A Corona period commentary to Charles Baudelaire “La Solitude”

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In this period of the corona blockade which continues without knowing till when, and arouses complains about the solitude and lack of activity which bother so many of us reverberates the pessimistic lines of David Avidan in his poem “Power of attorney”:
“*What justifies most of all the loneliness, the great despair, the strange caring of the great loneliness and the great despair is the simple indisputable fact that we don’t really have anywhere to go*”.
But I preferred to come back to peruse Les poems en prose “La solitude” in “Le spleen de Paris” of Charles Baudelaire (I quote the poem and add my commentary).

“Un gazetier philanthrope me dit que la solitude est mauvaise pour l’homme ; et à l’appui de sa thèse, il cite, comme tous les incrédules, des paroles des Pères de l’Église”.

A philanthropic journalist tells me that solitude is bad for human-kind and, in support of his thesis, cites — as unbelievers generally do — the Church Fathers.

This opening, a declaration of the Church Fathers, vesting importance to the collective and presenting the solitude as negative serves Baudelaire as a base for discussing the solitude as positive and vital state.

Je sais que le Démon fréquente volontiers les lieux arides, et que l’Esprit de meurtre et de lubricité s’enflamme merveilleusement dans les solitudes. Mais il serait possible que cette solitude ne fût dangereuse que pour l’âme oisive et divagante qui la peuple de ses passions et de ses chimères.

I’m aware of how the Demon prefers arid places and how the Spirit of murder and lust, left in solitude, unaccountably ignites. But possibly such solitude is dangerous only for idle and incoherent souls, who populate it with their own passions, their own chimæras.

Baudelaire presents his thesis: the danger in solitude is to the empty psyche. This note reminds me what I heard years ago from the criminologist prof. S. G. Shoam, how criminals in prison who are sent to solitary confinement cannot contain the emptiness which takes over them, and to run away from its terror, they cut across their belly, and thus create a big drama around them and

displace the focus of experience from their inner psyche darkness to the external environment…

Il est certain qu'un bavard, dont le suprême plaisir consiste à parler du haut d'une chaire ou d'une tribune, risquerait fort de devenir fou furieux dans l'île de Robinson. Je n'exige pas de mon gazetier les courageuses vertus de Crusoé, mais je demande qu'il ne décrète pas d'accusation les amoureux de la solitude et du mystère.

Certainly a chatterbox, his supreme pleasure to spout from pulpit or rostrum, if put on Robinson Crusoe's island is not at all unlikely to go raving mad. I don't ask of my journalist the courageous stamina of Crusoe, but I insist he not condemn, out of hand, all those enamored of solitude and mystery.

Here, Baudelaire directs to the extravert man, who looks after stages, because he needs others attitude and relations like air for breathing. He cannot cope with solitude which might push him out of his mind. Baudelaire takes the opposite side of the journalist who quotes the church fathers - the man who can cope with solitude is brave and have good capacities - enriched psyche who might turn the solitude into space for creative activity.

Il y a dans nos races jacassières des individus qui accepteraient avec moins de répugnance le supplice suprême, s'il leur était permis de faire du haut de l'échafaud une copieuse harangue, sans craindre que les tambours de Santerre ne leur coupassent intempestivement la parole.

There are, in our garrulous tribe, some who would take on the supreme penalty with less repugnance, if only they were permitted, from the gallows itself, to harangue the .crowd of spectators without dread of their spiel being cut off by Santerre's drums

Baudelaire refers to the extravert people who fear the terror (dread) of solitude. For them emptiness is worse than the example I brought above from prof. Shoam - they are ready to die for the sake of the drama that will eliminate (remove) their emptiness.

Je ne les plains pas, parce que je devine que leurs effusions oratoires leur procurent des voluptés égales à celles que d'autres tirent du silence et du recueillement ; mais je les méprise.

Not that I blame them, since I suppose they are as gladdened by oratorical overflow as others are by silence and meditation. Still, I do despise them.

Baudelaire counter the extraverts whom he despises, with the introverts who he sympathies and identify with.

Je désire surtout que mon maudit gazetier me laisse m'amuser à ma guise. Vous n'éprouvez donc jamais, - me dit-il, avec un ton de nez très-apostolique, - le besoin de partager vos jouissances ? Voyez-vous le subtil envieux ! Il sait que je dédaigne les siennes, et il vient s'insinuer dans les miennes, le hideux trouble-fête !

Mainly I want the damned journalist to let me enjoy myself my own way. "So you never feel the necessity," he says, down his apostolic nose, "of sharing your pleasures?" See there, the subtle envy! He knows I disdain his pleasure and so wants to infiltrate mine, the wretched spoil-sport.

Here Baudelaire describes the extravert's trial to compel his attitude to the world on the introvert, to his rich inner world, which makes him envious, he tries to pervade to be nourished by him as a parasite.

Ce grand malheur de ne pouvoir être seul !.. dit quelque part La Bruyère, comme pour faire honte à tous ceux qui courent s'oublier dans la foule, craignant sans doute de ne pouvoir se supporter eux-mêmes.

"The unfortunate inability to be alone! . . ." La Bruyère says somewhere, casting shame on those who rush into a crowd for forgetfulness, fearful no doubt of being unable to stand their own selves.

Baudelaire quotes here a French writer and moral man with whom he identifies: those who cannot cope with their being alone escape to the masses.

Presque tous nos malheurs nous viennent de n'avoir pas su rester dans notre chambre, dit un autre sage, Pascal, je crois, rappelant ainsi dans la cellule du recueillement tous ces affolés qui cherchent le bonheur dans le mouvement et dans une prostitution que je pourrais appeler fraternitaire, si je voulais parler la belle langue de mon siècle.

“Practically all our mishaps come from not staying in our room,” says another sage, Pascal I think, recalling thus to the cell of meditation all the fools searching for happiness in movement and in a prostitution I would call fraternalistic, if I wanted to speak in my century’s uppity tone.

Baudelaire ends with determined claim: the fast run to over-activity and to the collective is a self selling, sort of prostitution where the payments are the external stimuli which appease the dread of emptiness in the solitude of those with meager inner world.

We can recognize an affinity between the attitudes of Baudelaire and the British poet John Keats in his concept of Negative Capability, a concept adopted by W. R. Bion as demanded capability from a therapist for containment. Negative capability according to Keats is the capacity to cope with uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason. Creative genius, according to Keats, requires people to experience the world as an uncertain place that naturally gives rise to wide array of perspectives. The one with the negative capacity is the one who can be in his inner world, which creates contents leading to diverse and sometimes contradictory directions. And, he is not in hurry to escape toward the collective and the facts, the explanations and the justifications, as does the extravert man, who cannot cope with the inner uncertainty and looks for external anchoring points for certainty and logical explanations.

English translation:

LA Solitude by Charles Baudelaire

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There are, in our garrulous tribe, some who would take on the supreme penalty with less repugnance, if only they were permitted, from the gallows itself, to harangue the crowd of spectators without dread of their spiel being cut off by Santerre's drums.
Not that I blame them, since I suppose they are as gladdened by oratorical overflow as others are by silence and meditation. Still, I do despise them. Mainly I want the damned journalist to let me enjoy myself my own way. "So you never feel the necessity," he says, down his apostolic nose, "of sharing your pleasures?" See there, the subtle envy! He knows I disdain his pleasure and so wants to infiltrate mine, the wretched spoil-sport.
"The unfortunate inability to be alone! . . ." La Bruyère says somewhere, casting shame on those who rush into a crowd for forgetfulness, fearful no doubt of being unable to stand their own selves.
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