ELEMENTS OF AESTHETIC IDENTITY IN CHARLES BAUDELAIRE'S WORK

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Abstract: Of course, it can't be a question of applying Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) the label of symbolist poet. From a chronological point of view, he precedes the movement with so many years (he starts writing art criticism in 1845 and gives the most important part of his critical work between 1857 and 1861) – that he can only be considered a "precursor", term which however, on the other hand, does not entirely fit a writer of his value, with such an original critical force and sensibility; we see in him, rightly, one of the most important critics of the 19th century. The main share of his critical creation regards, of course, plastic arts and, although we can't say that he was a systematic theoretician, Baudelaire remains an important aesthetician and a literary critic of distinguished attire. It is also true that neither the aesthetic side, nor the critical one reaches the level of novelty and originality of his sensibility, a quality that makes a magnus parens of the entire modern poetry out of him.
It is because of the poet Baudelaire, that his aesthetical and critical writings drew so much attention: we must add that – with very few exceptions – neither the aesthetic, nor the criticism of Baudelaire is actually situated at the level of a rationalization of the poetics implicit in his proper creation. But Baudelaire's aesthetic plays nonetheless an important historical role in the transmission of certain romantic motives from the predecessors to the end of the 19th century, not the "romanticism" in the French meaning of emotionalism, of cult of nature and exaltation of the ego, but, sooner, the German and English inspiration doctrine regarding the creative imagination, the rhetoric of certain metamorphoses and the role – central, here – of the symbol.

Keywords: art, aesthetic, poetic vision, artistic experience, cultural identity.

Baudelaire's art criticism went on in parallel with his poetic explorations, inaugurating the modern research of poetry with the instruments of aesthetics. Benefiting from the romantic rupture, with the notion of gender, and retaking the romantic ideal of art synchronism – that of Delacroix, of Hugo and Wagner, Baudelaire will conclude that art, poetry, harmony, melody, sensuality and thinking, the heroism of modern life, reunited, must make a unitary whole in the great romantic artist. He does not conceive of poetry as being different, in its nature, from painting or music, but sees, on the contrary, in this poetic unity of different languages, an application and a confirmation of the aesthetic of analogy and correspondence, because not only "perfumes, colours and sounds answer each other", but also the arts themselves; the colours of painting, sounds of music, syllables, rhythms and allegories of poetry. Baudelaire's effort was directed towards the perfection of an aesthetic spirituality capable of founding a universal poetry in whose bosom verbal poetry is nothing more than a possible technical expression. In all which he wrote, we find the constant preoccupation for this problem: in poetry, prose, criticism, in "Les Fleurs du Mal" (1857, 1861), in "Petits poèmes en prose" (1861-1869), in "Curiosités esthétiques", the pages written about Delacroix, about Constantin Guys or Wagner, about Hugo, Gautier or *The pagan school.* How satisfied he was when he spoke of the poetry of the painting of Delacroix, of the poetry of the music of Wagner, of the poetry of the caricatures of Goya, next to which he put his verbal poetry to procure moments of delight for the poetry lover!

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In the sonnet *Correspondances*, the poet denounces, it is true, an occult theory; in poetry, he resorts to synaesthesia, as if it were a simple analogy in the great dictionary of symbolism, in the same way in which he constantly resorts to comparisons between arts, characterizing paintings in musical terms, or musical compositions in visual images, without however confusing the specificity of arts or supporting their fusion. Although Baudelaire make free parallels between arts, stating, for example, that a poem by Gautier reminds him of a symphony of Beethoven[1], he does not bother to state that "the infringement of one art upon another" is a flaw[2] and that "any art must be sufficient for itself and, at the same time, must remain within its own, providential limits"[3]. At most, Baudelaire will admit that the tendency towards a fusion of the arts is a symptom of his era, which he considers decadent. "Arts aspire, if not to substitute each other, at least to lend one another new forces"[4]. Baudelaire understands Wagner's intention to bring each art to flourishing in its own terms, to produce the synthetic art of musical drama, which does not embody a fusion of the arts, but their working together for a common goal. When, in his article about Wagner, Baudelaire quotes his own sonnet *Correspondances*, he does nothing but justify, in this way, the verbal description made to the "Lohengrin" overture, in aerial light and analogies of white. However, we can't speak about the fusion of sense in his case; we are dealing with an art of translation, rhetoric of analogies in which metaphors, alternating among senses, plays just a minor part. The false idea, that this unique procedure represents the reference centre of the entire symbolism and its interpretation, as a clinical feature of those poets, made symbolism questionable, as decadent and pathologic.

But, in order to arrive at the understanding of this universal poetry, a poet like Baudelaire was necessary, obsessed with the faith in the original sin, which imposed the necessity of a spiritual perfecting. And as the sin lurks both art, as well as the soul, he committed himself with all resources to the feverish search of equivalences between art and the spiritual. Art must have a soul.

For Baudelaire, the "spiritual" is that "frontier world", where the work of art traces its existence in the contact and community of man with the supernatural, that is why the aesthetic form of spiritualism is supernaturalism, key words of art and of the soul, in the unity of their language, which is poetry, whether it's about verb or colour, rhythms or shapes. He had the aesthetic nostalgia of the spiritual, whether it's about painting, literature or music, law of the entire creation, of any creation. In his opinion, only through creation can one achieve the salvation of the spirit. Baudelaire rejects with irritation the term of "realism" – "a disgusting insult thrown before all analysts, a vague and elastic word which, for the rabble, means not a new method of creation, but sooner a minute description of the accessories"[5]. There are, says Baudelaire, two categories of artists. The realists, whom he prefers to name "positivists", are the ones stating: "I want to represent things as they are, or as they would be, presuming I wouldn't exist". The universe without man. The other, the imaginative artist, says: "I want to enlighten things with their own spirit, projecting their reflex on other spirits"[6].

And as art situates itself beyond nature, he declares that beauty is heterogeneous to the nature, which the artist must, on the contrary, subject to numerous magical operations, as the women does when she creates herself, through make-up, a beauty which nature did not give her. The entire aesthetic of Baudelaire is a development of this "eulogy of make-up" that

[1] Ch. Baudelaire, *L'art romantique,* 1962, p. 177.
[2] Ch. Baudelaire, *Curiosités esthétiques,* 1962, p. 168.
[3] Ch. Baudelaire, *L'art romantique,* 1962, p. 129.
[4] *Ibidem*, p. 5.
[5] Ch. Baudelaire, *L'art romantique,* 1962, p. 399.
[6] Ch. Baudelaire, *Curiosités esthétiques,* 1962, p. 284.

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forms an important chapter in the article: "Le Peintre de la vie moderne", acknowledged to Constantin Guys, the painter of this beauty of artifice. Nature must be reduced to purity to be able to be lifted to spirituality. The artist must be a "perfect chemist in order to be able to metamorphose in gold the marsh offered by nature and by man, and to achieve through this, the dignity of the *holy soul*". We could say that the verse "Comme un parfait chimiste et comme une âme sainte", which is part of the epilogue project for the volume "Les Fleurs du Mal", constitutes the most authentic testament of Baudelaire.

There is, in Baudelaire, an aspiration to mysticism, a belief that art, in its climaxes, means vision, ecstasy and, as such, a certain inspiration, a search – almost with the meaning given by Wordsworth – after "banks of time". As in the case of Edgar Allan Poe, there is an abyss between the accent placed on deliberation, lucid calculus, work and will, on one hand, and the striving for supernatural beauty, for an achievable childhood paradise and achieved only in the moments of ecstasy, on the other hand. But, overall, Baudelaire distinguishes himself from Poe (and even from himself at certain times), by the fact that he interprets beauty not as a vaporous ideal, but as an actual-human thing, even evil, satanic, bizarre and grotesque. Baudelaire's doctrine comprises, partly, an aesthetic of evil, a belief in the power of the artist to defeat any impediment, to overcome all obstacles, to reveal "the flowers" of evil[7]. But it means more: Baudelaire masters authentically the creative imagination, the subject-object dialectics, the rhetoric of artistic transformations, grounded on a theory of analogies, correspondences and universal symbols.

The artist must not accept the confusion between "gold" and "marsh", this sin of the world which is the aesthetic error, ignoring the conditions of the alchemist perfection, the perpetual attachment to the multiform illusions of a corrupt sensibility: imitations, sentimentalism, picturesqueness, realism, positive art, moralism, didacticism. This "parfait chimiste" must use purely spiritual techniques, experimental techniques with which he can discover or revive the soul, techniques subjected, for this, to a double law: the law of the supernatural and the law of art unity. Baudelaire embraces Heine's "supernatural" credo, from which he also quotes, in the sense that "the artist can't find all types in nature, but the most remarkable are revealed in his own soul, such as the innate symbolism of innate ideas"[8]. Here, Baudelaire can accept a credo, ultimately Neo-Platonic, in the interior model, in the vision of the "artist who dominates his model, such as the Creator dominates His own creation"[9]. This "supernatural" credo means, in practice, abhorrence towards the theories of naturalism and realism, flourishing at that time.

By knowing and studying profoundly the romanticism and by escaping its shortcomings, Baudelaire purifies his look and comes to reach an authentic supernature, that of Delacroix, of Maryon, of Legros, of Wagner or of Edgar Poe. But each artist produces his own super-nature, that is why Baudelaire subjects both the critic, as well as the painter, sculptor, musician, poet or novelist to the same requirement, the requirement of pure art, because only by purity can arts dominate their technical divergences and reach, by the correspondence of their languages, a common spirituality, that of art's own soul. That is why no divergence is found in Baudelaire between the experience of critic and that of poet, because both are based on the same aesthetic requirement supported on an experimental dialectics of lucidity and passion, of knowledge and admiration.

For this, the poet-critic opposes a total and absolute refusal to all aspects of aesthetic conformism; he refuses the plastic poetry and neopaganism, protests against moralism and

[7] See the projected preface to *Les Fleures du Mal*, 1925, p. 373.
[8] Quoted by Sainte – Beuve, in *Portraits littéraires,* volume 2, 1833, p. 256-257.
[9] Ch. Baudelaire, *Curiosités esthétiques,* p. 108.

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against the aesthetic of art's social utility, whom he provides a liberating potential. For him, poetics and spirituality have their primary source in these refusals. But in Baudelaire also the craving for the unusual manifests, a kind of reality which manifests itself simultaneously, after mysterious correspondences in the interior world and in the exterior world, and which is, in many ways, the shell of what is positive, natural or formal, unusual that at him identifies with the poetic that dominates "Les Fleurs du Mal" and explains the fascinating originality of the volume "Petits Poémes en Prose". It is a poetics of amazement that involves a poetics of the bizarre and of the unusual. Baudelaire will declare that "Beauty is always bizarre", because it contains some naïve, unwanted, unconscious bizarreness, which makes it stand out.

This poetics of amazement belongs to all arts, because they, in turn, belong to the same universal poetry, as was remembered before. The inexhaustible scope of the unusual, fantastic or ordinary, imaginary or real, is a true "forest of symbols", that triggers the free operation of dreaming and imagination, producing those "holidays of the brain" in each true artist, whether he is a poet, painter, musician, choreographer etc. Reaching universal valences, poetry will become a true "spiritual catharsis" that allows the artist to hear "the language of flowers and of mute things". Therefore, it comes to "pure art" and not to "art for art's sake", because it achieves, by a sort of absolute lyricism, direct communication with the interior of the soul.

Pure art operates an overcoming, beyond positive and useful, in order to reach poetic purity, beyond shape in order to reach a magical spirituality and beyond nature in order to reach supernaturalism. "In poetry and through poetry, in music and through it, the soul glimpses at the splendours beyond the grave". Only overcoming this screens that mask the clear-obscure of the soul (positivism, naturalism and formalism) to reach the discovery of the poetic paradise and the knowing of poetic anguish, which is not done by "art for art's sake", but only by "pure art", based on that absolute baudelairian refusal, art which can reach the supernaturalist magic.

Baudelaire is an intransigent of purity, he is painfully sensible to everything that surrounds him: firstly to the helplessness of a romanticism that forgot more and more that it must be before all a new way of feeling; to the abuses of the picturesque, whether it is fantastic, exotic, oriental or pseudo-dramatic; to the decadent romanticism, which a Louis Boulanger represents, or some small masters of historic painting such as Robert-Fleury.

The poet-critic will have to defend pure art on several fronts at once. He will use the work of Delacroix, a loner of art, as fortress of intransigency and of truth, and he will also rely on other loners, promoters of pure art such as Poe, Wagner, Daumier or Leryon.

One of the resorts of pure art is imagination, which occupies an important place in the baudelairian aesthetic as the "queen of faculties", the ordinator of the "brain holidays", the true supernatural paradise. Imagination establishes the unity between criticism and creation, between criticism and painting or poetry, as a queen of creation and queen of knowledge, at the same time, because it covers the entire spiritual, divine and satanic, comic and epopee, painting, theatre, novel and poetry. Only an aesthetic of unity, of spiritual totality, could satisfy Baudelaire. He started by discovering alone, in himself, than in the works of Delacroix, of Corot and of Théodore Rousseau, than Edgar Poe made him conceive it as a true doctrine, solid and undeniable.

Thus, starting from a simple aesthetic curiosity, native impulse, that became with the aid of the dandyism cultivated by him, conscience and will, started than looking for pure art, in an aesthetic universe that multiplied impurities and diversions, entertainments, in the Pascalian sense of the word, Baudelaire comes to have in the end the unitary and intransigent reference that establishes definitively *the order of Beauty.*

The aesthetic experience, ordered around the absolute power of imagination reaches thus admiration, which comes to cover the spiritual curiosity: itinerary without detour and

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without deadlock, throughout which the great protagonists of supernaturalist literature will appear in the unity of their diversity.

But Baudelaire did not find his true spiritual brothers amongst the poets of the verb, with the exception of Edgar Poe, who came from abroad, but amongst the poets of music, of colours and shapes, with the entire range of possible admirations, on all registers of supernaturalism, from Wagner to Delacroix and to Constantin Guys, from Corot to Daumier, from Goya to Legros. He gathered in the profound unity of his spiritual nature the ampleness of his aesthetic universe, marked by the accuracy and originality of his critical judgments.

But for the achievement of this performance which would suddenly elevate him above the sterile polemics practiced with great pleasure by contemporaries, such as Delécluze or Planche, Gautier or Thoré, Baudelaire promoted, as a good spiritualist and conscientiously, the sacred principle of inter-subjective identification of knowledge, that of the reader or spectator with that of the spirit which dwells and breathes in the viewed, read or heard work, principle notice with much evidence in the modern criticism in certain critics such as: Thibaudet, Du Bos, Rivière, Raymond, Béguin, Starobinsky, Richard and others, as also George Poulet noticed in his speech "Baudelaire, précurseur de la critique moderne", held with the occasion of celebrating the centennial of the poet's death (*Journées Baudelaire*, Actes du colloque, Namur – Bruxelles, 10-13 Oct. 1967), in which he considered Baudelaire one of the founders of modern criticism.

What helped the poet-critic very much in realizing this identification in the ideal manner is the fact that he tastes the work which he was going to analyse both as a reader or artist, as well as a creator and, finally, as a critic, hence besides the direct identification at the level of the poetry or of the work of art, he also realizes a double identification: poet-object and critic-poet, his imagination no longer being satisfied with the rebirth or revival of interior life of another, it recreates it in the shape of correspondent feelings which the contemplation of another's past makes revive in him. The poetic identification act comes to a repeating, the happiness or unhappiness of another repeating itself in the poet – critic's thought and sensibility and finding here an equivalent expression force. If we also add the creator's intuitions – the scope of the spiritual provides them to him – we find ourselves in the presence of some equivalences pushed to perfection, equivalences that help establish, without reproach, the value of each analysed work. That is why in art criticism, translating the expression communicated by a painting does not mean repainting it in words, but expressing what it suggests, because the painting, as the poem, represents a system of suggestions to which the art or literature amateur must conform. Conformity and suggestion. "Baudelaire is the most original art critic of his time, because he is the only one who completely let be achieved in his spirit the effect wanted by the painter" (Georges Poulet, as quoted).

We could exemplify with the great study "L` Oeuvre et la vie d` Eugene Delacroix", in which Baudelaire speaks of the special quality of the emotion conceived in him upon seeing the master's painting, where he says that "Delacroix is the most suggestive of all painters, the one whose works …. make you think the most and remind the memory to a greater extent of already known poetic feelings and thoughts, but which he thought lost for ever in the night of the past". Actually, it is a question of identifying mnemonic life of the painting with that of the spectator himself. Baudelaire actually names Delacroix's work "a sort of mnemonics", because the painter's art targets to reach within the spectator's thought the exact reserve of his own memories; the spectator recognizes himself in the work of art, in a similar past with that evoked in the work.

Baudelaire appreciates very much the role of shape, as stimulus for the imagination. Defending the sonnet, it's Pythagorean beauty, he states: "it is when shapes constrains, that the idea gushes with more intensity. Any tone fits the sonnet, tomfoolery, gallant tone, passion, dreaming, philosophical meditation. We find here the beauty of metal and well-made

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mineral. Did you not notice that a patch of sky looked at through the orb or between two chimneys, between two cliffs, an arcade etc … communicates a more deeper idea of the infinite, than an immense panorama seen from the crest?"[10]

In the same way, "rhetoric, as well as prosodies, doesn't represent arbitrarily invented tyrannies, but collections of rules demanded by the organisation of the spiritual being itself. And never did prosodies and rhetoric impede originality from being produced distinctly"[11]. But, while Baudelaire acknowledged the stimulating power of shape, for example of the sonnet, or of metric convention, he confers the term of "style" a depreciative intendment. Style, claims him, is "a foreign poetry, generally borrowed to the past", not "the natural poetic quality of the subject which asks to be extracted in order to be better brought forward in another manner"[12]. Ingres and Millet are criticized because they have "style": a distortion or a subterfuge, sooner, than actual creation. Baudelaire remains thus firmly on a middle position, which allows him to reject both the academic formalism, as well as the photographic naturalism. Art is not "idealization", because nature, although evil, must not be "purified" by abstraction or sentimentalization: sooner, nature is absorbed in the permanence of art, metamorphosis, symbolized, but not evaporated. At least, this is the newness of the Baudelairian poetic sensibility: the power to exorcise the ugly and the evil, so that "the horrible, artistically expressed, becomes beauty …. as rhythmed, cadenced pain, to fill the spirit with a calm joy"[13]. Sometimes, this power is conceived as the one of a momentary escape or a pure illusion. "The drunkenness of art hides the terrors of the abyss, because the genius can also play comedy on the side of the word"[14]. The clown condemned to death, in the superb execution of his role, never shows a sign which would betray his imminent faith.

The term "symbol" or the concept of "myth" don't occupy a prominent role in Baudelaire: "symbol", accidentally used in the context of the theory of correspondences and of universal analogy is, for the poet, applicable to an equal extent with the sense of allegory, cypher, hieroglyph and even emblem[15]. For Baudelaire, mythology is "a dictionary of live hieroglyphs, of hieroglyphs known to all"[16]. Baudelaire probative quotes the defence of the myth, done by Wagner[17], discussing the musical creation of the following composers: he sees in "Lohengrin" an analogy for the old story of Psyche, but avoids stating that at the bottom would be an actual literary derivation. The similarity of the two stories is "the sign of a common origin, the proof of an undeniable kinship, but with the condition of not looking randomly for this condition, but in the absolute principle and common origin of all beings …. the myth is a tree growing everywhere, in any climate, under any sun, spontaneously"[18]. However, there is no evidence that Baudelaire would have seen the centre of poetry or of his own poetry in the myth, however clear, he would have otherwise intuited its universality, the universality of its power of attraction, and however much he would have admired its use by Wagner.

Thus, once his necessary refusals were asserted and art's supernaturalist transcendence was defined, once the royalty of Imagination and the scope of pure art were clarified, the cult of shape re-becomes legitimate, but a shape, this time, as symbol of spirituality and as sign of the soul within the language. Baudelaire engages thus poetry in a new way related to the

[10] Letter to Armande Fraisse, 18th of February 1860, in *Correspondence générale*, 3rd volume, p. 39-40.
[11] Ch. Baudelaire, *Curiosités esthétiques,* p. 283.
[12] *Ibidem*, p. 328.
[13] Ch. Baudelaire, *L'art romantique,* p. 172.
[14] *Le spleen de Paris*, p. XXVI, *Une Morte héroïque*; in the "Pléiade" edition, 1st volume, p. 452.
[15] Ch. Baudelaire, *L'art romantique,* p. 164 and p. 305.
[16] *Ibidem*, p. 354.
[17] *Ibidem*, p. 217.
[18] Ch. Baudelaire, *L'art romantique*, p. 229-230.

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tradition of a poetry that was no more than a poetic ornament through the indissoluble unity of sign with sense, of the telling with the being. He focuses his attention on the search for poetic unity by elaborating a language which is beyond matter and shape and which constitutes a system of signs.

Answering to a universal symbolism, the poetry of the verb is thus placed alongside the poetry of the colour and the one of sound or shape, in a poetic unity of various languages that coexists within a universal poetry. At a certain point, Baudelaire formulates his ideal of "sympathetic criticism", when, for example, the critic is demanded the following: "in order to represent well the work, is thus necessary to get into the skin of the being thus created, to deeply sink yourselves in the feelings it expresses, to personally feel them so well, that it may seem to you that this could be about your own work"[19]. However, most of the times, in the practice of his literary criticism,, Baudelaire did not make any effort to acquire the aesthetic coherence or that sympathetic "getting into another's skin". He was contempt satisfying the requirements he previously formulated himself: "the best criticism is the one that is funny and poetic; not a cold and algebraic criticism, that, under the pretext of explaining all, knows neither hate, nor sympathy, and which voluntarily divests of any temperament … in order to be fair, namely to have its own reason for being, criticism must be biased, passionate, poetic, namely done from an exclusive point of view, but that concurrently opens as many horizons as possible"[20].

It's a matter of an ideal fit for the poet and for the creative artist: actually, in art criticism, as in many of his reflections about aesthetic, Baudelaire went much further in the direction of a coherent theory.

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[19] Ch. Baudelaire, *Curiosités esthétiques,* p. 223-224.
[20] Ch. Baudelaire, *L'art romantique,* p. 172

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