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Crowds translated by Enid Rhodes Peschel

Charles Baudelaire

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CROWDS

It is not granted to everyone to bathe in the multitude: to enjoy the crowd is an art; and he alone, at the expense of the human race, can have a drinking bout of vitality, into whom a fairy has blown in his cradle the taste for disguise and mask, hatred for his dwelling place and passion for travel.

Multitude, solitude: equal and convertible expressions for the active and prolific poet. He who doesn't know how to people his solitude, doesn't know either how to be alone in a bustling crowd.

The poet enjoys this incomparable privilege, that he can be himself and other people, as he pleases. Like those wandering souls who search for a body, he enters, when he wishes, the character of everyone. For him alone, everything is tenantless; and if certain places seem to be closed to him, it's that in his eyes they aren't worth the trouble of being visited.

The solitary and pensive stroller draws a singular intoxication from this universal communion. He who easily embraces the crowd knows feverish enjoyments, of which the egoist, closed like a coffer, and the sluggard, confined like a mollusk, will be eternally deprived. He adopts as his own all the professions, all the joys and all the miseries that circumstance presents him.

What men call love is quite small, quite restrained and quite feeble, compared with this ineffable orgy, this blessed prostitution of the soul that gives its entire self wholly, poetry and charity, to the unforeseen that appears, to the unknown that passes on.

It is good sometimes to teach the happy people of this world, were it only to humiliate for one instant their foolish pride, that there are felicities superior to theirs, more vast and more exquisite. Founders of colonies, pastors of peoples, missionary priests exiled to the end of the world, doubtlessly know something of these mysterious intoxications; and, in the bosom of the vast family that their genius has made for itself, they must laugh sometimes at those who pity them for their so unsettled fortunes and for their so chaste lives.

Translated by Enid Rhodes Peschel