



The Poetic Wound: Baudelairean Romanticism

Ian Thomas Fleishman
University of Pennsylvania

for Carol de Dobay Rifelj

“Qui dit romantisme dit art moderne,”¹ famously announces Charles Baudelaire in his writings on the Salon of 1846. If, implicitly, read historically, this declaration presents Romanticism as a precursor to modernism, it is only because the modern itself is, for Baudelaire, a transhistorical category.² What the poet will later dub *modernité* is, after all, a mode of seeing, a mode of being and, most importantly, a mode of representation suspended in a constant state of becoming. To qualify as modern, art must concentrate on what the poet designates in 1863, in his *Peintre de la vie moderne*, as the “élément relatif, circonstanciel” (I 1154) of beauty: “le transitoire, le fugitif, le contingent, la moitié de l’art, dont l’autre moitié est l’éternel et l’immuable” (I 1163). And like modernity, thus defined, Baudelairean romanticism takes place in a perpetual present: “S’appeler romantique et regarder systématiquement le passé, c’est se contredire” (II 420). Both terms—romanticism and the modern—signal a break with the past, offering a revision and reconstitution of what precedes them, a transposition into the contemporary idiom: “le romantisme est l’expression la plus récente, la plus actuelle du beau” (II 420). Put plainly, Romanticism is modern because it modernizes.

As Nina Athanassoglou-Kallmyer concludes,

Baudelaire’s celebrated definition of Romanticism makes one thing clear at the very outset, by defining Romanticism as an alternate “way of feeling,” as a novel outlook on what is already there, it signals the

1 Charles Baudelaire, *Ceuvres complètes*, ed. Claude Pichois and Jean Ziegler (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1975), II 421. Wherever possible, and unless otherwise indicated, all references to Baudelaire and to the documents surrounding his trial are to the Pléiade edition of the *Ceuvres complètes* edited by Claude Pichois and Jean Ziegler. Those documents relating to the trial not included in the Pléiade are cited either from André Guyaux’s historical anthology or Yves Florenne’s chronological edition of the *Ceuvres complètes*.

2 For this same reason, in the current essay I will capitalize the names of movements such as Romanticism, Realism and Decadence only when referring to specific moments in French literary and art history in order to distinguish these from more structural varieties to be elaborated throughout.



movement's fundamentally revisionist intent. Romanticism thus ushers in the history of modernism by being the earliest manifestation of a concerted and antiphonal "counter-discourse" whose goal was both to break and, at the same time, revitalize moribund traditions preserved by a dominant order.³

In what follows I would like to read the documents and discourse surrounding Baudelaire's literary obscenity trial in order to reveal his *Fleurs du mal*, their public reception and, especially, their relationship to Romanticism as just such a revisionist project. Which is to say that Baudelairean modernism reflects on an earlier romanticism through a properly *romantic operation*: it seeks simultaneously to dismantle and to reconstitute the decaying codes of the earlier tradition. The poetic wound becomes the emblem of this operation.

In a dossier of *articles justificatifs* submitted on the poet's behalf during the 1857 trial, Baudelaire's friend and advocate Frédéric Dulamon insightfully distills the first public reactions to these poems into a salient question: "Pourquoi donc étaler toutes ces plaies hideuses de l'esprit, du cœur et de la matière ?" (I 1189). It is a faithful paraphrase of public reaction: a few days before the publication of the seminal volume in June of the same year—at a meeting of the Union des Poètes—a now all-but-forgotten literary figure by the name of Joseph Boulmier had publically lamented modern poetry's tendency to "étaler à tous les regards *ses plaies hideuses* [original emphasis], et réunir dans une espèce de bouquet fétide ce qu'elle [la poésie moderne] n'a pas honte d'appeler *Les Fleurs du mal* !"⁴ The reference is to those twelve poems already in print under the title of "Les Fleurs du mal" in the *Revue des deux mondes*, but with his description of Baudelaire's poetic project as a bouquet of wounds, Boulmier comes to an apt metaphor for the work about to be released as well. If it is to be adopted nearly verbatim by Dulamon in his rebuttal, it also echoes the very first review of these poems, penned by Louis Goudall more than a full year earlier, in apparent anticipation of just this line of defense: "Si *Les Fleurs du mal* ont été réellement écrites pour servir de traduction à certaines douleurs morales, j'estime que ces douleurs sont purement imaginaires, car elles n'ont rien de commun avec *les grandes plaies intérieures qui dévorent l'homme moderne* (emphasis added)."⁵ Before Baudelaire's volume even appears in its entirety, the *wound* has become a key leitmotif of its reception—and the very marker of the modern in his verse.

3 Nina Athanassoglou-Kallmyer, "Romanticism: Breaking the Canon," *Art Journal* 52.2 (Summer 1993): 18.

4 Quoted in James K. Wallace, "Joseph Boulmier: Ami ou ennemi de Baudelaire," *Études baudelairiennes*, 2 (1973): 78. Little is known today about Boulmier, despite his ten published volumes of poetry and assorted works of history and literary criticism. For a brief account of his relation to Baudelaire—which raises more questions than it provides answers—see Wallace's study.

5 Quoted in André Guyaux, *Baudelaire. Un demi-siècle de lectures des Fleurs du mal (1855–1905)*, (Paris: Presse de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 2007), 147.

But while the public uproar surrounding these first poems was certainly a factor contributing to their ultimate prosecution, it was neither Boulmier's assessment nor Goudall's that brought the *Fleurs du Mal* to trial. That dubious honor belongs instead to an incensed Gustave Bourdin, writing for the *Figaro*. Admonishing Baudelaire for having flaunted the grotesque, the objectionable and the obscene, Bourdin had inspired the second landmark literary obscenity trial of the year. Having failed effectively to censor Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and encouraged by Bourdin's enraged review, French authorities now turned instead to poetry,⁶ challenging eleven of the hundred poems of Baudelaire's volume on the grounds of an "offense à la morale publique" and ultimately excising six of these from the work. The eleven poems isolated by the prosecution can be categorized according to a nexus of certain distasteful excesses: unabashed nudity, explicit sexuality, vampirism, homosexuality and incest, and (of course) blasphemy.⁷ But the rhetorical query paraphrased by Dulamon above ("Pourquoi donc étaler [...] ces plaies hideuses") points to something far more fundamental albeit perhaps somewhat less obvious: what all of these poems, without exception, have in common—and what the trial itself fails ever explicitly to denounce, even in the most horrendous cases—is a depiction and a celebration of physical wounding, often as eroticized as it is repugnant.

In fact, the recurring plaintive condemnation of such *plaies hideuses* appears nowhere in Bourdin's review; it is a motif strangely repressed by both that critic and, more tellingly and more thoroughly, by the prosecution he inspires. But while those who bring the *Fleurs du mal* to trial almost pointedly avoid naming the wound as such throughout, tacitly they seem to recognize it as the secret center of gravity of what they find offensive in the work: the figure of the wound becomes the standard representation for both a mode of writing and, perhaps just as importantly, a mode of reading. At issue is Baudelaire's attention to an aesthetics of ugliness and injury, even to an aesthetics of evil, to the *grotesque* and the *decadent*—designations appropriate not only to the injured bodies depicted in his poems but also to the historical import of Baudelaire's project as a transitional and transformative poetics.

The charge against Baudelaire in 1857 is that he simply shows too much, with too much skill and vigor, that he keeps nothing hidden. It is Bourdin again, Baudelaire's most influential accuser, who puts the sentiment most pithily when he protests that never before "on ne vit mordre et même mâcher autant de seins dans si peu de pages" (quoted in Guyaux 160); it is on this particular surfeit of sexual violence that I wish to focus here. From the very beginning, the wound plays a role in Baudelaire's writing

6 Among many others, Richard Sieburth notes that while such censorship trials were by no means a rarity at this point in history—alongside Flaubert, the brothers Goncourt and Xavier de Montépin were also tried for an "outrage à la morale publique et aux bonnes mœurs"—Baudelaire was the first writer of *verse* (with the exception of a single example of poetry overtly aimed at political provocation) to be singled out. Richard Sieburth, "Poetry and Obscenity: Baudelaire and Swinburne," *Comparative Literature* 36.4 (Autumn 1984): 343–53.

7 Several of these poems were indicted as an offense against *la morale religieuse* but these charges were not upheld. I would like to thank my anonymous reviewer for bringing this point to my attention.

and almost immediately it is proscribed.⁸ As early as 1839, an imagery of injury creeps into his erotic poetry, as in a poem beginning, “Je n’ai pas pour maîtresse une lionne illustre...” Although written almost twenty years before the trial of the *Fleurs du mal*, this poem will first be published almost two full decades after it, and even then only with the offensive stanzas suppressed. (It will finally be printed in its entirety in 1884.) Considering this juvenilia in the current context, one might rightly cite the portions that were censored:

Et pourtant, me traînant chaque nuit sur son corps,
Ainsi qu’un nouveau-né, je tette et la mords ;

Et bien qu’elle n’ait pas souvent même une obole
Pour se frotter la chair et pour s’oindre l’épaule,
Je la lèche en silence avec plus de ferveur
Que Madeleine en feu les deux pieds du Sauveur. (I 203)

In the view of Baudelaire’s most admiring editor, Yves Florenne, this is “la seule de ces poésies de jeunesse qui annonce *les Fleurs du Mal*”;⁹ and, indeed, here already we have all of the key elements of Baudelairean injury that will be isolated and condemned during the trial of that masterwork. Both arousing and discomfiting, the image of breasts being bitten—which, as Bourdin remarks, is to become another leitmotif of Baudelaire’s poetic œuvre—is here linked to incest, insofar as the newborn nursling is also the erotic lover. Thus coupling this puerile transference of bodily fluids with an image of violence, the poem subtly suggests bleeding, a type of vampirism, perhaps even transubstantiation. Lastly, what appears to be an innocent nudity, the scrubbing of flesh and anointing of shoulders, is rapidly rendered both sacrilegious and violent by the now sexualized reference to Luke: 37: washing Christ’s feet with her tears, Mary Magdalene is in a sense preparing them to be pierced during his crucifixion. In a moment apparently benign, a single playful wound, nipple taken between teeth, Baudelaire assembles every one of the offenses that later constitute his *outrage à la morale publique et aux bonnes mœurs*: nudity, sexuality, incest, violence, vampirism and blasphemy.

Justifiably apprehensive that an open trial might make Baudelaire into a martyr, Pinard alternately reads Baudelaire as a representative of a larger trend of “realism” and, at other moments, nevertheless takes care to divorce the poet from any

8 The first known document attributable to Baudelaire’s hand is, incidentally, a letter written at the age of twelve describing his injured foot and the remedies applied: “Je viens de me fouler le pied de là emplâtre sur emplâtre (ou amplâtre), et je déteste les emplâtres aussi bien que les médecins.” Charles Baudelaire, *Correspondance*, ed. Claude Pichois and Jean Ziegler (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1973), I 3.

9 Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Yves Florenne (Paris: Club Français du Livre, 1966), I 1388.

grander cause or literary movement, instead maintaining that “Charles Baudelaire n’appartient pas à une école. Il ne relève que de lui-même” (I 1206). But if the prosecution emphatically insists on the singularity of this writer, those who testify on his behalf seem at moments equally eager to assimilate his work into a larger body of texts and authors, thereby sketching an implicit literary history past the Realism of Balzac and Flaubert and back to French Romanticism proper. Barbey d’Aurevilly, who, like Dulamon, provides an *article justificatif* in defense of the volume, situates Baudelaire with respect to a great number of other authors,¹⁰ but chiefly Poe (to whom Baudelaire plays replica and younger brother [I 1191]) and Gautier—concluding finally that Baudelaire “est lui-même une fleur du mal venue dans les serres chaudes d’une Décadence” (I 1194). But if the identification with Decadence writ large would appear primarily to connect Baudelaire to later moments in literary history, it is not a break in the way literature is written that is marked by the 1857 trial, but rather a *new way of feeling* about poetry: a seismic shift in its *reception*. Baudelaire himself is the first to point this out, noting that two of the poems put on trial had already been in print for quite some time without inspiring any notable scandal, and asserting, “[j]e pourrais faire une bibliothèque de livres modernes non poursuivis, et *qui ne respirent pas, comme le mien*, l’horreur du Mal (original emphasis). Depuis près de trente ans, la littérature est d’une liberté qu’on veut brusquement punir en moi. Est-ce juste ?” (I 1194). Charles Asselineau is more specific in assembling this library, putting Baudelaire’s name at the head of a list including Lamartine, Hugo, de Vigny, Sainte-Beuve and Gautier as authors who have operated according to a similar writerly philosophy “depuis trente ans” (I 1362)—a chronology explicitly echoing Baudelaire’s own. Attacking the intemperance of Baudelaire’s poetry, conservative authorities are attempting to correct an already well-established trend in contemporary writing, but it is too little too late. Pinaré recognizes in Baudelaire all the symptoms of a nascent literary decadence, but is unable to halt the decay.

Baudelaire’s *Choix de maximes consolantes sur l’amour*—first published in March of 1846 in the *Corsaire-Satan*, the short-lived Parisian daily at the origins of the Bohemian movement—is perhaps the first piece of mature writing to announce a new appreciation of what one might rightly term decadence *avant la lettre*. Here Baudelaire presents his view of the world—“ce vaste système de contradictions [...] *ayant toute caducité en grande estime* (emphasis added)” (I 546)—embracing inconsistency, ultimately advocating a radical revalorization of values and pointing to a sense of decline and deterioration that signals decadence not merely as a literary movement but more broadly.¹¹ For Baudelaire this will be coupled with an aesthetic-ethical program valorizing artifice and the ugly, notably through the image of the wound.

10 Among these both Shakespeare and Goethe: genius figures for which the French literary tradition has no equally emblematic representative—unless one were to make the case for Victor Hugo.

11 In his introduction to Poe’s *Nouvelles Histoires extraordinaires*, Baudelaire himself defends literary decadence against its critics—championing its procedures while dismissing the nomenclature that seeks

A *romantic* revision in both the literary and the erotic sense of the word, Baudelaire's maxims champion relativized aesthetics, prescribing for each type of lover the cultivated appreciation of a different type of woman, and often suggesting a complementary relationship in which the beloved idol provides the antidote to the lover's primary desires and instead offers a secondary, artificial appreciation of her initially off-putting qualities. This is precisely the variety of self-reflective gesture ("la substitution d'une action réfléchie à une action spontanée"¹²) that the poet Paul Valéry will later famously designate as the Symbolist renegotiation of Romanticism. Predictably aestheticist, this revalorization of values first focuses on aesthetics rather than ethics, coming to a new admiration of ugliness. As Baudelaire counsels, one must "tirer parti de la laideur elle-même" (I 548), and no example of this phenomenon is more appropriate to the current context than his own:

Je suppose votre idole malade. Sa beauté a disparu sous l'affreuse croûte de la petite vérole, comme la verdure sous les lourdes glaces de l'hiver. Encore ému par les longues angoisses et les alternatives de la maladie, vous contemplez avec tristesse le stigmaté ineffaçable sur le corps de la chère convalescente ; vous entendez subitement résonner à vos oreilles un air *mourant* (original emphasis) exécuté par l'archet délirant de Paganini, et cet air sympathique vous parle de vous-même, et semble vous raconter tout votre poème intérieur d'espérances perdues. (I 548)

Through an artificial "*association des idées* (original emphasis)" (I 548), the beloved is rendered desirable not despite but precisely for her hideousness: "C'est donc surtout l'association des idées qui fait aimer les laides ; car vous risquez fort, si votre maîtresse grêlée vous trahit, de ne pouvoir vous consoler qu'avec une femme grêlée" (I 548). Her smallpox is more injury than illness, considering how her malady inscribes the body with indelible markings—compared even more explicitly to writing by Baudelaire in the fragments of his *Mon cœur mis à nu*: "Le jour où le jeune écrivain corrige sa première épreuve, il est fier comme un écolier qui vient de gagner sa première vérole" (I 694). The selfsame erotic drive propels both writing and the scar: here pockmarks serve both as inspiration for the artifice of poetry and as the trophy of poetic accomplishment.

Notably, the simile runs both ways: the scar represents writing as much as writing metaphorically connotes the scar; each term is simultaneously signifier and signified of one another. This bidirectional allegorical relation—to be discussed more thoroughly later on—is fundamental to the semiotics of the wound in Baudelaire,

to denigrate it. For the poet's relationship to decadence more largely, see Guyaux, who calls Baudelaire "*l'instituteur des decadences*" and Catherine Coquio, "La 'Baudelairité' décadente: un modèle spectral," *Romantisme* 82 (1993): 91–107.

12 Paul Valéry, "Situation de Baudelaire," in *Œuvres*, ed. Jean Hytier (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1957), I 601.

and part of what constitutes both the novelty and the influence of his poetic project. More pointedly, however, I would like to suggest that this idiosyncratic semiotic procedure is itself analogous to the Baudelairean reworking of Romanticism. At the time of its writing, Baudelaire's pithy definition of Romanticism as modern art ("Qui dit romantisme dit art moderne") must have initially appeared redundant, if not tautological: it merely classes the most prevalent style of the day as timely, modish—modern. *Romantic* is thus as much a descriptor of *modern*, in this phrasing, as the other way around; each term defines the other. If the romantic operation is always already a modernizing one, to modernize Romanticism would be to re-romanticize it. Seeking to revivify a stultified tradition by an act of injury, Baudelaire's reception of romantic tropes at once constitutes a wounded Romanticism and reveals that movement's own injurious aesthetic. The poetic wound of my title would then be a romanticism undone by its own poetics—by "l'expression la plus récente, la plus actuelle du beau."

If the signficatory schema of the *Maximes* advocates a suppression of an initial association in favor of a secondary, artificial meaning—what Walter Benjamin will later theorize as the *allegorical* operation of Baudelairean verse—on a formal level, the wound then has its analogue in a particular mode of making meaning: one that disfigures in order to allow novel constellations to take form. Even in this early statement of Baudelaire's aesthetic philosophy, physical disfiguration becomes the very emblem of an experience that can be aestheticized and *eroticized* through artistic intervention—here a Paganini aria that represents an interior poem of perished hopes: "— Dès lors, les traces de petite vérole feront partie de votre bonheur, et chanteront toujours à votre regard attendri l'air mystérieux de Paganini. Elles seront désormais non seulement un objet de douce sympathie, *mais encore de volupté physique* (emphasis added)" (I 548). The thorough (and, in Baudelaire's view, potentially hazardously addictive) fetishization of the wound is, moreover, put into a provocatively religious context through the description of the pockmarks as *ineffaceable stigmata*. By the same token, an aesthetic preference for the ugly quickly comes to take on ethical undertones.

Over the course of the essay, Baudelaire develops what at first appear to be primarily programmatic aesthetic concerns into prescriptive ethical maxims, ultimately taking a somewhat surprising turn toward the moralizing. What began as specified advice for each type of lover has quickly taken on the status of a universal rule:

Pour certains esprits plus curieux et plus blasés, la jouissance de la laideur provient d'un sentiment encore plus mystérieux, qui est la soif de l'inconnu, et le goût de l'horrible. C'est ce sentiment, dont chacun porte en soi le germe plus ou moins développé, qui précipite certains poètes dans les amphithéâtres *et les cliniques* (emphasis added), et les femmes aux exécutions publiques. (I 548–9)

It is an admiration for the ugly,¹³ claims Baudelaire, that is at the core of the quest for knowledge generally; and although the discourse is largely masculinist, authoritative, and scientific—the more or less developed germ, the amphitheatres and clinics, public executions—the subject position is nevertheless lent to the poet and the woman, artists in their hysteric hyper-sensitivity and their morbid curiosity. Those deficient of this capacity are lamented for their lack of artistry: “Je plaindrais vivement qui ne comprendrait pas ; — une harpe à qui manquerait une corde grave !” (I 549). More to the point: with his allusion to clinics and public executions, Baudelaire inaugurates a metaphoric discourse of the hospital that will come to dominate the documents surrounding his trial. Over the course of the proceedings, the courtroom itself begins to resemble an amphitheater, with Baudelaire’s volume placed either upon an operating table or the bascule of a guillotine, depending on perspective.

Considering this clinical discourse, the prosecution puts it perhaps not too unfairly when it claims that the poet’s “principe, sa théorie, c’est de tout peindre, de tout mettre à nu. Il fouillera la nature humaine dans ses replis les plus intimes ; il aura, pour la rendre, des tons vigoureux et saisissants, il l’exagéra surtout dans ses côtés hideux” (I 1206). On the basis of this statement one cannot justly accuse Pinard of having misread Baudelaire;¹⁴ for while the imperial prosecutor’s assessment seems indeed indicative of an indiscriminate desire to yoke the poet’s verse together with an agenda of “realism,” the association is only confirmed by many of Baudelaire’s own writings. Just two years before his trial, in an essay on laughter, Baudelaire had defended, even championed “le cas du grotesque” as “une création mêlée d’une certaine faculté imitatrice d’éléments préexistants dans la nature” (I 535) as a particular (comic) sentiment issuing from a sense of superiority over nature. The grotesque, then, is Baudelaire’s revision, even refutation, of the unity of the Romantic symbol, of what Liselotte Dieckmann has identified as “the very centre of romantic thinking,” namely: “the notion that art is a hieroglyph of Nature.”¹⁵ These and similar reflections in the poet’s *De l’essence du rire* implicitly build on Victor Hugo’s 1827 defense of comedy vis-à-vis the epic in his preface to the publication of *Cromwell*; here Hugo—who playfully commended Baudelaire on his condemnation as “une des rares décorations que le régime actuel peut accorder” (quoted in Guyaux, 250)—contends that “le grotesque est [...] la plus riche source que la nature puisse ouvrir à l’art.”¹⁶ While Baudelaire’s private disdain for the earlier master is well-documented,

13 As Jérôme Thélot astutely notes, in Baudelaire “[o]n ne sait jamais où passe la frontière entre dégoût et désir, laideur et beauté.” Jérôme Thélot, *Baudelaire: Violence et Poésie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), 37.

14 Elizabeth Ladenson in a reading of Baudelaire’s trial to which I am very much indebted, interprets Pinard’s assertion in much the same manner. Elizabeth Ladenson, *Dirt for Art’s Sake: Books on Trial from Madame Bovary to Lolita* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2007), 54.

15 Liselotte Dieckmann, “The Metaphor of Hieroglyphics in German Romanticism,” *Comparative Literature* 7 (1995): 306–12.

16 Victor Hugo, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1985), V 11.

and although he is never cited directly in *De l'essence du rire*, Hugo is undeniably an influence: three of the *Tableaux parisiens* are dedicated to him. In his lengthy preface to an even lengthier play, Hugo advocates the faithfully imitative (and hence “realist”) grotesque as a modern, Christian phenomenon, and as a necessary complement to a melancholic society in decline.¹⁷ Baudelaire, who isolates *violence* as a factor central to the genre, concurs.

This notion of what both Baudelaire and Hugo call the grotesque will constitute an important quilting point for the current considerations insofar as the mode, historically, challenges the limits placed on both imitation and ornamentation: central concerns in Baudelaire’s early, programmatic writings—miniature manifestos such as his *Maximes* and his later essay on *Les Drames et les romans honnêtes*. Both here and in the *articles justificatifs*, Arnaud Berquin—a now obscure eighteenth-century moralist and writer of didactic children’s literature—becomes the locus of critique. The absolute epitome of what Baudelaire disparagingly dubs *l'école du bon sens*, Berquin is one of those “personnes honorables” who “vien[nent] de blesser à mort la littérature” with their “décret satanique” (II 43) in favor of moralizing writing. Describing the works of *l'école du bon sens* as a fatal and satanic wound, Baudelaire breaks with the straitlaced literary model in vogue, paradoxically condemning it by means of a rhetoric strikingly analogous to the one that will be leveled against him in his 1857 trial. The intentionally edifying stance is rendered immoral, and the self-justifying artistic one becomes ethical *de facto*: “L’art est-il utile ? Oui. Pourquoi ? Parce qu’il est l’art” (II 42). Even before it becomes necessary to defend himself in a court of law, Baudelaire’s aestheticism has an ethical bent: in his view it is the very *artistry* of an artwork that is morally defensible and, indeed, right. Any attempt at overtly moralizing, by consequence, is fundamentally *unethical* because it will have deprived art of its necessary autonomy and thus of its artistic value. As radical and revolutionary as he admittedly is, Baudelaire’s thinking is fundamentally ambivalent—as evidenced here by the deeply moral dimension to his art-for-art’s-sake aestheticism. Dependent as they are on natural imagery, Baudelaire’s poetic principles never fully embrace artifice at the expense of nature; reliant as it is on religious tropes, Baudelaire’s love of vice cannot escape the structuring principles of virtue.

Here already then, six years before his trial—in the aforementioned essay on *Les Drames et les romans honnêtes*—Baudelaire provides the perfect apologia for both Gautier’s *l’art pour l’art* paradigm and the type of “realism” authorities will later find so troubling in his verse:

Y a-t-il un art pernicieux ? Oui. C’est celui qui dérange les conditions de
la vie. Le vice est séduisant, il faut le peindre séduisant ; mais il traîne

17 One might stress the similarities to Benjamin’s description of Baroque drama in his *Trauerspiel* book—a tradition he sees echoed in Baudelaire. Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974), I.1 203–430.

avec lui des maladies et douleurs morales singulières ; il faut les décrire. *Étudiez toutes les plaies comme un médecin qui fait son service dans un hôpital* (emphasis added), et l'école du bon sens, l'école exclusivement morale, ne trouvera plus où mordre. Le crime est-il toujours châtié, la vertu gratifiée ? Non ; mais cependant, si votre roman, si votre drame est bien fait, il ne prendra envie à personne de violer les lois de la nature. (II 41)

Clearly, it is not without grounds that Pinard identifies Baudelaire's poetry with what one might call Realism or, later, Naturalism: here Baudelaire, recalling the clinic and the amphitheater of his *Maximes*, positions the poet much as Zola would, as a cultural diagnostician in the vein of Charcot.¹⁸ But if it is in order to emphasize the artistic necessity of studying "wounds" that Baudelaire employs the metaphorical description of literature qua hospital, the inheritance of this image in the discourse of the trial can be quite revealing. Bourdin, notably, adopts it in his review of the *Fleurs du mal*: "Ce livre est un hôpital ouvert à toutes les démences de l'esprit, à toutes les putridités du cœur ; encore si c'était pour les guérir, mais elles sont incurables" (quoted in Guyaux, 160). But what is missing from this metaphor, otherwise so faithfully appropriated from the defendant himself, is clear: Bourdin echoes the image of the literary hospital, but in doing so, already he has suppressed the wound itself.

For the defense, a discourse of injury becomes the justification for the sober depiction of societal ills and moral sorrows of which the poet stands accused—a line of defense commencing with Baudelaire's legal advocate, Gustave Chaix d'Est-Ange, at the poet's bequest. Placing Baudelaire's at the end of a chronology of literary masterpieces, Chaix d'Est-Ange contends, quoting an unpublished letter of Balzac's:

Moraliser son époque est le but que tout écrivain doit se proposer [...] mais la critique a-t-elle des procédés nouveaux à indiquer aux écrivains qu'elle accuse d'immoralité ? Or, le procédé ancien a toujours consisté à *montrer la plaie* (emphasis added). Lovelace est la plaie dans l'œuvre colossale de Richardson. Voyez Dante : le *Paradis* [...] ne se lit guère, c'est l'*Enfer* qui saisit les imaginations à toutes les époques. [...] Enfin le doux et saint Fénelon n'a-t-il pas été contraint d'inventer les épisodes dangereux de Télémaque ? Ôtez-les ; Fénelon devient Berquin, plus le style ; qui relit Berquin ? Il faut la candeur de nos douze ans pour le supporter. (I 1213)

18 The extant version of Pinard's prosecution, reconstructed in 1885 by Pinard himself from notes, is not entirely explicit in its charge of realism—wavering as it does between a portrayal of Baudelaire as a singular author not pertaining to any school and as an emblematic example—but Champfleury's account of the trial insists on this aspect of the accusation. Guyaux discusses these differing accounts at some length (31–44).

An open examination of the naked wound becomes itself the moralizing position. Berquin, attacked in Baudelaire's essay on *Les Drames et les romans honnêtes*, is resurrected briefly by Balzac, but only as a straw man to be burnt back down, banished, like Joseph Boulmier, to the annals of forgotten literature. Chaix d'Est-Ange's defense draws extensively on the *articles justificatifs* submitted by established writers, and it is here perhaps that he first finds his notion of the wound. Barbey, for instance, describes Baudelaire as an atheist Dante, "dans un temps qui n'aura point de saint Thomas";¹⁹ and it is with a somewhat less direct allusion to incredulous Saint Thomas that Asselineau excuses Baudelaire's macabre tone: "On dira que parfois [...] le poète semble se complaire à irriter les plaies où il a glissé la sonde. Mais, à notre tour, prenons garde à ne pas tomber dans l'exagération" (I 1201). Time and again, Baudelaire's offense has been represented as a wound, revealing that it is not merely a book of poems but rather an aesthetics of injury that is on trial.

In fact, throughout the scattered documents that still remain from Baudelaire's trial, his proponents speak repeatedly of wounds, whereas the prosecution—suppressing these images—prefers to describe the *Fleurs du mal* as symptomatic of a malady. The passages Pinard chooses to cite all centrally display, flaunt even, images of injury—the vampirism of the final stanza of *Le Lethé*, for example, or the penetrated wound in *À celle qui est trop gaie*, to be discussed at length in a moment. The sole exception might be *Les Bijoux*, but as Yvan Leclerc points out in his chapter on the trial, the poem "se présente comme un blason du corps de la femme dont les parties sont dénombrées et démembrées presque sans image, dans la plus exacte nomenclature anatomique."²⁰ Back in his amphitheater, Docteur Pinard cites almost the entire second half of the poem, tellingly stopping just short of the final stanza and the fire that "inondait de sang cette peau" (I 158). From *Les Métamorphoses du Vampire*, he draws the lines:

Quand elle eut de mes os sucé toute la moelle,
Et que languissamment je me tournai vers elle
Pour lui rendre un baiser d'amour, je ne vis plus
Qu'une outre aux flancs gluants, toute pleine de pus. (I 159)

Marrow being sucked from bone—fellatio figured as an injury—and the female body is reduced entirely to an open wound. Ultimately, the perception of the *Fleurs du mal* as a literary wound is not one imposed upon it by the authorities (Baudelaire's and his defenders' ostensible surprise notwithstanding) but one that is proposed, performed and problematized by the work itself.

Indeed, an aesthetics of injury is so central to Baudelaire's *Fleurs du mal* that it is impossible at points to distinguish between wounds and the titular flowers. A study of

19 Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, I 1195.

20 Yvan Leclerc, *Crimes écrits. La littérature en process au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Plon, 1991), 232.

open wounds in the first edition of the *Fleurs du mal* alone could easily fill volumes, but a single example might suffice. Keeping, as promised, to the theme of sexual violence, let us consider, for instance, *À celle qui est trop gaie*—one of the six poems successfully censored by the authorities, and certainly one of the most troubling depictions of a wound in literary history. In the current context, we can and ought to examine this poem against the backdrop of Romantic poetry similarly dedicated to capricious and overly “joyous” (*trop gaies*) young women in order to demonstrate how Baudelaire reveals the latent violence of these earlier poems—simultaneously adopting and amplifying their key tropes through his own injurious poetics. A posthumously published poem by Victor Hugo, for example, begins with a single unrhymed line that sounds in retrospect like an echo in advance of Baudelaire’s title:

Elle est gaie et pensive ; elle nous fait songer
 À tout ce qui reluit malgré de sombres voiles,
 Aux bois pleins de rayons, aux nuits pleines d'étoiles.
 L'esprit en la voyant s'en va je ne sais où.
 Elle a tout ce qui peut rendre un pauvre homme fou.
 Tantôt c'est un enfant, tantôt c'est une reine.
 Hélas ! quelle beauté radieuse et sereine !
 Elle a de fiers dédains, de charmantes faveurs,
 Un regard doux et bleu sous de longs cils rêveurs,
 L'innocence, et l'amour qui sans tristesse encore
 Flotte empreint sur son front comme une vague aurore,
 Et puis je ne sais quoi de calme et de vainqueur !
 Et le ciel dans ses yeux met l'enfer dans mon cœur. (IV 845)

What begins as a variety of thought experiment (“elle nous fait songer / À [...]”) quickly takes on the transcendent quality of pure symbolism: “Tantôt *c'est* un enfant, tantôt *c'est* une reine.” And these differing moods and fragmentary spiritual fluctuations of the female figure (over the course of the brief poem she is described as joyful, pensive, somber, childlike, regal, radiant, proud, scornful, charming, benevolent, wistful, innocent, loving and inexplicably placid and triumphant) are traversed *as a landscape* (“bois pleins de rayons [...] nuits pleines d'étoile”) that has a bewildering, maddening, indeed infuriating effect: a play of opposites that inspires a still-concealed animosity through its gay caprice. That this opposition is revealed by a variety of delayed volta implies, perhaps, an element of *formal* fragmentation to the poem as well; issuing from an unrhymed origin, a kind of textual lacuna, one might consider these thirteen lines a truncated sonnet of sorts. If the clichéd natural imagery of Hugo’s poem might initially appear innocuous to the point of being saccharine, it is just such latent violence in both form and subject matter that will be revealed by Baudelaire’s reworking of this variety of Romantic love poetry: his focus on excess, evident even from the title of *À celle qui est trop gaie*, explodes Hugo’s

Baudelaire's own adaptation of the subgenre of Romantic love poetry loosely sketched here should be considered less a parody than an unmasking of such overdetermined, muddled symbolism: by amplifying these tropes to their extreme, Baudelaire exposes semiotic violence as the underlying operation of the Romantic poetics just discussed. Even before the female body is injured at the conclusion of his *À celle qui est trop gaie*, it is fragmented by the poetic gaze—but made meaningful in the process:

Ta tête, ton geste, ton air
Sont beaux comme un beau paysage ;
Le rire joue en ton visage
Comme un vent frais dans un ciel clair.

Le passant chagrin que tu frôles
Est ébloui par la santé
Qui jaillit comme une clarté
De tes bras et de tes épaules. (I 156)

It is this kind of contre-blason—a pseudo-synechdocal dismantling of the body—that permits the poem (self-consciously, artificially) to engender meaning. Corporeal (*tête*) and metaphysical (*geste, air*) attributes intermingle from the very first line, which dissolves into what appears to be an intentionally clumsy simile: the rhythmic repetition of the adjective *beau* in the second line seems to mock the codified nature of the rather standard association between the woman's body and a landscape attested to by both Hugo's and Sainte-Beuve's poems. Subtly, then, if quite self-consciously, Baudelaire reveals the inner workings of what had seemed spontaneous, even naïve, in his predecessors, now emphasizing the *violence* inherent to such signification: every aspect of the female form is *compared* to something natural—not strictly metaphorically but through such similes that emphasize the artificial character of this comparison, the poetic instinct that describes a woman's health as radiating "*comme une clarté*" rather than as simply radiant or clear.

The woman portrayed—the poem was inspired by one of the nineteenth century's favorite muses, the demimondaine Madame Sabatier—appears to experience the alienation from one's own body that Benjamin designates as a key symptom of melancholy, and hence of what he calls the allegorical. Her laugh, personified and active, seems to act *upon* her; she is merely a blank canvas—an impression reinforced by the diction itself, specifically the word *paysage*: is the subject being compared to a natural landscape or rather to a painting thereof? Each body part (head, arms, shoulders) is transformed in turn into an element of signification inasmuch as it becomes the medium of meaning for something else, a *representation* of a natural image, through the written sign: the body has been transformed into a text.

Literally *incorporating* textuality in their depiction, these superfluous similes initiate a chain of signifiers:

Les retentissantes couleurs
Dont tu parsèmes tes toilettes
Jettent dans l'esprit des poètes
L'image d'un ballet de fleurs.

Ces robes folles sont l'emblème
De ton esprit bariolé ;
Folle dont je suis affolé,
Je te hais autant que je t'aime ! (I 156–7)

The beloved's "esprit bariolé" is first expressed through "retentissantes couleurs" that express themselves in turn through an *image* of a ballet and finally as flowers. If this manner of making meaning seems to operate on similarity, it also operates on redundancy: a colorful soul represented by loud colors themselves repeated by (presumably) colorful flowers. This redundancy is also evident in the repetition of the word "folle" used to describe both the woman and her clothing: an attribute that appears, moreover, to be contagious inasmuch as the poet (recalling the *pauvre homme fou* of Hugo's poem) is also *affolé*. Baudelaire himself describes this poetic process as emblematic ("Ces robes folles sont l'emblème"), which is to say: *not* symbolic, *not* possessing the pretended transcendence of the Romantic symbol, *not* naturalized; but rather artificial, deliberate—allegorical.

This exclamatory apostrophe—"Je te hais autant que je t'aime !" —concludes the first half of the poem²³ with its declaration of an antagonistic but simultaneously complicit rapport with an intended reader of sorts. I label the female subject here a *reader* not only because Baudelaire's gesture of having sent an early draft of this poem to Madame Sabatier would seem a tacit dedication, but also because the mistress of the poem will soon—through the wound to be inflicted—become an obvious recipient (read: *victim*) of *text*. And while this may appear to reflect Baudelaire's particularly brutal modernist bent, it should be noted that even in Hugo's poem the female figure is inscribed—her countenance *imprinted* with a kind of mark of Cain: "L'innocence, et l'amour qui sans tristesse encore / Flotte *empreint* (emphasis added) sur son front comme une vague aurore[.]" Baudelaire's apostrophe above thus constitutes a central textual breaking point: not only does it divide the poem in two almost exactly, but it also marks the first evocation of the

23 Lisa Downing divides the poem similarly, noting that a profusion of conventional similes in the first half gives way to a vengeful conclusion. Lisa Downing, "The Poetics of Baudelaire's Liebestod," in *Desiring the Dead: Necrophilia and Nineteenth-Century French Literature* (Oxford: European Humanities Research Center, 2003), 67–91.

lyric *I*, which commences here in a typically Baudelairean state of *spleen* (“atonie”) before being awakened by a ray of sunlight that is said to *tear* into the poet’s chest:

Quelquefois dans un beau jardin
Où je traînais mon atonie,
J’ai senti, comme une ironie,
Le soleil déchirer mon sein ;

Et le printemps et la verdure
Ont tant humilié mon cœur,
Que j’ai puni sur une fleur
L’insolence de la Nature. (I 157)

The violence perpetrated by the sudden sunlight marks a break even in temporal perception as the habitual plurality of the *imparfait* (“Quelquefois [...] je traînais”) is interrupted by the singular experience of the *passé composé* (“J’ai senti”). Moreover, this injurious sunlight is of a particularly literary variety inasmuch as the poet experiences it “comme une ironie”—a rhetorical figure, and doubly so, considering that it is once again expressed via simile. The ballet of flowers has become an entire garden, and the woman’s body has now slipped entirely into the metaphorical, completely becoming a landscape to be ravaged by the poet.

That Baudelaire first avenges himself against a flower before turning his rage toward his mistress not only recalls the conclusion of Sainte-Beuve’s poem, it is also an inescapable indication that the wound about to be inflicted shall be one of the eponymic *fleurs du mal* of the *recueil*—a word that has a double meaning here as both a collection of poetry and as a harvest (*cueillir* is to pick fruits or flowers):

Ainsi je voudrais, une nuit,
Quand l’heure des voluptés sonne,
Vers les trésors de ta personne,
Comme un lâche, ramper sans bruit,

Pour châtier ta chair joyeuse,
Pour meurtrir ton sein pardonné,
Et faire à ton flanc étonné
Une blessure large et creuse,

Et vertigineuse douceur !
À travers ces lèvres nouvelles,
Plus éclatantes et plus belles,
T’infuser mon venin, ma sœur ! (I 157)

Taking his cue from the sunlight itself (“Ainsi”), the poet—now turned perpetrator—crawls forward (along with the verb *traîner* above, here *ramper* recalls the choreography of the earlier “Je n’ai pas pour maîtresse [...]”) on all fours to violate his victim, with the aim of “spoiling” her pardoned breast. (*Meurtir*, for a fruit, means *to bruise*, but for a person it also carries the connotation of a mortal wound.) On a structural level—*how* meaning is produced as much as the meaning itself—this image of injury at the conclusion of *À celle qui est trop gaie* will set in motion a violent reconfiguration of the sign with the mortal wound occupying a paradoxical position as both a return to origins (insofar as it is made comparable by to the vaginal opening) and the doorway to death; this orifice is at the intersection between life-affirming libidinal urges and the death drive: it is a reinvigoration through destruction.

As Benjamin writes in his final fragments on Baudelaire, the posthumous collection titled *Zentralpark* (1938–9): “Das Herausreißen der Dinge aus den ihnen geläufigen Zusammenhängen [...] ist ein für Baudelaire sehr kennzeichnendes Verfahren. Es hängt mit der Zerstörung der organischen Zusammenhänge in der allegorischen Intention zusammen” (I:2 670). The vapid, clichéd conceit anticipated with the introduction of the flower is dismantled so that a novel constellation may come into being, producing a new, more meaningful, albeit artificial “flower.” The anti-natural, highly allegorical character of such flowers of evil makes it clear: they are shorthand for the very poems that Baudelaire is writing. The wound in *À celle qui est trop gaie* is thus a *mise-en-abyme* of the poetic project on the whole: it is a flower within a flower, a poem within a poem. And through this *mise-en-abyme* the wound at the conclusion of *À celle qui est trop gaie* is twice allegorized: first as a flower and then as *text*.

Both a rhetorical method and an attitude toward the world—an epistemological disposition, a means of perception or interpretation—the allegorical in Benjamin, like what I have been designating the grotesque in Baudelaire’s verse, is simultaneously productive (insofar as it seeks to signify) and deconstructive (insofar as it is a demythifying process opposed to the desired unity of the Romantic symbol). Of course, this same dynamic of deconstruction-reconfiguration characterizes Baudelaire’s position in literary history. That the wound of *À celle qui est trop gaie* would be addressed to *ma sœur* ineluctably recalls the “Hypocrite lecteur,—mon semblable,—mon frère” (I 6) from the volume’s prefatory poem, *Au lecteur*, definitively recasting that dedication in terms of an intended injury: after all, the mistress becomes a sister only via one of the most appalling poetic images imaginable—her body being endued with a new (and “more beautiful”) orifice which becomes the new site of sexual desire and penetration. It is through the wound in *À celle qui est trop gaie* that the poet not only comes into contact with the other, but—more acutely—with the sibling who, consanguineous, already maintains the unique status of simultaneously being both self and other. Through the proximity of the two dedications to the *Fleurs*—the first (addressed to Théophile Gautier) paratextual and the second (*Au lecteur*) liminally inscribed both within and outside of the volume itself—Gautier too becomes the hypocrite reader,

double and *brother* to the poet. Thus Baudelaire establishes a relationship of kinship and complicity with both his readers and his predecessors, but one by no means free of violence; it is founded, rather, on what Herschel Farbman has aptly identified as “fratricidal bloodlust.”²⁴

As Jean Pommier notes,²⁵ Baudelaire inherits the abhorrent image at the end of *À celle qui est trop gaie* in part from Gautier himself. In Gautier’s *Comédie de la Mort*, as in other poems examined above, the loss of virginity is brought into close constellation with a wound—here with the wounds of Christ:

Quel amant a jamais, à l’âge où l’œil reluit,
 Dans tout l’enivrement de la première nuit,
 Poussé plus de soupirs profonds et pleins de flamme,
 Et baisé les pieds nus de la plus belle femme
 Avec la même ardeur que vous les pieds de bois
 Du cadavre insensible allongé sur la croix !
 Quelle bouche fleurie et d’ambrosie humide,
 Vaudrait la bouche ouverte à son côté livide !²⁶

Religious devotion to the image of the crucifixion initially takes precedence over erotic desire, but in the end the terms are reversed as even Christ’s wound becomes an open mouth awaiting an ardent kiss. Such re-allegorization of the worn-out tropes of the religious is, of course, precisely what Baudelaire envisions in his cultivation of the flowers of Evil (writ large) and precisely what constitutes the provocation of his poetry both on the level of content (willful blasphemy, even if as moral counter-example) and form. The infliction of injury is the very procedure by which the initial *ennui* of the poem’s first line is conquered and by which meaning can once again be produced—the explicit aim of the Baudelaire’s poetic project, as laid out in his prefatory *Au lecteur*, where he enlists his reader in a combat against a violent, personified *Ennui*. Even here Baudelaire has both revised and trumped Gautier’s already provocative revision of this trope.

This homage by way of hypertrophy is, ultimately, a perpetual revivification through semiotic violence. For even Gautier’s wound was already the locus of an unsteady allegorical relation inasmuch as it is impossible definitively to determine whether the sexual valence there is employed as extended metaphor for the religious or vice versa. This is the result of the attempt entirely to uproot the most established and strictly codified of representational traditions—stigmata—reinvigorating it, allowing it to take new life and create new meaning. But as with Baudelaire’s treatment of the scars of *la petite vérole*, signifier and signified are thoroughly exchangeable: the thing

24 Herschel Farbman, “Poe’s Tattoo: Reading Fraternity in Baudelaire,” in *MLN* 124.5 (December 2009): 1163.

25 Jean Pommier, *Dans les chemins de Baudelaire* (Paris: José Corti, 1945), 188.

26 Théophile Gautier, *Comédie de la Mort* (Brussels: Imprimerie de E. Laurent, 1838), 76.

itself is constituted by its representation. One might say, by the same token, that Romanticism is, to some extent, first engendered by its modernist revision—coming to coherence as a discrete moment in literary history only once its strategies have been extrapolated and enhanced to their breaking point.

In his aforementioned essay on Baudelaire, Paul Valéry condemns what he sees as French Romanticism's naïve self-confidence, its earnest, unreflected nature. Yet, he also admits to an inherent difficulty in describing the very notion of Romanticism, ultimately opting for a definition by Baudelairean counterexample:

Nous possédons, en effet, grâce à la suite du temps et au développement ultérieur des événements littéraires, — grâce même à Baudelaire, à son œuvre et à la fortune de cette œuvre, — un moyen simple et sûr de préciser quelque peu notre idée nécessairement vague, et tantôt reçu, tantôt arbitraire, du romantisme. *Ce moyen consiste dans l'observation de ce qui a succédé au romantisme* (emphasis added), qui est venu l'altérer, lui apporter des corrections et des contradictions, et enfin se substituer à lui [...] Rien ne nous renseigne plus clairement sur les romantiques que l'ensemble des programmes et des tendances de leurs successeurs. (600)

In Valéry's view, it is through the later contradictions and refutations of Romanticism that it can be observed most clearly. Suzanne Nash has just that point in mind when she summarizes Valéry's view of Baudelaire's achievement as response to Romanticism: "Baudelaire's modernity is a kind of counter-imitation."²⁷ It has often been pointed out that Valéry's essay betrays the same iconoclastic, oedipal attitude towards Baudelaire as it finds in Baudelaire's attitude vis-à-vis Romanticism. The romantic counter-discourse has once again been reinstated and revitalized; Valéry holds up the same broken mirror to Baudelairean Symbolism as does Baudelaire to Romanticism. But perhaps Romanticism is indeed best revealed by this reflection.

27 Suzanne Nash, *Paul Valéry's Album des vers anciens: A Past Transfigured* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983), 52.