

DON JUAN
IN
PARIS

A NOVEL IN VERSE

BRIAN E. DRAKE

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DEDICATION

To lovers gone, and lovers yet to be,
 And lovers now, and those who've loved and lost;
To lovers false, to lovers ever free;
 To lovers true, and lovers tried and crossed;
To those who lied but lied convincingly;
 To those who heard and gladly paid the cost;
But most to those whom no one greatly rates:
We calm, content, and unduped celibates.

INTRODUCTION

1.

I here make bold to steal Lord Byron's verses
To tell the late adventures of his hero,
As sifted through Molina's sad excursus
Molière, and Mozart's gay lilliburlero
(Despite the roars of critics with fat purses
Whose doctoral decrees I count as zero),
With some melodic lyrics as digressions
To lend variety to Juan's indiscretions.

2.

His indiscretions? Manifold and many!
They'll be recounted shortly in smart rhyme.
Meanwhile, in a tradition rich as any,
I'll blithely leap the intervening time
Since Byron wrote, drag Juan through the fenny
Slough of the decades, then scrape off their slime
From his bright, handsome face and manly frame
To map the changes. First of all, his name—

3.

He's changed it in his travels round the globe
 To fit a passport bought from shady source
 And paid for with false bills—but let's not probe—
 Stately Hidalgo name renounced perforce
 To something French, *moderne* (woe fit for Job!),
 Some slangy *nom de crime* cops could endorse:
 And having built suspense thus, herewith know
 Our proud Don Juan's now Johnny le Beau!

4.

The greatest highwayman in history,
 With all the dashing traits peculiar to
 The bad romantic breed: nerve; bravery;
 A ready laugh at danger; smiling rue;
 And fatal good looks mixed with anarchy—
 Heady ingredients for any brew!
 The Robin Hood of Europe he was reckoned
 After the World War (who dreamed of a second?).

5.

Applauded by the crowds, damned by the law
 That yearned for one small charge they could make stick,
 Johnny robbed banks from Shkodër to Chalon,
 Roma to Rheims, from Brighton to Brunswick.
 For seven years each middle-sized bank saw
 The dreaded gray Phaeton and Johnny's slick
 Black pinstripe suit. And women saw it, too,
 But usually hanging neatly in the loo.

6.

So Johnny, like another famous Don,
Roamed looking for adventure, setting free
Repressed women he met, both Amazon
And quiet convent miss. Each trembling she
Fell limp at his romantic benison
And gave her secrets to him willingly.
And like Quixote, in this extravaganza
He has his own type of a Sancho Panza.

7.

His faithful, Leporello-like right hand
Was named Martin Boudreaux—Boudu for short.
Impeccable factotum: round, bald, bland,
A baritone (for ensemble support),
And practical, without a single strand
Of Romance in him. Hard fact was his forte.
A map, a plan was poetry to him.
He was, in all respects, John's antonym.

8.

Their arguments were many, fierce, and vain,
For neither heeded either's endless screeds.
Often as Boudu begged him to abstain
Or, at the least, abridge his amorous deeds,
Johnny would sing of love 'twixt maid and swain,
Couplings and kisses, bliss that throbs and bleeds....
And Boudu, leaving John his jubilates,
Would have a drink and wish his boss in Hades.

9.

Thus our uncommon hero and his squire.
Two opposites, and yet in one thing brothers:
Determined to carve out their world entire
And be content; this in a world that smothers
Dreaming of any kind, and all desire—
For proof check Zola's works, or any other's
Among the Realists. Eternal strife!
The war of dreams and drudgery that is life.

10.

For in our modern world Romance comes hard.
The golden Spain of yore is dead and gone.
El Grecoes fade—Picasso's avant-garde
Has set the tone in 1921.
High birth is laughed at—fervor's the last card
That's held to trump the world's hand by Don Juan.
Read on. We'll watch him in the pantomime
Sent to the devil ... or to heights sublime.

CANTO I

1.

A summer night somewhere in Beaujolais,
 Warm, bathed in moonlight, scented; everything,
In short, required for gentle lovers' play—
 Even a breeze to cool their dallying.
Outside a stately villa, an array
 Of tree-lined avenues meandering;
And there, beneath a low, poodle-clipped yew,
In happy doze, a-snore, lay our Boudu.

2.

How peaceful! What a charming pastorate!
 It only lacked a nymph or two, in keeping
With precedent, and, too, a virginal
 To underscore the lambkins' merry leaping.
(It seems a pity Boudu wasted all
 The pretty pictured *mise-en-scène* by sleeping.)
Dame Nature, with a generous hand, spread Peace
To lull to rest, and bring of toil surcease.

3.

But lo! a raucous sound disrupts the night!
A pealing screech, half ecstasy, half dread!
Boudu, with one last snort, sprang up in fright
And on the scaly yew trunk banged his head.
He moaned, he cursed; but when he heard aright
The pulsing shrieks of man and maid in bed,
Boudu sighed, rubbed his bump, and checked the hour.
“Ten minutes late tonight. This one’s gone sour.”

4.

He knew his master’s habits, and awaited
The passing of the usual quarter hour
Until, his passion momentarily sated,
Johnny would rise and dress and fain devour
A good thick steak, cooked rare, roast marinated
Chicken, pork, veal patties rolled in flour.
’Tis ever thus: when sweet push turns to shove,
A belly full’s the remedy of love.

5.

“Ten, nine, eight, seven ... ” Boudu was counting down.
At count of one the back door of the villa
Slid open stealthily. A white silk gown
Was dimly glimpsed; a ripe whiff of vanilla—
The late beloved with rumpled hair of brown.
She tripped against a sapling sapodilla;
She would have cursed, but Johnny caught her fast,
And that made all right. Rapture unsurpassed!

6.

For Love's first touch is to a man hot fire
 That rages quick, as quickly cools to clay.
But last caresses are the woman's desire:
 The lingering until the dawn of day
In coos and strokings, and the whispered choir
 Of muttering, half-guessed murmurs that betray
The true depths of her partner's vowing sigh
(Although it's then it's easiest to lie).

7.

Johnny le Beau's face, handsome with fatigue
 Earned well with all the skill at his command,
Shone with a wild light plain at half a league.
 The light of hope, of victory close at hand,
Increased by need of romantic intrigue.
 Boudu rolled up his eyes. "I understand.
In love again," he said, and prudently
He caught his breath and slipped behind a tree.

8.

The lovers spoke (Boudu could not help listening)
 The usual phrases, voices low, intense.
Upon the woman's face there lay a glistening
 As of the twilight dew that jewels the glens
Or (for the Church'd) the damp of christening
 That polishes the face of innocence.
Whatever sins the Church thought she committed,
By those tears of Love's joy she was acquitted.

9.

“Johnny, Johnny,” she whispered in his ear.

“My own Geneviève,” he murmured in reply.
And suchlike conversations, void and dear,

That lovers like to think transmogrify
Them from the lower to a higher sphere.

Geneviève’s own bourgeois self-esteem was high,
Being a daughter of Bienseance,
But Romance levels all ranks—for the nonce.

10.

She was the eldest child of Beaujolais’s

Oldest and most respectable bourgeois,
M. Hippolyte Bienseance, whose praise
Is sung by every bank with loud hurrah.

He was the Pickle King, Duke Mayonnaise,

With canneries and plants, *et cetera*,
Throughout the country. He had, thus cucumbered,
Power, real estate, and bank accounts unnumbered.

11.

Geneviève was his true child (he had a son,

But their relations were a trifle gray;
Bienseance was quite the manly one,
While Valérè, truth to tell, was somewhat fay);

Proud, vain, complacent, lovely, peer to none,
She ruled the roost when Papa was away.

Her white silk gown was copied from Chanel,
Her underthings, perfume, peignoir as well.

12.

"Johnny! Johnny!" she sang, and laughed with glee.

"A night in Heaven's paradise of light!"

"One hour of bliss become eternity!"

Said Johnny. "Night of rapturous delight!"

"One kiss the sum of life for you and me!"

Then Boudu modestly turned from the sight.

"Well, let them take their pleasures as they can,
For love flies fast as youth, joy, and the man."

13.

"I never knew what life was before you.

It seemed an endless string of senseless games,"

Said Geneviève. "Dinners with the well-to-do,

Teas, parties, new gowns, learning all the names
Of those who count. O vain hullabaloo!

It vanished like steam when I saw the flames

That boiled in your eyes when you looked at me."

She dropped her eyes, blushed, trembled timidly,

14.

And buried her face in her lover's chest.

He stroked her hair and kissed her ivory brow.

"Those flames you kindled in my eyes attest

Undying love for you. I hereby vow,"

He cried, "by your red lips, by your white breast ..."

But his delirious words were stopped somehow

As Geneviève's lips sought his, missed, leapt back, fumbled.

And then, as if on cue, John's stomach rumbled.

15.

Boudu looked at his watch: right on schedule.

Geneviève released his lips and slyly smiled.

“Bad man! What have you done to me? Why, you’ll

Make me forget my duties. Ah, what wild
And reckless ways we’ll prove the Golden Rule!”

She ran across the lawn quite like a child
And Johnny followed gaily, hungrily,
While Boudu crept in shade from tree to tree.

16.

They ran, and bandied laughs like tennis balls

Bounced back and forth in sport without a net,
Then tumbled to the lawn by ivied walls.

They lay in grass that smelled of anisette
And gazed up at the night sky that enthalls

To watch the stars’ and planets’ minuet.
Boudu was panting when at last he caught up,
Eager to hear what new speech Johnny’d thought up.

17.

Johnny sighed deeply, just for emphasis.

“Life is a mockery, a fool’s charade.”

He made his period with a short, sharp kiss.

“A journey quickly started, quickly made
From who knows where, to who knows what abyss?

Where, blinkered in a dreary cavalcade,
The hollow dancers tread their weary reel
And do their best to neither think nor feel.

18.

“But here’s another life we two have found,
 Another way to breathe, another world!
A world of blazing sight and blazing sound,
 A world where dismal grays and blacks are pearled
Like this night sky, with starry diadems crowned,
 Alive with music from the heavens hurled!
Each unhopd possibility enchants
That rises magically from our romance!

19.

“Geneviève, I’ve looked so long for one who feels
 The way that I feel—one who’d cast aside
The motley, humdrum, day-to-day that peals
 The death of all that’s holy to me. I’d
Come close to giving up. Now, here one kneels,”
 He rose up, “helpless, lost, for you to guide
From hell to happiness. Yes! You are she
To save me! Geneviève! Come away with me!”

20.

She rushed to his embrace. “Johnny, you know
 I will! I’m yours! I have the whole thing planned.”
“You do?” said Johnny. Boudu thought, “Uh oh.”
 Geneviève continued. “Dear, you understand.
You are my dearest sweet, my Romeo,
 But practical you’re not, correct, love? And
Someone has got to guide you to the future.”
She smiled. “Could any Baedeker be cuter?”

21.

Boudu grinned. He pulled out a thick black book
And made a note: "She lasted just a week."
Johnny le Beau's face wore a desperate look—
His vision dimmed—he could not breathe or speak.
She said, "For lunch tomorrow I'll tell Cook
To set an extra place. Wear something chic
But plain. You'll meet Papa. It won't be fun,
He won't like you, he can't like anyone.

22.

"But we'll start slowly, get him used to you,
A party now and then, dinner with friends ...
The usual way. Then in a month or two
We'll say that we're engaged! It all depends,
Of course, on who's in town. Then the to-do
Of wedding plans. Etiquette recommends
At least a year's engagement. Can you wait?
I can't! But then, we won't be celibate."

23.

She blushed and simpered. Johnny gasped out, "But—"
But Geneviève rushed on, lost in reverie,
Scouring the details of the glorious rut
Of life to come, arranging the debris
Of Johnny's hopes and dreamings. Boudu shut
The black book up and pocketed it. Said he,
"I always told the boss to keep away
From pretty middle-class décolleté."

24.

“Our wedding,” Geneviève said, “will be tremendous!
The banks of flowers! The food! Society’s cream
Spread all about the lawn. Simply stupendous!
You’ll be so handsome in your tux, I’ll beam.
We’ll honeymoon on what Papa will lend us—
A month or two in Povóa de Varzim ...
But then again, Capri is *de rigueur*
These days on every continental tour.”

25.

While Geneviève rambled on, John’s face grew blue.
“And then when we return from fun and games
Real life starts: dinners with the well-to-do—
It won’t take long for you to learn their names,
We only know old blood—no parvenu!
Teas, parties, soirées ... then Papa proclaims
He’s making you a partner in the firm!
There is Valère, of course, but he’s a worm,

26.

“So don’t fret on that score. Papa will be
As pleased as punch and proud to call you son.
No duties too complex at first, but he
Might offer you the Bourgogne plant to run.
In ten years’ time you’re Papa’s legatee
And managing the business from Verdun.
When Papa dies we’ll sell the household stuff—”
But Johnny suddenly cried out, “Enough!

27.

"I think you've missed the point, my own Geneviève.
That's not the way I'm fashioned," Johnny said.
"You're tramping down a private *rue des rêves*.
Get such ideas out of your pretty head!
I'm talking of adventure! Danger! Live!
Laugh at the tired regulations! Spread
Your wings against the mores of Society!"
Geneviève scowled. "Such things lead to notoriety."

28.

Then Johnny shivered. "Geneviève, don't forget
The ideals of our passion, and Romance!
It will not bow to license or lorgnette,
But stands up with a proud, disdainful glance
To stare out every proper madam's threat
And burst through to a life of radiance.
It's no poetic fancy! This is real!
True life is neither proper nor genteel!"

29.

"That's lovely, John. But must it interfere,"
Geneviève said, "with the lifestyle we prefer?"
Johnny was livid. "Geneviève, can't you hear
The words I'm saying?" Suddenly a blur
Obscured his eyes. He clutched to draw her near
And, frantic, feverishly kissing her,
He tried to capture love again. Too late:
His golden hope transmuted into plate.

30.

In that black, blinded moment Johnny saw
 Geneviève for what she was: a passerby,
High-minded, beautiful, whose only flaw
 Was inability to qualify
For his bright visions. Bleeding, aching, raw,
 He blamed his heart for yet another lie
He'd told himself and labored to believe,
The lie that pains most when it won't deceive.

31.

If love is the true fruit of knowledge, bitter
 Is that fruit's aftertaste of rot and death;
The cloud that comes to dim the dawn sun's glitter;
 The sweet night wine murked into morning breath;
For love does not teach till it's ended. Fitter
 To call love, then, not fruit, as poet saith,
But seed of knowledge: When it's taken root,
Sad, lonely wisdom is its tasteless fruit.

32.

Disgusted, desperate, Johnny turned to go;
 To run away, far, far; to think no more
On what he'd wished and wasted. But the glow
 Of love burned yet beneath the pinafore
Of Geneviève, who could not conceive a "no"
 Addressed to her. She said, "Now, let's explore
Dispassionately what you've rhapsodized.
You say that love can't live when legalized?"

33.

“Exactly!” “Johnny, pet, you’re acting silly.
That’s simply not how life is. What is wrong
With making laws to guarantee life’s hilly
Road will be safe, rich, comfortable, and long?
Consider—” Johnny interrupted shrilly,
“No! No! No more!” His head rang like a gong
At her judicious, politic expression.
He said, “Geneviève, I must make a confession.

34.

“I’m not the honest man you think I am.
My life is built on sin, on guilt, on crime.
I am, in fact, a robber on the lam.
There is a bank in Paris; right now I’m
En route to rob it. Yes, I am a sham,
Not worth the merest moment of your time.”
He said all this to try to make her hate him.
He had the speech by this time down verbatim.

35.

But Geneviève, true to form, was not put off.
“A thief!” she squealed. “You’ll be a great success
Then in the business world. It’s true, don’t scoff.
And later, politics. Being mayoress
Would suit me well. I love it when men doff
Their hats to me! That’s settled the whole mess.
You see? A great career’s mapped out for you.”
Johnny pulled free and signaled to Boudu.

36.

The loyal Boudu stepped forth, impatient, glad.
 "I'm here, Boss." Geneviève looked up with surprise.
"Who is that man?" she asked. But Johnny had
 Turned from her. "Geneviève, let's not eulogize
The brief but gorgeous times we've known, the mad
 Abandon of our hopeless passion. Wise
Is one who knows the time to say farewell."
He sobbed. "Farewell! What might have been, farewell!"

37.

Geneviève stood quickly, frowning, eyebrow raised,
 A pennant of humiliation's ire.
She was not one to faint—her anger blazed
 Too high to give occasion to expire.
"Am I to understand," she said, "you've lazed
 About with my love? That you now conspire
With this strange man to shame my father's child,
The innocent whose trust you have defiled?"

38.

"Geneviève, don't carry on so," Johnny sighed.
 "Our love was futile. You are not to blame.
It's all my fault. Once more my mad heart tried
 To fashion ecstasy from lust. The aim
Was noble, but misguided. Our love died,
 If e'er, indeed, it lived, when, broken, lame,
I saw you were yourself, not the illusion
I'd manufactured." He wept in confusion.

39.

But Geneviève did not weep. Her face was hard,
Her eyes glazed shrapnel, her chin granite block.
She stared at Johnny with arctic regard
And said, "Your latest speech is poppycock.
The fact is that you'd callously discard
My simple love, make me a laughing-stock.
I warn you, sir, such things are not allowed."
She cried, "For God's sake! Think of what we vowed!"

40.

She now was in tears, too, breathless, flailing,
And Johnny's words of solace now were clay.
He noticed now Boudu waving, regaling
Him with whispered advice. "Come on, Boss! Say
You'll marry her! From then on it's smooth sailing.
We'll catch the first train out of Beaujolais
And be far gone by morning," Boudu hissed.
"She's just another number on your list!"

41.

These harsh words stifled Johnny's tears. He sneered
At Boudu with contempt. "You wretch! You never
Have understood me. You have mocked and jeered
At each one of my heartbreaks with some clever
And cutting, cruel remark. Ha! If you feared
I'd changed my ways, you're wrong! I here assever
I'm still the hopeful fool. A thief am I,
But I'm an honest thief, and will not lie!

42.

“Geneviève!” he cried, and turned to her. “It’s done!
What our love was once is no more. Goodbye!”
“Goodbye?” she gasped. “Goodbye?” As from a gun
She fired her curses, dared him to deny
His love, his promises by moon and sun.
Heart-riven, mute, he let her vilify
Him as she would, nor sought to vindicate
His deeds with empty words deserving hate.

43.

At last she banished tears with a rough nod
And drew herself up, noble and majestic.
“Oh, here comes trouble,” Boudu thought. “The broad
Is out for blood. Why is it the domestic-
Type life is all they long for? Girls, by God:
The strong man’s alkahestic.”
A lengthy word, but Boudu was well-read
Through filling all the hours John spent in bed.

44.

Geneviève approached her handsome, hateful louse.
“Then you refuse to marry me?” she said.
Johnny replied, “What must I do to douse
This vain wish? No, Geneviève, I will not wed.”
“You’ve toyed, sir, with a daughter of the House
Of Bienseance. By this you’ve forfeited
All claims of mercy, all benevolences.
Monsieur, prepare to take the consequences!”

45.

“Revenge is ugly. Try to act adult,
Geneviève. Life is a book—we turn the page.”
He turned his back quite boldly. The result?
Geneviève went purple, near to hemorrhage,
And with a power of voice almost occult
She bellowed like a lion in a cage.
“Help.” First she whispered. Louder: “Help!” Agape,
Johnny spun round. “Help!” Geneviève hollered. “*Rape!*”

46.

“I knew it!” Boudu yelled. “Oh God! Run, Boss!”
But Johnny faltered. “Geneviève!” “Dump the bitch!”
Boudu cried. The vulgarity cut across
His partner’s dazed perceptions. With a hitch
Of trousers Johnny sped over the moss
While Geneviève kept on screaming “Rape!” To which
A figure, dressing-gowned, rushed in response:
The violet velvet girth of Bienseance.

47.

Portly and puffing, with a grizzled wreath
Of sleep-twined hair about his naked pate,
M. Bienseance—red face, gold teeth—
Hove into view, and not a jot too late;
His grandpapa’s Directoire sword in sheath
To guard his home ’gainst ravenous reprobate,
He set himself before his Nemesis,
Gruffly demanding, “Well? Well? What’s all this?”

48.

“Papa, of course!” Boudu moaned. “Worse and worse!”
 Bienseance in a flash took in the scene.
Johnny stood fixed as by a whim perverse,
 And Papa grumped, “Geneviève, what does this mean?”
Geneviève stared, grim. “I wish I could reverse
 The outrage done, the shocking sin obscene
In which as faultless victim I have lurched.
Papa, by this roué I’ve been besmirched!”

49.

“What’s that?” he asked, because it took a while
 To make sense of Geneviève’s complex syntax.
“Papa, this demon-fiend, loathsome and vile,
 Besmirched me!” “Besmirched! Gad!” As a climax
He rattled his old sword. Then in fine style,
 “Now wait a moment, let’s all just relax
And view the matter rationally. Sir,
Is it true, then, that you’ve ... accosted her?”

50.

Here Johnny tried to speak, but Geneviève rushed
 To interrupt. “Papa, this is no time
To question calmly! This madman,” she blushed,
 “Has ruined me. Repay him for his crime!
Quick! Run him through, or you will soon see crushed
 The good name of our family into slime!”
“My dear,” he said, “that’s not how things are handled.
We don’t want our good reputation scanded.”

51.

To Johnny he said, "Sir, I will assume
You are prepared to render good the stain
You've placed upon our proud escutcheon, whom—
I mean, which—never yet has known profane
Aroma of calumnious perfume.
Well, sir, I wait. Your answer is ... ?" In vain.
All eyes were trained upon Johnny le Beau.
A pregnant pause. John bravely answered, "No!"

52.

Bienseance stepped back, amazed, befuddled,
His preconceptions rocked by Johnny's scorn;
Geneviève was empty-eyed and helpless, huddled
Behind her father, humbled, lost, forlorn;
Boudu, impatient, tapping one foot, cuddled
His pocket-watch and tolled the time till morn;
But Johnny, dignified, proud, brave, unique,
Had said his say, and no more would he speak.

53.

The injured father finally found his tongue.
"Unhallowed miscreant! What is your scheme?
Your insult now's not only to my young
And blameless daughter—now you've dared blaspheme
The very root and rock of life!" He swung
His blunted sword free. "Guard yourself!" A beam
Of moonlight lit him as he charged pell-mell.
John drew his gun and fired. The old man fell.

54.

The old man fell. He fell without a sound.
A single shudder, and Geneviève had fainted;
Rudely and gracelessly she struck the ground.
An ugly, spreading splotch of scarlet painted
The earth beneath Bienseance. Profound
And utter silence stole the night. A tainted
Breeze, chill, arose, polluting all the earth
With stink of cold corruption's mocking birth.

55.

Boudu exclaimed, "Well, Boss, I hope you're pleased!
A fine night's work, I must say. Monolithic!
Bedded the daughter, broken her heart, appeased
Your conscience, killed the father ... Almost mythic!"
"It's self-defense," John said. "Yeah, Boss, you've wheezed
That same excuse a hundred times. A wee thick,
Now, don't you think? You and your scruples! Why
The hell on earth can't you just learn to lie?"

56.

"I have my principles." John's voice fell flat.
"But lying would save so much inconvenience!
A little hedging—where's the harm in that?"
John rubbed his eyes. "Boudu, don't try my lenience."
A light within; a cry. "No time for chat,"
Boudu said, "let's decide on the expedients."
As proper for a man who thinks ahead, you'll
Observe Boudu keeps close a railroad schedule.

57.

“Options?” quizzed Johnny. Boudu said, “In Rome
Are seven different warrants waiting for us.
The same in Nantes, Berlin, and Cannes. Back home
There is that trouble with the Louvre, but Maurice
Tramont has surely cleared that up. This tome
Says we’ll just make the next train.” Thus, in chorus:
“Paris, *plus belle* Paris, we come to you!
O boring, stinking Beaujolais—adieu!”

58.

Then perfect quiet. The silence of that scene
Was only deepened by the welling din
That rose within the house. Slowly between
The two still forms that lay there spread a thin,
Slick rivulet of human liquor, clean,
Bright ebon in the moonlight. Virtue, sin,
By that red stain on Geneviève’s gown of white,
The father and the daughter reunite.

59.

But—there—a step! A stealthy step comes creeping!
The bobbling of a lantern: faces drawn,
A tumbled knot of servants, stale from sleeping,
With whispers, hearts a-leaping, stumbles on.
Perspiring at the firing and the weeping,
They bravely came inquiring to the lawn—
Though evil should be furthest from their thought—
The meaning of that terrifying shot.

60.

And in their midst, concealed behind his valet,
Valère Bienseance stands in his drawers,
In his right hand (for self-defense) a mallet,
In his left hand some crumbled petits fours;
He had been titillating his base palate
When startled by the hubbub out of doors—
Caught eating while catastrophe held sway!
O Shame! O Guilt! Oh, what would Papa say!

61.

Not much. Valère peeped o'er the servants' tops
And saw at once the corpses of his clan.
He dropped his mallet. "Someone call the cops!"
The women wailed and shrieked while Valère ran
To his sire. "Shot!" Valère announced. Two plops
Were heard as chambermaids dropped *sans* divan.
Valère sped to Geneviève with expletives.
He felt for pulse. She moaned. He sobbed, "She lives!"

62.

"Hurrah!" the servants shouted with applause
(Which every well-bred servant's trained to do).
Valère slapped Geneviève, hard—only because
He thought that was the way to bring her to.
(According to the books he'd read, it was,
But romances don't, in all ways, hold true.
Geneviève awoke, sprang upward like a shot,
And gave Valère as good as she had got.)

63.

“Where is he? Johnny! Johnny!” Geneviève screamed.
Valère, bruised, told the butler, “She’s delirious.”
He reached for her again, but this time deemed
It wise to hold her hands. “Geneviève! Be serious!
What’s happened? Tell us!” Geneviève thrashed and steamed,
“Where is he? Find him! God!” With this mysterious
Apostrophe he had to rest content
Until the worst of Geneviève’s fit was spent.

64.

She stared about her wildly. “Gone! He’s gone!”
And promptly wilted into Valère’s arms.
“Geneviève! Control yourself!” She whimpered, “John.”
“John who?” Valère asked, puzzled. Hoots, alarms,
Bells, sirens tore the night, *sine qua non*
Of all emergencies. Fourteen gendarmes
Were racing, each one bound to be the first
To reach the rich estate and learn the worst.

65.

Geneviève leaped to her feet. “Quick, he’ll escape!
He mustn’t get away! Oh, hurry! Hurry!”
“Who mustn’t get away?” Valère said. “Drape
Something around yourself.” Geneviève, a-flurry,
Saw she must guard her tongue. “Help! Murder! Rape!”
She cried with purpose. Maids drew something furry
About her naked shoulders. Thinking quick,
She came up with a tale she thought would stick.

66.

“Valère! Oh, horrible! I was in bed,
Sleeping and dreaming of our sainted mother,
When, still asleep, I sensed a creeping dread,
A vague unease that nearly made me smother.
I woke and, trembling, stared about me. Spread
Before me were but shadows. Then—another!
He stepped before me boldly, loomed above me—
And then—oh, God!—he took advantage of me!”

67.

The chambermaids, revived, fainted again.
Geneviève warmed to her story. “You can’t think
What thoughts raced through my reeling mind just then.
My torment lasted centuries. As with ink
My soul is blotted, sullied. Ah, but when,”
She added histrionically, “the brink
Of sweet oblivion danced beneath my feet,
And I believed by death his crime I’d cheat,

68.

“The villain screamed and fell down in a sweat!
I don’t think I need say what that cry meant.”
Valère blushed, but he sighed with some regret,
Reminded of a stable-hand, absent
Now several years; Valère had been his pet
When, as a schoolboy, young Valère had spent
Long, breathless hours exploring his resources—
So few of which were wasted on the horses.

69.

Geneviève resumed. "Before I'd time to call,
He'd done his trousers up and, seizing me
With grip as strong as steel, began to haul
Me—kicking, biting—to the balcony!
He dragged me to the lawn, once more to maul
My poor, beleaguered body painfully.
Just then Papa appeared to 'venge my wound.
The villain fired. The rest you know." She swooned.

70.

She swooned quite prettily, one eye alert
To measure the effect her act had made.
'Twas satisfactory: Valère's filched dessert
Fell wadded to the earth, a gardener swayed,
The others crossed themselves twice (but one flirt
Betook the opportunity to raid
Her lady's jewelry box; the amethyst
Was later found on her; she was dismissed).

71.

Valère said, "Ssh. We've sent for the police.
They'll find whoever did these awful things."
"Police?" Her mind spun fast with cunning's grease.
"Police, with rules, procedures, all that brings
Delay? No time for that! Fetch my valise!"
She told a maid. "Hurry! Revenge has wings
And will not wait for stranger's hands to work it.
Heaven's curses on the one who tries to shirk it!"

72.

She glared at poor Valère, who stayed amazed
In kneeling posture on the ground. "But what
Do you propose to do? You're hurt, you're dazed,
You don't know up from down. In Walter Scott
You'd be in bed for months." But Geneviève blazed.
"I wonder, will God blast you on the spot?"
So thwarted lust provides the perfect kit
For any righteous rage we'd counterfeit.

73.

The servants, by this time, in whispering groups
Were scattered through the house and grounds. The
neighbors
Were learning all the plot-details in troops,
While teams of hostlers tried to cut their labors
By phoning all the papers with their scoops,
And old retainers called for fifes and tabors.
Astonishment! Whoever would expect
Such turmoil in a household so correct?

74.

Back to the ruling class. Geneviève, with old
Adroitness, filled her brother with remorse,
And every time Valère dared say, "Don't scold,"
Geneviève would curse. At last she grew quite
hoarse
And, dragging him to Papa, said, "Behold!
The blood still flowing from his reeking corse!"
Valère turned green and grimaced. "Yes, it's flowing.
It's flowing! So what? Why must you keep showing—?"

75.

“That blood is Heaven’s way of saying, Go!
Track down your enemy, and ruin him!
Don’t eat or rest until you find your foe
And beat him, kill him, rend him limb from limb!”
She seized Valère’s hand and forced it below
Their father’s body to that puddle grim.
“Valère, my brother—on his corpse we both
Shall swear to God and ghost a dreadful oath.”

76.

If lightning flashed, if all the hills capsized,
If earth cracked open and disclosed a hell
Packed full of tortured sinners terrorized
By chapbook imps like Dante used to sell,
Valère was sure he would not be surprised.
From Geneviève’s rhetoric how could he rebel?
He looked upon his hands—one white, one red—
And then repeated what his sister said.

“Upon his very blood we vow,
Although the search our lives consume,
To hunt the monster in his lair
And drag him forth to meet his doom.

“Turn we his fortune into blight,
His love to hate, his day to night,
His hope to death, his peace to blood,
His joy to pain, his bliss to misery!”

77.

The last remaining flunkey took it down
 (He formerly had worked for clippings sorters),
Checked twice for spelling faults, then rushed to town
 To try to auction it to the reporters.
With stylish use of adjective and noun,
 He knew what it was worth in certain quarters.
This economic precept is quite plain:
Even by their woes the wealthy bring some gain.

78.

In less than nothing Geneviève, dressed and packed,
 Was heading for the Rolls Royce in the stable,
The house locked up; Valère in tow (abstract
 But ambulatory); statement on the table
For the police to find; mapped, almanacked,
 Purse filled with cheques and cash; eager and able
To drive from Beaujolais to Tokyo
To catch the man who'd dared to tell her, "No!"

79.

Tranquility once more, and Silence reigns
 With soft hand, and soft breathing, and closed eyes.
No trace of bustle's worry, doing's chains
 To ripple the clear waters of the skies.
A breeze of eastern parentage disdains
 To tease the trees with play, and falls, and dies.
The dawn is late. The sun will not be rushed.
The very whirling of the world is hushed.

80.

A spider, rising earlier than the sun,
Smugly industrious, starts about her toil.
She tiptoes round the lawn, seeking that one,
That perfect blade of grass sprung from the soil
That's fit to bear her intricate homespun.
She finds a fit one, and begins to coil
From it to M. Bienseance's nose
Concentric, mathematically pure Os.

81.

Before her work is well begun, she stops,
Legs poised to leap from danger in a trice:
She's felt the barest tremor. Now she hops
Along her line to that dead nose of ice.
The dead nose sniffs. The frightened spider drops
And disappears without inquiring twice.
The body trembles, shivers, gives a yelp.
A weary, rasping voice says weakly, "Help?"

CANTO II

1.

Hail, Muse!—So much for that. Next afternoon
 Boudu and Johnny struck Paris. A corps
Of autograph hounds caught the team, but soon
 Scot-free (and gratified) they headed for
A dingy, dangerous riverfront saloon
 That bore the cheerful caption Le Rat Mort.
They found its charming atmosphere so cozy—
And far from every cop and judge too nosy.

2.

A muddy heap of crumbling boards and bricks
 Slung up beside the slimiest stretch of Seine—
The cops had dubbed it L'Hôtel-sur-la-Styx,
 And knew beyond a doubt it was the den
Of all the crooks in France. Some lunatics,
 Old ladies and ambitious aldermen,
Would scream, "The plagues of vice and murder grow there!"
But cops aren't fools, and not a one would go there.

3.

The keeper of this snuggerly was Marcel,
An ancient, shriveled bag of bilious air,
Glass-eyed, pocked, dirtier than his clientele,
Peg-legged and sallow: the ideal compere
For this lounge off the second round of hell.
His purple lips had never moved in prayer,
Or whispered words of love, or sung a hymn;
But he filled every glass up to the brim.

4.

Like Nestor in the Iliad, Marcel knew
A fitting tale for every pretty pass:
A chase with the police? Roland le Mou
Ran fourteen days and didn't rest his ass
A minute the whole time. A misjudged coup?
Le Petit Noir was forced to dump his lass
Into a lake to get away one time.
Marcel was the Herodotus of crime.

5.

He kept as a familiar a dark child,
An Arab urchin with a crooked back,
Not more than nine years old, but wicked, wild,
Blood-thirsty, evil as the night is black.
By careful study of the news he styled
Himself on the worst murderers he could track.
With glee he studied every mutilation
And sternly trained himself to his vocation.

6.

This nameless imp knew every lane and alley
From Pigalle to Pont Neuf, and every route
Of quick escape where cops don't dare to dally:
A human Michelin map. This simian mute
In miniature dressed like a dwarf Svengali.
He aped that maestro also in repute,
His rude behavior, filthiness, and smell;
The perfect child for childless old Marcel.

7.

This pair and place right out of Eugene Sue
With welcome greeted our intrepid team
That afternoon when Johnny and Boudu
(After the proper knocks and whistled theme)
Were let in by The Nameless, treated to
A beakerful of cognac, mint, and cream,
And set down at a table with their booze
To gratify their host with all the news.

8.

"How much? How many?" Marcel asked. "What kind
Of loot and women, Johnny? Pardon me,
But at my age, and crippled, and half-blind,
Sure, all that's left is curiosity.
So fill me in, my friends, if you don't mind.
Don't worry if The Nameless listens. He
Won't breathe a word. Discretion is his heart."
But Johnny took his glass and sat apart.

9.

“He’s sad,” Boudu explained. “These past two weeks
He had six one-nights and one longer fling—
The usual fascination with physiques
That he believes means some much deeper thing.
Two nights in bed with some girl and he speaks
Of love eternal, bliss bewildering ...
This last one caused more than a bit of bother.
She raised a row, and Johnny shot her father.”

10.

The Nameless looked alive at that. He skipped
Behind the bar and down a secret door.
In a dank cellar room The Nameless tipped
A hidden lever: instantly the floor
Broke open, and a filing cabinet flipped
Up into view. The boy pulled out a drawer
And, in a packet labeled *J. le Beau*,
He scribbled down this latest imbroglio.

11.

For Johnny was a favorite of Marcel’s
Because he was the greatest crook in France.
But information is a plum that sells
Without regard to the Exchange’s stance.
From bankrupt beggars to the swankiest swells
One law holds steadfast in Society’s dance:
To paraphrase a saw that often grieves,
There’s no more honor between kings than thieves.

12.

The Nameless reappeared, silent, unseen,
And crept beneath the table by his master.
Boudu was telling Marcel how, in Wien,
Johnny had robbed a bank dressed as a pastor
Then, minutes later on the train between
Tullno and Krems, they barely ducked disaster—
The bag of loot had burst, but, eyes to Heaven,
John thanked God for the gold good men had given!

13.

They laughed aloud. “Oh, Johnny! Priceless stuff!”
But Johnny’s eyes were focused on a form
Divine: a girl dressed like an *Apache* tough.
Pale face, two eyes as green as olives, storm
Of auburn hair tucked underneath a rough
Man’s cap; a shape endowed beyond the norm
And tantalizing in its male attire,
That seemed to challenge all men to admire.

14.

He caught his breath and would not set it loose—
He reveled in his newly captive state.
He gladly set his neck within the noose
And toward the girl began to gravitate.
He had no scheme to swindle or seduce,
He had no base designs to perpetrate;
He only wanted to be near, to touch
The girl he’d come too soon to love too much.

15.

Yes, last night's Beaujolais was quite forgot—
The love, the sex, the murder—like a joke
That makes you chuckle at its daffy plot
Yet loses humor at the second stroke.
But don't think Johnny heartless, cruel; he's not.
Nor impotent, nor frigid, for you folk
Who see all thing's through Dr. Freud's index;
His memory was simply in his sex.

16.

This girl with jade-green eyes and auburn hair
Who wore men's clothes to show off her fine figure
Sat smoking at a table with a pair
Of pickpockets; but she was no gold digger—
She was the present mistress of Colbert,
Part-owner of Le Rat Mort, well-known rigger
Of races, roulette wheels; strong, rich, effete,
Elitest of the criminal elite.

17.

To occupy her time and keep her quiet
He often sent his mistress to "the club,"
Where she religiously kept to a diet
Of biscuits, ginger beer, and salted chub.
Her job was to cool each incipient riot,
With smiles and winks to settle each hubbub.
She also sang sometimes—no second-rater—
The sort of songs Piaf sang twelve years later.

18.

This girl—not woman yet, not yet eighteen—
 Glanced up by chance as Johnny wandered near:
Glanced up; and for a moment blue met green,
 Met, mingled in a moment more than year
And mixed a rainbow color not yet seen
 In studied, prised, earth-bound atmosphere.
A moment only—then she turned away.
So young, and yet so used to stray eyes' play!

19.

Boudu approached. "Now, Boss, we've got to plan—"
 But Johnny, rapt, cried, "Boudu, did you see?
Of course you saw. No man who is a man
 Could not have seen!" Boudu groaned heartily.
"I cannot breathe!" said Johnny. "But I can—"
 Boudu said firmly, "Johnny, look at me.
For just ten minutes' time, please, banish love.
We've urgent business we must take care of.

20.

"Oh, yes, I see her. And I see your eyes,
 Your baby blues go zipping after her,
Go buzzing after her like two fruit flies
 About a compote. Well, don't you dare stir
In that direction till we can devise
 Some plot or scheme to get back where we were
Before you spent our profits on that dame!
This constant lust, I tell you, is a shame!"

21.

“Lust! Shame!” the Boss exclaimed. “Are you so blind?
How can you jabber business when before us
An angel’s standing?” “Johnny, turn your mind
To facts, please. Is that word in your thesaurus?
What’s there before us doesn’t count; behind
Us stands disaster like a brontosaurus
Ready to eat us up cold, without salt.
We’re broke again, Boss, and it’s all your fault.

22.

“You spent our hard-won loot all on that broad
In Beaujolais. The dinners and the gifts,
The mink stole, the bouquets, the car... . My God!
I don’t think half a dozen plain spendthrifts
Could waste that fifty thousand faster. Nod
Twice, Boss, to let me know you get my drifts.
I use the plural because I’ve made the point
So many times I’ve almost blown a joint!”

23.

Then Johnny crossed his arms and puffed and grumbled.
“Don’t pull that, Boss. The money belt is flat.
No use to groan, that’s how the cookie crumbled.
It’s not the first time, but I’ll eat my hat
If it don’t prove the last! And since you’ve jumbled
Up our affairs so, I’ll play diplomat
And bully you just like a hundred bosses
Until you have recouped in full our losses.”

24.

He led reluctant Johnny to a seat
And started in to plot. But soon he sensed
That Johnny wasn't listening. With a bleat
He changed his chair and sat his boss against
A pillar, round which Johnny couldn't cheat
A peek at pretty ladies. Thus dispensed,
The two of them mapped out a perfect plot
To rob the Georges V and not get caught.

25.

The girl, without expression, rose and left
The two pickpockets to their mugs of rum.
She wandered to the bar. The Nameless, deft
As Death, was standing needles on his thumb.
She signaled to Marcel. He checked the heft
Of a flask of ginger beer and poured her some.
As calmly as a practiced courtesan
She asked, "Marcel—Marcel, who is that man?"

26.

"What man?" Marcel said as he took his chair.
"Him, with the red tie and the funny friend.
Has he come in before?" She didn't dare
Return Marcel's wise glance. He said, "I tend
To lose track of the time. When did Colbert
First bring you to Le Rat Mort? At the end
Of August, Angélique? Or in September?
To tell the truth, I really don't remember."

27.

The girl paled, and her green eyes now were veiled.

“It’s not important. But I seem to know ...”

“Know what?” Marcel said quickly. But she failed

To note the urgent malice in him. “Oh,
Something so long ago ...” “If you have mailed

A letter, you would know Johnny le Beau.
His photograph’s in every postal station
And every bank and treasury in the nation.”

28.

“Johnny le Beau?” she whispered. “Who is he?”

Remember, Angélique was very young.

“Who’s Johnny?” laughed Marcel. “The A-B-C

Of robbing banks in Europe! Why, among
The *bon ton* set he’s called The Banker’s Fee.

And with the women ... well, he’s got a tongue
As smooth as any silken baby’s butt
To charm the underpants off any slut.”

29.

He laughed, and Angélique flushed red with rage.

Marcel said, “Angélique, don’t take on so.
I talk too much, too crude for one my age.

But,” he said slyly, “you just said you know ... ?”
She shrugged. “Forget it. It was just a page

Of something I tore up, too long ago.”
“What, child?” “A list.” Now her green eyes were haunted.
“I think ... a note of something that I wanted.”

30.

She laughed and reached out for a cigarette.
Marcel was disappointed: no new news!
“Well, stay away from Johnny. He’s a bet
All women seem to be too glad to lose.
Runs through ’em, blonde and redhead and brunette,
As if they were put here for him to use.
And do you think they mind it? Not a bit!
Each loser’s sure that she’s his favorite.”

31.

He lit her cigarette. “They say he’s bedded
Full half the women in Paris, and more
In Spain and Italy. He never wedded
A single one, though. Nun or wife or whore—
Forgive my Anglo-Saxon—gets light-headed
With fancy talk.” He grinned. “We all deplore,
Of course, his weakness for romantic play.
So take a tip from me, and stay away.”

32.

She said, “You know me much too well for that.
I’ve never had much trouble with the men.
A pretty smile, a wink, a friendly pat
At grabby hands that stray too close. And when
They get persistent, just turn acrobat—
A flip, a kick; they get the picture then.”
She blew a cloud of smoke in Marcel’s face.
“That’s how we girls keep you men in your place.

33.

"My mother, bless her black soul, taught me well.
And if I ever thought that someone might ...
Well, Pigalle knocks that pretty fairy-spell
Out of your dreaming head real quick. Moonlight
Can't touch the alleys here. No pimpernel
Blooms in the gutter. When a girl can't write
Or read, then fancy talk's a wasted net.
Come on, give me another cigarette."

34.

"You've got it pretty soft," Marcel declaimed.
"Oh yes," she said. "Colbert. You know, it's funny,
A girl like me with him. I can't be blamed
For falling for him, can I? Handsome, money,
And smart, and gentle—I'm almost ashamed
To say how gentle—but as strong as Tunney."
"So?" "So?" She pitched the new butt in the aisle.
"I don't know why I smoke these things. They're vile."

35.

A hand touched Angélique. She spun about.
"Hello, my love. Hello, Marcel." Colbert
Rapped on the bar. "My friends, the world's a drought—
Let's have a drink." Suave, dapper, debonair,
Fine figure of a man, a trifle stout,
With graying temples and that air, so rare,
Of perfect satisfaction and complacence
That takes for granted other men's obeisance.

36.

Colbert sat and kissed Angélique obliquely.

She smiled, without much flavor, and looked down.

“How’s tricks, Colbert?” Marcel asked. “I’ve been meekly

Awaiting all the news.” “The man could drown

In gossip, and die happy. No, your weekly

Report to all the long-ears in the town

Will have to wait, Marcel. I’ve come to look

With careful eye at your accounting book.”

37.

Marcel sighed while The Nameless fetched the tome

And brought it to Colbert before he blinked.

He tossed the boy a franc, scraped off the foam

From a tall mug Marcel had poured him, winked,

Said, “Here’s to health and happiness and home,”

And drained the mug. They all heard a distinct

But genteel belch. Colbert began to pore

Over the crabbed accounts of Le Rat Mort.

38.

The dusty minutes ticked away untold

As Angélique observed His Partnership

Work through the columns: face flushed, but skin cold;

Slick sheen of eager sweat on upper lip;

The anxious glint in eye at hint of gold

Ungarnered; quick suspicion of a slip

In the addition; the odd touch of bliss

That seemed to color his analysis.

39.

Quite suddenly her world turned into glass,
And she was glass, too: fragile, wary, waiting
For one wrong move, one stumbling, clumsy pass
To drop her, shatter, crack her armor-plating;
Her soul, if any soul she had, like gas
Would hiss out, take the wind, evaporating
Immediately; and her sad, empty crust
Would tumble to the floor in piles of dust.

40.

And Angélique gasped. Panicked, she glanced round
The room: black, filthy, smoke-stained, rotting walls;
Black, filthy ceiling; black, spit-muddied ground.
A dirty place packed full of dirty brawls:
That corner there—two men without a sound
Thrust knives at one another; someone falls,
Downed by a pal's fist; someone blacks an eye.
She gasped—and her Colbert did not ask why.

41.

A moment only. Then her wild, wide glance
Landed on Johnny. Johnny. Johnny's eyes,
Bright blue like fired ice, with that radiance
That kills mere gloom and boldly certifies
There is a sun; two eyes whose pert, proud prance
Did battle with and banished hows and whys;
Two hero's eyes that brooked no barrier;
Two eyes, beyond all doubt, now fixed on her.

42.

She started, and she blushed. But instantly
 She was again the mistress of her mind.
She did not drop her eyes at once—no. She
 First held his look a long while till, half-blind,
He blinked twice. Angélique triumphantly
 Sneered at the futile follies of mankind
And transferred her attentions to Colbert,
Who huddled o'er his book in pose of prayer.

43.

At last he closed the book. "I've just one question
 About that entry for the first, Marcel.
A case of port? May I make a suggestion?
 That's not the liquor for *our* clientele."
He belched again. "Excuse me. Indigestion.
 But really, partner, how much did we sell?
And don't come up with any shame-faced twaddle.
I'm sure you didn't crack a single bottle."

44.

Marcel scowled, and The Nameless hissed. "Insults!
 In all my years—!" "Come, come, Marcel. Don't stall."
"If I were younger ... Well. As for results,
 You might have seen the next line. You recall
What holiday the first of May is? Cults
 Are active then, and I, sir, sold it all
To Soviet comrades, in their celebration
Of the de-Tsaring of their frigid nation."

45.

Colbert checked twice. "And at a handsome gain!
Marcel, accept my deep apologies.
To dare to doubt Pigalle's most brilliant brain
Is sheerest folly. How may I appease
Your wounded sensibilities?" "You pain
With protestations," Marcel stated. "Please
Don't think of it again. Misapprehensions
Of this sort are an ill one never mentions."

46.

The two made pretty bows. The Nameless fetched
Another round to toast with. Colbert drained
His mug again, sighed pleasantly, and stretched
An arm round Angélique. He said, "You've stained
Your blouse, my careless child! Have I not etched
Into your mind the first law? As ingrained
As breathing, you must keep up your toilette
And ... darling, do put out that cigarette."

47.

"You know how it annoys me." Angélique
Stubbed out her passion. "Yes, my dear. I know."
"That's better. I'll be late tonight. A sneak
Preview of Robert's latest find's trousseau.
You'll see yourself home?" And she nodded, bleak,
But blandly smiling. "Yes, of course." "I—oh,
I noticed that my vest is still not mended.
Please see to it." He stood, their love-talk ended.

48.

But Angélique in panic caught at him.

“Colbert?” she said in an odd, yearning tone.
He blinked. “Hmm?” She fell back, defeated, grim;

Her voice was now as hard and blank as stone.
“Enjoy yourself.” He chuckled at her whim.

They looked at one another—each alone—
And, without speaking, something passed away
And left them cold and cramped and sad and gray.

49.

“Stay well,” Colbert said hoarsely. He snapped on
His gray fedora. “Don’t forget the vest.”

He rushed out. In a moment he was gone,
And Angélique felt something in her breast
Burst free: but whether fear, or joy, or yawn

She could not tell. She banished thinking lest
In this brief, unplanned ending, silent, small,
She find that she was suffering ... not at all.

50.

“That does it, Boss,” Boudu said. “One bank ripe

For picking. But we must be in Créteil
Before dawn.” “We’ll drive quick as teletype,

Get there by three. The vault will be child’s play,
Ten, twenty minutes at the most. We swipe

The dough, clean up our mess ... by break of day—”
“We’re back in town to square our alibis.
Great, Boss!” “And now ...” Don Juan was on the rise.

51.

Boudu sighed. "Got ten minutes in, at least.
I guess I shouldn't be a greedy Gus."
As Johnny slicked his hair, brushed coat, recreated
His trousers, Boudu mouthed a quiet cuss.
"Oh, mother! See him preening like a priest!
This is how hormones ruin the best of us!
Haven't you ever heard of abstinence?
Boss, you don't have a lick of shame or sense!"

52.

But Johnny smiled: what man needs sense or shame
When woman's heady scents are on the air?
He was inured to Boudu's constant blame
And, frankly, did not heed nor hear nor care.
Electric life was coursing through his frame,
Nor would it brook delay. John gave a prayer—
Despite his past, his confidence was weak—
And bravely marched toward Love, toward Angélique.

53.

She saw his trousers first, crease fresh and straight,
And looked up, startled. His eyes captured her.
Breathless she sat, the maid inviolate;
Breathless he stood, the hopeful challenger.
Earth stilled, prepared to see these two create
The god we all would be, or are, or were.
He did not sigh, or blink, or blush, or flail;
She did not fly, or sink, or flush, or pale.

54.

She rose to face him slowly, tall and bonnie.
He stepped *le premier pas* in love's gavotte.
He whispered, honey-voice hoarse, "My name's Johnny."
She found herself again, and sneered, "Mine's not."
She turned away. "Wait!" Stunned, he gasped, but on he
Pressed. He reached out, but she would not be caught.
He cried, "You don't know all I would say to—"
"No?" She laughed cruelly. "You're a man, aren't you?"

55.

Another instant, she was gone. John stared,
Then rushed to Marcel as Boudu joined them.
"Quick! Who was she? That angel, auburn-haired,
With skin like cream? Cream! Bah! Crème de la crème!
Her name!" "It's Angélique Levrais," declared
Marcel. The Nameless hawked a wad of phlegm
At Johnny, missed, and ducked behind the bar.
"Angélique Levrais!" crooned John. "Heaven's only star!"

56.

"Where does she live?" he shouted feverishly.
Marcel said, "27 rue des Gonifs,
But you don't stand a chance with that one. She—"
"Boudu, give me the money!" Disbelief
Showed dark in Boudu's face. "Now, Boss, be rea—"
"Give!" John demanded. Sighing with grave grief,
Boudu pulled out the last of their poor bank
And handed Johnny each centime and franc.

57.

"Bring round the car at one o'clock," John said.

"Please, Boss," Boudu whined, "just don't spend it all!"

"The car—" "I know, Boss." Boudu dropped his head

Into his hands. "Rue des Gonifs. I'll call ..."

"Rue des Gonifs! Say Heaven's gates instead!"

John paled. "Boudu, this night my fate will fall—

Her word will be my life ... or be my death!"

"Le petit mort," Boudu said 'neath his breath.

58.

John grabbed his hat and stick and sang, "Adieu!"

Marcel raised up a glass in solemn toast.

The Nameless hissed as his sire said, "Salut!"

Then quick as Johnny left took up a post

Ten paces to his rear, well out of view

To see what secrets might give up the ghost.

Meanwhile, Boudu gave vent to a tirade

On Romance *contra* how the real world's made.

59.

At this Marcel put in his two centimes.

"My friend, you're much too narrow in your rage.

Moan if you like, but clarify your themes—

Romance is not the sole crime of the age.

That fervor, fixed on politics, spins reams

Of frightful folly few would care to gauge.

Our motto's 'Confidence in Diffidence.'"

Boudu gave a sage nod. "You make much sense.

60.

“The soft touch is the only way to play.
You simply have to keep an even keel.
I’ve told the boss that passion is passé,
But he won’t learn—fanatics don’t appeal.
This is a world where men in suits can say
What pays or not. The secret to the deal
Is if one learns to keep his bile benign,
He’ll soon find out that apathy’s divine.”

61.

Then suddenly a shrieking, roaring gale
Swept up as hard and hot as Hell’s own blast—
A thunder like a train thrown off its rail
Shook wall and window. Every *mec*, aghast,
Leaped up from drink or game or fight. Wholesale
Confusion seized the cadging criminal caste
As Le Rat Mort, the dimmest of dim rooms,
Sank lost within the gloomiest of glooms.

62.

The windows fractured at the shutters’ rattle,
The walls gave off a choking cloud of soot.
Le Rat Mort seemed the center of a battle,
As if all cops had picked this time to shoot
Those hardened thieves, who crowded in like cattle
Before the prod, and whined round Marcel’s foot,
“Save us, Marcel! It’s Judgment Day, we swear!”
Just then the doors burst in—someone stood there.

63.

A silhouette stood framed within that door,
An image from Gustave Doré's *Inferno*,
Backlit by blood-red sun, shrouded before
With roiling dust and soot in one vast blur. No
Way to describe the dread that took that corps
And thrust them back like blasts of flaming Sterno.
The men cried out and huddled tighter still.
The figure moved ... a woman crossed the sill.

64.

A woman? Nay, say harpy out of Hades!
Say demon rat from Dutchman's nether decks!
As mold to mushrooms, Scylla to mermaid is,
So was this fury to the fairer sex.
This beast bore no similitude to ladies.
Some horrid wrong had dashed her hopes to wrecks.
Lust for revenge had twisted soul and feature
And changed a human to some baser creature.

65.

Hair black as pitch, skin white as Dracula's,
Eyes flaming red, set deep in pits of kohl,
Arms strong as cables, nails filed into claws,
Her bosom solid as a baobab's bole,
She stood before them with raised brow, clenched jaws,
The very image of an outraged troll.
To put the cap on this incarnate storm,
She's in Salvation Army uniform.

66.

Boudu stared, stupefied; fear froze his blood;
His skin was chill and clammy in his shirt;
For that hate-twisted face struck with a thud
His calm control and dealt it fatal hurt.
He felt his vaunted courage squeal and scud
Away, his atheism fall inert.
He gasped, he moaned, he gave a high-pitched cry.
“Dear God of Grace, it’s Magda Barinkay!”

67.

Magda rushed forward, seized his wide lapel.
“It’s you!” she shrieked. “I’ve found you, little man!”
She shook him, shook him like a Christmas bell
With unrelenting strength Promethean
(Meanwhile, Marcel’s bewildered clientele
Crept from the club, each tail tucked in each can),
And hissed victoriously, “Yes, I know you!
You are that villain’s odious toad, Boudu!”

68.

Boudu said stoutly, “Yes, I am!” then tried
A different tack, and gave a friendly grin.
“Why, Magda! What a shock ... surprise ... treat! I’d
Have never dreamed I’d see your sweet face in
A place like this. Marcel! Fetch out the pride
Of your black cellar! Toast—” But feminine
Wit’s not deceived by masculine flattery
(At least in rage), and she unleashed her battery.

69.

“Don’t speak to me as if I were half-mad!”

She growled. Boudu gasped with relief. “I am *All* mad!” she raged. “Yes, mad with Heaven’s glad

Rejoicing! I am bride now to the Lamb,
And so appear before you, sinner, clad

In perfect grace!” Boudu here tried to scam,
But Magda held tight. “I’ve a sacred mission:
To see *one* certain sinner to perdition!

70.

“Yes, *one*! You know the one of whom I speak.

Johnny le Beau, who swore love, then departed!
I’ve followed you for two years and one week

Along a tortuous trail of broken-hearted,
Exhausted women. Sneer! I turn the cheek.

But you don’t know what hell my heart has charted.”
She raised her hand to wipe away two tears
That made her eyes look sharp as barber’s shears.

71.

“But then I met—Heaven bless the angel-souled!—

A woman holy as a martyred saint,
Yet human, knowing well how sad sin rolled
Into an empty heart. She banned complaint

And brought me to the Blessed Army’s fold,
Taught me compassion, faith, and self-restraint.”

And so she sang her virtue’s panegyric,
Which took the form of the preceding lyric.

72.

“Pathetic,” Boudu wryly said. “A plot
Fit for a picture show for Lillian Gish.
What bathos! What dramatic sense! It brought
A tear to my eye (like a week-old fish).
But let me ask you, Magda, what you thought
You’d do once you found Johnny? What’s your wish?
What would you with a man so cold? So tough?
I would have thought he’d hurt you quite enough.”

73.

“Ha!” Magda’s laugh was bitter blast of scorn.
“You think your puny arguments could turn me?
You think that Magda Barinkay would mourn
Like some weak schoolgirl when a man would spurn me?
No, worm! I will seize *this* bull by his horn
And quench his roving heart’s fire, though it burn me!
If need be, I’ll fetch the police to storm him,
And then,” she glowed with mission, “I’ll reform him!”

74.

“Reform him?” Boudu spat. “Johnny le Beau?
Poor Magda, naïve Magda! These two years
Have made you lunatic! You must not know
The sort of man he is. You think your tears
The only tears he’s spilled? Would it were so!
From Paris to Peking, Omsk to Algiers
He’s ruined dozens, hundreds, thousands ... worse!”
She shrieked, but Boudu set her straight, in verse.

“He has a reputation
For bringing maids to ruin
And wives to paradise.

He's known across the nation
For all his daring-do in
Pursuance of his vice.

"In Marseille
He took a captain's daughter
Across the salty water
While singing barcaroles.

In Versailles
He dallied with a princess,
Two duchesses, and since is
Serving two paroles.

"He has a reputation.
Since he was in the cradle
And played at rock-a-bye,
Love was his recreation.
His former nursery maid'll
Gladly certify.

"He earned his reputation
Upon the field of battle
With Aphrodite's son.
In every situation,
Slave and aristocrat'll
Admit he fought and won.

"He guards his reputation
With the jealousy and fervor
Of a converted Socialist.
I keep his reputation:
I am the proud preserver
Of his little list."

75.

Magda had fallen shattered in a chair,
But Boudu never left a point half-hit.
He pulled from out his pocket with cool air
The thick black book he kept, wherein were writ
The names of each liaison, each affair
The Boss had consummated. "I submit
As evidence that my tale's not caprice
This book—you'll note it's big as *War and Peace*."

76.

As Boudu spoke, poor Magda fairly fainted
With horror as, to her appalled surprise,
She gazed upon the picture that he painted,
While flipping through the pages, to her eyes.
And, not to keep you, reader, unacquainted
With why John's fame is one we advertise,
We'll set forth herein every anecdote
Just as Boudu declaimed it, quote unquote.

"Twenty-four in Champagne,
Thirty-one in Plagne,
Fifteen in Campagne,
The majority young;
Seventeen in Nice,
Plus a foreigner from Greece
Who was happily obese
And rather highly strung;

"Gascogne,
Sologne,
Chinons,
Montluçon,
Avignon,
Ballancourt:
Eighty-four;

“Bordeaux,
Fontainebleau,
Vannes, Cannes,
Orleans,
Dijon,
Chateauroux:
Two hundred two;

“Aurillac, Bergerac,
Where we reached a cul-de-sac
With a lady in a hack
Who was tipsy on cognac,
Let me see ...
Calais, Beaujolais,
Montiers, Epernay,
Poitier, Montdidier,
Montpellier, Paramé,
And Paris!
In Paris
Four hundred thirty-three!

“Only nine in Angoulême
Where it’s always the same,
Every daughter and dame
Is a rollicking bore;
La Rochelle: twenty-seven;
Aix-en-Provence: eleven;
And Champagne—that was heaven!—
Wait, we’ve been there before...

“Normandie,
Romilly,
Pretty Lille,
Staid Trouville,
Charleville,
And Verdun:
Ninety-one.

“That’s nine hundred ninety-eight,
Plus the duo in Nantes
Makes it one thousand straight.
And that only covers France!

“Moving on:
In Hispania we toured,
Moving southward from Lourdes.
Our success was assured
 As we entered Madrid.
Señoritas in Castille,
And he didn’t rest until
We arrived in Seville,
 Where he slept through *Le Cid*.

“Valdepeñas,
Jalepeñas,
Barcelona,
Tarragona,
Badalona,
 Aracen:
 Two hundred ten.

“Nevada
In Grenada,
Asturias,
Estudias,
‘Buenos dias,
 Huate!’
 Than on to Italy—

“On the Lago di Bolseno,
On the Via Trasimeno,
Underneath a hot volcano,
 You can add a hundred more.
Up through steamy San Marino,
On the highway to Torino
With a ladies’ band and vino
 As a sort of encore.

“Took a train to Belgrad,
Then a boat to Novi Sad ...
A pair of twins in Dravograd
 That he slyly cajoled.
An old lady in a scow
On the river near Krakow.
We contemplated Moscow,
 But he thought it too cold.

“Every little German stadt
Yielded dozens to his art,
Though we did get rather sodden
When we fell in Baden-Baden.

“Summing up the numbers that have gone before,
Totting up the figures, adding up the score,
The grand total:
 three thousand, eight hundred and seventy-four!”

77.

Marcel stepped forward, dumb—he had not dreamed,
 Though he had known a lot of Johnny’s stories,
That John had been so diligent—and beamed
 With manly pride at this proof of such glories.
But Magda, meanwhile, just as Boudu’d schemed,
 Was occupied with fervent oratories
To God; and as he closed this verbal rape,
Boudu inched towards the door—and towards escape.

“He has a reputation
 For bringing maids to ruin
 And wives to paradise.
I work without remuneration.
 I get the residue in
 Lieu of any price.

“He has a pleasant occupation.
It does no good to chasten
Or even disagree,
For he has a reputation,
And he has earned his place in
History!”

78.

Marcel raised hand to brow in proud salute
To Johnny's strength, all other men's outclassing,
And, bowing, Boudu vanished like a newt—
The swinging door was all that marked his passing.
But Magda, who leaped up in quick pursuit,
Filled Paris with a doom like black clouds massing:
She snarled, she growled, she raged like any rhino,
And sped to cast John to *jure divino*.

CANTO III

1.

O Night, inhuman mother of dread deeds,
 Dark goddess of the worst of brutal crimes,
Yet also siren whom each lover speeds
 With prayers as blessed and happiest of times;
You starlit mistress in whose black fist breeds
 Theft, murder, man—the worst and best of slimes;
Help me set forth to those who live by day
What Paris is when you hold earth in sway.

2.

The back streets of Paris; the courts; the alleys;
 The lanes where burglars meet to plot their risks;
The promenades wherein the strumpet dallies
 To tempt or taunt; the malls where her pimp whisks
In silk shirts; the docks where the sailor rallies;
 The hustlers, whores: peris and odalisques
In some poor parody of paradise;
The lost who, cloaked in night, repel, entice.

3.

This dangerous, desperate, buoyant, fearless race—
It draws the city truer than a map.
It stares up, glaring boldly at the face
That turns away from what must crush, entrap,
And sings out loud, “Yes, I exist! Your grace
Is not required here!” A hard, mute slap
To those who *know* their way the only one
That should be lived beneath the moon or sun.

4.

Beneath the sun or moon ... the moon, night’s eye,
Looks down without praise, looks down without chaff,
Shines coldly as we humans sell or buy,
Or steal, or give, or kill, or bear, or laugh.
And so this night we bards personify
And hail as prosy daylight’s magic half
Is only darkness, which humanity
Makes darker or makes lighter, by choice free.

5.

The rue des Gonifs, *louche* lane off Pigalle,
Was lined with low saloons for low-life types
Not known for their humane, high-toned morale
(They oft wore suits with horizontal stripes).
This unromantic, seedy, stale locale
Was startled this night by the sound of pipes,
Guitar, and saxophone, as Johnny *loco*
Appeared with jazz band *allegro con fuoco*.

6.

He stood beneath the broken balcony
 At Number 27, where he knew
 The boudoir of his new eternal she
 Was situated, without more ado,
 Set the musicians round a dead, caged tree,
 Thought up a pretty poem impromptu,
 Cleared his throat like a good Romeo, and made
 To his would-be Juliet a serenade.

“Angélique! Angélique!
 Open your window, let my song in!
 Angélique! Angélique!
 Do not refuse the arms you belong in!

“Musicians I bring,
 Eager to play
 Blindfolds in place
 Waltzes at ready.

“Music can sing
 What words cannot say,
 Treble and bass
 Pulsing and heady.”

7.

Above him, something moved behind the drape
 Of the French windows; some dim figure stirred.
 The merest shadow, feminine in shape,
 Lifted the shade, stepped back in fright; paused; heard
 Those chords, that song; trembled between escape
 And daring; then, alarmed by his hot word,
 It vanished swiftly like a falling star—
 But first it left the French windows ajar.

“Angélique! Angélique!
From your coldness let me free you.
Angélique! Angélique!
If you hear me, let me see you.

“See there the moon,
Ordered to shine,
Waiting to wink
At lovers’ caresses.

“I Pantaloon,
You Columbine.
Don’t stop to think—
Romance possesses!”

8.

The opened window opened wider still.
A small, white hand pulled up the windowshade.
A lovely figure stepped across the sill,
Wearing a dressing gown of worn brocade
And negligée of white silk with a frill
For collar. Like a forest nymph afraid
Of Pan’s rough hands, she moved to ascertain
Who sang, and thus belied studied disdain.

9.

Then Johnny spun triumphant on his band
And tossed a sheaf of bills to the conductor,
Who caught them deftly in his free left hand,
Counted them quickly, like a good instructor
Paid his musicians with a manner grand
(But kept the usual tip maestros deduct or
Expect up front), and gestured for a forte,
Which Johnny cut short to pursue his sortie.

“Angélique! Angélique!
Your eyes deny the ice your lips profess.
Angélique! Angélique!
Your business No must yield to my Love’s Yes!

“Cold as you are,
Do not forget,
Love is an art
Distant from earning.

“No more guitar!
No string quartet!
Only my heart
Singing its yearning!”

10.

As the reluctant iron must draw near
The magnet; as torn scraps of paper dance
To static electricity; as clear
Spring water sinks ’neath oil; as dissonance
Resolves to harmony; as the austere
Dies or explodes into extravagance;
This woman-child, despairing at her fall,
Drew near, danced, sank, resolved, burst to Love’s call.

11.

But she, indomitable, set her jaw,
Determined not to fall without a fight.
Her mother taught her, “Never show men awe,
Whatever you may feel,” and she was right.
So, as the rat of love began to gnaw
Her heart, Angélique bit down her thrill—of fright—
And, with an air that would have pleased Boudu
(But not have fooled him), stated, “Oh. It’s you.”

12.

“Angel of Light!” John sang to her with fervor,
And, “Oh, my love!”—that frequent, fatal word.
“Don’t start that,” Angélique told her unnerved.
She turned from him. “You think I haven’t heard
Of you, Monsieur le Beau? Each summons-server,
Each postal notice board, each cop’s averred
That you should be condemned to deportation.
Johnny le Beau, *you* have a reputation!”

13.

John cried, “You rip my heart to ragged pieces
With your cruel coldness—” Angélique said, “Stop!
Poetic metaphor only increases
My loathing for you. Go, before I drop
A pisspot on your head.” “Your voice releases
A fall of flowers on me—” “I’ll call a cop
If you don’t leave this instant! All this frilly
Talk’s wasted. It’s embarrassing. It’s silly!”

14.

“Silly!” John moaned in agony of soul.
“It’s silly then to love? Embarrassing
To see a lovely woman and extol
Her beauty as God’s breath on earth? To bring
Her proper sacrifice—my heart, my whole
Desire, hope, life, love—all my everything?
If you say life is as you’ve diagrammed
In your speech, I confess it: I am damned.”

15.

"I'm sure you are." Angélique turned, rather breathless,
As Johnny spoke and then began to climb
To where she stood. "My love, my love is deathless,
Immortalized in your soul, old as time.
I call your name, and sweet love answers with less
Than merest whisper, 'Here is the Sublime.'
Angélique! Angélique! I'll sing your name lifelong
Until the birds have made your name their song!"

16.

"Your name's a fanfare for assembled brass,
Announcing loveliness before you come.
Your name's a melody from flutes of glass,
The secret beat of pulse's secret drum.
But music ... what is music? You surpass
All mortal music. Heaven's choir stands dumb
Before your beauty, dares not sing or speak
That wild word, that hymn, your name: Angélique."

17.

At that she turned and saw him on the wall,
Clutching at crumbling mortar like a fly.
Involuntarily she cried, "You'll fall!
And grabbed him tightly, helped to haul him high.
John slyly seized the chance to steal a small
Embrace, which she deemed proper to deny:
She pushed him hard away and knocked him flat,
Then crossed her arms and ordered, "None of that!"

18.

“Don’t torture me so! I can bear the whip
More easily, more lightly than your frown.”
John fell to his knees. “Pretty workmanship,”
She said. “How many women have gone down
To those nice words?” John answered, “From my lip
To your sweet ear each adjective, each noun,
Each syllable of praise you blast with scorn
Is purified and comes to you newborn.”

19.

But Angélique slapped back his hand. “You sound
Like some poor hero in a treacly play.
And yet, a handsome hero ...” She spun round
And started off, but Johnny whispered, “Stay.”
She paused. And, pausing, in that moment’s bound,
Though lost at the first word she’d heard him say,
She knew now she was lost, and said “Amen”;
And losing herself, found her soul again.

20.

“You frighten me. You are too high for me,”
John said. “I am deep shadow to your sun.
I cower, tremble; fear, yet pray to see
Your light blaze high to vanquish me. I run,
Then fall, a suppliant on bended knee,
And wait for your destroying benison,
Wait for your burning hand to fall, wait to
Be swallowed up in the bright heat of you.”

21.

“You *do* sound like a hero in a play,”

She murmured fearfully. John stepped up close,
But Angélique, bewildered, moved away

And did her best to not hear his verbose,
Extravagant, but sincere résumé

Of all her charms. But though too grandiose,
Like Mesmer’s magnet-rods his words entranced her,
And powerless she followed where he danced her.

22.

John whispered softly, hotly in her ear,

“Speech ... speech is far too poor to glorify.
Mere song is not enough for you to hear!

I would bring choirs and orchestras, supply
The greatest dancers in this mortal sphere,

Place them upon a stage and raise them high
By thousands of balloons red as your cheek
'Bove earth to sing, play, dance your name, Angélique.

23.

“But with that stratospheric ballet corps,

That orchestra and choir composed of nations,
That finest hymn that ever troubadour

Wrote for his lady love, these protestations,
I still would weep my failure and cry ‘More!

Let heaven shake with her name’s reverberations!
My love, forgive—that paltry masque above
Is naught to what I’d offer to my love.”

24.

A woman, though a woman, is still human,
And weakness is the lot of every mortal.
Remember, when besieged by false or true man,
If heart proves more than mere conflux aortal,
Lay there no blame; if she seeks with a new man
To drive the old out—well, the heart's a portal,
As every old philosopher agrees,
Which opens almost any way we please.

25.

“But this is vain,” John said, campaign well planned,
“The only poetry worthy you is this:
The warm caressing of a lover's hand,
The heady perfume of a lover's kiss,
A kiss that dares not broach that lotus-land,
The lips, those lips, your lips, the gates of bliss,
Whose scarlet pales the setting sun's own flame,
Makes Aphrodite blush with jealous shame.”

26.

“Oh ...” Angélique swooned. Then with stern resistance
She shook her head to clear her muddled thoughts.
As if to help, there echoed in the distance
A siren; in a moment other blots
On the romantic ambience lent assistance:
A car horn; thunder like ten juggernauts
From barroom brawls; a drunken laugh; the stench
Of fresh-spilled piss, peculiarly French.

27.

"No, stop!" she cried with freshly braced resolve.

"I will not hear another gorgeous word!"

"My love, my—" But before she could dissolve

In a new flood of certainly absurd

But charming blandishments, or he involve

Himself in forced allusions to a bird,

She said, "It's frightening, but you seem to mean

These lovely words that should be mere routine."

28.

"I do! I mean them all!" Johnny declared.

"Each word is gospel in my new religion."

"But it's not right!" she wept, quite unprepared

For this response. "You shouldn't mean a smidgen.

You say them all to everyone!" John stared

With wounded eyes and said, "My dove, my pigeon—"

"No, no, no, no! Oh! I could credit it

More gladly if you were a hypocrite!"

29.

"Don't think what other women might have been.

For years I've been asleep; now I awake.

I wake and, seeing you, forget again

My dreams. You are to me all my dreams make.

You are my prayer, and also my amen.

You are the victory I'd undertake.

You are all sight, all sound, all hope, all light,

All my desire—and you fill me with fright.

30.

“Beside your brilliance, sunlight is a ghost.
You fill me, overflow, and I lie drowned
In you. You are the ocean to my coast,
Breath to my body, heaven to my ground.
I see you there, and in my innermost
Heart’s soul I tremble, too amazed, too bound
By your eyes, by your cheek, by your tear’s jewel
To seek for safety from a love so cruel.

31.

“A love which might abuse, mock, or betray;
Might ask my life, and gladly I’d lie dead.
A love which warns me, go, and yet I stay;
Which drives me back, and yet I spring ahead.
A unicorn, I want to run away,
But, fascinated, I will lay my head,
Sweetly unknowing, sweetly trusting, too,
In your lap, and give myself up to you.”

32.

And Angélique, lost, loving, said, “Oh, god,
Is this then love, in this place, now, for me?
Is this what I have jeered at, what I’ve trod
Beneath my foot as so much lunacy?
Is this what I’ve so feared? Is this the rod
To tame me, make me slave? Is this love?” He
Seized her and held her tight to still her can’ts.
“Yes, this is love, and more than love: Romance!”

33.

“No!” Angélique breathed. “Please! I beg you, please!
I *cannot* love!” She gasped and fell, and wept.
Then Johnny, weeping, said, “You can love. These
Tears prove your lover’s fearful heart. Accept
Mine as blood pact. Say yes!” “No!” “Ecstasies
Await! Say yes!” “No!” No more words! He swept
Her up in his arms and stole his success—
She clutched him feverishly and shrieked, “Yes!”

34.

Her Yes rang louder than a peal of thunder.
It shook the walls and burst the window glass.
For miles around bourgeois eyes stared in wonder
At this first breach of their close-guarded class.
That small word of acceptance burst asunder
The great You Shall Not which the moneyed mass
Held as its grimmest weapon and worst woe,
Demolishing their life-denying No.

35.

Her Yes denied, destroyed the politician
And all his chilly pillar of chill laws
(To them denial is decomposition);
Toppled the myth of shame that gives life pause;
Ignored and so upset gossip’s suspicions;
Annulled the dread whereby society draws
Its strength to reign by ignorance and strife.
It said, “Your rule is Death, but I am Life!”

36.

“Yes!” And they kissed—they kissed as bride and groom
 (And orchestras should have contributed)
As Johnny carried her into her room
 And lowered her upon their marriage bed,
Cast back stained linen sheets in a white spume—
 Then Angélique trembled and bowed her head
And said to him, “You’ll hurt me soon, won’t you?”
But John said, “Only if you want me to.”

37.

Now, reader, though this canto’s rather short,
 To imitate the cinematic fade-out
I think it’s best to pause in our report,
 Lest someone call the censorship brigade out.
Besides, though critics of a certain sort
 Like sex in books, I feel that topic’s played out.
And who can write its magic? I am sure
Sex doesn’t translate well to literature.

38.

I am a firm believer that the reader,
 Unlike the movie-goer, should expect
To think, and see the author as a leader
 Who guides him to fine scenes but, circumspect,
Steps back and, with some hints as a preceder,
 Allows his guest to savor the effect
Without intrusive words and punctuation,
By exercise of his imagination.

So let us draw a curtain o'er a scene
 No poet has the verbal art to paint.
If you've a healthy past, you may convene
 Some lovely memories; if not, you mayn't.
Our Angélique has waited long to glean
 The ripe fruits of true love without complaint,
And John deserves his hour or two of joy;
For danger lurks near our fair, blue-eyed boy.

CANTO IV

1.

Yes, danger! For in that same street, right there
At that same moment (or an hour later),
The Bienseance brood, Geneviève and Valère,
Came searching for the killer of their pater!
They sought to wreak dire vengeance for their père
And bring to justice his abbreviator,
And Geneviève, like a Gallic Sherlock Holmes,
Had tracked him to these low-class catacombs.

2.

Yet not like that cold sleuth at all: for passion
Made Geneviève a bloodhound, not cool reason;
A passion even in that time out of fashion,
To business-minded men a kind of treason.
But Geneviève, fists and jaw and mind clenched, ashen
In complexion, resolved to put the squeeze on
Her errant lover, outclassed all detectives
And made Holmes look the feeblest of defectives.

3.

For clues she had a cast-off ticket stub
 That named Paris as some old destination,
A cigar butt descried beneath a shrub
 (Its foreign stink brought on asphyxiation),
And a small, crushed matchbox that named a club
 And gave its address in a foul location.
With these three clues and shrewd analysis
She'd traced him to the French metropolis.

4.

But poor Valère seemed less enthusiastic,
 For twenty sleepless hours had dulled his sense
Of filial duty; and with the bombastic
 Hysterics of his sister's vehemence,
He felt done in. But Valère was elastic
 (It was his happiest fault): obedience
Had been crammed in his cranium since birth
And made him what he was—for what that's worth.

5.

But still Valère had in him some small spark
 Of independent spirit, and he muttered,
Gazing about into the verminous dark,
 “My God, this is a shabby spot. How cluttered
They keep their curbstones hereabouts. But hark!
 Was that a shot? Geneviève! Come back!” he stuttered,
And raced to where she waited with contempt.
He smiled for truce, but she squelched the attempt.

6.

“Pathetic lump of cowardice!” she raved.

“You haven’t done a single bit of good!
Your lack of masculinity’s depraved.

You don’t care for my ravaged maidenhood!
Just wait—you’ll find the road to hell is paved
With bones of heartless brothers who just stood
Around with hands in pockets while their sisters
Saw their good names popped like so many blisters!

7.

“I am ashamed to find you such a waste—”

“—your dragging me all over France half-dressed—”
“—no manly pride, you stand there liver-faced—”

“‘Manly’ this! ‘Manly’ that! You are obsessed!”
“I have to find the clues, take charge! Disgraced—”

“Yes, I’m a total loss, and you’re a blessed
Vidocq, and Juve, and Attila the Hun,
And Virgin Mary rolled up into one!”

8.

And so they bickered with hard sibling hate,
Discovering one of the secret rules
Of vengeance (they did not articulate
It, though): whenever blood-related fools
Hunt justice down, they think revenge is great;
But later, when their righteous blood-lust cools,
They’ll find a blot on the fun vengeance gives—
They’ve learned too much about their relatives.

9.

Geneviève turned from her brother with disdain.

“I won’t waste time in empty arguments.
You’ve been complaining since we left the train,
And I won’t have it! Haven’t the events
Of last night penetrated to your brain?”

Valère spoke not a word in his defense,
But, peering sadly round the habitat,
He found a clean spot on the curb, and sat.

10.

“Get up!” she cried. “The trail is growing cold!”

“I’m sorry,” sighed he, “but it’s just no use.
I couldn’t move a step for bags of gold.

Trains, taxis, tramping ... can’t we call a truce
For one night’s sleep? My God, we must have strolled

Through every alley, searched through every sluice
And sewer in Paris. And now my shin
Is cramping! Sorry, sister ... I’m done in.”

11.

“No wonder Papa loathed you,” she began.

But Valère said, “Go on, insult away.
I’m much too tired to care.” “You’re not a man!”

Geneviève spat. “Often I’ve heard Papa say
He wished you had just half of my élan.

That you had no more spine than a soufflé!”
“Rant on,” he said. “You can’t get me depressed,
I’m too exhausted. Please, I need to rest!”

12.

“Well, hurry up!” Geneviève demanded. “Sure,”
Valère said softly. “Hurry up and rest.
You’re all heart, sister. A man can endure
Only so much, you know. The doughtiest
Detective on a case will feel the lure
Of a soft bed. Why, I’m not even dressed!
You didn’t even give me time for that,
But dragged me off without my coat or hat.”

13.

“Ha!” Geneviève snorted. “You and your attire.
That’s all that’s ever touched your flabby heart!
Your sister’s honor cast into the mire
And trodden underfoot by some upstart;
God, even worse, the murder of your sire,
Struck down by monstrous villain’s monstrous dart.
But are you moved? No! Unmoved as Stonehenge!
You’d hide, forget these crimes demand revenge.”

14.

“And why not leave such things to the police?”
Valère responded. “That’s what they are for.
That is their area of expertise.
I really think that they are suited more
Than we are for the job. Then we could cease
This endless, fruitless quest from door to door:
It’s waste of energy. It’s time you saw
The truth, and hand this matter to the law.”

15.

“The law!” she hissed. “You traitor! Does ice water
Flow through your narrow veins? Aren’t you ashamed?
Your father murdered in cold blood, his daughter
Defiled, raped, ruined!” Geneviève exclaimed.
“Do you not hunger for avenging slaughter?
How can you think of rest before we’ve claimed
That scoundrel’s life in payment for our woes?”
But Valère had slipped off into a doze.

16.

Then Geneviève slapped him hard. “Wake up, Valère!
Wake up!” But, overcome, she crumpled, sobbing.
The chase, conflicting passions, rage, despair,
Fatigue had caught her of a sudden, robbing
Her of her stern strength. “Shirred eggs with Gruyère,”
Valère said, waking to his sibling’s throbbing,
Resounding groans. He sighed. “Oh. I was dreaming
We were at home, and Cook had sweet rolls steaming.”

17.

Geneviève slapped off her tears. “If you were not
My brother, I would drown you like a kitten.
But we’re born of one womb—no matter what,
I will submit myself to the unwritten
Commands of kinship, and I will allot
This precious time to see you conscience-smitten.
By hook or crook, by pity, pride, or pelf,
I *will* make you a man, despite yourself!”

18.

“Geneviève, I’m sorry, that’s not what I want.
You do not understand. I’m not complaining—
I don’t myself. Sometimes I am a font
Of power, and then other times I’m raining
Stupidity and weakness. Now I flaunt
My pride like Alexander, now I’m spraining
That pride. I am a cock one minute, then
Without a bit of warning I’m a hen.”

19.

Geneviève turned from him in confusion. “Oh,
Stop talking nonsense.” But Valère said, “Please,
It’s not nonsense. Or maybe ... I don’t know.
Don’t look that way, I don’t intend to tease.
You think I like this being tugged to and fro
And blown about by every vagrant breeze?
A prey to each authoritative voice
That tells me sternly that I have no choice?”

20.

“Are you through resting?” Geneviève said. “Not quite.
Oh, Geneviève, please! Please try to understand!
What I want—what I hope for—isn’t right,
In your opinion, isn’t what you planned
For me; but it is just as real, despite
What you think, as whatever you’d demand.
Perhaps more real than any goals you’d set—
Because I know it’s what I’ll never get.”

21.

“You idiot,” she grunted. “Twenty-five
Years old and still a baby. I will try
To make it simple for you. To survive,
Know this: the world’s the world. No alibi
Will save you from that fact. If you would thrive,
Be strong and conquer; but if you would die,
Be weak, and every strong man that you meet’ll
Crush you beneath his boot like a poor beetle.

22.

“If you would die, be weak and meekly follow;
If you are strong, bend others to your will.
You talk of hopes and dreams—all dreams are hollow!
Weak people have no right to dream! Until
You get this through your head you’ll simply wallow
In murky dreaming like an imbecile:
The strong don’t dream—they think, they plan, they deal
And make what you would only dream be real!”

23.

Valère blushed. “But my dreams are such small ones.
I gave up all the big, grand dreams long since,
There wasn’t room at home with Papa’s guns,
Bankbooks, and trophies, all your plush and chintz.”
He brightened. “But now Papa’s orisons
Are said, there might be space beneath the prints
For my dreams. They might even grow a bit.
At any rate, I want that chance. I quit!”

24.

Resolved, he stood to go. But Geneviève leaped
And caught him. "Bowelless beast! Unnatural child!
God, think of all the scorn that will be heaped
Upon your head!" He shrugged her off and smiled.
"I don't care. Shame's my middle name. You've reaped
What you have sown, dear." Geneviève, driven wild,
Shrieked, "Brother! On his bleeding corpse we both
Before the servants swore a dreadful oath!"

25.

"I will admit the drama was contagious
And I was caught up in your histrionics.
I always have been drawn to the courageous
Stage hero's antics—they act just like tonics
On me. But in real life they're just outrageous
And don't fit with your 'life is life' mnemonics.
Let's face it—you've picked the wrong albatross.
To find one man in Paris is imposs—"

26.

"Ssh!" Geneviève's ears perked like a German shepherd's
At sound of distant whistling drawing near.
Her eyes contracted to slits, like a leopard's—
A figure, short and plump, reeking of beer,
Climbed from a gray Phaeton while singing "Peppered's
My Gin and So's My Love." She checked a cheer
And said, "Fate makes your taunts a laughing-stock!
It's him!" A bell rang half-past twelve o'clock.

27.

"*That's* him?" Valère asked with ill-hid disgust.

"Not *him*! Be silent!" Geneviève hissed, and pulled Valère into a sheltering doorway just

As that full figure drew near, senses lulled
By Marcel's potent liquors. Valère thrust

His nose out of the shadows. "You've been gulled,
Dear," he said. "That one hasn't got the shape
To scale a wall and still have wind to rape."

28.

She slapped him. Boudu stopped short at the sound.

Yes, it was Boudu, drunk but punctual.
He stopped, then sighed—such sounds as slaps abound

In those low Paris streets. "The farcical
Effects of love," he chuckled. "Let's see, 'round

Here somewhere ... 27 ... Typical.
No numbers on the doors. I'll have to trace
Some barkeep who can help me find the place."

29.

He turned and barely missed a scuttling form

That tripped into the very shadowed door
Where Geneviève and Valère were hid. A swarm

Of muffled grunts and groans arose as poor
Valère fell awkwardly beneath the warm

And onioned breath of this new visitor—
One who betrayed by her fierce dragon's eye
The manic, vengeful Magda Barinkay!

30.

Boudu turned, puzzled by this novel din,
And stumbled forward two steps for a peek,
When suddenly, above them and within,
There came a fearful, wild, and female shriek.
Boudu smiled, checked his watch, and scratched his chin.
“That gives me twenty minutes. Now to seek
That bar.” He marked the building which he knew
Now was his 27, and withdrew.

31.

But that same bellow that to Boudu meant
A respite dragged Geneviève and Magda from
Their door like cannon-shot: its odd accent,
So fearfully familiar, dropped a bomb
On their astonished senses eloquent
As any tried and tested axiom.
And quick as intuition’s chill could smother,
They glared, enlightened, shocked, at one another.

32.

“Madame!” they each said simultaneously,
And, “You—?” as horror overwhelmed their brains.
Geneviève gave vent to an apostrophe
That stupefied all with its harsh refrains,
While Magda, rapt in pagan *jeu d’esprit*,
Stood silent like that famous Scottish thane’s
Ambitious dame envisioning a throne.
Valérè, bewildered, shrugged and stood alone.

33.

There's no such thing as mere coincidence,
According to Karl Jung and his converts.
And Niels Bohr, too, was building a defense
About this time with other such experts
To show there's no such thing as common sense.
Not to digress too much, say Nature flirts
With Man's advanced opinion of his power
By purposefully turning his plans sour.

34.

For at this very moment in our story
Monsieur Colbert, his evening's pleasures done,
Heaved into sight (scarcely ambulatory,
Having consumed at Robert's fête a tun
Of wine while eating chicken cacciatore
And praising his host's young phenomenon—
A girl whose talk commanded aggravation;
But from behind she was pure fascination).

35.

Colbert, with tipsy steps, approached the door
Where Geneviève, Magda, and Valère stood frozen.
He fumbled for his keys and hummed a poor
Parisian ballad of a love ill-chosen,
Aimed, key triumphantly discovered, for
The tiny target lock, but rammed his nose in
The back of Magda's head. With drunken wit
He bowed and tried to make out what he'd hit.

36.

“Pardon, madame,” he said, “or is it sir?
I didn’t see you standing in the dark.
I have mistook my door, I see. There were
A few too many toasts at our late lark.”
He focused then, but stumbled back at her
Expression, wild-eyed, wilder-haired, and stark
With rage mingled with something shrewdly meek.
Just then, from up above, another shriek.

37.

Colbert, confused, looked upward. “Angélique?”
He hadn’t heard her scream that way in ages.
Once on a time, of course, before the weak
Dilution of their love by minute stages,
He’d forced such noises from her with unique
Techniques cribbed from the *Kama Sutra*’s pages.
He hadn’t really noticed his love’s failing
Until now, hearing her ecstatic wailing.

38.

Magda took all in with a psychic glance;
Her fierce expression changed to fawning unction.
“Sir, you live here?” she asked. Another chance
Squeal from above confirmed passion’s conjunction.
Magda, unflappable, broke through his trance
Of bland bewilderment without compunction.
“Sir, do you live here?” she repeated, grasping
His right arm with a grip that left him gasping.

39.

“What?” Colbert witlessly said. “Who are you?”

“I ask again, sir: is this where you live?”

Magda did not let go. “What’s that to do

With you, madame?” Colbert’s superlative
Sangfroid once more took over, and he threw

Her clutching claw off. “Sir,” she said, “forgive
My asking after such a private fact.

There is grim purpose in my every act.”

40.

Colbert was shaken by her Orphic style.

“I live here, yes.” “But not alone, I think,”

She said with something like a leering smile,

And then gave a distinctly nasty wink.

Colbert would have protested, but meanwhile

The loud, impassioned, ceaseless, rhythmic clink
Of bouncing iron bedsprings all about him
Betrayed what Angélique was doing without him.

41.

“You see?” Magda relentlessly pursued,

“My business *is* indeed your business. Try
To follow me: up there, where all those rude

And irreligious noises come from, my
Dear errant husband, one of Satan’s brood,

Is acting like the hell-born incubi
With your own ladyfriend. My crown of thorns
Is fitting you with a fine set of horns!”

42.

Geneviève, who had been silent, spoke at last.

“Madame, you say your husband. Quick! His name!”

“His name?” said Magda. “I gladly broadcast

The best-known alias of one whose fame

Has been my ruin. The iconoclast

Is called ... Johnny le Beau!” “Le Beau!” “The same.”

“Your mate!” Geneviève cried. “That’s what you’re confessing?”

“In everything but Mother Church’s blessing.”

43.

“Aha!” Geneviève exclaimed in a smug tone.

“Just as I thought: the manner you assume

Is all show. You’re no threat: the rose full blown

Cannot compare to one in its first bloom.”

She laughed like an hysteric saxophone.

“Begone before your runaway bridegroom

Appears to put the lie to all you’ve told.

I have the heart you clearly could not hold!”

44.

Magda, astonished and infuriated,

Made noises like a raging Romanov

(The sorts of curses best left untranslated

And set to airs by Rimsky-Korsakov).

She said, “Though our love was unconsecrated,

He has not cast Magda Barinkay off.

I don’t see any golden wedding ring

On *you* to show he’s done the decent thing.”

45.

This cruel—but factual—statement brought fresh tears
To Geneviève's eyes, dimming their scarlet flames.
“Madame,” she countered, “all your jealous jeers
Cannot support your mad, fantastic claims.
A man who runs away for miles and years
Will not succumb to crazy, mustached dames
Who think a kindly smile and pitying nod
Are vows of matrimony before God!”

46.

Magda took arms. “You filthy-mouthed French bitch!”
“Hungarian whore!” Geneviève cried. “I’ll rip out
Your hennaed hair by its black roots!” “I’ll pitch
Your satin-pantied butt into the spout
That empties hell’s toilet!” The ladies’ rich
Vocabularies left but little doubt
There soon would be a violent two-girl riot.
Colbert, however, dazed, shouted, “Be quiet!”

47.

The raging women turned in unison,
Twin basilisks prepared to smite him dead.
He paled but bravely spluttered, “Will someone
Please tell me what is going on? My head
Is spinning! Who are you? What’s being done
To my own Angélique? Speak up!” he said.
Ere any could an answer to him make,
A twin, ecstatic cry made windows shake.

48.

“Is it not clear what’s happening?” Magda smirked.
“I’ll kill him!” Colbert roared as if he’d smash in.
A sudden fit of violent twitching jerked
His left eye up in frightening manic fashion,
His face was purple with hot blood that perked
His ears but left his thin, gabbling lips ashen—
The whole effect could not be put in writing,
But Valère found it all oddly exciting.

49.

Colbert repeated twice, “I’ll kill the man!”
But Magda caught him as he hurried in.
“Wait!” she exclaimed. “I have another plan!”
Geneviève shot forward like a javelin,
“The man belongs to me!” The reader can
Best conjure up Magda’s responsive din.
Colbert, fed up with warring wolverines,
Said, “Someone tell me, please, what all this means!”

50.

Magda drew herself up in rigid grandeur.
“I’m Magda Barinkay, from Budapest.
Two years ago a wild goose-chasing gander,
Johnny le Beau, who robs banks without rest,
Married me—” Geneviève interrupted. “Slander!”
Magda growled on “—and left my loving breast.
Since then I’ve chased this man from pole to pole
To force him to repent and save his soul!”

51.

"I'm Geneviève Bienseance," the same declared,
 "Of Beaujolais, you've heard our name, of course.
Last night this villain, Johnny le Beau, dared
 Defile my innocence with rude, brute force!
In the ensuing tumult this man spared
 No one, but struck our family at its source:
In cold blood, without any show of bother,
This monstrous criminal shot down my father!"

52.

Magda simpered with bland impertinence.
 "Pardon, my dear, but I'm afraid my French
Is not so good. 'Defiled your innocence'?
 Pray tell, what does this mean?" The ugly stench
Of female indignation drowned the sense
 Of all who stood there in that Pigalle trench.
"What does it mean?" said Geneviève. "You wigged ape,
In vulgar language—fit for you—it's rape!"

53.

Then Magda laughed. Geneviève appeared to smother.
 Colbert, to stall the storm, turned to Valère.
"And you, sir, you seem saner than this other,"
 He said. "What part in all this do you bear?"
Valère said, "I'm the injured lady's brother."
 Then, feeling more was needed, added, "There
Is outrage to be remedied, as *she* says,
And so I've come to help pick up the pieces."

54.

Perhaps confusion made him more exposed
 To parts of himself he had never known;
Perhaps the frightful rages that reposed
 Within these women's hearts made him too prone
To yearn towards the candor he supposed
 He saw in Valère's pretty face. Condone
Or damn it as you please, Colbert felt stir
A spark for a him, instead of for a her.

55.

For his own part, Valère was disconcerted
 To be *face à face* with a fantasy:
A tall, dark, handsome man had not averted
 His eyes, embarrassed, from close scrutiny,
But stared right back, almost as if he flirted,
 Did not seem mad or predisposed to flee!
The world became a magic-lantern slide;
Then jealous time pushed magic to one side.

56.

Colbert blinked, then surveyed this vengeful bunch,
 And couldn't form a single thoughtful thought.
"Well, isn't this a pretty picnic lunch?"
 He said, shame-faced with lack of wit. "And what
I am supposed to make of such a crunch
 Of crazy, hare-brained stories I cannot
Imagine." From above another cry
Of lusty pleasure creased the Paris sky.

57.

“This is intolerable!” he huffed, half-choked.

“There’s more, dear sir,” said Magda. “I must say
This John le Beau, he has not only cloaked
Our names in shame. He’s famous for his play
With all females he meets. His name’s invoked
By would-be lovers from Bonn to Bombay.
It’s no chance he is famous as a lover:
He’s bested Casanova’s list twice over.”

58.

“What?” Geneviève whispered. Colbert would have laughed,
But Magda said, heartbrokenly, “I’ve read
The proof.” Her solemn tones could not be chaffed.
A-splutter, “But— But— Oh, come!” Colbert said.
“Last night with you and now with—? This is daft!”
Just then two ululating “Yes!”es sped
From up above like amorous epistles.
Colbert and Valère gave astonished whistles.

59.

The thoughts of our quartet of injured souls
Cannot be drawn complete, but only hinted
(Without Dame Music’s aid and Time’s controls,
The grand sweep of confusion can’t be printed):
Shame, horror, awed respect, the Grand Guignol’s
Peculiar brand of pleasing torture tinted
With purple dashes of eroticism—
Such is their stewing, frozen paroxysm.

60.

Colbert, befuddled yet with spirits' fumes,
 Could scarcely comprehend what had occurred.
Geneviève, whose hopes were now within their tombs,
 Stood dazed and dumb, struck dead by what she'd heard.
Valère, threatened since birth by Geneviève's dooms,
 Yes, almost relished seeing her hopes deterred.
And Magda, stern against the tide of grief,
Took refuge in her usual leitmotif.

61.

"We cannot stand aside and meekly moan
 While this man desecrates all humankind!
For if you think weak women are alone
 His victims, you betray yourselves as blind.
A man who thinks all rules may be o'erthrown
 When they don't suit his whim and twisted mind
Is nothing but an anarchist uncropped.
For his own good, and ours, he must be stopped!"

62.

That dreadful word awoke the deepest fears
 Of those three true and steadfast bourgeoisie.
(Colbert, though criminal from toes to ears,
 Was still and all a businessman, and he
Was middle-class at heart as his compeers)
 And shook them with a proved anxiety.
For anarchist's a term mishandled by
The status quo to mean "You all will die!"

63.

All governments name anarchy a crime
Most heinous among all upon their list,
Because it threatens their rich paradigm
That keeps them fat and cool and prejudiced.
They say Man is a beast born of the slime
Who must be whipped and chained to coexist.
But anarchists declare Man would be good
If given half a chance to prove he could.

64.

“Anarchy” is a word simply explained:
It means a social order with no king,
A way of life where power is disdained
And people work in harmony to bring
About what they desire. This much-profaned,
Abused word has a democratic ring.
If you’re repulsed by butts that must be kissed,
Be warned: you may be called an anarchist!

65.

Perhaps John *was* an anarchist at heart—
God knows he never studied all the “isms.”
He only understood that, for his part,
He could not follow social catechisms.
His soul was built to strain with every art
To be true to itself, accept no schisms.
Because such thinking tends to burst constraints,
Most will place John with devils, few with saints.

66.

Back to our tale. These four were galvanized
To action by the sudden creak of doors.
“He is the devil!” Magda proselytized.
“Are you with me?” They answered her with roars
That hushed to whispers at her hiss. “Disguised
As beggars, or,” she glared at Geneviève, “whores,”
We will surround him. Careful, though. He’s sly.
We must be quick to see he doesn’t fly.”

67.

They crept within the shadows of the door
On tiptoes, like a pack of guilty thieves
Upon the prow for loot. Quickly all four
Readied themselves to catch him. Thus Fate weaves
Her net from pretty ribbons of *l’amour*,
Strong and deceitful as Sleep’s knitted sleeves,
And spreads it on the paths where lovers wander:
A notion everyone in Spring should ponder.

68.

Upstairs, the windows opened and exhaled
The fruity sweet musk of sex-sated flesh.
Despite themselves, the two wronged women quailed
To think they’d see again their lover fresh
From joys denied them. Geneviève would have wailed,
But Magda, like a Mary in a crèche,
Held her. Silent, the four avengers waited
The perfect chance to see John checked and mated.

69.

Into the moonlight Johnny le Beau stepped,
His hat crushed, suitcoat rumpled, tie askew,
And collar open. Valère almost wept
To see how perfectly this impromptu
Toilette enhanced John's beauty; but he kept
Control, aware how shamefully they'd view
Such soft behavior. (He need not have toiled so:
Despite themselves, each of the others boiled so.)

70.

The moonlight made John's handsome face glow like
A white silk lantern filled with a wild flame;
The shadows underneath his eyes might strike
Some as debauchery's medal of its shame,
But connoisseurs would think of a van Dyck,
A Rembrandt, stepping living from its frame.
Comparisons are false: a living heart
Recks not of sin and ridicules mere art.

71.

He smiled, and reached inside, and took the hand
Of Angélique, drew her out with a kiss.
As moonlight made him glorious, so it fanned
Her beauty 'til she rivaled Beatrice
In calm, in holy rapture, in sheer, grand
Fulfillment of herself in perfect bliss.
Sex was the flint, and Johnny was the steel,
But her soul was the fuel that made all real.

72.

Yes, there was more than satisfied desire
In her smile when she looked at him now: Love
Was there. Not that mad, angry, greedy fire
That eats what it would hold; but generous Love,
True love, that only knows itself entire
When what it loves is free: most human Love.
No need, no rage, no fear can move such Love.
No rhyme, no meter can improve such Love.

73.

Johnny looked anxiously into her face
And saw there what he couldn't quite believe—
A pure reflection of his own true grace,
As simple and accepting, and naïve.
He stood apart from her a little space,
Though desperate to leap forward and retrieve
The sweet warmth of her sympathetic soul
That for some fleeting moments made him whole.

74.

"You know I'll have to leave," he said with fear.
"Of course," she said, and passed the unthought test.
"You will not try, my love, to hold me near?"
She smiled and blushed, and took him to her breast.
"I could not hold you any closer, dear.
What we have now is true, and good, and best
Of all the loves there are. And it is mine!"
She cried with wonder. "Such a thing is mine!"

75.

Beneath them, in the darkness, eight eyes blazed
 With jealousy—not just for this bright pair,
But for the love shown possible, which raised
 Foul memories of what they'd never dare.
Such honest love strikes paltry souls amazed
 And shows them all their imperfections bare—
Humiliated by their self-made cage,
They arm their sad selves with blood-thirsty rage.

76.

Shame is the reason: shame to know their lack,
 And shame to be eternally dread's slave.
They dread all feeling, both the lash's crack
 And the full pleasure of love's tidal wave.
Their safety's cowardice—their virtue black
 With lies—only their hatred can be brave.
No joy will they accept for fear of pain:
And these humanity declares as sane!

77.

For a long while the lovers simply stood
 And looked at one another in the glow
Of tender love that dimmed the moonlight, would
 Have stood so till the moon had dipped below
The Paris rooftops, startled by the good
 They'd found together. He studied her so,
She puzzled, smiling, wondering what he'd do.
John laughed and said, "I'm memorizing you."

78.

The perfect peace of two people content,
A small, still island in a jealous sea.
Whatever God, or Fate, or Chance have meant
By all the muck of human history,
This quiet is the goal to which we're bent,
All of us: this strange, simple unity.
Yes, reader, I'm embarrassed by it, too.
But who can honestly deny it's true?

79.

"You're going," Angélique said with a flirt.
"I'm going." Johnny smiled at her small joke.
Secure in love, they now can play with hurt
To tease the certainty that they invoke.
Their newfound faith no doubt could disconcert:
This gospel could not fall to any stroke.
"And now I'm really going," Johnny mused.
He smiled. She smiled. Their bodies still refused.

80.

At last he moved. He kissed her gently, then
He took a step away—not very far.
A heartbeat, then he came to her again.
He kissed her, stepped away—and similar
Gyrations for a quarter hour. When
At last he said a final "Au revoir,"
He climbed the iron balcony rail wholly
And went down, gazing ever upward, slowly.

81.

When John's foot struck the pavement, Magda hissed,
And when he gazed up yet again to sigh
A last "Goodbye!" and when he once more kissed
The air between his love and him, "Goodbye!"
She whispered, "Hurry! or we will have missed
The scheming skunk!" She set her evil eye,
And glared at their entire lack of bustle:
Not one of them could move the smallest muscle.

82.

Frenzied, she leaped to seize her *amour fou*.
"Forgive," she wheezed, "the whinings of a cur,
But please, sir, oh, sir, can't you spare a sou
For one who once knew better days? Oh, sir—"
Geneviève caught the hint quickly. "Oh, sir, you
Will help me?" she said, almost with a purr.
With unexpected acting flair, Valère
Said, "I'm a vet'ran, sir. Please, can you spare—?"

83.

Magda went on: "Give something, sir. You must!"
Geneviève flipped up her skirt like a street belle,
"Come, love, help out a girl?" while Valère thrust
His hand out like a crippled cockleshell.
Colbert looked on with unconcealed disgust
At all their antics, wondering what the hell
They thought that they were doing. "Lunatics!"
He shouted. "That's enough of shabby tricks!"

84.

“Just what,” he quizzed, “were you up to up there?
Yes, up there, fellow! Up there, with my girl?”
Johnny looked round, as suddenly aware
Of where he was, and through the muddy swirl
Of cold reality he saw the pair
Of women who looked more than fit to hurl
Him head o’er heels into the moonlit sky.
“My God!” he said. “It’s Magda Barinkay!”

85.

“Yes!” Magda shouted. “Yes! And you remember!”
She longed to cry, laugh, moan, bay at the moon.
For her, the permanence of cold December
Had finally thawed into the warmth of June.
But Geneviève doused her carefully tended ember.
She said, “And me? Do you forget so soon?”
John fumbled for an apt, yet cool, response,
Then settled for, “Mlle Bienseance.”

86.

The women glared bullets triumphantly
At one another, chins high as their brows.
John, worried, bravely looked around to see
What other nightmares from his past might rouse
To blast his present. Valère cried, “And me!”
John stared at Valère, wondering what carouse
Had introduced this boy into his leisure.
“No, sorry. I don’t think I’ve had the pleasure.”

87.

“Oh, pardon me,” Valère said. “I’m the brother
And son of both the injured parties, sir.”
Johnny smiled sweetly. “Yes, I met your father
Too briefly. But I should have guessed you were
Related to the sweet Geneviève: no other
Could have such eyes. I’ve seen few lovelier.”
Valère, who ne’er before had been thus pelted
With compliments so pretty, promptly melted.

88.

Then, more at ease, Johnny turned to Colbert.
“And you, sir. I believe you had some frets
About my recent whereabouts? It’s fair,
I grant you. I’ve upset your etiquettes
By dropping down upon you from midair.
I won’t insult with verbal pirouettes,
No made-up tales to prove my innocence.”
The air was dense with threat of violence.

89.

“No, lying’s not my way. Geneviève can vouch
For that, I fear.” Geneviève wailed like a banshee
As proof of Johnny’s statement. “I won’t crouch
Behind a tale, Magda can tell you, can’t she?”
Magda said plainly, in Hungarian, “Ouch!”
And fell back as before an avalanche. He
Nodded, shrugged. “Sir, as you plainly see
I love your Angélique, and she loves me.”

90.

Geneviève and Magda fell back, still as death.

Colbert's face went white, then went cherry red.

Valère was puzzled, but he held his breath,

Wondering what revelations lay ahead.

Johnny stood proud as the foredoomed Macbeth,

Prepared to offer up his handsome head,

If need be, for the truth that he had spoken:

For Angélique, a paltry enough token.

91.

Their thoughts are worthy of examination,

But let's adopt a more exciting style.

This is a climax; some elaboration

Might very likely help to reconcile

Complex emotion with versification

(And demonstrate this poet's versatile).

To better know the psychic panorama,

Let us adopt the manner of the drama.

COLBERT

(*Aside.*)

I have to admit, though it does make me wonder,

I'm not as upset as I think I should be.

Has my burning passion been cooled to an ember?

I know I once loved her, but I can't remember ...

Geneviève

(*Aside.*)

Whatever he says, he is certainly lying.

No saint is as honest as he claims to be!

I'll get him apart and, redoubling my ardor,

I *know* he must tumble for me all the harder!

VALÉRIÈ

(Aside.)

Even now, God above! when he stands there before me,
I have a hard time finding hate for this man.
With feelings of guilt I am maddened, distracted.
On top of all this, I admit I'm attracted ...

MAGDA

(Aside.)

The bastard! Dear Heaven, he's not even bashful!
Not one spec of shame for the sins he has sinned!
I *must* win him back into God's congregation.
Jaj, Gott, I could maybe resort to castration?

COLBERT

(Aside.)

For some time with the woman I've been discontented,
But went through the motions quite dutifully.
Yet now at the crisis, to my disbelief,
I can feel no emotion but that of ... relief!

92.

And so on. Just imagine a quartet,
Soprano, mezzo, tenor, baritone,
Singing those mixed emotions of regret,
Religious exaltation, shame, love grown
Quietly stale; with lyrics nicely set,
An over-arching melody full-blown
To soar, and counterpoint that's proper ... ah!
Life could be lived just like an opera.

93.

So Johnny waited, ready to defend
His love against this unbelieving horde.
Colbert, dumbfounded, could not quite transcend
The sneaking apprehension his adored
Was not worth fighting for. But he was penned
About with people wanting Johnny gored:
Thus many souls are hurled into infinity,
Lest someone doubt the hurler's masculinity.

94.

"Apologies, but you give me no choice."
Colbert reached in his jacket and drew out
A Pistole Parabellum—the Rolls-Royce
Of handguns. With a taste like sauerkraut
Puckering his mouth, he uttered, in a voice
As cold and solemn as a pint of stout,
"My honor forces me to murder you.
Make ready to confront, sir, *le bon Dieu*."

95.

Valère felt a wild, swooning, primal thrill
That overcame his natural squeamishness
To think he'd see this handsome stranger kill
This other handsome stranger. Geneviève, less
Excited by the prospect, felt a chill
Unjustified by the night's warm caress.
Magda wept, almost fainted, almost cheered.
At this height of suspense, Boudu appeared.

96.

Boudu, sober Boudu, was, to be blunt,
 A sheet or so past four sheets to the wind.
But when he saw the way his boss's stunt
 Had ended up, with Johnny plainly pinned,
His brain cleared instantly. He gave a grunt,
 Leaped in among them, snorted, guffawed, grinned.
He hollered, "I want women right away,
And tell the whores that I'm prepared to pay!"

97.

Before they could quite understand this bluster,
 Boudu tossed coins by fistfuls in the street
That rang and filled the sewage with bright luster.
 Immediately, on little, snow white feet,
From everywhere, by ones, twos, in a cluster,
 More than a dozen *poules* ran up *tout de suite*.
The courtesans cooed up to every man,
And circled in an impromptu can-can.

98.

Colbert was knocked down, swung up, stroked, and lost
 His gun in the *melée*. Magda was pitched
Into the reeking gutter. White as frost,
 Disgusted and aghast, poor Geneviève twitched
To see her lover Johnny kissed and tossed
 About from whore to whore like candy. Hitched
Between two older, buxom tarts, Valère
Struggled to keep a touch of *savoir faire*.

99.

Lights clicked on in some windows. Neighbors hollered
Rude curses and foul *bravi* at the flap.
A fat young trollop with a slight beard collared
Colbert and gave him a tremendous slap
Across the rump. "Big boy!" she roared, "I follered
You an' I mean t' git you!" With a clap
She knocked Colbert all in a scrambling heap.
Geneviève, Magda, Valère were in as deep.

100.

The neighborhood was now alive with noise.
From all about was heard the gendarmes' whistles.
Galumphing through the alleys came the boys
Out of the bars. They blasted in like missiles,
Fought over breasts and bums and other toys,
And soon the din of crunching bones and gristles
Mixed with the hubbub of slaps, kisses, giggling,
Until the buildings and the street were jiggling.

101.

Boudu could not help laughing at the sight
Of those four bourgeois boobies snared by sluts.
When John spun round again, he grabbed him tight
And yanked him free sans ifs or ands or buts.
John bowed him thanks, then off into the night
They ran, pursued by two small barking mutts.
Up on the balcony, above the brawl,
Was Angélique, who silently watched all.

102.

This canto's been packed full of incident,
Which could cause modern readers some confusion.
Some authors think that plot development
Is quite beneath them. That's a false conclusion.
A book that's only style is like a tent
Without a center pole. The old delusion
That real art must be dull is just a fad.
Catch Dickens saying anything so mad!

103.

Art must reflect life, yes; but so much more—
The cracks of life, where all our living's done
Between the constant doing, are the core
Of storytelling. And without the fun
One finds in well-planned action, books will bore
And scare the readers off ere they've begun.
Profundities are pleasant in small doses,
But it's the hurtling story that engrosses.

104.

Enough. It's time truth and tale made a pause.
Let's give our characters a good night's rest.
They've worked so hard to merit our applause,
They need a little nap to look their best.
I hope I have my cunning writer's claws
In you, and that the outcome can't be guessed.
I'll guide you soon wherever my plot bends
To denouement. Thus this long canto ends.

CANTO V

1.

Before noon, up the Quai de la Rapée,
Between the cyclists and the omnibuses,
A small, dark figure raced along its way,
Ignoring all the usual petty fusses
Of angry taxi drivers, and the sway
Of swollen-bellied businessmen in trusses.
Without even a pause to pick a pocket,
The Nameless sped like the proverbial rocket.

2.

The Avenue Ledru-Pullin was blocked—
He detoured to the Voie Mazas with zeal.
On Quai des Célestins a beggar rocked
And pleaded for a penny towards a meal,
But he laughed. Each shortcut he could concoct,
He took; he almost slipped beneath the wheel
Of a dray cart, but did not pause to worry:
No time for that. The Nameless had to hurry!

3.

He passed the Rue Saint-Martin, then the whole
Théâtre Sarah-Bernhardt's bric-a-brac
And crossed the Pont au Change, paying no toll,
Onto the Ile de la Cité, a black
Scowl on his face—he looked more like a troll
Than like a human child. With one look back
He struck a martyred pose and made his peace.
Then he went in the Palais de Justice.

4.

Le Rat Mort squatted in the morning light,
Cranky and crabbed, like an ill-natured squint.
“I tell you,” Boudu told Marcel, “a night
Of nights! You should have seen the trollops sprint
To catch their prey. No, thanks, I can't get tight.”
He had already had two gins with mint.
“I have to keep my head, friend. Don't forget,
We're not out of the bouillabaisse, not yet.

5.

“Most women wouldn't waste the time to spit,
But these two aren't the type to give up easy.
I guess one must admire their fire and grit,
But no, their crazy passion makes me queasy.
Their lust for retribution's infinite;
It's quite enough to make your heart's blood freeze.” He
Finished his drink and glanced back at the Boss.
“Look at him, like he's nailed up on a cross.”

6.

“You’d think he’d seen his dear old mother hanged,”
Marcel smiled. Boudu growled. “We’ve got to go.
Paris’s too hot for us. I won’t get banged
Up anymore like last night. No, oh no,
His much-too-sensitive heartstrings have twanged
Their final chord. It’s off to Borneo,
Or Timbuktu, or maybe Madagascar.
Or I’ll freeze off his ardor in Alaska.”

7.

Marcel just smiled and nodded in agreement.
Whatever plots he plotted, he kept hid.
He had his notions and ideas, and he meant
To see them through, whatever else he did.
To him the cops’ reward, the gendarmes’ fee meant
Another bundle ’neath his strongbox lid
To keep his old age comfortably lined.
Betrayal to Marcel was peace of mind.

8.

Boudu sat down again where Johnny pouted.
“And here he is, the best of cavaliers,”
Boudu sneered. “Boudu—” “Shut up, Boss. You’ve flouted
All common sense this time. Don’t you have ears?
The talk is all Parisian law is routed
To hunt us, ’cause of Bienseance. The shears
Of Fate are clicking closer to our skein.
You’ll do what *I* say, if you have a brain.”

9.

“Don’t talk to me like I’m some sort of child.”

“I’m talking to you, Boss, like you’re a brat,
Which is just what you are.” John looked up, wild

With rage. “A spoiled brat. I’m no diplomat,
I call it as I see it, Boss. You’ve piled

Your last offense on my back. Tit for tat.
From now on I’m in charge, and you can bet
What’s in my pants don’t give me orders yet!”

10.

“I don’t have time for this,” John said with pride.

“I’ve got to get back—” “Get back? Back to whom?
To last night’s tumble?” “I have had your snide

And cheap talk up to here! Now you presume
To slander her—” He stood. “Put your backside

Back down!” Boudu said. “You don’t leave this room
Till we get this mess settled. Either you
Agree to do what I say, or we’re through!”

11.

Marcel’s ears perked to hear this ultimatum.

Was this the finish of a noble team?
Despite himself, he caught his breath: at bottom

He’d always held the duo in esteem.
And yet he hoped that when the law had caught ’em
At last, he’d be the cat that won the cream.

Contrary notions in one mind aren’t rare.
How many such do *you* hold unaware?

12.

The two old friends and colleagues, silent, glared
At one another; neither would concede.
This stubborn strength was one trait that they shared,
And Boudu knew this was no time to plead.
He knew John's weak spot, and he was prepared
To hit it hard, however it might bleed.
This was no time for gentleness or tact—
Their lives were on the line. He had to act.

13.

"You think that girlie's waiting just for you?
There's ten-year-olds that have more common sense!
Guess who she is. Go on, guess!" said Boudu.
"You'll figure it out, Boss. You're not that dense!
She's Colbert's latest live-in trick, that's who!"
He slammed the insult home with eloquence.
"She's just another hooker from Pigalle.
That's who you fell in love with this time, pal!

14.

"You think last night was all an accident?
That that Bienseance broad just chanced by,
Sightseeing after you killed her old gent
When she bumped into Magda Barinkay?
Why, Magda popped in here after you went.
Next thing, they all show up together. I
Can tell you, this girl who's got you so het up
Rigged up the whole charade! It was a set-up!"

15.

Johnny did not believe this, not at all,
But Boudu's ugly hint had its effect:
A doubt was planted, making him recall
The myriad other women's lies, the wrecked
Hopes he had cherished, the eternal brawl
Of his life. He began to recollect
Love's flights that always crashed in disillusion,
Clear-seeming truths that ended in confusion.

16.

So many women lied, but Angélique ...
How could this love, of all loves, ever fail?
No, she was true. Those lips could never speak
A lie. He knew this. But the bitter gale
Of doubt now whistled in him, and left weak
His certainty. This was no time to quail.
He had to go to her. He had to know
If what Boudu had hinted at was so.

17.

"All right," said Johnny. Boudu gabbled, "What?"
"I said all right. I'm fed up, friend. I'm through.
I haven't got one scheme left, not a thought
Worth thinking. No more dreams. It's up to you."
Boudu's eyes narrowed. "I'll do as I ought.
You lay the plans. You be the boss, Boudu."
"What's this?" Boudu said. "Oh! Some sort of sham, hah?
Grow up, and lose this taste for melodrama!"

18.

“Boudu, you know too well I do not joke.”
He sighed. “We have to run or we will die.
Well, let us run, or die. Whatever stroke
May fall on me, I can no longer try
To care. Do what you will with me.” He spoke
In quiet, even tones. Boudu sat by
And pondered skeptically John’s apathy:
This ennui smacked of some diablerie.

19.

“You’re plotting something,” Boudu said. John frowned.
“Don’t overstep yourself, Boudu,” he warned.
“Don’t overstep—? I thought I heard the sound
Of your own voice confessing that you scorned
To run the show from now on! I’ll be bound
I heard it! ‘Oh, Boudu!’” he mocked, “‘I’ve mourned
The passing of my hopes, it’s all in *your* hands
To save me from these pesky police warrants!’”

20.

“Boudu!” “Spill it!” Boudu snapped. “What’s your scheme?”
John turned red, then pale, then sat silently.
“Boss?” “I could never fool you.” “We’re a team,
And always were. In it together, see?
Come on, cough up. You had yourself a dream
You’d try to run back to your latest she
And leave old, faithful Boudu high and dry,
Now, didn’t you?” Poor Johnny dropped his eye.

21.

There's still a drop of shame in him, at least,
Boudu thought. Johnny said, "Forgive me, friend."
He stared ashamed at his hands as they creased
A scrap of paper. "Boss, you are the end,"
Boudu laughed. "Would you be half the artiste
You are without that queer, peculiar bend
That makes your heart beat funny near a skirt?"
And so they quickly buried one great hurt.

22.

But Boudu saw John's face fall once again
Into a blank and dull portrait of pain.
He tried to sneer, to roll his eyes; but then
The depth of Johnny's suffering struck him plain.
"Boss, please: why can't you be like other men?"
Boudu asked gently. "Please, try to explain.
Why can't you just have fun and then let go?
Please, Johnny. Please. I really want to know."

23.

"All these years, and you still don't understand?"
John fiercely said. "You can't see that Romance
Is not insane, is not a lotus land
For stupid dreamers in a mindless trance?
Romance is simply hope, Boudu. A grand,
Undying hope that maybe there's a chance
That somewhere, somehow in this foul, flat earth,
Something of beauty can be given birth."

24.

John faltered, and he looked away, confused.

“I followed hope. I did. I tried to find
A love that wasn’t only to be used,
A love that freed and didn’t try to bind.
But every love turned grasping, each accused,
Each held, and choked, turned desperate, ugly, blind,
Despairing, dreading to be left alone.
A love cannot be love that tries to own.

25.

“And love was there. But now we have to run.
You say we’ve got to run, or I’ll be jailed.
You see?” he laughed. “God, even when I’ve won,
With what I seek right in my hand, I’ve failed.
Maybe it’s true, what you say—that I’m one
The world sneers at as crazy.” He inhaled.
“Perhaps I’m just a meaningless mistake,
A danger that the world has got to break.

26.

“Last night I thought—oh God, I always think
This time it could be ... but it’s always lies,
And why should she be different? She will wink,
And tease, and in a day or two devise
Some way to grab hold, and I’ll have to slink
Away again.” He rubbed his swollen eyes.
“Why can’t what I am inside ever fit
What happens outside, just a little bit?

27.

“You see?” John said. “You see? Love must be free.

Not free to take and then to run away,
But free to be, and free, too, not to be.

It’s not from love I always run away,
But from its stinking corpse. I have to flee.

I can’t watch that dead thing. I run away.
That desperate clutch that makes the prize a prey ...
I have to run. I have to run away!”

28.

“Oh, Boss. What have you done, Boss?” moaned Boudu.

“You’ve built your life around a masquerade.
No, don’t rage. Please. I understand, I do.

We all know what you want. We all have prayed
For something honest, something real and true.

But don’t you see, Boss? Everyone’s afraid.
We lose so much. We lose ... we lose it all.
Our things, our time, our life, our wanting. All.

29.

“And so we make a mask. We tell a lie

To hide the terror, and say that we *can* hold.
Some people, like the ones we rob, they try

To hold on to their stocks and jewels and gold.
Some hold on to ideals. Most people die

Believing every fool’s tale they’ve been told.
And some, too many, think that love will last,
And do most anything to hold it fast.

30.

“They’re just afraid, Boss. And you come along
And promise them a love they can’t have known,
Because it’s just not possible. You’re strong,
And handsome, and they think, ‘I’m not alone,
And won’t be anymore.’ It’s just plain wrong.”
“It *can* be real!” “No. That’s the mask *you* own.
We’re all scared, so we make a pretty mask.
It keeps us going. That’s not too much to ask.”

31.

Johnny sat with horror in his face.
“If that were true,” he whispered. “If I wear ...”
His hands crept slowly up to interlace
Before his mouth—fingers began to tear
At ears and nose and hair, seeking the space
Between pasteboard and flesh, trying to pare
The false thing off, the beautiful deceit
That covered up the face of rotting meat.

32.

Boudu grabbed hold and pulled his fingers back,
“Boss! Boss! Dear Jesus, Boss!” Cold terror gripped
John’s face with such force that it seemed to wrack
The flesh and bones beneath. Then something slipped,
And Johnny slumped and crumpled, with a lack
Of strength that shattered Boudu’s heart and stripped
Him of his anger, and left only grief
For Johnny’s sole and now destroyed belief.

33.

Had he lived his whole life in fantasy,
Blinded by lies of beauty and of hope?
And trying to make life a rhapsody,
Had he done so much hurt? The misanthrope
At least keeps separate from humanity
And touches no one's life. How could he cope
With knowing, not alone that life was long
And empty, but that he'd done so much wrong?

34.

John closed his eyes, and then smiled with despair.
"And everything I've done, and everything
I am has been a cosmic joke, a rare,
Hilarious joke. I'm only here to bring
A grin to God's gray lips. Why don't I wear
A motley suit instead of pinstripe? String
A band of bells onto my hat and jig
Like every other proper puppet-prig?"

35.

Boudu held Johnny's hands. "Now, Boss, be brave."
"Brave?" Johnny laughed. "Yes, brave to be the same
As everybody else, and to behave,
And wish for nothing more than to be tame.
Oh, that's a life worth working for." A wave
Of loathing rippled over him in shame
At what he was, at what he'd always been.
Just then the Nameless silently crept in.

36.

Boudu's sense of self-preservation sent
A warning signal at the secret look
Between the Nameless and Marcel. He spent
One moment thinking, "No. No?" But a crook
Knows crooks: Boudu knew Marcel's temperament
And, wasting not another second, took
John by the collar, hauled him to his feet,
And dragged him out the back door to the street.

37.

"Hey, where're you fellows going?" Marcel cried.
He gestured to the Nameless, who leaped up
And hissed, "The cops are already outside!"
Marcel spat. "That Boudu is one smart pup.
They'll never catch 'em. Oh, the double-dyed
Black traitor, damn him." He gave a hiccup.
"Well, well, so much for *that* hefty reward.
They didn't set *me* up, and thank the Lord."

38.

Boudu pulled Johnny up the alley, peeked
Around the corner—there were two gendarmes
There waiting. "Thought so," Boudu said. "He squeaked,
The bastard. Come on. They'll sound the alarms
When they find out we're gone." The alley reeked
Of rot and blood and cat piss: all the charms
Of picture-perfect Paris in the summer
Contrived to help the glum feel that much glummer.

39.

Boudu checked east—two cops—and then checked west—

Two more, and others hurrying from the quai.

“That’s half the force, and here come all the rest,”

He grumbled. “Now, there has to be a way ...”

He glanced up, found the answer to his quest:

A window set deep in the wall. “Hurrray!”

He linked his hands. “Come on, Boss. Allez-ooop!”

But Johnny stood immobile in a stoop.

40.

“Boss!” Johnny didn’t look up. “I can’t move,”

He whispered. Boudu had to strain to hear.

“I can’t ...” “Boss, what the hell d’you think you’ll prove

By waiting for the cops to grab your rear

And shove it in the lockup? Come on! You’ve

Got to get going! When we’re in the clear,

If you want to sit fretting, go ahead—

But there’s no time for fretting if you’re *dead!*”

41.

He linked his hands and gave the Boss a boost,

Then hoisted himself, clinging to the bricks.

In three flicks they were in their narrow roost

While cops circled below. “Someday I’ll fix

That cheat, Marcel,” Boudu growled, and unloosed

His necktie. “Phewee!” He gave two sharp kicks,

The glass burst, and they jumped through on the run,

Right on top of two sailors having fun.

42.

“Whoops! Pardon us!” said Boudu. “Passing through!”
He bowed, and then pushed Johnny out the door,
Leaving the startled, naked sailors to
Try to regain the mood they’d had before.
Along the hall Boudu and Johnny flew;
They finally found the stairs to the ground floor,
But heard a bleating whistle down there, proof
The cops were close by. Boudu cried, “The roof!”

43.

And up they went, to where the pigeons rule.
Across the rooftops they began to dash,
Around the skylight of a vestibule,
Up steep, slick tiles, through pools and piles of trash.
“If we get out of this, it’s Istanbul
For me, Boss,” Boudu panted. In a flash
They climbed a chimney, leaped to a pilaster,
Swung up like apes, and ran off all the faster.

44.

And as they ran, it was a funny thing,
But Johnny felt his horrified shame crumble.
His lately empty heart began to sing,
His death-grip on self-pity made a fumble.
His racing feet developed quite a spring.
He even felt his stomach start to rumble
(It had been one full day since Johnny’d eaten),
And, somehow, Johnny felt no longer beaten.

45.

He felt his broken heart pounding within;
He felt his nostrils biting at the breeze;
Electric sparkles danced along his skin;
His feet gripped slick rooftops like claws; his knees
Were well-oiled hinges, gaze a javelin
To pierce the safest path ahead with ease.
The danger thrummed in his veins, rich as honey.
The world seemed once more worth the living. Funny.

46.

Meanwhile, back at Le Rat Mort, Marcel greeted
Colbert and Angélique, Geneviève, Valère,
And Magda Barinkay. When all were seated
(Geneviève aghast at where she was), Colbert
Demanded explanations. "We're defeated,"
Marcel said. "Trap was set up, fair and square,
But they made off. I don't know how they knew it.
They're smart, those two. I knew we'd never do it."

47.

"Incompetent!" Geneviève spat. Angélique sighed.
Colbert heard, and his banker's face grew grim.
"Don't think one minute, Angélique, that I'd
Give up after one try. I *will* get him.
And not for love of you, but out of pride."
She looked down guiltily, but could not dim
The glow that lit her face with pure contentment
(And filled the other ladies with resentment).

48.

“We’re wasting time!” said Magda. “They’re nearby,
No doubt in hiding with some other woman.”
Geneviève snarled hopelessly. “This morning I
Saw two doves crushed by traffic: it’s an omen,”
Said Magda. “He’ll be ours. We must be sly.
Johnny is cunning, and Boudu’s no slow man.
We need a carefully planned subterfuge
To catch this demon lover and his stooge.”

49.

Valère, quite nervous, drummed his fingers, licked
His lips, too often glanced to where Colbert
Stood masterfully presiding. Geneviève kicked
His shin. “Ow!” Valère cried. “Don’t just sit there!”
Geneviève fumed. “Think of something!” Valère picked
A straying thread from his lapel with rare
Impertinence, despite his sister’s glaring;
Then froze when he discovered Colbert staring.

50.

“I know ’em,” said Marcel. “They’ll try to skip.
They’ve got to leave town. You should watch the stations.”
“That’s good,” Colbert mused. “Every train and ship
Will be watched. We’ll set up communications.
He won’t escape again. And then I’ll whip
The villain personally.” “Emasculation’s
The only punishment that would be just,”
Smiled Magda, “once we’ve got him soundly trussed.”

51.

“No!” Geneviève shouted. “He has ruined me,
And I demand some legal satisfaction!”

“What do you mean?” Magda hissed evilly.

“I mean, although I’d like the brute in traction,
That we must wed, to clear his perfidy.”

“I knew it!” Magda screeched, mad with distraction.
“But you can’t have him! He’s meant for the bosom
Of Christ! I’ll slit your throat before I lose him!”

52.

The ladies fly together like two furies.

Valère and Colbert leap into the breach
To pry the two apart. The Nameless scurries
To get the best view, giggling wildly. Each
Is squealing, squawking with her violent flurries,
Until the men have pulled them out of reach.
But Angélique sits silent, self-contained,
So still amid such turmoil, so restrained.

53.

Colbert hurled Magda back into her chair.

“Sometimes you women utterly disgust me!
I can’t conceive why smart, sane men should care
To get involved with any of you. Trust me,
I don’t intend to anymore.” Valère

Thought with surprise, *I thought that it was just me,*
And stared at Colbert with mounting excitement,
As if his fancy needed new incitement.

54.

"I have no interest in your private quirks,"
Sneered Magda. "And what's *that* supposed to mean?"
Colbert said with two strangulated jerks.
"No more!" yelled Magda. "I have never seen
A weaker crew! We need a plan that *works*,
We need it *now*, to snatch that libertine!
How will we find him, huh? How can we catch him!
We have to snare him, or we can't dispatch him!"

55.

They saw the logic of this view, and fell
To serious thinking—all to no avail.
Geneviève was still too furious; Marcel
Was thinking he should order in more ale
Against the evening's business; Magda's spell
Of choler passed, and left her almost frail.
The painful silence weighed so on these folk,
Valère could bear no more, and finally spoke.

56.

"If women are this fellow's handicap,"
He diffidently said, "I'd think we could
Use one of them to sort of bait the trap."
Stone silence. Valère blushed. Then Colbert stood
And crossed his arms behind his back. "That's good.
That's good. We won't send men to hunt this chap:
Instead we'll get ourselves a female force out.
Ha ha!" he laughed. "Marcel! Call all my whores out!"

57.

The Nameless hopped to summon Colbert's corps
Of working girls out of their hidey-holes.
"You're brilliant, sir!" Colbert crowed. "Trust a whore
To catch a John! I'll send them out in shoals,
Cover the streets, the stations. Every door
Will have a doxy by it. My patrols
Will find him. The reward: five hundred francs."
He smiled at Valère warmly and said, "Thanks."

58.

Whatever inhibitions were erected
In Valère's soul were instantly destroyed.
The bourgeois fantasies he had affected
Were done; there was no way he could avoid
The truth now. And if crazed Geneviève suspected,
If any knew, he was too overjoyed,
Too horrified—too much alive to care,
He loved, and loved a man. He loved Colbert.

59.

Colbert's defensive ramparts were more firm,
Built on long years of sexual experience.
He did not crumple, but began to squirm.
(Such latent needs date back to the Assyrians;
Gods, kings, and lords have borne the fickle germ.
See Marlowe, Kyd, and other pre-Shakespearians,
Masters and Johnson, William James, and so on,
If you need antecedent works to go on.)

60.

But Angélique's betrayal and the rush
Of recent doings challenged all he once
Believed himself to be. A raging crush
Of new uncertainties, old fears, affronts
Swept over him: public opinion's slush,
Whose foul smell neither power nor money blunts.
But there Valère sat, handsome and adoring,
And Colbert's fixed convictions lost their mooring.

61.

And Angélique remained in her own world,
Head bowed, eyes downcast, hands demurely folded.
While Colbert recollected himself, hurled
Commands; while Magda cursed, and Geneviève scolded,
She kept her secret joy discreetly curled
Safe in her heart. And there her spirit molded
Itself to fit this new light of her soul:
The knowledge that, at last, had made her whole.

62.

The next few hours were all enormous fluster.
An endless train of prostitutes traipsed in.
Colbert gave each her orders, and then thrust her
Out on the street again. "His discipline,
It stupefies me," Magda said. "To muster
Such forces ... You see? Even filthy sin
Combines to bring this monster to perdition—
Where he will face my private inquisition."

63.

Geneviève fumed quietly, refusing food
Or drink, brushing her skirt obsessively,
Slapping at every speckle that she viewed,
Certain each tickle meant a roach or flea.
She longed for genial solicitude
Of ill-paid servants in full livery.
She wasn't meant for such abomination
And felt that Heaven owed some explanation.

64.

The Nameless and Marcel, meanwhile, conferred
Without the others noticing. Marcel
Could not bear to see poor Johnny interred
In jail now—not unless the reward fell
To him. The Nameless left without a word,
Determined to outstrip each demoiselle,
Find Johnny, warn him of the plot. Then they
Could trap him on some more propitious day.

65.

The last tart left. They set themselves to wait,
But Geneviève said, "If you think I'll sit here
Another minute, you're cracked in the pate!"
She pointed at Marcel. "You. Can you steer
Us to a hotel?" "We've got rooms, first-rate—"
Marcel spied, but she broke in. "You think we're—?"
Colbert said, "Do you think you ought to go?"
Valère said, "One of us should stay, you know."

66.

The two men carefully exchanged no look.

Geneviève, half-crazed with sheer exhaustion, sobbed,
“I don’t know! I can’t think! Valère!” She shook,

Tears started in her eyes, her temples throbbed.

“What should I do?” Valère stood up and took

Her trembling hands. “You go and rest.” He swabbed
Her eyes. “Poor thing. Don’t worry, I’ll stand guard.”

“There’s a hotel right on the boulevard,”

67.

Colbert cooed helpfully. “That’s right, you’re right,

I saw it, too,” Valère said. “Looked quite nice.

You get some sleep, Geneviève, you look a fright.

I’ll stay right here, I’ll make that sacrifice.”

“Give them my name, they’ll treat you most polite,”

Colbert said. “And I’ll be there in a trice

The minute we get any sort of news.”

They rushed her out before she could refuse.

68.

They stood there in the doorway close together,

Surprised to find themselves beasts of a kind,

Amazed, but unafraid to find out whether

Their possibilities could be entwined;

Incapable of sneering at a feather

Of different design, and not so blind

To think what is must know no rearranging.

They knew nothing’s alive that is not changing.

69.

Weak, vacillating, Valère'd always thought
 He'd have to take what crumbs life tossed his way.
Strong, always in command, Colbert was not
 Accustomed to not knowing what to say.
But now a miracle: Valère forgot
 To be shy, and Colbert played protégé.
As simply and as easily as that
They built a world, and left the old one flat.

70.

Which left Magda and Angélique alone.
 Magda wished Angélique would show some spirit,
So she could yell and insult, curse and moan;
 But clearly Angélique would never hear it.
She was rapt in her bliss, safe in a zone
 Of peace and joy, so obviously sincere, it
Riled Magda past endurance, struck her speechless,
Unmanned her, and for once she was left preachless.

71.

The hours slouched by. The sun sank toward its nadir.
 The whole of Paris seemed to wait, and watch.
No taxi driver honked; no serenader
 Seduced with song; no drunk cried out for scotch;
No tourist wept; no workman raised a spade or
 Pickaxe to dig; no rake raced to debauch.
And with the population, we must pause,
Ere John draws near to retribution's jaws.

CANTO VI

1.

Paris in 1921 was troubled,
 As now, with all sorts of financial woes.
The unemployment rate had lately doubled,
 The post-war boom had settled to a doze.
And yet the streets of Paris fairly bubbled
 With music; as *poules*, *mecs*, and *gigolos*
Danced to the latest tango, waltz, or foxtrot,
Such tunes as make the grumpiest bourgeois ox trot.

2.

Paris was then a city wild with song:
 Salons and restaurants had orchestras;
The theatres sold out nightly to the throng
 Mad for revues, and operettes, and operas.
The radio had lately come along
 To fill the air with noise, and cinemas
Hired bands to underscore the biographs,
To cue the viewers' tears or gasps or laughs.

3.

Each corner held a moaning balladeer,
 An organ-grinder, or jejune chanteur,
 Each hoping that he might seduce the ear
 Of any passing well-heeled connoisseur.
 There were so many one could scarcely hear
 Oneself think clearly. Every guided tour
 Was set upon by tin-eared virtuosi
 Who begged by warbling off-key ariosi.

4.

A singer stood outside the Gare du Nord
 Accompanying himself with a guitar.
 His voice rasped and his sense of pitch was poor,
 His playing tentative, irregular.
 The people paid no heed, pushed through the door,
 Ignored the singer and his repertoire.
 He only knew two flat chords, more's the pity,
 To sing the following pathetic ditty:

"Romance"

"They met, and suddenly the world was flowers—
 Lilac-scented, rose- and lily-bright.
 She thought him very handsome; he thought her lovely;
 And they made love many times each night.

"They lost track of the time, as lovers will do,
 And autumn turned to winter, turned to spring.
 He thought that he had never been so happy,
 And gladly said yes to her in everything.

"One night his sweetheart told him she was pregnant:
 His love directly withered and grew cold.
 He had resolved to hold on to his freedom.
 Her hand now seemed too fat for him to hold;

“And now her squinty eyes seemed too apparent;
And now her thin lips seemed hard and dry;
And her skin seemed to sprout pimples in a moment,
Right before his unastonished eye.

“‘My love,’ she said, ‘when shall we have the wedding?’
She held his arm so firm he could not run.
‘My love,’ he answered, ‘let’s not be too hasty.
There’s time enough to do what must be done.’

“‘I’m in my fourth month now,’ exclaimed his
sweetheart.
‘Don’t wait too long or there will be bad talk.’
He put his arm around her waist and whispered,
‘The night is fair, my dear. Let’s take a walk.’

“They strolled away from town and found a river
And climbed a cliff where they had once made love.
And as they stood and gazed down at the water,
He took his arm away, and shoved her off.

“She fell full fifty feet. He watched her quietly
As she landed with a thud upon the stone.
Then he walked home again, and found another
sweetheart,
For he could not bear to be too long alone.”

5.

“You hear that, Boss? It’s got a catchy chorus.”
Boudu slapped Johnny on the back. “Come on,
Hat down. We’ve got the whole world searching for us.
Let’s buy our tickets quick and get us gone.
I know you’re a romantic, stubborn Taurus,
But off we go. Now—Zurich? Leipzig? Bonn?
Or we could try the other hemisphere.
Bangkok, Hong Kong ... Tahiti’s nice, I hear.

6.

“Think of it—native girls you’ve never met
Lined up, eager to try the strangers’ kisses.
There’s scorpions and sharks, sure, but I’d bet
The girls could take your mind off python’s hisses.
Enough sarongs can make a guy forget
Murders and loot and marriage-minded misses.
After a trip up through the steamy jungle, oh,
I wouldn’t mind a small, secluded bungalow.”

7.

“Shut up, Boudu,” said Johnny. “Find some place ...
I don’t care where. Some place I’ve never seen.”
He wasn’t thinking of the posse’s chase
That drew too near too quickly. “Some place clean,
Where nothing can remind me of a face
That could have saved me.” Boudu sighed. “Between
The cops and crooks and your dramatics, Boss,
No one can say I haven’t borne my cross.”

8.

Boudu dragged Johnny toward the ticket booths,
Then stopped, stunned, when he saw the lengthy lines.
Right, center, left were crowds of gangly youths,
Mothers with babies, Yankees, Argentines,
Fat priests, thin workers. There are several truths
That may be trusted when all faith resigns:
When *le soleil* makes it *un brasserie*,
Nigh *everybody* wants to leave Paris.

9.

“Ah, *merde*,” muttered Boudu. “We’re out of luck.
So much for quick escapes. You’d think these folks
Would do their traveling early. I could chuck
The whole lot in the Seine. Think I could coax
My way past these provincials? No, we’re stuck.
We’ll have to wait. I wish I had some smokes.”
John said, “I’ll get you some.” Boudu huffed, “No, sir!
You stick with me,” and pulled John even closer.

10.

John kept his eyes fixed firmly on his shoes.
Boudu observed and shook his head. “Well, we’ve
Got time now, anyway, to sing the blues.
But, Boss, instead, why not take this reprieve
To figure out our next move? I could use
A real rest after all this mess. Believe
Me, Boss, after we’re safely out of reach,
I wouldn’t mind a few weeks on the beach.”

11.

John still kept silent, so Boudu kept babbling.
“I think we should head first to Rotterdam ...”
Around them were the crowds of people scrabbling
To make connections “... if we had to scam
To England ...” children wailing, women gabbling,
Men acting tough, or begging—dithyramb
To modern life’s perpetual derangement
And every individual’s estrangement,

12.

An emptiness glossed over with the bustle
 Of millions trying desperately to snatch
 Whatever bauble draws them in the tussle.
 John's jaundiced eye was eager now to catch
 The ugliness, the foolishness, the muscle
 Decayed to mush, the wig that did not match
 The mustache, girdles to contain the belly—
 The species sunk from meat and bone to jelly.

13.

And Johnny now thought this, of course, was true.
Mankind is foul, and I'm the foulest ass.
Just hungry, rutting bastards. We're a stew
Of petty needs and filthy wants, a mass
Of grabbing, selfish spitefulness. This new
 And bitter outlook was the usual pass
 To which depression brings a noble spirit—
 If there is joy, they do not want to hear it.

14.

Such thoughts have driven stronger folks to drink,
 And we should not blame John for his confusion.
 It's not a pleasurable thing, to think
 Calmly and deeply on mankind's delusion
 That good is weak and trembles on the brink
 Of evil constantly—this disillusion
 Transforms conservatives and anarchists
 Into the staunchest type of monarchists.

15.

John's weak philosophy could probe no more
And dwindled into gruff dissatisfaction.
He wasn't used to ordering the roar
Of mind, he was a man more used to action.
Where Wittgenstein, Nietzsche, Descartes might soar
To dizzying heights of beautiful abstraction,
Johnny's philosophy was something fresh,
Grounded entirely upon the flesh.

16.

The flesh was basis for le Beau's pandect,
But he disguised it with high-flying phrases
(The same dichotomy holds, I suspect,
For other thinkers and their various crazes,
The which, as exercise of intellect,
Draw from me nothing but the highest praises);
This fog of high romantic phraseology
Was what gave John his singular psychology.

17.

For if you live for love and what feels good
But then you hide behind high-blown conceits;
Condemn the world for not being as it should
But cram yourself full of its many sweets;
You set yourself up for the likelihood
Your sophist conquests will become defeats.
However slyly you philosophize,
The flesh is honest and will brook no lies.

18.

Speaking of flesh, "I have to use the john,"
Said Johnny. Boudu started to protest,
But John said, "Don't make this a marathon
Of nagging, Boudu." Boudu was distressed,
But nodded. "Okay, but no liaison
Between here and the toilet." Hand on breast,
John swore a solemn oath, bid *au revoir*,
And headed off to the nearest pissoir.

19.

Boudu clamped down foreboding in his heart.
"Keep your hat on and keep your head well down,"
He called. But then he shrugged. "Oh, well, apart
From those schoolgirls and that dame in the gown,
There's not a lot to tempt him. It's a start—
I've got to trust him. Once we're out of town ..."
He turned back to the line stretched out before him,
But indecision and vague fear still tore him.

20.

John finished in the loo, but then stood still.
His mind was limp and weak and was not working.
A fever? But he shivered. He was ill,
He knew that much. He felt the poison lurking
Within him yet, the poison of the shrill
Lies he had held as truths so long, the smirking,
Pale zombies of a false romantic past,
Raised from the tomb by boredom and bombast.

21.

The bankruptcy of modern life appeared
 To him as clearly as this urinal.
He saw romantic fallacies that reared
 A world war up with all its casual
Destruction, unheroic weapons geared
 To murder millions with a clinical
Detachment. If Romance must lead to this,
Then wasn't Romance Life's antithesis?

22.

He saw the trenches scarring the rich fields,
 The bombs that lit the dark with hellish light.
He heard the rhetoric the leader wields
 To gull his people to support the fight.
He saw the bankers counting up the yields
 From sales of gas, and guns, and dynamite,
And coffins. If Romance must lead to this,
Then wasn't Romance Life's antithesis?

23.

But Life's antithesis is Death. Romance
 Must equal Death. John held his head, in pain.
He could not sort out logic from the dance
 Of words that whirled and gibbered in his brain.
Is this why art was ugly, dissonance
 Called music? Why the pointless and insane
Was hailed as poetry? Had all the bad
Been truly good? Or had all men gone mad?

24.

*It is all lies, all lies, he thought. Well, then,
I have to rout them, kill each violation.*
For Johnny was most resolute of men:
Once truth was seen, there was no hesitation.
He could no longer live in falseness when
At last he had been forced to revelation.
So one by one he dragged his lies to light,
Examined them, and put them all to flight.

25.

Here was the lie that beauty could exist—
Begone! The lie that people could be fair—
Begone! That cowardice might be dismissed
By bravery—Begone! That men could care
For one another—Gone! The endless list
Of puerile views demolished by Voltaire
So long ago, but daily resurrected
By weaklings who don't dare live unprotected.

26.

Gone! Cast out! Banished! And in their place—what?
That emptiness is where the canker gnaws.
If there's no heaven or hell; if time's a pot
Of random incidents; if no "because"
Or "why" has meaning; if life is a plot
Enacted without catcalls or applause,
Then why prolong the aimless pretense? Why
Don't we, the unpaid actors, simply die?

27.

That's how all such philosophies conclude:
The cold superiority of death.
And once confirmed in this embittered mood,
It's hard to see why one should still draw breath.
(Savants with existential angst imbued
Still manage to survive, though.) As Macbeth
Declaimed, "Life's but a walking shadow." Tough.
But if Life's all, why isn't Life enough?

28.

Why isn't breathing and its joy enough?
What in us drives us to insist on more?
Why do we denigrate life as a bluff
If there's no God or Heaven or Hell in store?
We howl for something meaningful, we huff
For cosmic consequences, and ignore
Daily delights that little can destroy,
The simple pleasures most of us enjoy.

29.

Bewilderment is the sole state in life
For anyone aspiring to be human.
Who stands convinced immovably is rife
With error, lacking basic acumen.
Who has not contemplated once the knife
To end it all is not, to me, a man.
Our questioning in life is never done.
Of answers to our questions, there are none.

30.

But John was not inclined to change his humor.
When one has slogged to the Slough of Despond,
One wants to wallow in it. Like a tumor,
Despair grows, swells, hungers to go beyond
All natural bounds of reason, hailing doom or
Cosmic catastrophe to correspond
With its own private, picayune distress.
Despair demands all, and will brook no less.

31.

A Hollander broke John's black reverie
By bumping him aside to reach the trough.
He wore a monocle and a goatee
Slimy with memories of beef stroganoff.
He glared at Johnny quite defiantly,
Then uncontrollably began to cough
Till he brought up phlegm brightly specked with red.
John watched this, nodded grimly, turned, and fled.

32.

Back to the aimless crowd outside that milled,
The tourists, travelers, pickpockets, whores,
The listless sea of weary heads that filled
The waiting room, beating against the shores
Of brick and wood. Panic began to build
In Johnny, and he stumbled toward the doors,
Danger, escape forgotten, and Boudu—
Then a small voice said with surprise, "It's you!"

33.

John wheeled and saw a young and lovely girl
Dressed primly in plain muslin, her blonde hair
Put up demurely with a single curl
Escaped to decorate an ear. Aware
Of his shocked stare, she blushed—a pretty whorl
Of crimson that swirled up to stain a pair
Of round, white cheeks. “I—I’m so sorry.” She
Turned in an agony of shame to flee.

34.

“Wait!” Johnny said, and stepped a step too near.
For Johnny, gallantry was stronger than
Despair and pain, no matter how severe.
She was a woman, he was still a man.
She turned back, eyes downcast, then looked up, clear
And brave. Her full lips parted. She began
To speak, then stopped. Her face started to glow
Again. John said, “Excuse me. Do I know—?”

35.

“Oh, no!” she answered quickly. “Mademoiselle?”
He smiled. She smiled. “I mean, we’ve never met.”
“I’m sorry, but you seemed to—” “I can’t tell
You how ashamed I am. I do regret
Accosting you, Monsieur, but I—ah, well,
You *don’t* know me, but I—Oh, please forget
My bothering you!” She smiled again, and he
Was struck by her ingenuous modesty.

36.

“The truth is, I saw you for the first time
Two months ago, and when I saw you then ...
I’m sorry, I’m behaving like—but I’m
Not given to approaching unknown men.
When I first saw you, it was like a chime
Rang through my soul, right through it. And now, when
I saw you, here, so unexpectedly,
I felt that selfsame chime again in me.

37.

“I know it’s foolish! It is criminal
To let one glimpse of some strange man entrance
Me so. I’ve always been so practical.
I never have read novels of romance.
Love at first sight just isn’t natural!”
Once more a blush suffused her countenance.
She gasped, amazed at having said so much.
For John le Beau, this was the crowning touch.

38.

He saw another knew, as he had known,
Had always known, despite his late ordeal,
That there was something true beneath the lone,
Cold, battling world of greed and stone and steel,
Something that seized the heart’s soul as its own,
Taught it to sing and soar and see and feel.
This truth shone in a bashful woman’s eyes,
This truth no shame or censure could disguise.

39.

All his despair and gloom faded and fled,
 Their insubstantiality exposed.
The truth lay here in every word she said,
 In every look her honest eyes disclosed.
And once again his heart awoke and spread
 Through him a music never yet composed,
A music tuned to radiance and light
To banish doubt and pessimism's blight.

40.

This was the answer to philosophy
 And all its constipated contemplation:
Life—breathing, pulsing life's enormity
 Demanding our embrace and adoration.
If Kierkegaard had known such simple glee,
 He would have stopped his gloomy rumination,
And Sartre might not have been nauseated
(A modish mood too often imitated).

41.

He was alive again! He was no goose
 For thinking life could be a thing of pleasure!
Let Schopenhauer and his kind produce
 Acres of bile to fill their wretched leisure,
Here was life like a ripe fruit for man's use
 To fill his cup with sweetness beyond measure.
The world was not a pit of ugliness.
It was a great, resounding, chordal "Yes!"

42.

So Johnny shot from most horrendous deeps
 To dizzy heights with frightening aplomb.
It is the mix of glee and grief that keeps
 The true romantic on his pendulum.
Today we medicate the world in heaps
 To keep the people passive, dull, and dumb,
Painless but joyless, yet ambulatory.
Hysteria was John's weakness, and his glory.

43.

For who would not endure the sharpest pain
 If losing it meant losing joy's keen edge?
When we sedate and medicate the brain,
 Fence in extremes behind a plastic hedge,
We muffle all life's ecstasies and drain
 The flavor from existence. Life's a pledge:
The risk of opening to pleasure's spell
Is that we might allow in hell as well.

44.

And Johnny soared to joy no one may speak—
 It's best expressed by some great wash of song
(Not modern music, pale, prosaic, and weak,
 But good old tunes that make you hum along).
It cleared his mind and strengthened his physique.
 It woke him from depression like a gong.
Thus bleak philosophy found itself shoved
Aside, because a woman said she loved,

45.

Only because a lovely woman seemed
To be romantically inclined as he.
However self-sufficient, we've all dreamed
Of finding our own private lunacy
Affirmed in someone sympathetic, schemed
To sway another soul. (And, naturally,
It's always very soothing to our egos
To find such beautiful, sexy amigos.)

46.

The beautiful amigo stood perplexed
By Johnny's multi-stanzaic abstraction.
He suddenly broke from the trance that hexed
His thoughts, and gazed on her with satisfaction.
He smiled, she smiled, and in this new context
He thought that a most suitable reaction.
"Are you all right?" she asked. "Hmm?" he replied,
With wit that was not quite electrified.

47.

"Are you all right?" she asked again. "All right?"
He sighed, and so with like inanities
These two performed the ancient dance, a sight
To do an old heart good. Diogenes
Would have thrown down his lantern out of spite
On finding Johnny spinning love at ease
Without the least hint of dishonesty.
That grumpy Greek could not bear irony.

48.

And during this, Boudu was growing restive.
Why was the Boss taking so long a while?
This line was barely moving. A congestive
Sensation strangled him with dread. A vile
Old prostitute approached to make suggestive
Remarks. He almost slapped her toothless smile
Off her repulsive face. "There's something brewing,"
He muttered. "What the hell is the Boss doing?"

49.

A scrabbling hand touched his. He spun around
To give the ancient whore a right good belt,
But—no one there! A "Hist!" rose from the ground,
And when he looked down, there the Nameless knelt,
Eyes darting, muscles tensed, prepared to bound
Away at any peril seen or felt.
Boudu jerked back with natural distaste,
Then grabbed the boy and pulled him up posthaste.

50.

"I've got you now, you traitorous, snitching heel!"
The Nameless laughed and easily broke free;
He was as slick as the proverbial eel.
"I'll kill you, ratting on the boss and me!
Come here, you filthy brat! You'll never squeal
On any honest crook again, you'll see!"
The people on the line watched with relief,
Assuming Boudu'd caught a petty thief.

51.

The Nameless danced just outside Boudu's clutches,
 Stomping upon a country farmer's toes
And knocking an old lady off her crutches.
 Boudu kept aiming kicks and slaps and blows,
But could not catch him, no, could not so much as
 Make contact with this Rumpelstiltskin's clothes.
He found this exercise less than enchanting
And saw the Nameless wasn't even panting.

52.

"All right, you walking nest of lice," he wheezed,
 "I'll have to murder you some other day.
What do you want?" The Nameless, much too pleased,
 Let Boudu wait for what he had to say.
He picked his nose, and scuffed his feet, and teased—
 It's clear that torture was the child's *métier*.
At last he spilled the facts of Colbert's plot,
Left Boudu stunned, and took off like a shot.

53.

Boudu looks round him wildly at the swarms
 Of people. Where the devil is le Beau?
That's when, at last, he sees the uniforms
 Dotted throughout the room like nuts in dough.
Oh lord, he thinks, we're heading into storms
 Without a compass. First he has to know
Where Johnny is, and where the nearest exit.
To the pissoir! He rushes in and checks it.

54.

No Boss. Back out into the sweating mob.
How to find one man in so great a crowd?
He grabs at every dandy, every slob;
He quells an urge to call for him aloud.
There has to be some sneaky way to fob
The cops off till he's found the Boss and plowed
Their way to freedom. The gendarmes are gathering.
He has to stop his panicked, mindless blathering.

55.

And Johnny stood with his new love nearby,
But hidden by a most convenient pillar
From the unsympathetic viewer's eye.
Their honeyed banter gradually grew stiller—
The usual blandishments that stupefy
The more pragmatic types. He swore he'd fill her
Ears with sweet verse and symphonies of love.
(See Canto I and Canto III, above.)

56.

He held her hands; she held his still more tightly.
Their perfect concord was self-evident.
A lesser lover might have wondered, rightly,
Just what her instant acquiescence meant,
But, true to form, John wasn't even slightly
Suspicious or perturbed. He was content
To wallow in the bliss of a new passion,
So seldom granted in sufficient ration.

57.

And while he wallowed, minions of the law
 Moved ever closer in a tightening ring.
Boudu ran frantically, and finally saw
 Where Johnny, unawares, was dallying.
He shouted, "Boss! Run!" Then the brouhaha
 Broke: whistles, cries, and screams; John tried to spring
Away, but found his hands still tightly held
By his sweet thing with strength unparalleled.

58.

He looked at her. She looked at him. Her eyes
 Were calculating, sly, and icy cold,
And what he'd thought was truth was only lies,
 And what he'd thought young love was pinched and old.
And so all life that lives on fables dies.
 He did not fight when the gendarme took hold,
Declaiming with his puffed-up pigeon's chest,
"Johnny le Beau, you are under arrest!"

59.

Boudu, across the room, out of the fray,
 Gasped, almost wept to see his buddy trapped.
There was no chance to help. Another day
 Might offer something. Now he must adapt
To harsh reality. He ran away,
 Pushed through the gawking crowd of yokels, slapped
Aside a porter, hit the street, jumped on
A taxi's running board, and snap! was gone.

60.

The cop ran through the charges: murder, fraud,
Theft, breach of promise, rape. A crowd of toughs
Stood by, and at each charge they would applaud.
John held his hands out meekly for the cuffs.
The officer was plainly overawed,
But hid it underneath a bully's bluffs.
He clicked the cuffs on, making sure they'd pinch,
And then he tightened them another inch.

61.

Someone pushed through the crowd. It was Colbert,
With Geneviève and Magda close behind,
And trailing after them, of course, Valère,
Though now he had a cockiness, combined
With a mature, manly, commanding air.
Amazing how even the most maligned
Of weaklings can feel hale, robust, and active,
When once assured he's, after all, attractive.

62.

Magda stood frozen in a paroxysm
Of vengeful faith triumphant, eyes a-bulge,
Jaw clenched, unable to spout one truism
To make John squirm, but ready to indulge
In all the state- and Church-sanctioned sadism
Godly fanaticism could divulge.
She wanted to out-torture Torquemada,
But, paralytic, could accomplish *nada*.

63.

Geneviève could not decide to faint or shriek,
To tear John's eyes out, or to kiss him madly.
She settled for an air of tragic chic
And looked at him reproachfully and sadly.
After all, they had made love within the week,
Though he had afterwards behaved quite badly.
Compared to Magda, it was nice pretension,
But Johnny wasn't paying much attention.

64.

"Well, well, monsieur," Colbert smirked, "what a shame
To see your fine career cut short so soon!
You may have staked some petty claim to fame,
But now you're caught, and *I* can call the tune.
You tried to play Pierrot, but all the same,
You found out Colbert is no Pantaloon.
You'll have time to reflect on all your faults
Before you do your pretty gallows waltz!"

65.

He turned to her who had entrapped our John.
"My dear, you did your work extremely well.
I'll speak to Rouget. He'll put you upon
The stage to please a higher clientele.
Here's payment for your first chaste liaison."
He handed her a purse. Her blue eyes fell
Before John's knowing gaze. She took her pay.
Without a word, she turned and sped away.

66.

Her character is done. She'll not be met
With in this song again. "Unknown Betrayer"
Shall be this figment's only epithet.
She is a supernumerary player,
A necessary walk-on we forget
When her task's finished. A plot-point conveyor.
This girl has done her duty by our story
And exits to bit actors' purgatory.

67.

And yet perhaps in that one line, "Her blue
Eyes fell before John's knowing gaze," we'll find
A teasing touch of reticence: a clue
That she is not so willingly inclined
To play the way the author wants her to.
(That verse did not end quite as I'd designed.)
Perhaps it isn't just a trick of diction
That brings to life the characters in fiction.

68.

"Ah," Colbert sighed. "A cunning little beauty."
Valère squinted and cleared his throat in warning.
Colbert smiled wryly. "Gendarme, do your duty!
I'll be along sometime tomorrow morning
To see the judge and claim my rightful booty."
The cops saluted, led off Johnny scorning
To make a scene or vow to make amends.
And on this bleak note our sixth canto ends.

CANTO VII

1.

The great day came. The city was ablaze—
The master criminal, Johnny le Beau,
Was brought to trial! The summer's long malaise
Would terminate, *pro bono publico*,
When Johnny met his end. To paraphrase
A poet active not too long ago,
“But summer boredom's not the only thing
That's cured by hanging someone from a string.”

2.

His was the most impressive case in years,
More controversial than Dreyfus's.
From every quarter swarmed the buccaneers
Of journalism. From the far Suez,
From Moscow, Roma, Wien, Oslo, Tangiers,
They come to note each word the rascal says.
But Johnny sat immobile in his prison
And did not answer one word to their quizzin'.

3.

The cops knew that this Johnny was a slick one
And kept him under close watch day and night
In case he should escape their bailiwick. One
Policeman was assigned, a neophyte,
Just to keep Johnny's cell-light lit (a quick one,
That gendarme; he kept himself lit, all right).
But Johnny sat immobile in detention
And did not cause the slightest apprehension.

4.

The great legal authorities that ruled
Allowed scant time for advocates to shape
Their cases pro and contra; fears were fueled
By public outcry. Johnny's little scrape
Was now the show for which the public drooled.
This very Lucifer must not escape!
But Johnny sat immobile in his cell,
And, on the whole, behaved himself quite well.

5.

The streets outside the court were blocked to traffic,
Awash with hundreds of the common rabble,
Who formed a sort of cultural demographic,
Suited and ragged, in a common scrabble.
A congregation not, in truth, seraphic,
Though raising up a fine biblical babble.
(Some there were not aware of what was doing,
But stayed because they saw the others queuing.)

6.

Inside, a true *bon ton* colored the pack:
 The court was teeming with celebrities.
 Picasso sat with his *ami*, Georges Bracque;
 Across the aisle were Duchamp and Matisse,
 Philippe Soupault (showing a pleasant lack
 Of dadaistic levity), Juan Gris;
 Pavlova, famed for dancing *Les Sylphides*,
 Was admirably perched with André Gide.

7.

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, off the train from Munich,
 Was deputy for Deutsche expressionists.
 Maurice Ravel, that dapper little eunuch,
 Held court with Paul Dukas. One row consists
 Of Jean Cocteau, dressed in a navy tunic,
 With matelots and other low-class trysts.
 And Madame Sarah Bernhardt, La Divine,
 Had come to see John get the guillotine.

8.

A little further back sat Mistinguett
 With Paul Claudel and Maurice Chevalier.
 The *chanteuse* coaxing a new *chansonette*
 From a bemused and charmed Gabriel Fauré.
 Behind them were Chaliapin and Colette,
 The one so dour, the other *toujours gai*,
 Valiantly forcing some light conversation,
 While Fyodor fumed at missing an ovation.

9.

The Brits have crossed the Channel in great numbers:
 Lord Beaverbrook is noting notables
 To fill the *Evening Standard*. Asquith lumbers
 To his place, ready with his quotables.
 Max Beerbohm slouches peaceful in his slumbers,
 Relaxed by last night's potent potables.
 Young Thomas Beecham, proper and punctilious,
 Is seated with the somber Frederick Delius.

10.

The Slav contingent also made the trek.
 From Russia, that brisk writer, Maxim Gorki,
 Prepared to note the West's decline; the Czech
 Playwright (at this time curiously porky),
 Who's famed for *R.U.R.*, Karel Čapek;
 And with these two, restraining his pet Yorkie
 While trying to keep up the glittering smart talk,
 The virtuoso pianist, Béla Bartók.

11.

With her new husband, on their honeymoon,
 Was film vamp Theda Bara in a fur
 Attempting, to no purpose, to dragoon
 Belasco into making room for her.
 Italo Balbo also seemed immune
 To Theda's charms, but Chaplin took the lure.
 He gallantly shrank smaller than a tuber,
 And Theda sat 'twixt him and Martin Buber.

12.

In the first mezzanine were an array
Of big names feeling slighted: first, Nijinsky,
Red-hot with insult; Raymond Radiguet;
Bespectacled, placid Igor Stravinsky
(Not speaking to Nijinsky); Claude Monet;
And, looking like she'd last performed for Minsky,
(How scandalous in the a.m.) a drunken
And loudly laughing Isadora Duncan.

13.

In the back tier is William Butler Yeats,
Deciding if John fit his occult theories.
Fritz Haber bores his scientific mates
With endless dirty jokes and goofy queries,
While Carl G. Jung impatiently awaits
A chance to make a parallel with Ceres,
The goddess, to refute a new belittler,
Another Carl, Carl Friedrich Georg Spitteler.

14.

And then there were Americans someday
To know fame, *i.e.*, the two music pupils
Of the *professeur* Nadia Boulanger,
A. Copland and V. Thompson (genteel scruples
Forbid more gossip of them); Hemingway,
With Gertrude Stein, *la grande dame*, who quadruples
Each sentence that she speaks for sake of rhythm,
And meager Alice Toklas, of course, with them.

15.

(Some of the names bandied about herein
Will no doubt strike the reader as obscure.
If you feel culturally slow, read in
Your library the standard literature
For biographical accounts. They've been
My solace during many a weary tour
Of research suffered for my fiction's frames.
Where do you think *I* happened on their names?)

16.

In few words, *tout le monde* was in that room,
Packed in like high-toned sardines in a tin,
Along with common folks, and, too, the bloom
Of all the whores of Paris. The chagrin
Expressed by these at John's impending doom
Was probably the sole emotion in
That courthouse not dictated by vulgarity.
(Among the highbrows, empathy's a rarity.)

17.

In the first row behind the prosecution
Were solemnly positioned the aggrieved,
Geneviève and Valère, seeking retribution,
Dressed in deep mourning suiting the bereaved,
A picturesque and moving contribution,
As all the painters instantly perceived,
To the grave rite about to be enacted.
Geneviève appeared especially distracted.

18.

Her shoulders heaved with sobs, her handkerchief
Was damp with tears, her swollen eyes were veiled
Behind a black Italian lace. A sheaf
Of tissues waited, once her hanky failed,
To swab her endless outpourings of grief,
And smelling salts were there to be inhaled
If she succumbed and reason abdicated,
Which all most eagerly anticipated.

19.

Her mourning clothes set off her pale complexion,
Also enhanced by stole of sable fur.
Geneviève's effect, in fact, was such perfection
That more than one composer, seeing her,
Vowed to concoct a musical confection
To make immortal her sad *cri de coeur*.
With her theatrically tragic mien,
She *did* look like a Massenet heroine.

20.

Valère displayed heroic, stoic gravity,
As suited a most manly gentleman.
He obviously was shocked by the depravity
Inflicted on his sister and his clan.
(In point of fact, he had a painful cavity,
But used the tooth like a true thespian
To magnify his masculine behavior
And play the part of his poor sister's savior.)

21.

Valère was quite aware of all the staring
 He was the object of from many eyes.
He kept, of course, the semblance of not caring,
 But secretly he thrilled to hear the sighs,
And gradually got grander in his bearing.
 His star was definitely on the rise.
He surely made Madame Bernhardt feel so,
And also titillated Jean Cocteau.

22.

Another watching closely was Colbert,
 Who sat just three rows back from his new lover.
He wore an eminent and prideful air
 (Despite an anxious tendency to hover)
To see the girls admiring his Valère.
 He saw Valère bend, reaching to recover
A dropped pen, and he marveled at the thrill
That swept through him, a sort of hollow chill.

23.

He hadn't felt so since he was thirteen
 And fell in love with a young neighbor wench.
He had already tasted the obscene
 Delights of sexual congress (he was French),
But that young girl, so virtuous, so pristine,
 Had conjured that same urgent, tingling clench
Of bowels and heart that is the portent of
That odd, weak state of mind that we call love.

24.

But Colbert guarded yet his reputation,
And in his day, as, sadly, still in ours,
There was no real, complete Gay Liberation.
A man, especially of Colbert's powers,
Did not court gladly the vilification
Of the close-minded. Even courage cowers
Before the rough words met with on the street.
Like most, they were content to be discreet.

25.

Like most, they would pursue their little lives
And leave the world to wonder as it wished.
No public kisses, but some passion thrives
On quiet privacy. Impoverished?
Don't fool yourself. It's what's inside that drives
The spirit. While the great outside world's pished,
Millions have calmly gone about their bliss
In every hamlet and metropolis,

26.

As these two would, pursuing happiness
Without imposing on the world's *hauteur*,
Without indulging childish sappiness
Like so many mistakenly cocksure
Rebellious types who must rely on scrappiness
To feel important. This had no allure
For Colbert. He believed the world works nicely,
And only wanted to fit in precisely.

27.

One of our *tragediennes* is not seated.
Magda has planted herself by the door
In full Salvation Army dress, conceited,
Singing her militant hymns, bugling the more
When guards attempt to hush her. Undefeated,
She promises this bad world blood and gore
On the Redeemer's imminent arrival,
Staging her own inopportune revival.

28.

"Repent, you wasted sinners!" Magda sang.
"See, here's one now on trial who thought he'd win out,
But Heaven is not mocked. God's boomerang
Spins round and round until it's rooted sin out
And chopped it down! And so with you, you gang
Of miserable backsliders! God will thin out
Your ranks when Michael blows the final trump.
He'll wither all of you in one big clump!

29.

"Oh, that will be the glorious day of days
When all of you are blasted with no bother
And only we are left alive to praise
Our great Redeemer and our Holy Father!"
An endless spew of verbal mayonnaise,
Blah blah and ever on with suchlike pother.
A rich, bloodthirsty stew of hate and blight
All wrapped up in the rhetoric of light.

30.

I really have to say, I think it odd
How many of the self-proclaimed religious,
Who praise a loving and forgiving God,
So eagerly anticipate prodigious
And bloody carnage. Why the pious squad
(So proud of meekness, yet the most litigious),
Of all fanatics throughout history
Should be the cruelest is a mystery.

31.

How one mind, though unused to thought, can hold
Two such complete and utter contradictions
As God the loving shepherd of the fold
And God the reveler in maledictions
Is a conceit I never have extolled.
No wonder some find God and Heaven fictions!
How much more thoughtful simply to live rightly
And not pray for annihilation nightly.

32.

What does one call these souls dichotomous?
We surely cannot name them hypocrites.
Hypocrisy implies intent. Bilious
They are, but they're not purposefully twits.
They don't, or can't, see just how humorous
It is, subscribing to their holy writs,
Touting self-righteously their chosen creed
And then betraying it with every deed.

33.

They blunder thoughtlessly through life, doing bad,
 Proclaiming themselves good with every crime,
Totting our numerous sins up on a pad,
 Committing evil acts with a sublime,
Indifferent smugness, getting boiling mad
 At all us sinners, planning for the time
Their loving deity will smite the earth
With drooling mouth and misbegotten mirth.

34.

Magda, however, was an archetype
 To dwarf the primal deities. Her ambition
Was to see Johnny dressed in prison stripe,
 Locked up without a chance of extradition
Where she could daily fill him with the tripe
 Of her private, perverted superstition.
And so she stood there banging on a drum,
Preaching to all the days of wrath to come.

35.

I think that's all our *dramatis personæ*.
 Oh, wait. Another character we know
Is there to watch the trial. No sanctimony
 Deforms her features. She's in the last row
Of standees, pale, with her expression stony
 And imperturbable. Whatever blow
May fall, she is determined to observe,
To bear all with calm heart and steady nerve.

36.

She takes good care to be sure she's not seen,
 Though she can see, from where she stands, Colbert.
Her life this last week hasn't been serene—
 She's slept in doorways, and her bill of fare
Has not been much or fine. But the machine
 Of justice soon will start its busy blare
And she must stay to witness with clear vision
(It's Angélique, of course) the court's decision.

37.

She'd used her last centime to bribe a guard
 And gain her place behind the farthest column.
She stands still while the vulgar crowds bombard
 The room with laughs and shouts, and two kids slalom
Right down the stairs upon a sheet of card.
 She waits, attentive, with an air so solemn
That those about her gradually grow hushed,
As if by some subconscious influence shushed.

38.

At last the doors behind the bench unlocked,
 Swung open, and two guards led Johnny in.
All noise ceased as the famous robber walked
 To his place, shoulders back, head up, and chin
Squared, suit pressed, tie tied neatly. Geneviève rocked;
 Valère, resigned, reached to support his kin
In her patent, inevitable swoon—
Good for the press, but he found it jejune.

39.

John looked as comfortable as a man can
 When handcuffed and with his legs bound in chains.
As he came in, an overzealous fan
 Leaped past the guards—showing more gall than brains—
For Johnny's autograph. Deluded man,
 He got a week in prison for his pains
And for his screaming "John!" deliriously.
The French take etiquette most seriously.

40.

The audience suddenly let loose a cheer
 That almost raised the ceiling off the court.
If Johnny had so much as wagged an ear
 There would no doubt have been some bloody sport,
But Johnny only looked with a severe
 And disapproving look. This did abort
The threatened mutiny. The guards, nonplussed,
Reacted with relief, and coolly cussed.

41.

John, when he reached the dock, turned toward his two
 Accusers, offering them a courtly bow.
This gallant act backfired. As if on cue,
 Geneviève set up a truly dreadful row.
She shrieked and wailed, she kicked and lost a shoe,
 Till even reporters laughed and wondered how
A sane man had assaulted such a beldam.
What dreadful urge could ever have compelled him?

42.

Valère calmed her at last. They took their seats
And tried to resurrect their grave decorum.
Valère paled at the choral cry of bleats
The low-class spectators raised rudely for 'em,
And sighing like a researcher of Keats
Uncovering a faulty variorum,
He caught Colbert's eyes. Instantly they light up.
Valère discovers that this perks him right up.

43.

A clerk made entrance in black livery.
The courtroom promptly quieted. He posed
With folded hands until expectancy
Was at its height, opened his mouth, then closed
It once again. The people groaned. "Hear ye!"
He hollered suddenly. Somebody nosed
Past Colbert's arm, but Colbert never budges.
"Hear ye! All rise to greet the noble judges!"

44.

All stood in honor of the learned men
Who entered in red robes and curly wigs.
It's fair, I think, to say no citizen
Within those august chambers gave two figs
About the solemn judges. Past their ken
Were notions of ideals, and red-robed prigs
Should have been cause for jokes, by definition.
But still they stood, because it was tradition.

45.

The judges numbered three, past masters all
In complex issues of French jurisprudence,
And fifty years since these three sons of Gaul
Had exited the Lyceum as students,
Fifty years since they'd known a lecture hall.
They're famous as juridical occludents,
Opposing their cold front to warm opinion,
Thus keeping all correct in the dominion.

46.

They entered with a dignity so vast
That Valère was about to gently giggle.
It took some time to get there, but at last
They gained their seats, and settled with a wiggle.
The clerk, like a medieval scholiast,
Gave his pince-nez a preparatory jiggle,
Perused a sheaf of papers, and, completed,
He pompously announced, "You may be seated."

47.

"Defendant, rise!" he shouted instantly,
And John, surprised, got to his feet once more.
It's worse than church, he thought. His memory
Was dim with years since he had been before
A priest, but he recalled the old ennui
Of standing, kneeling, sitting. *What a chore.*
It's not enough they're going to cut my head off.
They have to bore me right up till I'm led off!

48.

I must be fair. The court clerk was not dull.

But he, like all of us, had his pet tricks
To make the empty days seem meaningful.

He did not dabble much in politics,
He did not gossip, was not fanciful.

But he was horrifyingly prolix.
To make believe he had some sort of power,
He'd drone on grandiosely by the hour.

49.

He thought himself a master of suspense

And often interjected long cæsurae
Into the most somniferous events,

Persuaded they would make his audience worry
That something unexpected and intense

Was just about to happen—then a flurry
Of what he thought theatrical ferocity,
And he would seat himself with vast pomposity.

50.

He looked on Johnny's trial as opportunity

To wallow in theatrics to the hilt,
Indulge in histrionics with impunity

Until the judges fixed the villain's guilt.
With no regard for neoclassic unity

He paused, and still paused; with a practiced lilt
He placed his pince-nez firmly on his snout
And then began to read the charges out.

51.

“Jean Ténor, alias—” That was all he’d got out
When suddenly cacophony explodes
From somewhere in the rear! Two gendarmes shout out,
Colliding with poor Magda. Peace corrodes
Immediately. All try to find the plot out
And chatter, wondering what this furor bodes.
Poor Magda picks herself up off the tiles
Before she’s almost trampled in the aisles.

52.

The judges bang their gavels, and the clerk,
Betraying his rhetorical ideals,
Brays, “Order! Order!” Geneviève gives a jerk,
Valère scowls, Colbert fidgets and reveals
Within a hidden pocket a sharp dirk.
All wait, impatient, as the plot congeals.
A moment. Then, the crowd grown almost violent,
With one accord they turn and fall dead silent.

53.

The doors creak open slowly. Magda shivers.
Her military fervor falls to nil.
Valère and Geneviève tremble to their livers—
Their nerves are strung so tight they’re almost ill.
The breathless crowd—a single beast now—quivers,
And everyone, yes, even the clerk, is still.
A shape appears and, with cool nonchalance,
Steps forward ... Hippolyte Bienseance!

CANTO VIII

1.

Monsieur Bienseance was not defunct;
 Appearing, rather, quite alive and rosy.
Better, in all, than when we left him bunked
 Upon the cold earth bleeding o'er a posy.
Supporting him as medical adjunct
 A buxom nurse, who holds his arm quite cozy,
Trots trustfully on high heels, which most nurses
Would hurl aside as bunion-building curses.

2.

"Papa!" Valère shrieked like a little girlie
 And fainted fast before he rued his lapse.
(And as he swooned, Colbert pushed past a surly
 Guard, dove, and caught him gracefully.) Perhaps
Geneviève was shored up by the hurly-burly,
 Or filial love raised her by her bootstraps:
She did not scream, cry, faint, or shout abuse, ah,
But stood still as a victim of Medusa.

3.

The court, meanwhile, impatiently awaited
Some indication of what all this meant.
No one knew who this man was who prostrated
One of the plaintiffs, and the other sent
Into apparent catatonia. Slated
For courtroom scandal and the subsequent
Bloodthirsty pleasure of an execution,
They're puzzled by this stranger's contribution.

4.

Bienseance tried to make himself heard,
But all the people in the room were blathering
At one another, wondering what absurd
Twist this would prove. And meanwhile guards were
gathering.
He managed to somehow stay self-assured,
Despite the nearing guards, whose lips were lathering.
Perhaps the pretty nurse, who kept her palm
On his arm, was what helped to keep him calm.

5.

The tallest judge popped both eyes open wide
And glared at the intruder in a fury.
The middle-sized one, underqualified
In terms of wit, was indignant *de jure*.
The third and smallest, on the shaggy side,
Blustered and flushed red as chicken tandoori.
They all looked Bienseance right in the kisser
And spluttered out, *sans façon*, "What's all this, sir!"

6.

"This is a court of law!" the tall judge shouted.

"You can't just saunter in free as you please!
Guards! I want this old rascal promptly routed!

This is a legal venue! Damn you, seize
Him!" "Sir!" said Bienseance. The third judge pouted.

"Don't argue with him!" he squeaked. "On your knees!"
"To make all clear, your honors, I am willing.
I am the party he's accused of killing."

7.

"What? What?" they honked. The audience was ecstatic

To find the murder victim resurrected.

"You cannot be alive," one judge, dogmatic

Against all reason (not rhyme), interjected.

"It is quite clear." "Quite quite." "We're most emphatic,"

The judges unanimously reflected.

"A trial for murder never is begun

Unless, indeed, a murder has been done."

8.

"And yet it's evident I am not dead,"

Monsieur Bienseance said logically.

"Existence is not evidence. You've said

You live. *Bien*. But what valid guarantee

Can document this claim that you have pled?

A court is not a children's spelling bee.

We must have proof, and proof incontrovertible

To take your allegations as assertable."

9.

The judges sat back, smug in their rebuttal.
“To prove my status, though I’m not on trial,”
Said Bienseance, “I won’t depend on subtle
Or legalistic arguments; for while
I am well-versed in such, I’d rather scuttle
This vain inquest without sophistic guile.
Therefore, with your forbearance, I’ll relate
The tale behind my present vital state.”

10.

“It’s most unprecedented,” said one judge,
“To have the victim in a murder case
Give testimony.” “We should have to trudge
Through centuries of transcripts for a trace,”
Another said. The third gave them a nudge.
“Allowing such would win us all a place
In the judicial history books,” he hinted,
And then their egoistic eyeballs glinted.

11.

The tall judge spoke. “After deliberation,
My two respected colleagues and I find
In favor of this person’s recitation.
You may proceed. However, we’ve opined
That if your explanation’s *sans* foundation,
Sir, your own liberty will be consigned
To legal custody. If you attempt
To cheat us, we will find you in contempt.”

12.

Bienseance bowed formally. "Your honors,
I think you will agree, when you have heard me,
That I am not one of your common conners,
And that no selfish motivation's spurred me.
I trust my tale will satisfy all yawners,
For neither pain nor injury's deterred me
From coming here to see that right is done."
Just then he heard a groaning from his son.

13.

"Valère?" "Papa?" Valère sat up, confused
To find himself prone and in Colbert's lap
With his dead father watching. He enthused,
"Papa! You live!" "I do. And who's this chap?"
Poor Valère's face was suddenly transfused
With an amazing purple glow. "Brap—brap—"
He gabbled, speechless. Colbert swiftly rose up
And smiled at Bienseance, who kept his nose up.

14.

"Here now!" the medium judge yelled. "Your reunion
Is touching, monsieur, but will have to wait."
"Yes, speed it up!" the court clerk said. "My union
Won't put up with a member's working late!"
The judges scowled at him in dark communion,
Which gave the clerk something to contemplate.
In all his faithful years in the judiciary,
Of such a look he'd not been beneficiary.

15.

Bienseance bowed. "Sirs, I beg your pardon.
We'll bridge our family rifts another day."
He shot Colbert a look certain to harden
Colbert's resolve to hold his protégé.
"It took place," Bienseance said, "in our garden
At my lovely estate in Beaujolais.
Une nuit d'été as beautiful and sultry
As ever led a bored wife to adultery."

16.

As well as any of de Maupassant's,
This opening whet the listeners' appetites
For dirty doings among debutantes
And cads and criminals and socialites.
They waited breathless for Bienseance
To speak. The average hominid delights
In seeing his fellow creature's moral weakness
Set forth without obscurantive obliqueness,

17.

Especially when it's our so-called betters
Who've been discovered in such low buffoonery—
The rich, the famous, the social pacesetters.
Then we become indignant gods sublunary,
Pass moral judgment, clap them into fetters
Of censure, and subject them to lampoonery.
Meanwhile, like hounds, we howl for every detail
That any journalist is pleased to retail.

18.

Pathetic's what I call it. A foul murder
Is rapidly forgotten by the press;
The dangerous collapse of some great girder
Because of state corruption is no less
Forgotten; social ills; war; and absurder
Crimes that affect us all in life's progress.
Yet let that word "sex" be thrown in the trough,
And we blind piggies cannot get enough.

19.

We'll snort and root up every peccadillo
We can discover and fill up our brains
With trivial nonsense washed up on the billow
Of rumor, joke, and hearsay, taking pains
To look shocked—eager to get to our pillow,
Where we can ruminate on tangled skeins
Of obscene fantasy and sexual drives
To add sad spice to our dull, empty lives.

20.

I know I'm being hard on my poor species,
But every time I see another scandal
Same as the last in all but players ("She sees
Him with another woman!"), like a vandal
I want to curse and break things and smear fœces
Upon them all. It's more than I can handle.
But two deep breaths—and there, my rage is past.
I'm steeped in objectivity at last.

21.

Bienseance, at any rate, was thrilled
To have the audience firmly in his grasp.
An ardent talker, but one never skilled
In holding interest, folks were wont to gasp
Whenever he his native woodnotes trilled.
But now they all were eager in his clasp.
Supremely gratified (well past comparative),
He relished every vowel in his narrative.

22.

“Yours truly was awake in his boudoir,
Awake because of the excessive heat,
And trying to make sense of *Le Rouge et Noir*
Again, with bags of fresh ice at my feet.
I stood up to go to my *escritoire*
To fetch a glass of water, when a fleet
But clear sound of soft laughter reached my hearing,
Now swelling, and again now disappearing.

23.

“I knew, though Geneviève didn’t know I knew—
I’d not have stayed in business being slow—
That my young daughter had been lately too
Involved with some unknown, fly-by-night beau.
I don’t butt in my children’s lives. I view
Such interference as sure cause for woe.
To raise good children, one must trust, ideally.
Unfortunately, some behave *too* freely.”

24.

At this he looked askance at poor Valère,
Who trembled at what he would suffer later.
Colbert, however, plainly didn't care
What Bienseance thought. This was not *his* pater.
He ran a soothing hand through Valère's hair,
Which acted as an instant elevator
To Bienseance's petulant blood pressure.
This in turn made Valère feel rather fresher.

25.

The short judge growled and rolled his eyes, annoyed.
The medium-height judge pointed with a finger.
"I don't see what this matters, sir. You've toyed
With this court too long as it is. Don't linger
A moment in your tale, if you'd avoid
Madame de la Justice's deadly stinger."
The other judges liked this admonition
And added their support to his position.

26.

"At any rate," Bienseance proceeded,
"I thought my daughter might have gone too far—
To bring a boyfriend in past midnight needed
A stern reproach. And I'd had steak tartare
For dinner, and felt cocky. So, impeded
A moment wondering where my slippers are,
I put my robe on to pursue my scheme,
When suddenly I heard my daughter scream!"

27.

At that the courtroom temperature rose
And almost everybody's ears were perked.
The clerk was not, I'm sad to say, of those—
Such amateur theatrics merely irked
One who considered himself pro of pros.
The short judge, pleased with hairs to sunder, smirked,
"You say you heard your daughter scream, monsieur.
Might I ask how you knew that it was her?"

28.

"I know her scream well. Geneviève is a brat
And screams whenever she wants something done."
Valère nodded deliberately at that.
"But I grabbed up a sword my *grandpère*'d won
From some Hun in our nations' ancient spat
And rushed outside to find her, like a nun,
Haranguing this young man for having raped her,
The irony of which, it seems, escaped her."

29.

Geneviève was blushing with such ardent fire
One wondered why her black veil wasn't singed.
She hoped her weeds would not turn funeral pyre,
And at each word her father blabbed, she cringed.
She glanced at Valère—shocked at a live sire,
He still appeared a little bit unhinged.
She felt the ribald gaze of all bore through her,
And wished she'd vanish in the deepest sewer.

30.

“This young man looked to be a bit uneasy
At my Geneviève’s ingenious allegations.
In fact, he seemed to me completely queasy.
I tried to set to rest his perturbations,
And did not in the least attempt to tease. He
Behaved politely. I made protestations
Of my full willingness to hear how he meant
To reach an amicable, sane agreement.

31.

“You know, in such predicaments one course
Is tried and true for solving such a deadlock.
I gave him choices: throw off all remorse
And take my Geneviève in holy wedlock,
Or else I must sadly resort to force
By calling for the police and instead lock
Him up in our unpleasant local gaol.
That’s not the way I would hope to prevail.

32.

“However, this young man—and I respect him
For being honest in a trying strait—
Refused my generous offer. To correct him
I waved my sword. He did not hesitate,
But drew his gun. Before I could deflect him
He’d pulled the trigger to annihilate
Yours truly. Sudden darkness overcame me;
I fell; I don’t think anyone can blame me.”

33.

He raised his chins up proudly. His attendant
 Smiled cheeringly, and gave his arm a tweak.
Valère, still in Colbert's embrace dependent,
 Felt all the blood once more drain from his cheek.
Geneviève felt sick, and even the defendant
 Trembled as if a twinge shook his physique—
A twinge of conscience? A twinge of regret?
It's not time to examine Johnny yet.

34.

"What happened next, I cannot say. I woke
 Upon the grass alone but for one servant,
An old and rather addlepaté bloke
 Who was not, truth to tell, the most observant.
When I came to, he almost had a stroke,
 Believing me a spectre. But my fervent
And frequent cries for help at last persuaded
The old fool, and he saved me ere I faded.

35.

"I was rushed off to hospital, where I
 Lay three weeks in an execrable mood.
This lovely lady," here he gave a sigh,
 "Was there to nurse me. Sirs, the magnitude
Of charity and tender care she—why,
 My tears start up remembering it. My brood,
Meanwhile, unusually overzealous,
Were gone the minute this bad luck befell us.

36.

“After some time I was allowed the papers
And saw our scandal bugled in their pages,
My daughter called the victim of ten rapers,
Myself dead, murdered, and suchlike outrages
'Gainst common sense, the truth obscured by vapors
Of credulous inanity. That wages
Should be paid to detectives and the cleric
Who will not verify fact is barbaric!

37.

“You really might have waited half a minute,
I think, to see if I was truly dead!
But nowadays sense doesn't enter in it—
You all rush off half-cocked, out of your head,
Prepared for nothing, flighty as a linnet.
Things just aren't like they were when *I* was bred!
I never was a one, sirs, to pontificate,
But did you ask them for my death certificate?

38.

“That might have settled everything at once
And saved us all a lot of time and trouble.
Well, when I heard of all my children's stunts,
My nurse and I came hither on the double
To clear up my dear progeny's affronts.
I surely hope that no further hubbub'll
Be necessary. That, sirs, is my history.
I trust that I have cleared up every mystery.”

39.

The judges sat in silence, royally stunned
By the recited epic they'd just heard.
The people in the courtroom also shunned
Vulgar reaction: no one said a word.
At last the short judge, hairy and rotund,
Turned to his fellow judges. They conferred
A moment in soft whispers, tightly huddled;
Then all looked at Bienseance, befuddled.

40.

"We must admit, we're at a loss," said one.
"No precedent for such a case presents
Itself to our long memory. What a run
Of sordid, tangled, and deranged events!
If there's another case like this, it's none
That I have heard of! The embarrassments
You've brought to this court make my senses fail—
I've half a mind to throw you *all* in gaol!"

41.

The Bienseances, by this threat united,
Regarded one another fearfully.
The dreadful threat that they might be indicted
Worked as a spur on their torpidity.
At once Valère and Geneviève, incited,
Began to protest simultaneously
That they were guiltless in the day's proceedings.
But Bienseance *père* quick cut short their pleadings.

42.

“Sirs, if I may,” he said, “it’s the result
Of many people’s errors all compounded,
And not the fault of any. We’re adult,
And should seek resolution firmly grounded
In sense and justice. Now, if you’ll consult
Me, I think I’ve a proposition founded
In just these virtues.” He approached the bench
And made his offer in straightforward French.

43.

“Your honors, now that you admit I’m me,
I’d like to offer all a simple cure.
I could charge John le Beau with battery,
Assault, intent to kill—but I assure
You, I am not at all vindictive. We
Are civilized adults and should abjure
Such eye-for-eye and tooth-for-tooth barbarities,
Which set us all at hostile angularities.

44.

“I bear this hasty gentleman no malice.
Quite contrary—I’m really rather grateful.
If he had not intruded in our palace
And acted toward me in a manner hateful,
I never would have met my faithful Alice,
Who nursed me back to health. It was a fateful
Hot summer’s night, but one I don’t deplore
Because it led me to one I adore.

45.

“That’s right, your honors, we are to be wed.
In three weeks’ time the doctors say I’m healed
And then it’s onward to the marriage bed,
Eh, darling?” At that utterance, Geneviève keeled
Right over, and Valère, without a shred
Of dignity remaining, once more reeled.
Alice, the nurse and fiancée, was mute,
But did her duty, and kept looking cute.

46.

“My pretty little Florence Nightingale,”
Bienseance beamed, with a doting pat,
“Alone did not desert me in the vale
Of death, but right beside my bedside sat
Without a pause, ’til once more I was hale
And hearty. Her fidelity begat
In me an almost holy, calm benevolence,
Which wiped out any yearning for malevolence.

47.

“So I’ve a fine solution for our quarrel,
Easy to make and easy to enact,
Pleasant for all concerned and aptly moral,
For which, if you’ll forgive a breach of tact,
I venture to propose myself a laurel,
Such as the Roman statesmen might exact
As tribute for some wise bit of diplomacy
Back in the hallowed days of ancient Roma, see?”

48.

The judges, lawyers, guards, and audience
 Waited expectantly for Solomon
To solemnly declaim his common sense.
 John only stood with no expression on
His face, seeming unmoved by these events,
 Inert as an unwound automaton.
Will no red blush, no cry, no tears, no shout come?
You wouldn't think his life hung on the outcome.

49.

“Yes, I'd be happy, sirs, to drop all charges.
 When one sees mercy's quality's not strained,
The heart leaps up with joy, the soul enlarges,
 And vengeance, petty vengeance, is disdained.
Vindictiveness is a mad bull that barges
 Into the spirit's china shop 'til trained
To calm itself beneath the soft command
Of charming, dainty Pity's gentle hand.”

50.

The court clerk was at this forced to admit
 The old man had a winning way with words,
But thought he might have seen the benefit
 Of the well-ordered cadence that begirds
Its wielder with an unbreachable wit.
 That one clause struck him as whey free of curds:
“Sees mercy's quality's not strained”? Thin, weak!
(Thus every booby must give his critique.

51.

Another reason why I pay no heed
To critics' comments, praise or otherwise.
I hope I've better things to do than read
Hasty opinions hauled out in the guise
Of educated criticism. I plead
We who spend years to write, write, and revise
Our deepest, heartfelt thoughts can better do it
Than those who spend a weekend skimming through it.)

52.

"But what is it?" the short judge finally screamed.
"What's what?" "What's what! Why, sir, your proposition!"
"Ah!" Bienseance, remembering, said. "Esteemed
Sirs, pray excuse me. Lost in exposition,
I quite forgot just why you all had deemed
It necessary to make this inquisition."
He bowed to the assembled with sobriety
And donned an aspect of hermetic piety.

53.

"Get on with it!" the judge reiterated.
"Your honors, my proposal is prosaic.
I don't want this young man eviscerated;
Such rabid retaliation is archaic.
My daughter's honor is calumniated—
A minus B is C, in algebraic
Terms. It is no insuperable barrier.
The one solution is to have him marry her."

54.

Geneviève perked up at this. “Yes, if he’ll wed
My daughter, I will call the charges moot,
Forget the pints of blue blood I have bled,
And, too, forsaking any future suit
I might be tempted to,” Bienseance said,
“Start him in any honorable pursuit
He feels he has a hankering for. There.
I don’t think anyone could be more fair.”

55.

Geneviève leaped to her feet and threw herself
About her father’s neck. The pretty nurse,
Alice, gave way and, smiling, said, “What welf
Of thweet emothion dwellth herein!” (Her curse
Was a terrific lisp; cute as an elf,
The nicest thing within the universe.
But all her speech was baby talk combined
With coos. Bienseance didn’t seem to mind.)

56.

Geneviève gave her a look. Alice smiled back—
The evil eye was no affright to her.
She was an innocent without a smack
Of meanness or spite in her character.
Geneviève would have liked mightily to whack
That smile off her insipid visage, were
The situation otherwise. But glee
At nuptials imminent brought clemency.

57.

“Papa!” she cried. “Papa! You really mean
We can be married? You’re the dearest dear
There ever was!” She kissed him. Magda, green
Around the edges, smoldered at such sheer,
Bald-faced, inane inequity. Racine
Could not have written a more insincere,
Ill-founded switch, a plot twist so perverse. All
Her sentiments recoiled from this reversal.

58.

The audience was in a perfect tizzy
At all these new, surprising circumstances.
Ah, quel théâtre! Every tongue was busy:
An uproar that’s peculiarly France’s.
But John was still. The people wondered, “Is he
Alive or dead? How many other chances
Does he expect to get before we hang him?”
And everybody started to harangue him.

59.

“Wake up, you icy-hearted scalawag!”
Yelled Hemingway. “Speak up!” cried Theda Bara.
“Come on,” said André Gide, “you’ve got no gag!”
“The moon and I are gold,” hummed Tristan Tzara.
“Speak!” “Answer him!” They almost rushed to drag
Poor Johnny from the dock. Magda’s mascara
Was running down her cheeks on tears of rage
Too copious to measure on a gauge.

60.

The guards jumped forward. Each judge banged his gavel.
The court clerk bellowed, "Order in the court!"
But order was beginning to unravel—
It looked like they might soon need to resort
To force to quell the riot. Not to cavil,
But force is the authoritarian's forte.
(Please pardon this political parenthetical;
I'll try to keep to the purely poetical.)

61.

The guards pulled out their truncheons, threatening
The too-rambunctious crowd with fisticuffs.
They beat down an *Apache* who tried to spring
At Johnny, then lit into three big toughs
Who looked to be prepared for butchering
The judges. Six guards seized them by the scruffs
Of their necks, hustled them right out the door,
Then hurried back in, primed to spill some gore.

62.

At last they made the spectators quiescent
And all the din subsided to a murmur
Which, though a marked improvement, was incessant.
"That's it!" the tall judge bellowed (he's the firmer
Of those three). "I want no more adolescent
Behavior in this courtroom! Every squirmer,
Each mutterer, each one who dares to cut up
Will in a trice be hauled off to the shut-up!"

63.

The other judges seconded his motion
And fixed the public with horrendous scowls
Sure to command immediate devotion
And strangulate each man's incipient howls
Of protest. His life is not worth two groschen
Who'd dare defy those three official owls—
And like owls, they remained with feathers ruffled
Until the last complaint and curse were muffled.

64.

Then, as one man, they all turned to face John,
Who was at that time staring at his feet.
So slowly it seemed a phenomenon
To everyone, he raised his eyes to meet
The anxious looks from that vast pantheon
Of great, near-great, and low. Pale as a sheet,
He moved his gaze from face to face to face.
No sound, no breath, no move made in that place.

65.

And there, before him, Geneviève in her veil,
Her blue eyes wide; a lacy kerchief wrung
In her hands; lips a-tremble; face as pale
As Johnny's; on her cheek a lone tear clung.
She looked to Johnny so weak and so frail,
So scared, so old in sorrow, yet so young
In hope. He'd been the cause of her distress,
And could erase it with a simple, "Yes."

66.

Why not? He had, mere weeks ago, loved her
As truly as he had loved anyone.
Why should a scruple or distaste deter
Him from accepting this? Why should he shun
A lovely and devoted worshiper?
(In all his desperate musings, there was none,
At least, about the money he might gain—
Which some would say proved that he was not sane.)

67.

Beside her was Valère, a pleasant lad;
Behind her, Bienseance, a decent fellow.
To join this family—was that so bad?
His notions about romance would soon mellow;
When he was old and tired, he would be glad
He had said yes. A bourgeois Punchinello,
Fat and complacent, he would tell the stories
To his grandchildren of his former glories.

68.

Geneviève, gray-haired, would tsk and remonstrate
At his filling the kids' heads with his crimes,
So he would carefully ameliorate
Them with a proper moral. But sometimes
He'd visit one of his banks, calculate
The possibilities, and pantomimes
Of derring-do would fill him for a while,
Bringing a lazy, rather wistful smile.

69.

That was the comfortable life he'd lead;
And all he had to do was utter, "Yes."
A single syllable—a simple deed
To do. Then no more statutes to transgress.
A calm, flat line of socially sanctioned greed,
Hot food, warm sheets, the privileged *noblesse*
His fond companions; all for the caress
Of one lone, softly sibilant sound: "Yes."

70.

Sharp panic seized on John. He could not breathe.
The lights turned black; for moments he was blind.
When sight returned, the courtroom seemed to seethe
With maggots, poisonous serpents seemed to wind
Upon the rail before him and to wreathe
The rotting, corpselike judges. Undefined
And molten shapes rushed on him, cruel and sneering,
While harsh and mocking laughter filled his hearing.

71.

He took a breath and squared his manly jaw,
Closed his eyes briefly, looked up, flashing blue
Lightning, which filled the onlookers with awe,
And said with simple dignity, "What you
Have offered—" oh, the chill of his *sangfroid*!—
"Is kind. But to my principles I'm true.
Put me in prison, hang me from a tree—
I will not stoop to join the bourgeoisie."

72.

A moment. Then cacophony rampaged
Like a mad elephant. Guards blew their pipes.
Some women shrieked and fainted, others raged.
A certain element—artistic types—
Cheered loud and long while some wit promptly staged
An impromptu ballet of guttersnipes
Performing an accomplished tarantella
And off-key “Marseillaise” sung *a capella*.

73.

“Hang him!” “Make him a saint!” “Cut out his gizzard!”
“Hanging’s too good!” “Give him the Croix de Guerre!”
And suchlike exclamations in a blizzard
Of caterwauling pro and con. Valère
Clamped his hands to his ears while Geneviève scissored
Her arms in dull humiliation. Where
Could she conceal her black mortification
From the hard, mocking crowd’s disapprobation?

74.

Rejected—twice!—by one who’d rather die
Than marry her! A wound no balm can mend.
Made fool of in the spiteful public eye.
Geneviève, of course, could never comprehend
That this was Johnny’s fate making reply;
That he had not intended to offend.
And why should she? She has been cruelly hurt.
It’s no time for philosophy’s advert.

75.

Someday, indeed, this blast to her vast pride
 Will show her money's not the only power,
And she will lose that snide air that belied
 Her quite real beauty, which is nature's dower.
But now she only wished somehow to hide
 Forever, find a hole, dive in, and cower.
There is no help in healing such events,
No cure but time for such embarrassments.

76.

Of all in that room, only one perceived
 The dreadful pain Geneviève was suffering.
Alice, the nurse, so used to the bereaved,
 Tried to embrace her. As from hornet's sting
Geneviève tugged free—then trembled, wailed, and heaved
 Herself into Alice's arms, freeing
The burden of a flood of poisonous sobs.
Alice swabbed them with sympathetic daubs.

77.

The furor in the court had reached its height
 With all the various factions running riot.
It seemed like everyone was in a fight,
 With not a single person sitting quiet.
Madame Bernhardt herself slapped a rude wight
 Who reached for her, to show him not to try it.
Guards yelled, men laughed, one clown played a euphonium.
In short, the place was perfect pandemonium.

78.

The chaos coalesced—a cabal formed,
Someone claimed for himself its leadership
And shouted, “We must hang him!” Up they stormed
To send our Johnny on his final trip.
But as they reached the dock, and as they swarmed
Like ants upon a crumb of bread, a rip
Sounded above. There was a sudden smash:
A windowpane fell on them with a crash.

79.

They screamed like Wagner’s gnomes and quickly scattered.
The judges squealed and crawled beneath their seats.
Another pane of glass fell down and shattered.
The mob let loose a choir of sheepish bleats.
All looked up as a makeshift ladder clattered
Down, built of slats of wood and old bedsheets.
A form is recognizable now through
The broken windowpane—it is Boudu!

80.

It seems fidelity is not passé,
At least in one breast. John whispered, “Boudu!”
He almost wept. Boudu smiled with a gay
Yet grim determination. “My Boudu!”
How to describe the joy, how to convey
The awe and gratitude that overthrew
John’s heart at this display? John chokes back tears
As hope for human virtue reappears.

81.

Boudu produced a most impressive gun,
Designed to put the fear of God in folks.
“See this?” he hollered at them. “Everyone
Stand nice and quiet—this baby’s no hoax.
I’ve got you covered, Boss, come on the run!
The first who tries some funny business croaks.”
He slowly raised that Herculean rifle
To show them no one ought to try to trifle.

82.

John showed his handcuffs. Boudu dropped some keys
(The skeletal kind—Boudu, like a scout,
Prepared for all eventualities).
John caught them deftly in one hand. Without
A pause he’s free, as easy as you please.
He grabs the ladder, bows, and is about
To climb, to rise, to mount, to levitate,
When suddenly a female voice cries, “Wait!”

83.

Who spoke that word? John felt his pulse beat faster.
He peered into the crowd to find that voice.
“Oh, wait! Wait for me!” Boudu moaned, “Disaster!
I swear, sometimes I wish he fancied boys.
Boss, come on! Climb up! You must be the master
Of your rebellious hormones! Lust destroys!”
A vain reprise of his old litany—
John still looked round the courtroom anxiously.

84.

The tension in that room was at its height
With everyone in shackles of suspense—
John on the ladder trying for a sight
Of she who'd called; Boudu with his immense
Gun up above; the guards frozen with fright;
The judges pale but dignified and dense.
And then—a loud commotion in the rear
As someone, someone pushed free to appear.

85.

Magda, still at the door, spotted her first,
And howled with jealousy and baffled zeal.
Geneviève, eyes bleared with tears, saw her and cursed.
Colbert stood up, looked, saw, began to reel,
And fell—this strange response was unrehearsed.
But John was still. Had he no heart to feel?
Did he not thrill to hear that dear voice speak?
Did he not ache when he saw Angélique?

86.

For it was Angélique, thin, wan, eyes rimmed
With red from weeping, trembling, weak, but glowing
With an unearthly loveliness undimmed
By pain or fear—a beauty that was growing
With every step she took towards John. Tears brimmed
Again in her eyes, threatened to start flowing,
But Angélique shook them away. No time
For tears now. Now all tears would seem a crime.

87.

How could he stand so still? He was afraid—
 Afraid to have his trusting heart once more
Laid waste. He could not bear to be betrayed
 Again. One new strain and his heart, still sore,
Would crack and die. He knew it. And he laid
 His hand upon the ladder, left the floor,
Climbed two steps. Angélique stopped. “John, sweet boy.”
She smiled at him. John’s heart flooded with joy.

88.

For one look passed between them and he knew
 There was no chance of falsity in her.
Their two souls, twins, embraced and made one. Who
 Could doubt in this one moment what they were?
She climbed the dock to him. “I’ll be with you.”
 He might have died then gladly, in a blur
Of happiness. But once find love igniting,
And you’ll find life becomes much more inviting.

89.

“You know what it will mean?” She said, “Of course.
 It means I’ll be with you.” John touched the skies.
Romance, while a twin sister to remorse,
 Is parent to a joy that never dies.
It’s not for everyone. It is a force
 That cripples weak souls, withers youth, and tries
To make slaves of those victims who deny it.
It’s not for those who want lives calm and quiet.

90.

Romance, I think, keeps best on meager rations.

Practitioners are, thankfully, too few
To mar the daily business of the nations.

For stay-at-homes like me (perhaps like you?),
Romance is fine for our imaginations

But much too rich and dangerous a stew
For daily dining. Yet could life suffice
Without some romance added in for spice?

91.

Romance. For even a dream of it's enough

To make life more involving than the wastes
Of time we have thrust on us daily. "Stuff

And nonsense!" some would say. Not for all tastes,
I must admit. The hard-nosed and the tough,

The cynical, the crushed, the bowed, the pastes
Dressed up as puddings—they disparage dreams.
Who speaks against reality blasphemes!

92.

No, we—yes, I am one. I'm a romantic.

I do confess it, if this book in verse
Has not betrayed me yet. We are not frantic

With crazy, unreal wants. We are not worse
Than all the solid, blinkered, dull, pedantic,

Poor "realists." We know this universe.
But we still see the possibility
Of wildness in it—or we try to see.

93.

And so we cast aside with scorn a plot
That would condemn our Johnny to a noose,
Or to a prison term or marriage knot
With one incapable of letting loose
Her inmost fancy now and then. He's fought
The good fight; he's stood up to all abuse
With courage and unwavering idealism.
He's earned his Angélique. *That's* realism!

94.

He seized her hand and pulled her close, where she
Belonged. Boudu grinned, helpless at the sight.
He hollered, "Going up!" They hurriedly
Climbed up into the setting sun's red light.
Boudu hugged Johnny. An apostrophe,
A last soliloquy seemed only right.
He looked down at them all with godlike pity,
Then smiled, bowed, and escaped into the city.

95.

Valère was swept away by the romance
And gave Colbert, right there, a smacking kiss.
Geneviève collapsed in shame, in rage, by chance
Of high blood pressure, while Magda, the priss,
Succumbed, despite her God, to circumstance
And felt her sure world turn to an abyss.
What Bienseance felt doesn't bear quotation.
Let's leave such things to your imagination.

96.

And to your fancy I will leave the fates
Of all our desperate and abandoned friends.
Sheer tact requires we overlook their states,
And novels are more lifelike with loose ends.
Let's all come up with our own postulates
On how each role's biography extends.
I will not risk the reader's disillusion
With my own notions of each life's conclusion.

97.

But Johnny's somewhere out there, still alive,
And now and then he makes his presence known,
Even in our prosy world. Where daydreams thrive,
Where hopes of beauty aren't entirely prone,
Where courage, pluck, and chivalry survive,
Defying staid stability's ingrown
Respectability with *savoir faire*,
Then you can bet Johnny le Beau is there.

98.

He's there, and must be there, for Reason's sake—
For Reason cannot keep its sanity
Without a little Romance. It would break
Beneath the burden of lucidity.
Beside the staid oak grows the charmed mandrake
With its dark mockery of sobriety.
Intoxication brings the needed waves
To linear conservatism's slaves.

99.

So bless Don Juan, keep him safe from all
The flat temptations of the status quo;
Hold him upright through every moral squall;
Give him strength to withstand each bourgeois blow.
Though we're too smart, too tame to join the brawl,
I'm sure it's good for all our souls to know
That somewhere in this world Don Juan survives
To show what might be made of human lives.

100.

So now this epic tale's at last complete.
We've lived our hero's life some little time,
Seen him drain every draught, bitter and sweet,
Basking in triumph, suffering in the slime
Of utter desperation and defeat,
And watched him safely climb to heights sublime.
I let him go now, free; Johnny, adieu.
Good readers, all my blessings go with you.