Baudelaire's "Correspondances": The Dialectic of a Poetic Affinity
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Over the past fifty years, the rival claims of French Symbolism and seventeenth-century English Metaphysical verse on the modern developments in poetry have been anything but neglected. What is needed, however, is a measure of penetration into the assimilative interest which modern poets have exhibited in both Symbolist and Metaphysical verse. Such a penetration requires a clearer view of contrasts and affinities between the last two types of poetry.

I have elsewhere argued for a Symbo-metaphysical tradition of poetry, a tradition which vigorously re-emerges from the French Symbolist Movement as expressed by Mallarmé, Rimbaud, Laforgue, and Corbière.¹ The continuity of this tradition in modern poetry is brightly, if partially, illuminated by the techniques and sensibility implicit in Baudelaire's "Correspondances." My present object is to allow Baudelaire's sonnet to reveal, not only the intimate bearings of Symbolism on modern British poetry, but also that distinctive character of sensibility which permits a comparison between Metaphysical, Symbolist, and modern British verse.

That we should invoke Baudelaire to clarify the modern trends in French and British poetry, to which he has so vastly contributed, is neither arbitrary nor accidental. With him an impeachment of the logical and banal surface of experience had begun—has, in fact, culminated after radical modifications with Impressionism, Cubism, and Surrealism. An emphasis on the world of dream and unconscious, on suggestion and evocation, on multivalent symbols and intuitive, rather than intellectualistic, perception was communicated by such writers as Baudelaire, Poe, Novalis, and Nerval to both Symbolists and moderns. It became apparent that a new conception of poetry was operative, such a conception as was deeply to affect our present esthetics. Valéry, himself a descendant of Symbolism, has characterized this conception as "une volonté remarquable d'isoler définitivement la poésie de toute autre essence qu'elle-même."² A keen sense of form, an intensive preoccupation with technique were generated—were not only generated but further developed among Symbolists and among British poets of the twenties. Baudelaire's cult of "magisme, sorcellerie évocatoire"

also redounded in a curious overvaluation of the imaginative reality of experience. He wrote: “C’est l’imagination qui a enseigné à l’homme le sens moral de la couleur, du contour, du son et du parfum. Elle a créé, au commencement du monde, l’analogie et la métaphore. Elle décompose toute la création.” And the Symbolists paid their homage—“Baudelaire est le premier voyant...,” Rimbaud acknowledged.

But the affinity of Baudelaire with modern poets, that affinity which asserts itself in the dialectic of his “Correspondances,” is better perceived in other traits: his sense of isolation; his irony and self-irony, correctives of Romantic sentimentality; his acute awareness of diversity and disorder, of multivalence in good and evil, of the diffusiveness in consciousness; and his pungent, almost Bergsonian, sensitivity to change, to the durée. On the level of language, these traits were reflected in the febrile tension of his metaphors—Auden’s “neural itch”—the compression and intensity of his images, the fierce fusion of dissonants and unexpected flashes of analogy, the mixture of the abstract and concrete, sensuous and spiritual. “Il y a dans l’engendrement de toute pensée sublime une secousse nerveuse qui se fait sentir dans le cervelet,” Baudelaire observed—and here we are not too distant from Eliot’s “sensuous apprehension of thought.”

These very elements are the presuppositions of “Correspondances.” The sonnet, no doubt, has an extensive philosophical background in which Leibniz, Swedenborg, Fourier, Lavater, Hoffmann, and Wagner may feature. With this phase of the subject I am not concerned. We may, however, consider Baudelaire’s poem as the metaphorical manifesto of a sensibility. And it is not an isolated sensibility that we face, but one that informs, to a large extent, a flourishing tradition of poetry. The relationship between Symbolist and modern British poetry is implicit in that tradition. Through Baudelaire’s “Correspondances” I propose to gain a narrow, if penetrating, access to some crucial elements of this relationship. The poem is quoted for the reader’s convenience:

La Nature est un temple où de vivants piliers
Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles;
L’homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles
Qui l’observent avec des regards familiers.

Comme de longs échos qui de loin se confondent
Dans une ténébreuse et profonde unité,
Vaste comme la nuit et comme la clarté,
Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent.


BAUDELAIRE’S “CORRESPONDANCES”  

Il est des parfums frais comme des chairs d’enfants,  
Doux comme les hautbois, verts comme les prairies,  
—Et d’autres, corrompus, riches et triomphants,  

Ayant l’expansion des choses infinies,  
Comme l’ambre, le musc, le benjoin et l’encens,  
Qui chantent les transports de l’esprit et des sens.

In simplest terms, the poem presents us with a possibility, the possibility of both unity and multivalence in poetic perception. Unity and multiplicity, identity and analogy, association and dissociation, contraction and expansion, subjectivity and objectivity, constitute, to my mind, the fundamental dialectic of Baudelaire’s sonnet, the framework to his poetic consciousness.

To examine, and illustrate, this dialectic in the context of the Symbolist-metaphysical tradition, the following headings are perhaps as limited as they are provisional, but they afford a basis for telling comparisons between Symbolist and modern.

SYNESTHESIA

Synesthesia is perhaps the most obvious—though certainly not the most significant—implication of “Correspondances.” It levels conventional barriers between our senses and permits a purposive commerce between the various areas of our perception. Edith Sitwell writes: “... where the language of one sense was insufficient to cover the meaning, the sensation, I used the language of another, and by this means attempted to pierce down to the essence of the thing seen, by discovering in it attributes which at first sight appear alien but which are acutely related—by producing its quintessential color (sharper, brighter than that seen by an eye grown stale) and by stripping it of all unessential details.”

A synesthetic image reflects a certain totality uninhibited by logical classifications. It puts the reader in contact with a forceful sensory presence, a primitive wholeness or synthesis of impression. But this aspect alone does not endow the figure with esthetic value: it could be as well the naive reaction of a child or the wanton phantasy of a maniac. For synesthesia contains the element of selection and, still more important, of analysis. This is the second term of our dialectic—the first was synthesis. Analysis is involved when the poet translates the language of one sense into another, not to display verbal virtuosity, but to develop his statement in the given poetic situation. In this a criticism is entailed.


6 This may explain the double aspect attributed to synesthesia, its primitiveness and sophistication. Johansen observes, “D’une part la synesthésie permet d’obtenir le plus haut degré de raffinement... dans l’expression et, d’autre part, elle tire son
To illustrate the point, I shall cite a number of poets who may be considered in the Symbo-metaphysical tradition. The relationship between the following excerpts—these are not isolated instances—should not be hard to discern: “Le silence déjà funèbre d’une moire / Dispose plus qu’un pli seul sur le mobilier” (Mallarmé, “Hommage”); “... il sonne une cloche de feu rose dans les nuages.” (Rimbaud, “Phrases”); “Can words or music reach / The stillness, as a Chinese jar still / Moves perpetually in its stillness.” (Eliot, “Burnt Norton”); “Ribbons of noisy heat,...” (Edith Sitwell, “Switchback”); “Dressed to die, the sensual strut begun, / With my red veins full of money,...” (Dylan Thomas, “27”).

**METAPHOR: CATACHRESIS AND WIT**

Synesthesia is the special case of a special trend in metaphor, a trend, nonetheless, central to the poetic tradition we are examining. Baudelaire’s line, “Comme de longs échos qui de loin se confondent,” backed as it is by the singular metaphors of his other poems, points to an imagination attuned to metaphorical dissonances: a radical and seemingly inappropriate conjunction of the explicit and implicit terms of metaphors. I shall risk a literal interpretation and suggest that Baudelaire’s “confuses paroles” are the very essence of catachresis in metaphor. His own poetry is bristling with such metaphors. Here are but a few: “rêve de pierre”; “corbillards de mes rêves”; “je buvais, crispé comme un extravagant, / Dans son ceil...”; “ton esprit bariolé”; “j’aiguisais lentement sur mon cœur le poignard,” etc.

The world posited by a catachretic metaphor is as singularly a modern world as it was Symbolist. It is not governed by logical norms. In it, the two principles of similarity and association undergo radical modification. Similarity becomes imaginative, unrestricted to any single phase of relationships; association overcomes the native shackles of custom and inertia. The *mythos* of these metaphors is not hostile to the poet: it is a pillared temple, forests “Qui l’observent avec des regards familiers.” It is a storehouse of units of experience which, when welded into a metaphor, acquire meaning and coherence. The dialectic of identity and similarity, of association and dissociation, reflects the continual reordering of experience to which every poet aspires. To the extent that the poet’s world seems inclusive, diverse, and disordered, the commitment which every metaphor makes seems ineluctable, unified, and authentic. The power of this type of figure lies in its capacity to preserve possibility while seemingly making a choice, an inevitable choice. This is the secret of its suggestiveness. Such a metaphor

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origine de ce qu’il y a de plus primitif et de plus original dans la poésie, le besoin de donner une impression concentrée et entière. . . .” See Svend Johansen, *Le Symbolisme* (Copenhagen, 1945), p. 25.
does not merely conjoin its two terms; it initiates an obvious interaction
between them. Eliot’s well-known remark on the fierce fusion of discordant
elements is directly relevant. Fusion creates the metaphor or image. The
reader unconsciously recreates the diminutive mythos, hence the greater
sense of participation. And participation is a definite trait of the Symbo-
metaphysical tradition.

A great number of these metaphors can be found in the poetry of that
tradition:

From Mallarmé: “Une dentelle s’abolit”; “les creux roseaux domptés / Par le talent . . .”; “le si blanc cheveu qui traîne / Avarement . . .”; “sylphe de ce froid plafond”; “Mordant au citron d’or de l’idéal amer”; “Le temple enseveli divulgue par la bouche / Sépulcrale d’égout bavant boue et rubis,” etc.

From Rimbaud: “la soif malsaine / Obscurcit mes veines”; “Le cœur fou Robinonnié à travers les romans”; “des froides sueurs / De la lune et des verdures”; “des archipels sidéraux”; “la lumière diluvienne”; “la soie des mers et des fleurs arctiques . . .,” etc.

From Corbíre: “j’ai fait des ricochets sur mon cœur en tempête”; “L’amour mort, tombe de ma boutonnière”; “le plat du hasard”; “L’heure est une larme”; “Et ma cotte de maille / Aux artichauts de fer,” etc.


From Yeats: “Crazed through much child bearing / The moon is stagger-
ing . . .”; “the balloon of the mind”; “A contrapuntal serpent hiss”; “love has a spider’s eye”; “I have mummy truths to tell”; “Sang a bone upon the shore”; “those great honey-coloured / Ramparts at your ear,” etc.

From Eliot: “I am formulated, sprawling on a pin”; “His soul stretched
tight across the skies”; “the street / Held in lunar synthesis”; “The silent
vertebrate in brown”; “This broken jaw of our lost kingdom”; “The fever
sings in mental wires”; “Accept the constitution of silence,” etc.

From Edith Sitwell: “The wooden chalets of the cloud”; “Their empty
mouths are sewed up whole”; “blue pebbles of the rain”; “The embassade / Of shadows invade”; “The worm is a jailer”; “the sun is a world of red
meat”; “And Love is the vernal equinox in the veins,” etc.

From Dylan Thomas: “The signal moon is zero in their voids”; “[The
hand] that ropes the blowing wind / Hauls my shroud sail”; “My busy
heart . . . / Sheds the syllabic blood”; “driving / Through vision and the
girdered nerve”; “His mother’s womb had a tongue that lapped up mud”;

"The spitted eyes, the salt ponds in the sleeves"; "the meat-eating sun," etc.

The variety of metaphors in preceding examples does not conceal the peculiar unity of an informing sensibility. Besides catachresis, metonymy, synecdoche, and ellipsis are recurrent. These impart a distinctive aura of density and compression to metaphors, a certain intransigence in the poet's grappling with experience. The immediate impression of the figure is galvanic, as if turbulence had been arrested in the most meaningful of its ever-changing patterns.

Another binding feature, manifest in all these examples, is the frank combination of the sensuous and spiritual, the abstract and concrete, the emotional and cerebral. These are the combinations that sing "les transports de l'esprit et des sens," in Baudelaire's language, or the "sensuous apprehension of thought," in Eliot's. Both statements point to an eminent characteristic of the Symbo-metaphysical tradition. What Baudelaire's sonnet implies, we have already observed, is a correspondence of ever-present experiences. These experiences are neither isolated nor static—they are in nature's temple "de vivants piliers." When the frontiers of consciousness are thrown back to embrace the interrelationships of continually self-modifying experiences, language must reflect the expansion of sensibility. "Je fais la part," wrote Baudelaire, "des mille circonstances qui enveloppent la volonté humaine et qui sont elles-mêmes leurs causes légitimes; elle sont une circonférence dans laquelle est enfermée la volonté; mais cette circonférence est mouvante, vivante, tournoyante, et change tous les jours, toutes les minutes, toutes les secondes son cercle et son centre."8

Now, the availability of experience to a poetic sensibility, such as Baudelaire's "Correspondances" delineates, is closely related to the element of wit in modern and in seventeenth-century poetry. And here an interesting facet of the affinity between Symbolist and modern poets is exposed: the notion of Wit, as entertained by modern poets, strikingly resembles the Symbolist or Romantic conception of the Imagination. The fact is interesting because both Wit and Imagination are, respectively, typical accents of twentieth- and nineteenth-century sensibility. Eliot, on one hand, has remarked that Wit "implies a constant inspection and criticism of experience, of other kinds of experience which are possible. . . ."9 Baudelaire, on the other hand, asserts that "l'Imagination est la reine des facultés . . .," then goes on to define it as "une faculté quasi divine qui perçoit tout d'abord, en dehors des méthodes philosophiques, les rapports intimes et secrets des choses, les correspondances et les analogies."10 One needs only

8 Charles Baudelaire, L'Art romantique (Genève, 1947), p. 266.
9 "Andrew Marvell," Selected Essays, p. 262.
10 Charles Baudelaire, Preface, Nouvelles Histoires Extraordinaires, Œuvres complètes (Paris, 1944), VII, p. XVI.
to remember Coleridge's famous passage from the *Biographia Literaria* (ch. 14) to realize the presence of a factor common to both concepts of Wit and Imagination: "the imagination . . . reveals itself in the balance or reconcilement of opposite or discordant qualities: of sameness, with difference; of the general with the concrete; the idea with the image. . . ." Samuel Johnson's idea of Wit, from the essay on Cowley (in *Lives of the English Poets*) "as a kind of *discordia concors*; a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike. The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together . . .," is another significant parallel, pertinent to seventeenth-century poetry as it is to modern verse.

I believe that Baudelaire's "Correspondances" is the keystone of wit in the structure of Symbolist and modern poetry. His own metaphors are to the point—three, cited earlier from his poetry, are given that unmistakable twist which creates the wry conceit. My illustrations from other poets contain a number of parallel examples. In these, wit, irony, and far-fetched analogy are evident. The "neural itch," the febrile tension so conspicuous in modern poetry, is no less conveyed by this type of figure than is tough-mindedness, a sort of intellectual recalcitrance in the texture of our verse. Wit has permitted our poets to absorb and express complexity and discord, to impose form without loss of artistic integrity. For it is, *par excellence*, the dialectic between meaning and contradiction, association and dissociation, coherence and chaos. It is precisely this dialectic that we find in Corbière and Laforgue.

**Symbol**

The pressure of context sometimes transforms a metaphor into a symbol. A symbol is a trope, a node of relationships in the poem. It is a special point of concentration where meanings from various planes meet. It also is, within a particular sphere, a focus of radiation, invested with the power to suggest all the various meanings, on their different planes, which converge towards its center.

"Correspondances" reveals the ideal conditions of symbolism. In the world posited by that sonnet, a symbol engages in a perfect dialectic of expansion and concentration, radiation and convergence, multiplication and unification of reference. Kenneth Burke has defined the symbol as a "verbal parallel to a pattern of experience."11 But in the Romantic sensibility of "organic dynamicism" (the phrase is Peckham's)12 reflected in "Correspondances," the pattern of correlative experiences is more nearly

12 Morse Peckham, "Towards a Theory of Romanticism," *PMLA*, LXVI (March, 1951), 5-24. Peckham puts dynamicism and organicism as the leading characteristics
pyramidal, with a symbol for apex. A symbolic unit acquires power and effectiveness "only because of its relationship to everything else in the work of art." Hence the peculiar effectiveness of symbols in a highly organic language of poetry, and hence the insistence on oblique and symbolic expression in both Symbolist and modern poetry. Baudelaire's "live pillars" and "forests of symbols" have been the signposts to writers of the Symbolist-metaphysical tradition.

It is unfortunate that no adequate illustration of symbolism can be made without sufficient support from the poem's text. Since my space is here restricted, I shall refer the reader to such well known poems as Baudelaire's "Le Voyage," Mallarmé's "Le vierge, le vivace, et le bel aujourd'hui" or "L'Après-midi d'un Faune," Rimbaud's "Bateau Ivre" or "Les Chercheuses de Poux," Yeats' Byzantium poems, Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" or "The Wasteland" or "Quartets," Edith Sitwell's "The Shadow of Cain" or "The Song of the Cold," and Dylan Thomas' "The Marriage of a Virgin" or "Poem in October." In these poems, and many of their kind, symbols are rooted in the organic fibre of meaning which pervades experience, experience in all its variety and interdependence, its adamant and its pliant aspects, its unsoundable depth and its surface shimmer, in short, its correspondences.

THE ACCENT OF SENSIBILITY

"De la vaporisation et de la centralisation du Moi. Tout est là."13 Baudelaire's statement indicates a rare measure of self-apprehension; it captures the accent of his sensibility. One, in fact, is inclined to accept it as the primary dialectic of sensibility in "Correspondances," the dialectic of expansion and contraction that activates the various figures and techniques of his verse. It is also, I think, a key to the affinity between Symbolist and modern poets.

The distinction of a Romantic poet, it is now accepted, lies in his capacity to erase the boundaries between the sentient "I" and its field of perception, between himself as subject and the external world as object. This, fundamentally, is an immanence of poetic consciousness, a bias of sensibility rather than a strict philosophic attitude. But the position involves the poet in difficulties: it undermines his vantage of criticism, his stance of self-apprehension, and his attempt at self-objectification. This, I believe, is at the heart of Baudelaire's paradoxical statement. And it was precisely to overcome such a dilemma that he availed himself of the system of correlatives and equivalences implicit in "Correspondances." For that system, in

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so far as it can be called a system, affords a means of gaining distance from a state of self-involvement, merely by stepping to a correlative state, once or twice removed from the original, and hence acquiring the necessary perspective for the evaluations and judgments which are inherent in poetic statement. The symbol itself is conspicuously such a means of controlling the affective power of language, of finding an “objective correlative” of particular multivalence, and of objectifying an avowedly subjective stimulus. And once again we discover the nucleus of a modern critical concept—and, therefore, an index of modern poetic sensibility—embedded in Baudelaire’s sonnet: I am referring to Eliot’s “objective correlative.” “Correspondances” initiates the possibility of such correlatives, and although some minor Symbolist often erred in the proper objectification of their “states,” the result is an incalculable benefit to modern poetic language.

The central point, however, is that Baudelaire conceived modern art as “une magie suggestive contenant à la fois l’objet et le sujet, le monde extérieur à l’artiste et l’artiste lui-même.”14 This is the dialectic of objectivity and subjectivity. It was as paramount in his own poetry as it was among the Symbolists. I find it deeply relevant to modern British poets who, in this special sense, may be called Romantics (certainly the term arouses no great controversy when applied to Yeats, Edith Sitwell, or Dylan Thomas—or Wallace Stevens and Hart Crane in America; the case of Eliot is only superficially different).

I have tried to emphasize the viability of certain aspects in the Romantic sensibility, aspects that have stemmed from Baudelaire, in more recent times, and that are permeating our poetry through a line of development which I have called the Symbo-metaphysical tradition. The dialectic of “Correspondances” casts a needed light on a tradition that contains both French Symbolism and the greater part of modern British poetry.

14 L’Art romantique, p. 129.