésie est faite de beaux détails could be turned into: 'La critique est faite de beaux détails' in order to help us appreciate — albeit with 'l'esprit de finesse' rather than with the spirit of scientific rigor — the lively erudition of this incomparable guide of the text.

An overall interpretation emerges from these details: the sequence of synonymous images constitute a variation on the theme of the symbolisation of the cat as representing contemplative life. Repetition of the cat motifs provides a continuity that is itself an antithesis in which the natural cat, symbol of contemplation, is contrasted with the symbolic cat, sign of the object of the gaze, that is to say the hidden or esoteric object.

Finally, Riffaterre lays bare the inadequacy of the comparative approach in the last section of his essay when he rejects the identification of Baudelaire and the cat, more specifically its connotations of sexual ambiguity and androgyny. Baudelaire's cat is not a female entity, a hermaphrodite genus, but a mystical sphinx-like figure. The most flagrant fallacy of the approach is the confusion between stylistic characteristics, feminine and masculine rhymes and substantives, with psychological or psychoanalytical peculiarities of the author.

These objections are reinforced by Georges Mounin who also belongs to a tradition that has much in common with structuralism. True, the words feminine and masculine apply both to the sonnet's formal elements and to the semantic content of the poem, but this may be the effect of polysemy consequences of the French language itself. The intersection of the linguistic axis and the ethnological one may be fortuitous, a surrealist accident of chance as it were.

One of the interesting postscripts of this debate is Jakobson's rebuttal of these objections in a series of lectures at the Collège de France in 1972, ten years after his initial article, and six years after Riffaterre's early version of his essay in YALE FRENCH STUDIES. He took special care to refute the notion that the grammar of the poem can never be more than the poem's grammar. Although the leader of scientific lin-
guistics and formalism carried on the argument without sparing his opponents his utmost scorn and his sarcasm, their objections stand. Mounin was quite right in asserting that Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss chose only the linguistic structures useful for their analysis, but that they set aside those that might refute it. Facts were made to fit the theory, but the theory did not provide a satisfactory explanation for these facts.

Roland Posner is also part of the family, but he is a structuralist who has gone beyond structuralism. His essay, "Le structuralisme dans l'interprétation des poèmes. Description du texte et analyse de la réception à l'aide de l'exemple de Baudelaire LES CHATS," begins with an outstanding review of structuralist methodology. It continues with an explanation of communication theory and its concern with sender, receiver, message, channel, and code. The various levels of the message are briefly summarized: typographical, graphic, phonetic, phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic. Some of the recent controversies about such issues as the material quality of the sign, the role of the interpreter, validity in interpretation, and the hermeneutic circle are touched upon in passing. These approaches, which seemed to us so exciting in the sixties and seventies, now have about them an air of parody. The vocabulary is the vocabulary used by early radio engineers when vacuum tubes were the latest technology. Code, apparatus, phase, channel, receiver, sender seem old-fashioned terms to Americans who are familiar with the terminologies of solid state physics, semiconductor electronics, fiber optics, and genetic engineering.

The point here is to give a modern answer to the question: "What is a work of art?" A work of art shares its own specific characteristics with other works that are not necessarily of art. Hence the use of the word 'static'. A work becomes 'of art' when it is interpreted as such by an audience who comes into contact with it. It is therefore 'dynamic'. The audience, however, is not any audience whatsoever, but an audience of one or more, depending on the class of work at hand, who has mastered the esthetic code. This is how Posner puts it: "Works of art are both static and dynamic. On the one hand they are fixed in the shape of sign-carrier (texts, sculptures, notes), and they may be bought, sold, modified, and destroyed; on the other hand, they must be actualized during the receiving process because the esthetic code is only accessible to the reader, the spectator, or the listener. Consequently, a literary work's esthetic information must be borrowed from the formal organization of the sign-carrier; that is to say the text's structure or else it must be sought in the specific properties of the reception process (p. 126)." Static interpretation is a syntactic attempt while dynamic interpretation is a pragmatic task. Jakobson's approach to "Les chats" is typical of the one, and Riffaterre exemplifies the other, but both are semiotic endeavors. Comparing the two methods should allow us to determine which one is more valid. At any rate, such is Posner's purpose here.
THE BATTLE OF 'LES CHATS'

After analyzing Jakobson's and Lévi-Strauss's theories in their various volumes, not only the pages of the sonnet at hand, Posner's conclusion is that their method is very valuable for analyzing micro-structures. Structuralism gives a very satisfying account for the recurrence of a segment on all levels. EtinCELLES, parCELLES d'or, pruneELLES are linked on the semantic level insofar as the words suggest illumination; on the phonetic level because the sound ELLES is repeated, and on a psychoanalytical level suggested by the scatological reference that is avoided by every interpreter. The method, however, is not particularly successful in determining the global structure. Segments are analyzed according to a gratuitous superstructure, and the text becomes a super poem reflecting the subjectivity of the interpreter, and this subjectivity forces its own interpretation unto each micro segment. In other words, there is a leap from the text to the reader.

That is why Riffaterre's method of interpreting the poem as a receptivity structure, that is to say according to how each element is perceived by the reader, is infinitely more pleasing to Posner. But for him, this approach also has its own Achilles heel. Whereas Lévi-Strauss and Jakobson introduce their scientific ethos into the poem, so Riffaterre lets the poem's effects and their associations submerge his analysis. In fact the only super reader is Riffaterre himself. Furthermore, Posner laments his fellow scholar's lack of precision and his weak theoretical framework. His own conclusion calls for an awareness that a literary theory should also consider the semiosis that history has wrought upon successive receptions of a given sign carrier.

These pages stress critical high mindedness. I am referring for example to the use of geometric nomenclature for linguistic concepts. Identifying classes of vertical equivalences and classes of horizontal equivalences are metaphors that complicate some rather simple ideas: they are not indices of theoretical rigor and exactness. I like to reflect on the fact that Bourbaki mathematicians always sought a language as concrete as possible in order to make abstract concept intelligible. Here on the other hand, and this is characteristic of a lot of fashionable literary theory, an attempt is made to muddle the field by describing commonplace observation with terms that are never properly defined but that have a certain scientific cast for those outside science.

Of course, Lucien Goldmann should also be included among friends of structuralism, but his purpose in this short essay, written with the collaboration of Norbert Peters is to illustrate his own structuralism and show how the global structure of "Les chats" may be linked to Baudelairian's world view. While the cat, who is a synthesis of four elements, lovers, fervor, sages, and austerity, is too proud to become the serf of the transcendent, the sphinx provides an equilibrium between the human and the nonhuman. This "global structure" matches the global signficance of Baudelaire's poetry, and even a superficial knowledge of LES
FLEURS DU MAL makes this obvious: rejection of transcendence linked to man's pride, the choice between either evil or immobility, and the maintenance of tension.

We have all become quite familiar with the paradox of the hermeneutic circle, with the "you would not seek me if you had not already found me" approach. The global structure of the poem and the global structure of the poet's world view are tautologies one of the other. The paradox is confirmed by W. Delsipecch's elaboration of the Goldmann and Peters essay. While in a sense sums of parts may not add up to the whole — I mean the global effect of a text may not be the same as the effect of each of its isolated constituents — the assumption that there is a totality or a world view incorporated in each poem determines the meaning of the micro synthesis in advance. The definition of the terms presented will necessarily lead to the conclusion that the one is symmetrical to the other. Nor does the graphic representation of this analysis rectify this basic knot. I have already stated my objection to the use of gratuitous formal nomenclature: arrows and vectors are useful notations in Algebra and Topology, but their role in literary theory remains to be justified. Are very elaborate graphic configurations and detailed descriptions of formal linguistic properties necessary for the expression of very simple concepts? Is this science or pseudo-science? In mathematics and symbolic logic, notation has the function of a shorthand. Here, it does the opposite, complicate rather than simplify, and confuse rather than clarify.

I do not know whether the late Léon Cellier would have let himself be included in the structuralist extended family as it were, but in this cat debate his exegesis is on the side of tradition insofar as it is a model of a classical 'explication de texte.' A footnote informs us that the author had probably been called upon to give a decisive interpretation of the sonnet following Jakobson, Lévi-Strauss, Riffaterre, Mounin, and Durand. Methodological issues are set aside, and the concern is only with solving the puzzle that these commentaries have created.

First, the cat's sexual orientation: any possible androgyny or female-ness is dismissed out of hand, and Cellier goes even further than Riffaterre in his masculanizing and virilizing operations on the cat. The cat is a poet, and he may have the softness or sweetness of a female, but if so, it is not because he is like a female, but because he is a male. Victor Hugo's verse defining the poet comes to bear here: "Homme, il est doux comme une femme." Gentleness, a characteristic of womanhood, defines the true male essence. The cat may remind us of a woman, but it does so because of his maleness.

The other troubling question for Cellier was the sense of the second quatrains, and especially the verse: "L'Érèbe les eût pris pour ses courriers funèbres," a verse that Jakobson and others have found particularly ambiguous. Again, Cellier agrees with Riffaterre, and attempts to main-
tain the poem's ambiguity inherent in the simultaneous presence of the various semantic possibilities. In other words, ambiguity is compatible with poetry, a fact explored by Empson many decades ago.

In turn, Léon Cellier is himself the object of an analysis by Georges Legros who questions certain details of interpretation, especially the Érèbe verse. I shall restrain from adding my own comments because by now more words may have been written about that line than about "la fille de Minos et de Pasiphaë." Legros's other essay about "Les chats," written in collaboration with Maurice Delcroix, exhausts the topic. But of special relevance to theory of literature is whether the order of interpretation should coincide with the order of reading. In other words, a normal reader reads from the beginning to the end. Should analysis take this sequential progression into account, or is Jakobson right when he perceives a structure as a sequence of synonymous images constituting variations of the theme at hand?

Such issues of literary theory are very different from the ones with which Gilbert Durand deals. In this file history, Durand has the role of a Pygmalion as it were, embittered because the structuralist statue of which he was an early shaper was remodelled according to criteria not to his liking. "Alas, — he laments — the term 'structure' has become fashionable and made a fortune!" While I can understand his irritation at Parisian vorges that overpopularize and overgeneralize some perfectly serious and solid notions or other, allowing his annoyance to find its way into print is a foolproof path towards the road to oblivion. Furthermore, his own favorite term, 'archetype' may well hold the prize for the most often used and abused word in Anglo-American literary criticism of the 20th century. It never actually caught on in Paris, but on this side of the Atlantic many of us find it an irritating buzzword.

Setting aside the politico/theoretical alignment of the argument, Durand's appraisal of the Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss analysis is close to that of Mounin and Rifataterre. He recognizes the brilliance of their description of the formal characteristics of the sonnet. Nevertheless he stresses that the two scholars have overvalued formal markers to suit their purpose. Their technique, which strives to derive the meaning or value of a poetic structure out of its linguistics characteristics, is doomed to failure. But in every other way, Durand's idiosyncratic approach stands alone.

Whereas a linguist isolates semantic and phononic units in order to compare and contrast them, Durand isolates them in order to substitute other words that will then have the effect of parodying the original. "Les chats puissants et doux . . ." become "Les rats bruiisants et roux" or even "Les rats glissants et mous." What matters is not form, but content. The structures of the poem are polarized by archetypal structures and symbolic meaning, not formal devices. If we rationalize the concept of archetype and if we were to define an archetype as the text or the motif of our
culture itself, then the archetype could be defined as the motif that is perceived by the super reader. Since in its broadest extension the super reader is an umbrella for all readers of a given language and culture, then the archetype simply means the element generalized in the culture.

But Durand’s archetype, borrowed from Jung, is quite different. It is a universalizing image that is linked to the gestures of the human child and to all the reflexes that characterize homo-sapiens before and beyond languages and writings (p. 103). I cannot begin to refute such fanciful ontological speculations because there is simply no biological evidence for any such universal principle. Reflexes probably exist without any consciousness whatsoever, and they are not limited to homo-sapiens. The capacity for gesture, and by gesture I mean using the hand as a sensorimotor organ, seems to have evolved through the prosimian and anthropoid primate, and is simply not due to a “universalizing image,” whatever that image may be. The same point can be made about reflexes, the axon and synapses of a neuron, for example. How do corneal gag, deep and superficial tendon reflexes — the Babinski response, for instance — and other reflexes translate themselves into Durand’s archetypal image? They don’t of course because we are dealing here with two altogether different classes of signs. The ‘reflex’ as sign denotes not only a signifier and a signified, but also a referent to an actual thing that exists whether or not it is named by language. The reference of ‘archetype,’ however, can be found only in our linguistic experience. It belongs to the class of words that Valéry’s Monsieur Teste attempted to ban from his vocabulary, words that are the tools of poetry, but not of rigorous thinking. In fact, the belief in archetypes of this sort is but a delusion, and while a delusion may have aesthetic or historical interest or even therapeutic value, it should be appraised for what it is, a delusion nevertheless.

Like Durand, Ida-Marie Frandon seems angry with structuralism, and she identifies the controversy focussing on the Lévi-Strauss and Jakobson analysis with structuralism itself. The purpose of her essay, she says, is to examine the value of structuralist methods for the study of a literary work. She begins by attempting to determine the specific characteristics of such a work, and her objection is that structuralist analysis cannot set apart a literary work from a nonliterary work. In other words, the method can be applied to any writing at all, and it will work not only for “Les chats” but also for any other Baudelaire sonnet, or even any sonnet whatsoever. Structuralist approaches fail to make explicit the uniqueness of a work of art, and fail to show just what it is that makes such a work original and that sets it apart from other works.

Yes, Frandon is quite right. However, if structuralism has made a difference in the way we talk about aesthetics, it is precisely on this point. A work of art has no essence, and it is not in itself different from other creations. It is different only insofar as it is so perceived by a reader, or a
viewer, or a listener. This difference can only be perceived against the backdrop of other similar cultural artefacts. In other words, the lesson of structuralism is the lesson of intertextuality. “Les chats” is not ipso facto a work of art; it is a work of art only in the context of the general text of a given culture. Furthermore, even mechanical word games of the type she cites: “Tu as tort, tortue, tu meurs, meurtri, tripot, potin, tympan, etc.” can be turned into literary works; Rabelais and Joyce did none other!

Morten Nojgaard also seems to me to have much in common with Durand. His central thesis is that Baudelaire wrote “Les chats” as the expression of an act of faith in the power of mystical creation. Such creation entails the metamorphosis of reality, and the sonnet is a machine for transposing reality. Its essence, like the essence of any machine, should be sought in the process that defines it, rather than in its ultimate product. Nojgaard's reason for using this particular poem to illustrate his idea is that it is a particularly clear example of the cyclical nature of Baudelaire's quest. (245)

I note in passing that Nojgaard ridicules the fact that so many critics have dealt with this particular sonnet, and he subheads one of the sections of his piece: “Hypertrophie de la critique.” His own excuse for taking up a pen is that none of the commentators have sought fit to describe what is specifically Baudelairian about it. It seems to me that whatever else may be said about the articles in this collection, they all give the reader a flavor for what critics of another generation used to call “l'univers de Baudelaire.” Nor do I agree that the problems coming out of the Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss explication are false problems that should be ignored. How does literary theory define a problem? I like grappling with words, and it seems to me that determining the ambiguity inherent in the polysemous meaning of a syntactic structure such as “les eût pris” may be as much of a problem as figuring out a quadratic equation and certainly more of a problem that the fact that according to Nojgaard, the sonnet is one of Baudelaire's least interesting works because it leaves out the “problématique du moi.”

We are left with a reading of the poem that is very much in the Jungian tradition, but it is much less subtle and even more idiosyncratic than Durand's imaginative exploration. The metaphor of the poem as a mystical and esoteric machine contrasting inside and outside, death and life, real life and surreal life, dream and thought, with light as the organizing principle has more in common with a delusional system than with the essence of what is specifically Baudelairian.

Counterbalancing such a fanciful reading, the two psychoanalytical interpretations, by François Pire and Léon Somville, are much more convincing, and the essay “Baudelaire entre chien et chat” by François Pire is an outstanding piece. Setting aside Jakobson, Lévi-Strauss, Riffaterre, and all the commentators of the volume at hand, Pire seeks to
interpret Baudelaire's attraction for the feline creature by following the guidance of Marie Bonaparte, René Laforge, Charles Mauron, Georges Blin, Jean-Paul Richard, and Jean-Pierre Weber. The author believes that although every literary work is a palimpsest of an archaic text, reducing the cat to a vision of a mother substitute is uninteresting and limited. Stressing the femaleness of the cat leads to neglecting the feline nature of the female. The Baudelairian cat may be a female, but it is also an animal variant of the dandy and it embodies many of the characteristics of this type. Because the dandy values the artificial at the expense of the natural, perceiving the cat as a dandy implies prizing the artificial aspect of the animal and removing it from nature. Furthermore, identifying the self with this animal, stripped of the elements of nature as it were, allows the poet to divest himself of both his human and mammal attributes, and to become a symbolic and supernatural creature, a sphinx let us say, neither female nor male, neither human nor animal, but yet possibly all these things and more. There is no concern with the polemics at hand, and the essay concludes with a summary of Baudelaire's handling of the dog. Cat and dog are but two instances of a generalized animal symbolism practised by the poet in quest of past identities.

Léon Somville believes that all the elements in the sonnet indicate that there is another symbolic or second level. He calls his reading, based on the approaches of Charles Mauron and Paul Ricoeur, a 'psychoanalytical' interpretation. The method is as follows: a first reading must determine the psychological conflict within the creator (p. 229). The poem's exegesis will provide both the decoding of archaic material and the unravelling of a symbolic meaning. In fact, what we have at hand is a psychoanalytical reading of the poem based on well-known facts about Baudelaire's biography: the link between money and love, his exhibitionism, his anxiety, his dependence on drugs, and his love of learning. Each of the poem's stanzas for example corresponds to a particular drug used symbolically by the poet in order to soothe his anguish: pleasures of the mind are contrasted with pleasures of the body.

Ten years after the first essay in this cat series, Jean Pellerin's essay reviewed some of the essential issues, and this review still stands today, another ten years later, as an excellent 'mise-au-point'. Is it possible, for example, to determine pertinent phonetic traits? In more colorful language the question is whether we are allowed to deprave phonemes. Lewis Carroll comes to mind and we might indeed ask ourselves whether sounds can be paid extra to mean more. Care must be taken not to confuse the arbitrariness of a language system with arbitrariness per se: a sound is not a structuring device, but repetition is. The various levels that Jakobson establishes is but a convenient expository technique. True categories can only be binary, and are limited to relations between the signifier and the signified. Other themes of the debate are again called
forth: the cat’s sexuality, the verse about Érèbe, the poem’s illumination, and all this leads to Baudelaire’s own definition of poetry: “La poésie... c’est ce qui n’est complètement vrai que dans un AUTRE MONDE.” (p. 222)

As we enter into the third Postcat decade, it is likely that Delcroix and Geerts have enough material leftover for a second volume of collected essays about the same sonnet. I for one would not encourage them: their intelligent preface, their superb index, and their comprehensive glossary of concepts are extremely useful for all of us who deal with literary theory, but they have already worked hard enough. At this juncture, what may now be needed is an analysis of why “Les chats” continues to fascinate critics and scholars. Is this a kind of catmania whose symptoms may resemble tulipomania of 17th century Holland? The price of tulip bulbs collapsed eventually, but tulips endured to become popular and plebeian flowers. Likewise, sooner or later, the value of such critical commentary in academia may lessen, but not before most of us have accepted and assimilated it. The Graduate Center and Hunter College, City University of New York