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Whitman, Baudelaire, and Opera: Modernity in the (Un)Making

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RÉSUMÉ. Les trajectoires créatrices de Whitman et de Baudelaire coïncident au mitan du XIXe siècle. Malgré des choix esthétiques apparemment divergents, l'examen de leur rapport à l'opéra fait ressortir des préoccupations communes aux deux poètes : la modernité, la voix, la sensualité ainsi qu'un rapport à l'avenir, appréhendé non sans angoisse d'un point de vue individuel et/ou collectif. Qu'ils théorisent la modernité ou qu'ils l'invoquent au fil de leurs écrits, tous deux éprouvent un choc esthétique fondamental au contact de l'art lyrique, qui leur ouvre de nouvelles perspectives sur leur médium artistique et sur son rapport au monde.

ABSTRACT. *Whitman's and Baudelaire's creative paths coincided briefly in the middle of the 19th century. Despite favoring apparently diverging aesthetics, these two poets' relationship to opera may be seen to have brought to the fore common preoccupations—modernity, voice, sensuality, and a somehow anguished apprehension of the future, examined individually and/or collectively. Whether they approach modernity theoretically or invoke it in their poems, their contact with opera is described by both as causing them a major aesthetic shock, opening new vistas on their artistic medium and its relationship to the world.*

MOTS-CLÉS : esthétique, poésie, politique, Verdi, voix, Wagner

KEYWORDS: *aesthetics, poetry, politics, Verdi, voice, Wagner*

Parallels have sometimes been established between Walt Whitman and Charles Baudelaire in mid-nineteenth-century studies[1]. The latter happens to have left no written proof that he was aware of the former's existence. Yet one of his most celebrated poems—"Recueillement"—was printed in a magazine edition featuring an unfavourable review of *Leaves of Grass*, a review that he can therefore be expected to have read.[2] Whitman, on the other hand, quotes Baudelaire once, in a February, 1881, essay of his—"The Poetry of the Future"—in which he isolates a statement by the French poet making the latter sound uncharacteristically censorious.[3] The convergences between these two aesthetically divergent poets, while by and large coincidental, are nevertheless real and arresting. They both came of age artistically in 1855, with poems—in book form for Whitman, as magazine contributions for Baudelaire—which were published within days of one another—in late June for Baudelaire, and early July for Whitman. Both, despite their radically different sensibilities and aesthetics, were to play a pivotal role in the development of French symbolist poetry and move world poetry irretrievably away from its romantic posturing. What has owed them most frequently to be named alongside each other, however, is the part they played in the constitution of modernity as a key theoretical concept in literary and cultural studies.

As is well known, modernity reverberates differently from one poet to the next. Jean-François Lyotard ascribes to modernity—in as much as it carries in itself the seeds of what will come after it (i.e. post-modernity)—a transformative quality which may be thought to fit both poets' vision of the phenomenon, albeit in different ways:

> [M]odernity, modern temporality, comprises in itself an impulsion to exceed itself into a state other than itself. And not only to exceed itself in that way, but to revolve itself into a sort of ultimate stability, such for example as is aimed at by the utopian project, but also by the straightforward political project implied in the grand narratives of emancipation.[4] (Lyotard 1991, 24-25)

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[1] The latest of such endeavours is Laure Katzaros's *New York-Paris: Whitman, Baudelaire, and the Hybrid City*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012, walking in the footsteps of William Chapman Sharpe's classic, *Unreal Cities: Urban Figurations in Wordsworth, Baudelaire, Whitman, Eliot, and Williams* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990. An analysis of the proximity between Baudelaire's and Whitman's urban poetics can be found in Éric Athenot, "Walt Whitman, passant moderne" in *L'Art de la ville*. Toulouse : Presses du Mirail, 2009, 139-152.

[2] This story is analysed in Éric Athenot, « 1886, année vers-libriste : Laforgue traducteur de Whitman » in *L'Appel de l'étranger : traduire en langue française en 1886*. Dir. Lucile Arnoux-Farnoux, Yves Chevrel et Sylvie Humbert-Mougin. Tours : Presses de l'université François-Rabelais, 2015, 107-123.

[3] In 'Poetry Today in America—Shakspere—The Future—', Whitman's quotation from Baudelaire appears as follows: "The fatal defects our American singers labor under are subordination of spirit, an absence of the concrete and of real patriotism, and in excess that modern æsthetic contagion a queer friend of mine calls the *beauty disease*". "The immoderate taste for beauty and art," says Charles Baudelaire, "leads men into monstrous excesses. In minds imbued with a frantic greed for the beautiful, all the balances of truth and justice disappear. There is a lust, a disease of the art faculties, which eats up the moral like a cancer." (Whitman 1996, 1046) The Baudelaire quotes come from his 1853 pamphlet, « L'École païenne ».

[4] « [L]a modernité, la temporalité moderne, comporte en soi une impulsion à s'excéder en un état autre qu'elle-même. Et non seulement à s'y excéder, mais à s'y résoudre en une sorte de stabilité ultime, celle que vise par exemple le projet utopique, mais aussi le simple projet politique impliqué dans les grands récits d'émancipation » (Lyotard 1988, 194).

Whitman never wrote a comprehensive definition of what he labelled "the modern." He nevertheless gave it a pivotal role in the "grand narrative of emancipation" that is *Leaves of Grass*. The closest we have to a definition may be found in a famous passage from *Democratic Vistas*:

> And, topping democracy, this most alluring record, that it alone can bind, and ever seeks to bind, all nations, all men, of however various and distant lands, into a brotherhood, a family. It is the old, yet ever-modern dream of earth, out of her eldest and her youngest, her fond philosophers and poets. Not that half only, individualism, which isolates. There is another half, which is adhesiveness or love, that fuses, ties and aggregates, making the races comrades, and fraternizing all. Both are to be vitalized by religion, (sole worthiest elevator of man or State,) breathing into the proud, material tissues, the breath of life. For I say at the core of democracy, finally, is the religious element. All the religions, old and new, are there. Nor may the scheme step forth, clothed in resplendent beauty and command, till these, bearing the best, the latest fruit, the spiritual, shall fully appear. (Whitman 1996, 972-973)

The passage lists future-oriented realities that are to be cemented by "the old, yet ever-modern dream of earth," i.e., "adhesiveness," Whitman's term for democratic bonding, taken from the phrenologists and celebrated in the "Calamus" cluster of *Leaves of Grass*. What is more, he imbues modernity with overtly political overtones, locating it precisely in a political system—democracy— that, as seen in this extract, appears forever to be waiting fully to be realized.

In the poems, his programmatic approach to this concept is expressed right from the beginning of *Leaves of Grass* and casts its propitious shadow over the remainder of the volume:

> One's-Self I sing, a simple separate person,
> Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse.
>
> Of physiology from top to toe I sing,
> Not physiognomy alone nor brain alone is worthy for the Muse, I say the Form complete is worthier far,
> The Female equally with the Male I sing.
>
> Of Life immense in passion, pulse, and power,
> Cheerful, for freest action form'd under the laws divine,
> The Modern Man I sing. (Whitman 1996, 165)

The poem seems to have been inspired by the balance of powers between the federal government and the individual states as formulated in Article Four of the Constitution of the United States.[5] The first stanza, in particular, goes from the individual to the collective and back to the individual. This delicate balance

[5] Cf. http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/constitution_transcript.html

between the individual and the collective—an equilibrium that binds the poems to one another in the volume as a whole—rests on Whitman's perception of democracy as the ultimate element of modernity inasmuch as it remains forever in the act of being fully achieved. Besides the passage quoted above, Whitman repeats this idea over and over again throughout *Democratic Vistas*.[6]

It was left to Baudelaire, however, famously to define the concept of aesthetic modernity in his oft-quoted essay, *The Panter of Modern Life*, a study of a now-largely-forgotten journal illustrator, Constantin Guys: "Modernity is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immovable." (Baudelaire 1972[2], 402)[7] To which he added: "In short, in order that any form of modernity may be worthy of becoming antiquity, the mysterious beauty that human life unintentionally puts into it must have been extracted from it" (Baudelaire 1972[2], 200).[8] Baudelaire, in Gerald Froidevaux's analysis, appears to offer a strikingly oxymoronic approach to modernity:

> Baudelaire does not fear paradox, as this paradox is modernity itself, the theory of a relative absolute, of a subversive legitimacy, of an aesthetic permanency in the ephemeral.[9]

Andrea Gogröf-Vorhees, while dealing exclusively with Baudelaire, encapsulates what may be seen to bring both poets together:

> Modernity is a term of praise. Baudelaire uses it to point out the presence of original beauty in an artwork. Yet the term "modern" carries a double ambiguity. On the one hand, Baudelaire uses the term in a purely chronological sense, conforming to [the *Littré* definition], which equates "modern" with the contemporary. On the other hand, he invests the term with a qualitative value, where "modern" is connected with the idea of beauty or ugliness. In opposition to the supporters of progress, who gladly attach to the word "modern" a

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[6] See, for example, such statements as: "America, filling the present with greatest deeds and problems, cheerfully accepting the past, including feudalism, (as, indeed, the present is but the legitimate birth of the past, including feudalism,) counts, as I reckon, for her justification and success, (for who, as yet, dare claim success ?) almost entirely on the future." (Whitman 1996, 953), or "I submit, there fore, that the fruition of democracy, on aught like a grand scale, resides together in the future." (Whitman 1996, 980), or again "Assuming Democracy to be at present in its embryo condition, and that the only large and satisfactory justification of it resides in the future, mainly through the copious production of perfect characters among the people, and through the advent of a sane and pervading religiousness, it is with regard to the atmosphere and spaciousness fit for such characters, and of certain nutriment and cartoon-draftings proper for them, and indicating them for New World purposes, that I continue the present statement – an exploration, as of new ground, wherein, like other primitive surveyors, I must do the best I can, leaving it to those who come after me to do much better. (The service, in fact, if any, must be to break a sort of first path or track, no matter how rude and ungeometrical.)" (Whitman 1996, 983-984) While sounding frequently negative and pessismitic about modern-day America, I would contend that by incribing the fruition of democracy in a future forever of out reach Whitman managed to make the concepts of modernity and democracy paradoxically stable and enduring.

[7] « La modernité, c'est le transitoire, le fugitif, le contingent, la moitié de l'art, dont l'autre moitié est l'éternel et l'immuable ». (Baudelaire 1863, 69)

[8] « En un mot, pour que toute *modernité* soit digne de devenir antiquité, il faut que la beauté mystérieuse que la vie humaine y met involontairement en ait été extraite ». (Emphasis in the original) (Baudelaire 1863, 70)

[9] « Baudelaire ne craint pas le paradoxe, car ce paradoxe, c'est la modernité elle-même, la théorie d'un absolu relatif, d'une légitimité subversive, d'une permanence esthétique dans l'éphémère ». (Froidevaux 1986, 91)

> positive value, Baudelaire uses it mostly with a negative connotation. Hostile to the glorification of progress, he associates the chronological sense of modern with the evaluative one of "beautiful" and "ugly". (…) [Yet] "modern" can signify the ugly of the particular ugliness of modern times as well as the beautiful of the particular beauty of modern times. […] Modernity and in turn "modern" designate the original and eternal beauty of the present times, but at the same time they indicate the precarious condition of the present, its alignment with invading vulgarity. (Gogröf-Vorhess 1999, 36)

Both Whitman and Baudelaire, as I hope to demonstrate in this paper, may be seen to have developed an ultimately ambiguous approach to modernity, an attitude that may be regarded as "chronological" for both poets. Whitman's vision of the modern rests on an endlessly forward-looking gaze, the present, as he grew older, coming to prove increasingly disappointing, both from a political and an artistic point of view. Whitman's frustration with the present also stemmed from a deep-seated anxiety about his own standing as an enabler of modernity for future generations. Baudelaire's definition grounds the modern in an ever-present eternity, in which, as Gogröf-Verhess suggests, eternal beauty cohabits precariously with vulgarity, while opening the way for future creations that will make present-day "modern" artistic productions worthy to be looked back upon as antique.[10] This paper will try to analyse Baudelaire's and Whitman's attraction to opera as revelatory of their approach to modernity, with Whitman trying—and failing?—to absorb the medium into his own political agenda, and Baudelaire seizing on it as a confirmation of his own poetic practice. The discovery of opera by these two creators, while first appearing to upset each poet's seemingly unshakeable artistic certainties, will be shown finally to have been absorbed within their general poetic systems.

Whitman and Baudelaire as opera converts

The narrative of Whitman's and Baudelaire's conversion to opera differs on several counts but resonates in similar fashion. Whitman fell under the spell of Italian opera shortly before embarking upon the composition of *Leaves of Grass* while Baudelaire heard Wagner's music when his poetic career was largely over. Both poets, for different reasons, were long sceptical about, if not openly hostile to opera, Whitman because of a marked preference for home-grown forms of music-making, Baudelaire by virtue of what Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe analysed as the age-old ranking by the French of literature above all other art-forms.[11] Whitman's

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[10] In the light of Gogröf-Verhees's analysis, Whitman's quotation of Baudelaire (cf. n.3 above) acquires a particular relevance. Words like 'greed', 'truth', 'justice', 'disease' all carry in Whitman's handling of them moral, political as well as aesthetic connotations.

[11] « L'entrée de Wagner (…) est en réalité une intrusion. Elle signifie la mise en cause et le bouleversement du « système des beaux-arts » qui ordonne plus ou moins explicitement l'esthétique à la française, qui est pour l'essentiel, malgré Rousseau et Berlioz, une esthétique d'écrivains, soucieuse de préserver la primauté de la poésie et tout occupée à s'adapter au présent concept de *littérature*. Or ce dont Wagner, avec fracas, rouvre la question et

opera reviews document his unaccounted-for transformation from a firebrand journalist prone to opera-bashing into a die-hard advocate of an art-form which, as will be seen, he gradually came to see as the epitome of communal democratic experience.

In his better-known reviews of native singing families Whitman's early attacks on opera are tinged with characteristically nationalistic overtones. They echo his often stringent nativist positions, which frequently reverberate through *Leaves of Grass*. In this regard, the December 4, 1843 piece, "The Hutchinson Family," offers some arresting arguments about the superiority of domestic popular music:

> The accomplished minstrels of our own soil give their parting concert at Niblo's this evening. In listening to the enchanted strains in which they sing the triumphs of American thought, we feel they are doing a good work. They are nationalizing our sentiments and making us feel that America need not look abroad for noble deeds to celebrate, or inspired bards to commend them to the popular heart. This is precisely what we want—national melodies, and if it may be (and this gifted family shows us we have the material) native performers who can make them more acceptable than the choicest airs of foreign importation. "Genius is of no country," but we want something that is all our own, fearless, republican, outspoken and free—the musical embodiment of the American character—and the commencement of this we see in the enthusiastic reception invariably accorded to these children of the Granite State. (Whitman 1843, 176)

Many of these arguments will sound familiar to anyone vaguely cognizant of Whitman's later polemic texts such as *Democratic Vistas*. The formulation, though, is bolder and more metaphorical than in his more mature pieces. At the heart of this paragraph-long review is the "inspired bards"/"national melodies,"/"performers" triad. Typically Whitmanian, too, is the political definition of culture in nationalistic terms. In calling for "something that is […] fearless, republican, outspoken and free—the musical embodiment of the American character," Whitman is preluding on a theme that he was to reiterate in almost all his theoretical texts about poetry.

American singing families were a weapon Whitman frequently wielded against foreign-born, aristocratic opera. In a long *Broadway Journal*, November 29, 1845 article, he sets "art-singing"—or foreign opera—against "heart-singing"—or popular American music. Moreover, he condemns "the songs made for a different state of society […] made to please royal ears." In his younger years, when the desire to be America's national bard was not yet a preoccupation of his, Whitman ascribed to music the role he later was to claim for literature, singling it out as the medium best fitted to encapsulate and contribute to the character of a country: "The subtlest spirit of a nation," he writes in this opinion piece, "is expressed through its music—and the music acts reciprocally upon the nation's very soul." Opera, for Whitman in this regard, is "anti-republican," and "taint[s] the young

entame le procès, un demi-siècle après Iéna, c'est précisément la littérature ». (Lacoue-Labarthe 1991, 38, emphasis in the original)

taste of the republic." The argument developed in the article, it must be noted, was endorsed by a note written by the *Broadway Journal*'s editor, no other than Baudelaire's precipitant of poetic modernity, Edgar Allan Poe. (Whitman 1845, 318-319)

Less than a year later, however, Whitman changed mysteriously into an ardent supporter of "Italian Opera," the title of the following one-paragraph piece:

> More as tending, by comparison and familiarity, to elevate the standard of music in this country—than as anything to bow down to, or servilely imitate—the Italian opera deserves a good degree of encouragement among us. Thus it is to be hoped that the company now performing at Palmo's, N. Y., will take root and become what Susan Nipper calls 'a permanency.' (Whitman 1847[1], 2)

Whitman had obviously turned his back on the repertory of the singing families he earlier defended so aggressively, and, as editor of the Brooklyn *Daily Eagle* he was here plainly advertising for a company in one of New York's earliest opera venues. Opera is here again approached in didactic terms. It is not to be enjoyed *per se* but viewed as a means to "elevate" the general American public. The scope of the article is somehow broadened in the closing intertextual reference to Susan Nipper—a maid in Dickens's *Dombey and Son*. The allusion may simply stem from Whitman's desire to amuse the reader. What this unexpected close does, it might be suggested, is alert us to the role played by Italian opera in what could be termed Whitman's post-colonial cultural politics. Through the Dickensian allusion, Italian opera finds itself linked directly to the kind of literary preoccupation Whitman was relentlessly to voice in his theoretical texts. Being sung in Italian—in a language, therefore, far removed from the English language, "America's mighty inheritance"[12]—opera—however artificial and "anti-republican" this European cultural import first struck him—finally came to be embraced by Whitman as a cultural product contributing to somewhat loosen England's grip on his imagination and ultimately unleash his creative faculties on the path to creating a modern poetic aesthetics. As he writes in the concluding words of a note written a few weeks later—a review of Verdi's *I Lombardi alla prima crociata*—, in the wake of what amounted to no less than the first staged performance ever of a Verdi opera in the United States:

> We would advise all who appreciate the inspiration of true music, to go and hear some of the finest chorus-singing, instrumentation, and arias, ever produced in this part of the country. (Whitman 1847[2], 2)

The author of the above-quoted lines has gone a long way from "Italian artificiality" to "true music." He does not seem to object to the show being fully run and sung by Italian artists. Gone is the call for a national melody, for a

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[12] This phrase occurs in Whitman's August, 1856, letter to Emerson, published alongside other critical paratexts at the end of the 1856 edition of *Leaves of Grass* (cf. https://whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1856/whole.html)

republican form of entertainment. As is characteristic of his approach to opera, even to one as explicitly political as *I Lombardi*, Whitman keeps silent about the political subtext, about the libretto being based on Torquato Tasso's milestone *Gerusalemme liberata* and showing Italians united against a common foe. How deeply did that resonate with a poet whose country was waging a war whose territorial outcome was ultimately to spell the country's doom and lead it to disunion? How did Verdi's recently acquired political standing fare with the reviewer? If this review is anything to go by, nothing for Whitman seemed to matter but the music and its effects on the American masses.[13]

Baudelaire's conversion is much better documented and at least as sudden and irrevocable as Whitman's. Unlike Whitman's, though, whose allegiance was to one singer—the Italian contralto Marietta Alboni—and to Italian bel canto indifferently, Baudelaire's passion was to revolve around one single musician—Richard Wagner. It is not known precisely how Baudelaire came to know about Wagner but he mentions his name in a letter dated July 13, 1849, alluding to an admiration for the musician common to himself and his correspondent. Unlike the poets Théophile Gautier and Gérard de Nerval, who had come into direct contact with Wagner's music in Germany and had written in glowing terms about it in the French press,[14] Baudelaire's experience of Wagner at that date was confined to what he possibly heard in the Parisian salons, no public concert or opera performance having yet taken place in France. Baudelaire's famous letter to Wagner, following the first-ever public performance of Wagner's music in France, on January 25, 1860, shows him preparing for a major disappointment: "The first time I went to the Italian Theatre in order to hear your works," he writes, "I was rather unfavourably disposed and indeed, I must admit, full of nasty prejudices, but I have an excuse: I have been so often duped; I have heard so much music by

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[13] Whitman was to make up for his silence about the political dimension of Verdi's *I Lombardi* in "Proud Music of the Storm," a poem written 1870. In this poem, a reference to Verdi's *Ernani* precedes a scene showing characters swearing an oath to "Libertad," to which Whitman had earlier devoted a poem — "Turn, O Libertad"— in 1865:

> I see where Ernani walking the bridal garden,
> Amid the scent of night-roses, radiant, holding his bride by the
> hand,
> Hears the infernal call, the death-pledge of the horn.
>
> To crossing swords and gray hairs bared to heaven,
> The clear electric base and baritone of the world,
> The trombone duo, Libertad forever ! (Whitman 1996, 527)

The reference to "the crossing of swords" may be an allusion to Meyerbeer's famous "Bénédiction des poignards" (blessing of the daggers) from his opera *Les Huguenots*, during which, a few days before the Saint-Bartholomew's Day massacre, the main Catholic character and his accolytes swear to exterminate all Protestants. In similar fashion, his poem "To a Certain Cantatrice" rewards an unnamed singer—most probably Mariette Alboni—with a "gift," "reserv[ed] […] for some hero, speaker or general, One who should serve the good old cause, the great idea, the progress and freedom of the race" (Whitman 1996, 173).

[14] Théophile Gautier published « L'ouvertude de *Tannhäuser* » in the December 2, 1850 edition of *La Presse* while his review of *Tannhäuser* appeared in the September 29, 1857, edition of *Le Moniteur*. Gérard de Nerval attended the première of *Lohengrin* in Weimar on 28 August, 1850. He recorded his impressions in *Lorely: souvenirs d'Allemagne*, published in 1852.

pretentious charlatans." (Baudelaire 2012)[15] He concludes in half-military, half-sexual fashion: "But you conquered me at once." (Baudelaire 2012)[16] Baudelaire was to go to all repeat performances of the programme, undaunted by the growing Germanophobia affecting France at the time. Unlike Whitman, whose Road-to-Damascus moment remains shrouded in mystery, Baudelaire's letter to Wagner offers ample details about his conversion, a moment rendered once again in terms not devoid of sexual innuendos, as when he tells the composer that "[he] owe[s] [him] the greatest musical pleasure [he has] ever experienced" (Baudelaire 2012)[17]—the French word "jouissance"—which was to become a key term in Lacanian psychoanalytic vocabulary and one of Barthes's choice words—only feebly rendered by the English "pleasure." The unrepentant opium-eater develops an addiction to Wagner's music: "From the day when I heard your music, I have said to myself endlessly, and especially at bad times, *'If I only could hear a little Wagner tonight!'*" (Baudelaire 2012).[18]

Such was his addiction that he took to haunting a Parisian music hall whose band sometimes performed the bridal music from *Lohengrin*. Many of his friends with piano-playing skills, including Parnassian poet Villiers de l'Isle Adam, complained of being Baudelaire's "martyrs" in his thirst to hear Wagnerian music.[19] The French creation of *Tannhäuser*, in March, 1861, despite being a resounding fiasco, was to confirm Baudelaire's Wagneromania.

Translating Opera into Words

Both poets succumbed to opera within fifteen years of each other but as we shall see they wrote about it in much similar terms, developing strikingly identical metaphors. Opera, when Whitman fell under its spell, was the epitome of a kind of European sophistication he had long dismissed in scathing terms. As David Reynolds notes, however:

> The possibility for aesthetic appreciation of music, which he had long considered inchoate in the American masses, seemed actualized in operatic performance whose appeal transcended class lines. Opera was now his chosen preference in music, and he did what he could to enhance its appeal for the general public. […] One way of exciting the average American about opera was through catchy journalism. (Reynolds 1996, 191-192)

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[15] « La première fois que je suis allé aux Italiens, pour entendre vos ouvrages, j'étais assez mal disposé, et même, je l'avouerai, plein de mauvais préjugés ; mais je suis excusable ; j'ai été si souvent dupe ; j'ai entendu tant de musique de charlatans à grandes prétentions ». (Baudelaire 2013, 10)

[16] « Par vous j'ai été vaincu tout de suite ». (*Ibid.*)

[17] « Avant tout, je veux vous dire que je vous dois *la plus grande jouissance musicale que j'aie jamais éprouvée* ». (*Ibid.*, 9, emphasis in the original)

[18] « *Ah si seulement je pouvais entendre ce soir un peu de Wagner !* » (Baudelaire 1861, 12, emphasis in the original)

[19] This anecdote is related in Cécile Leblanc's « Des écrivains au miroir de Wagner, "un avant-goût de jouissances nouvelles" : Baudelaire et *Tannhäuser* », a conference given at the *Cercle National Richard Wagner*, in 2008, and available at http://cnrw-paris.org/Resources/Baudelaire%20C%20Leblanc.pdf (link checked on 31 August 2016)

Opera came to be enrolled by Whitman into the cause of what he viewed as the quintessence of modernity, i. e., the future-oriented and ever embryonic American democracy. The communal experience of attending an opera performance may be understood in Reynolds's analysis to represent a quintessential moment of en-masse aesthetic communion. In this regard, Whitman's question about Wagner to Horace Traubel towards the close of his life—"Do you figure out Wagner to be a force making for democracy or the opposite?" (Traubel 2001, 116)—may be construed as making perfect sense. Before asking this question, Whitman explained to Traubel that people pointed out the resemblance existing between Wagner's music and *Leaves of Grass*. Wagner's rising position among American *mélomanes* coincided with Whitman's withdrawal from the opera circuit: "I have got rather off the field—the Wagner opera has had its vogue only in these later years since I got out of the way of going to the theater." (Traubel 2001, 116) One possible reading of Whitman's query to Traubel may have to do with Wagner standing in 1888—or four years prior to Whitman's death—for the kind of modernity the poet was so keen to embody. Was there room for two apostles of modernity? Could they collaborate in the promotion of a future-oriented democracy? When one thinks of the uses to which both creators were to be put in the twentieth century, Whitman's reluctance to demonstrate unquestioning affinities with Wagner appears chillingly foresighted.

The situation for Baudelaire was quite different. By the second quarter of the 19th century, musical tastes among the European literary classes were undergoing a sea change. In France, in particular, attending performances at the Paris opera house was becoming synonymous with being affected with a hefty dose of political, moral and ultimately aesthetic conservatism. "By 1850," Heath Lees writes, "devoted and knowledgeable attention to serious music was one of the chief pursuits of a large and increasingly dedicated group of musically oriented amateurs, who made themselves clearly visible in all the public and private music-making arenas of the time—with the notable exception of the *Opéra*." (Lees 2007, 44) "For many devotees," he goes on, "the activity of listening to music had high importance on its own account, and they began to seek a deeper and more rewarding musical experience than was available in the showy clamour of the opera. These serious musical dilettantes, most of them, like Mallarmé, comparatively young and with a distinctly literary background, were to form the first generation of *mélomanes* that Paris could claim to have produced." (Lees 2007, 43) These music-lovers were sensitive to an art form whose increasing complexity was made possible by an accelerating wave of technological innovations in the manufacturing of instruments. The language of poetry was becoming more and more complex at the same time as the practitioners of a more elevated form of verse-writing devoted their attention to more and more difficult kinds of music—none being more modern to them than the self-styled music of the future composed by Richard Wagner.

Opera and vocal music, for Whitman, came to offer the perfect trope for lyric performance by virtue of a theory he called *vocalism*. "Language must cohere," he writes in the notes assembled posthumously by Horace Traubel into *An American*

Primer. "Yet all the rules of the accents and inflections of words, drop before a perfect voice." (Whitman 1987, 12) In the poem entitled "Vocalism" Whitman offers an allusive lesson in metapoetics:

> All waits for the right voices;
> Where is the practis'd and perfect organ? where is the develop'd soul?
> For I see every word utter'd thence has deeper, sweeter, new sounds, impossible on less terms.
>
> I see brains and lips closed, tympans and temples unstruck,
> Until that comes which has the quality to strike and to unclose,
> Until that comes which has the quality to bring forth what lies slumbering forever ready in all words. (Whitman 1996, 510)

The passage is replete with *double entendre* and celebrates the power of the human voice to awake what "lies slumbering forever ready in all words." Not semantic exegesis but performing the poem vocally is what brings out the poem's implicit meaning. "I sometimes wonder," he writes in a short prose text, "whether the best philosophy and poetry, or something like the best, after all these centuries, perhaps waits to be rous'd out yet, or suggested, by the perfect physiological human voice." (Whitman 1996, 1293) Voice for Whitman is not a theoretical concept but is grounded in the human body. The power of words, therefore, rests less on their meaning than on their physical actuation through bodily performance. This alone may account for Whitman's recurrent use of such terms as *song*, *sing*, and *singer*. (Of the 206 musical words in his poems, 123 relate specifically to vocal music, and some are used many times. "Song" appears 154 times, "sing" 117, and "Singing" and "singers" more than 30 times each.) Despite Whitman's awkward and unconvincing efforts to link opera and democracy—just as unconvincing as his effort to portray his poetry as democratic—his numerous references to opera and singing in his poetry and his prose show this art-form to be the choice vehicle for aesthetic concerns.

Opera and Jouissance

Whitman's depiction of musical ecstasy is famously to be found at the end in Section 26 of "Song of Myself" and is full of Baudelairian echoes:

> I hear the violoncello, ('tis the young man's heart's complaint,)
> I hear the key'd cornet, it glides quickly in through my ears,
> It shakes mad-sweet pangs through my belly and breast.
>
> I hear the chorus, it is a grand opera,
> Ah this indeed is music—this suits me.
>
> A tenor large and fresh as the creation fills me,
> The orbic flex of his mouth is pouring and filling me full.

> I hear the train'd soprano (what work with hers is this?)
> The orchestra whirls me wider than Uranus flies,
> It wrenches such ardors from me I did not know I possess'd them,
> It sails me, I dab with bare feet, they are lick'd by the indolent waves,
> I am cut by bitter and angry hail, I lose my breath,
> Steep'd amid honey'd morphine, my windpipe throttled in fakes of death,
> At length let up again to feel the puzzle of puzzles,
> And that we call Being. (Whitman 1996, 215)

The persona's paroxysmic little death opens up tragic vistas. Not only does the drug-like music cause him almost to die in the same circumstances as Ahab, strangled by "the fakes of death," but he experiences a rebirth that leads him to re-enter the community of men after his individual *jouissance*. Thus can he move on from *I* to *we*. The parenthetic question about the validity of poetry—or at least this poetry—to rival music becomes purely rhetorical. The poet's power and justification is to inscribe his poetic utterance within a communal fabric. From the human voice the persona borrows and acquires the power to probe—to *feel*—the mystery of human existence, or *Being*.

What this passage furthermore shows is how opera brings about an ultimate reinvigoration of poetic language, discernable in the barrage of operatic metaphors and similes. The persona is here being "let up again," when in the poem's preceding section speech taunted him by asking him "*Walt you contain enough, why don't you let it out then?*" (Whitman 1996, 213, emphasis in the original) In so doing, it might be argued that Whitman is seizing on opera precisely as the medium enabling the poet to circumvent the age-old impasse over the superiority of music to language and vice-versa, and to turn music into poetry, not, like Poe, by trying to sound like music but by subjecting it to a linguistic depiction of its effect—psychological, physical and metaphysical—on the listener. Music releases the persona's imaginative faculties and a new, modern, poem is being *let out* in the process, and American poetry finally evades the deathly grip of the kind of backward-looking aesthetics favoured by most of his contemporaries.

When Baudelaire writes admiringly to Wagner on February 17, 1860, he confesses how much of an event the discovery of this music was to a poet whose whole aesthetic system was based on literature and painting. Through Wagner, Baudelaire discovers in music an art form, as Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe explains, appearing to threaten the long-claimed supremacy of poetry. According to Lacoue-Labarthe, Baudelaire's reaction documents how Wagner upended the century-old French hierarchy consecrating literature as the superior art form. Baudelaire, on hearing Wagner's music, undergoes an experience of the sublime which, still in Lacoue-Labarthe's analysis,[20] foreshadows Nietzsche's Dionysian ecstasy—

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[20] Cf. Lacoue-Labarthe 1991, 78-79 : « Tout se passe pour Baudelaire comme si l'effet de la musique était nécessairement abyssal — « vertigineux », dit-il, quand il le compare aux effets de l'opium. L'écoute est une épreuve de dépossession ou de désappropriation. Non pas une affaire de plaisir, mais de jouissance, au sens où Barthes a repris le mot à Lacan. C'est l'arrachement à soi, l'exposition à l'horreur et à la douleur originelle, très proche déjà de ce que Nietzsche essaiera de penser comme l'extase dionysiaque ou le vertige tragique. Tel est,

Nietzsche, by the way, who described Baudelaire as "a kind of Wagner without music." (Baudelaire 1994, XI) In the letter, the French poet analyses his ecstatic experience in terms that echo uncannily section 26 of "Song of Myself":

> [Q]uite often I experienced a sensation of a rather bizarre nature, which was the pride and the joy of understanding, of letting myself be penetrated and invaded—a really sensual delight that resembles that of rising in the air or tossing upon the sea. And the music at the same time would now and then resound with the pride of life. (Baudelaire 2012)[21]

About Baudelaire's claim that Tannhäuser longs after pain, Lacoue-Labarthe concludes that the poet knows that at least since Burke, pain has been part and parcel of pleasure.[22] What operatic music does to each poet, it would therefore appear, is to open new vistas as to—for Baudelaire—the definition and—for Whitman—the practice of writing. As hinted by Lacoue-Labarthe, Baudelaire resorts to opera and to its strong impact on his sensibility as a means to expand his own poetic explorations. It may be apposite in particular to dwell on perhaps the most Baudelairian notion of all—synaesthesia, which features at the heart of his poetic practice and his study of *Tannhäuser*. "In music as in painting and even in the written word—which is nevertheless the most positive of arts—, there is always a gap filled in by the imagination of the listener." (Baudelaire 1972[2], 330)[23] Baudelaire demonstrates the full extent of his imagination in describing his response to the aesthetic shock caused by his experience of music. If Whitman finds in opera tropes for his own practice of poetry, what Baudelaire recognises in opera is the wordless equivalent of his own theory of correspondences, which he elevates to the "most positive of arts" through the process of putting it into words. He wrote an admission of sorts in his letter to Wagner:

> At the outset it seemed to me that I knew this new music, and later, on thinking it over, I understood whence came this mirage; it seemed to me that this music was *mine*, and I recognized it in the way that any man recognizes the things he is destined to love. (Baudelaire 1972[2], 335)[24]

In his study of *Tannhäuser*, he twists his argument further by subsuming the music under his own synaesthetic system:

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pour Baudelaire, *Tannhäuser* — et son auditeur — qui, « saturé de délices énervantes, *aspire à la douleur !* » (emphasis in the original)

[21] « [J]'ai éprouvé souvent un sentiment d'une nature assez bizarre, c'est l'orgueil et la jouissance de comprendre, de me laisser pénétrer, envahir, volupté vraiment sensuelle, et qui ressemble à celle de monter dans l'air ou de rouler sur la mer. Et la musique en même temps respirait quelquefois l'orgueil de la vie ». (Baudelaire 2013, 11-12)

[22] « 'Cri sublime,' ajoute Baudelaire, qui sait parfaitement de quoi il parle, c'est-à-dire à quel point, et pas seulement depuis Burke, la douleur est consubstantielle au sublime » (Lacoue-Labarthe 1991, 79)

[23] « Dans la musique, comme dans la peinture et même dans la parole écrite, qui est cependant le plus positif des arts, il y a toujours une lacune complétée par l'imagination de l'auditeur ». (Baudelaire 2013, 19)

[24] D'abord il m'a semblé que je connaissais cette musique, et plus tard en y réfléchissant, j'ai compris d'où venait ce mirage ; il me semblait que cette musique était *la mienne*, et je la reconnaissais comme tout homme reconnaît les choses qu'il est destiné à aimer ». (Baudelaire 2013, 10)

> May I allow myself to tell, to put into words the inevitable translation that my imagination carried out of the same piece, when I first heard it, my eyes shut and I felt as I were carried off the ground? I would not indeed dare complacently to discuss my reveries were it not necessary to join them here to the preceding […] What would be really surprising is that sounds could not suggest colour, that colours could not evoke the idea of a melody, and that sounds and melodies were unfit to translate ideas, things having always expressed themselves through mutual analogy since God uttered the world into a complex and indivisible totality. (Baudelaire 1972[2], 346)[25]

Then come the first two quatrains of his famous sonnet, "Correspondences":

> Nature is a temple in which living pillars
> Sometimes give voice to confused words;
> Man passes there through forests of symbols
> Which look at him with understanding eyes.
>
> Like prolonged echoes mingling in the distance
> In a deep and tenebrous unity,
> Vast as the dark of night and as the light of day,
> Perfumes, sounds, and colors correspond. (Baudelaire 1954, 22)[26]

What the inclusion of these quatrains inside his review of *Tannhäuser* reveals about Baudelaire's approach to Wagner, to borrow from Lacoue-Labarthe again, is to what extent Wagner resoundingly re-opens the question and proceeds precisely to try literature. Coming after his practice of translating Poe, Wagner's music makes it possible for Baudelaire to crystallise his literary intuitions into a higher system of correspondences which was to make it possible for Mallarmé to go one step further towards working towards turning poetry into pure music.

Conclusion

The study of the role of opera in Whitman's and Baudelaire's writings documents how central to post-romantic poetry was the art-form towards whose condition all art was famously said constantly to aspire. Not that either of them succumbed to Pater's fallacy.[27] Quite the opposite. Whitman generalised in poems like "Out of

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[25] « M'est-il permis à moi-même de raconter, de rendre avec des paroles la traduction inévitable que mon imagination fit du même morceau, lorsque je l'entendis pour la première fois, les yeux fermés, et que je me sentis pour ainsi dire enlevé de terre ? Je n'oserais certes par parler avec complaisance de mes *rêveries*, s'il n'était pas utile de les joindre ici aux *rêveries* précédentes. Le lecteur sait quel but nous poursuivons : démontrer que la véritable musique suggère des idées analogues dans des cerveaux différents ». (Baudelaire 2013, 23)

[26] 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. // Comme de longs échos qui de loin se confondent / Dans une ténébreuse et profonde unité, / Vaste comme la nuit et comme la clarté, / Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent ». (Baudelaire 1972[1], 38)

[27] I am here, of course, alluding to Walter Pater's much-commented upon statement— "All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music."—occurring on page 140 of the 1888 version of his epoch-making study, *The*

The Cradle Endlessly Rocking" or "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" the metaphor of poetry as the translation of non-human musical sounds, thereby asserting in somewhat aggressive fashion the poet's hold over his material. Baudelaire, for his part, seized upon Wagner's music to devise the right theoretical utterance fit to help him formulate his own poetic ambition. Modernity, fleeting, transient and ultimately future-oriented for both, was politically-charged a concept for Whitman and a more openly aesthetic concern for Baudelaire. Both may be said to have found a precipitant in opera, an art-form which, while borrowing heavily from its codes, made it possible for once and for all to declare the past dead in a way which neither Poe in America nor Hugo in France had made possible. The discovery of opera by both poets, in this regard, may be said to accompany them on their explorations of poetry that were to open the way for symbolist and, beyond, modernist poetry. In this respect opera may be said to have crystallised modernity for Whitman and Baudelaire, a modernity poised to be unmade, i. e. gone beyond by the artists and poets empowered by the works of their two predecessors. The opening of poetry towards the future may be said to represent Whitman's most fundamental democratic gesture, just as it may have enabled Baudelaire—in keeping with his definition of the phenomenon—to make his own modernity "worthy of becoming antiquity."

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