

## **'Baudelaire, Lacausade and the Historical Identity of La Belle Dorothée'**

Alexander Ockenden (New College, University of Oxford)

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Much of the academic debate regarding Baudelaire's voyage to the Indian Ocean in 1841 has centred on the figure of Dorothée, who directly inspired both the prose poem 'La Belle Dorothée' (first published in 1862) and the poem 'Bien Loin d'Ici' (which first appeared in the posthumous 1868 version of *Les Fleurs du Mal*). In his letter of 15<sup>th</sup> December 1859 to his publisher Poulet-Malassis, Baudelaire describes 'La Belle Dorothée' as his "souvenir de l'île Bourbon" [modern-day Réunion]. As Emmanuel Richon notes, this should have put to rest long ago the considerable confusion amongst critics as to where Baudelaire met her.<sup>1</sup>

The modern consensus is that the figure of Dorothée originates from Baudelaire's time in Réunion, and that she was an ex-slave working as a prostitute in order to "racheter sa petite sœur" out of slavery.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, even recent critics have failed to take into account the full realities of colonial slavery. Hélène Sicard-Cowan, for example, mistakenly suggests that Baudelaire's use of the word "affranchie" must mean that he is depicting post-1848 Réunion "au lendemain de l'abolition de l'esclavage qui sert de cadre au poème".<sup>3</sup> In fact, a significant number of slaves were freed in the years preceding abolition.<sup>4</sup> Slavery was indeed omnipresent in Réunion when Baudelaire arrived in 1841, although illegal in British-controlled Mauritius since 1835, so the scenario of an ex-slave working to free a relative from slavery was very much a real possibility.

Even so, opinion has been divided as to whether Dorothée was an actual person: for example, Sicard-Cowan's suggestion "Le prénom choisi par le poète pour sa figure reflète d'ailleurs la persistance de l'être de l'affranchie...Dorothée, ou celle ôtée de l'or de la représentation"<sup>5</sup> [my emphasis] implies that the name Dorothée was the poet's own invention, based on the rather cryptic wordplay of *D'or ôtée/Dorothée*. Meanwhile, Debarati Sanyal claims "Dorothée is a parody...virtually enshrined in her own analogy",<sup>6</sup> whilst Elvine Maurouard lists the historical Saint Dorothy of Cappadocia as a possible inspiration.<sup>7</sup> It might be suggested in response that the fact that the two aforementioned poems both describe Dorothée in a very similar manner, despite being published more than twenty years after Baudelaire's voyage, implies that he retained a strong and vivid memory of her, strengthening the case for her being a real person.

Another complication is that, while Baudelaire's movements during the nineteen days which he spent on Mauritius with the Autard de Bragards are well-documented, the forty-five days which he spent on Réunion are something of a mystery. Baudelaire stubbornly refused to divulge information about the journey, on one occasion even denying to Leconte de Lisle that he reached the Indian Ocean at all.<sup>8</sup> As Gérard Nirascou has pointed out, however,<sup>9</sup> the captain's log of the 'Paquebot des Mers du Sud' demonstrates that Baudelaire spent the first month from his arrival in Saint-Denis (the capital of Réunion) on 20<sup>th</sup> September living on board the same ship originally intended to carry him to Calcutta. When this ship departed for India without him on October 21<sup>st</sup>, he spent another two weeks on the

island before returning to France on 'L'Alcide' on 4<sup>th</sup> November.<sup>10</sup> This means that we know Baudelaire spent the majority of his time in or around Saint-Denis, where the ship was moored.

The *Archives départementales de la Réunion* contain a comprehensive list of all slaves freed on the island in the period from the return to French control in 1815 to the abolition of slavery in 1848. A thorough search of slaves freed in Saint-Denis before Baudelaire's visit in 1841 reveals just one with the name Dorothée: Dorothée Dormeuil, freed by an ordinance on the 30<sup>th</sup> January 1838 at the age of 23, and thus 26 years old at the time of Baudelaire's visit.<sup>11</sup> This alone might not constitute sufficient proof of identity, but further examination of the records reveals that Dorothée had two younger sisters who *were* both still slaves in 1841. One of these, Marie Dormeuil, matches the description "sa petite sœur qui a bien onze ans" in 'La Belle Dorothée' almost perfectly: the records show that in 1841 she was 10 years old.

Dorothée Dormeuil must have been saving up to free her sister for more than three and a half years (since 1838) when Baudelaire arrived on 20<sup>th</sup> September. Bearing in mind that he had been sent away from Paris largely because of his extravagant spending, specifically his liaisons with prostitutes, it seems probable that he paid for the services of "la célèbre Dorothée", especially given his life-long erotic fascination with dark-skinned women. On 30<sup>th</sup> September 1841, within just ten days of his arrival, Marie Dormeuil was finally bought out of slavery by her sister.<sup>12</sup> This is surely no coincidence. We know that Baudelaire was reckless with money, that he was free-spirited and dismissive of social norms, and that he paints a very sympathetic picture of Dorothée's plight. It does not seem too far-fetched to suggest that the impulsive twenty-year-old himself contributed financially to the freedom of Dorothée's sister as well as immortalising the two in poetry. On the contrary, Baudelaire himself seems remarkably sure that the young Marie Dormeuil will be freed: "Elle réussira sans doute, la bonne Dorothée" – perhaps precisely because he wanted her to succeed and made sure of it with his own money. In fact, the captain of the 'Paquebot des Mers du Sud' wrote to Baudelaire's step-father on 14<sup>th</sup> October that "quoique M.-Beaudelaire [sic] ait été modéré dans ses dépenses, à Maurice et ici, il a fortement écorné les 1700 francs que j'avais reçus",<sup>13</sup> an apparent paradox thus far unexplained. Not needing to pay for accommodation in Mauritius (thanks to the Autard de Bragards) or Réunion (at the time of the letter he was still living on board ship), we might perhaps assume that a large portion of this money went towards freeing Marie Dormeuil two weeks earlier.<sup>14</sup>

The archives provide another interesting addition to the historical Dorothée's story: the record of the liberation of slaves not only gives dates and family relations, but also the name of the master from whom each slave is freed. In this case, the master of Marie Dormeuil is described by Baudelaire in no uncertain terms: "le maître de l'enfant est si avare, trop avare pour comprendre une autre beauté que celle des écus!".<sup>15</sup> The master in question was one Sr. Édouard Lacaussade – a surname familiar to experts on the abolition of slavery in Réunion, as well as those with an interest in nineteenth-century French poetry, thanks to the celebrated Auguste Lacaussade. The only Édouard Lacaussade to appear in any records of the island in this period was in fact one of Auguste's older brothers.

Édouard and Auguste were born in Saint-Denis in 1806 and 1815 respectively to the French lawyer Pierre-Augustin Cazenave de Lacaussade and the mixed-race Fanny-Lucile dite Desjardins, making all of their six children 'quarterons' in the terminology of the day.<sup>16</sup> However, the fates of Édouard and Auguste began to diverge even before the latter was born: Édouard and the two other older brothers

were inscribed on the 'registre des Blancs' in 1812; Auguste and his younger brother and sister were not.<sup>17</sup> The reasons for this anomaly are not entirely clear,<sup>18</sup> but as Raphaël Barquissau explains, the island's complex ethnic history meant that the usual division between black slaves and white masters was anything but black and white in nineteenth-century Réunion.<sup>19</sup> It was thus possible for two brothers from the same two parents and with the same skin colour to be inscribed on registers which defined them as legally 'black' and 'white' respectively. This distinction shaped both of their lives: the fiercely intelligent Auguste was barred from entering the Collège Royal in Saint-Denis (where he would have studied alongside Leconte de Lisle) on the grounds that he was not 'white', and so instead was sent away to study in Nantes.<sup>20</sup> Although he would return to his homeland twice, he was unable to integrate into pre-abolition society. His opposition to slavery, and its expression in his poetry, is well-documented – Prosper Ève speaks of a "discours anti-esclavage assez exceptionnel" and suggests this may have contributed to him being unable to find employment on the island.<sup>21</sup>

Meanwhile, as Auguste was writing of "hommes déçus, infortunés esclaves"<sup>22</sup> his brother Édouard was making his fortune with the help of slave labour, creating a monopoly in the island's tobacco industry in the 1830s.<sup>23</sup> This project and the subsequent purchase of a sugar refinery and distillery were apparently viewed with disdain by Auguste: in Barquissau's words, "le commerce était pour [Auguste] l'abomination de la désolation".<sup>24</sup> On 1<sup>st</sup> February 1835, slavery was abolished in nearby Mauritius, and the governor of Réunion feared an uprising of slaves in Réunion supported by the largely sympathetic mixed-race population. In response, he summoned four of the wealthiest mixed-race citizens and instructed them to help maintain order in the colony: one of the four was Édouard Lacaussade (despite his status as legally 'white').<sup>25</sup> Jean Urruty identifies Édouard's ownership of the sugar refinery as a likely point of contention between the brothers because "on devait certainement employer des esclaves".<sup>26</sup> In fact, Barquissau's research confirms that, after the abolition of slavery in 1848, Édouard was compensated for 145,000 Francs, which at the arbitrarily set rate of 733 Francs per slave would indicate a total of approximately 200 slaves.<sup>27</sup> A few were lucky enough to be granted their freedom by Édouard early – including Dorothée Dormeuil and her two sisters (the youngest, Vitaline, was freed in 1843).

The reasons why Édouard Lacaussade released Dorothée from slavery in 1838 are unknown: at that point only the master had the power to free a slave, and it was not until 18<sup>th</sup> July 1845 that slaves gained the right to buy their own liberty.<sup>28</sup> It was, however, common practice to free a slave but then make them work for years in order to buy their own relatives, in this case Dorothée's sisters, out of slavery.<sup>29</sup> In this way, the master maintained control over the freed slave – who could hardly be described as 'free': Dorothée merely entered what Sanyal calls an "interlocking system of sexual and colonial violence".<sup>30</sup> There is, however, little evidence to support T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting's claims that Dorothée "contentedly accepts her sexploitation...in exchange for "piastres"", or that she is "at ease with the sex trade".<sup>31</sup> On the contrary, Dorothée's struggle is clearly not a quest for money in itself, but a deep-seated desire to free her sisters and perhaps also safeguard them in turn from prostitution.<sup>32</sup> In this instance, the only person to profit financially was Édouard Lacaussade, who would have received the proceeds of Dorothée's prostitution as payment for her sister – a fact which chimes perfectly with the aforementioned description of him as "trop avare pour comprendre une autre beauté que celle des écus".

Although Auguste Lacaussade actually returned to Réunion at some point between 1840 and 1842, he stressed "Je n'ai connu ni rencontré Baudelaire à Maurice ou à Bourbon".<sup>33</sup> And yet the two had a

number of similarities, not least as poets who were sent away from their homelands to a different hemisphere at an early age: Baudelaire from France to Réunion, Lacaussade in the other direction.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, Emmanuel Richon notes Baudelaire's message to Lacaussade on receipt of the latter's collection of poetry, *Les Salaziennes*: "Je n'ai pas besoin de vous dire que j'ai commencé par les paysages de l'île de Bourbon".<sup>35</sup> Baudelaire's own defining collection of poetry, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, could itself be said to have begun both chronologically and thematically with "les paysages de l'île de Bourbon". Yet he was not to know that one of the figures who inspired this poetic genesis, Dorothée, was herself bound to the addressee of his letter by the same complex ties of family, money, race, slavery, and colonialism which both poets immortalised in their work, and which left lasting marks on the lives of both from opposite sides of the world.

<sup>1</sup> Emmanuel Richon, *Les poèmes mascarins de Charles Baudelaire* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2000), p. 177.

<sup>2</sup> 'La Belle Dorothée' in Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes, Vol. 1* (Paris, Gallimard, 1975), pp.316-317.

<sup>3</sup> Hélène Sicard-Cowan, 'Désir Colonial et "Conscience Historique Authentique": "La Belle Dorothée" de Charles Baudelaire', *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, 35, 3&4 (Spring-Summer 2007), 537-546, p. 540.

<sup>4</sup> Sudel Fuma cites the figure of 4,736 slaves freed between 1832 and 1846, of a population of roughly 100,000 (compared with approximately 62,000 freed through abolition in 1848). See: Sudel Fuma, *L'esclavagisme à la Réunion: 1797-1848* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1993), p. 149.

<sup>5</sup> Sicard-Cowan, p. 543.

<sup>6</sup> Debarati Sanyal, *The Violence of Modernity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), p. 126.

<sup>7</sup> Elvire Maurouard, *Les beautés noires de Baudelaire* (Paris: Karthala Editions, 2005), p. 34.

<sup>8</sup> Letter to Leconte de Lisle referenced by Hippolyte Foucque in his 1930 conference 'Baudelaire aux îles Maurice et Bourbon', cited in : Emmanuel Genvrin, *Baudelaire au Paradis* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1998), p. 116.

<sup>9</sup> Gérard Nirascou, *Les enfants terribles de l'île Maurice. Baudelaire et Bernardin de Saint-Pierre* (Paris: Delville, 2003), p. 101.

<sup>10</sup> This is confirmed by Baudelaire's name in the list of departures in the 'Feuille Hebdomadaire de l'île Bourbon', 10<sup>th</sup> November 1841. Consulted in the *Archives départementales de la Réunion*, 12th August 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Saint-Denis, Archives départementales de la Réunion (ADR): 'Bulletin officiel de l'île Bourbon, 1838'.

<sup>12</sup> ADR : 'Bulletin officiel de l'île Bourbon, 1841'.

<sup>13</sup> Letter from Captain Saliz to General Aupick, cited in: Claude Pichois and Jean Ziegler, *Charles Baudelaire* (Paris: Fayard, 2005), p. 190.

<sup>14</sup> As will be seen later, the value of a slave laid down at the time of abolition seven years later was 733 Francs, so a roughly similar sum would certainly have made a dent in the 1,700 Francs allocated to Baudelaire.

<sup>15</sup> 'La Belle Dorothée' in Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, p. 317.

<sup>16</sup> Signifying one-quarter black ancestry ('Quadroon' in English).

<sup>17</sup> Raphaël Barquissau, *Le poète Lacauassade et l'Exotisme Tropicale* (Paris: Comité Leconte de Lisle et Lacauassade, 1952), p. 17.

<sup>18</sup> Barquissau offers two possible explanations: either "une certaine tolérance" which was prevalent in 1812 but was ended by the political consequences of the 1814 Bourbon restoration, or a simple mistake.

<sup>19</sup> Barquissau, pp. 17-23.

<sup>20</sup> Barquissau, p. 23.

<sup>21</sup> Prosper Ève, *Auguste Lacauassade: Frère de cœur, frère de plume* (Saint-André, Réunion: Océan Éditions, 2009), p. 209.

<sup>22</sup> Auguste Lacauassade, *Les Salaziennes*, XXIV (Sainte-Clotilde: CRI, 1989).

<sup>23</sup> Prosper Ève, *Auguste Lacauassade: Le fils d'une affranchie d'avant 1848 et d'un noble de Guyenne* (Saint-André, Réunion: Océan Éditions), 2005, p. 325-336.

<sup>24</sup> Barquissau, p. 21.

<sup>25</sup> Prosper Ève, *Auguste Lacauassade: Le fils d'une affranchie...*, p. 313.

<sup>26</sup> Jean Urruty in *Le Mauricien*, 25 avril – 4 juillet 1959. Cited in: Prosper Ève, *Auguste Lacauassade: Frère de cœur...*, p. 125.

<sup>27</sup> Barquissau, p. 64.

<sup>28</sup> Prosper Ève, *Le 20 décembre 1848 et sa célébration à la Réunion* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2000), p. 76.

<sup>29</sup> For more information about the process of 'affranchissement', see the numerous articles of Tristan Picrate [pseud.] in the journal *Témoignages* (Le Port, Réunion: 1995-1997).

<sup>30</sup> Sanyal, p. 127.

<sup>31</sup> T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Black Venus: Sexualized Savages, Primal Fears, and Primitive Narratives in French* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), pp. 67-70.

<sup>32</sup> Before 1845, the ruling anti-abolition 'Conseil colonial' were in fact deeply concerned that if female slaves earned the right to buy their own liberty they would turn to prostitution in order to achieve it, as Prosper Ève notes (Prosper Ève, *Le 20 décembre 1848...*, p. 72).

<sup>33</sup> Jean Urruty, *Le Voyage de Baudelaire aux Mascareignes* (Port Louis, Mauritius: Vizavi, 2007), p. 95.

<sup>34</sup> These similarities are outlined in depth in: James S. Patty, 'Baudelaire and Auguste Lacauassade: A New Look', *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, 32, 1&2 (Fall-Winter 2003-2004), 23-40.

<sup>35</sup> Emmanuel Richon, p. 191.

M. Gervin,

Oxford, Angleterre

Le 20. septembre 2015

Je ne sais pas si vous vous souvenez de moi,  
mais je suis étudiant anglais (je viens de finir mes  
études), et je suis venu vous voir à Pétersbourg il y a  
deux ans, avec une copie Satya. Vous nous avez très  
gentiment invités chez vous pour discuter le voyage de  
Baudelaire aux Mascouignes et vous m'avez donné  
votre livre 'Baudelaire au Paradis', que j'ai lu avec  
intérêt. Je voulais vous écrire (quoiqu'en retard) pour  
vous remercier encore une fois de votre assistance et de  
votre accueil chaleureux. Je voulais aussi vous envoyer  
l'article que j'ai écrit sur le voyage de Baudelaire et  
surtout sur au sujet de 'La Belle Domitrie', qui a été  
publié dans French Studies Bulletin en Angleterre. Bonne

à vos suggestions, j'ai trouvé des informations  
sur l'identité de Dorothea qui pourrissent vous  
intéresser aux Archives départementales de la Réunion.  
Veuillez trouver ci-joint mon article, et j'espère que  
tout va bien chez vous - nous avons de beaux  
souvenirs de votre séjour !

Bien cordialement :

Sasha (Alexandre) Ollender