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0521025591 - Baudelaire and Intertextuality: Poetry at the Crossroads

Margery A. Evans

Excerpt

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A KALEIDOSCOPIIC STRUCTURE

J'ai cherché des titres. Les 66. Quoique cependant cet ouvrage tenant de la vis et du kaleidoscope ... put [sic] bien être poussé jusqu'au cabalistique 666 et même 6666

...

These remarks about the *Petits Poèmes en prose*, taken from the *Canevas de la dédicace* found amongst Baudelaire's papers after his death, provide a tantalisingly suggestive but enigmatic indication of the poet's conception of the collection of prose poems. The allusion to a cabalistic multiple of 6 clearly signals to us that meaning is being proffered but at the same time withheld, and we are immediately encouraged to cast ourselves in the role of *déchiffreurs/euses*, striving to resolve an enigma. In what way do the screw and the kaleidoscope resemble each other, and how do they afford a model for a collection of prose poetry? It is not difficult to see that both incorporate principles of linearity and circularity. The screw suggests also a capacity for penetration, and this seems consistent with the thematising of acts of psychological, sexual or artistic penetration in a number of the poems. The kaleidoscope image is equally suggestive and can be read as a metaphor for the 'spin-off', the patterns of association, linking an individual poem to others in the collection and beyond to the numerous other works by moralists, novelists and poets alluded to in *Le Spleen de Paris*.

Let us look at the different levels on which the comparison with the kaleidoscope might operate. One of these is the controlled randomness of the method of composition, a method

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which has even been described as ‘desultory’. Certainly, the unfinished nature of the collection and the apparently haphazard order of composition have always caused problems for those critics who have sought to establish the poet’s intention. Although the 1869 text, published posthumously by the poet’s friends Asselineau and Banville, presents the poems in an order indicated by Baudelaire in late 1865 or early 1866, it seems that the collection might have contained additional poems and the structure might therefore have been modified had not sickness and death prematurely curtailed the project.¹ However, had Baudelaire lived longer there is nothing to suggest that the collection would have been given a more rigid structure or that the poet had conceived of such a structure at the time he embarked on writing the first poems.

It is true that no work of art is entirely preconceived and does not evolve in the course of its composition, and so the method of composition of the collection of prose poems cannot be placed in antithesis to that of *Les Fleurs du mal*. As a number of critics have emphasised, the collection of verse poetry was itself profoundly modified by rearrangements and additions in the years 1857 to 1861.² However, even if the difference can only be one of degree, *Le Spleen de Paris* does appear to have evolved more freely along its own self-determined paths, and with less deference to an architectural plan, than was the wont of contemporary nineteenth-century *prose* works (and particularly the novel with its fixed beginning and ending and its submission to the dictates of plot).

In his 1865 ordering Baudelaire seems to have deliberately alternated contrasting types of poems, and the resulting distribution is probably far less arbitrary, but nevertheless this has the effect of breaking down any impression of a progressive structure and of increasing the reader’s sense of the work’s heterogeneity. It is true that the ‘Liste de Projets’ found with Baudelaire’s notes does contain a number of ‘classements’ (‘Choses parisiennes’, ‘Onéirocritie’ and ‘Symboles et moralités’), but these seem to have served more as private reminders of the relative proportion of different categories of poems within the collection than as a planned linear structuring principle.

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Even if they might ultimately have served as the basis of some system of organising the poems, the fact that not all the planned poems come under headings suggests that this would always have been a *retrospective* patterning and not a rigid architecture. In a note included with the second list ('SPLEEN DE PARIS à faire') Baudelaire refers not only to 'Choses parisiennes', 'Rêves' and 'Symboles et Moralités', but also to 'Autres classes à trouver', as though these categories would emerge from the accumulating body of the text rather than dictate its development from the outset.

A kaleidoscope involves the compositional principle of *bricolage*, the *a posteriori* association of elements. Patterns emerge, rather than being preordained from the start (although materials are selected with a view to favouring these patterns).³ If this is the governing principle, clearly it does not matter that the *Petits Poèmes en prose* may be an incomplete collection; indeed incompleteness scarcely matters in an open-ended work. Baudelaire would have been familiar with Hugo's assertion that the edifice of literature is 'toujours inachevé'. It is also the case, of course, that the twentieth-century reader of *Le Spleen de Paris*, familiar with Valéry's remark that 'un ouvrage n'est jamais achevé... mais abandonné', is unlikely to find incompleteness a barrier to either appreciation or analysis.⁴

But would not Baudelaire, like Edgar Allan Poe, have rejected the very notion of taxing the reader's memory with the effort of appreciating the extensive collection of prose poems as one long whole? Would it not then amount to the sort of long poem which Poe had so firmly condemned in *The Poetic Principle*? Do not the condescending remarks in the dedication about 'commodité' and the 'volonté rétif' of the reader indicate that we are being asked to read the poems as separate pieces, and are not required to draw connections between them? It is easier to answer these questions if we first consider Baudelaire's comments on epic poetry in his *Notes nouvelles sur Edgar Poe*.

Baudelaire's observations in the *Notes nouvelles* are particularly revealing of his views on the unity of effect to be produced by a work of art, and specifically poetry. When he discusses Poe's theories about long poems he distinguishes very clearly between

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the artistic conception, or prior intention, and the effect on the reader, the impression produced by the finished work. This is where he differs from Poe. The following passage is interesting as much for its divergence from Poe's *Poetic Principle* as for the similarities to it.

Voilà évidemment le poème épique condamné. Car un ouvrage de cette dimension ne peut être considéré comme poétique qu'en tant qu'on sacrifie la condition vitale de toute œuvre d'art, l'Unité; – je ne veux pas parler de l'unité dans la conception, mais de l'unité dans l'impression, de la *totalité* de l'effet, comme je l'ai déjà dit quand j'ai eu à comparer le roman avec la nouvelle. Le poème épique nous apparaît donc, esthétiquement parlant, comme un paradoxe. Il est possible que les anciens âges aient produit des séries de poèmes lyriques, reliées postérieurement par les compilateurs en poèmes épiques; mais toute *intention épique* résulte évidemment d'un sens imparfait de l'art. Le temps de ces anomalies artistiques est passé, et il est même fort douteux qu'un long poème ait jamais pu être vraiment populaire dans toute la force du terme. (*Oeuvres complètes* II, 332)

The epic poem is here seen as an 'artistic anomaly' which is inappropriate in modern nineteenth-century France. The aristocratic implication of a certain dislike for the capacities of the crowd is something which Baudelaire would have found in Poe. But the doubt as to whether the long poem could be *populaire* also tallies with other statements by the poet at this period, and with the condescending remarks about the 'volonté rétif' of the reader in the dedication to Houssaye. It is interesting that he links the problem of writing epic poetry to the problem of achieving totality of effect in the novel, as opposed to the *nouvelle*. Significantly, Baudelaire is much more reserved than Poe in his critique of the epic (if it even amounts to a critique), and he omits quoting Poe's outright dismissal of the idea that a long poem might have any advantages at all. Baudelaire refers to the epic as a paradox, but he prefers to stress the aesthetic error of 'epic intention' rather than linger over the problem of the possible unity of effect. Nor does he make any negative reference to Milton's *Paradise Lost*, as Poe had done. Instead, he alludes exclusively to the epic poets of antiquity, and here his description of the *retrospective organisation* of their work clearly

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invites comparison with his own compositional method in writing *Le Spleen de Paris*.

As early as 1846 Baudelaire had written of the challenge of creating a new artistic tradition which might rival the achievement of the Ancient World, and had paid tribute to Balzac's achievement in rendering 'le coté épique de la vie moderne'.⁵ However, we know that Baudelaire's attraction to the power and vitality of the epic was accompanied by an equally intense attraction to poetic concentration and verbal economy. His comments in 1861 on Hugo's *Légende des siècles* make plain his interest in a truly modern epic which succeeds because its component parts are kept brief. The passage reveals his preoccupation with the problem of reconciling the impact of epic dimensions with the intensity of the short poem:

Victor Hugo a créé le seul poème épique qui put être créé par un homme de son temps pour des lecteurs de son temps. D'abord les poèmes qui constituent l'ouvrage sont généralement courts, et même la brièveté de quelques-uns n'est pas moins extraordinaire que leur énergie. Ceci est déjà une considération importante, qui témoigne d'une connaissance absolue de tout le possible de la poésie moderne. (*Oc* II, 140)

Certainly, given Baudelaire's interest in Hugo's achievement, it does not come as a surprise that *Le Spleen de Paris* is covertly presented as rivalling the epic. 'Cela vaut mieux qu'une intrigue de 6000 pages', is the assertion we find in the notes for the dedication, pursuing the idea of infinite multiplication which is attached to the cabalistic number 6. The urban poet figure of 'Les Bons Chiens' specifically compares and contrasts himself with the pastoral minstrels of traditional epic poets:

Les bergers de Virgile et de Théocrite attendaient, pour prix de leurs chants alternés, un bon fromage, une flûte du meilleur faiseur ou une chèvre aux mamelles gonflées. Le poète qui a chanté les pauvres chiens a reçu pour récompense un beau gilet... (*Oc* I, 362)

The alternative title, *Petits Poèmes en prose*, closely echoes Hugo's sub-title for *La Légende* (*Petites Épopées*). Did Baudelaire see *Le Spleen de Paris* as in some ways an analogous project?⁶ Like the *Légende*, the collection of prose poems resembles the epic in

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its capacity to evoke an experience common to myriads of individuals (the poet is ‘une âme collective’⁷). It differs from the epic of the Ancients in that it does not concern itself with the teleology of a particular racial destiny. Neither does it share the formal simplicity of the traditional epic.

The distinction which Baudelaire makes in the *Notes nouvelles* between the *retrospective* totality of effect of a work of art and what he calls ‘l’unité dans la conception’ or ‘l’intention épique’ is, of course, particularly relevant to *Le Spleen de Paris*. The prose poems do not each fall into place within a vast preconceived architecture, but this does not mean that ultimately they may not generate their own play of patterns and interconnections (although the poet’s comments in the dedication imply that these may not be appreciated by the majority of readers). A poem which on a first reading may stand alone as an individual ‘tronçon’ will be remembered as the reader progresses through the text, and their understanding of it will be modified in the light of what they are now decoding. Michael Riffaterre gives a useful analysis of such stages in the reading of poetry in his *Semiotics of Poetry*:

The second stage is that of *retroactive reading*. This is the time for a second interpretation, for the truly *hermeneutic* reading ... As the reader works forward from start to finish, he is reviewing, revising, comparing backwards. He is in effect performing a structural decoding: as he moves through the text he comes to recognize, by dint of comparisons or simply because he is now able to put them together, that successive and differing statements, first noticed as mere ungrammaticalities, are in fact equivalent, for they now appear as variants of the same structural matrix... The maximal effect of retroactive reading, the climax of its function as generator of significance, naturally comes at the end... poeticalness is thus a function coextensive with the text... This is why, whereas units of meaning may be words or phrases, *the unit of significance is the text*. To discover the significance at last, the reader must surmount the mimesis hurdle: in fact this hurdle is essential to the reader’s change of mind. The reader’s acceptance of the mimesis sets up the grammar as the background from which the ungrammaticalities will thrust themselves forward as stumbling blocks, to be understood eventually on a second level. I cannot emphasize strongly enough that the obstacle that threatens meaning when seen in isolation at first reading is also the guideline to semiosis,

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the key to significance in the higher system, where the reader perceives it as part of a complex network.⁸

Riffaterre's theory is based on the unit of the individual poem, but it also works well when we apply it to the prose poems, taking the collection as a whole as the ultimate unit of significance. His analysis does not fully take account of the mobility of the reading opportunity afforded by *Le Spleen de Paris*. But it conveys well the idea of the reading of poetry as a movement from the initial perception of what he terms 'ungrammaticalities', or elements which resist immediate understanding, to their ultimate integration within new semi-otic networks. Joseph Frank was already feeling his way towards a similar formulation twenty years earlier in his chapter 'Spatial Form in Modern Literature' in *Criticism: The Foundation of Modern Literary Judgement*:

Since the primary reference of any word group is to something inside the poem itself, language in modern poetry is really reflexive ... instead of the instinctive and immediate reference of words and word groups to the objects and events they symbolise, and the construction of meaning from the sequence of these references, modern poetry asks its readers to suspend the process of individual references temporarily until the entire pattern of internal references can be apprehended as a unity.⁹

Certainly Baudelaire's own description of the collection as a kaleidoscope already suggests the complexity of the reading process which it solicits. Like a kaleidoscope the *Petits Poèmes* offer a structure which is both single and multiple. The collection is described in the dedication as being a unit. Even if an element is removed, the organic whole is preserved: 'Enlevez une vertèbre et les deux morceaux de cette tortueuse fantaisie se rejoindront sans peine.' Moreover, we know from Baudelaire's correspondence that he thought of the prose poems as functioning together, and that his sense of the unity of the work was such that he referred to the whole collection in the singular as 'LA LUEUR ET LA FUMÉE: POÈME, EN PROSE'. At the time he mentioned this title (in a letter to Arsène Houssaye, around 20 December 1861) he was proposing that the 'poème, en prose' should comprise forty or fifty pieces, of which he claimed to have

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written twelve. Three years later, although he had abandoned the idea of calling the collection a 'poème, en prose' and had adopted the plural 'poèmes en prose', he still saw the collection as one unit whose composition necessitated a continuous chain of thought:

Le Spleen de Paris, ce maudit livre sur lequel je comptais tant, est resté suspendu à la moitié. Ah! qu'il me tarde d'être chez moi! Il y a décidément un grand danger à laisser longtemps un travail interrompu, et à faire plusieurs à la fois. Le fil de la pensée se perd souvent, et on ne peut plus retrouver l'atmosphère spirituelle où on s'était d'abord placé. (Letter to Madame Aupick, 3 November 1864)

However, it is also true that *Le Spleen de Paris* resembles a kaleidoscope in that it gains its effects from a sequence of fragments which appears at first sight to be completely random. Critics have often remarked on the heterogeneous nature of the collection, and on the whole have accepted the poet's suggestions in the dedication as indicating that the prose poems need not be read in a fixed sequence and that their ordering is not so important as, for example, the disposition of the poems in *Les Fleurs du mal*. The arrangement of the verse collection has often been held to correspond, broadly speaking, to the logical progression of a deductive argument, although in recent years critics have argued that too rigid an adherence to such a view can impede one's reading of *Les Fleurs du mal*.¹⁰

Few have argued that any progressive structure may be traced in the prose poems.¹¹ Certainly, Baudelaire's comparison of the work to a kaleidoscope suggests that it does not, even tenuously, take its shape from a thesis. The randomness of sequence is drawn attention to in the first sentence of the dedication:

Mon cher ami, je vous envoie un petit ouvrage dont on ne pourrait pas dire, sans injustice, qu'il n'a ni queue ni tête, puisque tout au contraire y est à la fois tête et queue, alternativement et réciproquement. (*Oc* I, 275)

The affirmation here gains strength from its formulation in terms of a double negative: 'on ne pourrait pas dire, sans injustice, qu'il n'a ni queue ni tête'. By withholding its meaning,

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keeping it at several removes from the obvious, the sentence makes the reader hesitate, fixes their attention. And the conclusion, whose syntax might at first sight appear reassuring (since the negatives are abandoned in favour of a positive statement of fact), proves to be deceptive since it teases one's powers of logic with the apparently absurd claim that head and tail, beginning and ending, may be the same thing. The contrast with *Les Fleurs du mal*, where the recognition of a beginning and an ending was considered by the poet to be of such importance, is striking.

The unstable structure of the collection, and the absence of any continuous *narrative* thread linking the different poems, encourages the reading of a given element to benefit from an effect of inter-reflection or collaboration with other elements in the whole. The metaphor of the kaleidoscope suggests the possibility of unity without the rigidity of a fixed order. It reconciles two often ambivalent Romantic aesthetic ideals: the ideal of incompleteness (because it is constantly becoming) and that of coherence (all its parts are interconnected and contribute to the whole). At the same time, it implies a radically modern view of the reader's role and of the degree of control exercised by the poet over his product. For however many additions Baudelaire might have been able to make to the collection, his description of the work as a kaleidoscope suggests an awareness that it would always remain in some sense incomplete. Because of its mobile structure it is a work which is conspicuously 'en devenir', and which actively encourages the reader to participate in its creation by perceiving patterns and associations within the text, in the same way that Baudelaire describes the poet in his article on Hugo as actively discerning the correspondences in nature. Baudelaire, then, before Mallarmé, already forcefully implies that it is ultimately the audience which produces the book.

The collection of prose poems does not solely offer a play of internal correspondences; at the same time it draws attention to a further level of correspondences linking it intertextually to other works by different authors. The reader is actively encouraged to read not only across an individual poem to others

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in the collection, but also across the whole collection to other works. Born of an ideal derived from observing ‘(les) villes énormes’ and the ‘croisement de leurs innombrables rapports’, *Le Spleen de Paris* is presented in the dedication as a kind of infinite crossroads. It can be viewed as the point of convergence not only of a number of internal cross-reflections but also of a cultural heritage: an ‘écho redit par mille labyrinthes’. Chateaubriand, Balzac, Nerval, Rabelais, Rousseau, La Fontaine, Vauvenargues, Defoe, La Bruyère, Pascal, Aloysius Bertrand, Diderot, Horace, Régnier, Sterne, Sainte-Beuve, Cervantes, Virgil, Lucan and Theocritus are all directly or indirectly invoked in the text, sometimes with detailed reference to specific passages in individual works. This reworking of literary *topoi* is consistent with Baudelaire’s fascination with the advantage of the *lieu commun* (itself, of course, a similar metaphor to the *carrefour*). ‘Sois toujours poète, même en prose’, the poet exhorts himself in his private diary, ‘(g)rand style (rien de plus beau que le lieu commun). In his 1859 *Salon* he remarks: ‘existe-t-il (...) quelque chose de plus charmant, de plus fertile et d’une nature plus positivement *excitante* que le lieu commun?’¹²

The descent into prose was to be a descent into the *carrefour* and the *lieu commun*, a metaphor which is taken up again and expanded in the poem ‘Perte d’auréole’. This move is appropriate to the urban subject matter and it is in keeping with the climate of the period in which Hugo writes his celebration of William Shakespeare ‘(pris) en flagrant délit de fréquentation populaire, allant et venant dans les carrefours, “trivial”, disant à tous le mot de tous, parlant la langue publique’.¹³ It is a move which implies an awareness of the collective discourse and a recognition of the magical concentration and suggestiveness of cliché and hence of language in general, which, at the same time that it may take the form of a single articulation, also bears clustering around it the myriad associations of past utterances.

We can see, then, that at the dawn of our era *Le Spleen de Paris* is self-consciously offered to the reader as a mobile or open structure which invites each interpreter to discover interconnections within the whole, and to pursue the multiple intratextual and intertextual avenues in the labyrinth of the