

Chez Sherry: A Prose Poem

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Baudelaire says of the man who has eaten Hashish that he thinks himself a god who has dined ill; but I am not eating Hashish; I am eating *bécasse flambé*, and already I am a god who has dined devilish well.

For I am asitting on the balcony at Sherry's, and I am one of the superior gods. Yes, this is a temple, and the *maitre d'hôtel* is the high priest of my cult. But they do not know my secret. I have a god of my own—the God of Sunset, whom the old Egyptians worshipped by his name of Tum. I am moved always to sly sacrilegious jests like this by that unusual Corton. With the second bottle the world becomes visible to my eyes; I see my friends about me, every one with a quick smile, a pleasant word, a deferential bow, or a glance of secret understanding. Magistral they sit among the napery and the silver and the crystal under the lamps, my friends delectable.

There is the dapper banker, who slips me the sufficient word of Wall Street; there the gray dowager, to whose good will I owe so perfect a week at Newport; beyond her, with a gay crowd of sparkling girls, sits the King of Tact, young, handsome, and urbane, telling a delicately witty story. At the next table is the strong, stern face, lit kindly, of the great lawyer who plays politicians for pawns, and defies empires as a lesser man might defy flies.

But mostly I am shamming; I pretend to greet the world; in truth my eyes flash furtively to a certain corner where, like a fairy peeping from a cornflower, amid her crepitating silk and whispering lace, laughs the rose-gold and ivory of a wine-flushed Bacchanal face, tiny and yet terrible, framed in faint flames of hair. Nobody knows

as yet that we are eng—hush! I will not tell it even to myself; I will signal it in sips of Burgundy, and get her answer in champagne!

I like dining alone, for a change; I can perceive what, when I dine with others, I can only feel. The restaurant is not only a temple made with hands; it is the true temple, the universe. The stately swirl, ideally solemn and merry at once, is but a presentation, in the form of art, of the birth of a nebula.

But silence! What are they about to sacrifice at my altar? It is my own favorite dish—a truffle wrapped in red pepper and a sage leaf, stewed in champagne, then baked in the shortest, crispest dumpling that delight could dream; each dumpling set upon a pyramid of foie gras. Besides them is an egg-shell china dish of caviar with stalks of young onions finely chopped—moistened with vodka. It is that which gives me one appetite for the salad of vanilla and alligator pear!

I do not know any music like the murmur of a thousand hushed voices; I do not know any sight fairer than love and friendship—the flowers of philosophy—incarnate among men and women. And here I see them at the culmination. All harshness, all distress, all things that mar the measure, these no longer exist for us who dine. Without, the wind may howl, and fearful things of darkness menace our joys. Does not the blackness, the cold of space, encompass every star and every system?

Do not be melancholy; have you not heard the tale of the philosopher who made the experiment of intoxicating himself with ether, and, after a little while, said solemnly, "NOTHINGNESS, with twinkles." Then, after applying himself yet a little more to the vial of madness, raised his venerable head, lofty with the purity and passion that informed it, to remark, "Nothingness with twinkles—but WHAT twinkles!"

That (for I have finished the salad) is my identical state: nothing else is worth a word; bring the *profiterolles au chocolat!* The frozen cream within, a

core of coolness; the spongy sweetness that engirdles it, the boiling chocolate sauce splashed over it—it is like the purity of love that masks itself in sweetness, strength, and passion.

But love is not the end of life; beyond it is true worship, symbolized by coffee that makes vigilant; cognac that intoxicates; and the cigar that marries these in equipollence of peace.

No, do not think, blasphemer, that I have dined! I have been god and worshipper, not in one temple only, but in every temple, of the universe. I have passed from the abyss to the abyss, and sounded every lyre of heaven, and heard its echo on every drum of hell.

If I am exhausted, it is not with wine, but with ineffable rapture—for it is almost akin to suffering, this delight wherein one is lost and overwhelmed. The chariots of eternity and the horsemen thereof, oh my father! They course upon my soul; they trample my humanity; they leave me crushed and bleeding, so that, radiant and immortal, my pure, my passionate, my imperishable, impenetrable soul may seize the sceptre and acclaim itself imperial, heir of its celestial halidom, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent; a unit conscious of its identity with all; a concentration of knowledge, being, and bliss armed against change and sorrow and illusion...

"Your check, sir."