



Correspondences

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IN Baudelaire's poem 'Correspondences', Nature is a temple the living pillars of which sometimes make strange – the poet's word, in fact, is 'confused' – utterances. Man – it is 'l'homme' in the original, though in contemporary translations this tends to be adjusted to 'us' for reasons, one presumes, of political correctness – walks there through *symbols* which seem to observe him with a familiar gaze (or is it with familiar looks?: *regards familiers*): 'Like long echoes which from a distance confound themselves in a deep and shadowy unity' (*Comme de longs échos qui de loin se confondent / Dans une ténébreuse et profonde unité*) 'as vast as night and as day', 'The perfumes, the colours and the sounds respond to themselves.'² Most English-language translations employ the word 'correspond' here, picking up the suggestion from the title. I'm not sure that the decision to do so doesn't change the sense, but I won't quibble because I am going to do a worse thing, and very loosely paraphrase. In this world, the poem seems to be saying, we find ourselves amongst things – Baudelaire's other writings give us license to broaden 'Nature' in this way, to things more generally – which seem to hold meanings we can't quite grasp (I don't think he really meant the bit about hearing voices, but it's an effective image): things seem to look at us – can we say beckon to us? draw our attention? – as if they want something from us (certainly Rilke later took it this way, in the *Duino Elegies*³), or as if we should know them, recognise something in them. Any poet, any artist, any photographer for that matter, knows these things well: many would say they spend their lives looking for things which seem to call to them, inspire them, things which seem to *want* to be painted or photographed or sculpted, or to have poems written about them, or which seem to inspire an answering need in the artist or poet.

Baudelaire's poem is widely recognised as a key statement of symbolist



– or, more specifically, *Symboliste* – aesthetics, or at least of one important aspect thereof, this theory of correspondence, but I think its significance is broader. It is a key statement about art, and the mind and motivation of the artist *per se* (Baudelaire did not know that he was making a *Symboliste* statement: no such movement had developed, let alone been named, when he wrote this poem). It may be that I think this is a key statement about art more generally only because I live in a late- or post-symbolist age, and think of art in symbolist or post-symbolist terms, but I don't think so. Walking through so many collections of art from that of the earliest 'civilizations' to the present (a strange word, 'civilizations': who decides?), and having studied poetry from Sappho to some of the latest post-modern releases, I have come to think that the issues that Baudelaire's poem raises are as old as art and poetry themselves. Artists and poets have always worked with available materials, as in fields of potential subjects, but, unless severely constrained by circumstance (and even then one might suggest that their 'art', in the first place, lay in making choice where there appeared to be none), not just with any of them: they have always worked with the available materials that *called* them. This principle – this *fact* – of the artist being called to certain things rather than others, and working with these things rather than others, has operated in all ages.

The problem – the question – is not so much in the practice as in the meaning of that calling. It is this to which Baudelaire would seem to draw our attention. Things respond, or 'correspond', but *how* do they correspond, and to *what* do they correspond, and why?

In the essay which follows I intend to do little more than list and briefly describe five ways of looking at, or interpreting, the idea of correspondence. There is no particular reason to classify them ways, but, if we were interested in doing so, two of them might be described as vertical – a reaching for the origin of the haunting apparent meaning of things in or on planes other than that of the things themselves, the first a reaching outward, and the second a reaching inward – and two of the others might be termed horizontal, in that they are connections between things that could be said to be on the same plane. To put this another way, two of them might be termed *metaphoric*, and at least one of these others (perhaps

both of them) *metonymic*. But such terms might be as misleading as they are helpful, since I think it will also be seen that correspondence might operate in one way in order that it might better operate in the other, and that these modes, separable in theory, are most often deeply intertwined in the work of art itself.

Let me approach this in a different way. The perfumes, the colours, the sounds in Baudelaire's poem – and can we be so presumptuous as to say the symbols, or the things for which they are symbols, and the voices, the *confuses paroles?* – blend somewhere into a deep and tenebrous unity. Let us say that this unity is a kind of Meaning, if only in the sense that it gives a kind of direction or purpose to these other things, or to the responses which they elicit in the humans who perceive them. But where *is* this unity, this meaning? For it is, surely, not a present meaning, but a meaning promised, a meaning held out as not yet known, not yet achieved. A symbol is not a symbol if all it symbolises is itself. To speak of symbols, of correspondences, is (or at least would seem to be) to gesture elsewhere. Is this gesture to some thing or place or meaning *beyond* the things which Baudelaire sees as symbols, as in something the percipient might see *through* them, or might believe that he or she might see, if he or she had the power, the understanding to do so? Certainly this was the initial understanding of the *symboliste* poets, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Mallarmé and others – that the thing gestured to, the sense behind things, a realm beyond the human, transcendent in some way (called, by several of them, the Absolute), to(ward) which the human might aspire, or at least hope, in further understanding it, to increase their understanding of their own existence. And this outward gesture, we might say, this sense of correspondence directing us toward something which is not here, is not us, is the first of the five kinds of correspondence toward which a contemporary consideration of Baudelaire's poem might lead us.

But there is also the possibility that the Meaning, the gestured-toward unity, is not *out there*, beyond us, but is *within* us in some way, and I don't mean within in the sense of a potential we have yet to reach – as in a stable thing that we have yet to apprehend, put together, or understand – since this would seem to me very much like the kind of correspondence

just discussed, an entity of its own, separate from ourselves. I mean something else. One might call it psychological, or depth-psychological, or psychoanalytic, for certainly these terms, while each in their own way very limited, gesture in the right direction. Baudelaire wrote elsewhere of a *paysage d'ame*, a 'landscape of the soul': one gathered clues to it, its pieces, as they called to one – as did his *flaneur* wandering the streets of Paris, drawn by one thing or another, open to invitation. It seems to me that this *paysage*, this landscape, is as likely to be a place within us as it is to be a place beyond us to which the soul is called as if it were being called home, as it might be said to be called in Platonic terms, or in terms of Christian religion. And within us in a particular way that does not mimic the callings-home of which I have just spoken.

There are several ways in which we might conceive or theorise this place, this interior landscape. It might, for example, be a place of our distant past, formed by or perhaps even in some way pre-existing the experiences of our childhood – a place fashioned by childhood joys and traumas and wonders, let's say, or perhaps a pre-linguistic place, an open, unchartered place, before the acquisition and intrusion and confinement and channeling of language.⁴ Or, since each of these seems to me problematically static – as if all meaningful experience ceased before our memories or our language began – it might be better conceived as a more dynamic place or landscape, a place that responds and changes with our continuing experience, a place the features – and narratives – of which are added to and enriched as our lives continue, in the same way in which our dream-lives are added to and enriched, but which, since it is a place of deeper adjustments and processes, is still not readily available to the conscious mind, and perhaps could not do its work if it were – a place with which, through our art, our imagination, our dreams, our desires, our analyses of our own feelings and behaviours, we are always in a kind of ghostly, confused dialogue. A rolling, continually-composed place, the changing face – the instability – of which may, unrecognised, have been a key source of the notorious frustration of some of the *Symbolistes* with the apparent impotence of their own approaches. Perhaps a good deal of their frustration, this is to say, inhered not so much in the idea



of correspondence itself as in a problem in their conceptions (as fixed, as stable) of truth and meaning in the first place. Had they seen these as processes, conceptual horizons, rather than as fixed and appraisable entities, the changing constellation of the things doing the calling might not have been quite so confusing, or at least might have had an explanation.

The third of the ways in which we might look at this idea of correspondence, the *metonymic*, inheres in the relationships – the correspondences – that things bear to one another, as in the implication of Baudelaire's line that the perfumes correspond to colours, the colours to sounds, the sounds to perfumes, etc., as if there were secret strings connecting them, resonances between them, a system – at least it is one of the dreams of the Symbolists that it is a system – of sympathies that, as Baudelaire seems to be implying, are not always apparent to us but are there to be discovered, teased out, like a code, regardless of or prior to what that code, once cracked, might be found to be saying. A conviction of this kind of encoding has led numerous artists and poets into elaborate systematisations of correspondence, at times in the belief that the system uncovered *is*, or is on the path to discovering, a kind of System of Systems or universal truth, and at other times in the more modest understanding that the system elaborated is a metaphor for – is itself a symbol of, corresponds in some way to – such a larger system or universal truth.

In another sense, however, this is a fairly practical observation about art, and particular works of art, and the way such works come together – metapoetic, in that Baudelaire's poem can be seen to be about poetry itself, and the way it is in part the work of the poet to seek the most harmonious arrangement of the materials he or she has assembled, the way it is part of his/her task to seek the most harmonious materials *to* assemble, the way he/she could therefore be said to be concerned to find the inherent connections, correspondences, between these materials – but also to do with the perception and functioning of the work of art in the first place: I stand, in an art gallery, before a work from the Italian quattrocento, a della Francesca or a da Vinci, let's say, and am observing, seeking out, immediately, the way one part of the painting corresponds to another, these shoes to that glove or hat, the knife on this plate to the severing of



John the Baptist's head in the opposite panel, the way the colour of this dove catches the colour of that woman's cheek, and the way that these things convey the artist's sense of how things correspond in the world about her/him (the work of art as simulacrum, as model of the way the wider world operates), but also the way the colour of the night sky catches, corresponds to, Ginevra's mood, the way colour and line and form and texture – *these* colours and lines and forms and textures – work together to form a remarkable work in Leonardo's hands, whereas in the work of an artist with less of a sense of such inherent correspondences they might not come together, might not harmonise to quite the same extent or effect ... the way *changing* some of these elements, a colour, a line, might disrupt the harmony, break the chain or arrangement of correspondences, the way this harmony, this set of correspondences comes together in, comes to be regarded as, a thing of beauty (culturally determined and relative as such a concept or perception must always in large part be) – the way, one set of correspondences evoking or implying (corresponding to) another, this thing of beauty seems to 'move' us, as in (also) take us from the place in which we were, *to* another place, in such a way as implies that that first place is not the only place, that there is somewhere to go, to be moved *to*, that the purpose of beauty is to gesture, to lead us *toward*: that it symbolises, which is to say *is not entire in itself*: that it is, as it were, a kind of correspondence in itself and the nexus between the metonymic and the metaphoric, the horizontal and the vertical ways of correspondence. (Why does a poem, a photograph, a painting *work*? Why and how does it come together? Isn't it at least sometimes that a moment is experienced – we could call it, from the poet/artist's perspective, the moment of inspiration, but should acknowledge at the same time that this is also the way the reader/viewer might experience the finished work – in which a set of correspondences, simple or very complex, is glimpsed, between a pair of horses, a fence, a country road, long grass, let's say – *between* these things, but also between the intuitive grasp of their correspondence and a set of words or colours or tones – a *set* of sets of words or colours or tones – and the rhythms of these words or colours or tones – internal rhythms within the sets, and the rhythms amongst the sets, etc.?)

Three modes of correspondence, then (at least three): the Absolute (for want of a better term), the Interior, and the Metonymic (which, as we have seen, can barely be contained as such). But there are at least two others.

A fourth – we might call it the Systemic, were it not for likelihood that this will lead to confusion with the impetus to systemitise which we have just identified with the third – owes itself to and can be explained by a thirst for meaning in the absence of meaning. In a sense it is not a mode of correspondence at all, but the appearance, the ghost of correspondence, something which manifests as such, but is in fact something quite different. A sense of meaning where there is none. Or at least something more systemic than the other ways – as in created by system, as an affect of system. We might term it the excess of signification: a word (*parole*), a murmuring, a regard therefrom. A sense that the communication that would seem to be coming to Baudelaire from the other side of the things he perceives might in fact be no more than an illusion, an affect, created by the systems employed in the act or process of apprising those things – ‘reality’ – in the first place. A ghost of – created by – structure, an effect of the systems (and the system of language is of course at their centre) which enable meaning to come into being. Things resonate (murmur) with what has been left out in order for those things to be able to ‘mean’, as things, at all. In this fourth way of correspondence, correspondence itself is an illusion, created by the act and mechanism of seeing. (This is perhaps in the area of Derrida’s *trace*.)

The fifth mode of correspondence might be taken as an aspect of the fourth, but is in fact a compensation for it. There are times when words are heavy with the things that they cannot say – though, looking at ‘heavy’ here, I think I’d be just as prepared to accept ‘seared’, or ‘brittle’, or ‘lifeless’, to suggest that there are times when words seem seared, lifeless with what they cannot convey, when ‘star’ cannot say ‘STAR’, *that star*, *this star*, with all its, or even something approximating, suggesting its *thatness* or *thisness*, with all the intensity of *star* (and for ‘star’ here we could read ‘horse’, ‘vase’, ‘road’, ‘car’, ‘web’, etc.: anything that might strike us with a desire to convey its quidditas, its existential intensity). And the poem – to confine myself here to verbal composition – becomes, or exists, as a

setting in which its, the star's, intensity, the things that the word 'star' is *not* saying or conveying, *cannot* say or convey, might be restored, or at least suggested, in the same way as a setting enhances a jewel, to bring out its lights, its lustre.

This might be extended to the poetic image, in the manner in which the word/thing is 'set' within the image, which in turn requires to be 'set' in the stanza and the poem more broadly, which may be a matter of disposition of whiteness alone (as in haiku), so that line-break, shape, their isolation on a page, draw attention to the word/image they contain, drag it out of – or highlight it within, isolating it while at the same time not preventing it from performing its function within (indeed, this function itself may be what is being 'set') – the discourse that otherwise sears or dis-enlivens it. The poem itself, continuing to supply this setting – drawing in other things to enhance it which it then, mutually, enhances – becomes an act, an *enaction*, a piece of correspondence, using language, its only tool, to *circumvent* language, which may be seen as its attempting to point up and at the same time to suggest and/or escape its limitations. The poem or work of art, this is to say, *corresponds to* – is attempting to *be* – a simulacrum (no, it cannot be that, but an intimation) of the fullness of that world to which language has always been, paradoxically, at once a bridge and a barrier, the fullness which language, and our entry into the realm of language, shuts us away from, and for which art, ever after, attempts to compensate.

It could be said, of course, that it is not a mode of corespondence at all, in the sense in which the first four are, in that they are principally to do with correspondences perceived or intuited by the poet or artist in the world beyond the poem or work of art, whereas this fifth mode concerns the manner in which the poet/artist tries to reflect such correspondence in his/her own work. It could also be said that, in my discussion of this fifth mode, I touch, in fact, upon a sixth: the manner in which the work of art is or can be not so much a microcosm as itself a symbol of the world beyond it, but this, too, is rather a matter of the artist/poet's own creation than a perception of correspondence beyond it, and it may be best to make no such claim for it.

This fifth mode might also seem to bring us back to the second. One comes again, this is to say, to the issue as to whether the felt intensity of the star (or horse, or vase, or road) comes from within, or lures, draws us from without, or whether, indeed, it is not recognition of a different kind, whether it is not something that is in some part given us by art in the first place, and the way that art can not only teach us to see, but, in so doing, can teach us to desire, to expect (Wallace Stevens' 'ideas of order', Mallarmé's 'glorious lies'). I don't propose to revisit, let alone attempt to develop this here, for to do so would draw attention away from the other modes of correspondence I have outlined: rather it is my point, in closing, to suggest (as the mention of Stevens and of Mallarmé might just have done) that, however much it may suit us to separate them for the purpose of critical examination, these things themselves, these modes of correspondence, operate together, and probably *always* together, in the deeper and more shadowy unity that is the work of art itself.

Notes

- 1 'confound' (*se confondent*) not only rhymes with but in so doing emphasises its inner semantic harmony with 'profound' (*profonde*), as if to confound is also here in some sense to go deeply, and go to ground.
- 2 In order to avoid the impression that this is an essay primarily on Baudelaire's poem, I have not quoted the poem in the main body of the text, but give it here for the reader's reference:

La Nature est un temple où de vivants piliers
Laisser parfois sortir de confuses paroles;
L'homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles
Qui l'observent avec des regards familiers.

Comme de longs échos qui de loin se confondent
Dans une ténébreuse et profonde unité,
Vaste comme la nuit et comme la clarté,
Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répendent.

Il est des parfums frais comme des chairs d'enfants,
Doux comme les hautbois, verts comme les prairies,
– Et d'autres, corrompus, riches et triomphants,

Ayant l'expansion des choses infinies,
Comme l'ambre, le musc, le benjoin et l'encens
Qui chantent les transports de l'esprit et des sens.

- 3 Often a star
was waiting for you to notice it. A wave rolled toward you
out of the distant past, or as you walked

under an open window, a violin
yielded itself to your hearing. All this was mission.
But could you accomplish it?

‘The First Elegy’, trans. Stephen Mitchell

- 4 In a recent paper on ‘Literary Ambiguity’ I cited the following entry from one of my own notebooks, which may give a better sense of my meaning here:
- A place. A site. It is 5.00am. ... I have been lying awake and for the last hour or more going over and over in my mind the same few lines of a poem I began yesterday. Obsessively, over and over, though I think already I have done all I can with them. As if ... it were not the words themselves, not the *meaning* of them, so much as something in the rhythm, or the sequence of sounds. All of my writing life I have done this. ... a few lines, a sentence, sometimes only a few words or phrases, as if the activity, the mind’s action with these words, these rhythms, somehow sustained me – or as if I were not so much trying to polish them (that is often already done), or even to try to get used to them, ... as somehow trying to get *through* them. I thought I knew this before: that one was trying to get through them, as in *along* them, to what might or should come *after* them, as if by simple, obsessive repetition they could be forced to grow into whatever they seemed to hold in them, or break through some barrier at the end of them ... but have only just now realised that ‘through’ in this other sense: of going through the lines or phrases to something *behind* the rhythm and sound and fragmentariness (the deep but incomplete *meaning-ness* of the fragment): to something of which it is the token and residue. Because only just now it has occurred to me that it might have a connection, its roots, in something far earlier, the moment or hour, or maybe it is weeks or months, when one first falls in love with language, the rhythms of it, the sequence of sounds (as I remember my own child doing, repeating the same simple sequence of sounds *ad nauseam* in the back seat of the car...), and presumably, plausibly, goes over them obsessively like this, and that one of the things we do, or at least *I* do, in writing, is to go back to, or try to get back to – or perhaps it is to recreate, reiterate – this place or site or time: that one remembers it, even when – mostly when – one does not know that it is memory, and that that is what one is doing. And a further thought, an extension of this, that that moment, that obsession, that love, is a kind of bridge, belonging as it does as much to an earlier, pre-linguistic time, as it does to the time after it, when language would become all that it does: that for a moment, then, language, before one really *has* it, is a thing, a new discovery *in*, and so, briefly, a part *of*, that earlier place, not this. And that, in this way, in the making of poems, as presumably, in some other aspect, in the making of stories, one is (also) going back, however much one might also be trying to go forward.