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Rimbaud and Mallarme

Nathaniel Wing

Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION

... l'homme a composé sa propre figure dans les interstices d'un langage en fragments.  
M. Foucault, *Les Mots et les Choses*<sup>1</sup>

L'Oeuvre pure implique la disparition élocutoire du poète, qui cède l'initiative aux mots, par la heurt de leur inégalité mobilisés; ils s'allument de reflets réciproques comme une virtuelle traînée de feux sur des pierreries, remplaçant la respiration perceptible en l'ancien souffle lyrique ou la direction personnel enthousiaste de la phrase.

S. Mallarmé, "Crise de vers"<sup>2</sup>

In 1886 Mallarmé announced a profound shift in the ways that writing can consider literature. The elusive formulations of "Crise de vers" are often taken as a series of propositions which constitute our modernity; the text is situated as the threshold of the contemporary moment. If not precisely false, this interpretation is in many ways untrue, even mystified. In pronouncing the death of a poet, the irreconcilable retreat of the subject and its re-emergence in the transpositions of language, Mallarmé's text is engaged in a general reflection about the incompatibility between man's being, the nature of things and language which has many analogs in other post-Romantic writers. The break, then, which Mallarmé announced and which the text itself performs in the configurations of its language is only possible as a repetition of an intense questioning in the nineteenth century about how the known and the unknown can be thought, about the desiring and speculating subject, about the retreat of origins, the discontinuities and fragmentation of language. In short, Mallarmé's text has a history; to situate "Crise de vers" as a beginning and to accord to its speculations the status of reflections of modernity is to forget this history. One can re-read Mallarmé's prose, however, as a figure of modernity if it is acknowledged that this is possible only against a background of the already begun.

While the problems raised in 1886 in Mallarmé's speculations

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about writing are unfolded in configurations specific to that text, they are also the questions which emerge consistently from the readings of Baudelaire, Flaubert, Rimbaud and an earlier Mallarmé in the chapters which follow. Put most generally, the question is how thought, desire and the fictions of experiences are articulated in the unbridgeable gap which separates the figure of a subject present to itself and what is irreducibly other, the unthought, the unthinkable. The exploration of these problems in fiction does not proceed from the stable ground of an integral subject nor lead to a confirmation of being, but rather opens up a series of questions about the question of being.<sup>3</sup> Writing is no longer lodged within the limits of representation and emerges from the order of representation at the expense of the fiction of an integral self. The depersonalization of the writers is concurrent with a disintegration of the links between language, thought and things:

Abolie, la prétention, esthétiquement une erreur, quoique'elle régît les chefs-d'oeuvre, d'inclure au papier subtil du volume autre chose que par exemple l'horreur de la forêt, ou la tonnerre muet épars au feuillage; non le bois intrinsèque et dense des arbres.

...

Parler n'a trait à la réalité des choses que commercialement: en littérature, cela se contente d'y faire allusion ou de distraire leur qualité qu'incorporera quelque idée . . .

Cette visée, je la dis Transposition – Structure, une autre. (365–6)

The urgency with which literature scrutinizes itself in Mallarmé's later writings ("l'acte d'écrire se scruta jusqu'en l'origine")<sup>4</sup> is already inscribed in each of the earlier texts that will concern us here: Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* and *Le Spleen de Paris*, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Rimbaud's *Une Saison en enfer* and Mallarmé's "L'Après-midi d'un faune". Though with varying degrees of indirection, these texts explore certain rhetorical and ontological impasses; these are reiterated as unresolvable, yet deflected as the texts drift away from identity and open up radically new modes of writing and understanding. By demystifying the figure of romantic subjectivity these fictions disengage veiled differences and repressed hierarchies in oppositions between subject/object, self/other, masculine/feminine, teller/told, and others which circulate within the myth of the "proper" or "self-same." To the extent that these texts ironically or nostalgically repeat aspects of the myth they deconstruct, they produce violence

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within that containment; there is a heavy residue of desire for unity of consciousness present to itself as subjectivity, for an ultimate congruity between sign and meaning, for a fusion between desire and its objects. Yet, in the dismembered lyric “self” of Baudelaire’s verse allegories, in the ex-centric narrators of his prose poetry, in Flaubert’s demystification of Emma’s narratives of Romantic desire, in the dispersal of the “absolutely modern” narrating subject severed from history in Rimbaud’s *Une Saison en enfer* and in the “false confusions” between narrative, dream and the fictions of desire in “L’Après-midi d’un faune,” the desires for limits, for unity and for a language capable of securing the self-same are shown to be lures. In various ways, the most evident of which takes the narrator as its central figure and the forms of narrative as its rhetorical support, these texts explore the impulses for containment of meaning, for the authority over expression: as they draw out the impasses produced, they open up on new configurations of subjectivity and meaning, less destructively violent, charged by a different excess.

Each chapter of this book focuses on particular rhetorical figures and narrative patterns and proposes a reading of a specific literary corpus.

The opposition in Baudelaire’s esthetics between allegory and symbol is examined in Chapter 1, in several poems of *Les Fleurs du mal* in which allegory functions in ways radically different from those outlined by the theoretical texts. Baudelaire’s theoretical writings privilege the symbolic mode over allegory as a poetic language of concrete intuition, named variously as symbol, correspondence, universal analogy or *surnaturalisme*. Consistent with Romantic esthetics, allegory is discredited as a rational, even prosaic mode of expression which differs from the processes of universal analogy in its function and its finality. In spite of Baudelaire’s devaluation of allegory, however, it is one of the most prevalent figures of *Les Fleurs du mal*. In “Le Masque,” the transparency of an allegorical enigma is revealed with ironic astonishment as the allegorical signified is unveiled, yet the control of meaning is itself subjected to irony. In “Le Cygne,” “Les Sept Vieillards” and “Le Tonneau de la haine,” allegory momentarily effects a recuperation of sense, hidden and controlled by the figural system, only to be caught in a vertiginous and virtually limitless multiplication of meaning in an open displacement. The allegory of the Danaides’ Vessel serves as a figure of the figure; there is an

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irresistible imperative to contain meaning, to fill the figure with its own sense, yet meaning always exceeds the limits of containment.

“On certain relations: figures of sexuality in Baudelaire” considers a number of problems opened up with particular force by Baudelaire’s texts as the notion of *genre* (in its rhetorical and sexual senses) becomes unstable: these problems are the figuration of objects of desire or aversion, specifically the figuration of sexuality. I examine several passages on love and art in Baudelaire’s journals, “Fusées” and “Mon Coeur mis à nu,” a text on woman in the essay *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*, and the preface to the prose poems, *Le Spleen de Paris*. These readings provide an interpretive network for consideration of several of the prose poems.

On the one hand Baudelaire’s figuration of sexuality is consistent with that of a nineteenth-century male imaginary in advancing hierarchical oppositions in certain texts, while on the other hand other texts dismantle those oppositions. Sexuality is often defined through oppositions in which the “mystery of woman,” paradigm of enigmatic difference, is accessible to an interpreting male subject in terms which attempt to appropriate feminine otherness. Many of Baudelaire’s texts, however, exceed a dialectics between subject and object, disrupt polarities and produce an intensely pleasurable circulation of meanings and erotic energy. A metaphoric mode of figuring objects of desire, as a double of the poet or a feminine analog, stills desire or erupts in violence; metonymic figures of partial objects, however, proliferate desire and intimately associate erotic pleasure with the production of poetry.

“Emma’s stories: narrative, repetition and desire in *Madame Bovary*,” re-examines the familiar problem of irony in the novel in a discussion of Emma’s stories of Romantic desire. Flaubert’s use of narrative in the novel demystifies in many ways the desires which motivate Emma’s stories, her fantasies, dreams and her extended fictions of escape and romantic love. Her narratives, protonarratives (fantasies and dreams) and her letters to her lovers can be read as repeated and unsuccessful attempts to give order to desires which are destabilizing in their effects and ultimately unattainable.

The division between language and experience is a major concern of the novel. Emma’s stories oppose the events which constitute her world, yet lack the force to transform that world. One can attribute Emma’s difficulties throughout the novel, then, not just to her foolishness and to the mediocrity of her milieu, but

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to the more general problems of desire and its realization, of language and illusion.

This chapter focuses on the content of the order of Emma's narratives; it also re-examines the general problematic of writing in the novel. If Emma is a figure for the writer at a certain point in the history of the novel, this figure does not function exclusively as an uncomplex emblem of the deluded Romantic in an already post-Romantic moment. In fact, the novel does not validate without reserve the control of an enlightened narrator whose understanding transcends the dilemmas of Romantic subjectivity and Romantic literary stereotypes. An omniscient narrator is also caught up in an intricate web of repetition and difference which both includes and radically exceeds identification between narrator and protagonist, includes and exceeds a simple demystification which would deny altogether the links between protagonist and narrator.

"The autobiography of rhetoric: on reading Rimbaud's *Une Saison en enfer*" analyzes confession as an interpretive process in which examination of the narrator's past and present, of history, metaphysics, love and writing leads with increasing explicitness to an examination of the speaking subject as a configuration of language. The narrator is also a reader whose interest in the course of the poem shifts from an interpretation of a narrative signified (*histoire*) to an evaluation of narration (*discours*). In many respects, the poem conforms to traditional patterns of autobiography; it tells a story of a passage through a world of past sufferings, delusions and failed strategies to reinvent love and art, from which the poet emerges into the clear light of truth ("Matin") as the narrated self and narrating *I* merge in the present of narration. The poet overcomes a deficient ("pagan") language, rejects a personal and cultural history in which he has no place and seeks absolute newness ("Il faut être absolument moderne"). The narrating subject is engaged less in a process of self-realization, however, than in writing the self in and as language, deprived of any reassuring epistemological or ontological ground. This chapter studies the narrative patterns of the poem, specifically the uses of verb tenses and the interaction between narration and the narrated past; it considers the implications of the imperative to be "absolutely modern" in terms of relations between history, language and a fragmented "subject."

The narrator of Mallarmé's "L'Après-midi d'un faune" purports to wish to "perpetuate" two nymphs, to possess them sexually and to reproduce the story of his own desire. "False confusions: fictions

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of masculine desire in Mallarmé's 'L'Après-midi d'un faune' studies the distinctions between subject and object and the possibility of appropriating an erotic object; the poem suggests that there are radical and irreconcilable differences between feminine pleasure and masculine desire which unravel the faun's complex narrative.

The narrator's own story fails to establish limits between memory, present interpretation and invention. As the faun's monologue unfolds, it becomes apparent that an "authentic" narrative of desire is impossible, that whatever fragments of "real," past events may endure are available only through a figural language which blurs the demarcation between the "real" and fantasy, and collapses essential temporal separations between past, present and future. This chapter studies the disruptions of the distinctions between literal and figurative language, the use of personal pronouns, particularly the doubling of the narrating voice as both *I* and *you*, self and other, and the abolition of the distinction between the first and third person (the so-called non-person) as the faun's thoughts and song are metaphorized and inscribed as decor at once external to and formative of the "subject." The study also considers how this text from Mallarmé's early writing (roughly, 1865–76) prefigures practices which will be systematically developed in the later poems and in the later critical texts.

In the place of a conclusion, a final chapter "The trials of authority under Louis Bonaparte" speculates on the wider, historical context of the textual practices discussed in the book. I explore the configurations of certain fissures in the symbolic system of political representation, in a reading of Marx's writings on the consolidation of power by Louis Bonaparte, *Class Struggles in France: 1848–1850* and *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* and in a discussion of the documents of Flaubert's and Baudelaire's trials for "outrages to public morality," in 1857. The decentering and fragmentation of the subject, the disruption of hierarchical relations between prose and poetry, narrator and protagonist, masculine and feminine, and so on, and the disordering of narrative *telos* in fiction are associated here with a wider crisis in cultural systems of representation. This chapter attempts to set the context for a more extensive inquiry into the conjunction between discursive registers, the literary and the historical, and into the ideological status of literary texts, which both reproduce dominant culture and subvert the dominant which inhabits them. While this inquiry into complex and interrelated levels of discourse is necessarily

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hypothetical and without any claim to having established relations of determination, it is hoped that it will open up questions about the interaction between politics, ideology and fiction.

At issue throughout this book are the ways in which literary texts question their own relations to mastery and to a desire for totalization, which is never fully renounced, yet always deflected and displaced as it is reiterated. A brief quotation from an early essay by Roland Barthes, “Littérature et signification,” will serve as a guide to what follows, to be recalled at the end of this text, when I explore the wider issues concerning writing and history:

en littérature . . . il n’y a pas de question *pure*: une question n’est jamais que sa propre réponse éparse, dispersée en fragments entre lesquels le sens fuse et fuit tout à la fois.<sup>5</sup>

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## 1

THE DANAIDES VESSEL: ON  
READING BAUDELAIRE'S  
ALLEGORIES

An inquiry which proposes to re-examine the functions of allegory in *Les Fleurs du mal* risks, at the outset, recalling with particular insistence that most famous of Baudelaire's allegorical personifications, the delicate monster in "Au lecteur," *L'Ennui*, who threatens to engulf the world in a vast yawn. Conventional poetic devices, at least since the mid-nineteenth century, are not held in good repute, in so far as they have been associated with normative rhetoric and with the use of figurative language as an "ornament of discourse." In reconsidering Baudelaire's allegories we risk participating in that condescension with which recent history has treated the figure. There is a profusion of allegory, however, in *Les Fleurs du mal* which cannot be written off simply, as Valéry and others would have it, as a repeated lapse into an outmoded eloquence, or as sententious and moralistic posturing.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, Baudelaire often praises the figure unequivocally as:

ce genre si *spirituel*, que les peintres maladroits nous ont accoutumés à mépriser, est vraiment l'une des formes primitives et les plus naturelles de la poésie<sup>2</sup>

In the familiar late eighteenth-century and Romantic schema, allegory as a figural transfer of meaning is eclipsed in importance by symbol, which comes to stand for processes of analogy functioning within a radical monism. The problem of allegorical constructs in *Les Fleurs du mal* is considerably more complex than this opposition between symbol and allegory would lead us to believe. Our reading cannot place itself *outside* of the debate, however. That controversy, which inextricably mixes considerations about language with metaphysics and esthetics, necessarily informs a reading of the poems. Because its delimiting concepts are also to be found in those texts, in the art and literary criticism and the *Journaux intimes*, it is appropriate to review it briefly here.<sup>3</sup> The esthetic devaluation of allegory, furthermore, is the source of irony in many



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of *Les Fleurs du mal*, in which the texts play with and against a shop-worn rhetorical figure. Within a certain esthetic and metaphysical enclosure, however, concepts are frequently turned against themselves and their presuppositions undermined by processes of meaning which cannot be accounted for by the traditional rhetorical/esthetic definitions. My inquiry will consider the interplay between these configurations of meaning.

For Baudelaire, the term *symbol* frequently stands for figurative language in general; it is assumed to be capable of transforming all individual experience into general truth, since, as de Man summarizes:

The subjectivity of experience is preserved when it is translated into language; the world is then no longer seen as a configuration of entities that designate a plurality of distinct and isolated meanings, but as a configuration of symbols ultimately leading to a total, single, and universal meaning.<sup>4</sup>

The numerous passages which Baudelaire devotes to symbol give a privileged status to the symbolic mode as the poetic language of concrete intuition, designated by various interchangeable expressions, such as *symbole*, *correspondance*, *analogie universelle* and *surnaturalisme*. Allegory, on the other hand, as the morpheme *allos* (other) indicates, differs from the process of universal analogy in both its function and its finality. It relays meaning from one semantic level to another, within a limited polyvalence. The suggestiveness of allegory in art is criticized as too rationally mechanical, exhausted as soon as the meaning (signified) is attained.

The short essay on “L’Art philosophique” (1859) formulates this contrast succinctly and in terms sufficiently general to apply equally well to painting or literary language. Baudelaire reproaches philosophical, pictorial art for meddling in concerns which are properly those of didactic prose, by seeking to replace the book and to teach history, morality and philosophy.

Toute bonne sculpture, toute bonne peinture, toute bonne musique, suggère les sentiments, et les rêveries qu’elle veut suggérer.

Mais le raisonnement, la déduction, appartiennent au livre.

Ainsi l’art philosophique est un retour vers l’imagerie nécessaire à l’enfance des peuples, et s’il était rigoureusement fidèle à lui-même, il s’astreindrait à juxtaposer autant d’images successives qu’il en est contenu dans une phrase quelconque qu’il voudrait exprimer.

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Plus l'art voudra être philosophiquement clair, plus il se dégradera et remontera vers l'hiéroglyphe enfantin; . . . (1099–100)

As an example of the aberration, Baudelaire describes in detail a representation of *une bonne mort*, a virtuous man surprised in his sleep by death; each figural element in the painting is correlated with an extrinsic meaning:

Il faut, dans la traduction des oeuvres d'art philosophiques, apporter une grande minutie et une grande attention; là les lieux, le décor, les meubles, les ustensiles (voir Hogarth), tout est allégorie, allusion, hiéroglyphes, rébus. (1101)<sup>5</sup>

Both the separation of levels of meaning and the rational link between them provoke Baudelaire's criticism, for in this mode the signifier is cut off from a (mythical) consubstantial relationship between the sensible and the non-sensible, which would obtain in the symbolic mode of "pure," "modern" art. The conventionalized relay between levels of meaning in allegory both maintains a separation of the levels and claims to link them conceptually through a translation. In terms of contemporary semiotics, the first level of meaning is constituted by the link between a signifier and a signified and subsequently becomes a signifier for a secondary signified.

Allegory thus functions through its parallel systems as both a referral and deferral of meaning; in positing and incorporating a second semantic level, it can be recognized as a figure of containment. As such, it is inimical to that expansion of meaning in the symbolic mode through universal analogy, which, for Baudelaire, is virtually limitless multiplicity and concentration of being produced by the associative potential of language. The opening paragraph of "L'Art philosophique" briefly states that ideal:

Qu'est-ce que l'art pur suivant la conception moderne? C'est créer une magie suggestive contenant à la fois l'objet et le sujet, le monde extérieur à l'artiste et l'artiste lui-même. (1099)

In this passage, characteristic elements of the symbolic mode are a fusion between the semantic and representative functions of language, in analogy, an abolition of the distinctions between the particular and the general, and a synthesis between subject and object in a relation of simultaneity.<sup>6</sup>

I return to these distinctions because, as I have noted, they function according to the schema outlined in many of Baudelaire's poems and because they are undercut in others by certain textual