

Melancholy in the Mirror:
Three Readings of Baudelaire

by Jean Starobinski

translated by Charlotte Mandell

Hyperion, Volume V, issue 2, November 2010

HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics

**MELANCHOLY
IN THE MIRROR:
THREE READINGS
OF BAUDELAIRE**

JEAN STAROBINSKI

**TRANSLATED BY CHARLOTTE MANDELL
INTRODUCTION BY RAINER J. HANSHE**

Introduction: Transforming Melancholy

by Rainer J. Hanshe



One finds the cult of evil as a political device, however romantic, to disinfect and isolate against all moralizing dilettantism.

—Walter Benjamin, “Surrealism”

Jean Starobinski should need no introduction but despite the fact that, in Europe, he is regarded as an intellectual peer of Foucault and Derrida, his work is hardly ubiquitous let alone as pervasive an element of theoretical and critical discourse, at least this side of the Atlantic. While perusing the shelves of even the most intrepid bookstores in New York, one will find nearly all the texts of Foucault and Derrida, but Starobinski’s will rarely be in evidence, certainly not in abundance. In Starobinski’s texts, as opposed to those of Foucault and Derrida, there are few radiant methodological concepts to easily seize upon, thus, paradoxically, in spite of the limpidity of his style, his work is perhaps more intractable than that of his peers and therefore difficult to readily assimilate and adopt and deploy. Even if when appropriated the complexity of Foucault’s and Derrida’s terminology is not always sustained or reduced to interpretive catchphrases, notions such as *différance*, trace, governmentality, biopower, etc. lend themselves to swift absorption. Even though before the phantasmagoric linguistic display of thinkers like Foucault and Derrida Starobinski is less psychedelic, more sober, and therefore not as attractive to the intellectual counter-culture, he is always compelling and, in both senses of the term, no less brilliant. He has implemented a precise, philologically grounded criticism of texts and fundamental aspects of literary experience.

Aside from his concern with literature, medicine, and the arts, on several broad themes—the use and denunciation of masks, sumptuous gifts, melancholy—he has developed a general form of comparative literature that does not separate evidence from theory. He was the youngest member of the “Geneva School” of “critics of consciousness” and the one most interrelated with, and to some degree challenging of, the discourses of Foucault and Derrida. After studying classical literature and medicine at the University of Geneva,

he worked for a few years as a doctor assisting in internal medicine, then in psychiatry. Following the publication of his book *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: la transparence et l'obstacle* (1957), the book of his most well known in America, he was appointed professor of the history of ideas and French literature at the University of Geneva. He received the Balzan Prize in 1984 for his outstanding contribution to the knowledge of French and European culture through his research on literature, psychoanalysis, and linguistics, which reveals a subtle intellect and profound knowledge of numerous authors of different historical periods. Other works of his translated into English include *A History of Medicine* (Michigan: Hawthorn Books, 1964), *The Invention of Liberty, 1700-1789* (Cleveland: Skira, 1964), *Words Upon Words: The Anagrams of Ferdinand De Saussure* (New Jersey: Yale University Press, 1990), *1789, the Emblems of Reason* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), *The Living Eye* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), *Blessings in Disguise, or, the Morality of Evil* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), *Enchantment: The Seductress in Opera* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), and most recently, though first translated and published in 1985, *Montaigne in Motion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009). Among his distinctions are the Prix de l'Institut de France (1983), the Premio Tevere (Roma, 1990), the Goethe Prize (Hamburg, 1994), the Nuova Antologia, as well as the Prize Karl Jaspers of the University and the town of Heidelberg.

The brief essay before you now, "Melancholy, at Noon," is the first section of Starobinski's *La mélancolie au miroir. Trois lectures de Baudelaire* (1990). Not previously aware of it ourselves, this book was brought to our attention by Fulya Peker, a frequent contributor to *Hyperion*, who read it in a Turkish translation. Although it has been translated into Italian and German, too, and the former with a preface by no less than Yves Bonnefoy, there is as of yet no translation into English. The following excerpt was translated expressly for *Hyperion* by Charlotte Mandell, known for her translations of Blanchot, Nancy, Genet, Proust, etc.

As a philosopher, but more especially as an historian of medicine and a trained physician, Starobinski's literary perspective on melancholy possesses an unusual combination of methodological rigor and cultural nuance. One of his earliest books is *A History of the Treatment of Melancholy from Earliest Times to 1900* (Thèse, Bâle: Acta Psychosomatica, 1960), and melancholy has continued to remain a primary and essential theme for Starobinski. *La mélancolie au miroir* is thus the continuation of a long-standing and persistent concern with melancholy. The methodology of the book combines philological precision, speculative theory, and history of ideas. This work on Baudelaire has multiple resonances and is an important contribution not only to Baudelaire studies, but to studies of melancholy as well, a work which follows in the line of Burton's classic *Anatomy of Melancholy*, Sontag's *Under the Sign of Saturn*, and Margot and Rudolf Wittkower's *Born Under Saturn*:

The Character and Conduct of Artists. Along with Benjamin's *The Writer of Modern Life*, which, surprisingly, was translated into English only several years ago, Sartre's seminal study *Baudelaire*, and both Eliot's and Adorno's work on the poet, Starobinski's *La mélancolie au miroir* is one of the most significant and formative studies of one of the founding poets of modernity or the modern sensibility as we know it. However, despite its importance and its being listed in the University of California's fifth volume of the history of the human sciences (Routledge, 1992), it is little known in America and other English speaking countries. Even the *Cambridge Companion to Baudelaire* neglects to mention Starobinski's work, a significant oversight. In reaching across various disciplines, Starobinski's text appeals not only to lay readers interested in Baudelaire and in poetics as such but to those in French Studies, Comparative Literature, and English, if not even those in the medical community and those concerned with literature and medicine and narrative medicine. It appeals to the artist as well, to all artists concerned with their role in the world, even to the artist who remains *contra mundum*. To truly assess one's epoch, one must sustain a *Pathos der Distanz*. To stand with one's back to civilization, or with civilization to one's back as a friend once said to me. The modern man as Jung declared is "the man who stands upon a peak, or at the very edge of the world, the abyss of the future before him, above him the heavens, and below him the whole of mankind with a history that disappears in primeval mists. The modern man [...] is rarely met with. There are few who live up to the name, for they must be conscious to a superlative degree. Since to be wholly of the present means to be fully conscious of one's existence as a man, it requires the most intensive and extensive consciousness, with a minimum of unconsciousness." It is for these reasons then that we publish this excerpt, and in the future that, with sufficient funding or donations, we make a translation of the entire work available.

In the following excerpt, Starobinski shows how Baudelaire reinvented melancholy to divest it from its associations with a self-pitying form of romanticism, evident for instance in de Musset and Verlaine. Similar to the way in which Paul de Man regarded Baudelaire, in "The Rhetoric of Temporality," as both foil and inheritor of Romantic discourses, Starobinski shows how Baudelaire's clinical, in a way morbid, but also highly ambitious and speculative concept of melancholy disposed of Romanticism in order to reuse Romanticism in a darker, more urban, and more overtly allegorical milieu. What informs Baudelaire's conception of melancholy in part, and suffuses it with such darkness, his 'satanism' *per se*, is the failure of the 1848 revolution and its humanistic ideals. The hypocrite reader, and twin of the poet—despite his insight, he does not escape—who suffers fierce assault in the poet's 'Au lecteur' with which *Le fleurs du mal* commences, is a "dainty monster" (the dandy is thus not merely effeminate but grotesque, too, and dangerous, as threatening as a monster) surrounded by a bestiary that includes jackals,

¹ For a particularly, and rightfully, unsettling recitation of *The Litanies of Satan*, see the recording of the same name by Diamanda Galas (Mute Records, 1982; 2001). Recitation however doesn't sufficiently convey the style of Galas' performance of the poem, which is volcanic, a ferocious *incantation* in the spirit of Artaud and Carmelo Bene.

hounds, scorpions, vultures, snakes, etc. The human has become monstrous, and later in the century this monstrosity will receive incandescent expression in Rimbaud's *Saison en Enfer* and even more ferocious expression in Lautréamont's *Maldoror*.

Outlining Baudelaire's knowledge of the tradition of melancholy, Starobinski analyzes how Baudelaire transformed the concept, endowing it with new attributes particular to the crises and conditions of his epoch. In turning from the figurations of melancholy as formulated by Dante, Charles of Orleans, and Milton and forging his own unique figurations, such as making misfortune a vital part of beauty and thereby departing from the classical notion, and celebrating *volupté*, Baudelaire gave new vigor to melancholy. Hence the flowers of evil are the flowers of a virile but crepuscular beauty, not evil in its common sense, but the *Stimmung* of those broken from fortune, the misfortunate, a mood evident in the countenance of Bernini's *Damned Soul*, and in the litanies of Baudelaire's fallen angel.¹ In representing the youth of his time, in articulating as he claimed its "spiritual agitation," Baudelaire etched into melancholy its destructive element, the threat of decay that all misfortune brings, the instance of twilight, when everything gleams, irradiated by the hypnotic cerulean of the sun, the sky, and the oncoming darkness crossing during that magical hour of evening. But the spectacle of such beauty contains death, it is death in part which suffuses it with its radiance, and that is part of what makes the sublime so captivating. In Baudelaire's melancholy, we have a new sensibility. Sartre argues that such melancholy is a form of solipsism, a defense mechanism or shifting away from and abandonment of an all too terrifying modernity. Is it not actually a direct turn *towards* modernity, in fact, a *confrontation* with twilight, that is, with the destruction of one era and the birth of another, with all its sacrifices and loss of blood, therefore—*an opening?* Like a void expanding before us. Baudelaire may not be a *poet engagé* in Sartre's sense, but he is not solipsistic in failing to meet such criteria. There is something far too psycho-biographical in Sartre's judgment, for the quotidian man is not he who forges the form in the fire. In divesting melancholy of self-pity, Baudelaire did not seek comfort, but the concretization of the tragic. In the solitude of the work of art, "we discover" as Blanchot said "a more essential solitude. It excludes the complacent isolation of individualism; it has nothing to do with the quest for singularity." It is, I would assert, a form of poetic power. Seizing a rifle isn't the only form of engagement. To return to Jung in concluding, "The man whom we can with justice call 'modern' is solitary. He is so of necessity and at all times, for every step towards a fuller consciousness of the present removes him further from his original 'participation mystique' with the mass of men—from submersion in a common unconsciousness. Every step forward means an act of tearing himself loose from that all-embracing, pristine unconsciousness which claims the bulk of mankind almost entirely." Baudelaire suffered no such unconsciousness.

Melancholy in the Mirror: Three Readings of Baudelaire

Jean Starobinski

Translated by Charlotte Mandell

I

“Melancholy, at Noon”

Melancholy was an intimate companion of Baudelaire. In *Les Fleurs du Mal*, the introductory poem “To the Reader” clothes the grotesque and repellent figure of Ennui in majesty. The “Epigraph for a Condemned Book” that comes later is even more explicit:



Peaceful, bucolic reader,
Sober, simple, well-meaning man,
Throw away this saturnine book,
Orgiastic and melancholic.¹

Surely the very word ‘melancholy,’ and its direct descendant, the adjective *melancholic*, had become hard to utter in poetry: these words were suffering from overuse. They had been linked too often with solitary contemplation, in landscapes of cliffs or ruins. Commonplace sentimental remarks also relied on it. In “Fusées” (“Rockets”), after a list of affectionate “caprices of language,” we find: “*Mon petit âne mélancolique*” (“My little melancholy donkey”).² In his verse, Baudelaire uses this dangerous word only rarely, and then judiciously. (This is not true in his prose, his critical essays, or his correspondence, where the same precautions are not required.)

Expressing melancholy without saying the word ‘melancholy’ too often requires you to fall back on synonyms, equivalents, metaphors. It poses a challenge to the poetic task. Adjustments must be made, in the lexical domain first of all. The word ‘spleen,’ from English, which had taken it from Greek (*splên*, seat of black bile, hence of melancholy), designates the same malady, but by a detour that turns it into a sort of intruder, both elegant and irritating. French vocabularies had welcomed it even before the words *dandy* and *dandysme* (almost its accomplices, as we shall see) were introduced. The place of

¹ All texts by Charles Baudelaire are cited according to the edition of the *Oeuvres complètes*, edited, collected and annotated by Claude Pichois, Paris: Gallimard, “Bibliothèque de la Pléiade,” 2 volumes, 1975, 1976. (Abbreviated as O.C. in the notes that follow.) [All translations of the Baudelaire texts cited are my own.—Trans.]

O.C., I, p. 137. Cf. the overview presented by Pierre Dufour, “*Les Fleurs du Mal*: dictionnaire de mélancolie,” *Littérature*, No. 72, December 1988, pp. 30-54.

² O.C., I, p. 660.

³ O.C., I, "Lettre à Sainte-Beuve," pp. 207-208.

⁴ Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy*, New York: Basic Books, 1964. See also: William S. Heckscher, "Melancholia (1541): An Essay in the Rhetoric of Description by Joachim Camerarius," in *Joachim Camerarius (1500-1574), Essays on the History of Humanism during the Reformation*, Frank Baron, ed., Munich: W. Fink Verlag, 1978, pp. 32-120; Maxime Préaud, *Mélancolies*, Paris: Herscher, 1982.

spleen, in the *Fleurs*, is dominant: it figures not in the poems themselves, but in the titles. The poems entitled "Spleen" ("Spleen et Idéal" in the first section), without uttering the word 'melancholy,' can be regarded as so many symbols or periphrastic blazons of melancholy. They express it in other words, in other images: they allegorize it—and it is hard to decide if allegory is the body or the shadow of Baudelairean melancholy. I will not be able to avoid speaking about this again in the course of this study.

From his earliest poetic attempts, Baudelaire knew quite a bit about melancholy: he had experienced it subjectively, and he knew the rhetorical and iconological resources a long tradition had employed to interpret it. In the poem he addresses to Sainte-Beuve, around 1843, Baudelaire proves his aptitude for "drinking," as he says in the same text, "the distant echo of a book." The evocation of the "ennuis" of his school years gives rise to a beautiful entrance onto the stage of allegorized Melancholy, and the reference to Diderot's *La Religieuse* literarily allegorizes allegory itself: the figure seen is the fictive figure of another captive youth, exposed to the worst tortures behind the walls of a convent. School, convent: two aspects of the same cloistered melancholy:



It was especially in summer, when leaden rooftops softened,
That those great walls blackened with sadness abounded [...]
Season of daydreams, when the Muse clings
The whole long day to the clapper of a bell;
When Melancholy, at noon, when everything is drowsing,
Chin in hand, at the end of the hallway—
Her eyes darker and bluer than [Diderot's] Nun
Whose obscene distressing story is known to all
—Drags a foot made heavier by early sorrows,
Her brow still damp from the languors of her nights.³

"Chin in hand" (see figure 1, Georges de La Tour's "La Madeleine Terff"), as we know, is the symbolic gesture that has been studied, in numerous texts, by Panofsky, Saxl and their successors.⁴ Noontime is the hour of the demon and acute *acedia*. It is the time when the seemingly triumphant light summons an attack by its contradictor; the time when the extreme vigilance prescribed for the mind is captured from the rear by somnolence. Slowness, heaviness are some of the most constant attributes of the melancholic person, when he is not given over to complete immobility. In countless earlier texts, the *slow step* is one of the main signs of the melancholic *habitus*. In Baudelaire's poem, the "foot made heavier," while renewing this traditional image, also attests

that the poet has not forgotten the feet of Suzanne Simonin (Diderot's Nun) wounded by the shards of glass her persecutors scattered in her path... As to the bell, while it might make one think of the woman who sees herself in the Dürer engraving, it also prefigures the women who "leap with fury" in the fourth "Spleen."

Like Diderot's heroine, the Melancholy allegorized by Baudelaire is young: her "sorrows" are "early"; she knows languorous "nights." She belongs to the "Lesbians" (the continuation of the poem is the obvious proof of this) whose chief bard Baudelaire wanted to be; he even envisioned inscribing them on the title page of his collection. At first glance, there is no resemblance to the personifications we meet in Dante, Alain Chartier or Charles d'Orléans: Melancholy (or *Merencolie*, or *Mère Encolie*) appeared in them as an elderly, hostile woman dressed in black, bearing bad news. Nor is there any analogy with the angel or muse of contemplative life, invoked by Milton in *Il Penseroso*. But in the figure outlined by the young Baudelaire, something remains of these previous incarnations, even if only the persistent typological name and the grave slowness.

Melancholy allegorized in the past animated not only anthropomorphic figures; it was also inscribed in things, in aspects of the world. For Charles d'Orléans, remember, it is the cold "wind" of winter, the "Dedalus prison," the "forest" where one lives as a hermit, the "well most profound" [*puis parfont*] where the "thirst for Comfort" cannot be quenched.⁵ In the series of text-testimonials that guide me, this well prefigures from afar the stream over which, in *As You Like It*, Jaques the melancholic droops and cries, in an attitude that resembles that of Narcissus. Charles d'Orléans' "puis de ma merencolie" is also the "deep well" to which King Richard II, in Shakespeare's tragedy, compares the crown he must give up, at the bottom of which, like a bucket made heavy with water, he sinks, full of tears; Richard II, in this same scene, has a mirror brought to him, to read the marks of his sorrow in, before he smashes it.⁶

This is a good moment to remember that the iconological tradition of melancholy has at times linked a mirror with it, along with the gaze focused on the reflected image. That the mirror was a necessary accessory of coquetry and also a symbol of truth should not make us think that it is less properly employed if it is placed before the eyes of a melancholic. A stronger motivation emerges from this multivalence. Coquetry, in the mirror of truth, is futility, a perishable image. And there is no melancholy more "profound" than the one that rises up, faced with the mirror, before the evidence of mutability, lack of profundity, and hopeless Vanity.⁷

Did the young Baudelaire know this from the "library" on which his "cradle" leaned,⁸ from the "engravings" with which he was "in love"?⁹ The fact remains that in the poem dedicated to Sainte-Beuve, two scenes with a mirror follow

⁵ Cf. Jean Starobinski, "L'encre de la mélancolie," *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, March 1963, XI, pp. 410-423. Particular emphasis is placed on the rondeau "Ou puis parfont de ma merencolie" (No. CCCXXV in the Pierre Champion edition: Charles d'Orléans, *Poésies*, 2 vol., Paris: Champion, 1927, Vol. II, p. 477).

⁶ *Richard II*, act IV, scene I.

⁷ See G.F. Hartlaub, *Zauber des Spiegels. Geschichte und Bedeutung des Spiegels in der Kunst*, Munich: R. Piper, 1951. Especially pp. 149-157. See also Hart Nibbrig, *Spiegelschrift*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1987.

⁸ "La Voix," O.C., I, p. 170.

⁹ "Le Voyage," O.C., I, p. 129.

¹⁰ O.C., I, p. 207.

¹¹ O.C., I, p. 208. Pain, as allegorized entity, forms part of Melancholy's escort. Occasionally it is Melancholy's substitute. It allows us to distinguish between real and false melancholy. Hégésippe Moreau "will cry a lot over himself"; but he "did not like pain; he did not see it as beneficial"... (O.C., p. 158 and 160).

¹² O.C., I, p. 161.

the appearance of Melancholy personified. A mirror of solitary pleasure [*volupté*], and an equally solitary mirror of pain. Melancholy appeared at noon. Baudelaire's first mirrors belong to evening and nocturnal hours; they are celebrants of a perverse pleasure:

“ —And then came the unhealthy evenings, the feverish nights,
That turn their bodies into girls in love,
And make them contemplate in mirrors—sterile pleasure—
The ripe fruits of their nubility—¹⁰

These lines, we know, will reappear in “Lesbos,” somewhat modified (‘contemplate,’ notably, will be replaced by ‘caress’). Addressing Sainte-Beuve, Baudelaire seems to have introduced the word ‘*volupté*’ the better to evoke his reading of Sainte-Beuve’s “story of Amaury,” and the better to confess that the reading of *Volupté* led him to examine himself: ‘scratch’ then comes to take the place of ‘contemplate’:

“ And in front of the mirror I perfected
The cruel art a nascent demon gave me,
—from Pain to fashion a real pleasure—
To make pain bleed, and to scratch your wound.¹¹

Of the insistent association Baudelaire made between melancholy and the mirror, we see proofs in other textual similarities. I will give only two examples at the moment.

A stanza (lines 29 to 36) in “Jet d’eau” (“The Fountain”) can be read as the exposition of the musical theme:

“ O you, whom night renders so beautiful,
How sweet it is for me, leaning over your breast,
To listen to the everlasting lamentation
Sobbing in the pools!
Moon, resounding water, blessed night,
Trees rustling all around,
Your pure melancholy
Is the mirror of my love.¹²

The second testimonial is the famous page of “Fusées,” where Baudelaire defines his ideal of beauty, and the melancholic component whose presence seems necessary to him. A simple allusion would indeed have sufficed, if it only involved recalling an “aesthetic of Misfortune” (which Pierre Jean Jouve, closer to our time, will appropriate in turn). But I would like to quote these lines, because we hear in them the word ‘melancholy’ and the word ‘mirror’ calling to each other, and because, later, I will let myself be guided by the conjunction of these two terms:



I do not maintain that Joy cannot be associated with Beauty, but I do say that Joy is one of its most commonplace ornaments—whereas *melancholy* is so to speak its illustrious companion; thus I can scarcely conceive (might my brain be an enchanted mirror?) a type of beauty where there is no *Misfortune*. — Based on—others will say, ‘obsessed by’—these ideas, one can see how it would be hard for me not to conclude that the most perfect type of virile Beauty is *Satan*—as Milton presents him.¹³

In the lines preceding the passage cited, Baudelaire had analyzed the beauty that could most confer seductiveness on a female face: he had also called here for a mixture “of voluptuousness and sadness.” He desired “an idea of melancholy, of weariness, even of satiety,” and added: “A woman’s face is a provocation that is all the more attractive if this face is in general rather melancholy.”¹⁴ Baudelaire knows, of course, all the danger of melancholy. And in what seduces him, he knows how to read the “surging bitterness, as if stemming from privation or despair,” or again: “spiritual needs, ambitions darkly repressed.”¹⁵ To interpret this repression, we don’t need the commentary of Freud, but of Baudelaire himself, when he speaks of “this humour, hysterical according to the doctors, satanic according to those who know a little better than doctors...”¹⁶ The ambivalence is complete: Baudelaire has “cultivated” his “hysteria with delight [*jouissance*] and terror,” but he wants to be “cured of everything, of misery, illness and melancholy.”¹⁷

Yes, this “brain” of Baudelaire’s is indeed an “enchanted mirror”: on the subject of his definition of Beauty, he cannot prevent himself from evoking, in that same page, “the ideal type of the Dandy.” Dandyism has the beauty of a twilight plunged in mourning. We read, in *Le Peintre de la vie moderne* (O.C., II, p. 712): “Dandyism is a setting sun; like that fading star, it is superb, without warmth, and full of melancholy.” The dandy, whose main concern is his toilette and his search for the personal sublime, “must live and sleep in front of a mirror” (O.C., I, p. 678). In *La Fanfarlo*, drawing the portrait of his

¹³ *Journaux Intimes*, O.C., I, pp. 657-658.

¹⁴ O.C., I, p. 657.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ “Le Mauvais Vitrier” (“The Bad Glazier”), O.C., I, p. 286.

¹⁷ *Journaux intimes*, O.C., I, pp. 668-669.

hero, Baudelaire writes: “A tear was germinating in the corner of his eye at some memory; he went over to the mirror to watch himself cry” (*O.C.*, I, p. 554). Samuel Cramer plays the comedy of emotion for himself. At the end of his adventure, we find him “sad, and sick with blue melancholy” (p. 578), and possessed by “the sadness we are thrown into by the awareness of an incurable, constitutional illness” (p. 580)... Something we must note here: linked with dandyism, with strange pleasure, with the ritual of the toilette, the gaze in the mirror is the aristocratic *privilege* of the individual who knows how to make himself the performer of himself. It is a real sacrilege that Baudelaire denounces in the prose poem “Le Miroir”: a “horrid man” claims to have the right to be mirrored, “according to the immortal principles of 1789”!

published in *Hyperion: On the Future of Aesthetics*, a web publication of
The Nietzsche Circle: www.nietzschecircle.com, Volume V, issue 2, November 2010