

## Romanticism extracts

### Victor Hugo

This poem, *Mugitusque boum*, is almost Modernist in its title (literally: *Moo-istic boom*) and displays the freedom that can be found in alexandrines, when handled more loosely than they were in the Classicist era. It is from one of Hugo's most successful verse collections, *Les Contemplations* (1856), which contain poems detailing his personal development, the historical changes in France, and, as we find here, a straight-forwardly Romantic eulogy to nature. It has been rendered into particularly vibrant English by the Blackmores (2004).

### Charles Baudelaire

Baudelaire, in contrast to Hugo's enormous output, published only one slim volume of poetry in his life, *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857), *The Flowers of Evil*. I have included here the opening poem, *To the Reader*, which was a successful, and darkly humorous, attempt to metamorphose the Romantic tone. A comparison might be made by Hugo's Christian rapture before a divinely-touched nature in *Mugitusque* and Baudelaire's vision of Beauty in the ensuing sonnet, *Beauty*, and where Baudelaire celebrates a poetic muse that is uncomfortable, morally ambivalent, and cold. Both translations are by Campbell (1952), who manages the difficult feat of bringing Baudelaire into fluent, if not brilliant, English verse.

### A further note:

These are reasonably short extracts for this week, but my hope is that you will give these poems their due and read them more than once. In particular, you might be interested to compare different translations of Baudelaire into English with these and other poems, something which you can easily do on this very helpful site (<https://fleursdumal.org>) where each poem in the *Fleurs* is accompanied by a dozen different historical translations into English. It is worth noting how remarkably different the poem can sound in different translations. For more Hugo, a good selection of his massive opus can be found, again in a bilingual edition, here: [https://cdn-cms.f-static.com/uploads/1259807/normal\\_5c994187e5a74.pdf](https://cdn-cms.f-static.com/uploads/1259807/normal_5c994187e5a74.pdf).

**Mugitusque boum**

Mugissement des bœufs, au temps du doux Virgile,  
 Comme aujourd'hui, le soir, quand fuit la nuit agile,  
 Ou, le matin, quand l'aube aux champs extasiés  
 Verse à flots la rosée et le jour, vous disiez:  
 Mûrissez, blés mouvants! prés, emplissez-vous d'herbes! 5  
 Que la terre, agitant son panache de gerbes,

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*During the Exile: 1851–1870*

Chante dans l'onde d'or d'une riche moisson!  
 Vis, bête; vis, caillou; vis, homme; vis, buisson!  
 A l'heure où le soleil se couche, où l'herbe est pleine  
 Des grands fantômes noirs des arbres de la plaine 10  
 Jusqu'aux lointains coteaux rampant et grandissant,  
 Quand le brun laboureur des collines descend  
 Et retourne à son toit d'où sort une fumée,  
 Que la soif de revoir sa femme bien-aimée  
 Et l'enfant qu'en ses bras hier il réchauffait, 15  
 Que ce désir, croissant à chaque pas qu'il fait,  
 Imite dans son cœur l'allongement de l'ombre!  
 Êtres! choses! vivez! sans peur, sans deuil, sans nombre!  
 Que tout s'épanouisse en sourire vermeil!  
 Que l'homme ait le repas et le bœuf le sommeil! 20  
 Vivez! croissez! semez le grain à l'aventure!  
 Qu'on sente frissonner dans toute la nature,  
 Sous la feuille des nids, au seuil blanc des maisons,  
 Dans l'obscur tremblement des profonds horizons,  
 Un vaste emportement d'aimer, dans l'herbe verte, 25  
 Dans l'ancre, dans l'étang, dans la clairière ouverte,  
 D'aimer sans fin, d'aimer toujours, d'aimer encor,  
 Sous la sérénité des sombres astres d'or!  
 Faites tressaillir l'air, le flot, l'aile, la bouche,  
 O palpitations du grand amour farouche! 30  
 Qu'on sente le baiser de l'être illimité!  
 Et paix, vertu, bonheur, espérance, bonté,  
 O fruits divins, tomber des branches éternelles!—  
 Ainsi vous parliez, voix, grandes voix solennelles;  
 Et Virgile écoutait comme j'écoute, et l'eau 35  
 Voyait passer le cygne auguste, et le bouleau  
 Le vent, et le rocher l'écume, et le ciel sombre  
 L'homme...— O nature! abîme! immensité de l'ombre!

## Lowing of Oxen

Those lowing oxen, in the days of gentle Virgil\*—  
 At dusk, when agile night came rushing through,  
 Or at dawn, when the sun poured floods of dew and daylight  
 On ravished fields— declared, just as ours do:  
 ‘Ripen, you flowing wheat, and fill with grass, you meadows!  
 And may the land, stirring its plumes of grain,

### *Contemplations*

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Sing in the dark about the gold of a rich harvest!  
 Stones, men, plants, beasts— be alive! On the plain,  
 At the hour when the sun is bedding down, when dusky  
 Phantoms of trees are filling the terrain  
 Up to the distant writhing, growing mountains,  
 When the brown ploughman leaves the hillsides for  
 His own roof, out of which a trail of smoke is rising\*—  
 May the desire to see his wife once more,  
 And the beloved child he warmed in his arms yesterday—  
 May that thirst, at his every step, progress  
 Within his heart, like the progressing darkness!  
 Be alive, all things! fearless, sorrowless,  
 Numberless! let them all spread in a smile of brilliance!  
 May people have repose, and oxen sleep!  
 Be alive! increase! sow your seed at random!  
 In the dim tremblings of the distant deep,  
 Among the nests, on the white thresholds of the houses,  
 In the green grass, in clearing, cave, and spring,  
 Throughout the whole of nature, may a far-flung  
 Embrace of love be felt, all quivering,  
 Beneath the calm of the dark golden constellations—  
 Endless love, constant love, ever complete.  
 You mighty, untamed love, set all winds and waves pulsing,  
 Set all wings and mouths pulsing with your beat!  
 Let them feel the unbounded I AM’s kisses!  
 And, all you everlasting branches, shed  
 Your sacred fruits— peace, virtue, joy, hope, kindness!’

So those great voices, solemn voices, said;  
 And Virgil heard them just as I do; and the water  
 Saw the majestic swan go past,  
 The birch the wind, the rock the spray, and the night sky  
 Man... Nature! you abyss! so dark, so vast!

**Baudelaire****Au Lecteur**

La sottise, l'erreur, le péché, la lésine,  
Occupent nos esprits et travaillent nos corps,  
Et nous alimentons nos aimables remords,  
Comme les mendiants nourrissent leur vermine.

Nos péchés sont têtus, nos repentirs sont lâches;  
Nous nous faisons payer grassement nos aveux,  
Et nous rentrons gaiement dans le chemin bourbeux,  
Croyant par de vils pleurs laver toutes nos taches.

Sur l'oreiller du mal c'est Satan Trismégiste  
Qui berce longuement notre esprit enchanté,  
Et le riche métal de notre volonté  
Est tout vaporisé par ce savant chimiste.

C'est le Diable qui tient les fils qui nous remuent!  
Aux objets répugnants nous trouvons des appas;  
Chaque jour vers l'Enfer nous descendons d'un pas,  
Sans horreur, à travers des ténèbres qui puent.

Ainsi qu'un débauché pauvre qui baise et mange  
Le sein martyrisé d'une antique catin,  
Nous volons au passage un plaisir clandestin  
Que nous pressons bien fort comme une vieille orange.

Serré, fourmillant, comme un million d'helminthes,  
Dans nos cerveaux ribote un peuple de Démons,  
Et, quand nous respirons, la Mort dans nos poumons  
Descend, fleuve invisible, avec de sourdes plaintes.

Si le viol, le poison, le poignard, l'incendie,  
N'ont pas encor brodé de leurs plaisants dessins  
Le canevas banal de nos piteux destins,  
C'est que notre âme, hélas! n'est pas assez hardie.

Mais parmi les chacals, les panthères, les lices,  
Les singes, les scorpions, les vautours, les serpents,  
Les monstres glapissants, hurlants, grognants, rampants,  
Dans la ménagerie infâme de nos vices,

Il en est un plus laid, plus méchant, plus immonde!  
Quoiqu'il ne pousse ni grands gestes ni grands cris,  
Il ferait volontiers de la terre un débris  
Et dans un bâillement avalerait le monde;

C'est l'Ennui! L'oeil chargé d'un pleur involontaire,  
 Il rêve d'échafauds en fumant son houka.  
 Tu le connais, lecteur, ce monstre délicat,  
 — Hypocrite lecteur, — mon semblable, — mon frère!

— *Charles Baudelaire*

### **To the Reader**

Folly and error, sin and avarice,  
 Labour our minds and bodies in their course,  
 Blithely we nourish pleasurable remorse  
 As beggars feed their parasitic lice.

Our sins are stubborn, our repentance faint,  
 We sell our weak confessions at high price,  
 Returning gaily to the bogs of vice,  
 Thinking base tears can cleanse our every taint.

Pillowed on evil, Satan Trismegist  
 Ceaselessly cradles our enchanted mind,  
 The flawless metal of our will we find  
 Volatilized by this rare alchemist.

The Devil holds the puppet threads; and swayed  
 By noisome things and their repugnant spell,  
 Daily we take one further step toward Hell,  
 Suffering no horror in the olid shade.

As an impoverished rake will kiss and bite  
 The bruised blue nipples of an ancient whore,  
 We steal clandestine pleasures by the score,  
 Which, like dried orange rinds, we pressure tight.

Serried, aswarm, like million maggots, so  
 Demons carouse in us with fetid breath,  
 And, when we breathe, the unseen stream of death  
 Flows down our lungs with muffled wads of woe.

If poison, knife, rape, arson, have not dared  
 Yet stamp the pleasing pattern of their gyves  
 On the dull canvas of our sorry lives,  
 It is because our torpid souls are scared.

But side by side with our monstrosities —  
 Jackals and bitch hounds, scorpions, vultures, apes,  
 Panthers and serpents whose repulsive shapes  
 Pollute our vice's dank menageries,

There is one viler and more wicked spawn,  
 Which never makes great gestures or loud cries  
 Yet would turn earth to wastes of sumps and sties  
 And swallow all creation in a yawn:

Ennui! Moist-eyed perforce, worse than all other,  
 Dreaming of stakes, he smokes his hookah pipe.  
 Reader, you know this fiend, refined and ripe,  
 Reader, O hypocrite — my like! — my brother!

— Jacques LeClercq, *Flowers of Evil* (Mt Vernon, NY: Peter Pauper Press, 1958)

## **La Beauté**

Je suis belle, ô mortels! comme un rêve de pierre,  
 Et mon sein, où chacun s'est meurtri tour à tour,  
 Est fait pour inspirer au poète un amour  
 Éternel et muet ainsi que la matière.

Je trône dans l'azur comme un sphinx incompris;  
 J'unis un cœur de neige à la blancheur des cygnes;  
 Je hais le mouvement qui déplace les lignes,  
 Et jamais je ne pleure et jamais je ne ris.

Les poètes, devant mes grandes attitudes,  
 Que j'ai l'air d'emprunter aux plus fiers monuments,  
 Consumeront leurs jours en d'austères études;

Car j'ai, pour fasciner ces dociles amants,  
 De purs miroirs qui font toutes choses plus belles:  
 Mes yeux, mes larges yeux aux clartés éternelles!

— *Charles Baudelaire*

**Beauty**

I'm fair, O mortals, as a dream of stone;  
My breasts whereon, in turn, your wrecks you shatter,  
Were made to wake in poets' hearts alone  
A love as indestructible as matter.

A sky-throned sphinx, unknown yet, I combine  
The cygnet's whiteness with a heart of snow.  
I loathe all movement that displaces line,  
And neither tears nor laughter do I know.

Poets before my postures, which I seem  
To learn from masterpieces, love to dream  
And there in austere thought consume their days.

I have, these docile lovers to subject,  
Mirrors that glorify all they reflect —  
These eyes, great eyes, eternal in their blaze!

— Roy Campbell, *Poems of Baudelaire* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1952)