

CHARLES BAUDELAIRE'S 'LES CHATS'*

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It may come as a surprise that an anthropological review should publish a study devoted to a nineteenth-century French poem; there is, however, a simple explanation. If a linguist and an ethnologist have seen fit to join forces in their efforts to try to understand what a Baudelaire sonnet is made of, it is because, independently, they have found themselves confronted with complementary problems. The linguist discerns structures in works of poetry which are strikingly analogous to those which the analysis of myths reveals to the ethnologist. For his part, the latter cannot fail to recognize that myths do not consist simply of arrangements of concepts but that they are also works of art which arouse in those who hear them (and in the ethnologist himself when he reads them in transcription) profound aesthetic emotions. Is it possible that the two problems are but one and the same?

Admittedly, the author of this preliminary note has at one time described the myth as being in opposition to the poetic work (see C. Lévi-Strauss, *Anthropologie structurale*, p. 232), but those who have reproached him for this have not taken into account the fact that the very notion of opposition implies that the two forms were originally conceived of as complementary terms, forming a part of the same classification. The relationship outlined here does not in any way detract from the quality of discreteness which we first emphasized, that is, that each work of poetry, considered in isolation, contains within itself its own variables ranged on an axis which can be described as vertical, since it consists of superimposed levels: phonology, phonetics, syntax, prosody, semantics, etc.; whereas the myth can at the very most be interpreted only on the semantic level, the system of variables (always an indispensable part of structural analysis) being supplied by the multiplicity of versions of the same myth, that is to say a cross-section through a body of myths at the semantic level only. However, one should bear in mind that this distinction fulfils a particular practical need, in that it enables the structural analysis of myths to take place in the absence of a genuine

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linguistic basis. Only by pursuing both methods, even at the cost of imposing on oneself abrupt changes of viewpoint, can one begin to some extent to lay the first bet: that if either method can be selected according to circumstance, in the final analysis it is because they can be substituted one for the other, without necessarily being completely interchangeable.

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1. Les amoureux fervents et les savants austères
2. Aiment également, dans leur mûre saison,
3. Les chats puissants et doux, orgueil de la maison,
4. Qui comme eux sont frileux et comme eux sédentaires.

5. Amis de la science et de la volupté,
6. Ils cherchent le silence et l'horreur des ténèbres;
7. L'Érèbe les eût pris pour ses coursiers funèbres,
8. S'ils pouvaient au servage incliner leur fierté.

9. Ils prennent en songeant les nobles attitudes
10. Des grands sphinx allongés au fond des solitudes,
11. Qui semblent s'endormir dans un rêve sans fin;

12. Leurs reins féconds sont pleins d'étincelles magiques,
13. Et des parcelles d'or, ainsi qu'un sable fin,
14. Étoilent vaguement leurs prunelles mystiques.

If one puts one's faith in the article 'Le Chat Trott' by Champfleury, in which the above Baudelaire sonnet was first published (*Le Corsaire*, November 1847), it must already have been written by March 1840 and – contrary to the claims of various purists – the text in *Le Corsaire* and that in *Les Fleurs du Mal* correspond word for word.

The poet has arranged the rhymes according to the following scheme: aBBa CddCeeFgFg (upper-case letters being used to denote the lines ending in masculine rhymes and lower-case letters for the lines ending in feminine rhymes). This pattern of rhymes is divided into three groups: two quatrains, and one sestet composed of two tercets, which do nevertheless form a whole because, as has been shown by Grammont, the use of rhymes in the sonnet is governed by 'the same rules applied to all sestets'.¹

The rhyme-scheme of the sonnet in question is the product of three different rules:

1. Two couplets with alternating masculine and feminine rhymes cannot follow one another.
2. Where two contiguous lines each have a different rhyme, one of them must be feminine and the other masculine.
3. The final lines of contiguous verses must have alternating masculine and feminine rhymes: ⁴sédentaires – ⁸fierté – ¹⁴mystiques.

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According to classical rules, so-called feminine rhymes should always end with an unstressed syllable, and masculine rhymes with a stressed syllable; but the distinction between the two types of rhyme does persist in current pronunciation where the lapsed 'e' of the final syllable is omitted, the stressed final vowel being followed by a consonant in all feminine rhymes in the sonnet (*austères-sédentaires, ténèbres-funèbres, attitudes-solitudes, magiques-mystiques*), whereas all the masculine rhymes end with a vowel (*saison-maison, volupté-fierté, fin-fin*).

The close link between classification of rhyme and choice of grammatical category emphasizes the importance of the role of grammar in addition to the rhyme-scheme in the structure of this sonnet.

Every line ends with a noun, whether it be substantive (8) or adjectival (6). All the substantives are feminine. In the eight longer lines with a feminine rhyme, the final noun is plural, whether the ending is a stressed syllable in the traditional manner, or a post-vocal consonant as in present-day pronunciation; conversely the shorter lines with a masculine rhyme in all six cases end with a singular noun.

In the two quatrains, the masculine rhymes are constituted by substantives and the feminine rhymes by adjectives, with the exception of the key-word ⁶*ténèbres* which rhymes with ⁷*funèbres*. We shall return later to the whole question of the relationship between these two particular lines. As far as the tercets are concerned, the three lines of the first tercet all end with a substantive, and those of the second with an adjective. Thus the rhyme which links the two tercets – the only instance in this poem of a homonymous rhyme (¹¹*sans fin* – ¹³*sable fin*) – places a masculine adjective in opposition to a feminine substantive – and it is the only adjective, and the only example of the masculine gender, amongst the masculine rhymes in the sonnet.

The sonnet is made up of three compound sentences, indicated by full stops, i.e. each of the two quatrains, and the two tercets together. These three sentences form an arithmetical progression according to the number of independent clauses and the personal verb-forms in each one:

1. One single finite verb (*aiment*);
2. Two finite verbs (*cherchent, eût pris*);
3. Three finite verbs (*prennent, sont, étoilent*).

On the other hand, the subordinate clause in each of the three sentences has but one finite verb: 1. *qui ... sont*; 2. *s'ils pouvaient*; 3. *qui semblent*.

The ternary division of the sonnet implies an antinomy between the

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two-rhyme verse units and the three-rhyme verse units. It is counter-balanced by a dichotomy which divides the piece into two pairs of verses, that is to say, one pair of quatrains and one pair of tercets. This binary principle, supported in turn by the grammatical structure of the text, also indicates a further antinomy between the first section of four rhymes and the second of three, and between the first two subdivisions or four-line verses and the last two three-line verses. It is on the tension between these two modes of arrangement and between their symmetric and dissymmetric elements that the composition of the whole piece is based.

There is a clearly visible syntactical parallel between the pair of quatrains on the one hand and the pair of tercets on the other. Both the first quatrain and the first tercet consist of two clauses, of which the second is relative, and introduced in both cases by the same pronoun, *qui*. This clause comprises the last line of its verse and is dependent on a masculine plural substantive, acting as complement in the main clause (³*Les chats*, ¹⁰*Des ... sphinx*). The second quatrain (and similarly the second tercet) contains two co-ordinate clauses, of which the second, compound in its turn, comprises the last two lines of the verse (7-8 and 13-14) and is composed of a subordinate clause linked to the main clause by a conjunction. In the quatrain that clause is conditional (⁶*S'ils pouvaient*) and in the tercet it is comparative (¹³*ainsi qu'un*). The first is consecutive, whereas the second is incomplete and parenthetical.

In the 1847 *Le Corsaire* text, the punctuation corresponds to this division. The first tercet ends with a full stop as does the first quatrain and the last two lines of the second tercet and of the second quatrain are preceded by a semicolon.

A semantic view of the grammatical subjects reinforces the parallel between the two quatrains on the one side and the two tercets on the other.

I Quatrains	II Tercets
1. First	1. First
2. Second	2. Second

The subjects in the first quatrain and the first tercet are all animate objects, whilst one of the two subjects in the second quatrain and all in the second tercet are inanimate substantives: ⁷*L'Érèbe*, ¹²*Leurs reins*, ¹³*des parcelles*, ¹³*un sable*. In addition to these so-to-speak horizontal

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correlations, a correlation which could be described as vertical emerges, placing the group of two quatrains in opposition to the group of two tercets. Whilst all the direct objects in the two tercets are inanimate substantives (⁰*les nobles attitudes*, ¹⁴*leurs prunelles*), the only direct object in the first quatrain is an animate substantive (³*Les chats*), and the objects in the second quatrain include, in addition to the inanimate substantives (⁶*le silence et l'horreur*), the pronoun *les* which refers to *les chats* in the preceding sentence. If we look at the relationship between subject and object, the sonnet presents two correlations which could be represented by diagonals. One descending diagonal links the outside verses (the first quatrain and the last tercet) and puts them in opposition to an ascending diagonal which links the two inside verses. In the outside verses subject and object form part of the same semantic category: animate in the first quatrain (*amoureux, savants - chats*) and inanimate in the second tercet (*reins, parcelles - prunelles*). Conversely, in the inside verses, object and subject are in opposing categories: in the first tercet the inanimate object is opposed to the animate subject (*ils [-chats] - attitudes*), whilst in the second quatrain the same link (*ils [=chats] - silence, horreur*) alternates with the link between animate object and inanimate subject (*Èrèbe - les [=chats]*).

Thus each of the four verses retains its own individuality: the animate genre, which is common to both subject and object in the first quatrain, is peculiar to the subject only in the first tercet; in the second quatrain this genre characterizes either subject or object; and in the second tercet, neither one nor the other.

There are several striking relations in the grammatical structure both of the beginning and of the end of the sonnet. At the end, as at the beginning, but nowhere else, there are two subjects with only one predicate and only one direct object. Each of these subjects and objects is governed by a determinant (*Les amoureux fervents, les savants austères - Les chats puissants et doux; des parcelles d'or, un sable fin - leurs prunelles mystiques*), and the two predicates, the first and last in the sonnet, are the only ones accompanied by adverbs, both of them derived from adjectives and linked to one another by an assonant rhyme: ²*Aiment également -* ¹⁴*Étoilent vaguement*. The second and penultimate predicates are the only ones with a copula and an attributive predicate, the latter being emphasized in both cases by an internal rhyme: ⁴*Qui comme eux sont frileux;* ¹²*Leurs reins féconds sont pleins*. Generally speaking, only the two outside verses are rich in adjectives: nine in the quatrain and five in the tercet;

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whilst the inside verses have only three adjectives in all (*funèbres, nobles, grands*).

As we have already noted, it is only at the beginning and at the end of the poem that the subjects are of the same genre as the objects: each one belongs to the animate in the first quatrain and to the inanimate in the second tercet. Animate beings, their functions and their activities, dominate the first verse. The first line contains nothing but adjectives. Of these, the two substantival forms which act as subjects – *Les amoureux* and *les savants* – have verbal roots; the text is inaugurated by 'ceux qui aiment' and by 'ceux qui savent'. In the last line of the poem, this is reversed: the transitive verb *Étoilent*, which acts as predicate, is derived from a substantive. The latter is related to the series of inanimate and concrete appellatives which dominate this tercet and distinguish it from the three preceding verses. A clear homophony can be heard between this verb and the members of the series in question: /etēsɛʃə/ – /e de parseʃə/ – /etwafə/. Finally, the subordinate clauses contained in the last lines of these two verses each include an adverbial infinitive, these two object-complements being the only two infinitives in the entire poem: ⁸*S'ils pouvaient ... incliner*; ¹¹*Qui semblent s'endormir*.

It is apparent that neither the dichotomous partition of the sonnet, nor the division into three verses, leads to a balance of the isometric parts. But if one were to divide the fourteen lines into two equal parts, the seventh line would end the first half of the work, and the eighth would mark the beginning of the second. It is, therefore, significant that it is these two middle lines which most clearly distinguish themselves by their grammatical construction from the rest of the poem.

Thus, in more than one respect, the poem falls into three parts: in this case into a middle couplet and two isometric groups, that is to say, the six lines which precede the couplet and the six which follow it. One has then a kind of distich inserted between two sestets.

All personal verb-forms and pronouns and all subjects of verbal clauses are plural throughout the sonnet, except in line seven, *L'Érèbe les eût pris pour ses coursiers funèbres*, which contains the only proper noun in the poem, and is the only instance of both the finite verb and its subject being in the singular. Furthermore, it is the only line in which the possessive pronoun (*ses*) refers back to the singular.

Only the third person is used in the sonnet. The only tense used is the present, except in lines 7 and 8, where the poet envisages an imaginary action (*eût pris*) arising out of an unreal premiss (*S'ils pouvaient*).

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The sonnet shows a pronounced tendency to provide every verb and every substantive with a determinant. Each verbal form is accompanied by a governing term (substantive, pronoun, infinitive) or perhaps an attribute. All transitive verbs govern only substantives (²⁻³*Aiment ... Les chats*; ⁶*cherchent le silence et l'horreur*; ⁹*prennent ... les attitudes*; ¹⁴*Étoilent ... leurs prunelles*). The pronoun which acts as the object in the seventh line is the only exception: *les eût pris*.

With the exception of adnominal complements which are never accompanied by any determinant in the sonnet, the substantives (including the adjectival ones) are always governed by epithets (e.g. ³*chats puissants et doux*) or by complements (⁵*Amis de la science et de la volupté*); line seven again provides the only exception: *L'Érèbe les eût pris*.

All five epithets in the first quatrain (¹*fervents*, ¹*austères*, ²*mûre*, ³*puissants*, ³*doux*) and all six in the two tercets (⁹*nobles*, ¹⁰*grands*, ¹²*féconds*, ¹²*magiques*, ¹³*fin*, ¹⁴*mystiques*) are qualifying adjectives, whilst there are no other adjectives in the second quatrain other than the determinative epithet in the seventh line (*coursiers funèbres*).

It is also this line which reverses the animate/inanimate order governing the link between subject and object in the other lines of this quatrain, and which is, in fact, the only one in the sonnet to adopt this inanimate/animate order.

Several striking characteristics clearly distinguish line seven, and indeed the last two lines of the second quatrain, as unique. However, it must be noted that the tendency for the central couplet to stand out agrees with the idea of an asymmetric trichotomy, which puts the whole of the second quatrain in opposition to the first quatrain on the one hand and in opposition to the final sestet on the other, thus creating a central verse discrete in several respects from the verses either side of it. We have already shown that only in the seventh line are subject and predicate in the singular, but this observation can be extended: only within the lines of the second quatrain do we find either subject or object in the singular and whereas in the seventh line the singularity of the subject (*L'Érèbe*) is contrasted with the plurality of the object (*les*), the neighbouring lines reverse this relationship, having a plural subject and a singular object (⁶*Ils cherchent le silence et l'horreur*; ⁸*S'ils pouvaient ... incliner leur fierté*).

In the remaining verses, both object and subject are plural (¹⁻³*Les amoureux ... et les savants ... Aiment ... Les chats*; ⁹*Ils prennent ... les ... attitudes*; ¹³⁻¹⁴*Et des parcelles ... Étoilent ... leurs prunelles*). It is notable

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that in the second quatrain singularity of subject and object coincides with the inanimate and plurality with the animate. The importance of grammatical number to Baudelaire becomes particularly noticeable by virtue of the role it plays in opposition-relations in the rhymes of the poem.

It must be added that the rhymes in the second quatrain are distinguishable by their structure from all other rhymes in the work. The feminine rhyme *ténèbres* – *funèbres* in the second quatrain is the only one which confronts two different parts of speech. All other rhymes in the sonnet, except those in the quatrain in question, present one or more identical phonemes, either immediately preceding or some distance in front of the tonic syllable, usually reinforced by a supporting consonant: ¹*savants austères* – ⁴*sédentaires*, ²*mûre saison* – ³*maison*, ⁹*attitudes* – ¹⁰*solitudes*, ¹¹*un rêve sans fin* – ¹³*un sable fin*, ¹²*étincelles magiques* – ¹⁴*prunelles mystiques*. There is no correspondence between the syllables immediately preceding either of the two pairs of rhymes ⁵*volupté* – ⁸*fierté* and ⁶*ténèbres* – ⁷*funèbres*. However, the final words in the seventh and eighth lines are alliterative, *funèbres* – *fierté*, and the sixth and fifth lines are linked by the repetition of the final syllable of *volupté* in *ténèbres*, and by the internal rhyme ⁵*science* – ⁶*silence*, which reinforces the affinity between the two lines. Thus the lines themselves reveal a certain relaxation in the relationship between the two halves of the second quatrain.

The phonic texture of the sonnet is dominated by the role of the nasal vowel. These vowels, 'as though veiled by nasality', as Grammont² appropriately puts it, occur very frequently in the first quatrain (9 nasals, from 2 to 3 per line) but most particularly in the final sestet (21 nasals with increasing frequency throughout the first tercet, ⁹3 – ¹⁰4 – ¹¹6: 'Qui semblent s'endormir dans un rêve sans fin' – and with a decreasing frequency throughout the second tercet ¹²5 – ¹³3 – ¹⁴1). In contrast, the second quatrain contains only three: one per line, excepting the seventh – the only line in the sonnet without a nasal vowel; this quatrain is also the only verse where the masculine rhyme does not contain a nasal vowel. On the other hand, in the second quatrain, the role of dominant phonic passes from the vowel-sounds to the consonant phonemes, in particular to the liquid consonants. The second quatrain is the one that reveals an excessive number of these liquid phonemes, twenty-three in all, as opposed to fifteen in the first quatrain, eleven in the first tercet and fourteen in the second. There are rather more /l/'s than /r/'s in the

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quatrains, but rather fewer in the tercets. The seventh line has only two /l/'s but five /r/'s, that is to say, more than any other line in the sonnet - *L'Érèbe les eût pris pour ses coursiers funèbres*. We should always remember that, according to Grammont,³ where one puts /l/ in opposition to /r/ it 'gives the impression of a sound that is neither grating, rasping, nor rough but, on the contrary, that glides and flows, that is limpid'. The abruptness of /r/, and particularly of the French /r/, in relation to the glissando of the /l/ is clearly illustrated in the accoustical analysis of these phenomena in Mlle Durand's⁴ recent study; the effacement of /r/ before /l/ eloquently evokes the transition of the empirical cat to its phantastical transfigurations.

The first six lines of the sonnet are linked by a characteristic reiteration: a symmetric pair of co-ordinate phrases linked by the same conjunction *et*: ¹*Les amoureux fervents et les savants austères*; ³*Les chats puissants et doux*; ⁴*Qui comme eux sont frileux et comme eux sédentaires*; ⁵*Amis de la science et de la volupté*. The binarism of the determinants thus forms a chiasmus with the binarism of the determined in the next line - ⁶*le silence et l'horreur des ténèbres* - thus completing the binary structure. This structure, common to almost all the lines of this 'sestet', does not recur in the remainder of the poem. The juxtapositions without a conjunction are a variation on the same theme: ²*Aiment également dans leur mûre saison* (parallel circumstantial complements); ³*Les chats ... orgueil ...* (one noun in apposition to another).

These pairs of co-ordinate phrases and their rhymes (not only those which are exterior and underline the semantic links such as ¹*austères* - ⁴*sédentaires*, ²*saison* - ³*maison*, but also and especially the interior ones) serve to draw the lines of this introduction closer together: ¹*amoureux* - ⁴*comme eux* - ⁴*frileux* - ⁴*comme eux*; ¹*fervents* - ¹*savants* - ²*également* - ²*dans* - ³*puissants*; ⁵*science* - ⁶*silence*. Thus all the adjectives characterizing the persons in the first quatrain are rhyme-words, with the one exception ³*doux*. A double etymological figure of speech links the openings of three of the lines: ¹*Les amoureux* - ³*Aiment* - ⁵*Amis*, in accordance with the unity of this crypto-stanza of six lines, which starts and ends with a couplet, each of whose first hemistiches rhyme: ¹*fervents* - ²*également*; ⁵*science* - ⁶*silence*.

³*Les chats*, who are the direct object of the clause comprising the first three lines of the sonnet, become the implied subject of the clauses in the following three lines (⁴*Qui comme eux sont frileux*; ⁶*Ils cherchent le silence*), revealing the outline of a division of this quasi-sestet into two

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quasi-tercets. The central couplet recapitulates the metamorphosis of the cats from object (in this case understood) in the seventh line (*L'Èrèbe les eût pris*) to subject, again understood, in the eighth line (*S'ils pouvaient*). Through this the eighth line is linked to the next sentence (*¶Ils prennent*). On the whole, the subordinate, consecutive clauses make a kind of transition between the subordinating clause and the sentence which follows it. Thus, the implied subject *chats* from the ninth and tenth lines gives rise to a reference to the metaphor *sphinx* in the relative clause in line eleven (*Qui semblent s'endormir dans un rêve sans fin*) and, as a result, forges a link between the tropes used as the grammatical subjects in the final tercet. The indefinite article, a complete stranger to the first ten lines with their fourteen definite articles, is the only one admitted in the last four lines of the sonnet. Thus, by virtue of the veiled references of the two relative clauses in the eleventh and the fourth lines, the four final lines tentatively disclose the outline of an imaginary quatrain which gives the appearance of corresponding to the real initial quatrain of the sonnet. Animate subjects are never expressed by substantives, but rather by adjectival substantives in the first line of the sonnet (*Les amoureux, les savants*) and by personal or relative pronouns in the final clauses. Human beings appear only in the first clause, in the form of a double subject supported by adjectival verb-substantives. *Les chats*, named in the title of the sonnet, appear by name only once in the body of the text, as the direct object in the first clause ¹*Les amoureux ... et les savants ...* ²*Aiment ...* ³*Les chats*. Not only does the word *chats* not appear again in the course of the poem but even the shushing sound of the initial /ʃ/ only reappears in one word: ⁶*/il [ʃɛrʃə/*, the repetition of the sound representing the primary action of the feline species. This muted hissing associated with the name of the poem's subject is carefully avoided throughout the remainder of the work. In the third line, *les chats* become an understood subject, the last animate subject in the sonnet. The substantive *chats* in the role of subject, object and adnominal complement is replaced by anaphoric pronouns: ⁶, ⁸, ⁹*ils*, ⁷*les*, ⁸, ¹², ¹⁴*leur(s)*, and it is only to *les chats* that the pronominal substantives *ils* and *les* refer. These accessory adverbial forms occur only in the two inside verses: in the second quatrain and in the first tercet. The autonomous form ⁴*eux* (twice) occurring in the initial quatrain corresponds to them, and this form refers only to human beings in the sonnet, whilst the last tercet contains no pronominal substantive.

The two subjects of the opening clause of the sonnet have one single predicate and one single object: it is thus that ¹*Les amoureux fervents et*

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les savants austères finally ²*dans leur mûre saison* identify themselves with an intermediary, an animal which embodies the paradoxical characteristics of two human but opposed conditions. The two human categories contrast with each other as sensual/intellectual and the cats act as the intermediary agents. From this point, the role of subject is implicitly assumed by the cats who are at the same time *amoureux ... et ... savants*.

We are given an objective representation of the personages: *les chats* in the two quatrains; whilst in the two tercets their transfiguration is presented. However, the second quatrain differs fundamentally from the first and, on the whole, from the remaining verses. The equivocal *ils cherchent le silence et l'horreur des ténèbres*, gives rise to the misapprehension provoked by the seventh line of the sonnet and denounced in the next line. The Delphic quality of this quatrain, particularly the ambiguity of its latter half, and more particularly of line seven, is accentuated by the peculiarities of its grammatical and phonic texture.

The semantic affinity between *L'Érèbe* ('shady region bordering on Hell', metonymic substitute for 'the powers of darkness', and particularly for Erebus, 'brother of Night') and the cats' predilection for *l'horreur des ténèbres*, supported by the phonic parallel between /tɛnɛbra/ and /ɛrɛbɔ/, all but harnesses the cats, heroes of the poem, to the grisly task of *coursiers funèbres*. Does the line which implies that *L'Érèbe les eût pris pour ses coursiers funèbres* raise a question of frustrated desire or one of mistaken identity? The exact meaning of this passage, long questioned by the critics,⁵ is still ambiguous.

Each of the quatrains and tercets tries to give the cats a new identity. The first quatrain associates them with two types of human condition, and, by virtue of their pride, they succeed in rejecting the new identity put forward in the second quatrain, which would associate them with an animal condition: that of chargers in a mythological context. It is the only identification that is rejected in the course of the whole piece. The grammatical structure of this section, in clear contrast to that of the other verses, betrays its characteristic isolation: unreality of form, lack of qualifying epithets, a singular inanimate subject void of any determinant and governing a plural animate object.

The verses are linked by allusive oxymorons: ⁸*S'ils POUVAIENT au servage incliner leur fierté* – but they *can/not* do so because they are truly ³*PUISSANTS*. They cannot be passively *PRIS* to play an active role, which is demonstrated by the way in which they themselves

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actively ⁹PRENNENT a passive role because they are obstinately *sédentaires*. Leur *fierté* predestines them for the ⁹nobles attitudes ¹⁰Des *grands sphinx*. The ¹⁰sphinx *allongés* and the cats which mimic them ⁹en *songeant* are linked by a paranomastic connection between the two participles – the only participial forms in the sonnet: /ãõ zã/ and /alõ ze/. The cats seem to identify themselves with the sphinxes who in their turn ¹¹semblent *s'endormir*, but the illusory comparison to *les chats sédentaires* (and by implication to all who are ⁴comme eux) and to the immobility of supernatural beings achieves the status of a metamorphosis. The cats and the human beings who are identified with them unite as mythical beasts with human heads and animal bodies. Thus the rejected identity is replaced with a new and equally mythological identity.

⁹En *songeant*, the cats come to be identified with the ¹⁰grands *sphinx*, and a chain of word-plays linked to these key-words and combining nasal vowels with constrictive dentals and labials reinforces the metamorphosis. ⁹en *songeant* /ãõ ... / – ¹⁰grands *sphinx*/ ... ãsfẽ ... / – ¹⁰fond /fõ/¹¹semblent /sã ... / – ¹¹s'endormir/sã / – ¹¹dans un/.ãzçẽ/ – ¹¹sans fin /sãfẽ/. The sharp nasal /ẽ/ and the other phonemes in the word ¹⁰sphinx/sfẽks/ recur in the last tercet: ¹²reins/.ẽ/ – ¹²pleins/..ẽ / – ¹²étincelles /..ẽs ... / – ¹³ainsi /ẽs/ – ¹³qu'un sable /kçẽs ... /.

We read in the first quatrain ³Les *chats puissants et doux*, *orgueil de la maison*. Does it mean that the cats, proud of their home, are the embodiment of that pride, or that the house, proud of its feline inhabitants, tries, like Erebus, to domesticate them? Whichever it is, the ³maison which circumscribes the cats in the first quatrain is transformed into a spacious desert, ¹⁰fond *des solitudes*. And the fear of cold which is common to *les chats* ⁴frileux and ¹Les *amoureux fervents* (note the word-play /fervã/ – /frilø/) is dispelled by the appropriate climate of the *solitudes austères* (*austères* like the *savants*) of the torrid desert (torrid like the *amoureux fervents*) surrounding the sphinxes. On the temporal plain, the ²mûre *saison*, rhyming with ³la *maison* in the first quatrain and related to it by signification, has a clear counterpart in the first tercet: these two visibly parallel groups of words (²dans *leur mûre saison* and ¹¹dans *un rêve sans fin*), the one evoking numbered days and the other eternity. Constructions using *dans*, or any other adverbial preposition, do not occur elsewhere in the sonnet.

The miraculous quality of *les chats* pervades the two tercets. The metamorphosis unfolds right to the end of the sonnet. In the first tercet the image of the sphinxes lying stretched out in the desert already hovers

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between the creature and its effigy, and in the next tercet animate beings become effaced by material objects. Synecdoche substitutes for the cat-sphinxes various parts of the body: ¹²leurs reins, ¹⁴leurs prunelles. In the final tercet, the understood subject of the inside verses again becomes the complement: the cats first appear as an implicit complement of the subject – ¹²Leurs reins féconds sont pleins – then, in the last clause of the poem, they are no more than an implicit complement to the object ¹⁴Étoilent vaguement leurs prunelles. Thus the cats are linked to the object of the transitive verb in the last clause of the sonnet and to the subject in the penultimate, attributive clause, thereby making a double parallel on the one hand with *les chats* as the direct object of the first clause of the sonnet and on the other with *les chats* as the subject of the second clause, this being at the same attributive.

Whereas at the beginning of the sonnet both subject and object were animate, the two word-groups of the final clause are both inanimate. In principle, all the nouns in the final tercet are concrete and animate – ¹²reins, ¹²étincelles, ¹³parcelles, ¹³or, ¹³sable, ¹⁴prunelles – whilst in the inside stanzas all the inanimate appellatives, with the exception of the adnominal ones, are abstract nouns: ²saison, ³orgueil, ⁶silence, ⁶horreur, ⁸servage, ⁹ferté, ⁹attitudes, ¹¹rêve. The inanimate feminine gender, common to the subject and object of the final clause – ¹³⁻¹⁶des parcelles d'or ... Étoilent ... *Leurs prunelles* – counterbalances the subject and the object of the initial clause, both of which are animate and masculine: ¹⁻³Les amoureux ... et les savants ... Aiment ... *Les chats*. ¹³Parcelles is the only feminine subject in the sonnet, contrasting with the masculine ¹³sable fin at the end of the same line, which is itself the only example of the masculine gender in a masculine rhyme.

In the last tercet, the final fragments of matter take it in turns to be object and subject. They are the incandescent fragments that a new image, the last one in the sonnet, identifies with the *sable fin* and transforms into stars.

The distinctive rhyme linking the two tercets is the only homonymous rhyme in the whole sonnet and the only masculine rhyme which juxtaposes different parts of speech. There is also a certain syntactical symmetry between the two rhyme-words, since they are the final words in subordinate clauses, one of which is finite and the other elliptical. The phonetic parallel, far from being confined to the last syllable of each line, closely links the whole of both lines: ¹¹/sāblə sādər mir danzœ rævə sã fẽ/ – ¹³/parsələ dər ěsi kœ sablə fẽ/. It is not by chance that precisely the

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rhyme that links the two tercets evokes *un sable fin*, thus taking the desert motif up again, in the same position as *un rêve sans fin* of the *grands sphinx* appears in the first tercet.

³*La maison*, which circumscribes the cats in the first quatrain, disappears altogether in the first tercet, where desert solitude holds sway, a true home for the sphinx-cats who hold in the irises of their eyes the sands of the desert and the light of the stars. The epilogue again takes up the original theme of the *amoureux* and the *savants* united in *Les chats puissants et doux*. The first line of the second tercet seems to answer the first line of the second quatrain, the cats being ⁵*Amis de la volupté*; ¹²*Leurs reins féconds sont pleins*. One is tempted to believe that the poem is talking about creative force, but Baudelaire's work is all too open to ambiguous interpretation. Does it refer to power in their actual loins, or electric sparks in the animal's fur? Whatever it may be, it is a *magic* power that is attributed to them. The second quatrain opens with two co-ordinate complements: ⁵*Amis de la science et de la volupté*; and the final tercet refers back not just to ¹*Les amoureux fervents* but equally to ¹*les savants austères*.

In the last tercet, the rhyming suffixes accentuate the strong semantic link between ¹²*les étinCELLES*, ¹³*parCELLES d'or* and ¹⁴*prunELLES* of the cat-sphinxes on the one hand, and on the other between the ¹²*MagIQUES* sparks from the animal, its *MystIQUES prunelles*, illuminated by an internal light, open yet closed. This is the only rhyme in the sonnet which is stripped of its supporting consonant, as if to lay bare the balance of the morphemes, and the alliteration of the initial 'm's juxtaposes the two adjectives. ⁶*L'horreur des ténèbres* is dissipated by this double luminescence, which is reflected on the phonic plane by the predominating phonemes of light timbre in the nasal vocalization of the final stanza (seven palatals and six gutturals), whereas in the preceding verses there have been a far greater number of gutturals (sixteen to none in the first quatrain, two to one in the second, ten to five in the first tercet).

Due to the preponderance of synecdoche at the end of the sonnet, where parts of the animal are substituted for the whole, and the animal itself is substituted for the universe of which it is a part, the images seem to take on an intentional obscurity by their imprecision. The definite article gives way to the indefinite article and the verbal metaphor selected by the poet - ¹⁴*Étoilent vaguement* - brilliantly reflects the poesy of the epilogue. The conformity between the tercets and the corresponding quatrains (in horizontal parallel) is striking. The restrictions of space (³*maison*) and time (²*mûre saison*) imposed in the first quatrain are

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answered in the first tercet, by distancing, or by breaking down of barriers (¹⁰*fond des solitudes*, ¹¹*rêve sans fin*). Similarly, in the second tercet, the magic of the light irradiated by *Les chats* triumphs over ⁶*l'horreur des ténèbres*, which nearly wrought such deception in the second quatrain.

Now, in drawing the parts of our analysis together, we shall try to show how the different levels on which we touched blend, complement each other, or combine to give the poem the nature of an absolute object.

First of all, division of the text: several divisions can be clearly distinguished, as much from the grammatical point of view as from the semantic links between different parts of the poem.

As we have already pointed out, there is a primary division corresponding to the three parts which end with a full stop, that is to say, each of the two quatrains and the sum of the two tercets. The first quatrain presents, in the form of an objective and static picture, a factual situation, or one that purports to be so. The second quatrain attributes to the cats a purpose, interpreted by the powers of Erebus; and attributes to the powers of Erebus an intention towards the cats which the latter resist. Thus, in these two sections, the cats are seen from outside, firstly through the passivity with which lovers and savants are particularly associated, and secondly through the activity seen in and by the powers of Erebus. By contrast, in the last part this opposition is overcome by realizing in the cats an actively assumed passivity, no longer interpreted from the outside but from within.

A secondary division gives us the contrast of the sum of the two tercets with the sum of the two quatrains, at the same time revealing a close connection between the first quatrain and the first tercet, and between the second quatrain and the second tercet.

Thus:

1. The sum of the two quatrains contrasts with the sum of the tercets in the sense that the latter dispenses with the point of view of the observer (*amoureux, savants, powers of Erebus*) and places the cats outside all spatial and temporal limits.
2. The first quatrain introduces these spatio-temporal limits (*maison, saison*) and the first tercet abolishes them (*au fond des solitudes, rêve sans fin*).
3. The second quatrain defines the cats in terms of the shades wherein they dwell and the second tercet in terms of the light they irradiate (*étincelles, étoiles*).

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Finally, a third division can be added to these two, by regrouping the text this time in a chiasmus with the initial quatrain and the final tercet on the one hand, and, on the other, the two inside verses: the second quatrain and the first tercet. In the first group, the independent clauses assign to the cats the function of complement, whereas from the outset the other two stanzas assign to the cats the function of subject. Thus, these phenomena of distribution have a semantic basis. The point of departure in the first quatrain is provided by the context: cats, savants and lovers in the same house. A double comparison arises out of this contiguity (*comme eux ... comme eux*). Similarly, a contiguous relationship in the last tercet evolves towards a comparison. Whereas in the first quatrain a metonymic link between the feline and human inhabitants of the house forms the basis of their metaphorical relationship, in the final tercet the situation is, in a manner of speaking, interiorized: the link derives from synecdoche rather than from the metonymy itself. *Reins, prunelles*, the parts of the cat's body, provide a metaphorical evocation of the astral, cosmic cat, allied to the transition from precision to imprecision (*également - vaguement*). The analogy between the two inside verses rests on relations of equivalence, the one rejected in the second quatrain (cats and *coursiers funèbres*) and the other accepted in the first tercet (cats and sphinxes), which indicate in the first instance a refusal of location (of the cats in Erebus) and in the second the establishment of the cats *au fond des solitudes*. Here we have the reverse of the preceding situation; a transition is made from a relation of equivalence, reinforced by a comparison (in this case by metaphor) to a relation of contiguity (in this case by metonymy), whether negative or positive.

Up to this point, the poem has appeared to be composed of relations of equivalence, which fit into one another like boxes and which form as a whole an apparently closed system. There is, however, yet another way of looking at it, whereby the poem takes on the appearance of an open system in dynamic progression from start to finish.

In this first part of this study we elucidated a division of the poem into two sestets separated by a couplet whose structure was in marked contrast to the remainder. In the course of our recapitulation, we provisionally set this division to one side, because we felt that, unlike the others, it marks the stages of a progression from the real order (the first sestet) to the surreal (second sestet). This transition operates via the distich, whose combination of semantics and form carries the reader for a brief moment into a doubly unreal universe, since, whilst sharing

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the characteristic exteriority of the first sestet, it still introduces the mythological tone of the second sestet.

1 to 6	7 to 8	9 to 14
extrinsic		intrinsic
empirical	mythological	
real	unreal	surreal

By this sudden oscillation both of tone and theme, the couplet fulfils a function which bears a strong resemblance to modulation in musical composition. The purpose of this modulation is to resolve the implicit or explicit conflict set up from the beginning of the poem between metaphor and metonymy. The solution accomplished in the final sestet is achieved by transferring this conflict to the very heart of the metonymy, whilst expressing it in a metaphorical form. In effect, each of the tercets advances an inverse image of the cat. In the first tercet, the cats traditionally enclosed in the house are so to speak extravasated from it in order to expand spatially and temporally in the infinite deserts and the dream without end. The movement is from inside to outside, from cats in seclusion to cats at liberty. The breaking down of barriers in the second tercet is expressed by the cats attaining cosmic proportions, i.e. they conceal in certain parts of their bodies (*reins* and *prunelles*) the sands of the desert and the stars of heaven. In both cases the transformation is effected by metaphor, but the two transformations are not exactly equivalent: the first is still concerned with the nature of appearances (*prennent ... les ... attitudes ... qui semblent s'endormir*) and of the dream (*en songeant ... dans un rêve ...*), whilst the second really brings the whole thing to a conclusion by its affirmative nature (*sont pleins ... Étoilent*). In the first, the cats close their eyes to sleep, in the second they keep them open.

However, these ample metaphors of the final sestet simply transpose on to a universal scale a conflict that was already implicitly formulated in the first line of the poem. Around the *amoureux* and the *savants* terms are assembled which unite them respectively in a contracted or a dilated

relationship: the lover is joined to the woman as the *savant* is to the universe: two types of conjunction, the one close and the other distant.⁶ A parallel relationship is evoked in the final transfigurations: dilation of the cats in time and space – confinement of time and place within the beings of the cats. Here again, just as we noted earlier, the symmetry between the two formulae is not complete. The latter contains within it a collection of all the conflicts: the *reins féconds* recall the *volupté* of the *amoureux*, as do the *prunelles*, the *science* of the *savants*; *magiques* refers to the active fervour of the one, *mystiques* to the contemplative attitude of the other.

Two final points:

The fact that all the grammatical subjects in the sonnet (with the exception of the proper noun *L'Érèbe*) are plural, and that all feminine rhymes are plural (including the substantive *solitudes*), is curiously illuminated (as indeed is much of the rest of the sonnet) in these quotations from *Foules*:⁷ 'Multitude, solitude: terms which are equal and full of potential for the active and creative poet ... The poet enjoys that incomparable privilege, that he can, at will, be both himself and someone else. What men call love is very small, very restrained and very weak compared with that ineffable orgy, that blessed prostitution of the soul which gives itself in its entirety, its poetry and charity to the unexpected event or to the passing stranger.'

In the Baudelaire sonnet, the cats are initially described as *puissants et doux* and in the final line their *prunelles* are likened to the stars; Crépet and Blin⁸ compare this to a line in Sainte-Beuve ... 'Astre puissant et doux' (1829); and point out the use of the same epithets in a poem by Brizeux (1832), in which women are thus apostrophized: 'Êtres deux fois doués! Êtres puissants et doux!'

This would reaffirm, were there any need to do so, that for Baudelaire the image of the cat is closely linked to that of the woman, as is explicit in his two other poems on the same theme, i.e. the sonnet: 'Viens, mon beau chat, sur mon coeur amoureux' (which contains the illuminating line: 'Je vois ma femme en esprit ...'); and the poem: 'Dans ma cervelle se promène ... Un beau chat, fort doux ...' (which asks outright 'est-il fée, est-il dieu?').

This motive of oscillation between male and female in 'Les Chats' becomes evident in the intentional ambiguities (*Les amoureux ... Aiment ... Les chats puissants et doux ... Leurs reins féconds ...*). Michel Butor⁹ is justified in his claim that in Baudelaire 'the two aspects of femininity and

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supervirility, far from being mutually exclusive are in fact bound together'. All beings in the sonnet are masculine but the cats and their alter ego, *les grands sphinx*, are of an androgynous nature. This very ambiguity is emphasized throughout the sonnet by the paradoxical choice of feminine substantives for so-called masculine rhymes.¹⁰ Through the mediation of the cats, woman is eliminated from the poem's initial galaxy of *amoureux* and *savants*, leaving face to face, if not totally enmeshed, 'le poète des chats' freed from love 'bien restreint' and the universe, unfettered by the savants' austerity.