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The contemplation of desolation
On the Motive of the Ennui by Eugéne Delacroix and the Aesthetic Experience as Melancholy

In his writings on early romantic aesthetics the German philosopher, Karl Heinz Bohrer,[1] presents a new reading of Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867); it is a reading in which aesthetic experience is conceptualised as the experience of melancholy. Being early-romantic in its origin it is a reading that opposes emphatically the influential reading by Walter Benjamin in which the writings of Baudelaire are analysed in the light of aesthetic experience as socially and historically conditioned. In this paper I shall discuss how the early-romantic reading of Baudelaire also has an impact on the interpretation of Eugéne Delacroix' (1798-1963) paintings as it allows for an understanding of his paintings as the unfolding of an aesthetic experience of the melancholy of contemplation that transcends the stylistic and temporal limitations put on his paintings. I shall maintain that this is an understanding which is already formulated in the critical writings of Baudelaire if they are read without what Bohrer describes as the historical and social limitations put on them by Benjamin.

It is a theme that calls for focus being put on both the interpretations of works by Delacroix as well as of the writings by Charles Baudelaire. It is, however, unavoidable that the two themes intermingle: not only did Baudelaire as Delacroix' contemporary base a great deal of his art critique on his work, Delacroix' painting is to a certain extent being associated with Baudelaire and his writings, his art critique, in particular. The paradox is that in spite of both being a part of the romantic movement in France in the 19th century this romanticism has been interpreted as a pure traditionalism that was due to be overcome as a result of the development of art away from literary and historical subject-matter towards a "pure" autonomous art. This modernist credo of

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[1] Karl Heinz Bohrer, *Der Abschied. Theorie der Trauer* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1997).

progression was first of all formulated by Clement Greenberg,[2] and it has dominated the discourse around both romanticism and modernism. This, of course, was substantiated by the way in which Baudelaire's concept of *la Modernité* has been interpreted and in that connection the importance that is attached to Baudelaire's emphasis on Delacroix' use of colour. As a result, Baudelaire's praise of Delacroix is being regarded a mistake due to the fact that Baudelaire did not know Manet's art well enough. Had he known him, he would have been the one to be praised for *la Modernité*, and not Delacroix, the argument runs.[3]

In addition to being determined as the first to formulate the modernist claim for the new, Baudelaire is also being inscribed as a central figure in the activities and theories of revolutionary politics in mid-nineteenth-century France. In the formulation of this modernity Walter Benjamin's book on Baudelaire plays a central role.[4]

No doubt, the modernist tradition as it was formulated by Greenberg and the concept of modernity as an aesthetic experience inseparable from "social consciousness" represent two different conceptions of modernity: one arguing in favour of modernism as an aesthetics of pure form and the other as a social experience, closely connected to the contingencies of Paris in the mid nineteenth century. When it comes to the actual interpretation of the works by Delacroix this differentiation looses some of its relevance because the point of view of modernism per se forces the attention into evolutionist aspects, resulting in his art being evaluated in relation to what was before, i.e. classicism, and the impressionism that succeeded. Furthermore, this evolutionary perspective is normative because it implies that what came after was more progressive than what came before, and because Delacroix continued painting history paintings he was defined a traditionalist in the sense of old-fashioned.

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[2] See for example Clement Greenberg, "Abstract, representational and so forth", in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961).

[3] See note 21.

[4] The book *Charles Baudelaire. Ein Lyriker im Zeitalter des Hochkapitalismus*, that Walter Benjamin worked on from 1937 – 1939 belongs to one of his unfinished projects. It consists of two completed texts "Das Paris des Second Empire bei Baudelaire" and "Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire". Besides it includes a text consisting of fragments, "Zentralpark". The version referred to here is from Suhrkamp Verlag 1974. In the English translation, *Charles Baudelaire. A Lyric Poet In The Era Of High Capitalism* (London: Verso (1973) 1989) "Zentralpark" has been omitted.

In the following another conception of time shall form the basis of interpretations on Baudelaire and Delacroix. It is a conception of time that Karl Heinz Bohrer has formulated as the time that is irretrievably lost, materialised first of all in the motive of the ennui.

The Category of Time and Karl Heinz Bohrer's critique of Walter Benjamin

Time forms the pivotal point in Bohrer's book, *Der Abschied. Theorie der Trauer*. It is on the basis of his interpretation of Baudelaire that he reaches his particular definition of time as the irretrievably lost, and it is on the basis of this interpretation that he criticises Walter Benjamin's interpretation of Baudelaire.

In his interpretation of Baudelaire Walter Benjamin reads Baudelaire's poetry and art criticism as resulting from social-historical experience of the modernity that evolved in Paris in the middle of the 19th century. It is an interpretation that has been almost unquestioned until Karl Heinz Bohrer in 1996 presented an interpretation of Baudelaire, denouncing Benjamin's interpretation as a "Fehlurteil", as a social-historical misunderstanding. The misunderstanding is according to Bohrer a result of Benjamins conception of aesthetic experience as social-historical. Instead Bohrer maintains that the aesthetic experience unfolding in the writing of Baudelaire is non-historical and non-philsosophical: it is the experience of melancholy, radicalised in the theory of "Abschied", leave-taking. It is a leave-taking that does not imply a reunion but that is final. As a precondition for experience leave-taking is transformed into an act of consciousness: the present is a figure of reflection and as such it always already belongs to the past.

The consequences of Baudelaire's aesthetics is, according to Bohrer, that it is linked to an aesthetic-theoretical line of thinking and not an artistic-philosophical. Bohrer exemplifies the artistic-philosophical discussion by Hans Ebling, who in his book *Die Ästhetik des Abschieds* makes use of a concept of "leave-taking" as aesthetic difference in Kants definition: "Abschied von aller vertrauten Zielsetzung"[5] (the leave-taking of any well-known goals). An aesthetic-theoretical discussion as it appears in Baudelaires writings, manifests

[5] Hans Ebeling, *Die Ästhetik des Abschieds. Kritik der Moderne* (Freiburg 1989) 24f. Citation from Bohrer, *Der Abschied*, 39.

itself as an "Abschiedbewusstsein", a construction of the consciousness of leave-taking that also is an analysis of the lost time, that cannot be regained: a theory of grief. Bohrer underlines that Baudelaire's consciousness of time as the consciousness of lost time is solely subjective; it is without any historical-philosophical tendency of objectification.[6]

One of Bohrer's criticisms of the social-historical reading of Benjamin is, that he misunderstands the specific constellation of time that is not integrated into his socio-psychological category of cognition. The cliché, that the poetry of Baudelaire is emphatically modern is according to Bohrer a result of this. It possesses, furthermore, lead to a double mistake: the assumption that Baudelaire has a philosophy of history in the sense of a present that can be understood historically, and that a political functional progressive understanding of time corresponds to his aesthetics. The often used term of "historical experience" is even more misleading, Bohrer claims, because Benjamin understands the time dimension of the metaphoric of Baudelaire at the same time as he fails to appreciate the aesthetic structure. Also the poetologically inspired explanation of Baudelaire's lyrical resources emphasizing the difference from tradition is opposed to historico-philosophical understanding. The reason is that it pretends that in the history of form and motive lyricism functions within a secularised process of enlightenment.[7]

Bohrer emphasises the theme of loneliness in Baudelaire's works as a figure of reflexion of "what has been", understood as the moment that passed, in the melancholy of the ennui (*spleen*). In *Fleur du Mal* remembrance is given an elegiac quality, according to Bohrer, and this "Vergeblichkeit" is what distinguishes the form of leave-taking in Baudelaires work.[8]

The figure in which Bohrer first of all finds melancholy materialised is the figure of the dandy as he appears in Baudelaire's poems. As a self-destructive poem of recollection, the present is devalued in *Spleen* because this recollection only brings with it death. The present can no longer achieve anything from the experience of recollection. Therefore the reflection of loss is radicalised. The present is experienced as a modality of the past and recent achievements are transformed into recollections.

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[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid., 109.
[8] Ibid., 38.

However, Bohrer focuses on yet another motive in which the aesthetic experience of melancholy prevails: the figure of Sardanapalus in Delacroix's painting, *The Death of Sardanapalus*. In Bohrer's interpretation of Sardanapalus the dandy is conceptualised as ennui, not as a hero as was the case in Walter Benjamin's understanding.

The *Flaneur* is a central motive in Walter Benjamin's essays on Baudelaire.[9] Here Benjamin defines the *flâneur* as the product and the victim of the same modern capitalist society that allows him to lead the life as a *flâneur*:

> The *flâneur* is someone abandoned in the crowd. In this he shares the situation of the commodity. He is not aware of this special situation, but this does not diminish its effect on him and it permeates him blissfully like a narcotic that can compensate him for many humiliations. The intoxication to which the *flâneur* surrenders is the intoxication of the commodity around which surges the stream of customers.[10]

In his interpretation of Baudelaire Benjamin claims that it took an heroic constitution to live through the transforming and contradictory conditions of modernity. In Bohrers interpretation of Baudelaire's *flaneur* as an "ennui" loneliness preconditions the condition of contemplative melancholy as well as boredom and disgust.[11]

The Death of Sardanapalus and the Dandy

The Death of Sardanapalus was painted between 1827 and 1828. The motive is dominated by a bearded man, Sardanapalus, reclining on a huge, red bed watching what is happening around him. Nude women press or lean against the bed and in the forground a black man stabs a white horse and to the right a bearded and exotically dressed man plunges a dagger into the throat of a woman.

The picture is obviously inspired by a play by Byron, *Sardanapolus* from 1821.[12] The play ends with a scene in which the Assyrian monarch terminates his life of debauchery by a heroic death. Spector emphasises that Delacroix's painting parallels Byron's play in its innovative approach to the monarch, and

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[9] see Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire.*
[10] Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire*, 55.
[11] Bohrer, *Der Abschied*, 51.
[12] See Jack J. Spector, *The Death of Sardanapalus*, p. 19.

displays him as meditative rather than fearful or stupefied admidst the mounting flames.[13] It was a drama that formed the basis for many different versions in France and Italy, according Spector, but one thing that Byron's and Delacroix's Sardanapalus had in common was their approach to the king. The most significant aspect of Byron's conception of the character of Sardanapalus, and the one most important for Delacroix's interpretation was their transformation of the monarch into what Spector calls a bourgeois dandy, "a fashionable and elegant gentleman contemptuous of morality and lightly self-indulgent".[14] At two points, however, Delacroix's painting deviates from Byron's play as well as any other interpretations of the myth of Sardanapalus: the massacre and the bed. Spector emphasises that in all earlier examples Sardanapalus himself is immolated on his *Throne* – as in the conlusion of Byron's play.

Spector brings forwards two different motives, the motive of Sardanapalus as a dandy and the motive of horror. In his interpretation the dandy is a hero:

> This blend of nobleman and bourgeois in Byron's hero reflected the complex mood of those young middleclass artists and writers who, regarding themselves as aristocrats of art, emulated the manners of the *ancien régime*. Curiously, this escape to older models of nobility came to signify by the mid-twenties a real rebellion against the sterility and repression of the Bourbons with whom young Romantics at first had identified. One step more and we will reach the Baudelairean dandy, coolly poised at the precipice of his own mystery.[15]

In art historical literature the interpretation of the Baudelairean dandy as a modernist hero is first of all related to the painting of Manet:

> Manet's paintings of the 1860s included a range of themes directly related to Baudelaire's view of modernity: new modern themes, characters whose existences were being transformed by Haussmann's rebuilding of Paris, "heroic" subjects, derived from "common types", the "refuse of the city". *The Old Musician* represents several such "Baudelairean" characters[16].

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[13] Ibid., 12.
[14] Ibid., 59.
[15] Ibid., 59-61.
[16] Nigel Blake, Francis Frascina, "Modern Practices of Art and Modernity" in: Frascina et. al, *Modernity and Modernism. French Painting in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Yale University Press, 1993), 82.

Blake and Frascina point out that "the one contemporary character who was alive to the ironic heroism of modernity was the new *flaneur*".[17] The name of the *flaneur* included figures like the dandy, the absinthe drinker, fashionable women, prostitutes and ragpickers. According to Blake and Frascine "one of the 'spectacles' of modernity was the populace on the margins of society, a populace which constituted one modern *subject*".[18] In this way Baudelaire becomes the link that connects Delacroix with Manet, traditional painting with modern painting. Interpretations of Baudelaire usually presuppose modernity as the frame of reference as can be seen from, for example, Walter Benjamin' s comments on Baudelaire and modernity:

> Modernity designates an epoch, and it also denotes the energies which are at work in this epoch to bring it close to antiquity. Baudelaire conceded such energies to Huge reluctantly and in only a few cases. Wagner, on the other hand, appeared to him as an unbounded, unadulterated effusion of this energy. "If in he choice of his subjects and his dramatic method Wagner approaches classical antiquity, his passionate power of expression makes him the most important representative of modernity at the present time". [19]

When Walter Benjamin insists on modernity as the only relevant way of relating to contemporary life in the 19th century he bases it on his conviction of romanticism as conservative and traditionalistic.

> The hero is the true subject of modernism. In other words, it takes a heroic constitution to live modernism....With their belief, Balzac and Baudelaire are in opposition to Romanticism. They transfigure passions and resolution; the Romanticists transfigure renunciation and surrender.[20]

Baudelaire, formalism and modernity

While the *Flaneur* was understood as representing the motive in which the modernity of Baudelaire was materialised, colour is the material in which the formal aspect of modernity in Baudelaier's interpretations of Delacroix appears. Also within this aspect of Delacroix's painting Baudelaire is given the role of

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[17] Ibid.
[18] Blake, Frascina, "Modern Practices...", 55.
[19] Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire*, 81-82.
[20] Ibid, 74.

the mediator between traditional painting and modernism. This can to a great extend be seen to be due to the fact that art historians tend to consider it a mistake that Baudelaire did not chose Manet as representing *La Modernité* instead of Delacroix. Thus, the dominant view among art historians, that Baudelaire anticipates impressionism, is underlined by Baudelaire's focus on colour. In a book on the relationship between Baudelaire and modern art the American art historian David Carrier proclaims: "Denying that Le Peintre anticipates Impressionism would be perverse."[21] This statement is occasioned by the debate among art historians as to why Baudelaire did not single out Manet as the painter of modern life instead of Constantin Guys.[22] Carrier's answer to the problematic is that Baudelaire did not know about Greenbergian formalism, which is the reason why it is wrong to try to make him fit into the modernist line going from Manet to Degas and ending in abstract expressionism. Instead Baudelaire "loves the modern world depicted by Guys" Carrier claims: "The presentness achieved by these drawings permitted Baudelaire to overcome momentarily his distaste for contemporary reality, not because he takes aesthetic distance from what he sees, but because he enjoys these images as images."[23]

Even though Carrier dissociates himself from the Greenbergian narrative of Baudelaire's role in the development of modernism, his point of departure is still modernism and its credo of formalism and progression. Therefore the transition in Baudelaire's work leading from "the praise for the bourgeois, and Delacroix's romantic art, and this demand for a painting of modern art" is a problem for Carrier. He describes it as a movement, "which requires a very different aesthetic theory.....Old-masters and modernist art are separately described, with no explanation of how they are connected".[24] What he therefore finds puzzling "is Baudelaire's inability or unwillingness to explain the transition from Delacroix's traditional art to the painting of modern life".[25]

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[21] David Carrier, *High Art. Charles Baudelaire and the Origins of Modernist Painting* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 53.

[22] See for example: T.J.Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life.* (New York 1984) 85 and Anne Coffin Hanson, *Manet and the Modern Tradition* (London, Yale University Press, 1979), 20.

[23] Carrier, *High Art...*, 68.

[24] Ibid., 18.

[25] Ibid., 19.

One reason for Carrier's puzzlement is no doubt his understanding of Delacroix. He describes Delacroix as a "traditional artist"[26] who "achieves that unity which defines artistic greatness, at least in old-master art."[27] "Unity" is a key-concept in Carrier's interpretation of Delacroix and in his reading of Baudelaire's interpretation of Delacroix; simultaneously he criticises Baudelaire's use of unity, claiming that his analysis merely are "clichéd ways of thinking found already in Aristotle's *Poetics*".[28] Carrier, however, has big problems with the concept of "unity" in particular and Baudelaire's aesthetics in general. Sometimes he finds dualism instead of unity and sometimes unity prevails. Carrier eventually gives up providing an unequivocal definition of Baudelaire. Instead he suggests that Baudelaire "sought a compromise, a synthesis of traditional Neoplatonic theory and fascinating modern beauty. His analysis has the problems inherent in all such compromises".[29]

Even though Carrier's intention is to present an alternative interpretation of Baudelaire, liberating him from an inclusion in Greenbergian modernism, he ends up arguing from the point of departure of the same evolutionism that Greenberg is advocating: "it can hardly be doubted that Baudelaire was the prophet of Impressionism."[30] This modernism forms, according to Carrier, one part of Baudelaire's thinking. Another is reserved for the more traditional arts: "Time is divided into two disjoint parts, the era of the old masters (including Delacroix) and the era of painting of modern life."[31]

Baudelaire and *La Modernité*

Carrier's interpretation of Baudelaire is a product of a perception of romanticism as traditional. This results in Baudelaire's thinking being conceptualised as divided into two, a traditional romantic part and a progressive modernist part. Spector did not go deeper into the obvious contradiction he found in Delacroix's configuration of the figure of Sardanapalus but there is no doubt that the interpretation of Sardanapalus as a modern hero in the figure of

[26] Ibid., 24.
[27] Ibid., 28.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid., 66.
[30] Ibid., 127.
[31] Ibid., 124.

the dandy did not fit the horrifying massacre this hero initiated nor the fact that this so called hero was lying on a bed an not on a throne.

If, however, Baudelaire is read differently, if the aesthetics of the fragment and the infinity of the early romantics is allowed to form the basis of the interpretation, the relationship between romanticism and modernity in Baudelaire's thinking is no longer contradictory, because there will be no definitive break between the two. In his art criticism Baudelaire is explicit when it comes to unity: the difference between romanticism and modernism is irrelevant; instead *la modernité* implies a third category. This is described by Maurice Blanchot in his essay on the early romanticism:

> Romanticism, the advent of poetic consciousness, is not simply a school of literature, nor even an important moment in the history of art. Romanticism inaugurates an epoch; even more, it is the epoch in which every epoch reveals itself for, through it, the absolute subject of all revelation comes into play.[32]

According to Blanchot

> the future belongs in its entirety to romanticism because romanticism alone founds it: "*Romantic creative art is still in the process of becoming, and it is even its essence proper never to obtain perfection, to be always and eternally new; no new theory can exhaust it, it alone is infinite just as it alone is free*" (Schlegel).[33]

"Romanticism is precisely situated neither in choice of subjects nor in exact truth, but in a mode of feeling"[34] proclaims Baudelaire and continues, "for me, Romanticism is the most recent, the latest expression of the beautiful".[35] Later Baudelaire develops this point announcing that "to say the word Romanticism is to say modern art".[36] And by modernity Baudelaire means "the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and

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[32] Maurice Blanchot, "The Athenaeum" in *The Infinite Conversation* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 356. Translated from English by Susan Hanson. Originally published as *L'Entretien infini*, (Paris, Editions Gallimard, 1969).

[33] Ibid.

[34] Charles Baudelaire, "What is Romanticism?" in *Art in Paris 1845-1862. Salons and Other Exhibitions Reviewed by Charles Baudelaire*, translated by Jonathan Mayne. (London: Phaidon Press 1965), 46. "Le romantism n'est précisément ni dans le choix des sujets ni dans la vérité, mais dans la manière de sentir."

Carles Baudelaire, *Critique d'art* (Paris: Éditions Gallimards, 1992), 80.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibid., 47.

the immutable".[37] This is the extract that has been interpreted as an expression of Baudelaire's conceptualisation of a modernism of "the new", and thus as one of the first formulations of a modernist way of thinking. In painting it has primarily been regarded as an aesthetic program for impressionism.

Even though fluctuation plays a central role in Baudelaire's aesthetics, it is a fluctuation that presupposes the gesture of infinity, a gesture that Baudelaire poetically compares with that of a symphony: "This great symphony of today, which is an eternal variation of the symphony of yesterday, this succession of melodies whose variety ever issues from the infinite, this complex hymn is called *colour*. In colour are to be found harmony, melody and counterpoint."[38] The conception of colour that Baudelaire puts forward in this extract can be interpreted as the expression of an aesthetics and art theory that stands in opposition to the use of colour in subsequent artistic movements. In Baudelaire's aesthetics the true colourist is like nature; neither can make mistakes and to both everything is allowed. Baudelaire points out that the art of great colourists, who have studied nature, is rarely faithful to nature, "falsifications are continually necessary."[39] This contrasts with the attachment of colour to the object as is prevalent in both naturalism and realism. It is also very different from the practice of impressionist painting, where harmony of colour is static and poetical, based on the laws of the retina. In contrast to these practices Baudelaire describes Delacroix' use of colour as participating in the creation of the unique quality of Romanticism, and "to say the word Romanticism is to say modern art – that is, intimacy, spirituality, colour, aspiration towards the infinite, expressed by every means availble to the arts".[40] The modernity of Delacroix is in Baudelaire's interpretation not tied to any social-historical experience of estrangement; instead modernity is associated to his ability to materialise "the unique and persistent melancholy with which all his works are imbued".[41] For Baudelaire it is this quality that makes Delacroix the true painter of the nineteenth century. Furthermore, it is not limited to some specific aspect of Delacroix's painting but concerns the "total effect, the

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[37] Charles Baudelaire, "Modernity" in *The Painter of Modern Life and other Essays* (London: Phaidon Press, 1964) 13.

[38] Ibid., 49.

[39] Ibid., 50.

[40] Ibid., 47.

[41] Ibid., 65.

profound and perfect harmony between his colour, his subject-matter and his drawing, and the dramatic gesticulation of his figures".[42]

In Baudelaire's art criticism colour never achieves the same independent status as impressionist painting and theory. Instead colour is an aesthetic means in line with movement and atmosphere: "These three elements necessarily demand a somewhat undecided contour, light and floating lines, and boldness of touch".[43] To Baudelaire colour is important because it protects the picture from the tyranny of straight lines: "Delacroix is the only artist today whose originality has not been invaded by the tyrannical system of straight lines; his figures are always restless and his draperies fluttering."[44]

It is in relation to this totality that Baudelaire's interpretation of Delacroix's art as the expression of *La Modernité* must bee seen. To Baudelaire Delacroix's use of colour is only of interest as long as it forms a unity with other formal elements as well as with the literary qualities and rhetorical gestures of the work. The perfect harmony that is achieved in the picture transcends the traditional compositional harmony in its dramatic gesture of infinity:

> Without having recourse to opium, who has not known those miraculous moments – veritable feast-days of the brain - when the senses are keener and sensations more ringing, when the firmament of a more transparent blue plunges headlong into an abyss more infinite, when sounds like music, when colours speak, and scents tell to me to *translate* those fine days of the soul. It is invested with intensity, and splendour is its special privilege. Like nature apprehended through extra-sensitive nerves, it reveals what lies beyond nature.[45]

Baudelaire associates these qualities only with Delacroix's pictures. While Delacroix according to Baudelaire has learned intimacy from Rembrandt, a feeling for decoration from Rubens, a sense of colour from Veronese his paintings have an indefinite quality of their own. Baudelaire calls it the quality of melancholy and defines it as "the passion of his age".[46] An explosion of time is contained in it and it has its own world of ideas and sensations; but if it were destroyed, "too great a gap would be blasted in the chain of history".[47] On the

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[42] Ibid., 142.
[43] Baudelaire, *Art in Paris...*, 59.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid., 143.
[46] Ibid., 143.
[47] Ibid., 143.

one hand Baudelaire places the aesthetic expression of melancholy as it unfolds in Delacroix's work in history. It is contingent and part of history. On the other hand it is without ancestry, "without precedent, and probably without a successor".[48] There is no before and no after only the moment in which the work of art unfolds.

In his essay on romanticism "The Athenaeum" Blanchot describes the romantic art work this way:

> Dissolved in the whole, even if at times (and equivocally) it seeks to establish its empire over the totality of things, romanticism has the keenest knowledge of the narrow margin in which it can affirm itself: neither in the world nor outside the world; master of everything, but on condition that the whole contain nothing; pure consciousness without content, a pure speech that can say nothing.[49]

To Blanchot the romantic work of art is a totality that is neither inside nor outside the world. It has no social nor any historical relation. What is left is time. And when time is without history it is left to itself. In Blanchot's thinking this results in time assuming a totality that is empty. In Bohrer's interpretation time is not empty but lost. Because time does not produce any memory it is irretrievably lost. This is the melancholy of experience prevalent in romantic art, according to Bohrer, and it is this concept of time that is behind his interpretation of Baudelaire's aesthetic experience as the experience of melancholy.

Common to these two interpretations is the assertion that romanticism is not limited periodically; instead it is a way of thinking and a way of perception. From the point of view of this aesthetics our initial problem of the dualism of Baudelaire's aesthetics as both pointing backwards and forwards becomes irrelevant; the whole question of modernism versus traditionalism is irrelevant. Instead the aesthetics of early romanticism allows us to focus on motives and themes in a new way, freed from the normative modernist credo of progression. Therefore new ways of approaching Delacroix as well as the relationship between Delacroix and Baudelaire emerge.

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[48] Ibid., 143.
[49] Maurice Blanchot, "The Athenaeum", 356.

The infinity of the Ennui

One aspect of Baudelaire's aesthetics that tend to be ignored is his satanism. As Bohrer points out, satanism underlies all of Baudelaire's writings. It is elaborated in particular in his essay *On the Essence of Laughter.*[50] Here Baudelaire describes laughter as "an involuntary spasm comparable to a sneeze and prompted by the sight of someone else's misfortune?"[51] Bohrer emphasizes that it is not a feeling of disdain for a society that is found to be unethical, but it is about a laughter that lies beyond anything that is identifiable in moral or political terms, and something that cannot be controlled by the will.[52] As such it is turned into a poetological figure of the romantic school Baudelaire explicitly states: "The Romantic school, or, to put it better, the Satanic school, which is one of its subdivisions, had a proper understanding of this primordial law of laughter."[53] As a poetical figure it unfolds it in Baudelaire's description of Delacroix:

> The *morality* of his works – if it is al all permissible to speak of ethics in painting-is also visibly marked with Molocism. His works contain nothing but devastation, massacres, corrigible barbarity of man. Burnt and smoking cities, slaughtered victims, ravished women, the very children cast beneath the hooves of horses or menaced by the dagger of a distracted mother-the whole body of this painter's works, I say, is like a terrible hymn composed in honour of destiny and irremediable anguish.[54]

It is through this molocism that Delacroix according to Baudelaire expresses "the gesture of man."[55] In the works of Baudelaire and Delacroix the dandy is the personification of this gesture of man. In "The Painter of Modern Life" Baudelaire compares the dandy with a sinking sun. He says that he is like a dying star; it is splendid but without warmth and full of melancholy.[56]

In his book on the melancholy of Baudelaire Jean Starobinsky links melancholy with irony through the association of the melancholy with the

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[50] Baudelaire, "On the Essence of Laughter", in *Art in Paris.*
[51] Ibid., 152.
[52] Bohrer, *Der Abschied,* 89.
[53] Baudelaire, *The Painter...,* 152.
[54] Baudelaire, "The Life and Work of Eugene Delacroix" in *The Painter,* 59.
[55] Ibid., 44.
[56] Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life" in *The Painter*

mirror[57]. He cites the poem *L'Héautontimorouménos* as an illustration. It is a poem in which pain finds itself mirrored in pain: "It proves, if it is necessary, the precondition of the sardistic aggression in relation to its turn into masochism."[58] According to Starobinsky, the reflective action lead the German romanticist to the theory of irony, but as a reflection of reflection ("réflexion de la reflexion"), it does not have any liberating power. If it is in any way connected to "le comique absolu", then the essay "On the Essence of Laughter" shows that it is satanistic: "Irony belongs, just as melancholy, just as the picture the mirror throws back, to Satan."[59]

In relation to this very radical aesthetics the tone in some of Baudelaire's writings on Delacroix seems surprising:

> First of all it is to be noted – and this is very important – that even at a distance too great for the spectator to be able to analyse or even to comprehend its subject-matter, a picture by Delacroix will already have produced a rich, joyful or melancholic impression upon the soul. It almost seems as though this kind of painting, like a magician or a hypnotist, can project its thought at a distance. This curious phenomenon results from the colourist's special power, from the perfect concord of his tones and from the harmony, which is pre-established in the painter's brain, between colour and subject-matter.[60]

While Baudelaire praises the harmony between colour and subject-matter in Delacroix's picture he also emphasizes the literary qualities of Delacroix's pictures:

> Another very great and far-reaching quality of M. Delacroix's talent, and one which makes him the painter beloved of the poets, is that he is essentially literary....And rest assured that it is never by means of a mere feint, by a trifle or a trick of the brush, that M. Delacroix achieves this prodigious result; rather is it by means of the total effect, the profound and perfect harmony between his colour, his subject-matter and his drawing, and the dramatic gesticulation of his figures.[61]

In his writings on the Salon of 1859 Baudelaire describes the imagination behind Delacroix's work as "the infinite within the finite", "The heavens belong to it, no less than hell, Olympus and love!"[62] Baudelaire points out,

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[57] Jean Starobinsky, *La mélancolie au miroir* (Paris: Julliard, 1990)
[58] Ibid., 30.
[59] Ibid. 32.
[60] Baudelaire, *Art in Paris*, 141.
[61] Ibid., 142.
[62] Ibid., 171.

> His imagination blazes with every flame and every shade of crimson, like the banks of glowing candles before a shrine. All that there is of anguish in the passion impassions him; all that there is of splendour in the Church casts its glory upon him. On his inspired canvases he pours blood, light and darkness in turn.[63]

In the first two extracts Baudelaire emphasizes the harmony he sees in Delacroix's picture, in the last this harmony makes the expression of death and darkness possible. This total turn into the opposite mood, the infinity of satanism, casts an ironic light on the concept of harmony, and it shows how different Baudelaire's aesthetics is from the aesthetics of traditional painting. Therefore the concept of unity and harmony, when used by Baudelaire on Delacroix, has specific implications related to the aesthetic experience of melancholy.

Bohrer finds melancholy materialised in the figure of the dandy in Baudelaire's poems. Another motive is that of Sardanapalus. In *Spleen*, as a self destructive poem of recollection, the present is devalued because this recollection only brings with it death. In the *Spleen* poem of *A une Passante* the possibility of any achievement is categorically denied. As a result the *Spleen*-poems turn into an endless mental uneventfulness. Bohrer claims that this is what happens in *Spleen LXXVII* where the speaker imagines himself to be the absolute ruler of an exotic country in which the eternal rain represents the incurable condition of his "ennui". Bohrer finds this figure materialised in Delacroix's tyrant, "Sardanapal" depicted as lying on the bed as a cruel sick ("ce cruel malade"). It is a bed that changes into a tomb ("transforme en tombeau").[64] The "ennui" of the ruler leaves him with no expectations. Not even the massacre ("ce bains de sang"[65]) has any influence on the spleen, the depression of the ruler because in his artery runs "Lethe", the stream of forgetting: The one that is ruled by "ennui" remembers neither the bad nor the beautiful events of his past. Every new event has the structure of the past and it must be perceived and accepted as such. The one that is ruled by "Lethe" has no relationship to time, because its inevitability gives him melancholic power. He will not live, only sleep. In *Le Léthé* he says: "Je veux dormir! dormir plutôt que vivre!/Dans un sommeil aussi doux que la mort."[66] The longing for the sleep of

[63] Ibid., 166.
[64] Baudelaire, I, 74, citation from Bohrer, *Der Abschied*, 172-3.
[65] Ibid., 173.
[66] Ibid

death as the alternative to a life of reflection is the iconographic sign of the melancholy of the "spleen", Bohrer maintains.[67]

In Baudelaire's vocabulary time is turned into the grim God of horror, Bohrer claims and Delacroix's depiction of women can be interpreted in the light of this conception of time.

Horror is in Baudelaire's vocabulary no ornamental word. Horror comes to the artist as nature, perceived as infinite, and this horror is time analytically conceived.[68] Therefore the greatest pleasure ("volupté") does not result from sexual pleasure according to Baudelaire, but from the spiritual: i.e. to cause evil. The evil, that he has in mind is situated in the act of transcendence of the conventional human situation: as the experiment that Baudelaire characterised as a "surgical operation". All the erotic poems of *Fleur du Mal* are characterised by the consciousness of the pleasure of disharmony. The "délice" (pleasure (Wonne)) that *L'Horloge* is about, the bodily lust, implies that there is nothing beyond this lust that engages the worldly spirit. The ideal characterization of the female as a heroine, that associates her body with a horrifying soul is the opposite of the sarcastic melancholy of the Dandy, who sees woman as a naturalistic principle in St. Augustine's sense and as such disgusting: "Elle est en rut et elle veut être foutue".[69] The dualism between a man of God and Satan is not metaphysical but spiritual, mystical. A woman cannot have the talks with God that Baudaleire had. She is not pure.

Baudelaire's manic construction of the female body from theatrical elements allows for sexual voyeurism's and the evocation of an artificial figure is illustrated in the scene that takes place before the eyes of Sardanapalus. In Baudelaire's world the male eye compares his beloved predominantly to "animals", be it tigers or simply animals as such. This construction results, according to Bohrer, from a desire to see women as sexual objects, it lacks an experiential basis. It is a will that seeks a different intensity: that of "infinity" that according to Bohrer characterises all Baudelaire's erotic poems.[70]

Through the depiction of women Baudelaire represents in *Le Fleurs de mal* an abstract thematic of time: melancholy, Bohrer emphasizes. Baudelaire describes Goya's paintings of women as ("cauchemar plein de choses inconnues" a nightmare of unknown things and Delacroix's paintings he

[67] Ibid., 172-73.
[68] Ibid., 126.
[69] Ibid., 129.
[70] Ibid.

describes as ("lac de sang hanté des mauvais anges") a lake of blood overflown with evil angles. These pictures, Bohrer says, represent the ultimate intensification of Melancholie in therms of which the Metaphorics of the erotic poems in particular was formed: the additive infinite excessive content of pictures from the Renaissance and Romanticism. A chain of the voices of unhappiness that never stops, that is infinite "qui roule d'âge en âge/ Et vient mourir au bord de votre éternité!" Thereby, the aesthetic construction of lust in the shape of the female demon as a postfiguration of the specific romantic content of pictures that preoccupied Baudelaire becomes clearer. The transition of erotic fantasies in the pure pictorial content of the contemplative style, that was emphasised in, for example, Goya's "cauchmar" is, according to Bohrer, in a provocative manner affirmed in the poem that blasphemously turns the thematic of the infinite seduction of the female body into the quintessence of the repulsive female animal: in *Une Charogne*.[71]

Aesthetic experience

In the light of the interpretation of *The Death of Sardanapalus* as an unfolding of the aesthetic experience of melancholy Thomas Crows critique of Delacroix's way of depicting women seems moralistic and out of place. He writes: "His [Delacroix's] extravagant projection of futility in the *Sardanapalus* was played out most centrally through imaginary violence against women conceived entirely as objects of erotic possession. The regrettably automatic sexism of the time, which made such extreme fantasies acceptabel, cannot be set aside."[72] It is the same political/ideological attitude that Walter Benjamin expresses when he claims that "Baudelaire's Satanism must not be taken too seriously. If it has any importance, it is because it is the only attitude, in which Baudelaire could uphold a non-conformist position that lasted".[73] As Bohrer also points out this comment about the Satanist element in Baudelaire's language reveals the political jargon into which Benjamin falls: he talks as if the artist adopts an attitude and a position that he could maintain or not maintain, as if Baudelaire took part in a discussion in which he argued tactically. Because he can only

[71] Ibid., 131-32.

[72] Thomas Crow, "Classicism in Crisis: Aros to Delacroix, in Eisenman, Stephen F. (ed.), *Ninetenth Century Art. A Critical History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994), p. 76.

[73] Ibid., 84.

perceive "Satanism" as a politico-intellectual semantics he deprives himself of what was inherited from Edgar Allan Poe, "perversion" as poetic talk, Bohrer claims.[74] The same lack of sensibility to the poetics of Delacroix's figurations that is responsible for Crow's condemnation of his works on account of their political incorrectness.

Both Bohrer and Starobinski compare Baudelaire's poetry to the elegy. Starobinsky claims that "according to Schiller nature and the ideal are objects for dissolution, because nature is represented as lost and the ideal is not yet achieved. *Spleen et Ideal*, the subtitles of *Fleur du Mal* corresponds almost exactly to Schiller's categories."[75] The assumption that contemplation is the common denominator between Baudelaire and the romantic elegy excludes furthermore, according to Bohrer, any assumption to the effect that Baudelaire's aesthetics implies an interest in the representation of social facts. Bohrer points out that the socio-historical explanation contrasts with this romantic-contemplative intention. A misrepresentation of the perspectives of leave-taking as a figure of reflection therefore fails to take the romantic-contemplative complex into account.[76]

Bohrer sees it as both a historico-political and individual-historical paradox that the only interpreter who has taken the contemplative structure as well as leave-taking seriously, Walter Benjamin, at the same time undertook a socio-historical reading that in no way took the poetical peculiarity of Baudelaire's poetry into consideration. Instead Benjamin emphasizes the politico- historical aspect. This resulted in the figure of "the Boheme" inspired by Marx's identification of the boheme with the social group of "professional conspirators". Benjamin accordingly points out: "To illustrate Baudelaire's physiognomy, is to show how he looks like these political types".[77] When Benjamin became a theoretician of leave-taking when, for example, in his first Baudelaire-thesis he develops a theory of the "Eingedenkens" and the "Vorgeschichte" of the "unwiderbringlich Verlorenen" and it becomes perfectly clear that for Benjamin – in contrast to Baudelaire – nothing is irrevocable.[78]

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[74] Ibid.
[75] Starobinski, *La mélancoli..*, 57.
[76] Bohrer, *Der Abschied..*, 77.
[77] Ibid., 81.
[78] Ibid., 107.

The implications of these two different conceptualisations of aesthetic experience are illustrated by the interpretations of *Le Cygne* (The Swan). According to Bohrer Baudelaire's view of art was in the late 50's very pessimistic. He thought that "Imagination" had been taken over by handicraft. In his remarks in *Salon of 1859* he characterises romantic painting as exemplified by Delacroix's painting in very negative terms. In retrospect the Melancholy of *Le Cygne* appears as a homage to the motive of the tomb and Bohrer sees the same melancholic character behind the painting of Delacroix.[79] Baudelaire considered this the most important element in Delacroix' art: "Le romantisme est une grâce, céleste au infernale, à qui nous devons des stigmates éternels."[80] (romanticism is gracious, heavenly till hell, from which we receive the eternal stigmas)

Bohrer maintains that in *Le Coucher du Soleil romantique* it becomes apparent that Baudelaire, in taking leave of romanticism, he also takes leave of art as a whole. The metaphorical identification with the setting sun is no mere rhetorical phrase; it is an identification of great importance, Bohrer emphasises. A doubling takes place: the speaker of the poem regrets the disappearance of romantic literature and its aesthetic characteristics. But, by putting it in the framework of the "Soleil couchant" he once more emphasises that romanticism is as an act of disappearing concepts. Thus, romanticism achieves the greatest dignity that the melancholic consciousness can achieve: it is both an assertion that romanticism has come to an end and it is also an assertion that this "coming to an end" is the romantic act par excellence.[81]

Benjamin's interpretation is different. "The irrevocably lost' is by Benjamin called experience. Thus is belongs to a "mémoire involontaire" and it is not lost for "Erinnerung". It is no longer about the problem of lost time, but about the problem of aesthetic experience that is perceived as an act of recollection. It is obvious that what interests Benjamin is not the individual reflection of lost time as a subjective catastrophe, but the history and the participation of the human consciousness, Bohrer concludes. To have a history and not to have a history is what interests Benjamin.[82]

According to Bohrer, "leave-taking" as Benjamin perceives it does not occur in Baudelaire's poetry . This would demand a past happiness that can be

[79] Ibid., 267.
[80] Ibid., 267.
[81] Ibid., 267-68.
[82] Ibid., 511.

recollected. And this happiness does not exist in Baudelaire's poetry, Bohrer maintains.[83] Benjamin perceives "leave-taking" as constituting a substantial opposition to infatuation. He even envisages a period of happiness that gives "leave-taking" eternity thus associating it with ecstasy: if leave-taking is forever then there is an element of eternity in leave-taking. In opposition to this, Bohrer's interpretation of Baudelaire's conception of time as the pain of a sudden realisation of the pain of loss is a priori negative. There is no disposition to "eternity". Baudelaire wrote a poem on the structure of tragedy of spiritual sensuous experience. Benjamin turns this tragedy into a history in history: such a leave-taking is the historically new of people living on the boulevards of the metropolis. Bohrer claims that Benjamin wants to retell a story of the 19. century, it is a story that does not deal with the pain of reflection, but the pathos of a historico-anthropological change: not the subjectivity of the lyrical I is the theme, but the objectivity of the historical drama.[84]

What does it amount to, Bohrer asks, to talk about unhappiness, an unhappiness that is no longer poetic. Nowhere in literature has the mood of subjectivity overcome idealism with such consequences. Therefore Baudelaire's grief is not only elegiac, it also has a theoretical impact. The theory of grief does not indicate any theoretical *historical* reasons, nor is it amenable to autobiographic analysis. What it is all about is the recognition of poetical grief as a consciousness of leave-taking as phenomenal. Historical theory does not provide a last date for the poetical history of consciousness, Bohrer claims, only the category of intensity that occurs only once and cannot be overcome can provide that.[85]

In response to Bohrer's categorical denial of any social-historical meaning in Baudelaire's work Starobinsky takes a middle position: "One could also claim that *The Swan* also contains a political-social meaning. But it would be incorrect to reduce the poem into that."[86] This applies no doubt also to *The Death of Sardanapalus*. Liberated from the dominating story of modernism the radicality of Bohrer's position paves the way for new ways of understanding not only Delacroix's works but the aesthetics of romanticism as the basis of an aesthetic experience of infinity.

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[83] Ibid., footnote 39, 513.
[84] Ibid., 514.
[85] Ibid., p. 515.
[86] Starobinsky, *La mélancolie...*, 65.