The Danaïdes’ Vessel:
On Reading Baudelaire’s Allegories

NATHANIEL WING

An inquiry that proposes to reexamine the functions of allegory in *Les Fleurs du mal* risks, at the outset, recalling with particular insistence that most famous of Baudelaire’s allegorical personifications, the delicate monster in “Au lecteur,” L’Ennui, who threatens to engulf the world in a vast yawn. Conventional poetic devices, at least since the mid nineteenth century, are not held in good repute, insofar as they have been associated with normative rhetoric and with the use of figurative language as an “ornament of discourse.” Yet there is a profusion of allegory in *Les Fleurs du mal* that cannot be written off simply, as Valéry and others would have it, as lapses into an outmoded eloquence, or as sententious and moralistic posturing. Furthermore, Baudelaire praises the figure unequivocally as “ce genre si spirituel, que les peintres maladroits nous ont accoutumés à mépriser, . . . est vraiment l’une des formes primitives et les plus naturelles de la poésie.”

In the familiar late-eighteenth-century and romantic schema, allegory as a figural transfer of meaning is eclipsed in importance by symbol, which comes to stand for processes of analogy functioning within a radical monism. The problem of allegorical constructs in *Les Fleurs du mal* is considerably more complex than this opposition between symbol and allegory would lead us to believe. Our reading cannot place itself outside of the debate, however; that controversy, which inextricably mixes considerations about language with metaphysics and aesthetics, necessarily informs a reading of the poems; for its delimiting concepts are to be found in those texts, in the art and literary criticism, and in the *Journaux intimes*, and it is for that reason that I review it briefly here. The aesthetic devaluation of allegory, furthermore, is the source of irony in many of *Les Fleurs du mal*, in which the texts play with and against a shopworn rhetorical figure. Within a certain aesthetic and metaphysical enclosure, however, concepts are frequently turned against themselves and their presuppositions undermined by processes of meaning that cannot be accounted for by the traditional rhetorical/aesthetic definitions. My inquiry will consider the interplay between these configurations of meaning.

For Baudelaire the term symbol frequently stands for figurative language in
general; it is assumed to be capable of transforming all individual experience into general truth, since, as De Man summarizes, "The subjectivity of experience is preserved when it is translated into language; the world is then no longer seen as a configuration of entities that designate a plurality of distinct and isolated meaning, but as a configuration of symbols ultimately leading to a total, single, and universal meaning." The numerous passages that Baudelaire devotes to symbol give a privileged status to the symbolic mode as the poetic language of concrete intuition, designated by various interchangeable expressions, such as "symbole," "correspondance," "analogie universelle," "surnaturalisme." Allegory, on the other hand, as the morpheme allos—other—indicates, differs from the process of universal analogy in both its function and its finality. It relays meaning from one semantic level to another, within a limited polyvalence. The suggestiveness of allegory in art is criticized as too rational, exhausted as soon as the meaning (signified) is attained.

The short essay "L'Art philosophique" (1859) formulates this contrast succinctly and in terms sufficiently general to apply equally well to the signifying systems of painting or literary language. Baudelaire reproaches philosophical art for meddling in concerns that are properly those of didactic prose by seeking to replace the book and to teach history, morality, and philosophy:

Toute bonne sculpture, toute bonne peinture, toute bonne musique, suggère les sentiments et les rêveries qu'elle veut suggérer.

Mais le raisonnement, la déduction, appartiennent au livre.

Ainsi l'art philosophique est un retour vers l'imagerie nécessaire à l'enfance des peuples, et s'il était rigoureusement fidèle à lui-même, il s'astreindrait à juxtaposer autant d'images successives qu'il en est contenu dans une phrase quelconque qu'il voudrait exprimer. . . .

Plus l'art voudra être philosophiquement clair, plus il se dégradera et remontera vers l'hiéroglyphe enfantin. [Pp. 1099–100]

As an example of the aberration, Baudelaire describes in detail a representation of "une bonne mort," a virtuous man surprised in his sleep by death; each figural element in the painting is correlated to an extrinsic meaning: "Il faut, dans la traduction des œuvres d'art philosophiques, apporter une grande minutie et une grande attention; là les lieux, le décor, les meubles, les ustensiles (voir Hogarth), tout est allégorie, allusion, hiéroglyphes, rébus" ("L'Art philosophique," p. 1101). Both the separation of levels of meaning and the rational link between them provoke Baudelaire's criticism, for in this mode the signifier is cut off from a (mythical) consubstantial relationship between the sensible and the nonsensible, which would obtain in the symbolic mode of "pure," "modern" art. The conventionalized relay between levels of meaning in allegory both maintains a separation of the levels and claims to link them conceptually through a translation. In terms of contemporary semiotics, the first level of meaning is constituted by the link between a signifier and a signed and subsequently becomes a signifier for a secondary signified.
Allegory thus functions through its parallel systems as both a deferral and an attainment of meaning; in positing and incorporating a second semantic level, it can be recognized as a figure of containment. As such, it is inimical to that expansion of meaning in the symbolic mode through universal analogy, which, for Baudelaire, is a virtually limitless multiplicity and concentration of being produced by the associative potential of language. The opening paragraph of "L'Art philosophique" briefly states that ideal: "Qu'est-ce que l'art pur suivant la conception moderne? C'est créer une magie suggestive contenant à la fois l'objet et le sujet, le monde extérieur à l'artiste et l'artiste lui-même" (p. 1099). In this passage characteristic elements of the symbolic mode are a fusion between the semantic and representative functions of language, in analogy, an abolition of the distinctions between the particular and the general, and a synthesis between subject and object in a relation of simultaneity.6

I return to these distinctions because, as I have noted, they function according to the schema outlined in many of Baudelaire's poems and because they are undercut in others by certain textual processes. Furthermore, the terms in which a discussion of the figures is necessarily formulated—binary relationships (semantic or intersubjective), separation between levels of meaning, a temporal dialectic between interconnected sign systems—lead to a reconsideration of the problems of duality in Baudelaire, to a reexamination of meaning, not as a system of containment, but as an irreducible and genetic multiplicity. 7

Finally, these questions invite us to look again at the still taunting problem of ironies in Baudelaire.

This reading will not propose an all-inclusive typology of allegory in Baudelaire's verse. A comprehensive system as a totalizing discourse, whether that of the poetic or critical text, is subject to suspicion, as Baudelaire notes in a passage written in 1855: "un système est une espèce de damnation qui nous pousse à une abjuration perpétuelle; il en faut toujours inventer un autre, et cette fatigue est un cruel châtiment. Et toujours mon système était beau, vaste, spacieux, commode, propre et lisse surtout" ("L'Exposition universelle de 1855," p. 955). In various ways, however, the question of control is central to the inquiry, as each text manipulates and undermines allegory as a figure that delimits and masters meaning. In "Le Masque" the opacity or transparency of an allegorical enigma is unveiled with ironic astonishment as the allegorical signified is revealed, yet that ironic control of meaning is itself subjected to irony by the text. In a second group of poems—"Le Cygne," "Les Sept Vieillards," "Le Tonneau de la haine"—allegory momentarily effects a recuperation of meaning, hidden and controlled by the figural system, only to be caught in a vertiginous and virtually limitless multiplication of meaning in a process of production and open displacement. Irony in this second group of texts is far more unsettling than in the first; it is a delirium verging on madness.

"Le Masque," in "Spleen et idéal," is dedicated to the sculptor Ernest
Christophe and subtitled “Statue allégorique dans le goût de la Renaissance.” The poem describes a statue of a woman in a profusion of visual detail commensurate with the physical abundance of the model:

Contemplons ce trésor de grâces florentines;
Dans l’ondulation de ce corps musculeux
L’Elégance et la Force abondent, sœurs divines.
Cette femme, morceau vraiment miraculeux,
Divinement robuste, adorablyment mince,
Est faite pour trôner sur des lits somptueux,
Et charmer les loisirs d’un pontife ou d’un prince.

Her gaze is a combination of fatuousness, languor, and mockery:

—Aussi, vois ce souris fin et voluptueux
Où la Fatuité promène son extase;
Ce long regard sournois, langoureux et moqueur;
Ce visage mignard, tout encadré de gaze,
Dont chaque trait nous dit avec un air vainqueur:
“La Volupté m’appelle et l’Amour me couronne!”

Both narrator and reader are set in the text as spectators; and, as the poet invites the reader to approach the statue, the narrator, in a series of hyperboles, proclaims astonishment at the deception of art (“O blasphème de l’art! ô surprise fatale!”). The voluptuous face is only a mask, the statue a two-headed monster: “La femme au corps divin, promettant le bonheur, / Par le haut se termine en monstre bicéphale!” A parallel series of terms designating unequivocally the artistic travesty of truth (“masque,” “décor,” “suborneur,” “la face qui ment”) and those that identify the “true representation” (“La véritable tête, et la sincère face”) point unmistakably to the dual structure of meaning in allegory:

—Mais non! ce n’est qu’un masque, un décor suborneur,
Ce visage éclairé d’une exquise grimace,
Et, regarde, voici, crispée atrocement,
La véritable tête, et la sincère face
Renversée à l’abri de la face qui ment.

The enigma is articulated explicitly: “Mais pourquoi pleure-t-elle? Elle, beauté parfaite . . .” and answered three lines below, as the key to the allegory is provided:

—Elle pleure, insensé, parce qu’elle a vécu!
Et parce qu’elle vit! Mais ce qu’elle déplore
Surtout, ce qui la fait frémir jusqu’aux genoux,
C’est que demain, hélas! il faudra vivre encore!
Demain, après-demain et toujours!—comme nous!

The poem contains elements of surprise and mystery, which in Baudelaire’s aesthetic are necessary to artistic effect, and which are inscribed throughout Les
Fleurs du mal. These effects are ironized here, however, by their very explicitness, by the mock exaggeration of surprise, and by the singularly direct question and answer format in which the moral of the fable is presented. In this way the text plays ironically with the dual (perhaps one could say two-faced) structure of allegory, with both the initially enigmatic distance between levels of meaning and the necessarily rational correlation between those levels. A reading of the poem that would delimit the ironic effects to this implicit devaluation of a didactic rhetorical figure could be substantiated by reference to Baudelaire’s comments on sculpture in the Salons of 1846 and 1859. In the section “Pourquoi la sculpture est ennuyeuse” of the Salon of 1846, sculpture is criticized as either too primitive (“un art de Caraïbes”) or too naïvely mimetic. In the “Salon de 1859” Baudelaire discusses the statue by Christophe that was the model for this text, noting: “Le caractère vigoureux du corps fait un contraste pittoresque avec l’expression mystique d’une idée toute mondaine, et la surprise n’y joue pas un rôle plus important qu’il n’est permis” (p. 1095).

In both the poem and the prose analysis, effects of surprise, allegory or irony, are strictly controlled. To delimit allegory and irony in “Le Masque” in this manner is to read them as vehicles of containment. This is true in part, of course, but one may question whether the moral is that simple and explore the possibility that a critique of the irony of containment is already inscribed in the text. A reexamination of the final stanza suggests that the ironic distance between the poet/reader/spectator of the allegory and the allegorical signified is itself the subject of irony. The accumulation of logical connectors and the periodic syntax of the conclusions (“Mais ce qu’elle déplore / Surtout, ce qui la fait frémir . . . C’est que . . .”) seem to posit the truth of the text very much in the manner of those literal translations of philosophical art that Baudelaire criticizes elsewhere. The final words of the poem, however (“comme nous!”), unexpectedly narrow the distance between the message figured by the allegorical statue and the reader/spectator as judge by including both the reader and the poet as protagonists in the same metaphysical conflict as that conveyed by the allegory. The clear conscience of ironic containment is itself the subject of irony through the revelation that it is a mystified consciousness. There is thus a far more complex and indeterminate interplay of irony here than our initial reading anticipated, and one that links the metaphysical dilemma allegorized by the text to the structure of the allegory. The meaning constituted by the allegorical system can consist, as De Man has shown, only “in repetition of a previous sign with which it can never coincide, since it is of the essence of this previous sign to be pure anteriority.” Meaning is structured here as a process of deferral. An indefinite temporal displacement of sense is oriented simultaneously in two directions: the meaning of the allegory depends upon a previous sign, the first face of the statue derives its meaning from the second, the face of suffering. Yet the discovery of that second face does not delimit
meaning in a stable manner but projects it as irony in a displacement toward an indefinite future ("encore").

The initial interplay between allegory and aesthetic conventions is less marked in several other texts of *Les Fleurs du mal* in which meaning subverts the traditional mode of allegory as a figure of containment and concurrently undermines the status of the textual first person as a stable subject. I shall outline this problematic in readings of "Le Cygne," "Les Sept Vieillards," and "Le Tonneau de la haine."

The allegorical signified in "Le Cygne" is introduced in the opening line of the poem and thereby reinforces the traditionally rational connection between the two levels of meaning:

Andromaque, je pense à vous! Ce petit fleuve,
Pauvre et triste miroir où jadis resplendit
L'immense majesté de vos douleurs de veuve,
Ce Simois menteur qui par vos pleurs grandit,
A fécondé soudain ma mémoire fertile,
Comme je traversais le nouveau Carrousel.

A link between the decor and, by extension, the forthcoming narrative anecdote is established as a correlation between signifieds, in which an immediate experience is read by the poet as the relay of an anterior meaning. The first section of the poem describes a construction site at the Nouveau Carrousel, which figures in its rapid change and disorder the instability of the heart. An analeptic narrative then recalls an earlier scene in which a swan had escaped from its cage in a menagerie since destroyed. This allegory of exile is too well known to require elucidation here; my main interest is in the interrelation between allegories in the two sections of the poem. In the first, the figure clearly functions as a circumscribed polyvalence, in the traditional manner, whereas the second part of the text puts in question the possibility of that very containment of meaning. The opening stanza of the second section repeats the descriptive framework and returns explicitly to the poet/observer as interpreter of the allegorical landscape, in an apparent reassertion of his mastery over meanings:

Paris change! mais rien dans ma mélancolie
N'a bougé! palais neufs, échafaudages, blocs,
Vieux faubourgs, tout pour moi devient allégorie,
Et mes chers souvenirs sont plus lourds que des rocs.

The exclamation "tout pour moi devient allégorie" may be read initially as a rather conventional hyperbole exalting the poet's inventiveness, yet read "dans tous les sens," as Baudelaire counsels elsewhere; and in context it is hardly a reassuring statement, as it precedes an enumeration of no fewer than nine allegorical figures in a series that remains open.

An anaphoric sequence, structured as a repetition of the verbal unit "je pense
à,” presents the series of synonymous figures: a negress, nostalgic for “la superbe Afrique”; an indefinite “quiconque a perdu ce qui ne se retrouve / Jamais, jamais!”; those who nurse suffering like a she-wolf; orphans; the poet’s own memory, which sounds like a horn in the forest; sailors forgotten on an island; captives; the vanquished; and, finally, an indefinite “à bien d’autres encore,” which leaves the series perpetually open. The supposedly rational monosemic or polysemic figure functions, then, in a curious and unsettling manner, to inscribe the predicament of a thought caught in an open and endless displacement. Poetic thought is no longer delimited by the semantic horizon of the allegorical signified; it breaks that horizon by the repetition of an endless discontinuity. Each allegorical figure reiterates the impossibility of retrieving a lost origin; the loss that is allegorized here is that which is always already absent. The “object” (“ce qui ne se retrouve jamais”), moreover, is not easily compensated for by the language that figures its displacement, for language is here powerless to restore the plenitude of an original presence.

The following poem in “Les Tableaux parisiens,” “Les Sept Vieillards,” to which I shall allude only briefly, carries one step further the process of displacing meaning in an allegorical system, and that is the step into madness. To think the reiteration of an allegorical figure as a repetition cut from any link to a signified, as origin of its own replication “Sosie inexorable . . . Dégoûtant Phénix, fils et père de lui-même,” is to think the production of sense as non-sense. There is no nostalgia here for a lost plenitude, an absence that is the deluded form of presence, but its ultimate guarantor. In the pure interplay of allegorical signifiers, the poem provokes the terror of non-sense, as an attack on the formation of meaning. As the poet encounters

\[
\begin{align*}
\ldots & \text{ un vieillard dont les guenilles jaunes} \\
& \text{Imitaient la couleur de ce ciel pluvieux,}
\end{align*}
\]
\[
\begin{align*}
& \text{Et dont l'aspect aurait fait pleuvoir les aumônes,}
\end{align*}
\]
\[
\begin{align*}
& \text{Sans la méchanceté qui luisait dans ses yeux}
\end{align*}
\]

he is assaulted by a series of baroque spectres; the old man appears seven times: “Car je comptai sept fois, de minute en minute, / Ce sinistre vieillard qui se multipliait!” The enigma here is not formulated as a sense veiled by the allegory; the mystery is the meaning of repetition. Again the poet is the reader of the allegory, but what he seeks to interpret is the process of its proliferation. An extension of the completed cycle of seven would represent the leap into infinity:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Aurais-je, sans mourir, contemplé le huitième,} \\
\text{Sosie inexorable, ironique et fatal,} \\
\text{Dégoûtant Phénix, fils et père de lui-même?} \\
& \text{—Mais je tournai le dos au cortège infernal.}
\end{align*}
\]

Death menaces the poet at the moment that the proliferation threatens to
become engaged in an infinite spiral. Exasperated, he turns away from the allegorical scene to take refuge in his room, hoping to recover his reason; the solace that he finds there, however, is the delirium of madness:

Vainement ma raison voulait prendre la barre;
La tempête en jouant déroutait ses efforts,
Et mon âme dansait, dansait, vieille gabarre
Sans mâts, sur une mer monstrueuse et sans bords!

Repetition is both the insistence of meaning and its impossibility within the enclosure of a system that requires that meaning circulate as the sense of something. That need is figured here by the allegorical decor, by the poet as reader, by the room, even by the anticipated, but absent, limits of the sea. Madness begins where reason contemplates pure gratuitousness, and, in this text, that is the undoing of the first person as a subject. That gratuitousness, however, is an uncanny repetition; as the allegory escapes the control of the subject/reader there is a terrifying shift in the functional value of the allegory from a figure of containment to a figure of the uncontrollable return of the fearful. The rhetoric of mastery is violently displaced by the rhetoric of the uncontrollable.10

"Le Tonneau de la haine," the last text I shall consider, takes the myth of the Danaïdes' vessel as its literal level. The vat that the Danaïdes were condemned to fill as punishment for having slaughtered their husbands is allegorized here as Hate. The role of the Danaïdes is taken by Vengeance, who "A beau précipiter dans ses ténèbres vides / De grands seaux pleins du sang et des larmes des morts," and it is the devil who pokes holes in the vat through which flow the blood and tears:

Le Démon fait des trous secrets à ces abîmes,
Par où fuiraient mille ans de sueurs et d'efforts,
Quand même elle saurait ranimer ses victimes,
Et pour les pressurer resusciter leurs corps.

This overfilling, which is both an excess (there is too much to be contained) and a deficiency (the container cannot fully enclose), repeats a process figured in "Le Cygne" and "Les Sept Vieillards." Once again, this endless proliferation is a very threatening indeterminacy, for what is figured here is the loss of the illusion of meaning. Containment, fullness, completion are necessary, since the buckets are themselves being filled and continually being emptied into the vat, but the process is inadequate to the task. Allegory thus inscribes the impossibility of figurative language to contain what it would hold.

This allegory of indeterminacy is doubled in the tercets by a second allegory, this time presenting Hate as a drunkard whose thirst multiplies with its satisfaction. An unhappy boozer. Hate can never know oblivion by passing out under the table:
La Haine est un ivrogne au fond d’une taverne,
Qui sent toujours la soif naître de la liqueur
Et se multiplier comme l’hydre de Lerne.

—Mais les buveurs heureux connaissent leur vainqueur,
Et la Haine est vouée à ce sort lamentable
De ne pouvoir jamais s’endormir sous la table.

The tragically grotesque image of Hate in the final tercet not only reiterates the characterization of desire (Hate) as seeking an object endlessly displaced, but it ironizes in a most deprecatory manner the ironic consciousness. The self-multiplication that forms the ironic interruption of being is written elsewhere as a process of demystification asserted, as in “L’Héautontimoroumenós,” as a lucid sadomasochistic doubling of the self, both victim and torturer, wound and knife:

Je suis la plaie et le couteau!
Je suis le soufflet et la joue!
Je suis les membres et la roue,
Et la victime et le bourreau!

In “L’Irremédiable” irony is consciousness contemplating its own fragmentation: “Tête-à-tête sombre et limpide / Qu’un cœur devenu son miroir!”

In “Le Tonneau de la haine,” however, desire’s victim cannot turn awareness of the predicament into an investigation of inauthenticity. In an interplay between irony and allegory, meaning as a process of positing and circumscribing effects of sense is interrupted and indefinitely deferred. In the quatrains the poem inscribes a figure of the figure of allegory as a system that both calls for and denies the possibility of sense. The text also inscribes irony as a turning away of meaning by figuring a poetic language discontinuous with its own telos. Where he anticipates rhetorical constructs that deflect, yet ultimately reappropriate, meanings, the reader is engaged by, and in, the writing of a limitless deferral, which demystifies some of Baudelaire’s most persistent myths.


5. Baudelaire groups different semiotic processes in the four terms allégorie, allusion, hiéroglyphe, and rébus; what is of interest to me here is the common link provided by the term translation, which supposes a separation between levels of meaning and a correlation to be established rationally between them.


7. See J. Derrida, Positions (Paris: Editions de minuit, 1972), pp. 57–64, for a summary of distinctions between meaning considered as accessible to thematic (polysemic) readings and meaning as dissemination, a nonfinite number of semantic effects. See also “La Double Séance” in his La Dissémination (Paris: Seuil, 1972).


9. The expression appears in the opening pages of “Du vin et du hachish,” p. 323, in which Baudelaire criticizes Brillat-Savarin’s Physiologie du goût for its blindness to the poetic properties of wine: “Vous aurez beau feuilleter le volume, le retourner dans tous les sens, le lire à rebours, à l’envers, de droite à gauche et de gauche à droite.” The passage is an invitation to disrupt the traditionally linear, metonymic process of reading and anticipates better-known statements by Mallarmé and Rimbaud.
