Baudelaire, Vischer, and Self-Transforming Empathy

Abstract:

This article proposes to situate what it will show to be Charles Baudelaire's bi-directional empathy with objects in relation to his departure from Romanticism and move towards Modernism. It will show that transformative receptiveness to the outside world is at least as central to his aesthetic as any self-projecting transformation of that world. The article will consider the poet's presentation of identification with objects, in the poems "La Cloche fêlée," "La Musique," and "Le Flacon," in the light of early thinking about empathy by Robert Vischer and others, and then briefly in the light of more recent work on the theme. It will argue that his inscriptions of the confrontation between self and non-self reveal him to be an early thinker of a self-transforming kind of empathy, which is central both to his Modernism and to the thinking of the early empathy theorists whose work was so influential for Modernism.

Article:

It has been argued in recent years that the late nineteenth-century philosophical and cultural turn away from sympathy towards empathy ushered in a new, Modernist way of configuring the relationship between subject and world.[1] Where then does the work of the poet Charles Baudelaire, a key transitional figure between Romanticism and Modernism, sit within this sympathy/empathy paradigm? In other words, how does Baudelaire's writing configure the relationship between human subject and non-human object?

The treatment of empathy in Baudelaire's work has often been written about in the context of relations with other people, where it appears to mean different things to different commentators: authentic insight and compassion, for some, and, for others, a self-centeredness with overtones of sadism.[2] By contrast, the lyric subject's identifications with non-human objects in Baudelaire's verse have received strikingly little attention over the years, despite the singularity of these identifications. As Walter Benjamin noted in the 1930s, "There is scarcely a single poet before Baudelaire who wrote a verse anything like "Je suis un vieux boudoir plein de roses fanées'" (Benjamin 245; Baudelaire 1: 73). For Benjamin, the poet's "empathy with inorganic things," his "empathy with the material," was extraordinary, and a key source of his inspiration.[3] A similarly object-focused understanding of Baudelairean empathy is central to an argument proposed more recently by Timothy C. Vincent, who maintains, largely on the basis of a reading of the poem "Épilogue," that Baudelaire's work testifies to "an empathetic identification with the object world in which the subject is projected *onto* the object instead of experiencing a sympathetic identification *with* it" (4). In other words, the world of objects is presented by Baudelaire as "possessing no inherent meaning whatsoever outside of what is empirically assigned to it" (6). For Vincent, this gesture of making the external world meaningful and expressive through an act of self-projection marks a break from a Romantic aesthetic of sympathy, is fundamental to Baudelaire's modernism, and can be aligned with the thinking of the German aesthetic philosopher Robert Vischer. This article will agree with all of these points, but will argue that Baudelaire's empathy with objects involves not just an imaginative transformation of the physical world by the subject, but also the subject's reciprocal alteration under the influence of external objects. In this way, my argument complicates Vincent's hypothesis about Baudelaire and Modernist aesthetics, showing how the attempt to impose imaginative shape on the physical universe implicates the Baudelairean subject profoundly, in a way that is not often imagined either for the Romantic magus or the modern dandy. In other words, the world of things is far from supine in Baudelaire's work; it is not just a screen upon which the subject projects his imaginings.

Baudelaire’s depictions of identification with things resonate closely with early object-centered attempts to theorize empathy. Reading the poet’s verse in parallel with the thinking of the first empathy theorists will allow us to discern certain striking patterns which will in turn help us better to understand the wider place and significance of empathy in his work. It will be shown that depictions of empathy in *Les Fleurs du Mal* ultimately emphasize not just the identificatory transformation of the external object by the expressive, self-projecting subject, but also, crucially, the destabilization of the empathizing subject by this identificatory encounter. The poet’s work will be revealed, thus, indirectly to highlight a sometimes side-lined aspect of his thinking and that of his contemporaries—namely, the dialogic and responsive as distinct from purely projective dimension of object-identification or empathy—while also anticipating far more recent thinking about empathy.

The bell, the boat and the bottle

Before considering Baudelaire’s depictions of self-object relations in his verse, it is worth recalling the way in which an archetypally Romantic poet presents these relations. Victor Hugo’s series of six “Soleils couchants” poems (1828–29) evoke a range of sunset scenes. In the first poem (116–18), the mental pictures (a giant wielding a sword, a crocodile with three rows of teeth, a palace, upturned mountains…) produced in the lyric subject by his perception of changing light shining through shape-shifting clouds can be surprising and even disorientating for the reader, just as the various exclamations suggest they are disorientating for the “je.” However, the lyric subject always maintains his position as viewer, indeed seer, whose role it is to reveal to the reader the presence of a “mystère” that lies behind the visible. The lyric subject may allude to his own “œil épouvanté,” in the fourth of the six poems (121–22), but Hugo’s figurations and personifications of the external world do not genuinely threaten the mastery of the lyric subject, or knock him off his pedestal. Accordingly, when the city is presented in one poem as a giant widow, the lyric subject is entirely in control: he stands upon her forehead as she sleeps. It may well be the case that Romantic poetry bears witness to what W. J. T. Mitchell describes as “a new, heightened perception of thingness–of materiality, physicality, objecthood,” coinciding historically with “the appearance of the fossil and the totem” (173, 176). Nevertheless, however fascinating and mysterious the world of things is, in the work of Hugo, the poet remains the central and dominant figure, deciphering signs and drawing out their hidden meanings. The sense of a hierarchical distinction between mind and matter is never threatened in any real or sustained way in Hugo’s poems.

Baudelaire’s poems tend by contrast to ironize the notion of the poet as decipherer of the material world. The object-signs that feature in “Correspondances” (1: 11), Baudelaire’s most obviously visionary poem, are famously resistant to reading, seeming to interpret “l’homme” rather than vice versa: it is the “forêts de symboles” that watch the man and that release “de confuses paroles”. In the poem “Paysage” (1: 82), the rooftop-dwelling poet figure, who gazes down upon the city and upwards towards “les grands ciels qui font rêver d’éternité,” seems somewhat ridiculous, particularly when we read that he conjures up, through the sheer power of his will, fairytale palaces and pastoral fantasies whenever there is no longer anything worth looking at. Finally, Baudelaire deflates any elevated notion of the poet as visionary by evoking an undignified merging of the lyric subject with the flesh of the world. In the two sketches for an “Épilogue” to *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1: 191–92), the city is figured as a giantess (“l’énorme catin’), like a lewd version of Hugo’s city as giant widow, though now the lyric subject figures himself as the city’s coarse lover, so is metaphorically enmeshed in his own image in a way that Hugo’s subject was not. Baudelaire points to no mystery lurking behind appearances: he may personify the city and its components, but these images return us to raw physicality: temples that vomit music and a whore-like city that luxuriates in its vice. Here, Baudelaire marks a shift from Romantic sympathy to Modernist empathy not just by replacing sympathetic fusion with expressive self-projection, as Vincent suggests, but by dramatizing the interpenetration of mind and matter in a manner that troubles any hierarchical distinction between subject and object.[4] It is this interpenetration and this troubling of subject-object distinctions that are the subject of this article.

"La Cloche fêlée" (1: 71–72) describes the lyric subject's apparent identification with an inanimate object. Even the title of the text suggests a kind of confusion between the human and the non-human, because while the poem is ostensibly about a broken bell, the term "avoir la cloche fêlée" has, since the nineteenth century at least, had the meaning of "être fou" (Rey). This means that the title, usually translated as "The Cracked Bell," also hints at "The Madman." The first quatrain of "La Cloche fêlée" (1: 71–72) describes the lyric subject listening to memories that are triggered by the sound of vaguely humanized, singing bells: "des carillons qui chantent dans la brume."[5] In the second quatrain, it is a single bell, rather than a plurality of bells, that is evoked, and this object is more strenuously humanized than the singing bells of the first stanza: it is associated with adjectives ("bienheureuse," "vigoureux," "alerte et bien portante"), nouns ("vieillesse," "cri"), and an adverb ("fidèlement") that are normally applied to humans, before being compared to an old soldier on guard beneath his tent, a simile that is amply prepared by the prior characterization of the bell not only as human but also as elderly, faithful, and alert.

In the first tercet, a shift happens: the focus is no longer on the attribution of human characteristics to the bell, but on the lyric subject's imaginary transformation into a kind of bell. Projection, or the humanization of the inanimate object, is thereby superseded by the becoming-object of the subject. Where, previously, human attributes had been applied to the bell, now a quality associated with bells is applied to the human subject: his soul is described as "fêlée," an adjective usually applied to inanimate objects (except when it applies, figuratively, to the human head). We read that this newly thing-like soul wants to emulate the bell of the previous quatrain by filling the cold night air with its “chants.” The soul, referred to in the third person by the lyric subject, therefore serves as a kind of hybrid of subject and object. The “voix affaiblie” of the lyric subject’s soul, at the end of the first tercet, likened to “le râle épais” of a dying man in the final stanza, indirectly recalls the vigorous “cri religieux” of the bell in the second quatrain. In the final lines of the sonnet, the bell-like soul is compared to a wounded man in the midst of a scene of bloody devastation, a simile that recalls, thanks to the shared lexis of battle, the earlier comparison of the bell to a healthy old soldier. Furthermore, the fact that this imagined man is lying “sous” a pile of dead bodies indirectly recalls, by way of a visual analogy, the image of the soldier keeping watch “sous” his tent, both mental pictures calling to mind the shape of a bell,[6] with its more or less vigorous soldier (or “battant”) at its centre.

The anthropomorphizing projections of the two quatrains, succeeded by the lyric subject’s identification with the bell, or rather with a certain version of the bell, set up a kind of reverberation between subject and object: the object is initially humanized (as a soldier-like bell), then the lyric subject is reciprocally objectified (as a bell-like soul), before being re-humanized through the comparison of its voice to that of a man dying on a battlefield (a soldier-like bell-like soul), a comparison that itself recalls the initial humanization of the bell and the sound it makes (the soldier-like bell); finally, the reference to the dying man struggling immobile under “un grand tas de morts” suggests a concluding though not quite complete merger of human and thing. The rhetorical logic of the poem therefore suggests a complex interpenetration of human and object, an interpenetration that is anticipated by the “bruit des carillons” of the first stanza, not only because of the (unmentioned) human work involved in bell-ringing but also because of the reverberative sound effects of carillon (effects that are not explicitly evoked, but that are implied by the plural “carillons” and, perhaps indirectly, by internal repetitions, such as the decreasing return of the /l/ phoneme that is prominent in the poem’s title, and that features eight times in its opening quatrain, seven times in each of the next two stanzas, and six times in the final tercet).

The bells, in the first quatrain, appear to awaken a kind of collective memory in the lyric subject. In view of the two battle-related images that feature in Baudelaire’s text, it might be surmised that the memories aroused by the sound of the church bells are shared recollections of the Napoleonic wars.[7] The memories awoken by the bells of “La Cloche fêlée” are not described as the lyric subject’s own memories but are evoked by a noun phrase that suggests both impersonality and distance: “Les souvenirs lointains.” As Judd Hubert puts it, “nous ne savons pas précisément si ces *souvenirs lointains* appartiennent au poète ou aux cloches” (166). The replacement of “sentir,” which featured in the first published version of the poem in 1851 and which described the lyric subject’s apprehension of the memories, by “écouter,” in the version published in 1855, emphasizes the external origins of these “souvenirs.”[8] The lyric subject of “La Cloche fêlée” is penetrated by the human and inhuman world outside himself; before he populates that world with his own human and humanizing imaginings: “[Mon âme] veut de ses chants peupler l’air froid des nuits.” The exchange between self and non-self is bidirectional, and troubles the boundaries between self and non-self, human and non-human.

In “La Musique” (*Oc* 1 68), the lyric subject evokes the way in which music transports him. In the first line of the poem, he compares music to a sea that carries him, and by the end of the first stanza he has metaphorically identified with a sailing boat: “Je mets à la voile.” The identification is only partial, however, as the second quatrain begins with an evocation of the lyric subject’s chest and lungs puffed out like a sail, suggesting a human-object hybrid rather than a straightforward substitution of boat for human:

> La poitrine en avant et les poumons gonflés
> Comme de la toile,

J’escalade le dos des flots amoncelés
Que la nuit me voile

Reinforcing this sense of hybridity is the fact that the third line appears to identify the “je” straightforwardly with a boat, while the “me” of the fourth line is logically human, because its vision is obscured by the darkness. The vacillation between boat and human is continued in the third stanza, where the lyric subject claims to feel vibrating within him the emotions of a boat: his feelings are no longer his own, but rather are the products of his identification. The idea of the boat-object has been so thoroughly internalized by the human subject that the latter’s feelings are imputed to it. It is as if the boat is now more human than the human subject. Indeed, the sentient and even emotional qualities of the boat are highlighted by the double reference to its feelings (“les passions” and “qui souffre”):

Je sens vibrer en moi toutes les passions
D’un vaisseau qui souffre;

In the final four lines, the lyric subject again vacillates between object and human; the 12 | 5 rhythmic structure of the verse is itself deeply suggestive of fluctuation. In the penultimate sentence he is cradled (as a human would be) by storms (as a boat on water would be). In the last sentence, which somewhat disorientatingly lacks a verb, the human subject seems to reclaim his own emotions with the reference to “mon désespoir,” but the fact that the sea is his “grand miroir” suggests a continuation of the identification with a suffering boat:

Le bon vent, la tempête et ses convulsions

Sur l’immense gouffre
Me bercent. D’autres fois, calme plat, grand miroir
De mon désespoir!

So closely intertwined are human and boat that it is impossible to say whose despair exactly is evoked in the final line. Baudelaire’s text thereby anticipates recent thinking about emotion which identifies it not as a property or capacity of the subject but rather as “relational,” that is, as an effect of contact with an object or other.[9] The poem describes an emotional journey: at its beginning, the lyric subject states that often he is moved by music (“La musique souvent me prend comme une mer!”), but it is the metaphorical confusion of human and boat that conveys a sense of how uncanny that affective transportation and self-displacement can be. In arriving at this state of confusion, there is clearly some projection at work, in the sense that a perceived or imagined boat is imbued with human feelings, and the sea is made a mirror of the subject’s despair. However, this self-doubling or self-projection implicates the self: it is as if the self has become the boat at least as much as he has projected itself into it. By analogy, if music metaphorically transports a person, this transportation may work in two directions: as well as imaginatively transporting the self outside itself, music can (like bells) resonate inside a person (“Je sens vibrer en moi”), in a two-way movement that at least temporarily destabilizes or suspends the boundaries of the self.[10]

The seven stanzas of “Le Flacon” (1: 47–48) also describe the emotional and identificatory effects triggered by something external to the subject. The first stanza evokes the discovery of a heavily scented perfume bottle in an old chest. In the second stanza, an imagined bottle is discreetly humanized by the attribution to it of an ability to remember, and the suggestion that it contains a human soul:

Parfois on trouve un vieux flacon qui se souvient,
D'où jaillit toute vive une âme qui revient.

The third stanza presents the "pensers" that were sleeping in this bottle as butterfly-like creatures now emerging from their chrysalises. In the fourth, "le souvenir enivrant," now flying around outside the bottle, pushes an "âme vaincue" towards "un gouffre obscurci de miasmes humains." The soul is figured in the text as if it were a physical body: winged memory produces "le Vertige" which pushes the soul to the edge of the abyss: "le Vertige/ Saisit l'âme vaincue et la pousse à deux mains." The memory unleashed by the perfume bottle then reveals itself, in the fifth stanza, as the Lazarus-like, ghostly corpse of an old love. All of this can be understood as a form of self-projection: the lyric subject humanizes a perfume bottle by treating it as a receptacle for human thought and memory, memory which the poem goes on to personify in the reference to Lazarus. As in "La Musique," the self is implicated in this metaphorical animation of the physical object, firstly when the soul finds itself manhandled by 'le Vertige', and secondly when it finds itself metaphorically transformed, in the final two stanzas, into a perfume bottle:

Ainsi, quand je serai perdu dans la mémoire
Des hommes, dans le coin d'une sinistre armoire
Quand on m'aura jeté, vieux flacon désolé,
Décrépit, poudreux sale, abject, visqueux, fêlé,

Je serai ton cercueil, aimable pestilence!
Le témoin de ta force et de ta virulence,
Cher poison préparé par les anges! liqueur

Qui me ronge, ô la vie et la mort de mon cœur!

As in "La Cloche fêlé," the adjective "fêlé" is used to qualify the human-object hybrid, suggesting a fissure in the self, even a hint of madness; and as in both of the previous poems examined, there is no simple substitution of object for human, as object and human seem to coalesce into one other. The lyric-subject-cum-poison-containing-bottle, after all, lays claim to a heart, which is given prominence by its positioning as the last word of the poem. The porosity of the physical perfume bottle, asserted in the first stanza ("Il est de forts parfums pour qui toute matière/ Est poreuse. On dirait qu'ils pénètrent le verre"), would seem therefore to affect the metaphorical bottle, not just to the extent that the latter is corroded by its poisonous content, but also insofar as it is permeated by human qualities.[11] As in both "La Cloche fêlée" and "La Musique," then, an external object is not only metaphorically imbued with human qualities, but an implied human subject metaphorically takes on qualities of that non-human object, suggesting a two-way transformative identification between self and world, involving both projection and incorporation: the self transforms the world imaginatively and is, in turn, imaginatively transformed by it.

This intercontamination of human and object is suggested by a couple of other details in the poem too. Like the physical bottle evoked in the first two stanzas, the human-bottle hybrid of the last two stanzas is a container within a container; however, the thing within which the now objectified human-bottle is contained is now itself a human-object hybrid. What contains the humanoid bottle is "la mémoire/ Des hommes," which is metaphorically identified with "une sinistre armoire." The rhyming of "mémoire" and "armoire" emphasizes the interpenetration of physical object and human memory. As for the perfume contained by the physical bottle, it is metaphorically transformed into insect-like memories before mutating into an ambiguous, corpse-like human figure, and then into a pestilential poison which still possesses lingering human qualities: not only is this perfume tacitly humanized by being addressed in the second person by the lyric subject and by being implicitly identified, not least on account of the coffin metaphor ("Je serai ton cercueil"), with the memory that was previously personified as an odoriferous, cadaverous Lazarus, but it is often understood to symbolize an absent female mistress and implied addressee.[12]

It should be noted that there is no sense in the three poems analysed above, all drawn from the *Spleen et Idéal* section of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, that the identificatory event is anything other than an effect of imaginative processes: we know that the implied poet has not become part bell or boat or bottle in any literal sense. However, in the course of these two-way identificatory encounters, the post-Kantian human subject is arguably knocked off his symbolic perch, or, as Jane Bennett might put it, away from "the ontological center or hierarchical apex" (11) that such a subject habitually occupies.[13] These poems suggest a kind of infiltration of the human subject by the physical, inanimate world, even if that subject also imbues that world with meaning through the operation of his imagination.

In an essay on Théophile Gautier, Baudelaire describes the poet's animation of the physical world as "une espèce de sorcellerie évocatoire" (2: 118). What Baudelaire's verse poetry shows is that this quasi-magical humanization of the non-human world can be accompanied by a similarly strange objectification of the self. There is ample evidence in the poet's work of his belief in the shaping, transformative role of the imagination, and in the meaninglessness of the physical world in the absence of the human imagination. One has only to think of the essay on the painter Eugène Delacroix where Baudelaire describes "La nature extérieure" as "un amas incohérent de matériaux que l'artiste est invité à associer et à mettre en ordre" (2: 752), or the *Salon de 1859* where he writes that "Tout l'univers visible n'est qu'un magasin d'images et de signes auxquels l'imagination donnera une place et une valeur relative; c'est une espèce de pâture que l'imagination doit digérer et transformer" (2: 627). However, it is important to note that Baudelaire’s work *also* depicts the human subject being reciprocally shaped and transformed by (its own imaginative shaping of) the external world.

If it is true that aesthetic Modernism fixates upon things, material objects, as a form of resistance to the flux of modernity, as has been suggested,[14] then the reverberative, resonatory, or intercontaminatory relationship that Baudelaire sets up between self and objects in the poems examined above is surely one of the key ways in which he can be understood to be a founding Modernist poet. It is also one of the key ways in which he anticipates the early empathy theorists whose work was itself to play an influential role in the development of Modernist art and literature.[15]

Vischerian empathy and Baudelaire

Robert Vischer coined the term *Einfühlung* (literally: in-feeling or feeling into) in 1872, in the preparation of his doctoral dissertation; this term would be translated by “empathy,” another neologism, around 1908.[16] Vischer’s theory of empathy grew out of a reflection upon the role of sensation and emotion in the response to observed or imagined visual forms. It begins with the idea that mental acts are an effect of “certain vibrations and—who knows what—neural modifications” in response to “external phenomena” (1994 90). According to Vischer, physical stimuli can act upon the embodied self so that it “unconsciously projects its own bodily form—and with this also the soul—into the form of the object” (1994 92). *Einfühlung* was essentially, for Vischer, a “symbolizing activity,” predicated upon an unconscious perception of harmonious correspondence between subject and object, whereby the object effectively becomes a symbol of and for the subject (1994 109). *Einfühlung* has often been characterized, by Vischer and others, as a humanization or anthropomorphization of the external world. However, *Einfühlung* was also a complex two-way process involving what Vischer characterizes as “a direct merger of the imagination [*Vorstellung*] with objective form” (1994

92), a “remarkable merger of subject and object in the sentient imagination” (1994 109) and a “central projection, exchange, and return” whereby the empathic ego “looks at its second self as it sits reshaped in the object and intuitively takes it back to itself, yet without discerning it clearly or knowing why” (1994 108). Something of this activity of exchange is suggested by Vischer’s observation that, when we look at passing clouds, “the forms appear to move, but only *we* move in the imagination” (1994 101). Crucially, for Vischer, *Einfühlung* involved not simply an intellectual activity of projection whereby the perceived object remains a separate entity for the perceiving subject, but rather a genuine vibratory fusion of viewing subject and visual object, where the distinction between the two is merely apparent, and where the projected self is reshaped before being reintegrated:

> We […] have the wonderful ability to project and incorporate our own physical form into an objective form […] I project my own life into the lifeless form, just as I quite justifiably do with another living person. Only ostensibly do I keep my own identity although the object remains distinct. I seem merely to adapt and attach myself to it as one hand clasps another, and yet I am mysteriously transplanted and magically transformed into this Other.[17]

The binary use of verbs is worth noting: project and incorporate (*zu unterschieben und einzuverleiben*), adapt and attach (*anzubequemen und anzufügen*), transplanted and transformed (*versetzt und verzaubert*). What Vischer characterizes as a process that is mysterious and magical, or in German secretive (*heimlicher Weise*) and enchanted (*verzaubert*), involves two moments, one of which seems close to a straightforward transference onto an object/other (project, attach, transplanted), and one of which involves a mutation (incorporate, adapt, transformed). The subject both transfers himself into the object, and somehow integrates a quality of the object.[18] Similarly, for Theodor Lipps, who developed Vischer's thinking in the realm of intersubjective relations, empathy involves a reciprocal movement. In Lipps' thinking, as summarized by the philosopher Dan Zahavi, "My perception of the other's expression will evoke, in a rather mediated way, a feeling in myself, and this feeling is then attributed to the other through projection" (132). The British author Vernon Lee, one of the first to write about *Einfühlung* in English, insists upon the fact that the activity of empathy takes place within the body of the subject even as the subject's ego temporarily "coalesces" (63) with the object.[19] And while British psychologist Edward Titchener, who is usually credited with coining the word "empathy," defines the phenomenon as "the process of humanising objects, of reading or feeling ourselves into them" (1910 417) he also writes about the physiological effects of this process on the empathizer: "We are told of a shocking accident, and we gasp and shrink and feel nauseated as we imagine it; we are told of some new delightful fruit, and our mouth waters as if we were about to taste it" (1915 198). What is common then, to Vischer, Lipps, Lee, and Titchener, is the idea that empathy involves both a mental movement beyond the physical confines of the self and effects that are felt within the body of the empathizer.

The three verse poems analyzed earlier stage a dual process of self-projection and incorporation which anticipates the early theorization of *Einfühlung*. All evoke an object that the subject encounters through her senses (aural and olfactory) and through an imagination that is richly visual. Reading the poems now through the lens of Vischer's theorization of empathy we might even be tempted to see the old soldier of "La Cloche fêlée" as a representative of the lyric subject's reshaped "second self," his self-projection into the anthropomorphized object (1994 108). The collective memory awoken in the lyric subject by the ringing of the church bells might be understood to resonate with the German philosopher's idea that the external world of objects is made meaningful not by one single human imagination but rather by the collective human activity of symbolization, which produces what he calls "universal coherence" (1994 109). Such parallels notwithstanding, Baudelaire died six years before Vischer's doctoral dissertation was published, and therefore before the phenomenon of empathy was theorized. While the poet is known to have been familiar with the ideas of the eighteenth-century art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann, it is unlikely that he had any detailed knowledge of current thinking in German aesthetic philosophy. Nevertheless, Baudelaire, like Vischer, was interested in the mechanisms of aesthetic response, and while the latter's writing is densely philosophical in a way that the former's never is, phrases such as "universal harmony" and "the volatilization of the self" which feature in the German thinker's reflections on empathy (110), are similar to some that can be found in the poet's critical and private writings, as if to confirm the notion of universal harmony.[20]

Baudelaire was particularly interested in the potentially transformative influence of aesthetic form. In his essay about the 1855 *Exposition universelle,* for example, he writes that in order for a person to understand the beauty of a Chinese work of art, he needs to effect within himself "une transformation qui tient du mystère" and imaginatively participate in the "milieu" that produced this artwork. According to the poet, "cette grâce divine du cosmopolitisme" (2: 576) is a faculty that is much more likely to be found in a solitary traveller than in an art critic. He goes on to imagine the slow transformation of "un homme du monde, un intelligent," upon his transportation to a distant land (2: 576). The use of the term "sympathie" in this passage confirms that what is at stake is a process very similar to the one that would be named by Vischer almost twenty years later.[21] What Baudelaire describes is a gradual process of accommodation — a slow absorption, by the subject, of the strange, unfamiliar forms and colours and rhythms of this new environment. Importantly, it is the surrounding environment rather than the subject that is endowed with agency. Until its end, when the transformation is complete, all of the active verbs in the passage have the "homme du monde" as their object and another entity as their subject: sympathy will create a new world of ideas in the traveller; buildings will irritate his eye, flowers will enter his eye, fruits will deceive and displace his senses and reveal new ideas to him, and a world of harmonies will enter him, penetrate him, enrich him. It is only at the end of the passage that the now radically changed, even religiously converted, man becomes, grammatically and in effect, an active subject. The process of self-transformation evoked here would appear to have very little to do with self-projection, and everything to do with a receptiveness and an adaptation to external surroundings. Baudelaire goes on in the same essay to claim that if artists were to conform to systems and rules, all life and interest would disappear from art; it is the openness of artists to the new that enables "la variété," "quelque chose de toujours nouveau," and "[l]'étonnement," all of which are fundamental to great art in the eyes of a poet for whom "*Le beau est toujours bizarre*" (2: 578), and who ended the second edition of *Les Fleurs du Mal* with the pledge to dive "Au fond de l'Inconnu pour trouver du *nouveau*" (1: 134). In such formulations, Baudelaire anticipates Vischer, for whom "the artist lives in a state of amazement, as trusting as it is reserved. Because he keeps his eyes open, he is constantly surprised […] everything is new to him" (1994 116). Vischer could easily be paraphrasing here Baudelaire's own words about genius as "l'*enfance retrouvée* à volonté" (2: 690), or even anticipating Benjamin's analysis of the poet's heroic openness to the shocks of the external world.[22]

An ability to adapt to and incorporate the new clearly plays a vital role in aesthetic reception and creation, for Baudelaire: his ideal artist is "un *moi* insatiable du *non-moi*" (2: 692). This adaptation and incorporation have the potential to change the self, destabilize it. Margueritte Murphy goes so far as to say that what Baudelaire calls "le non-moi," the phenomenal world beyond the self, has the potential "to transform the subject so completely as to render the subject insubstantial" (201). If Baudelaire's version of empathy is different from Romantic sympathy, as we began by suggesting, it is not simply because his poetry presents the human being as self-projecting rather than divinatory, but also because the human subject is shown to be challenged and displaced in the course of entering into dialogue with the world outside itself. This is the key message of the 1855 *Exposition universelle* essay, just as it is a central feature of the poems analyzed in this article. The de-centering or un-anchoring of the self is also evoked, in ironic and possibly even caricatural mode, in the prose poem "Le Confiteor de l'artiste" (1: 278–79), where the narrator expresses uncertainty as to whether his thoughts come from within him or from the things around him: "toutes ces choses pensent par moi, ou je pense par elles […]. [C]es pensées, qu'elles sortent de moi ou s'élancent des choses, deviennent bientôt trop intenses." Baudelaire's focus on the ambivalence of the subject-world relationship in this latter text and in the other poems examined in this article arguably anticipates Wilhelm Worringer's thinking about "the urge to abstraction" which was, for this aesthetic philosopher of empathy and abstraction, motivated by the "inner unrest inspired in man by the phenomena of the outside world."[23] However, it is important to note that in its depictions of the human subject's identification with objects, Baudelaire's verse also anticipates the Modernist turn to empathy.

While the early empathy theorists have often been understood to privilege self-projection into the object over any reciprocal action upon the subject,[24] this article has argued that self-transformative incorporation also has an important place in the earliest philosophical writing about *Einfühlung* just as it does in Baudelaire's writing. To the extent that Baudelairean identification-with-things and Vischerian empathy make incorporation a key part of the identificatory process, they anticipate recent attempts, across a range of disciplines, to re-imagine empathy (albeit with other people rather than with objects) as an openness to being changed and not just as an ethically problematic activity of self-projection. For example, the historian Dominick LaCapra has coined the phrase "empathic unsettlement" to describe a receptiveness that endangers the certainties and even the integrity of the self (41). The cultural scholar Carolyn Pedwell writes of empathy as “a critical receptivity to being affected by ways of seeing, being and feeling that do not simply confirm what we think we already know” (36). The art historian Jill Bennet argues that empathy is “a mode of thought that might be achieved when one allows the violence of an affective experience to truly inform thinking” (55). The psychoanalyst Adam Phillips and historian Barbara Taylor note that empathy is “always hazardous because it is based on a susceptibility to others”; it “opens us up to the world (and worlds) of other people in ways that we long for and dread” (3). In the field of psychology, the relationship between self-change and empathetic identification with fictional characters has become a focus of investigation in recent years.[25] In other words, there has been considerable focus, in twenty-first century scholarship, across a wide range of disciplines, on links between the experience of empathic identification and self-transformation.

The self-modifying aspect of Baudelairean identification and empathy has often been overlooked, probably because the idea of receptive openness seems incompatible with the persona of the aloof, impassive dandy that for some commentators is inseparable from the poet’s modernity, even if we know that the porous, vaporized, self-prostituting self also plays a central role in his work, bringing the detached observer into sensuous and imaginative contact with the world outside himself: “La gloire, c’est rester *un*, et se prostituer d’une manière particulière” (1: 700). It may also be that, however post-humanist we believe ourselves to be, we find the poet’s human-object hybridization uncomfortable, even offensive to “la morale publique” (1: 1206), to borrow the words used by the magistrates in 1857 to censure *Les Fleurs du Mal*. After all, as a leading object-oriented philosopher points out, it can be alarming “when someone mixes a person with a thing”.[26] Certainly, in the absence of a willed suppression of some sort, it is difficult to explain why phrases in Baudelaire’s work such as “Je suis un cimetière abhorré de la lune” have not more often been discussed as expressions of empathy with the material world.

This article has argued that the idea of self-change, through boundary-challenging encounters with the world outside the self, is a key though often overlooked part of Baudelaire’s proto-Modernist aesthetic, and that it is an aspect of his thinking that anticipates not only the ideas of the early empathy theorists, ideas that would feed into aesthetic Modernism, but also much more recent thinking about empathy.

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[1] See for example Greiner 157–61 and Hammond.

[2] On Baudelaire's empathy with other people, see for example Kaplan, Gasarian, Jackson, Nakaji, Poulet, Scott, and Vernet.

[3] Benjamin 86, 245. Margueritte Murphy builds on Benjamin's interest in the physical object in her study of Baudelaire, but focuses on the latter's representations of material objects not as sites of empathetic identification but as places where aesthetic value intersects with economic, political, and commercial values. However, she comes close to discussing empathy with objects when she notes in relation to one passage that the subject's "visual identification" with the object is sense-based rather than cognitive (203).

[4] The notion of subject-object "interpenetration," a term used by the poet Shelley, is associated by Vincent with Romanticism. The latter writes of sympathetic identification that "a resonance occurs between stable object and reflective subject," whereas (modernist) "empathetic identification, on the other hand, […] acknowledges the separateness of the object […] while at the same time acknowledging the role of psychological projection in the creation of reality" (6). I agree with Vincent on the decisive role of psychological projection, as distinct from "Shelley's and other Romantics' emphasis on the transference of meaning from object to subject" (5), in the turn towards modernism, but also maintain that, in Baudelaire's work at least, a form of transference from the object to the subject does continue.

[5] This loose anthropomorphism affects another non-human object in the first quatrain also. One scholar points out that "'Palpiter' is an unusual word to use in describing a fire, and Baudelaire has chosen a word of which the most obvious connotation is physiological, a word which refers to a disordered, no longer rhythmic, heartbeat" (Walters 51–52).

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[6] A number of commentators have pointed to a visual analogy between the bell, the old soldier under his tent, and the wounded man under the mound of bodies. See Walters 53 note 7; Austin 292–93; and Hubert 166 note 1. Walters also notes the analogy between the two "canopy" images, in the second quatrain and the second tercet (55).

[7] Aimée Boutin points out in her analysis of this and other texts that bells regularly serve in Romantic and post-Romantic poetry as sites of collective memory and as "markers of a crisis in meaning and memory" (275). Further anticipating the argument of the present article, Boutin relates the human-object identification in this text to an anthropomorphizing folkloric tradition and to the "fragmentation or fêlure of modern lyric subjectivity" (272).

[8] See Claude Pichois's notes in Baudelaire 1: 972–73.

[9] See Ahmed 8.

[10] Judd Hubert notes "un mouvement d'intériorisation," whereby the music that is initially portrayed as an external force appears to move inside the body of the lyric subject in the second quatrain, puffing out his lung-sails (142).

[11] Interestingly, both Philippe Bonnefis (43–54) and Dominique Rincé (154–55) read "Le Flacon" from the perspective of contagion and contamination, but neither explicitly discusses the intercontamination of human and object in the poem.

[12] See for example Labarthe 189.

[13] It could be argued that Baudelaire anticipates speculative realism and object-oriented ontology, in his de-centering of the subject and also to the extent that he attributes a kind of independent agency, or "material vitality" (Jane Bennett 17), to things (such as playing cards, pipes, and clocks) that seems somehow more unsettling than Hugo's more explicitly figurative anthropomorphization of the outside world (the giant wielding a sword in the clouds). For a reading of the literature of the Fantastic of Baudelaire's time as a form of speculative realism, see Cropper as well as Cropper and Harman.

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[14] Bill Brown notes that “modernism’s resistance to modernity is its effort to deny the distinction between subjects and objects, people and things” (2001 12), that artificial separation between subject and object that he argues, following Bruno Latour, was instituted by modernity. Elsewhere Brown explores how modernist literature attempts to counteract, partly through its “material fixations,” the separation of subject and object (1999 23). Baudelaire’s subject-object hybrids might be understood to anticipate, superficially at least, the thinking of the philosopher Henri Bergson, for whom human beings have a propensity to become mechanical, thing-like that is accompanied by an *élan vital* that maintains mental elasticity. On Bergson’s influence on modernist writers, see Douglass.

[15] Kirsty Martin explores the interest of modernist writers of the early twentieth century in the phenomenon of empathy.

[16] The concept of empathy had been in development for some time before Vischer’s treatise. See Mallgrave and Ikonomou 17–21 and Edwards.

[17] Vischer 1994 104. For the original German text, see Vischer 1873 20.

[18] One article on Vischer describes these as “les deux moments de l’empathie, en premier lieu l’identification (*Einsfühlung*) avec l’objet, en second lieu l’empathie (*Einfühlung*) de notre sentiment dans l’objet. Ou encore, objectivation et anthropomorphisation” (Jorland and Thirioux 279). On the “reverberations” between subject and object in the experience of empathy, see Akavia 162. For Vischer, this author writes, “every act of projection was accompanied by one of introjection […] Thus, the empathetic process was essential not only for the subject’s embodied perception of the world, but also for the constitution and continual reconstitution of the subject’s own self” (Akavia 162).

[19] Lee objects to the “metaphysical and quasi-mythological” (66) notion of self-projection on the grounds that empathy “depends upon a comparative or momentary abeyance of all thought

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of an ego" (67). For a discussion of Lee's thinking about empathy, see Hammond 122–23 and Martin 30–81.

[20] The poem "Correspondances" certainly places universal harmony at its centre, whether in the synaesthetic or Swedenborgian sense. In his critical writing, Baudelaire takes up the Swedenborgian theme in his references to "l'immense analogie universelle" (2: 575) and to "l'*universelle analogie*" (2: 133). In his private writings, he refers to "la vaporisation et la centralisation du *Moi*" (1: 676) and to "le goût de la déperdition," which he contrasts with "le goût de la concentration productive" (1: 649).

[21] Sympathy and empathy are intimately linked: not only was the word "empathy" formed by analogy with "sympathy," but some commentators argue that there was never any real need to distinguish between them. See for example Jahoda.

[22] See "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" (Benjamin 170–210).

[23] Worringer 15. Baudelaire was arguably an early thinker of abstraction: "il n'y a dans la nature ni ligne ni couleur. C'est l'homme qui crée la ligne et la couleur. Ce sont deux abstractions qui tirent leur égale noblesse d'une même origine" (1: 752).

[24] See for example Fitzpatrick.

[25] See for example Gabriel and Young; Johnson; Sestir and Green.

[26] Harman 69. Interestingly, however, even Harman (who is generally very happy to talk about human-object hybrids), in a discussion of figurative language, uses the phrase "A candle is like a teacher" to demonstrate the workings of metaphor, thereby avoiding the use of an actual thing-person metaphor to explain the way in which, through metaphor, thing-like qualities can attach to a person and vice versa (25–30).