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Three Poems in Prose

By CHARLES BAUDELAIRE

(Translated by Clark Ashton Smith)

Les Sept Vieillards

SWARMING city, city full of dreams,
where the phantom in full day
picks up the passer! Mysteries flow
everywhere like sap in the narrow
ducts of the mighty Colossus.

One morning, while in the sad
street the houses, whose height was in-
creased by the fog, resembled the two
quays of a fallen river, and a foul
and yellow mist had inundated space,
—a setting like the soul of an actor,—
I went forth, stiffening my nerves
like a hero and debating with my soul
already tired, to follow the streets of

the suburb shaken by heavy dust-carts.

All at once, there appeared to me an old man whose yellow tatters imitated the colors of the watery sky, and whose aspect would have brought down a rain of alms without the malignity that glittered in his eyes. One would have said that his pupils were drenched in gall; frost sharpened his regard, and his beard of long hairs, stiff as a sword, projected like the beard of Judas.

He was not bowed but broken, his spine making a perfect right angle with his leg, so that his walking-stick, which served to complete the picture, gave him the figure and the awkward pace of an infirm quadruped or a Jew with three feet. He went on, impeded by the snow and the mire, as if he crushed the dead beneath his worn-out shoes; hostile to the universe rather than indifferent.

His double followed him; beard, eye, back, stick, tatters, nothing distinguished this centenarian twin, who had come from the same hell; and these baroque specters walked with the same pace toward an unknown goal.

To what infamous complot was I then exposed, or what evil chance humiliated me thus? For I counted seven times, from minute to minute, this sinister old man who multiplied himself before me!

Let him who laughs at my disquietude, him who has never been seized by a fraternal shudder, know well that despite so much decrepitude these seven hideous monsters had the air of eternal things!

Could I, then, without dying, have contemplated the eighth, inexorable, ironic and fatal double, disgusting Phœnix, the son and father of himself?—But I turned my back to the infernal cortège.

Exasperated like a sot who sees double, I returned; I closed my door, terrified, ill and benumbed, my spirit

feverish and troublous, wounded by mystery and by absurdity!

Vainly my reason wished to cross the bar; the playing storm defeated all its efforts, and my soul danced and danced, an old barge without masts, upon a monstrous sea that had no shores.