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1999

# Baudelaire, Theoretician of Modern Art

René Galand  
*Wellesley College*

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Translation of Reun ar C'halan [René Galand] "Baudelaire, diouganer an arz nevez", *Al Liamm*, niv. 316 (1999), pp. 62-70

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### Recommended Citation

Galand, René, "Baudelaire, Theoretician of Modern Art" (1999). *French Faculty Scholarship*. Paper 3.  
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## **René Galand, Baudelaire, theoretician of modern art.**

Baudelaire is not only one of the most celebrated poets of the XIXth century, as great as any of the greatest, Blake or Coleridge, Hugo or Nerval, Rimbaud or Mallarmé, Heine or Hölderlin, Lermontov or Pushkin, Poe or Whitman. He is also one of its best critics, for art and music as well as literature. In his essays on Hugo, Poe, Ingres, Delacroix, and Wagner, he has singled out what makes the true greatness of these artists. His critical writings have been collected in two volumes, *Curiosités esthétiques* and *L'Art romantique*. In all of Baudelaire's writings about art, it is impossible to find a coherent theory of esthetics. Baudelaire himself believed that any attempt to construct such a theory was doomed to failure, for the simple reason that beauty comes in countless forms. After all, the Romantics had already demonstrated that even the grotesque and the horrible can be essential components of beauty.

Some critics, obviously overinfluenced by Baudelaire's celebrated sonnet "Correspondances", have attempted to turn him into a disciple of Plato, for whom beauty is the visible, material reflection of a transcendental Idea, but even those critics have had to recognize that for Baudelaire, the quest for beauty is never accompanied by the serenity and the detachment which characterizes Plato's esthetic quest. In point of fact, Baudelaire was quite violent in his condemnation of the idealist professors of esthetics, those mad doctrinaires who shut themselves up within their academic system and thereby condemned themselves to remain forever blind to the many-splendored forms of beauty. He recognized that the beauty of Oriental art, for instance, may not be immediately accessible to the European eye, but the intelligent traveler who is willing to let himself be influenced by the strange shapes of exotic vegetation, by the unusual smells and tastes of its flowers and fruit, by the native men and women whose muscles do not follow the rhythm to which he is accustomed, such a traveler may come to worship what he had burnt, and to burn what he had worshipped (*Exposition universelle de 1855*, I)..

This does not mean that for Baudelaire beauty exists only in the eye of the beholder, far from it. There is, for him, such a thing as an esthetic ideal, but his notion of the ideal in art cannot be reduced to the academic canon represented, for instance, by the statues of Phidias or by the paintings of Raphael. In fact, there is some fuzziness in Baudelaire's use of the word "ideal" in his writings about art, but this fuzziness is due primarily to the fact that he uses the same signifier to denote very different kinds of signified.

First of all, can the Ideal be found in reality? Baudelaire says yes, emphatically. He has himself experienced moments of ecstasy in which he saw landscapes, buildings, men, women, and animals reach a kind of apotheosis. There have been artists fortunate enough to have been placed in surroundings where Nature itself was so beautiful and luminous that they, having nothing more to wish for, found nothing to invent that could surpass what they experienced directly with their senses (*Salon de 1846*, II).. For such lucky artists, the ideal is nothing more than the real, and they can delight in the contemplation and the reproduction of such a reality. This was the case, for instance, of Phidias, or of the Greek sculptors to whom we owe the Venus of Milo or the Venus of Medici. Baudelaire finds a contemporary example in the paintings of Ingres. Monsieur Ingres, he says, is never as happy or talented as when his genius is confronted with the charms of a young beauty. The muscles, the folds of flesh, the shadows of dimples, the

swelling of the skin, nothing is missing (*Le Musée classique du Bazar Bonne-Nouvelle*).. This fidelity to the model is not to be confused with the school of Realism, which Baudelaire abhors.

Modern realism, as it was advocated in literature by Champfleury, and in painting by Courbet, has nothing to do with the pagan beauty of Greek antiquity, or with the sensuous splendor of the Italian *Cinquecento*. And Baudelaire castigates the partisans of realism, those idiots who parrot endlessly: "Copy nature; copy only nature. There is no greater pleasure nor a higher triumph than an excellent copy of nature" (*Salon de 1859*, III). If this were the case, says Baudelaire, there would be no greater artist than a photographer, and since photography gives an exact reproduction of reality, the ideal work of art would be a photograph. For Baudelaire, however, all that photography is good for is to purvey dirty pictures to amateurs of pornography, and he mocks the doctrinaires of realism who believe that with a camera they can rival the greatest artists of antiquity. These misguided souls hire a group of roughnecks and harlots, dress them up in costumes, have them strike a pose, take a photograph, and claim that they have a faithful rendition of the tragic or graceful scenes of classical antiquity (*Salon de 1859*, II).. They fail to see that a work of art must be modern, that is, that it must be in harmony with the spirit of its time, with its historical and cultural context. This is why Baudelaire has such high praise for Constantin Guys' representations of the denizens of houses of pleasure, and I am sure he would have appreciated similar scenes by Toulouse-Lautrec, or the damsels of the house on Calle Aviñon portrayed by Picasso. For Baudelaire, the modern equivalent of a Greek hero is not a young Parisian butcher wearing a chiton, but an assassin like Lacenaire who walks to the guillotine without flinching (*Salon de 1846*, XVIII).. And when Baudelaire ridicules the painter of a seascape who puts a galley or a caravel in his paintings instead of the streamlined silhouette of a modern battleship, he appears as a forerunner of the futurists who saw more beauty in a modern factory than in a classical Venetian palazzo (*Le Peintre de la vie moderne*, IV).. Baudelaire would certainly have agreed with Apollinaire, who found beauty in the most recent creations of XXth century engineering: the Eiffel Tower, brand-new factories, trolley-cars, automobiles, airplanes, etc. And he would also have appreciated such paintings as *The Outskirts of Rome: Factories of Porta Romana* and *The Modern Idol*, by the Italian Futurist Carlo Boccioni, or the works of other Futurists like Carlo Carrà and Gino Severini.

If Baudelaire rejects the ideal models presented by Classical Antiquity, or the models found in the photographic copy of reality, he is equally harsh on the kind of idealization which is pure academic convention. According to such conventions, the ideal tragic landscape must have definite types of tree, fountains, tombs, and funeral urns(*Salon de 1846*, XV).. There is only one acceptable type of shepherd, and one acceptable type of sheep-dog. Needless to say, these conventional forms of art, which are commonly associated in French with the words "chromo" or "pompier", have no redeeming esthetic value.

There is another form of idealization in art which can be characterized as geometrization. A circle, for instance, is the geometric idealization of a curve, and Baudelaire certainly appreciated the beauty of geometric forms. He went so far as to say that at the theatre, what he found most beautiful was the chandelier, probably for the geometrical symmetry of its structure and for the brilliance of the crystal (*Mon coeur mis à nu*, XVII).. He feared, however, that an excess of geometric stylization might lead to lifeless abstraction (*Salon de 1846*, VII).. In brief, I

have the feeling that Baudelaire would have liked the work of the Cubists, or of such abstract-expressionists as Wassily Kandinsky, paintings like Picasso's *Le Joueur de mandoline*, like Léger's *La Femme en bleu* and *Le Triangle jaune*, like Braque's *La Composition à l'as de trèfle* and *La Musicienne*, like Kandinsky's *La Flèche* and *On White*, but that he might not have been too pleased with the rectangles and squares in a painting like *Composition II in red, blue, and yellow* by the leader of *De Stijl*, Piet Mondrian.

There is another danger in the geometric stylization of models taken from Nature. Ingres, for instance, is never as great as when he surrenders himself to Nature. Of course, he has a perfect right to correct Nature, and it does not matter if he places a woman's breast in a location which goes against every law of human anatomy, provided the resulting effect is esthetically successful (*Exposition universelle de 1855*, II).. This is trickery, to be sure, but trickery, in this case, is not only a right, but a duty of the artist. Ingres, however, makes a bad mistake when he imposes upon the model the kind of stylization which creates a clash: fingers too long and too thin attached to muscular forearms, for instance. What Baudelaire calls the ideal, in this case, is the expression of the individual model as a total harmony in which the hand fits the foot, and the hair the skin. Such an esthetic ideal is still dependent on nature. In his best work, Ingres expresses the movement and the physiognomy of nature, and Baudelaire highly praises Ingres' "dessin physiologique". To this form of drawing, however, Baudelaire opposes Delacroix's "dessin imaginé", or "dessin de création", which he finds greatly superior (*Salon de 1846*, IV)..

The source of the greatest art, for Baudelaire, is to be found in the struggle between the artist and the world of reality, as is most clearly expressed in his prose poem "*Le Confiteur de l'artiste*". Delacroix is such an artist: he rejects external nature in order to represent another nature more consonant with the spirit and the temper of the artist. The best artists do not draw from nature, they draw from memory. The creative process takes place in two stages: at the stage of perception, when the artist's eye operates a selection, and brings out the main lines of the model, its basic structure, so to speak; and at the stage of transformation, in the unconscious and involuntary transformation of the image inscribed in the brain (*Le peintre de la vie moderne*, V).. The result bears the unmistakable imprint of the artist's imagination. In essence, what a realist means is this: "We have no imagination, and we decree that nobody will have any." But the man of imagination would be entitled to answer: "I find it useless and boring to copy what exists, since nothing that exists satisfies me. Nature is ugly, and I prefer the monsters of my fancy to positive triviality" (*Salon de 1859*, III). If the realists were consistent, they would have to say that "the true artist must paint only according to what he sees and feels. He must be really (and Baudelaire italicizes really) faithful to his own nature. He must avoid like the plague borrowing the eyes and the feelings of another man, no matter how great the latter may be; for then the productions which he would give us would be lies, and not realities" (*Ibid.*) Or, as Baudelaire puts it more concisely in his preface to *Les Paradis artificiels*: "True reality exists only in dreams." The true artist does not copy an external landscape, but the landscapes which he creates according to his own desires: "fabulous gardens, boundless horizons, streams more limpid than is natural and flowing in spite of the laws of topography..." (*Salon de 1846*, XV). Baudelaire has seen such landscapes in works of Rembrandt, Rubens, Watteau, in English keepsakes. They have no more reality than stage scenery, but he has found in them, "artistically expressed and tragically

concentrated, his fondest dreams" (*Salon de 1859*, VIII). These visions may be lies, but they are infinitely closer to the only reality that counts: the soul's. This is what Baudelaire defines as pure art: it creates a "suggestive magic which contains both the object and the subject, the world exterior to the artist, and the artist himself" (*L'art philosophique*). Thus conceived, the work of art appears as a victory over the reality principle, as the triumph of an all powerful self over the outside world. Delacroix does not care that there are no pink horses in nature when he decides that they will exist in his paintings (*Exposition universelle de 1855*, III).. Baudelaire compares the artist to a sorcerer who is enabled by his magic powers to build fairyland palaces which will provide him with an impregnable refuge against the encroachments of vulgar reality (*Paysage, Rêve parisien*)..

But can the artist have such powers? Nature and Art are perhaps best represented as two women: one, an earthy peasant, repugnant with health and devoid of any allure; the other, a beauty who adds to her native charm the eloquence of her attire and of her movements, and whose voice is like a trained musical instrument. Every human defect has been hidden by cream, powder, mascara and lipstick (*Notes nouvelles sur Edgar Poe*, I).. The artist has changed the woman into a goddess, but is he a true magician, or just a good beautician? Let's not forget that Baudelaire has written an essay in praise of makeup, "*L'Éloge du maquillage*". In this sense, Baudelaire can accurately speak of "supernaturalism", a fundamental aspiration of the artist, his yearning for a supernal beauty, for the ecstasy which he can experience in the magic world of art where, as he puts it, "tout n'est qu'ordre et beauté, / Luxe, calme et volupté" (*L'Invitation au voyage*). But is not it all an illusion? The artist wanted to create a world in which there is neither pain nor ugliness. Alas! the world which he creates is not totally under his power. Who will be the master, the artist, or the secret forces which are the source of any great art?

Baudelaire does not believe that the artist can exert a complete control over his creative powers. He is not totally free to guide these powers toward the creation of a fairyland devoid of all ugliness or pain. An artist like Delacroix has realized that the first business of the artist is to substitute man for nature. But this substitution is not the result of an arbitrary and willful desire. The artist's recreation of reality comes in spite of himself. There is, and this is the word used by Baudelaire, something fatal about it (*Exposition universelle de 1855*, II).. The supernal aspiration which characterizes great art has its dark side. Baudelaire calls it:"Irony". Baudelaire sees Delacroix as a perfect example of this duality when he compares him to the crater of a volcano hidden under bouquets of flowers. In spite of all of his efforts to recreate the world as a rose garden, the dark truth of the human condition comes out in his paintings in the form of burnt down cities, victims with their throats cut, women raped, children thrown under horses' hooves or falling under the knives of raving mothers (*L'oeuvre et la vie de Delacroix*, V). Delacroix, just as a writer arranges words to make sentences, treats the world as dictionary, but he does not control the rules according to which the elements which he finds in nature will be disposed in his works (*Salon de 1859*, III).. These rules originate in the depths of the soul, they are imposed by the demonic powers which lurk in these depths. Baudelaire sees this demonic quality as equally characteristic of modern art (modern, that is, post-Romantic) as supernaturalism (*L'Art romantique*, XIX, vii)..

For Baudelaire, there is an artist who went farther than Delacroix in his submission to the

demonic power of the unconscious: Grandville. With uncanny acumen, Baudelaire has pinpointed what makes Grandville's drawings so important for today's art critics: it is because of the "mad side of his talent that Grandville is important. Before his death, he applied his will, always obstinate, to noting down in plastic form the succession of his dreams and his nightmares, with the precision of a stenographer who notes down the speech of an orator" (*Quelques caricaturistes français*, II). In other words, Grandville was already practicing his own version of what the Surrealists would call "automatic writing". Eventually, the visions won out, and he sank into madness. So did another artist whom Baudelaire greatly admired for his visionary power, Méryon. Baudelaire also linked the paintings of Brueghel with what he found in Grandville: visions of madness, fevered hallucinations, strange associations of ideas and forms. (*Quelques caricaturistes étrangers*, IV).. Finally, in this judgment on Goya, Baudelaire states as axiomatic that any work of art worthy of the name is tied to the unconscious: "There is in the works born of deep individualities something which resembles those periodic or recurrent dreams which beset our sleep. This is the mark of the true artist..." (*Quelques caricaturistes étrangers*, II). For Baudelaire, this was the trouble with Ingres: he lacked the "fatality of genius", what we might call the demonic violence of libidinal energy, whereas Delacroix, try as he might, could never submit to the classical restraint of Ingres. The true heirs of Grandville appeared sixty years after Baudelaire's death, artists like Chirico and the Surrealists. Baudelaire would have found in their paintings visions drawn from their unconscious, troubling paintings like *Gare Montparnasse*, *Melancholy of a Street*, *The Disquieting Muses* (Chirico), *Gulf Stream*, *La Ville entière*, *Les Dieux obscurs* (Max Ernst), *La Profanation de l'hostie*, *Persistence de la Mémoire* (Dali), *Château des Pyrénées*, *Le faux Miroir* (Magritte), *Dame à l'Absence*, *Parallels* (Tanguy), etc.

In conclusion, Baudelaire's opposition between supernaturalism and irony may best be understood if we consider it as a forerunner of Nietzsche's opposition between the Apollinian and the Dionysian. The Greek gods are the luminous images of man's wish to transcend his mortal limits, whereas the tragic hero crushed by fate, Oedipus Rex brought down from his throne, expresses the dark side of our human condition.

*René Galand, Professor of French emeritus, Wellesley College*

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