

From Aeschylus' Dream to Baudelaire's  
Reverie: Orestes Evoked

In his essay, "The Concept of the Collective Unconscious," C. G. Jung states that "while the personal unconscious is made up essentially of contents which have at one time been conscious . . . the contents of the collective unconscious have never been in consciousness and therefore have never been individually acquired."<sup>1</sup> Archetypes, therefore, are not individual, they are universal, and, as such, belong to all men. These residual entities inhabit the modern mind, and are as enduring as myths which are restored to consciousness and preserved through the work of art. Gods, demi-gods, heroes, egregious monarchs, supernatural monsters, human navigators of the underworld or of empyrean regions, at one literary period or another, have all embodied the aspirations and conflicts of the human race. Poets returned to the legends of the ancient world which have always furnished the paradigms for the plight of man in any century. In this century alone, three poets: Gottfried Benn, W. H. Auden, and William Carlos Williams used the figure of the fallen Icarus (no doubt inspired by Brueghel's painting, Landscape with the Fall of Icarus, rather than by the specific section in Ovid's Metamorphosis) to restate the theme of the fall into obscurity and oblivion attending the aspirational soaring into space, where no prudent mortal would venture. The expression "trying one's wings" is perhaps a metaphor for testing one's manly (or superhuman) strength, which this ancient myth passed down to us.

Not the least of the modern artists to arrest the plummeting hero in mid-flight was the poet Charles Baudelaire. His poem called "Les plaintes d'un Icare" appears in an addendum to the third

edition of Les Fleurs du Mal (1862); it contains the most direct reference to the fallen worshipper of beauty, whose lament:

Et brûlé par l'amour du beau,  
Je n'aurai pas l'honneur sublime  
De donner mon nom à l'abîme  
Qui me servira de tombeau.<sup>2</sup>

is a left-over from the Romantic attitude which Baudelaire was already to have abandoned at the time of the first edition of Les Fleurs du Mal (1857). The much-mourned and often portrayed youth, who, in defiance of his father's admonitions had flown too close to the sun, was not to be the chosen emblem of this poet; Baudelaire abandoned his poetic father in a tributary nod, and preferred to fly on, rather than founder in the waters which would not even bear his name. Another figure from Greek mythology, never directly alluded to, but very much present, was to serve as example for Baudelaire's image. Throughout Les Fleurs du Mal, Orestes' name is never mentioned; yet in the final tercets of the poem "L'Idéal", we can decipher Orestes' presence amid the stellar figures of the art and literature of the past:

Ce qu'il faut à ce coeur profond comme  
un abîme,  
C'est vous, Lady Macbeth, âme puissante  
au crime,  
Rêve d'Eschyle éclos au climat des autans;  
  
Ou bien toi, grande Nuit, fille de Michel-  
Ange,  
Qui dors paisiblement dans une pose étrange  
Tes appas façonnés aux boucles des Titans!  
(11. 9-14)

The flowering of a dream of classical Greek drama is analogous to the unfolding of Baudelaire's own con-

sciousness, of his purpose as a poet. The figure of Orestes represents the centralization of Baudelaire's personality, both as artist and man. Whereas Baudelaire might have overtly chosen such figures as Andromaque, Clytemnestra, sphinx-like cats and cat-like sphinxes as correlations of his ego-type, it is in the covert, but immanent manifestations of the figure of Orestes that we find the correspondence between Baudelaire and his Self.

Before determining how an Aeschylean dream expanded itself within Baudelaire's own conscious, we will examine the circumstances of the poet's life which contributed to this dream's appearance within the conscious work of art. Charles Baudelaire was born in Paris in 1821 to François Baudelaire and Caroline Archembaut-Dufaÿs. Attaining the age of majority in 1842, he fell into an inheritance of 75,000 francs left him by his father, who died when Charles was only six years old. Many things occurred between the time of François Baudelaire's death and Charles Baudelaire's majority; his mother married Monsieur Jacques Aupick (later to become Général Aupick), whom Charles would later swear to shoot down during the Paris uprisings of 1848. A year before he reached the age of twenty-one, at the instigation of his step-father, Charles was forcibly embarked on a sea voyage to Calcutta, from which he returned before the destination was reached. Once back in Paris and in possession of his inheritance, Charles established his own quarters on the Ile de la Cité. However, two years later, alarmed by her son's growing independence, and at the signs of incipient bohemianism, Madame Aupick, encouraged by her second husband, divested Baudelaire of this sum through the intercession of the family court. This act of "justice" was to throw the young man back upon the generosity of his parent and step-parent, and thrust him once more into a state of quasi-dependent childhood. However, the loss of legal privileges of manhood acted as a catalyst which was to spur creation and bring

into fruition Les Fleurs du Mal, published in a first edition in 1857.

The work has been assessed as standing midway between the preceding era of Romanticism and the succeeding generations of symbolist writers, who, thirty years later, were to acknowledge Charles Baudelaire as their titular head. Although the word symbole is used only three times in the collection,

. . . le mot "symbole" n'apparaît en tout que trois fois dans Les Fleurs du Mal (une fois comme adjectif, qualifiant le gibet de l'île de Cythère, emblème du sort hideux du poète, et comme substantif, en plus du vers célèbre des "Correspondences" pour désigner le menu cercueil ressemblant à des berceaux des petites vieilles ratatinées à demi-retournées à l'enfance,<sup>3</sup>

the term correspondence itself has been assigned a variety of meanings, from the vertical transcendence of the spiritual universe to the natural one (as in the mystical context of Swedenborg's philosophy), to the horizontal analogy between different sensorial perceptions. The term could just as well have been derived from Diderot's Lettre sur les aveugles, in which he speaks of an underlying perception which unites all the senses. Nevertheless, the use of the word to denote analogies is a good one. From Aeschylus' dream to Baudelaire's reverie, many levels of interpretation could emerge. Although no final and single meaning could be gleaned from any symbolist poem, the analogy which arises vaguely, but quite frequently from the reading of the poems which we will examine is the one between Baudelaire and Orestes, the awaited, but nevertheless unrecognized saviour of an afflicted city, be it Argos or Paris.

In the Libation Bearers, the second of the Oresteia trilogy, Orestes is alternately referred to as



a dispossessed, disinherited wanderer, an exile, a stranger, a foreigner among his own race. He is frequently spoken of as being a saviour: "Invoke the coming of some man, or more than man."<sup>4</sup> Thus, like Baudelaire, Orestes, though divinely inspired, is terrestrially disinherited, and appears in order to possess, by an act of God-prompted vengeance, the inheritance which was forcibly (though not illegally) wrested from him.

The big strength of Apollo's oracle will not forsake me. For he charged me to win through  
this hazard,  
with divination of much, and speech articulate,  
the winters of disaster under the warm heart  
were I to fail against my father's murderers;  
told me to cut them down in their own fashion,  
turn  
to the bull's fury in the loss of my estates.  
He said that else I must myself pay penalty  
with my own life, and suffer much sad punishment.  
(p.103)

The theme of restoration of a lost patrimony is re-echoed in the following lines:

. . . our man will kindle a flame  
and light of liberty, win the domain  
and huge treasure again of his fathers.  
Forlorn challenger, though blessed by god,  
Orestes must come to grips with two,  
so wrestle. Yet may he throw them. (p.123)

The decision of the family court, dispossessing Baudelaire of his 75,000 francs, signified the enactment of a mother's curse, a spell under which the poet was to labor during the greater part of his life. The following words exchanged between Orestes and Clytemnestra, though never uttered between nineteenth-

century mother and son, must have been felt in all their inflections when Madame Aupick's concern for her son's erratic ways resolved itself in the negative decision of the court:

--A mother has her curse, child. Are you not  
afraid?

--No. You bore me and threw me away, to a  
hard life.  
(p.125)

After the matricide is accomplished, Orestes envisions the punishment which awaits him and which he senses he must face, possibly at the price of his own sanity:

I would have you know, I see not how this thing  
will end.

I am a charioteer whose course is wrenched out-  
side

the track, for I am beaten, my rebellious  
senses

bolt with me headlong and the fear against my  
heart

is ready for the singing and dance of wrath

. . . . .

I go, an outcast wanderer from this land, and  
leave

behind, in life, in death, the name of what  
I did.

(pp.129-30)

In the Eumenides, the voices of the furies, invoking their ancient authority might have re-echoed in Baudelaire's ear:

. . . For we are strong and skilled;  
we have authority; we hold  
memory of evil; we are stern  
nor can men's pleadings bend us.

. . . . .

[Privilege] primeval yet is mine, nor am I  
without place  
though it be underneath the ground  
and in no sunlight and in gloom that I must  
stand.  
(p.148)

Somewhere within himself Baudelaire heard those ancient voices and adopted their form. In a letter to his mother, he said that he would have liked to set the whole human race against himself, seeing in that a pleasure which would console him for everything. Elsewhere, in his journal, he expressed his desire for solitude through his inspiration of universal disgust and horror. In the series of fragments entitled Fusées, Baudelaire scatters lines such as: "self-purification and anti-humanity" (I,659) and "j'ai cultivé mon hystérie avec jouissance et terreur" (I,668).

The key words in these excerpts stand out in their relationship to the duality, let alone to the multiplicity of inner personages which Baudelaire felt, perceived, divined, and consciously brought out to the surface. Clearly, hysteria can only be experienced by a woman, but just as Orestes and Electra were a pair, ". . . look forth/ and pity them, female with the male strain alike" (p.111), Baudelaire remained, throughout his person and poetic persona, a twin, doubled almost to infinity. Purification became a mode of catharsis in which these multiple selves were purged by deliberate exposure and cultivation. These diverse and seemingly extraneous and conflicting elements were not cast off, but rather annexed, grafted onto the personality, much in the manner of Jung's vision of catharsis as a "vision of completion, the experience of unification, and, in short, transformation."<sup>5</sup>

If the Erinyes can be envisioned as a group of hysterical womb-driven women, hell-bent on the avenging of matricide, then Baudelaire seized this image

and became, in turn, the redeemer, the self-scourger and his own sister; for, in addition to the images of the stranger speaking in strange accents which we read in "L'Héautontimorouménos":

Ne suis-je pas un faix accord  
Dans la divine symphonie,  
Grâce à la vorace Ironie  
Qui me secoue et qui me mord? (11. 13-16)

we also have the image of the Gorgon-like Fury:

Elle est dans ma voix, la crierde!  
C'est tout mon sang, ce poison noir!  
Je suis le sinistre miroir  
Où la mégère se regarde! (11. 17-20)

There are two striking puns in the above stanzas. First, the word "Ironie", deliberately capitalized, evokes the sound of "Erinnye", the implacable Fury. The word "mégère", meaning "shrew" in French, derives from Megara, one of the hissing sisters whose glance turned men to stone. Even the multiplicity of sibilants in the words: "C'est", "sang", "poison", "suis", and "sinistre", meaning "of left", suggests the complementary aspects of Baudelaire's personality. Not two-fold, but manifold, he, like his Protean counterpart, adopts a variety of personae in order to elude captivity, or being bound within the confines of restricted space, like Andromaque or, more concretely, like Electra. Despite the poet's recurring images of travelers, these are not yet explorers of the unknown, but landlocked voyageurs who cannot escape. Whereas in idea Baudelaire would seem to resemble the female-ridden Orestes, he was, in fact, more like Electra, bound to his native city, unacquainted with exotic terrain, except for a brief spell in Flanders, which he evokes in his bilious poems. Rarely does the voice of the left hand sing or soar; more often it spits, snarls,

or whines:

Je suis comme le roi d'un pays pluvieux,  
Riche, mais impuissant, jeune et pourtant  
très vieux,  
Qui, de ses précepteurs méprisant les cour-  
bettes,  
S'ennuie avec ses chiens comme avec d'au-  
tres bêtes.  
("Spleen," ll. 1-4)

By the time we reach the imaginary dialogue, "L'Etranger," the first selection from Spleen et Idéal, the irony, or duality, subsists as a poetic technique. It is no longer used as the self-mockery of the self-inflicted bite, but is elevated to the level of a smoothly polished probing instrument. Here the hand of the artist is more certain of its aim; the personage who answers to the question:

Qui aimes-tu le mieux, homme énigmatique,  
dis?  
ton père, ta mère, ta soeur ou ton frère?  
(I, 277)

is, as indicated by "homme énigmatique" no longer the ungainly Albatross prodded by the jeering sailors, nor quite the

. . . Ange, imprudent voyageur  
Qu'a tenté l'amour du difforme,  
Au fond d'un cauchemar énorme,  
Se débattant comme un nageur.  
("L'Irrémédiable," ll. 5-8)

Rather, he has assumed all the roles and adjusted them to suit his poetic purpose. Although each type of poetic stance may be considered a pose, it is worn with the equanimity of one who knows that he must assume various shapes in order to attain whole-

ness. In "L'Etranger," the calm, affirmative tone of "Je n'ai ni père, ni mère, ni soeur, ni frère" no longer suggests the "grand abandonné," the out-of-tune and the dispossessed; it is the voice of one who hopes to find his rank and harmony amid the other great discordant notes of past and future. The response, "Je l'aimerais [la beauté] volontiers, déesse et immortelle," upholds the view of Beauty which is both "anti-human" and above the human:

Je trône dans l'azur comme un sphinx in-  
compris;  
J'unis un coeur de neige à la blancheur  
des cygnes;  
Je hais le mouvement qui déplace les lignes,  
Et jamais je ne pleure et jamais je ne ris.  
  
Les poètes, devant mes grandes attitudes,  
Que j'ai l'air d'emprunter aux plus fiers  
monuments,  
Consumeront leurs jours en d'austères études;  
  
Car j'ai, pour fasciner ces dociles amants,  
De purs miroirs qui font toutes choses plus  
belles:  
Mes yeux, mes larges yeux aux clartés  
éternelles.  
("La Beauté", ll. 5-14)

"Homme énigmatique" and "sphinx incompris" are embodied in the same person. Both the male, or virile figure of the aristocratic poet, his head raised above the level of the jeering, inquisitive and uncomprehending crowd, and the inscrutable female sphinx, creating a kind of a "femme fatale" image, fuse alchemically in the vision of the poet. The word "incompris" may even have a two-fold meaning: for the "clartés éternelles" mirrored in the jewelled eyes of monumental and immortal beauty cannot be comprehended or enfolded by the dim, aged eyes of the

pursuing mortals. Thus, the "emblème net" and "tableau parfait" of:

Un navire pris dans le pôle,  
Comme en un piège de cristal,  
Cherchant par quel détroit fatal  
Il est tombé dans cette geôle.

("L'Irrémédiable," 11. 25-28)

which had formerly represented "une fortune irrémédiable," have been transmuted, as if by magic. The word "fortune" is redeemed from the notion of plight; the fortune now envisaged is the destiny of the poet who, an outcast from mankind (or womankind, like Orestes), returns not to his previous Electra-like condition, but plunges onward, not struck down, but aided by Apollo towards unexplored realms, where he will found "a new golden era." The lacerated figure of the exiled and prodigal son becomes transformed into the whole man who has embraced and therefore spiritually transcended his mortal situation in a gesture of "self-achieved submission."<sup>6</sup>

The Self is faintly perceptible in the opening lines of "Le Cygne":

Andromaque, je pense à vous! Ce petit fleuve,  
Pauvre et triste miroir où jadis resplendit  
L'Immense majesté de vos douleurs de veuve,  
Ce Simois menteur qui par vos pleurs grandit,

A fécondé soudain ma mémoire fertile.

(11. 1-5)

Baudelaire utters these lines more in the manner of a dream-like reminiscence, a transcendental vision on which he performs a magical operation. The "je" is entirely different from the one projected in "Les Plaintes d'un Icare." A distance has been established between the poet and the heroine of antiquity, a distance which allows him to project further

his dreams upon the emblematic swan. The breach of time and space between the author and his material serves as a metaphor for the poet's monumental poetic detachment, and for his own transcendence of the human situation. Also, the figure of the swan, who, imprisoned physically in the shallow waters, may become liberated as the symbol for the poet's feelings. These feelings, purely egocentric and particularized in the poem "Les Plaintes d'un Icare," are now transmuted into a purer, expansive vision which engenders infinite analogies. The landlocked swan now triggers a series of messages which it is the poet's aim to decipher:

Ainsi, dans la forêt où mon esprit s'exile  
Un vieux souvenir sonne à plein souffle du  
cor!  
("Le Cygne," ll. 49-50)

This forest is the same spiritual abode of "Les Correspondences":

La Nature est un temple où de vivants  
piliers  
Laissent parfois sortir de confuses  
paroles;  
L'homme y passe à travers des forêts de  
symboles  
Qui l'observent avec des regards familiers.  
(ll. 1-4)

This is also the forest inhabited by the Cumean sibyl who, through the incantatory power emanating from the "vivants piliers" of her leaves, spells out an infinite message:

Je pense aux matelots oubliés dans une  
île,  
Aux captifs, aux vaincus! . . . bien  
d'autres encor!  
("Le Cygne," ll. 51-52)



Memory has transformed the specific person into the universal situation. "Les matelots oubliés" are not named; thus Baudelaire invites us to form our own associations, to reconstruct a personal universe from the undefined substantives, to create our own harmonies from the notes proffered. Through a series of reveries moving backward in time, Baudelaire has freed the image of the swan from the captivity of specific reference and navigated it toward the clearing which later poets were able to fathom with the aid of his vision. W. B. Yeats's rhetorical question in "Leda and the Swan":

Being so caught up,  
So mastered by the brute blood of the air,  
Did she put on his knowledge with his power  
Before the indifferent beak could let her  
drop?

asked almost three-quarters of a century later, appears to be an affirmative response to the phrase left suspended at the closing of Baudelaire's "Le Cygne." The divine knowledge of the sibyl and the human craft of the mortal Daedalus became wings with which to fly beyond the sun. Toward the heroic end, the poet first discovered and charted the course on which his successors were to embark. This voyage which began with enforced exile of the Orestian hero, pursued by his own shadow, the inner fateful Furies of "la conscience dans le Mal," expanded into a vaster and richer Odyssey of the mind:

To sleep--perchance to dream: ay, there's  
the rub,  
For in that sleep of death what dreams may  
come  
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,  
Must give us pause.

For Charles Baudelaire, poetry is that "sleep

of death"--the "uncreated conscience of the race" wherein he may divest himself of the primeval Deities and, by casting off the base matter, transmute it into a work of art. The poet, in exile from his own country, may thus become united with men of all times and all places. Orestes, unconscious artist of the Self that he was, figures, not accidentally, as the initial sound of an unfinished symphony which still resounds in the inner ear.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Carl Jung, The Portable Jung, ed. Joseph Campbell (New York: Viking Press, 1971), p. 60.

<sup>2</sup>Charles Baudelaire, Oeuvres complètes (Paris: Gallimard, Pléiade, 1975), I, 143. Hereafter the poems shall be cited by line numbers and prose citations by page numbers, the Pléiade edition being the reference in all cases.

<sup>3</sup>Henri Peyre, Qu'est-ce que c'est que le Symbolisme (Paris: PUF, 1974), p. 36.

<sup>4</sup>Richard Lattimore, trans., Aeschylus I: Oresteia (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1953), p. 97. All citations of the plays are to this edition.

<sup>5</sup>Joseph Campbell, Myths, Dreams and Religion (New York: Dutton, 1970), p. 33.

<sup>6</sup>Joseph Campbell, The Hero With a Thousand Faces (Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 1968), p. 16.