

Baudelaire

Eighteen Poems

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Contents

‘N’est ce pas qu’il est doux’	4
‘Il aimait à la voir’	5
Incompatibility	6
The Albatross	7
Correspondences	8
The Balcony	9
A Voyage to Cythera	11
The Invitation to the Voyage	14
For Madame Sabatier	16
Hymn.....	17
Moesta et Errabunda	18
Semper Eadem	20
The Voyage	21
The Swan.....	28
Obsession	31
Epilogue	32
Lament of an Icarus	33
Calm	34
Index by First Line.....	35

'N'est ce pas qu'il est doux'

Is it not pleasant, now we are tired,
and tarnished, like other men, to search for those fires
in the furthest East, where, again, we might see
morning's new dawn, and, in mad history,
hear the echoes, that vanish behind us, the sighs
of the young loves, God gives, at the start of our lives?

‘Il aimait à la voir’

It was in her white skirts that he loved to see
her run straight through the branches and leaves, gracefully,
but still gauche, and hiding her leg from the light,
when she tore her dress, on the briars, in her flight.

Incompatibility

Higher there, higher, far from the ways,
from the farms and the valleys, beyond the trees,
beyond the hills and the grasses' haze,
far from the herd-trampled tapestries,

you discover a sombre pool in the deep
that a few bare snow-covered mountains form.
The lake, in light's, and night's, sublime sleep,
is never disturbed in its silent storm.

In that mournful waste, to the unsure ear,
come faint drawn-out sounds, more dead than the bell,
of some far-off cow, the echoes unclear,
as it grazes the slope, of a distant dell.

On those hills where the wind effaces all signs,
on those glaciers, fired by the sun's pure light,
on those rocks, where dizziness threatens the mind,
in that lake's vermilion presage of night,

under my feet, and above my head,
silence, that makes you wish to escape;
that eternal silence, of the mountainous bed
of motionless air, where everything waits.

You would say that the sky, in its loneliness,
gazed at itself in the glass, and, up there,
the mountains listened, in grave watchfulness
to the mystery nothing that's human can hear.

And when, by chance, a wandering cloud
darkens the silent lake, moving by,
you might think that you saw some spirit's robe,
or else its clear shadow, travelling, over the sky.

The Albatross

Often, for their amusement, bored sailors
take albatrosses, vast sea-birds, that sleep
in the air, indolent fellow travellers,
following the ship skimming the deep.

No sooner are they set down on the boards,
than those kings of the azure, maladroit, shamefully
let their vast white wings, like oars,
trail along their sides, piteously.

Winged traveller, gauche, gross, useless, laughable,
now, one of them, with a pipe stem, prods you,
who, a moment ago, were beautiful:
another, limping, mimics the cripple who flew.

The Poet bears a likeness to that prince of the air,
who mocks at slingshots, and haunts the winds:
on earth, an exile among the scornful, where
he is hampered, in walking, by his giant wings.

Correspondences

Nature is a temple, where, from living pillars, a flux
of confused words is, sometimes, allowed to fall:
Man travels it, through forests of symbols, that all
observe him, with familiar looks.

Like far echoes that distantly congregate,
in a shadowy and profound unity,
vast as the night air, in its clarity,
perfumes, colours, sounds reverberate.

There are fresh perfumes, like the flesh of children,
mellow as oboes, green as prairies,
- and others, rich, glorious and forbidden,

having the expansive power of infinities,
amber, musk, benjamin and incense,
that sing of the ecstasies of spirit and sense.

The Balcony

Mother of memories, mistress of mistresses,
O you, all my pleasures! O you, all my learning!
You will remember the joy of caresses,
the sweetness of home and the beauty of evening,
Mother of memories, mistress of mistresses!

On evenings lit by the glow of the ashes
and on the balcony, veiled, rose-coloured, misted,
how gentle your breast was, how good your heart to me!
We have said things meant for eternity,
on evenings lit by the glow of the ashes.

How lovely the light is on sultry evenings!
How deep the void grows! How powerful the heart is!
As I leaned towards you, queen of adored ones
I thought I breathed perfume from your blood's kiss.
How lovely the light is on sultry evenings!

The night it was thickening and closing around us,
and my eyes in the dark were divining your glance,
and I drank your nectar. Oh sweetness! Oh poison!
your feet held, here, in these fraternal hands.
The night it was thickening and closing around us.

I know how to summon up happiest moments,
and relive my past, there, curled, touching your knees.
What good to search for your languorous beauties
but in your dear body, and your heart so sweet?
I know how to summon up happiest moments!

Those vows, those perfumes, those infinite kisses,
will they be reborn, from gulfs beyond soundings,
as the suns that are young again climb in the sky,
after they've passed through the deepest of drownings?
-O vows! O perfumes! O infinite kisses!

A Voyage to Cythera

My heart soared with joy, like a bird in flight,
haunting the rigging sliding by:
The ship swayed under a cloudless sky,
like an angel, dazed by radiant light.

What island is that, dark and sad? - Cythera,
in verse, it's famous you understand,
every aged child's golden land.
Look, after all, there's nothing here.

- Isle of sweet secrets and the heart's delight!
Ancient Venus's marvellous shadow,
like perfume, covers the sea, around you,
fills the mind with love, and the languorous night.

Isle of green myrtle and flowers, wide open,
beautiful, revered by every nation,
where the sighs, of the heart's adoration,
glide like incense, over a rose garden,

or are cooing, like doves, in scented air!

- Cythera, now a desert, to mock,
full of piercing calls, a barren rock.
But I saw a strange thing there!

It was not a temple, shaded by trees,
where the young priestess, with flower-like desires,
her body alight with secret fires,
goes, opening her robes to the passing breeze.

But a shore where our white sails moving by
disturbed the birds, and we saw, like jet,
the black of a cypress tree's silhouette,
a three-branched gibbet, against the sky.

A fierce bird, perching, on the head
of a hanged man, rent him, surely,
planting its impure beak, in fury,
in the bloody corners of the dead.

The eyes were two holes: from the cavernous belly
the weight of his guts poured down his sides,
and his torturers, gorged on hideous delights,
had castrated him, most efficiently.

Beneath his feet, circling, spun a jealous pack
their muzzles lifted, of whirling beasts,
one large one, leaping in their midst,
an executioner, with cohorts at his back.

Inhabitant of Cythera, son, of that lovely sky,
you suffered their insults, silently,
to expiate your infamy,
lacking the tomb your crimes deny.

Hanged man, grotesque sufferer, your pain is mine!
I felt at the sight of your dangling limbs,
the long stream of gall, old sufferings,
rise to my teeth like acid bile.

Before you, poor devil, of dear memory,
I felt all the beaks, and ravening claws,
of swooping ravens, dark panthers' jaws,
that were once so fond of tearing at me.

- The sky was entrancing, so calm the sea,
but, to me, all was dark, and smeared with blood.
Alas! My heart was buried, for good,
in the depths, the winding sheet, of an allegory.

O Venus, in your island, what I found, was just
a symbolic gallows, with my image, in suspense.
O God! Give me the courage, and the strength,
to contemplate my heart, and body, without disgust!

Note: The island of Cythera in the Aegean Sea is the symbolic isle of
Venus Aphrodite, who was born from the sea-foam, near the island.

The Invitation to the Voyage

My sister, my child
imagine, exiled,
The sweetness, of being there, we two!
To live and to sigh,
to love and to die,
In the land that mirrors you!
The misted haze
of its clouded days
Has the same charm to my mind,
as mysterious,
as your traitorous
Eyes, behind glittering blinds.

There everything's order and beauty,
calm, voluptuousness, and luxury.

The surface gleams
are polished it seems,
Through the years, to grace our room.
The rarest flowers
mix, with fragrant showers,
The vague, amber perfume.
The dark, painted halls,
the deep mirrored walls,
With Eastern splendour hung,
all secretly speak,
to the soul, its discrete,
Sweet, native tongue.

There, everything's order and beauty,
calm, voluptuousness and luxury.

See, down the canals,
the sleeping vessels,
Those nomads, their white sails furled:
Now, to accomplish
your every wish,
They come from the ends of the world.
- The deep sunsets
surround the west,
The canals, the city, entire,
with blue-violet and gold;
and the Earth grows cold
In an incandescent fire.

There, everything's order and beauty,
calm, voluptuousness and luxury.

For Madame Sabatier

What will you say tonight, poor soul in solitude,
what will you say my heart, withered till now,
to the so beautiful, so sweet, so dear one,
whose divine gaze recreated the flower?

- We will set Pride now to singing her praises:
nothing outdoes her sweet air of authority.
Her spiritual flesh has the perfume of angels,
and her eye surrounds us in robes of infinity.

Whether in the night, and alone, and in solitude,
whether in the street, and among the multitude,
her phantom dances in air, like a flame.

Sometimes it speaks and it says 'I am beautiful.
You, for the love of me, must love beauty alone:
for I am your Madonna, Muse, Guardian Angel.

Hymn

To the too-dear, to the too-beautiful,
who fills my heart with clarity,
to the angel, to the immortal idol,
All hail, in immortality!

She flows through my reality,
air, mixed with the salt sea-swell:
into my soul's ecstasy,
pours the essence of the eternal;

Ever-fresh sachet, that scents
the dear corner's atmospheric light,
hidden smoke, of the burning censer,
in the secret paths of night.

How, incorruptible love,
to express your endless verities?
Grain of musk, unseen, above,
in the depths of my infinities!

To the too-dear, to the too-beautiful,
who is my joy and sanity,
to the angel, to the immortal idol,
All hail in immortality!

Moesta et Errabunda

Tell me, does your heart sometimes soar, Agathe,
far from the dark sea of the sordid city,
towards another sea, a blaze of splendour that
is blue, bright, deep as virginity?
Tell me, does your heart sometimes soar, Agathe?

The sea, the vast sea, consoles us for our efforts!
What demon entrusted the sea, that hoarse singer
that accompanies the immense roar of tempests,
with being the sublime sleep-bringer?
The sea, the vast sea, consoles us for our efforts!

Carry me wagons! Take me, frigate!
Far, far! Here the city slime is made of our weeping!
Is it true that your sad heart, Agathe,
cries: 'Far from remorse, from crime, from suffering,
carry me wagons, take me frigate!

How far perfumed paradise, you are removed
from us, where the clear blue is all love and happiness,
where what one loves is worthy of being loved,
where the heart drowns in pure voluptuousness!
How far, perfumed paradise, you are removed!

But the green paradise of childhood's thrill,
the games, the songs, the kisses, and the flowers,
the violin making music behind the hill,
and the wine glass, under the trees, in twilight hours,
- But the green paradise of childhood's thrill,

the innocent paradise full of secret yearning,
is it already further than India or China?
Can we call it back, with cries of longing,
and re-create it, with its voice of silver,
the innocent paradise full of secret yearning?

Note: Moesta et Errabunda: Sad and Restless.
'Agathe' is pronounced as 'Agat', to rhyme with 'that'.

Semper Eadem

‘Where does it come from,’ you ask, ‘this strange sadness,
that climbs, like the sea, over black, bare stone?’

- When our heart has once reaped the harvest,
life is an evil. That’s known,

as the simplest of miseries, and nothing mysterious,
and seen by everyone, like your ecstasy.

Stop searching, you, beauty, so curious!

And, though your voice is sweet, sit, silently!

Be quiet, fool! Ever-ravished soul!

Lips of childish laughter! Often, more than the whole
of Life, Death grips us, with subtle ties we have made.

Let me, let my heart, then, be drunk on its lies,
plunge as into a beautiful dream, into your eyes,
and, forever, sleep, in your eyelids’ shade.

The Voyage

À Maxime du Camp

I

For the child, in love with globe, and stamps,
the universe equals his vast appetite.
Ah! How great the world is in the light of the lamps!
In the eyes of memory, how small and slight!

One morning we set out, minds filled with fire,
travel, following the rhythm of the seas,
hearts swollen with resentment, and bitter desire,
soothing, in the finite waves, our infinities:

Some happy to leave a land of infamies,
some the horrors of childhood, others whose doom,
is to drown in a woman's eyes, their astrologies
the tyrannous Circe's dangerous perfumes.

In order not to become wild beasts, they stun
themselves, with space and light, and skies of fire:
The ice that stings them, and the scorching sun,
slowly erase the marks of their desire.

But the true voyagers are those who leave
only to move: hearts like balloons, as light,
they never swerve from their destinies,
and, without knowing why, say, always: 'Flight!'

Those whose desires take on cloud-likenesses,
who dream of vast sensualities, the same
way a conscript dreams of the guns, shifting vaguenesses,
that the human spirit cannot name.

II

We imitate, oh horror, tops and bowls,
in their leaps and bounds, and even in dreams, dumb
curiosity torments us, and we are rolled,
as if by a cruel Angel that whips the sun!

Strange fate, where the goal never stays the same,
and, belonging nowhere, perhaps it's no matter where
Man, whose hope never tires, as if insane,
rushes on, in search of rest, through the air.

Our soul, a three-master, heads for the isle, of Icarus.
A voice booms, from the bridge 'Skin your eyes!'
A voice, from aloft, eager and maddened, calls to us:
'Love... Fame... Happiness! Hell, it's a rock!' it cries.

On every island, that the lookouts sight,
destiny promises its Eldorado:
Imagination conjuring an orgiastic rite,
finds only a barren reef, in the afterglow.

O, the poor lover of chimeric sands!
Clap him in irons, toss him in the sea,
this drunken sailor, inventing New Found Lands,
whose mirage fills the abyss, with fresh misery?

Like an old tramp, trudging through the mire,
dreaming, head up, of dazzling paradise,
his gaze, bewitched, discovering Capua's fire,
wherever a candlelit hovel meets his eyes.

III

Astounding travellers! What histories
we read in your eyes, deeper than the ocean there!
Show us the treasures of your rich memories,
marvellous jewels made of stars and air.

We wish to voyage without steam or sails!
Project on our spirits, stretched out, like the sheets,
lightening the tedium of our prison tales,
your past, the horizon's furthest reach completes.

Tell us, what did you see?

IV

‘We saw the sand,
and waves, we also saw the stars:
despite the shocks, disasters, the unplanned,
we were often just as bored as before.

The sunlight's glory on the violet shoals,
the cities' glory as the sunlight wanes,
kindled that restless longing in our souls,
to plunge into the sky's reflected flames.

The richest cities, the greatest scenes, we found
never contained the magnetic lures,
of those that chance fashioned, in the clouds.
Always desire rent us, on distant shores!

Enjoyment adds strength to our desire.
Desire, old tree, for whom, pleasure is the ground,
while your bark thickens, as you grow higher,
your branches long to touch the sky you sound!

Will you grow forever, mighty tree
more alive than cypress? Though, we have brought, with care,
a few specimens, for your album leaves,
brothers, who find beauty, in objects, from out there!

We have saluted gods of ivory,
thrones, jewelled with constellated gleams,
sculpted palaces, whose walls of faery,
to your bankers, would be ruinous dreams.

Clothes that, to your vision, bring drunkenness,
women with painted teeth and breasts,
juggling savants gliding snakes caress.'

V

And then, what then?

VI

'O, Childishness!

Not to forget the main thing, everywhere,
effortlessly, through this world, we've seen,
from top to bottom of the fatal stair,
the tedious spectacle of eternal sin.

Woman, vile slave, full of pride and foolishness,
adoring herself without laughing, loving without disgust:
Man, greedy tyrant, harsh, lewd, merciless,
slave of that slave, a sewer in the dust.

The torturer who plays; the martyr who sobs;
the feast, perfumed and moist, from the bloody drip;
the poison of power, corrupting the despot;
the crowd, in love with the stupefying whip:

Several religions just like our own,
all climbing heaven. Sanctity,
like an invalid, under the eiderdown,
finding in nails, and hair-shirts, ecstasy:

Drunk with its genius, chattering Humanity,
as mad today as ever, or even worse,
crying to God, in furious agony:
“ O, my likeness, my master, take my curse!

And, the least stupid, harsh lovers of Delirium,
fleeing the great herd, guarded by Destiny,
taking refuge in the depths of opium!
- That is the news, from the whole world's country.'

VII

Bitter the knowledge we get from travelling!
Today, tomorrow, yesterday, the world shows what we see,
monotonous and mean, our image beckoning,
an oasis of horror, in a desert of ennui!

Shall we go, or stay? Stay, if you can stay:
Go, if you must. One runs, another crouches, to elude
Time, that vigilant, shadow enemy.
Alas! There are runners for whom nothing is any good,

like Apostles, or wandering Jews,
nothing, no vessel or railway car, they assume,
can flee this vile slave driver; others whose
minds can kill him, without leaving their room.

When, at last he places his foot on our spine, a
hope still stirs, and we can shout: 'Forward!'
Just as when we left for China,
the wind in our hair and our eyes fixed to starboard,

sailing over the Shadowy sea,
with a young traveller's joyous mind.
Do you hear those voices, sadly, seductively,
chanting: 'Over here, if you would find,

the perfumed Lotus! It's here we press
miraculous fruits on which your hopes depend:
Come and be drunk, on the strange sweetness,
of the afternoons, that never end.'

Behind a familiar tongue we see the spectre:
Our Pylades stretches his arms towards our face.
'To renew your heart, swim towards your Electra!'
she calls, whose knees we once embraced.

VIII

O Death, old captain, it is time! Weigh anchor.
This land wearies us, O Death! Take flight!
If the sky and sea are dark as ink's black rancour,
our hearts, as you must know, are filled with light!

Pour out your poison, and dissolve our fears!
Its fire so burns our minds, we yearn, it's true,
to plunge to the Void's depths, Heaven or Hell, who cares?
Into the Unknown's depths, to find the *new*.

Notes: Circe was the sea-nymph of Aeaea, who bewitched the followers of Ulysses, and delayed him on her island (See Homer, *Odyssey* X). Icarus fell into the Icarian Sea, and gave his name to the Sea and the island of Icaria in the Aegean, after his waxen wings had melted when he flew too near the sun. The wings had been made for the two of them by his father Daedalus, who buried him on the island (See Ovid, *Metamorphoses* VIII 195). Eldorado was the mythical golden man of Inca Peru, hunted for by the Spaniards, synonymous with an unattainable treasure. Capua was the wealthy capital of ancient Campania. After the Battle of Cannae, Hannibal and his troops wintered there, in 215 BC, succumbing, it was said, to the delights of its climate, food, baths etc. The expression the 'delights of Capua' later signified wasting precious time on idle pleasures. Here it represents a paradisaical mirage. The Lotus was the mythical drug of the Lotus Eaters, whom Ulysses visited (See Homer, *Odyssey* IX), their land a synonym for the world of languor outside time. Pylades was the friend of Orestes, who helped Orestes in his journey to avenge Agamemnon and return to his sister Electra (See Aeschylus, *The Oresteian Trilogy: The Choephoroi*).

The Swan

I

Andromache, I think of you! That false Simois
that narrow stream, meagre and sad, flowing there
where the immense majesty of your widowed grief,
shone out, growing from your tears,

stirred my fertile memory, suddenly,
as I was crossing the new Carrousel.
The old Paris is gone (the shape of a city
changes faster than the human heart can tell)

I can only see those frail booths in the mind's eye,
those piles of rough-cut pillars, and capitals,
the weeds, the massive greening blocks, that used to lie
water-stained: the bric-a-brac piled in shop windows.

There, there used to be a menagerie:
One dawn, at the hour when labour wakes, there,
under the cold, clear sky, or, when the road-menders set free
a dull hammering, into the silent air,

I saw a swan, that had escaped its cage,
striking the dry stones with webbed feet;
trailing, on hard earth, its white plumage;
in the waterless gutter, opening its beak;

bathing its wings frantically, in the dust,
and crying, its heart full of its native streams:
'Lightning, when will you strike? Rain when will you gust?'
Unfortunate, strange, fatal symbol, it seems

I see you, still: sometimes, like Ovid's true
man transformed, his head, on a convulsive neck, strained
towards the sky's cruel and ironic blue,
addressing the gods with his complaint.

II

Paris changes! But nothing, in my melancholy,
moves. New hotels, scaffolding, stone blocks,
old suburbs, everything, becomes allegory,
to me: my memories are heavier than rocks.

So, in front of the Louvre, an image oppresses me.
I think of my great swan, with its mad movements,
ridiculous, sublime, as exiles seem,
gnawed by endless longing! And then,

of you, Andromache, fallen from the embrace
of the great hero, vile chattel in the hands of proud Pyrrhus,
in front of an open tomb, in grief's ecstatic grace,
Hector's widow, alas, and wife of Helenus!

I think of the negress, consumptive, starved,
dragging through the mire, and searching, eyes fixed,
for the absent palm-trees of Africa, carved
behind the immense walls of mist:

Of those who have lost what they cannot recover,
ever! Ever! Those who drink tears like ours,
and suck on sorrow's breasts, their wolf-mother!
Of the skinny orphans, withering like flowers!

So in the forest of my heart's exile,
an old memory sounds its clear encore!
I think of sailors forgotten on some isle,
prisoners, the defeated!and of many more!

Note. Andromache was Hector's wife who mourned his death in the Trojan War. The Simois and the Scamander (Xanthus) were the two rivers of the Trojan Plain. Pyrrhus is Neoptolemus, son of Achilles. Andromache fell to him as a spoil after the fall of Troy. Helenus was a son of Priam and brother of Hector. Baudelaire follows Virgil, *The Aeneid* III 289, where Aeneas reaches Epirus and Chaonia, and finds Helenus and Andromache. Helenus has succeeded to the throne of Pyrrhus and married Andromache. Aeneas finds Andromache sacrificing to Hector's ashes in a wood near the city (Buthrotum) by a river named after the Simois. This is Baudelaire's 'false Simois'. Andromache explains that Pyrrhus has left her for Hermione, and passed her on to Helenus, who has been accepted as a Greek prince. Helenus has built a second 'little' Troy in Chaonia. Andromache is a symbol of fallen exile. The Carrousel is a bridge over the Seine in Paris, recent at the time of the poem. The Ovid reference is (arguably) to Cycnus, son of Sthenelus, changed to a swan, grieving for Phaethon (See *Metamorphoses* II 367 and also Virgil, *Aeneid* X 187). The Louvre Palace is now a Museum and Art Gallery, on the right bank of the Seine, in Paris.

Obsession

Great forests you frighten me, like vast cathedrals:
You roar like an organ, and in our condemned souls,
aisles of eternal mourning, where past death-rattles
sound, the echo of your De Profundis rolls.

I hate you, Ocean! My mind, in your tumultuous main,
sees itself: I hear the vast laughter of your seas,
the bitter laughter of defeated men,
filled with the sound of sobs and blasphemies.

How you would please me without your stars, O Night!
I know the language that their light employs!
Since I search for darkness, nakedness, the Void!

But the shadows themselves seem, to my sight
canvases, where thousands of lost beings, alive,
and with a familiar gaze, leap from my eyes.

Epilogue

With quiet heart, I climbed the hill,
from which one can see, the city, complete,
hospitals, brothels, purgatory, hell,

prison, where every sin flowers, at our feet.
You know well, Satan, patron of my distress,
I did not trudge up there to vainly weep,

but like an old man with an old mistress,
I longed to intoxicate myself, with the infernal delight
of the vast procuress, who can always make things fresh.

Whether you still sleep in the morning light,
heavy, dark, rheumatic, or whether your hands
flutter, in your pure, gold-edged veils of night,

I love you, infamous capital! Courtesans
and pimps, you often offer pleasures
the vulgar mob will never understand.

Lament of an Icarus

Lovers of whores don't care,
happy, calm and replete:
But my arms are incomplete,
grasping the empty air.

Thanks to stars, incomparable ones,
that blaze in the depths of the skies,
all my destroyed eyes
see, are the memories of suns.

I look, in vain, for beginning and end
of the heavens' slow revolve:
Under an unknown eye of fire, I ascend
feeling my wings dissolve.

And, scorched by desire for the beautiful,
I will not know the bliss,
of giving my name to that abyss,
that knows my tomb and funeral.

Calm

Have patience, O my sorrow, and be still.
You asked for night: it falls: it is here.
A shadowy atmosphere enshrouds the hill,
to some men bringing peace, to others care.

While the vile human multitude
goes to earn remorse, in servile pleasure's play,
under the lash of joy, the torturer, who
is pitiless, Sadness, come, far away:

Give me your hand. See, where the lost years
lean from the balcony in their outdated gear,
where regret, smiling, surges from the watery deeps.

Underneath some archway, the dying light
sleeps, and, like a long shroud trailing from the East,
listen, dear one, listen to the soft onset of night.

Index by First Line

Is it not pleasant, now we are tired,.....	4
It was in her white skirts that he loved to see	5
Higher there, higher, far from the ways,	6
Often, for their amusement, bored sailors.....	7
Nature is a temple, where, from living pillars, a flux	8
Mother of memories, mistress of mistresses,.....	9
My heart soared with joy, like a bird in flight,	11
My sister, my child.....	14
What will you say tonight, poor soul in solitude,	16
To the too-dear, to the too-beautiful,	17
Tell me, does your heart sometimes soar, Agathe,	18
‘Where does it come from,’ you ask, ‘this strange sadness,.....	20
For the child, in love with globe, and stamps,	21
Andromache, I think of you! That false Simois.....	28
Great forests you frighten me, like vast cathedrals:.....	31
With quiet heart, I climbed the hill,	32
Lovers of whores don’t care,.....	33
Have patience, O my sorrow, and be still.	34

