

"Assommons les pauvres!" (Let's beat up the Poor!)
Charles Baudelaire

For fifteen days I was confined to my room, and I was surrounded by the sort of books that were fashionable then (this was sixteen or seventeen years ago)--I mean to say those books in which is treated the art of making people happy, wise, and rich in twenty-four hours. I had, then, digested,--I should say, swallowed whole,--all the lucubrations of all of these entrepreneurs of public happiness,--of those who council all of the poor to make themselves slaves, and of those who persuade them that are all unthroned kings. You won't be surprised to learn that I was in a state of mind close to dizziness or stupefaction.

It seemed to me only that I felt, confined in the depths of my intellect, the obscure seed of an idea superior to all the old wives' tales collected in the encyclopedia that I had recently read through. But it was only the idea of an idea, something infinitely vague.

And I went out with a great thirst. For a passionate taste for bad reading engenders a proportional need for fresh air and refreshments.

As I was about to enter a cabaret, a beggar held out his cap to me, with one of those unforgettable gazes that would cause thrones to tumble, if spirit could move matter, and if the eye of a hypnotist could make grapes ripen.

At the same time, I heard a voice whispering in my ear, a voice that I well recognized: it was that of the good Angel, or good Devil, who accompanies me everywhere. Since Socrates had his good Demon, why shouldn't I have my good Angel, and why shouldn't I have the honor, like Socrates, of obtaining my own certificate of insanity, signed by the subtle Lelut and the well-advised Baillarge?

There is a difference between Socrates' Demon and my own, and that is that Socrates' only appeared to him to forbid, warn, and prevent, whereas mine deigns to offer council, suggest, and persuade. Poor Socrates only had a prohibitive Demon; mine is a great affirmer, mine is a Demon of action, a Demon of combat.

Now, his voice whispered this: "He alone is equal to another who proves it, and he alone is worthy of liberty who knows how to conquer it."

I immediately leaped upon the beggar. With a single punch I gave him a black eye, which became in a second as big as a ball. I tore one of my nails breaking two of his teeth, and since I didn't feel strong enough--having been born delicate and being little practiced in boxing--to beat this old man to death quickly, I seized him with one hand by the collar of his jacket and with the other I grabbed his throat, and I began to bang his head against the wall vigorously. I must admit that I had previously inspected the area with a quick glance and that I had verified that I would find myself, in this deserted suburb, out of the reach of any police officer for a fairly long period of time.

Having then knocked down this weakened sexagenarian with a kick in the back, energetic enough to have broken his shoulder-blades, I seized a big tree limb that was lying on the ground and I beat him with it with the obstinate energy of a cook who wants to tenderize a steak. Suddenly,--Oh delight of the philosopher who verifies the excellence of this theory!--I saw that ancient carcass turn, stand up with an energy that I would never have expected to find in so singularly broken-down a machine, and, with a look of hatred that seemed to me a good omen, the decrepit ruffian threw himself upon me, blackened both of my eyes, broke four of my teeth, and with the same tree branch beat me to a bloody pulp. Through my energetic medicine, I had returned to him his pride and his life...

Then I made him numerous signs to let him understand that I considered the discussion ended, and getting up with all of the satisfaction of a Stoic philosopher, I said to him: "Sir, you are my equal! Do me the honor of sharing my purse with me; and remember, if you are really a philanthropist, that you must apply to all of your brothers, when they ask you for alms, the theory that I had the sorrow of testing out on your back."

He swore to me that he had understood my theory, and that he would obey my advice.