CLASSICAL PAST IN BAUDELAIRE'S *LE CYGNE*: A RECONSIDERATION

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Abstract

In the the third preface to *Les Fleurs du Mal*, Baudelaire curiously refers to Virgil as the only 'source' for his *Le Cygne*. It has been seen that Horace's description of the living poet's metamorphosis into a swan (*Carmina* 2.20) is a much more obvious classical reference as far as the title character is concerned, and the mention of »l'homme d'Ovide« seems to point the reader to Ovid's narrative of the creation of man in the *Metamorphoses* (1.76-86) as a model *e contrario* for the degradation of the divine bird in Baudelaire's poem. Baudelaire's modern version of the classical symbol of the sublime at first seems to suggest an ironic response to Horace and Ovid. On a second reading, however, the basic 'negativism' of Baudelaire's swan myth reveals a hidden thread of continuity with the classical past: it reveals Ovid's experience as an exilee as the primary parallel to the situations of Andromache and the swan. Conversely, Horace's swan-metamorphosis, though essentially Platonic, provides, through its over-literal, grotesque realism, an *ante litteram* alternative to the Platonising aesthetics of the earlier Romantics.

In a note at the end of the third preface to *Les Fleurs du Mal*, Baudelaire strikingly acknowledges his debt to a number of classical and contemporary poets by a dry list of 'plagiarisms':

> Note sur les plagiats. – Thomas Gray. Edgar Poe (2 passages). Longfellow (2 passages). Stace. Virgile (tout le morceau d'Andromaque). Eschyle. Victor Hugo.[1]

For a literary historian inquiring into the poet's literary lineage, this short stock of models is an invaluable source of information although it is little more than a reaffirmation of the obvious. Moreover, its risk of diverting the critic's attention from other, less obvious but no less important literary presences in the collection is quite realistic.

Le Cygne is a case in point. Baudelaire's Andromache clearly is a Virgilian character, but only the first part of the first of the two poems (*Le Cygne* I) is conspicuously based on Virgil's *Aeneid*:

> Andromaque, je pense à vous ! Ce petit fleuve,
> Pauvre et triste miroir où jadis resplendit

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[1] Baudelaire 184.

L'immense majesté de vos douleurs de veuve,
Ce <u>Simoïs menteur</u> qui par vos pleurs grandit,

A fécondé soudain ma mémoire fertile,   5
Comme je traversais le nouveau Carrousel.
Le vieux Paris n'est plus (la forme d'une ville
Change plus vite, hélas! que le cœur d'un mortel) ;

Je ne vois qu'en esprit tout ce camp de baraques,
Ces tas de chapiteaux ébauchés et de fûts,   10
Les herbes, les gros blocs verdis par l'eau des flaques,
Et, brillant aux carreaux, le bric-à-brac confus.

Là s'étalait jadis une ménagerie ;
Là je vis, un matin, à l'heure où sous les cieux
Froids et clairs le Travail s'éveille, où la voirie   15
Pousse un sombre ouragan dans l'air silencieux,

Un cygne qui s'était évadé de sa cage,
Et, de ses pieds palmés frottant le pavé sec,
Sur le sol raboteux traînait son blanc plumage.
Près d'un <u>ruisseau sans eau</u> la bête ouvrant le bec   20

Baignait nerveusement ses ailes dans la poudre,
Et disait, le cœur plein de son beau lac natal:
«Eau, quand donc pleuvras-tu? quand tonneras-tu, foudre?»
Je vois ce malheureux, mythe étrange et fatal,

Vers le ciel quelquefois, comme l'homme d'Ovide,   25
Vers le ciel ironique et cruellement bleu,
Sur son cou convulsif tendant sa tête avide,
Comme s'il adressait des reproches à Dieu!

The obvious 'source' is Aeneas' encounter with the widow of Hector in *Aeneid*
III; *le Simoïs menteur*[2] unmistakably recalls the miniature model of Troy Andromache
shows to Aeneas upon his visit at Buthrotum:

progredior portu classis et litora linquens,   300
sollemnis cum forte dapes et tristia dona
ante urbem in luco <u>falsi Simoentis ad undam</u>
libabat cineri Andromache manisque uocabat
Hectoreum ad tumulum ...

...

talia fundebat lacrimans longosque ciebat
incassum fletus, cum sese a moenibus heros   345
Priamides multis Helenus comitantibus adfert,
agnoscitque suos laetusque ad limina ducit,

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[2] Baudelaire set as an epigraph to the first publication of the poem a quotation from the Aeneid: »*falsi Simoentis ad undam*«; *ibid.* 1008.

et multum lacrimas uerba inter singula fundit.
procedo et paruam Troiam simulataque magnis
Pergama et <u>arentem</u> Xanthi cognomine <u>riuum</u> 350
agnosco, Scaeaeque amplector limina portae ...

I was walking away from the harbour leaving ships and shore behind me
when I caught sight of Andromache, offering a ritual meal and performing
rites to the dead in a grove in front of a city on the banks of <u>a river Simois,</u>
<u>but not the true Simois</u> of Troy (lit. 'the false Simois').
...
She was weeping her useless tears and sobbing bitterly as these words
poured from her when the hero Helenus, son of Priam, arrived from the
walls of the city with a great escort. He recognized his own people and
took us gladly to his home. He too was weeping and could speak only a
few broken words to us between his tears. As I walked I recognized a little
Troy, a citadel modelled on great Pergamum and <u>a dried-up stream</u> they
called the Xanthus.

(Tr. D. West)

The parallel is almost too neat: the *vieux Paris* is as dead as Troy, and the archi-
tectural complex constructed by Haussmann in the place of the old quarter between the
Arc du Carrousel and the Louvre as a part of the urban renewal of 1852 is an artificial
substitute similar to Andromache's miniature model of Troy.[3] A further similarity, ne-
glected or considered of marginal importance by most interpreters, is the water imagery
introduced by the river augmented by a flood of tears: »ce Simoïs menteur qui par vos
pleurs grandit.« Simois is described as 'false' in Virgil's text; the rendition of *falsus*
with the stronger *menteur*[4] seems to suggest that in Baudelaire's version, Andromache's
'fake Troy' is little more than a delusion metaphorically referred to as a river watered
by tears. While the stream of tears is not Virgilian, the underlying idea of a dry river-
bed definitely is: Xanthus (=Scamander), the main river in Andromache's *parva Troia*
(and indeed the main river of the Troad), is described as 'dry' (*arens Xanthus*, 350; cf.
the *ruisseau sans eau* in the swan scene, 20). Taken together, the flow of tears and the
attribute *menteur* suggest, or at least make possible, a rationalising explanation of An-
dromache's 'little Troy' as a psychological delusion produced by grief. Virgil's Simois
is a palpable although artificial replica of the real river, and the riverbed of Xanthus
is there, even if empty. But the fusion of two Virgilian rivers, one 'deceiving' and the
other 'arid', results in the surrealistic metaphor of a dry riverbed filled with tears: even
if the little Troy is really there, the big river Andromache sees in the place of the dry
channel is a hallucination sprung from 'tearful' memories.[5]

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[3] Cf. Chambers, *Baudelaire's Paris* 107: »This story is a history of cities, viewable on the one hand as
a history of change and progress, as ancient Troy yields to Greece, then to Rome and finally to Paris, but
on the other as a narrative of exclusion and suffering that in its essentials has never changed since the sack
of Troy.«

[4] See Hampton 442–43: 'menteur' implies deliberate trickery. Less convincing is the claim that Simois
is twice a liar because it conceals its real identity as the Seine.

[5] Another interesting detail: the lying river is represented as an active agent, and Andromache as a
victim not very much different from the swan who is ironically looked down on by the cruel blue sky. The

The imagery of water is one of the few 'Virgilian' elements in the second part of *Le Cygne I*. Andromache's situation is almost literally reproduced in the swan's dustbath besides a waterless brook: *le beau lac natal* is just a dream inspired by memories. Except for the *ruisseau sans eau*, however, the image of the swan hardly recalls Virgil. It *could* recall the transformation of Cycnus, Apollo's beloved, into a swan, a metamorphosis curiously narrated at *Aeneid* 10.189–93, but only as one among many ancient passages. What, then, is the swan doing in *Le cygne*?[6] Curiously enough, the most likely ancient model for the swan is provided by Horace, an author curiously not acknowledged as an influence in the preface.

The text in question is *Carmina* 2.20, a poem in which the poetic 'I' intriguingly describes his own bodily metamorphosis into a swan:[7]

> iam iam residunt cruribus asperae
> pelles et album mutor in alitem
>   superne nascunturque leves
>   per digitos umerosque plumae.
>
> iam Daedaleo notior Icaro
> visam gementis litora Bosphori
>   Syrtisque Gaetulas canorus
>   ales Hyperboreosque campos ...
>
> ...
> absint inani funere neniae
> luctusque turpes et querimoniae;
>   conpesce clamorem ac sepulcri
>   mitte supervacuos honores.

> *Already, even now, rough skin is forming on my legs, my upper part is changing into a white bird and smooth feathers are sprouting along my fingers and shoulders. Soon more famous than Icarus, son of Daedalus, I shall be a harmonious bird and visit the shores of the moaning Bosphorus, the Gaetulian Syrtes, and the Hyperborean plains. ...*

> *Let there be no dirges or squalid mourning or lamentation at my corpse-less funeral. Check your cries of grief and do not trouble with the empty honour of a tomb.*

<div align="right">(Tr. D. West)</div>

The gradual transformation of the poet-figure into the feathered white animal repelled critics like Fränkel,[8] and it might have inspired Baudelaire's drastic realism, but the fact that Horace's 'swanification' draws on Platonic imagery[9] is only a further

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speaker of the poem, on the contrary, is more self-consciously aware of the illusionary character of visual memories: *Je ne vois qu'en esprit* ... On the self-conscious character of Baudelaire's spleen (as opposed to the contemplative melancholy of the Romantics) see the fundamental study by Starobinski.

[6] Terdiman 115.

[7] On Horace *Carmina* 2.20 as a model Lowrie; Elkins.

[8] Fraenkel 301.

[9] Gantar 135–140.

element of dissension between Baudelaire and his classical model. At the same time, the almost parodic degradation of the classical swan marks Baudelaire's own departure from the more classicising stance of his earlier poem, *L'Albatros*:[10]

> Le Poète est semblable au prince des nuées
> Qui hante la tempête et se rit de l'archer;
> Exilé sur le sol au milieu des huées,
> Ses ailes de géant l'empêchent de marcher.

In *Spleen*, Baudelaire's dialogue with Horace's more famous *Exegi monumentum* (C. 3.30) suggests a decidedly polemical attitude towards Horace's classicising aesthetics: the timeless tyranny of *spleen* materializes in the imagery of death and decay Horace uses only as a negative foil to his claim to eternity.[11]

Virgil, as far as the author of *Les Fleurs du Mal* is to be trusted, provided the material for »the whole Andromache piece«. The only poetic model explicitly referred to in the poem, though, is Ovid. The mention of Ovid, who described two swan metamorphoses in his epic poem (*Met.* 7.371-81, 12.71–167), might by itself suggest the idea of *metamorphosis*, all the more since the swan is called »a strange and fatal myth« (*ce mythe étrange et fatal*, 24). But again, this self-evident association is glossed over by a more concrete allusion to the creation of man narrated at the beginning of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*:

> Sanctius his animal mentisque capacius altae
> deerat adhuc et quod dominari in cetera posset:
> natus homo est, sive hunc divino semine fecit
> ille opifex rerum, mundi melioris origo,
> sive recens tellus seductaque nuper ab alto
> aethere cognati retinebat semina caeli.
> quam satus Iapeto, mixtam pluvialibus undis (!),
> finxit in effigiem moderantum cuncta deorum,
> pronaque cum spectent animalia cetera terram,
> os homini sublime dedit caelumque videre
> iussit et erectos ad sidera tollere vultus
> <div align="right">(1.76–86)</div>

> *A holier creature, of a loftier mind,*
> *Fit master of the rest, was lacking still.*
> *Then man was made, perhaps from seed divine*
> *Formed by the great Creator, so to found*
> *A better world, perhaps the new-made earth,*
> *So lately parted from the ethereal heavens,*
> *Kept still some essence of the kindred sky–*
> *Earth that Prometheus moulded, mixed with water,*

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[10] Wright 43: »There (sc. in *L'albatros*), in the last quartain, the point is rather laboriously (!) made that the poet is 'like' this prince of the clouds. ... Together, the albatross and the swan mark the distance covered by Baudelaire in the development of his poetic genius.«

[11] On this see Michèle Lowrie's insightful discussion, esp. p. 46.

> *In likeness of the gods that govern the world,*
> *And while the other creatures on all fours*
> *Look downwards, man was made <u>to hold his head</u>*
> <u>*Erect in majesty*</u> *and* <u>*see the sky*</u>*,*
> *And* <u>*raise his eyes to the bright stars above*</u>*.*
> (Tr. A. D. Melville)

The innate dignity of Ovid's man, created to look upwards to the sky, is mirrored in the swan as a classical paradigm of the sublime. Interestingly, Ovid presents the creation of man as a metamorphosis, and a very atypical, overtly 'optimistic' instance of metamorphosis: not only is the creation of man from earth and water one of the few instances of transition from dead matter to life (cf. Pygmalion's statue); it also gives birth to a semi-divine *sanctius animal.* Yet at the same time, Baudelaire's antropomorphic (*de ses pieds palmés frottant le pavé sec,* 18) representation of the sublime bird bathing in dry dust opens a still wider gap between the earthly and heavenly realms. The ascension of Ovid's semi-divine man to the ranks of a swan implies a fundamental reversal of status: Baudelaire's swan is not a divine singer but a miserable beast, a parody, as it were, of the classical divine bird. It has literally *returned* to the dust from which Prometheus had created the human race. The absence of the second ingredient used by Prometheus, the 'pluvial water', speaks for itself.

Whereas a metamorphosis of some kind has taken place on the way between the two texts, the reference to Ovid rather calls attention to the fact that the swan cannot escape its present state as an exile by an 'Ovidian' metamorphosis – not even by a symbolic metamorphosis of sorrow into song. Unlike man, whose supremacy over other beings is largely based on the faculty of speech, Baudelaire's swan is an immobilized, silenced exile; his unrealized swan song, as a 'missing' metamorphosis, is a silent expression of spleen, and a testimony to the poem's modernity. »Comme l'homme d'Ovide« is to be read as »à la différence de l'homme d'Ovide«: the only real parallel is Ovid himself, the (almost) silenced exilee, as a parallel to the addressee of the poem, Victor Hugo.[12]

Andromache, the tragic heroine par excellence, undergoes a similar metamorphic degradation (*Le Cygne* II, 37–40):

> Andromaque, des bras d'un grand époux tombée,
> <u>Vil bétail</u>, sous la main du superbe Pyrrhus,
> Auprès d'un tombeau vide en extase courbée
> Veuve d'Hector, hélas! et femme d'Hélénus![13]

The grim wordplay *tombée-tombeau* strips Andromache, bowed in ecstatic mourning, of the last vestige of tragic decorum: she is now only a step away from »the starved and phthisic negress tramping the mud«. Andromache's posture is as un-Racinian as

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[12] On the theme of exile as a hidden *tertium comparationis* see also Nelson 340; Hampton 1982, 444. An important contribution to the understanding of the political context is Chambers, *Un despotisme* 1987 (on *spleen* as a form of resistance to the reactionary politics of the time).

[13] Hampton 443 compares »Veuve d'Hector, hélas!, et femme d'Hélénus« (40) with »me famulo famulamque Heleno transmisit habendam« (*Aen.* 3.329), and »des bras d'un grand épuoux tombée« (37) with »heu! quis te casus deiectam coniuge tanto excipit« (*Aen.* 3.317–18).

it can be; if there is a tragic model behind Baudelaire's *vil bétail*, then it is Euripides rather than Racine. Her grieving posture and the convulsive gestures of the swan are a testimony to the spleen's antiphrastic relationship to the classical aesthetics, incorporated in the swan as an icon of musical harmony and immortal fame.

Baudelaire's strange modern version of the poetic swan seems to suggest, at least at the surface level, a bitterly ironic response to both Horace and Ovid. As a prisoner of his present exile, immobilized by nostalgia for the past, Baudelaire's *grand cygne* is the exact contrary to his fame-seeking Horatian counterpart, and the reproaches he addresses to the inexorable sky are simultaneously directed against Ovid's optimistic portrait of the first man. On a second reading, however, the basic 'negativism' of Baudelaire's swan myth reveals a hidden thread of continuity with the classical past. The context of the ironic reference to Ovid's semi-divine first man suggests Ovid's experience as an exilee as the primary (and indeed the only possible) parallel to the situations of Andromache and the swan. The same can be said of Horace's swan-metamorphosis: it is essentially Platonic, but it also provides, through its over-literal, grotesque realism, an ante litteram alternative to the Platonising aesthetics of the earlier Romantics.[14] To be sure, this particular point of contact does not invalidate the basic contrast between the white singer triumphing over an empty grave and the silent beast bathing in dust, but it clearly shows that Baudelaire's use of the Horatian myth of poetic eternity is not purely polemical: it presupposes a model that is itself open to ambiguity.

Perhaps there is more than a touch of irony about Horace's mention of Icarus, the mythic paradigm of the artist's downfall, in the context of poetic flight: »iam Daedaleo notior Icaro« (»Soon more famous than Icarus, son of Daedalus ...«).[15] The ironic possibility that the human swan is just a second Icarus might even explain why he so haughtily refuses the idea of a funeral. This is admittedly a very Baudelairean interpretation, but it is in fact suggested by another poem in *Les Fleurs du Mal*, a poem entitled *Les plaintes d'un Icare:*

> En vain j'ai voulu de l'espace
> Trouver la fin et le milieu;
> Sous je ne sais quel oeil de feu
> Je sens mon aile qui se casse;
>
> 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.

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[14] Baudelaire's relationship to the Romantic Platonism is conveniently summarized in Wolfreys 43–46.

[15] See Johnson 274–75; Tatum 14–15; Nisbet and Hubbard *ad loc.*; cf. also Sharrock on Ovid's self-consciously ironic use of the myth in *Ars amatoria* II.

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