

Baudelaire and the Ethics of Demystification

Zahi Zalloua

Imagination and Poetic Thinking

In *L'Usage des plaisirs*, Foucault describes philosophical activity as “le travail critique de la pensée sur elle-même”; such an activity is not at all concerned with legitimizing what we already know, but rather seeks to express “comment et jusqu’où il serait possible de *penser autrement*” (14-5, emphasis added). Isn’t this precisely what Baudelaire undertakes in poetry? In this study, I will explore how Baudelaire’s poetry makes us *think differently* about our modern predicament; how he changes our understanding of the relationship between poetry (words) and reality (things). I will begin with an analysis of Baudelaire’s profound attraction to the visual arts, especially painting and caricature. Baudelaire’s interest in these genres was twofold: first, they provided him with provocative insights into the human condition, which Baudelaire sought, in turn, to translate into poetic language. In painting, no artist, for Baudelaire, surpassed Delacroix’s imaginative and powerful depictions of the universal condition of man. Second, Baudelaire saw in the art of caricature, particularly in the work of Daumier and Goya, the potential for a radical reconceptualization of representation. For additional innovative techniques, Baudelaire turned to Constantin Guys’ anonymous “oeil d’aigle” for a penetrating perspective upon the flux of urban life. In examining how Baudelaire incorporates these new strategies, I pay particular attention to the role of the imagination in the production of poetic meaning: how Baudelaire’s use of language makes a strong ethical appeal to the reader’s imagination in the hope, I would argue, of demystifying the latter’s false consciousness of reality.

But before we examine how Baudelaire *translates* these modern representational strategies into poetry, let us first determine for whom his call for a “new” poetic thinking is intended. Baudelaire’s poem “Au Lecteur” seems an appropriate beginning place. The poet of “Au lecteur” opens with a critical assessment of the human condition: “La sottise, l’erreur, le péché, la lésine, / Occupent nos esprits et travaillent nos corps, / Et nous alimentons nos aimables remords, / Comme les mendiants nourrissent leur vermine” (1-4). His use of the first person plural immediately implicates the reader in the poem. The figure of Satan emerges as

TROPOS

the presumed source of our miserable condition. Satan has us (reader and poet) under his control: “C’est le Diable qui tient les fils qui nous remuent!” (13). This line seems to paint a pessimistic image of man caught in a quasi-manichean universe.

The poet describes the workings of Satan as those of a mesmerizing alchemist: “Sur l’oreiller du mal c’est Satan Trismégiste / Qui berce longuement notre esprit enchanté, / Et le riche métal de notre volonté / Est tout vaporisé par ce savant chimiste” (9-12). Paradoxically, Baudelaire’s “Satan” becomes a kind of model for the poet: Satan’s supernatural power to transform “reality” is surely an envious attribute for the poet (although this transformation is a negative one—since it is our “riche métal” that is being transformed into thin air (“tout vaporisé”)—it is the formal power of transformation that is being valorized, not the object of transformation.¹ In *Mon Coeur mis à nu*, Baudelaire reveals that in every man there exist “deux postulations simultanées, l’une vers Dieu, l’autre vers Satan” and that “l’invocation à Dieu, ou spiritualité, est un désir de monter en grade; celle de Satan, ou animalité, est une joie de descendre.” One can thus interpret Baudelaire’s “Satan” not as a substantive entity but rather as a dark source present within every human soul, perhaps even as a source of poetic inspiration. In this light, the lines, “Aux objets répugnants nous trouvons des appas; / Chaque jour vers l’Enfer nous descendons d’un pas, / Sans horreur, à travers des ténèbres qui puent,” (14-16) do not necessarily paint a bleak picture for mankind. On the contrary, it is the poet’s imaginative power that helps recreate the world by producing new aesthetic visions of its most degraded objects. By investing the world with imagination (this “reine des facultés”), the poet seeks *both* to break with normalization *and* to transform his world (including its utilitarian objects and banal language) into weapons of demystification. This task is in part accomplished through the problematization of language: the use of the oxymoron “aimables remords” and the paradoxical juxtaposition of “objets répugnants” with “appas.” Not corresponding to the conventional codes of poetic representation, Baudelaire’s use of language disturbs the complacent existence of the reader by violating the norms of readability.

One fundamental obstacle, however, does stand in the poet’s way of an aesthetic transformation of the life-world. After an eruption of verbal energy, “Mais parmi les chacals, les panthères, les lices, / les singes,

ZAHİ ZALLOUA

les scorpions, les vautours, les serpents, / Les monstres glapissants, hurlants, grognants, rampants / Dans la ménagerie infâme de nos vices, / Il en est un plus laid, plus méchant, plus immonde!” (29-33), “Ennui,” personified through its capitalization, emerges as the poet’s greatest obstacle. But why is “Ennui” such an awesome threat for the poet? Unlike other vices and physical monsters, “Ennui” affects the poet (and in principle the reader) at the *ontological* level. It corrodes the poet’s very life by paralyzing his creative faculties: “Serré, fourmillant, comme un million d’helminthes, / Dans nos cerveaux ribote un peuple de Démons, / Et, quand nous respirons, la Mort dans nos poumons / Descend, fleuve invisible, avec de sourdes plaintes” (21-24). “Ennui” is therefore the lack of force (good or evil) necessary to produce a poetic engagement with the world. Yet the poet describes this metaphysical “monstre” as “délicat” (39), producing yet another oxymoron, in order to underline the subtlety of the profoundly destructive workings of “Ennui.”

The last enigmatic line of the poem—“Hypocrite lecteur, mon semblable, mon frère!” (40)—continues to implicate the reader in an ambivalent relationship with the author of *Les Fleurs du mal*. Through “mon semblable” and “mon frère,” Baudelaire creates an illusory and deeply ironic intimacy between himself and the reader. Despite the fact that both the poet and the reader share a historically specific condition, the poem suggests that their sensibility to the external world remains quite different. The poet has demonstrated awareness of “Ennui,” but what about the reader’s awareness? Is the reader a “hypocrite” because he does not feel “Ennui,” or more precisely because he exhibits *mauvaise foi* by fleeing from it into habitual utilitarian routines? Is the poet the only one able to face the absurdity of human existence?

Even though Baudelaire does not explicitly discriminate between his readers, his implied reader is undoubtedly a member of the unimaginative and unsophisticated bourgeoisie, i.e., a reader who is most likely blind to the poet’s rhetoric of irony. Nonetheless, there is in Baudelaire’s poetry an ongoing dialogue with his (bourgeois) reader; as we shall see, the force of his poetry depends upon this implicit dialogue, upon this inter-subjective dimension of Baudelaire’s poetic discourse. With Baudelaire’s reader in mind, let us turn to his art criticism in order to understand better his poetic endeavor.

Translating Delacroix's *Douleur Humaine*: "La Vie Antérieure" and "Spleen"

In the search for a modern account of Beauty, Baudelaire makes the provocative claim: "*Le beau est toujours bizarre*" (*Exposition Universelle 1855*). By defining beauty as essentially "bizarre," Baudelaire underscores its transgressive nature. This vision of art as a potentially disturbing force, a force capable of subverting the banality of modern life, reflects the poet's ambivalence toward the present. In the face of a utilitarian society driven by the spirit of positivism, how are artists to respond to their historical conditions? Should they detach themselves from the triteness of everyday existence—this move translates into escapism or the endless pursuit of Beauty—or should they provoke their audience? Baudelaire seems to suggest the latter when he praises painters capable of "faire vibrer," "conjecturer" and "s'inquiéter" the very being of their beholder. In other words, Baudelaire values artists capable of defamiliarizing people's everyday lived experience by provoking within them "idées" and "rêveries."

Eugène Delacroix becomes for Baudelaire a perfect illustration of this type of artist. The poet's unqualified admiration for Delacroix is evidenced by his many laudatory remarks regarding the painter's works in the *Salons*. As early as the *Salon de 1846*, Baudelaire makes a penetrating observation of Delacroix's paintings (such as *Les Femmes d'Alger*): "Presque toutes [the women chosen by Delacroix] sont malades, et resplendent d'une certaine beauté intérieure. Il n'exprime point la force par la grosseur des muscles, mais par la tensions des nerfs. C'est non seulement la douleur qu'il sait mieux exprimer, mais surtout,—prodigieux mystère de sa peinture,—la douleur morale!" Delacroix's artistic genius allows him to depict the "douleur humaine" so often masked in modern existence. In the *Exposition Universelle 1855*, Baudelaire continues to admire the intensity of Delacroix's female subjects: "Leur pâleur est comme une révélation des batailles intérieures. . . . [C]es femmes malades du coeur ou de l'esprit ont dans les yeux le plombé de la fièvre ou la nitescence anormale et bizarre de leur mal, dans le regard, l'intensité du surnaturalisme."

Let us turn now to two Baudelarian translations² of Delacroix's expression of *la douleur humaine*, the poems "La Vie antérieure" and "Spleen." In "La Vie antérieure," the escape into memory or imagination

ZAHİ ZALLOUA

(it is unclear if the poem is about the memory or the dream of a former life), presumably because of boredom with everyday life, seems to express the poet's nostalgia for a lost paradise, described as a harmonious place where sea blended with sky, music with color: "C'est là que j'ai vécu dans les voluptés calmes. / Au milieu de l'azur, des vagues, des splendeurs" (9-10). But what first appears as an exotic escape is interrupted by a revelation concerning the actual condition of the poet. The impression of serenity and plenitude is subverted by the final couplet: "Et dont l'unique soit était d'approfondir / Le secret douloureux qui me faisait languir" (13-14).

The poet's enigmatic reference to a "secret douloureux" can be read as Baudelaire's poetic translation of Delacroix's *douleur humaine*. Like Delacroix, Baudelaire believes that "douleur" along with "mélancolie" are part of the modern condition and strictly speaking cannot be overcome or escaped. Moreover, Baudelaire challenges the belief that *douleur* must always be understood negatively: "J'ai eu longtemps devant ma fenêtre un cabaret mi-parti de vert et de rouge crus, qui étaient pour mes yeux une douleur délicieuse" ("De la couleur," *Salon de 1846*,). By using the negative substantive "douleur" with the positive adjective "délicieuse," Baudelaire invites his reader to *think differently* about the concept of *douleur*, to imagine a context—certainly an unfamiliar context—in which the words "douleur délicieuse" would be meaningful. Consequently, Baudelaire's oxymoron appears to extend poetic sensibility to the realm of everyday existence, allowing the possibility of an unnatural color having the effect of an aesthetic experience. This exemplifies Baudelaire's belief that beauty can no longer pretend to be eternal: beauty must also incorporate the transitory. As of the *Salon de 1846*, Baudelaire was still searching for an innovative understanding of Beauty—"Il est vrai que la grande tradition s'est perdue, et que la nouvelle n'est pas faite"—the sonnet "La Vie antérieure" arguably does embody the elements suggested by Baudelaire for a modern aesthetics. The movement from a harmonious lyrical painting of a lived or imagined world to the tragic recognition of a *douleur* that lies in the poet's heart implies a vision of poetry that is no longer based on a totalizing harmony (the poem's majestic third line: "Et que leurs grands piliers, droits et majestueux" could be said to symbolize the "grande tradition"), but rather on something that must represent the fragmented, incoherent and discontinuous

TROPOS

nature of the modern condition. In this light, wouldn't "approfondir" the "secret douloureux" mean to aestheticize the poet's modern malaise?

The poem "Spleen" translates further the inescapable nature of *la douleur humaine*. Haunted by the richness of his memories—"J'ai plus de souvenirs que si j'avais mille ans" (1)—filled, like a "gros meuble à tiroirs" and a "pyramide," with painful and tender secrets, the poet reveals his present bereft condition: "Je suis un cimetière abhorré de la lune, / Où, comme des remords, se traînent de longs vers / Qui s'acharnent toujours sur mes morts les plus chers" (8-10). His metaphorical identification with a "cimetière" implies that the graveyard's corpses correspond to the poet's most cherished *vécus*. The analogy between "vers" and "remords" further suggests that it is the poet's own regrets that are threatening the ontological status of his *vécus*. Next, the poet identifies himself with an old boudoir: "Je suis un vieux boudoir plein de roses fanées, / Où gît tout un fouillis de modes surannées, / Où les pastels plaintifs et les pâles Boucher / Seuls, respirent l'odeur d'un flacon débouché" (11-14). The poet's memories (the "roses fanées") are withering; the "flacon débouché" is only smelled (heard) by the "pastels plaintifs" and "pâles Boucher"—both signifying the trace of an unrecoverable harmonious eighteenth-century past.

In the next stanza, the poet begins by reflecting upon the nature of boredom: "Rien n'égale en longueur les boíteuses journées, / Quand sous les lourds flocons des neigeuses années / L'ennui, fruit de la morne incuriosité, / Prend les proportions de l'immortalité" (15-18). Gaining the dimension of immortality, boredom emerges in sharp contrast with the poet's finitude. It is important to note the identification of "fruit" with "ennui" and not with the poet's creativity. After this brief meditation on "ennui," the poet doubles himself, assuming the status of both subject and object: "Désormais tu n'es plus, Ô matière vivante! / Qu'un granit entouré d'une vague épouvante, / Assoupi dans le fond d'un Sahara brumeux" (19-20). This exotic self-image of a nearly impotent "vieux sphinx" corresponds to the poet's movement from a speaking subject ("Je suis une pyramide, . . . un cimetière, . . . un vieux boudoir") to a helpless object ("tu n'est. . . qu'un. . . vieux sphinx ignoré" [22]); the now petrified poet and his world appear to emerge as one in their immobility. Nonetheless, the last couplet hints that the poet's will is not entirely withered, that his agency has not been completely evacuated: "... dont

l'humeur farouche / Ne chante qu'aux rayons du soleil qui se couche" (18-19). Despite the poet's precarious condition, his voice has not been absolutely dispossessed.

What is distinctive about "Spleen" is the absence of a clear solution to the poet's splenetic condition. The poet denies both a return to a utopic *vie antérieure* (since the retrievability of one's past is seriously questioned by the erosive nature of time) and an escape to an exotic world. The poet has no illusion of escaping to a place (some "là-bas") free from *ennui* and spleen. Although the poem does produce some exotic images ("pyramide," "Sahara" and "sphinx"), the escapist force of Baudelaire's previous poems, such as "La Chevelure," "L'Invitation au voyage" and "Parfum exotique," is noticeably lacking here. Like Delacroix's paintings, Baudelaire's poems "La Vie antérieure" and "Spleen" have unquestionably greater implications than mere entertainment for the bourgeoisie or personal aesthetic *jouissance*. Their higher function is realized in l'*étonnement* that they generate through their expression of a profound and new kind of *douleur humaine*.

Translating the Violence of Caricature: "Le Mauvais vitrier"

As illustrated in "La Vie antérieure" and "Spleen," the desire to undermine the vision of a tranquil and stable bourgeois universe is at the heart of Baudelairean poetry. For this reason, it is not difficult to see how the subversive art of caricature (its power to violently invert traditional values) and Baudelaire's poetics of demystification converge. As an expression of *modernité*, the art of caricature is paradoxically anti-representational in nature. The function of a caricature is to distort, exaggerate, and heighten the object of representation in order to reveal to the normalized spectator a more profound "hidden" reality in the being of its subject. Through this act of demystification, the caricature produces a feeling of *dépassement*, i.e., a feeling of rupture with everydayness.

Baudelaire was particularly attracted to the work of Daumier and Goya. Daumier's revolutionary expression of a "réalité fantastique"³ along with Goya's *éclatement* of the line separating the "réel" from the "imaginaire" and his ability to unconceal *la beauté dans la laideur* significantly helped Baudelaire's conceptualization of modern aesthetics.⁴ Commenting on Goya's art, Baudelaire states: "Je présume qu'il n'aimait pas les moines, car il les a faits bien laids; mais qu'ils sont beaux dans

TROPOS

leur laideur et triomphants dans leur crasse et leur crapule monacales” (*Quelques caricaturistes français*). By associating the beautiful with the ugly, Goya’s disturbing caricatures question our belief in what constitutes the proper aesthetic object. His aesthetics violate the expectations of the traditional beholder; for whom the exclusion of *laideur* and *bizarrierie* is a necessary presupposition for the experience of beauty.

In the prose poem “Le Mauvais vitrier,” Baudelaire translates the deconstructive impulse inherent to the nature of caricature into poetic language. The poem begins with the observation of how the most tranquil souls are capable of sudden, inexplicably violent acts. The poet tells us that both moralists and doctors fail to understand this condition. The poem moves through several illustrations of absurd acts: from a man testing quite scientifically the belief that fire catches easily to an extremely shy man expressing an unusual amount of warmth to a stranger. The poet stresses that such actions are better accepted as inexplicable: “Pourquoi? Parce que... parce que cette physionomie lui était irrésistiblement sympathique? Peut-être; mais il est plus légitime de supposer lui-même il ne sait pourquoi.” The next example comes from the poet himself. This shift from the poet as mere commentator to the narration of a first person account of the effect of these mysterious forces gives the reader privileged insights into the bizarre nature of human behavior.

Awakening in a condition of boredom—“Un matin je m’étais levé maussade, triste, fatigué d’oisiveté”—the poet reveals that he was impelled to act by demonic forces. He denies the physician’s account of his disposition as “hystérique” and stresses the satanic origin of the act (implying that his insights into the human psyche are superior to those of the physician). Upon perceiving a glass vendor from the open window, an intense feeling of hatred overtook the poet. Like the act itself, the hatred which caused it is enigmatic: “Il me serait d’ailleurs impossible de dire pourquoi je fus pris à l’égard de ce pauvre homme d’une haine aussi soudaine que despotique.” After demanding that the vendor undertake the arduous task of reaching the seventh floor, the poet is quite unforgiving for the absence of any “vitres de couleurs.” He pushes the vendor toward the stairway and then, seeing him emerge into the street, the poet drops a small pot of flowers that shatters all of the man’s merchandise. These events render the poet drunk with madness (“ivre de ma folie”).

The movement from the poet's yearning for "vitres de couleurs" to his violence toward the glass vendor parallels the movement from the poet's religious desire for transcendence—he refers to the "vitres de couleurs" as "vitres de paradis"—to his demonic behavior in the world. The textual tension between elevation (heaven) and descent (hell) reappears at the end of the poem when the poet demonstrates lucid—but ironic—awareness of the moral consequences of his sadistic behavior: "Mais qu'importe l'éternité de la damnation à qui a trouvé dans une seconde l'infini de la jouissance."⁵

Like the art of caricature, "Le Mauvais vitrier" works to violently undermine binary logic in the poem, that of heaven/hell. The prose poem *both* assumes *and* denies this opposition. It assumes the opposition's existence by valorizing the satanic pull (it produces *jouissance*), but it denies any facile reversal by revealing how the religious overtones ("infini," "damnation," "éternité" and "paradis") haunt the poet's sadistic vision of reality. The poem shows that the satanic pull can only take place within a world that the poet recognizes as metaphysically void of spirituality. "Le Mauvais vitrier" thus serves to remind the bourgeois reader that his positivistic and utilitarian ethos has only blinded him to the metaphysical absurdity of modern existence. Such a reader remains within the binary oppositions of heaven/hell and good/evil; consequently, there remains for Baudelaire an urgent need to produce a Nietzschean-like transvaluation of values that will go *beyond* the metaphysics of binary logic.

Translating the Anonymity of Guys: "A une passante"

Whereas his attraction to the art of caricature lies primarily in the deformation of the *object* of representation, Baudelaire turns to Constantin Guys for a subversion of the traditional *subject* of representation. Baudelaire interprets Guys' desire for anonymity⁶ as the desire for self-effacement. By immersing himself in the *foule*, Guys challenges the Cartesian position—a static position in which the subject is conceived as a detached, mechanical observer looking at the world from the outside. Guys' *engagement* in the world seeks ultimately to produce a truer representation of modern life, one that exploits the power of his creative memory (consisting of a poetic fusion of memory and imagination) in the recollection of his experiences:

TROPOS

On peut aussi le comparer, lui, à un miroir aussi immense que cette foule; à un kaléidoscope doué de conscience, qui, à chacun de ses mouvements, représente la vie multiple et la grâce mouvante de tous les éléments de la vie. C'est un moi insatiable du non-moi, qui, à chaque instant, le rend et l'exprime en images plus vivantes que la vie elle-même, toujours instables et fugitive ("L'Artiste, homme du monde, homme des foules et enfant," *Peintre de la vie moderne*).

With his "oeil d'aigle," Guys is able to notice the smallest details of his ever-changing reality:

[E]t voilà que l'oeil de M. G. a déjà vu, inspecté, analysé les armes, l'allure et la physionomie de cette troupe. Harnachements, scintillements, musique, regards décidés, moustaches lourdes et sérieuses, tout cela entre pêle-mêle en lui; et dans quelques minutes, le poème qui en résulte sera virtuellement composé ("Le Beau, la mode et le bonheur," *Peintre de la vie moderne*).

Through exceptional visual sensibility, Guys succeeds in representing the "transitoire" and "contingent;" in other words, "la moitié de l'art, dont l'autre moitié est l'éternel et l'immuable" ("La Modernité," *Peintre de la vie moderne*).

Baudelaire translates the situatedness of Guys' perspective (understood as *le peintre de la vie moderne*) into the anonymous narrative voice of "A une passante." In the first stanza, the poet turns our attention to the flux of daily events, in a crowded street: "La rue assourdissante autour de moi hurlait. / Longue, mince, en grand deuil, douleur majestueuse, / Une femme passa, d'une main fastueuse / Soulevant, balançant le feston et l'ourlet" (1-4). The incoherence of the crowded street is juxtaposed with the lucid awareness of a desired passerby. The description of her fashionable dress—"Soulevant, balançant le feston et l'ourlet"—invites the reader to recognize the specificity of her modern condition, i.e., to situate her presence into a specific historical context, or a particular life-world context.

In the first line of the next stanza, the historical dimension of her beauty is contrasted with its eternal aspect: "Agile et noble, avec sa jambe de statue" (5). The woman clearly embodies the tension behind Baudelaire's view of modern aesthetics: Beauty must represent both the eternal and the ephemeral, the universal and particular. Whereas her fashion underscores the ephemerality of her image, her "jambe de statue" expresses a Parnassian atemporality. Like most Baudelairean women, she emerges as a mysterious being: "Moi, je buvais, crispé comme un extravagant, / Dans son oeil, ciel livide où germe l'ouragan, / La douceur

qui fascine et le plaisir qui tue” (6-8). Her fleeting presence and the elusive nature of her beauty—“Un éclair... puis la nuit! — Fugitive beauté / Dont le regard m’a fait soudainement renaître, / Ne te verrai-je plus que dans l’éternité?” (9-11)—reflect the poet’s inability to master her; beauty and woman become one. Moreover, his rhetorical question: “Ne te verrai-je plus que dans l’éternité?” implies that the woman’s beauty will be transformed into an image—a memory that the poet will cherish for eternity, the object of endless recollection—making it into a cherished *vécu*. He continues: “Ailleurs, bien loin d’ici! trop tard! jamais peut-être! / Car j’ignore où tu fuis, tu ne sais où je vais, / O toi que j’eusse aimée, ô toi qui le savais!” (12-14). The poem thus ends with the poet pondering the fading experience (the trace) of his ephemeral love.

What started, then, as a seemingly uncomplicated glimpse of a beautiful woman has turned into a poetic reflection on the nature of beauty. By transforming the cliché of *le coup de foudre* into a commentary upon the simultaneously ephemeral and universal characteristic of beauty, Baudelaire subverts the reader’s expectation to be entertained by the simplicity of a conventional love poem. Rather, through the anonymous “I”/eye of the poet, the reader is invited to *voyage* into the flux of a crowded street, to experience the contingent meaning of modern life.

Translating the (Mis)Recognition of the Other: “Le Cygne” and “La Corde”

As seen in Baudelaire’s translation of Delacroixean sensibility, the bourgeois reader finds the recognition of *douleur* quite discomfiting; indeed, his calculative utilitarian spirit demands that he minimize pain and maximize pleasure. What is different in “Le Cygne,” however, is Baudelaire’s appeal to his reader to recognize not only *la douleur humaine* in the abstract (as a universal condition of human existence), but also the *douleur* of the Other, i.e., the displaced subject of modern life. In other words, Baudelaire’s “Le Cygne” embodies a reflection upon *both* the metaphysics of exile *and* the exiled figures of modern life.

From the outset of “Le Cygne,” the poet makes an appeal to the reader’s imagination—“Andromaque, je pense à vous” (1). Who is this Andromache? For the reader, Andromache emerges as a sign to be decoded: an enigmatic being whose facticity must be interpreted. She is, of course, a great mythical figure of exile with a rich literary past: from

TROPOS

Homer to Virgil, from Racine to now Baudelaire, she has been a source of endless poetic contemplation. Profoundly unhappy with her condition, “L’immense majesté de vos douleurs de veuve” (3), Baudelaire’s Trojan heroine weeps beside her mock Simoïs. These tears of her grief have the *productive* effect of both swelling the river and enriching the poet’s fertile memory by providing him with images of a lost mythical past: “Ce Simoïs menteur par vos pleurs grandit, / A fécondé soudain ma mémoire fertile” (4-5).

What in fact triggers the poet’s memory—as well as his imagination—of Andromache is an awareness of the modernization of a square facing the Louvre. Deeply conscious of the contingent nature of the city, he notes: “Le vieux Paris n’est plus (la forme d’une ville / Change plus vite, hélas! que le coeur d’une mortel)” (7-8). The “hélas” signals a (perhaps mocked) sense of nostalgic separation from his native old city. The poet appears, however, to have transcended the temporal changes affecting Paris by way of a return to his memories: “Je ne vois qu’en esprit tout ce camp de baraques, / Ces tas de chapiteaux ébauchés et de fûts, / Les herbes, les gros blocks verdis par l’eau des flaques, / Et, brillant aux carreaux, le bric-à-brac confus” (9-12). This *décalage* between the poet’s vision and the urban world is significant, since it raises the question of (mythical) memory as a means of resistance to the ever-changing modern world.

Next, the object of the poet’s consciousness moves from Andromache to the anticipated image, of the swan. He describes its miserable condition: “Un cygne qui s’était évadé de sa cage, / Et, de ses palmés frottant le pavé sec, / Sur le sol raboteux traînait son blanc plumage” (17-19). The image of the swan undergoes a radical change in the next stanza: “Baignait nerveusement ses ailes dans la poudre, / Et disait, le coeur plein de son beau lac natal: / ‘Eau, quand donc pleuvras-tu? quand tonneras-tu foudre?’” (21-23). This account of the swan as a speaking subject exceeds a simple anthropomorphization of the swan. The poet strategically exploits the swan’s “ouvrant le bec” (20) to suggest both the natural reaction of the “bête” and to prepare the conditions for the swan to speak. The swan’s functional purpose has therefore clearly changed. It has moved from being a mere object of observation (in its struggling condition) to the status of a mythical subject: “Je vois ce malheureux, mythe étrange et fatal” (25). In an act of desperation, not unlike that of

ZAHİ ZALLOUA

the poet's, the swan turns to the oppressive and indifferent sky in revolt: "Vers le ciel quelquefois, comme l'homme d'Ovide, / Vers le ciel ironique et cruellement bleu, / Sur son cou convulsif tendant sa tête avide, / Comme s'il adressait des reproches à Dieu!" (25-28).

The break from the first to the second part of the poem functions to re-situate the poet's vision of his external reality. The poet focuses his gaze anew on the city of Paris: "Paris change! mais rien dans ma mélancolie / N'a bougé! palais neufs, échafaudages, blocs, / Vieux faubourgs, tout pour moi devient allégorie" (29-31). Again there is a lack of *correspondance* between the poet (the inner world of his memories) and the city (as it *is*). The poet turns to allegory as way of dealing with this fundamental discrepancy. By conceiving of the city as allegorical—as a dictionary for poetic creation, transforming reality into allegorical images—past and present consequently cease to have their traditional meanings for the poet. The following line, "Et mes chers souvenirs sont plus lourds que des rocs," (32) refers us back to lines 7-8, where a "coeur d'un mortel" is said to be more enduring than the "forme d'une ville." By claiming that "chers souvenirs"—his most privileged memories—are heavier than rocks, the poet valorizes the *meta*-physical over the physical nature of human beings, i.e., the part of our being capable of resisting the mutable and destructive nature of time.

The last three stanzas of "Le Cygne" illustrate how Andromache, the swan and the poet⁷ are members of a long list of exiles, including the "négresse," "maigres orphelins," etc. His poetic sensibility ("Je pense à . . .") has moved from the recognition of particular beings (Andromache and the swan) to anyone in a state of exile ("A quiquonque a perdu ce qui ne se retrouve. . ." [45]). The final couplet ends the poem with a compassionate *témoignage* regarding human suffering: "Je pense aux matelots oubliés dans une île, / Aux captifs, aux vaincus! . . . à bien d'autres encor!" (51-2). By giving voice to the *douleur* of the Other (47), Baudelaire produces an *imagined* solidarity, or a poetic gathering, linking all beings marginalized and excluded from social discourse.

The representation of the Other (symbolizing the forgotten and excluded voices of *Modernité*) and the subsequent appeal for the recognition of his *douleur humaine* are clearly disconcerting for the bourgeois reader, whose status depends on blindness toward the discomfort of others. Furthermore, the poem's allegorical images run contrary to the reader's

TROPOS

faith in the logic of progress,⁸ since allegory ruptures linear and teleological development of time.

Baudelaire's "Le Cygne" can be seen as a self-critical appraisal of his earlier poem "L'Albatros." In "L'Albatros," Baudelaire made use of the romantic theme of the misunderstood poet. Alienated from the world, cursed by wife and mother, the poet identifies profoundly with the status of the albatross: "Le poète est semblable au prince des nuées" (13). Like the albatross, the poet feels exiled: "exilé sur le sol au milieu des huées" (15). The image of the poet as a helpless victim, however, runs contrary to the image produced in "Le Cygne." Far from being a romantic victim, the poet of "Le Cygne" emerges as a dynamic agent, a subversive subject whose project is to actively *represent* the voice of the Other.

I suggest that we read the prose poem "La Corde" as another illustration of Baudelaire's critical appraisal of his poetry. More precisely, the ethical ideas entertained by the poet in "Le Cygne" become in "La Corde" the object of critical reflection. The narrative voice of "La Corde" is that of a painter, *recounting* an unusual "petite histoire." It is hinted that the story about to be told will demystify our sacred belief in a mother's maternal love. As a painter, the narrator believes himself to be very attentive to his surroundings (not unlike the narrator of "Le Mauvais vitrier"); his profession provides him, he thinks, with a privileged perspective upon the nature of reality: "Ma profession de peintre me pousse à regarder attentivement les visages, les physionomies qui s'offrent dans ma route, et vous savez quelle jouissance nous tirons de cette faculté qui rend à nos yeux la vie la plus vivante et plus significative que pour les autres hommes." The narrator tells us how he befriended a peculiar child in his neighborhood, who soon became, for the painter, the object of artistic fascination. After painting him several times—"Il a posé plus d'une fois pour moi, et je l'ai transformé tantôt en petit bohémien, tantôt en ange, tantôt en Amour mythologique"—the painter developed a liking for the child and, with the consent of the parents, took him in.

Soon thereafter, the child's mysterious and unusual nature is revealed: "Seulement je dois dire que ce petit bonhomme m'étonna quelquefois par des crises singulières de tristesse précoce, et qu'il manifesta bientôt un goût immodéré pour le sucre et les liqueurs." Hoping to put a stop to such unruly behavior, the narrator threatened the child that he

ZAHİ ZALLOUA

would send him back to his parents if he did not change his ways. Returning home the same day, the narrator discovered to his dismay the lifeless body of the child: “Quels ne furent pas mon horreur et mon étonnement quand, rentrant à la maison, le premier objet qui frappa mon regard fut mon petit bonhomme, l’espiègle compagnon ma vie, pendu au panneau de cette armoire!”

The narrator recounts how unhelpful and indifferent his neighbors were during this tragic moment: “[J]’avais vivement appelé au secours; mais tous mes voisins avaient refusé de me venir en aide, fidèles en cela aux habitudes de l’homme civilisé, qui ne veut jamais, je ne sais pourquoi se mêler des affaires d’un pendu.” More outrageous, however, was the reaction of the father to the news of his son’s death: “Après tout, cela vaut peut-être mieux ainsi; il aurait toujours mal fini!” Such a reaction appeared to the narrator as being both absurd and unconscionable. And with respect to the mother, he at first misread her silence—“pas une larme ne suinta du coin de son oeil”—thinking naively that “Les douleurs les plus terribles sont les douleurs muettes,” though, her request to keep the infamous “corde” was puzzling. Naively still, he tried to rationalize her behavior: “Son désespoir l’avait sans doute, me parut-il, tellement affolée, qu’elle s’éprenait de tendresse maintenant pour ce qui avait servi d’instrument à la mort de son fils, et le voulait garder comme une horrible et chère relique.” He became aware of her true interest only after a proliferation of demands from his neighbors for “un morceau de la funeste et béatifique corde.” The actual demystification of maternal love was deferred until the end of the poem: “Et alors, soudainement, une lueur se fit dans mon cerveau, et je compris pourquoi la mère tenait tant à m’arracher la ficelle et par quel commerce elle entendait se consoler.” Driven by self-interest, the child’s mother embodies the despicable values of her culture. “La Corde” thus exemplifies how, in a godless universe, everything is possible, even “une mère sans amour maternel.”

At first glance, the poem generates a contrast between the painter and the child’s parents, his neighbors and all other self-interested beings. Through his horrified reaction at the sight of the dead body together with his enraged disbelief at the true motives behind the mother’s actions, we are, it seems, invited to identify with this naïve but seemingly authentic sensitive artist, whose estrangement characterizes his modern existence. Faced with a world in which morality and sensibility can no longer be

TROPOS

grounded in human nature, the painter does not fall into despair but continues to feel compassion for the Other.

But this moral portrait of the painter becomes problematic upon close examination of the first paragraph of the prose poem, in which the narrator gives a kind of phenomenological account of demystification: “[Q]uand l’illusion disparaît, c’est-à-dire quand nous voyons l’être ou le fait qu’il existe en dehors de nous, nous éprouvons un bizarre sentiment, compliqué moitié de regret pour le fantôme disparu, moitié de surprise agréable devant la nouveauté, devant le fait réel.” If one is to take this quote literally, the demystification of “l’amour maternel” must have produced within the painter an unusual feeling of both regret and pleasure. One can accept that “devant le fait réel” of the immorality of a mother, the painter would feel a kind of nostalgia for the sacred vision of a lost (mythical) maternal love—but in what sense could this tragic recognition have brought him a “surprise agréable devant la nouveauté”?

The painter’s naïve faith in human nature seems to be ironically amplified.⁹ What about his own sensibility to the Other? It is true that the painter finds the child worthy of artistic representation, but by treating the child as an aesthetic *object*—“je l’ai transformé”—hasn’t he also reified and de-subjectivized the child? Although he saved the child from the “taudis paternel,” the commodification of the child renders questionable any facile appraisal of the narrator’s character. Indeed, the reader is left unsure about the “true” nature of their relation: Did the painter merely *use* the child? How well did the painter know the child? Why doesn’t he feel any responsibility for the child’s suicide, since after all it was his threat—“je le menaçai de le renvoyer à ses parents”—that presumably led the child to such a desperate act? Moreover, the lack of a profound interest into the nature of the pain felt by the child—why, for instance, did the child have “des crises singulières de tristesse précoce”?—together with the “surprise agréable” engendered by the demystification of maternal love—which displaces the tragic suicide of the child—suggest, at the very least, a degree of self-absorption on the part of the painter.

And finally, what about the poem’s dedication to Edouard Manet? That is, aside from the obvious historical reference to the suicide of Alexandre, the child that appeared in Manet’s *L’Enfant aux cerises*, what is Manet’s significance in Baudelaire’s prose poem? Are Manet’s representational strategies the subject of a parody? Has Baudelaire managed

to fuse Manet's "unimaginative" realism (since, unlike Guys, he does not paint from memory) with a dosage of irony—since the painter/narrator's own account is retrospective? I believe that Baudelaire's irony is even more profound. His critique of the painter's representation of the Other should be seen as the poet's recognition of his own problematic treatment of the Other. Baudelaire has become self-aware of the dehumanizing nature and the inherent violence of poetic representation. In this light, let us reconsider "Le Cygne" and attempt to evaluate whether Baudelaire succeeds in representing the exiles without simultaneously eradicating their otherness. In other words, can we rescue a Baudelairean ethic from his self-criticism? Or should we think of the poet of "Le Mauvais vitrier," with the violence he performs upon the Other (the "pauvre" glass vender), as a more accurate representation of Baudelaire's later sentiments toward the Other?

Baudelaire and an Ethics of Imaginative Demystification

The elusiveness of Baudelaire's poetic "I" makes his moral and political message difficult to assess. Unlike self-professed social artists, these "entrepreneurs du bonheur public" ("Assommons les pauvres!"), Baudelaire never desired to translate emerging utopian ideologies into poetry. That is to say, Baudelaire never conceived of his role as the moral conscience of the oppressed. For him, such a position would have been excessively didactic, lacking the "esprit poétique" necessary for the production of art. Nevertheless, we can perhaps try to bridge the apparent discontinuity in Baudelaire's ethical consciousness.

In "Le Mauvais vitrier" and "La Corde," Baudelaire voices skepticism about the possibility of rehabilitating bourgeois consciousness, of reviving such a dulled perception of reality. Baudelaire's ironic treatment of spirituality and maternal love no longer makes an appeal to the reader, or does it? Though their message is perhaps less explicit than "Le Cygne," these poems are far from lacking a moral dimension. In "Le Mauvais vitrier," the violence performed upon the Other should not be understood as a "shift" on the part of Baudelaire toward sadism. Baudelaire's poet has not turned his back upon the Other in favor of a nihilistic mode of existence, choosing nihilism over solidarity. On the contrary, the poet's excessive violence is purposefully intended to produce within his reader a *moral* experience.

TROPOS

Similarly, the ironic force in “La Corde” compels the reader to recognize that the poem’s semantic field is not reducible to the demystification of maternal love, but works also to demystify the narrator’s presumed moral superiority. Baudelaire presents the narrator as a man who paradoxically comes to recognize the otherness of the child only once the latter is found dead: “[L]e premier objet qui frappa mon regard fut mon petit bonhomme.” It was the materiality of the body, the child’s *être en soi* hanging from the rope, that undoubtedly engendered within the narrator a feeling of *dépaysement* which, in turn, demanded from him a different (and a more authentic) recognition of the child’s being. But the irony is that it took the death of the child for the painter to reevaluate his previous representational strategy.

Nevertheless, whenever the nature of representation itself is questioned, it seems appropriate to ask whether the poet himself is not guilty of this logic of dehumanization. But a closer investigation of “Le Cygne” reveals that the poet, unlike the painter of “La Corde,” does not simply *use* the Other. Through his representations of the exiles, the poet demonstrates an understanding of each figure’s facticity. Put differently, the poet’s representation of the exiles is not without a simultaneous recognition of their singularities. When he evokes the figure of Andromache, for instance, it is done not with the purpose of homogenizing her voice, of assimilating her voice into his discourse, but rather, with the hope of establishing poetic proximity with her *souffrance*. Baudelaire, of course, maintains at the same time an ironic distance from Andromache, because she has, in her fallen state, deluded herself by falsifying (mystifying) reality: “ce Simois menteur.” Nonetheless, the ambiguities surrounding Andromache’s predicament suggest that Baudelaire did not want to *reproduce* an unambiguous “Andromache”: a figure which the poet could have unequivocally supported or rejected.

Even though Baudelaire’s faith in the ability of his reader to recognize the *douleur* of the Other or to *think differently* about alterity may have diminished in his later prose poems, his will-to-demystify did not waver. Poetry remained, for Baudelaire, a genuine alternative to the social reality asserted and affirmed by bourgeois culture. Indeed, from *Les Fleurs du Mal* to *Le Spleen de Paris*, Baudelaire persisted in the creation of an ethics of imaginative demystification.

Princeton University

ZAHİ ZALLOUA

Notes

- ¹ In “Projets d’un épilogue,” Baudelaire makes clear the affinity between alchemy and poetry: “Tu [Satan] m’as donné ta boue et j’en fait de l’or” (34).
- ² This appears to be in defiance of the warnings of Lessing, who argued in *Laocoön* that we cannot translate visual images into poetic pictures (epitomized in the ambiguous metaphor, *ut pictora poesis*). But on one level, Baudelaire does agree with Lessing, since the poet never wishes to homogenize the arts by conflating the two rich mediums into one discourse. Rather, Baudelaire’s problem with Lessing’s position lies in the latter’s understanding of mimesis as the seemingly unproblematic art of imitation. Unlike Lessing’s eighteenth-century rational universe, Baudelaire’s nineteenth century *experience* of the real is no longer compatible with the belief that meaning is already ready-made in the world. Although Baudelaire never abandons his commitment to the referent, he is more suspicious of its ontological status and the desire to simply reproduce it.
- ³ In *Rue Transnonain*, for example, Daumier’s caricature presents the horrible sight of a semi-nude man whose murdered body is crushing that of his infant. The grotesqueness of the represented object together with the banality of the scene (the miserable bedroom of a poor worker) create a *mélange* that produces a feeling of defamiliarization in the beholder.
- ⁴ In *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*, for example, Goya’s caricature becomes the site where both reason and its otherness (madness) interplay, putting into question the binary opposition of rationality/irrationality: once Reason sleeps it is invaded or haunted by the force of the supernatural. See Michel Hannoosh for a thorough account of the force of caricature in Baudelaire (*Baudelaire and Caricature: The Comic to an Art of Modernity* [University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992]).
- ⁵ As Nicolae Babuts also points out: “In the very act of experiencing the brief orgasm of Satanic delight, the narrator affirms the immensity of the consequences of damnation” (*Baudelaire: At the Limits and Beyond* [Newark: University Presses, 1997], 56).
- ⁶ “Aucun de ses dessins n’est signé, si l’on appelle signature ces quelques lettres, faciles à contrefaire, qui figurent un nom, et que tant d’autres apposent fastueusement au bas de leurs incouciants croquis” (“L’Artiste,” *Peintre de la vie moderne*).
- ⁷ It should be noted that whereas the *négresse*’s displacement is spatial in nature—she is physically exiled from Africa—the poet’s exile is essentially mental in nature, suggesting that his exile (alienation) is permanent, lacking any hope of resolution.
- ⁸ Baudelaire does not deny that certain artists, for instance, have progressed; rather he raises the more problematic question: “Mais où est, je vous prie, la garantie du progrès pour le lendemain?” (*Exposition universelle 1855*).
- ⁹ J.A. Hiddleston makes a similar observation: “Pourtant ce qui ressort d’un examen même rapide du caractère de l’artiste tel qu’il est présenté dans le poème, ce ne sont pas seulement sa naïveté, mais bien plus sa fatuité, sa suffisance et son

TROPOS

insensibilité” (“Baudelaire, Manet et ‘La Corde,’” *Bulletin Baudelairien* 19 [1984], 7).

Work Cited

- Babuts, Nicolae. *Baudelaire: At the Limits and Beyond*. Newark: University Presses, 1997.
- Baudelaire, Charles. *Oeuvres complètes*. 2 vol. Paris: Gallimard, 1975-76.
- Foucault, Michel. *L'Usage des plaisirs*. Paris: Gallimard, 1984.
- Hannoosh, Michelle. *Baudelaire and Caricature: The Comic to an Art of Modernity*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992.
- Hiddleston, J. A. “Baudelaire, Manet et ‘La Corde.’” *Bulletin Baudelairien* 19 (1984): 7-11.
- Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim. *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984.