Synthesis of the Arts in the Romantic Period: European Painting, Poetry, Music

by

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Class of 2009

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Wesleyan University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts
with Departmental Honors in English

Middletown, Connecticut

April, 2009
I would like to thank Professor Stephanie Kuduk Weiner for all the time and energy she devoted to this project. Her endless generosity and encouragement made this thesis possible. I would also like to thank Professor Katherine M. Kuenzli for all her wonderful help and guidance. Professors Yonatan Malin and Joseph M. Siry also offered helpful advice for which I am grateful. Finally, I want to thank my parents, my brother, my friends, and my housemates for their consistent support.
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INTRODUCTION

“Delacroix, to the glory of our age, has interpreted better than anyone else…. the invisible, the impalpable, the dream, the nerves, the soul; and this he has done—allow me, please, to emphasize this point—with no other means but colour and contour; he has done it better than anyone else—he has done it with the perfection of a consummate painter, with the exactitude of a subtle writer, with the eloquence of an impassioned musician.”

-Baudelaire

In this quotation, the nineteenth-century French poet Charles Baudelaire discusses the synthesis of the arts in 1830s Paris, where artists such as Eugene Delacroix and Hector Berlioz broke away from strict boundaries between the arts that had been established during the Classical period in order now to merge different art forms together. This cross-fertilization of different artistic categories, i.e. between the structure and construction of painting and sculpture, allowed characteristics traditionally applied only to one specific form to broaden to include others as well. According to Baudelaire, Delacroix produces an art form that embodies painterly, musical, and poetic aspects and effects. In the latter half of the nineteenth century artists such as Wilhelm Richard Wagner and Charles Baudelaire extended these ideas and gave them philosophical form in their writings about art and aesthetics. Wagner, in his philosophy of the “Gesamtkunstwerk,” drew from both Berlioz and Delacroix’s
ideas of artistic synthesis, and put into words what they had only suggested through their art. Baudelaire produced provocative and decadent poetry, adapting the new subject matter that emerged from the general artistic liberation of the earlier wave of romanticism. The breakdown of classical formal boundaries in the two periods of the 1830s and the 1850s was accompanied by themes of gender confusion, indeterminacy, and a new wave of passionate, wild, and often scandalous subject matter.

French romanticism began in Paris in 1830 with the rise of artists such as Delacroix and Berlioz. Their art and music exploded on the scene in the Salons inciting awe, criticism, and controversy (Bloom, Music in Paris viii). These artists instigated the initial rejection of neo-classical beliefs and inspired a new-sprung overall artistic liberation. Breaking away from the strict Classical rules of form and subject matter, these artists brought a new and innovative, not to mention shocking, art form to the forefront of French culture. Instead of working uniformly with religious subject matter, these artists valued magic and the supernatural, eroticism and sensuality, often incorporating fantastical creatures, mythological figures, as well as themes of gender confusion, incest, and decadence into their work. Moreover, these artists were interested in studying cultures different from their own, incorporating in their work travel and exploration of new lands once viewed as too “barbaric” for serious investigation (Barzun 8). Discovering new exotic subject matter in foreign countries eventually led to new artistic forms. For example, Delacroix’s voyage to Algeria resulted in an entirely new stage of his work in which he painted with brighter and bolder colors than he had used before. Not only fascinated with the exotic lands of the Middle East and the Mediterranean, Delacroix and Berlioz were
both extreme anglophiles who studied the works of the English poet George Gordon Byron, whose poems ended up inspiring much of their work (Jobert 78).

In the following chapters I offer a close analysis of the works of Lord Byron, Delacroix, Berlioz, Wagner, and Baudelaire. I examine more specifically the paintings of Delacroix that were inspired directly by poems by Lord Byron and that reflect the political and social decline of France and its monarchical ruler, mainly Delacroix’s *The Death of Sardanapalus*. I will also explore Berlioz’s *Symphonie Fantastique* and *Harold en Italie*, the latter of which was a reaction to Byron’s *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, as well as Wagner’s opera *Die Walküre*, and Baudelaire’s collection of poems *Les Fleurs du mal*. Through my analysis of these works, I argue that the new use of controversial and shocking subject matter in the Romantic Period was a movement away from a strict separation of the arts and toward their synthesis. I investigate each phase of this shift, starting with an overview of art in the Classical period, turning to the initial rejection of neo-classical art and the preliminary practice of synthesis in 1830s Paris, and examining the complete synthesis of the arts concluding in written philosophies on the subject starting in 1850. In both chapters I also explore how the synthesis of the arts led to a cross-cultural study, in which travel to exotic lands was valued in a way that it was not throughout the Classical period. My main claim is that the new freedom of artistic form allowed not only for a wider range of subject matter, but also for subject matter that was scandalous and controversial at its moment of reception due to its dealings with unconventional sexuality, eroticism, and indeterminacy.

In the first chapter of this thesis I explore the artistic world of 1830s Paris, where an examination of different artistic forms resulted in the breakdown of
Classical barriers between the arts. These artists also “widened vocabulary and subject matter,” experimenting with content in ways that were both new and controversial (Barzun 9). The newly found freedom in artistic form thus liberated the artist, allowing him to explore more scandalous or provocative subject matter—an overall liberation from the strict rules of the Classical period concerning the arts. The use of form broadened to allow, for example, literary subjects to infiltrate paintings, or musical rhythms to influence poems, as a result producing subject matter that was uninhibited by and detached from the Classical period (Barzun 12). Artists in the 1830s not only studied each other’s art but also indulged in each other’s company, sharing ideas as friends and companions in the developing art world (Barzun 10). This close involvement with each other’s work as well as with each other’s characters inspired a new art to be born, one that called for the synthesis of the arts, in which paintings and symphonies could be inspired by poems, and poems could be inspired by operas. New subject matter arose from this phenomenon, as well as the idea that a painting could be musical, or a poem artistic. The French poet Baudelaire thus characteristically termed Delacroix the “painter-poet” in honor of the extreme “poetic nature” of his work (Benjamin 119).

The period has been categorized by the critic David Cairns as a breaking down of the classical boundaries between the arts: “The Romantics, taking their lead from Beethoven, made explicit what before had generally been implicit; they brought music’s inherent expressivity further, so to speak, into the open, and at the same time widened its frame of reference and blurred the lingering formal distinction between instrumental music and music associated with a text or a specific situation” (Cairns 88-89). The scholar Peter Bloom also traces the Romantic revolt to this historical
moment: “Symbolized by the credo ‘liberté dans l’art,’ the year 1830 marks the arrival of a new French romantic drama….it marks a high point in French romantic painting with Delacroix’s *Liberté Guidant le peuple*; the beginning of the psychological novel with Stendhal’s *Le Rouge et le noir*; and the dawn of the new age of dramatic instrumental music with Berlioz’s *Symphonie fantastique*” (Bloom, Music in Paris xii).

The music of the 1830s, John Warrack argues, exerted a key influence on Wagner’s later compositions. Wagner wanted not only to emulate French opera from the 1830s, he wanted to surpass it: “Certainly *Rienzi* is a French Grand Opera in manner—Wagner called it a ‘grosse tragische Oper’ whereas *The Dutchman* is a ‘romantische Oper’—and he admitted that, ‘Before me stood Grand Opera, with all its scenic and musical splendor, its richness of effect, its powerful musical emotionalism; and my artistic aim was not merely to imitate it but with reckless extravagance to outdo it in all its manifestations’” (Warrack 577). Warrack sites other French opera composers besides Berlioz as inspirations for Wagner’s written philosophies, including Halévy, who in *La Juive* and *La Reine de Chypre* “took the two operas as text for a sermon on the importance of poet and composer having proper artistic sympathy for each other” (Warrack 584). This idea that the libretto and the score should hold equal importance in the opera later became a part of Wagner’s philosophy of the “Gesamtkunstwerk.” French opera, Warrack argues, more so than “the German repertories of his youth, … represented an attempt to unify the arts of verse, painting, dance, and music on the largest possible scale” (Warrack 587). Similarly, the scholar Walter Benjamin has written extensively on Baudelaire and the artists influential to his poetry. He places Delacroix as one of the central inspirations
for Baudelaire’s work, arguing that Baudelaire borrowed much of his subject matter from Delacroix’s paintings. Referring to the lesbian character of Sappho in Baudelaire’s collection *Les Fleurs du mal*, for example, Benjamin writes, “he was by no means the first to bring the lesbian into art….Baudelaire also encountered her in the work of Delacroix; in a critique of Delacroix’s paintings, he speaks, somewhat elliptically, of ‘the modern woman in her heroic manifestations, in the sense of infernal of divine’ (Benjamin 119).

Chapter Two thus turns from the birth of French romanticism in the 1830s to the Wagnerian romanticism of the 1850s, in which the ideas and notions formed by the artists of the earlier period were solidified in written philosophies (Barzun 11). In this period, the composer Wagner and the poet Baudelaire reacted to the earlier period of French romanticism and to the work of Berlioz and Delacroix in particular, transforming their somewhat diffuse ideas into compact doctrines of thought.

Baudelaire internalized the artistic freedom founded by Delacroix and Berlioz that had allowed for new, explosive subject matter. His “decadent” poetry is filled with themes of morbid eroticism and notions of the fantastic, reflecting the more scandalous subject matter of Delacroix and Berlioz’s work. A direct reaction to the romanticism of the 1830s can also be seen in Wagner’s opera, *Die Walküre*, composed in 1856, which carries themes from Lord Byron’s poetry and formal techniques that express these themes. Similarly, Baudelaire’s collection of poems, *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857) completed only a year later, reflects the subject matter that pervaded the art of 1830s Paris, while bringing this subject matter to a new, even more shocking extreme. “What Wagner gained most of all, however, from the example of French Grand Opera, was the glimpse of a total art form” (Warrack 587),
as Warrack writes. This glimpse led to Wagner’s philosophy of the “Gesamtkunstwerk” or “total work of art.” I see the synthesis of the arts as directly connected to the new subject matter produced in this period. Not only did the breaking down of the classical barriers between the arts ignite an overall feeling of liberation, but also the cross-examination of different art forms led to new stories of exotic lands, magic, sensuality, and violence that reflected the social and political happenings of both periods.

Both periods directly follow large-scale revolutions. In 1830, Parisians revolted against the monarchy in the July Revolution, bringing about the downfall of Charles X (Figure 1). In 1848 the February Revolution brought the constitutional monarchy of Louis-Philippe to an end, leading to the establishment of the Second Republic (Figure 2). Politically, both periods are characterized by similar anti-monarchical revolutions. Noting that both periods follow revolutions is extremely vital to the purpose of this thesis. Revolution explains many of the central themes and ideas of both periods. The theme of the effeminate ruler, which arises in the 1830s in the story of Sardanapalus, reflects society’s disenchantment with monarchical rulers. The three artists mentioned in this thesis who depict Sardanapalus in their work, Byron, Delacroix, and Berlioz, all had complicated relationships with women, and often antagonized the opposite gender in their works. For example Delacroix, as he expresses in his personal journal, had completely denounced and excluded women from his life in his final years, allowing his art to be his only love. By linking effeminacy with weakness or evil, these artists presented a strong argument against monarchical rulers by portraying kings such as Sardanapalus predominantly in their work. Moreover, the modern conception of decadence arises in the revolutions of
Figure 1. Eugene Delacroix. *Liberty Leading the People*. 1830. Salon of 1831, Musée du Louvre, Paris.
these two periods. Revolution was thought to lead a society into a state of decline, in which order crumbles and chaos becomes the dominating force. The state of destruction by revolution, as is also exemplified in the fall of the Roman Empire and of Ancient Greece, helps explain the morbid, decadent subject matter produced in these two periods. The freedom enacted by the revolution also allowed for the use of such explosive subject matter: “Freedom was the battle cry of the young spirits of the early nineteenth century” (Robb 576). Facing political and social unrest, the focus turns to a philosophy of art for art’s sake rather than to a program for societal and political change. Also, the sense of chaos invoked by revolution inspires a need for unity or totality. The two periods are further linked together by social factors, in that both faced crippling cholera epidemics in which thousands of people died. The first cholera epidemic began in 1832, the second in 1849. Thus facing periods of crippling disease and mass revolution, these artists strove for alternate means of uniting humanity. Accordingly, their artistic synthesis reflects their desire to reunite after a period of weak governmental rule, violence, death, and destruction.

Nineteenth-century Paris was also shaped by the expansion and industrialization of the city. The growth and new prosperity of the city allowed for artistic flourishing and for new ideas to surface on the scene. The salon, which began in 1725, really came into fruition in this period, exhibiting the art of the Académie des Beaux-Arts, but also acting as a meeting place for painters, poets, and musicians of the period (Bloom, Music in Paris xiii). This group of artists, which included Delacroix and Berlioz, formed a new artistic elite that prospered immensely from the industrialization of Paris. The scholar Jacques Barzun discusses Paris in 1830 as the European center of artistic activity. He argues that economic growth due to a
bourgeoning industrialism allowed for a new class of artists to separate themselves as an elite group distinct from the middle class. Unlike the “middle-middle or lower-middle class, who have always hated elegance, art, and sexual freedom” (Barzun 18), these artists valued these qualities, which are reflected in their art.

The romantic synthesis of the arts accompanied by a new breadth of controversial subject matter embodies an overall rejection of classical statutes pertaining to the arts. One central difference between the classical and the romantic periods lies in the artists’ contrasting objectives for creating a work of art in any form. Classical artists valued mimesis, seeking to imitate, with attention to accuracy and detail, certain aspects of objects found in life that exemplified a classical notion of beauty. Through this selective process of imitation a hierarchy of aesthetics emerged, which the romantics would later re-evaluate and reject. Romantic artists sought to imitate life as well, but through an entirely different process that eschewed specific hierarchies of beauty. The romantics believed no object to be unworthy of depiction, and they brought beauty to the art object through their individual perceptions and translations. Thus the romantics used their own sentiments and emotions to explain and universalize the art object.

The romantic rejection of classical aesthetics cannot be viewed as a total rejection of classicism as a movement, since the romantics adapted certain ideas and principles from Ancient Greece and Rome. The romantics felt they could not escape these past traditions, but had to form them into a new artwork of the future. David Ferris explains the romantic tie to antiquity by encapsulating the relationship between the romantics and Homer’s “Odyssey”: “This legacy can be characterized as a Siren song
whose aesthetic promise conceals the profound silence from which it arises, the profound silence of a past that can no longer speak for itself” (Ferris xii). For example, the romantics looked towards Ancient Greece and Rome for their conception of “mythos,” which was seen by the romantics as an authentic, true, powerful, and highly symbolic means to universalize art. Aligned with their interest in the eternal, the romantics were drawn to the idea of mythos as pre-existing the written record, intuitive, abstract, and essential because it is universal. In an attempt to transcend ordinary life, nineteenth-century artists looked to myth in order to eternalize their work. The romantics were drawn to specific stories and figures from the myths of Ancient Greece and Rome.

In Delacroix’s painting on the cupola in the library of the Palais du Luxembourg, for instance, he includes four separate sections, each containing figures from Roman or Greek mythology and history, figures that also appear in Baudelaire’s poems such as “Landscape” and in Byron’s *Sardanapalus*. An engraver and dear friend of Delacroix’s, Frédéric Villot, reflects upon Delacroix’s choice of subject: “….episodes that allowed the introduction of women and men, nude and draped; animals and a magnificent landscape….” (Jobert 205). However, Delacroix did not simply replicate these images from antiquity, but brightened them, producing original scenes with bold and saturated colors. In his depiction of Saint Michael and the Devil in his painting “Saint Michael Defeats the Devil,” on the vault of the Chapelle des Saints-Anges in Saint-Sulpice, “Delacroix spared no experiment with color” (Jobert 226). The painting is marked by

the composition’s originality, with the Virgin’s arms outstretched as if on a cross (inspired by Rosse Fiorentino); its
monumentality; the expressive vigor of the colors, which suffuse a scene of grief with sorrow and melancholy; the humanity of the protagonists; and its realism, as well as the poetry it exudes, they were all that, with it, Delacroix was introducing something new to religious iconography. (Jobert 226)

Delacroix does not simply imitate the scene drawn from religious mythology, but incorporates his own style using bold color, adding life and emotion to an old subject. Delacroix writes in his journal: “Importance of the subject. Mythological subjects always new. Modern subjects difficult to treat on account of the absense of the nude and the wretchedness of modern costume. The originality of the painter gives novelty to his subject” (Delacroix 360). He produces a new art work that draws on antiquity, but reshapes it with his imaginative perspective.

The romantics tended to reject the balance between the Apollonian and Dionysian ideal outlined by Friedrich Nietzsche in his *The Birth of Tragedy*, in favor of the complete dominance of the Dionysian ideal. The Apollonian ideal, which was embraced by neo-classical artists, exemplified the side of art that represented delight, especially delight in mere appearances, the beautiful, the rational, proportion, symmetry, the external, disinterested contemplation, life-affirming thought, and productivity. These aesthetic preferences constructed a hierarchy of beauty, in which some subjects were viewed as inherently not beautiful enough to imitate through art, and thus were excluded. By contrast, the Dionysian ideal embodied the artistic spirit that was violent, drunken, chaotic, and primal. For the romantics, the Dionysian side represented the truth because it allowed for the ugly or the un-aesthetic to enter art as
an art object, therefore more accurately reflecting the truth of life. Walter Pater describes the human attraction to these primal elements:

   Complex and subtle interests, which the mind spins for itself, may occupy art and poetry or our own spirits for a time; but sooner or later they come back with a sharp rebound to the simple elementary passions—anger, desire, regret, pity, and fear: and what corresponds to them in the sensuous world—bare, abstract fire, water, air, tears, sleep, silence, and what De Quincey has called the ‘glory of motion.’
   (Pater 81)

According to Nietzsche, the Apollonian-Dionysian split offered a means of maintaining a balance within the internality of the artist. Both the Apollonian and the Dionysian were necessary for the creation of art, as they both introduced contradictory yet “cross-appeasing” elements; however, the romantics broke down this split by rejecting the Apollonian ideal as a false attempt to beautify the reality embodied by the Dionysian ideal. By contrast, the romantics believed that beauty did not exist in the art object itself, but in the artist’s translation of its natural form into the art object. Therefore an artist possessed the ability to transform any subject matter into something beautiful, rendering the intrinsic symmetry or proportions of the subject matter irrelevant.

For the romantics, the universality of these elements of life was brought out by emphasizing the Dionysian belief that all humans, and indeed both humans and nature, are intricately connected by common, basic truths. Alongside such arguments, the romantics also saw life as a tragedy, from which art must provide an escape, a
view in which art ultimately exists in a realm of death, the imaginary, or the intangible. Pater remarks on this common theme in romantic poetry:

Of that transfigured world this new poetry takes possession, and sublimes beyond it another still fainter and more spectral, which is literally an artificial or ‘earthly paradise.’ It is a finer ideal, extracted from what in relation to any actual world is already an ideal. Like some strange second flowering after date, it renews on a more delicate type the poetry of a past enjoyment of it is that inversion of homesickness known to some, that incurable thirst for the sense of escape, which no actual form of life satisfies, no poetry even, it is merely simple and spontaneous. (Pater 190)

Pater discusses the romantic desire to allow for new and “strange” subject matter to emerge in order to heighten the feeling of other-worldliness or fantasy. If art is an attempt to escape the ordinary by creating a transcendent world, then the classical idea that art should mimetically imitate life no longer seems pertinent. Instead, a world created through the artist’s imagination emerges, allowing for greater liberation to explore different themes and subjects. Whereas the classical artists believed this type of ethereal perfection could be found and further obtained on earth, the romantics believed it could not. Pater sees this departure from classical art as a shift from “a lower to a higher degree of passion in literature” (Pater 190).

In order to access the transcendent artistic world discussed by Pater, the romantics “emotionalized” the artistic process, even in its more technical aspects. The Dionysian ideal encourages a loss of self-control to the point of passionate frenzy,
often leading to the recognition of the futility of one’s actions, since the primary reasons for the action itself are lost in the process. In a way the artistic process is brought under another process, one of emotionalization, in which the sentiments of the artist take over or dictate the final artistic product. In my first chapter, I discuss an example of this passionate frenzy monopolizing the artistic process, in Delacroix’s painting of *The Death of Sardanapalus*. The final painting differs drastically from his original sketches for the work, demonstrating the emotional element that dominated the artistic process and finally shaped the final product. It seems relevant that Delacroix was working with Byron’s poem *Sardanapalus* when he experienced such a loss of self-control. Byron, a romantic poet, rejects the Apollonian ideal for a more Dionysian art form. He is a Romantic Hellenist who had a strong interest in Greece and Greek politics. He traveled extensively throughout the Mediterranean, and fought and died for Greek independence, a country not his own. Part of his interest in Greece seems to lie in the country’s fight to overturn the oppressive reign of the Turks by violent rebellion. This rebellion is somewhat similar to the romantic desire to cast off “outworn classicism” and instigate “a return to true Hellenism” (Pater 82). In his book *Silent Urns*, Ferris discusses Byron’s period as dominated by a culture of Romantic Hellenism. As older classical traditions are cast off, a new movement is formed stressing individuality, freedom, and self-identity, which has its roots in Greek Antiquity. In this period, “the individual’s act of sacrifice is the highest example of freedom, and the form in which this act is best expressed is Greek tragedy” (Ferris xv). A new liberation is found not in a complete return to antiquity, but in an adaptation of its elements, as Ferris argues: “the task of modernity… is to face what is ‘most difficult,’ namely, ‘the free use of one’s own’” (Ferris xviii). Thus
the individual must rise and figure predominantly in Romantic Hellenism. However, one’s individuality must also be shaped and guided by the history of antiquity, not its complete rejection.

One sees the rationale for the romantic rejection of the Apollonian ideal in the parallel romantic denunciation of the philosophies of Aristotle, Pluto, and Plutarch. Like classical artists, these early philosophers believed that art should directly imitate life: “The mind of the painter should be like a mirror which always takes the colour of the thing that it reflects and is filled by many images as there are things placed before it” (Abrams 32). M.H. Abrams argues that the classical philosophers view the human mind as a mirror, the artist’s hand reflecting most perfectly the object as it exists in reality. The artist attempts to please his audience by reflecting the world he inhabits. However, the mirror is not meant to reflect all aspects of life, but only the ones that will please the audience. The artist is thus forced into a process of selection based on the amount of potential aesthetic pleasure to be derived from the object depicted. This process of selection requires that the mind of the artist become a sort of looking glass to magnify those elements that are most beautiful, and to ignore those that are ugly or aesthetically displeasing, creating a hierarchical, exclusionary system of beauty. The “correct” aesthetic values must be present in the object being represented, or else it is not to be considered: “the work of art continues to be regarded as a kind of reflector, though a selective one” (Abrams 42). As critic David M. Robb argues, such theories devalued imagination and emotion: “From late in the eighteenth century the Neo-classic masters held that the artist should subordinate his personal feelings to an ethical ideal expressed in classical forms” (Robb 576).
In the romantic period, the interest shifts to the internality of the artist and to how this shift in focus affects the final outcome of the artistic process. Abrams describes this shift as one from the empirical to the intuitive: “The transition from the empirical to the intuitive ideal may be plausibly correlated with the transition from the solid naturalism of Leonardo to the twisted landscapes and attenuated figures of El Greco, who, according to the anecdote, refused to leave a darkened room because ‘the daylight disturbed his inner light’” (Abrams 43). The shift is inherently one that begins with the external and ends with the internal. Thus eighteenth-century classical music becomes problematic in the eyes of the romantics. Romantics such as Wagner saw classical music as an attempt to produce pleasure-inducing, joyful music. This “happy” music did not universally reflect life or human emotion, but was superficial and innately hollow. Wagner felt that Mozart was too confined to the melody, and that Bach was too mathematical, both composers relying on external means such as constructed philosophies of technique and structure to configure their music. These composers sought after perfection in an attempt to beautify, whereas Wagner (along with Beethoven) wanted to restore a depth or passion to the music. Robb explains: “How could Beethoven have conveyed the feeling expressed in the Eroica in the musical idiom of Mozart? No more could Wordsworth have expressed his understanding of nature and freedom in the classical couplets of Pope” (Robb 576). In a sense there exists a classical fascination with the external, which shifts to a romantic desire to expose the internal in an external manner, by means of the production of art. According to Abrams, poetry is “the utterance of a passion for truth, beauty, and power, embodying and illustrating its conceptions by imagination and fancy, and modulating its language on the principle of variety in uniformity” (Abrams 49). The
romantic era was “the exhibition of a state of human sensibility” (Abrams 49). Thus Byron described poetry as “the lava of the imagination whose eruption prevents an earthquake” (Symons 241).

The mirror that Abrams discusses above thus shifts from imitating life to imitating human thought and feeling. Abrams discusses William Hazlitt’s addition of the lamp to the analogy of the mirror in his discussion of art in the classical period: “Hazlitt complicates the analogy by combining the mirror with a lamp, in order to demonstrate that a poet reflects a world already bathed in an emotional light he has himself projected” (Abrams 52). The lamp is used as an analogy for the poet’s personal perceptions, which are capable of illuminating and thus revealing the object in a new and often heightened perspective: “Romantic poetry incorporates objects of sense which have already been acted on and transformed by the feelings of the poet” (Abrams 53). Moreover, concentrating on the emotionality of the work rather than its technical perfection allows for greater freedom in artistic form. Thus a liberation of both form and subject matter becomes characteristic of the romantic period.
CHAPTER ONE

Artistic Synthesis of the 1830s: Byron, Delacroix, and Berlioz

“Poetry is full of riches; always remember certain passages from Byron, they are an unfailing spur to your imagination; they are right for you. The end of the Bride of Abydos; The Death of Selim, his body tossed about by the waves and that hand—especially that hand—held up by the waves as they break and spend themselves upon the shore. This is sublime, and it is his alone. I feel these things as they can be rendered in painting.” -Delacroix

In this journal entry of Tuesday, May 11, 1824 the French painter Eugene Delacroix contemplates the work of one of his most admired poets, George Gordon Byron (1788-1824). He admires the richness of Byron’s poetry, as well as his imaginative choice of subject, and strives to have a similar effect in his painting. Such moments of inspiration were characteristic of 1830s Romanticism across the arts. In this chapter, I examine the cross-fertilization of the arts embodied in the works of Byron, Delacroix, and the composer Hector Berlioz.

Byron was an English poet and a vital figure in the development of the Romantic Period (Columbia Encyclopedia). Born and schooled in London, Byron traveled widely in the Mediterranean, Greece, and Italy (Figure 3). He is considered a revolutionary for his work fighting for Greek independence. His extravagant character, love of travel to exotic lands, and musical poetry deeply inspired the artists
working in 1830s Paris (Columbia Encyclopedia). Byron is best known for his poems *Don Juan* and *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, but it was *Sardanapalus* that most inspired Delacroix to experiment with poetical painting in his controversial *The Death of Sardanapalus* (1827-1828) (Jobert 82). Byron’s poem *Sardanapalus*, written in 1821, is the story of an Assyrian King who assumed the throne in the ninth century B.C.E. (Jobert 87). A closet drama with numerous characters, speeches, and stage directions, the poem follows the story of king Sardanapalus’s reign and downfall. Byron depicts king Sardanapalus as self-indulgent, cowardly, and most importantly effeminate, particularly in his political negligence. He turns a blind eye to the political affairs of the state to indulge in the luxuries of gold, jewels, wine, and concubines. His decision to ignore the state is what ultimately leads to his ruin. The people in Sardanapalus’s kingdom rebel and, in a large group, storm his castle in search of his head. At the end of the poem they kill Sardanapalus along with his favorite concubine, Myrrha.

Byron compares Sardanapalus to the Roman God Bacchus, who “was also known as the Liberator (*Eleutherios*), freeing one from one's normal self, by madness, ecstasy, or wine,” (Columbia Encyclopedia): “There was a certain Bacchus…. And in his godship I will honour him….He was a God, that is, a Grecian god” (12). The Bacchus of Greek mythology, who was known as Dionysus, was “a son of Zeus and Semele; other versions of the myth contend that he is a son of Zeus and Persephone. Dionysus is described as being womanly or man-womanish” (The Columbia Encyclopedia). Byron stresses the effeminacy of Sardanapalus by aligning him with the effeminate and lavish god Bacchus. Like Bacchus, Sardanapalus indulges in luxuries such as wine and allows his feminine side to flourish. The two figures share
the tendency to revel in personal pleasures that encourage intoxication or escape into reverie, and to ignore the more rational, logical matters of the state. He turns his back on the state: “And he has loved all things by turns, except / Wisdom and Glory” (27). He is described “As femininely garbed, and scarce less female, / The grandson of Semiramis, the Man-Queen” (64). The king allows himself to revel in his feminine side, enjoying all the pleasures normally enjoyed by his concubines, such as jewels and wine: “He sweats in palling pleasures, dulls his soul” (5). Not unlike the Roman poet Catullus, Sardanapalus neglects his state for poetry, sensuality, and art: “The weakness and the wickedness of luxury, / The negligence, the apathy, the evils / Of sensual sloth—produce ten thousand tyrants, / Whose delegated cruelty surpasses / The worst acts of one energetic master, / However harsh and hard in his own bearing” (8). His effeminate nature is negatively portrayed in the poem, blamed for rendering him weak, highly susceptible to drown in the luxuries of his kingdom, and unable to run a sound monarchy.

The sense of political negligence, confusion, and gender disorder invoked by the king leads the people to rebel against him. They blame his self-indulgence on his effeminacy, “because all passions in excess are female” (52). The men living under Sardanapalus discuss the king as “the effeminate thing that governs” (26). Their expectations for a masculine king have been perverted by Sardanapalus’ cross-dressing, which serves more closely to identify him with his concubines. A king who becomes associated with his concubines, the onlookers argue, will ultimately face chaos and lose control of his people. Concubines are kept in the kingdom to serve the pleasure of the king. They are his personal sexual objects that can be taken in or disposed of as he chooses. The concubine’s disposability and low status make it
highly problematic in the eyes of the people that a king could be so like a concubine as to be confused with one. Not only is Sardanapalus confused for the wrong gender, but he is also associated with servants of the kingdom, resulting in a confusion concerning class as well as gender.

The poem involves themes of chaos, disorder, inversion, and indeterminacy concerning sexuality and gender. Sardanapalus is aware of his effeminate behavior, and once his life is threatened by the rebels, he feels he must neglect this side of him in order to save his kingdom and his life: “But I grow womanish again, and must not; / I must learn sternness now. My sins have all / Been of the softer order” (64). The king inspires chaos through his unconventional rule, and the people incite chaos by fomenting a violent rebellion. Creating further chaos in the poem is the king’s disbelief in his own role in producing the disorder in the kingdom. Not understanding that it is the nature of his reign that they are rebelling against, the king believes the violent rebellion to have caused the mad chaos inflicting his palace, and created the disorder in the kingdom. He tells Myrrha, his beloved concubine, in his dying hour, “Love and Revel, in an hour were trampled / By human passions to a human chaos” (70). The chaos felt by the people, combined with the chaos felt by the king, creates for the reader an apocalyptic sense of pandemonium within the poem.

By the end of the poem the rebels have trapped Sardanapalus and Myrrha in a single chamber while the rest of the kingdom burns to the ground. In the chamber the king is forced either to destroy his trophies of pleasure or to transform them into objects that could be useful to the state: “Thence launch the regal barks, once formed for pleasure. / And now to serve for safety, and embark” (80). The regal barks act as symbols for the old regime now being overturned. The barks were once used for
pleasure, demonstrating the indulgent nature of Sardanapalus’ reign, and are now being transformed into objects that can be used for practical means. The people destroy a regime focused primarily on sustaining the luxuries of the kingdom. In another symbolic act, the king leaves behind his golden mug as a reminder of his reign. The symbolic significance of the golden cup serves to underline Sardanapalus’ lavish nature: “Here, fellow, take / This golden goblet, let it hold your wine, / And think of me; or melt it into ingots, / And think of nothing but their weight and value” (80). He seems to encourage the idea of being remembered for his love of pleasure and luxury, again not fully realizing the reason for the people’s rebellion. Not only does he leave behind a luxurious material object in his memory, but he also suggests that the people turn the mug into pure monetary value. Byron further emphasizes here Sardanapalus’ materialism; thus the people leave the king with his favorite concubine, Myrrha, to die in the flames of his palace.

The themes of chaos, disorder, inversion, gender confusion, intoxication, death, and rebellion grow naturally out of the plot and structure of the poem. A closet drama with no iambic pentameter or other recognizable verse form, the poem has no binding structure, furthering the feeling of chaos and disorder. Byron uses enjambment to create a sense of momentum from line to line, and exclamation to emphasize the irritability and passion felt amongst the different characters in the play. For example, Myrrha’s final goodbye before she dies with Sardanapalus is littered with exclamation points: “Then farewell, thou earth! / And loveliest spot of earth! farewell, Ionia! / Be thou still free and beautiful, and far / Aloof from desolation! My last prayer / Was for thee, my last thoughts, save one, were of thee!” (65). This repetitious use of exclamatory marks inspires a feeling of excitement and fervor. The
enjambment found in the transition from the third to the fourth line, “and far / Aloof” creates a disjointed feeling of isolation. The king says goodbye to his life in the kingdom as he is violently uprooted from his home. This sense of abrupt rupture is reflected in the break in the poetic line created by the use of enjambment. The subject matter and form of this poem alike are chaotic, unconventional and immoral.

The French painter Delacroix adapts Byron’s scandalous and controversial subject matter in his painting *The Death of Sardanapalus*, which he created in 1827-28 for the Salon. Inspired by Byron’s closet drama, Delacroix’s painting develops a similar sense of chaos and disorder, but to a greater extreme. Through his adaptation of Byron’s subject, Delacroix demonstrates his desire to fuse the art forms of poetry and painting together. He expresses this desire in his journal: “And so there will come a time when I shall no longer be agitated by thoughts and emotions, by a yearning for poetry and other effusions of all kinds…. How I long to be a poet! But then at least, create in painting!” (Delacroix 40). However, due to Delacroix’s choice of scandalous subject matter and unorthodox approach to form in *The Death of Sardanapalus*, the painting was poorly received in Paris by art critics as well as friends, and for many years was only permitted display in the Salon and in private collections (Jobert 89).

The painting is a large oil on canvas, standing 395 centimeters tall and 495 centimeters wide, and it now hangs in the Louvre in Paris (Jobert 89) (Figure 4). The scene is of king Sardanapalus stretched out on a bed in a long white gown looking on as all the objects that once gave him pleasure are destroyed. The king remains calm, his facial expression unaffected, as his concubines, his horse, and his dogs are slaughtered by his servants. By contrast, the expression on the horse’s face as it is slaughtered is one of terror and madness. One concubine in the foreground of the
Figure 4. Eugene Delacroix. *The Death of Sardanapalus*. 1827-28, Musée du Louvre, Paris.
painting is being stabbed; another concubine already lies dead, draped at the feet of the king. A third concubine to the right of the king’s bed hangs herself before she can be slaughtered. Each concubine wears a golden band around her upper arm, which, although only an accessory, resembles a prison chain. The concubines are nude from the waist up, and their bodies are painted in sexually suggestive positions. The concubine being stabbed in the foreground is being seized from behind by a male servant, her body bent backwards in submission. The concubine draped across the king’s bed, too, appears in a position of sexual surrender. The sexualized bodies of the concubines as they are being murdered produce a theme of morbid eroticism, as the king lies on his bed gazing unaffectedly at the horrifying events surrounding him. In the background of the painting the king’s kingdom is depicted in flames, smoke pervading the scene. In the foreground, large, gold, inanimate objects litter the floor, demonstrating the king’s lavish lifestyle. The golden trinkets and jewels are deliberately in disarray, scattered chaotically across the foreground of the canvas. Delacroix uses strong, bold colors in this painting, in particular an abundant use of a very intense red.

When the painting was first presented at the Salon, it sparked scandal (Jobert 82). The merging of death and sexuality in this painting deeply shocked its nineteenth-century audience (Marie 382-383). Uncomfortable with the decadent and violent subject matter, no one was willing to refer to the painting as one of Delacroix’s masterpieces. Delacroix was viewed as overstepping the boundaries of proper decorum. His work was not seen as the outcome of creative integrity or originality, but as exemplary of his “hotheaded temperament” (Jobert 81). Barthelemy Jobert writes, “One can understand why Sardanapalus created such a scandal: no one
had so scorned well-established customs, the conventions most commonly agreed on, even by Romantics” (Jobert 83).

The complaint being made against this painting referred not only to the scandalous subject matter but also to the improper form of the painting. A close friend of Delacroix’s, Auguste Jan, made the following comment just after the release of *The Death of Sardanapalus* at the Salon:

M. Delacroix does not systematically err; it is with all his heart that he painted Sardanapalus. He has worked with passion and feeling, but unfortunately in the delirium of his creation he has been carried beyond all bounds. His very original talent is absent from this canvas done under the inspiration of a great poetic thought. He wanted to compose disorder, and forgot that disorder itself has a logic. He wanted to frighten us with the spectacle of the savage voluptuous pleasure that Sardanapalus’ eyes feed on before closing forever, but reason cannot disentangle the painter’s idea from the chaos within which it is imprisoned. The destruction of so many living beings on the pyre of the most degraded tyrant is a beautiful horror; M. Delacroix feels it; but his hand has betrayed him, and the betrayal is complete. It must be said (and you may imagine what it costs me) that not only does the sum of the faults outweigh the beauties, but that the beauties do not exist. Composition, style, drawing, coloring—I do not want to defend anything. (Jobert 83)
Jan seems to be arguing not only that the subject matter is too controversial for public exposure, but also that the way in which the painting was carried out was too unstructured and chaotic. He implies that the painting was produced through an emotional reaction to the original poem, rather than through careful and precise work following the guidelines of painterly form. Stressing Delacroix’s personal passion for the poem as demonstrated in the painting’s intensity, he argues that the emotion Delacroix felt for Byron’s poem did not help to produce a more successful painting by enriching its emotional effect; instead, his emotional involvement led Delacroix to create a painting that was structurally unsound. Jan complains that the painting is too poetic: “His very original talent is absent from this canvas done under the inspiration of a great poetic thought…He wanted to compose disorder, and forgot that disorder itself has a logic” (Jobert 87). The mistake Delacroix made, Jan believes, is having the form or structure of the painting mirror its subject matter. The subject matter is unarguably chaotic, and Delacroix attempts to increase the disorderly effect of the painting by leaving it unstructured as well. Jan argues that the disorder of the scene may have been more effectively displayed had Delacroix considered reason and rationality in the painting’s form.

Indeed, Delacroix seems to have taken Byron’s depiction of the story of Sardanapalus and revised the plot to make it more violent, intensifying the chaotic nature of the scene. It is as if he consciously wished to heighten the feeling of anarchy and destruction of Byron’s original poem by portraying an even more evil and perverse picture. In a significant departure from Byron, Delacroix’s painting depicts Sardanapalus lying decadently on his bed as all the “trophies” of his life, including concubines, horses, and dogs, are slaughtered in front of his eyes. In Byron’s poem,
Sardanapalus refuses the offer to flee his kingdom to save his life and instead stays with his kingdom as it is burnt to the ground. The only concubine to die with him is Myrrha, who chooses to stay with him of her own free will. Byron leaves Sardanapalus with a certain degree of honor and integrity, since he chooses to stay with his kingdom. Delacroix, however, strips away any honor the king may have, turning him into the entire cause for the corruption of the kingdom. Delacroix also stresses the chaotic nature of the poem by exaggerating the violence of the original story. In the painting, Sardanapalus has ordered all his men to kill all his objects of pleasure. Delacroix heightens the feeling of chaotic violence that was more contained in Byron’s poem by portraying a king who has played a hand in carrying out his own destruction. Delacroix’s Sardanapalus sits back comfortably watching as everything in his kingdom is tortured and destroyed. His body is covered in a long white gown, suggesting innocence, and his head rests comfortably in his hand. His unaffected gaze produces a striking juxtaposition with the audience’s horrified reaction, heightening the terrifying aspect of the scene. This double layer of perspective creates a tension within the painting, as Sardanapalus’ perspective watching the scene unfold is entirely different from the perspective of the viewer, who looks on in horror.

Sardanapalus perceives the human concubines, live horses, and dogs as he does the inanimate objects depicted in the scene. He does not seem to be aware of their pain as they are brutally slaughtered before his eyes. Transformed into a kind of spectator to chaos, Sardanapalus is utterly unmoved by the disorderly slaughter of the living members of his kingdom, and viewers stand back aghast.

Delacroix also portrays the chaotic nature of the story through the structure of his painting, further abandoning formal artistic tradition. He leaves absolutely no
blank space in the painting, allowing the eye of the viewer no break. The painting is heavily detailed, cluttered with people, animals, and inanimate objects. Not only are a number of women being slain by the king’s servants in different parts of the canvas, but a number of inanimate objects representing the luxurious nature of the king are scattered throughout the painting. Moreover, the painting seems to be on a slant. The floor is completely covered with people and objects dispersed unevenly. The painting is so cluttered with these objects that the floor is entirely invisible. The off-balance perspective contributes to this feeling of unease or imbalance, almost like seasickness. One is not able to find any level ground as a means for perspective or leveling. The horse in the left corner seems to be on a different plane than the woman to the right being killed with a dagger. This feeling of imbalance lends the painting a dream-like quality. Not only does the whole scene appear to be a type of fantastical dream, the viewer is also transported into a realm of the intangible. The painting leaves the viewer in a trance-like state, feeling intoxicated by the dreamlike quality of the painting, and thus at once more easily affected by the horror depicted and more convinced of its reality.

Delacroix completely abandons traditional notions concerning form in this painting, liberally adapting his own personal style. Indeed, he seems to have undergone a process of self-abandonment while creating it. Experts argue that the final painting was quite different from Delacroix’s original sketches, which contain colors that are not as bold and figures that are not as explicitly exposed (Jobert 82-83). Delacroix was later to reflect on the lack of control inherent to his work in this period: “my palette is no longer what it was. It is perhaps less brilliant, but it no
longer goes astray. It is an instrument that plays only what I want it to play” (Jobert 83).

That tendency of his color to “go astray” is evident in comparing the finished painting to a sketch for The Death of Sardanapalus now hanging in the Louvre, which reveals a drastic difference in Delacroix’s use of color (Figure 5). For example, the horse in the left corner of the sketch is colored a very dull grey, whereas the horse in the painting is a brilliant white, with bold, red eyes. The original sketch is mostly dark, with no brilliant or saturated colors, yet in the painting Delacroix uses bright red and gold to color the bed, the floor, and the jewels scattered in the foreground. This use of color suggests he loses track of the original sketch of this painting and gives way to the chaotic and crazed energy of the scene. Further, the concubines in the original sketch are not nearly as physically exposed as they are in the painting. In the former, only the back of the concubine in the right corner is exposed whereas in the latter the breasts and rear of the same concubine are uncovered. The inanimate objects as well begin to hold new importance in the painting, becoming much more detailed and bolder in color. In their bright colors, they seem to reflect to an even greater extent the self-indulgent and decadent nature of the king. It is as if Delacroix had an initial idea of what the painting would be, which he crafted in the sketch, and then abandoned it in the process of creating the painting. The departures from the sketch imply a creative process, as well as an end result, that is both chaotic and characterized by the abandonment of structure.

In his journal, Delacroix acknowledges the importance of self-abandonment in order to produce beauty in art: “Without daring, without extreme daring even, there is no beauty. Lord Byron praised gin as his Hippocrene, because it made him bold. We
Figure 5. Eugene Delacroix. Sketch for *The Death of Sardanapalus*. 1826-27, Musée du Louvre, Paris.
must therefore be almost beyond ourselves if we are to achieve all that we are capable of doing” (Delacroix 370). By abandoning his prior ideas concerning color, Delacroix creates a scene that produces an entirely different effect than he originally intended. Delacroix explains, “Do you know what that proves? That I was only a student; color, that’s the phrase, is the style” (Jobert 83). At this period of his life, he is not restrictive or structured in his use of color, as he would become in the Oriental stage of his work. He uses lavish color where he had not planned to and exposes the nude bodies of the concubines in a more scandalous way. These elements lend the effect of a heightened sense of passion, chaos, and energy, all of which run throughout the painting. This is why the particular paintings produced in this period, such as The Death of Sardanapalus, were poorly received by a Parisian audience. The form of these paintings, as well as the subject matter, overstepped the boundaries for art established in the neo-classical period, which artists were just beginning to react to and to overthrow. That Delacroix was not able to produce in the final work what he had proposed in his sketches shows the wild abandon that occurred during the process of creating this painting.

Like Delacroix, the French Romantic composer Berlioz (1803-1869) also used Byron’s poems as inspirations for his work, producing a body of poetic work that exemplifies a synthesis of the arts as well as similar subject matter. For the Prix de Rome competition in 1830, Berlioz had composed a much less well-known cantata entitled “Sardanaple,” inspired by both Delacroix’s painting and Byron’s epic poem. Berlioz wrote one of his most famous works in 1834, Harold en Italie, (in English, Harold in Italy, Symphony with Viola obbligato, Op. 16), inspired by Byron’s poem
*Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage.* *Harold en Italie* is Berlioz’s second symphony, his first being the famous *Symphonie Fantastique*. Byron’s poem *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* is a long epic tale of Harold, the protagonist of the poem and an exemplary Byronic hero (The Columbia Encyclopedia). The first two cantos of the poem were published in 1812, cantos three and four in 1818. Written in Spenserian stanzas, the poem revels in the form’s abundant use of rhyme and its interplay of iambic pentameter and the alexandrine. In the poem Harold leaves behind his home and pleasurable life to travel abroad and explore the world. Harold visits Portugal, Spain, Acarnania, Epirus, and Greece. Harold’s travels are based on Byron’s own travels through the Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea between 1809 and 1811.

As well as on the subject matter, Berlioz seems to be drawing on the musical form of Byron’s poem. Like the poem, the symphony *Harold en Italie* was composed in two stages (Figure 6). The symphony began as one or two movements, and eventually evolved into four movements. In the first canto of Byron’s poem, Harold travels to Mount Parnassus in Greece. Mount Parnassus is in Delphi, and according to Greek mythology, was home to the Greek god Apollo, along with the Corycian nymphs and muses. The mountain became known as the center of music, poetry, and knowledge (The Columbia Encyclopedia). A stanza in which Harold describes the spirits of the muses who linger around the mountain demonstrates the musicality of Byron’s poetic line:

> Happier in this than mightiest bards have been,  
> Whose fate to distant homes confined their lot,  
> Shall I unmoved behold the hallow’d scene,  
> Which others rave of, though they know it not?  
> Though here no more Apollo haunts his grot,  
> And thou, the Muses’ seat, art now their grave,  
> Some gentle spirit still pervades the spot,
Sighs in the gale, keeps silence in the cave,
And glides with glassy foot o’er yon melodious
wave. (I.lxii)

The stanza’s iambic pentameter has the upbeat, downbeat rhythm of a musical line. The last two lines of the stanza are particularly mellifluous. Byron refers to the spirit of the muse, which creates sound and silence, recalling the pattern of notes and rests in a musical line. The spirit of the muse “sighs,” creating a sad, dissonant sound, and then is quiet again, keeping silence, introducing a pause or a rest in the line. There is also movement in these last two lines, as the spirit “glides” across the scene. Byron uses alliteration, increasing the melodiousness of the line. He uses the repetition of “g’s,” with “glides” and “glassy,” suggesting the movement “go” with the “g” sound, increasing the sense of motion within the line. A sense of expectation is produced as the verbs in the last line are placed before the noun, highlighting the readers’ sense of movement, as the eye is kept moving expecting the subject. Moreover, the poem directly thematizes its own musicality in the final words of the poem, “yon melodious wave.” “Having a pleasing melody” or “of, relating to, or producing melody,” “melodious” implies “a sweet or agreeable succession or arrangement of sounds” or “a rhythmic succession of single tones organized as an aesthetic whole” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). The wave, described as melodious, suggests a sound wave or a moving musical phrase. This musical poem thus introduces the idea of artistic synthesis.

Berlioz adapts these ideas and themes from Byron’s poem, in turn painting images with his musical line and creating a symphony that is rather poetic in nature. *Harold en Italie* is broken up into four movements: *Harold aux Montagnes*, *Marche de pèlerins chantant la prière du soir*, *sérénade d’un montagnard des Abruzzes à sa
maîtresse, and *Orgie de brigands* (Bloom, *Life of Berlioz* 66). Two unusual aspects relating to musical structure come to surface in this symphony. The first is Berlioz’s decision to compose this symphony in “Beethovenian form,” containing four movements, at a time when most symphonies only contained three (Bloom, *Life of Berlioz* 66). The second is the lending of titles to each movement of the piece as if they were separate and distinct poems. Berlioz’s choice to title each section of the symphony demonstrates his own awareness of the “poetic-ness” of his music. The entire symphony contains dramatic shifts in dynamics, many crescendos and ascending scales, depicting Harold climbing Mount Parnassus or exploring new exotic lands. Out of the four movements that make up the symphony, the final movement is by far the quickest in tempo, with the most dramatic ascending and descending scales. And like the epic poem relating the adventures of a young Byronic hero, the symphony also feels epic, a full orchestra painting the scene of Harold’s adventures. In a sense Berlioz took Byron’s poem, translated it into music, and in the process produced a highly “poetic” structure. In honor of the symphony’s poetic nature, Berlioz’s contemporaries termed him the “illustrative artist” of his time, producing highly visual music that reflected poetic and painterly as well as musical notions of form (Bloom, *Life of Berlioz* 66).

The “poetic-ness” of his symphony *Harold en Italie* can be seen in the constant alternating of key signatures throughout the piece, which reflect the different stages of Harold’s voyage. For Berlioz, the key of E Major seems to signify Harold’s home. The piece begins and ends in E Major, just as Harold starts off his journey from home, and ends his voyage by returning there. The second movement is the most famous movement of the symphony, often performed on its own in recitals
This movement is split into three distinct sections, representing the various stages of Harold’s journey. Starting out as a March, the movement then shifts into a middle section composed as a Trio, then back to a final March. The middle section, probably the most striking and dreamlike section of the movement, is a chorale of arpeggios written for the solo viola part. The viola part here seems to mirror the adventures of Harold in Italy. The arpeggios are drawn out and repetitious, yet not redundant, the entire section containing varying dynamics, which serve to increase the richness of the piece. The movement ends with a coda, back in the key of E Major, demonstrating Harold’s return home and emphasizing the circular nature of his journey. Wilhlem Richard Wagner would later borrow this particular ABA musical structure for his *Pilgrim’s March*, which he wrote for his opera *Tannhäuser*.

Just as his symphony *Harold en Italie* was inspired by Byron’s poem *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, his cantata “Sardanaple” was inspired by Byron’s poem *Sardanapalus* and Delacroix’s painting *The Death of Sardanapalus* (Bloom, Prix de Rome 296). In 1830, Berlioz entered a competition held in Paris called the Prix de Rome. For the competition, Berlioz composed a first grand prize-winning cantata, entitled “Sardanaple,” for solo voice and orchestra (Bloom, Prix de Rome 280). The competition was sponsored by the Académie des Beaux-Arts of the Institut de France, and held great importance for the people of the city. Although the cantata received a great deal of attention in the competition, once the competition ended, the cantata was performed only a limited number of times in public performances, and did not gain fame or recognition. In fact Berlioz’s audience felt relatively ambivalent towards the piece, contributing to Berlioz’s later decision to personally destroy it. However, the
judges of the competition, whom Berlioz did not deem capable of properly evaluating his music, ironically gave the piece a good review:

The cantabile was warmly applauded. The two arias, particularly the second, appear to be of broad structure and elevated style. Several graceful phrases, alternating in the last stanza with others of a more energetic character, produced the greatest effect. This was the best part of Monsieur Berlioz’s composition: it revealed a profound knowledge of all the resources of art.
(Bloom, Prix de Rome 291)

This quotation emphasizes the importance of the synthesis of the arts to Berlioz’s work. The author of this quotation, whose name remains anonymous, praises Berlioz’s acquaintance with all different art forms and his application of this knowledge to his music. Berlioz does not simply draw on other musical texts or standard musical structures to influence his work. Instead, Berlioz looks past the neo-classical boundaries set up between the arts and works to synthesize the arts though his examination of paintings and poems, which he then directly applies to his work. His cantata “Sardanaple” acts as a perfect example of this artistic synthesis so characteristic of 1830s Paris, deriving elements of form and subject matter from Delacroix’s *The Death of Sardanapalus* and Byron’s *Sardanapalus* (Bloom, Prix de Rome 285). Berlioz would later reflect on this particular historical moment of 1830 as having been “expressly made for the liberation of the arts” (Bloom, Prix de Rome 297).

Berlioz himself, however, was never entirely satisfied with the cantata, and after setting it aside in 1834, not expecting to see the piece performed again in a serious manner, he decided to destroy the piece entirely when it began to reappear in different concert halls. Before destroying the cantata, he wrote at the top of the score,
“Fragment à bruler,” in English “Fragment to burn” (Bloom, Prix de Rome 294). The cantata was lost until nearly a century later, when the librarian of the Paris Conservatory, Julien Tiersot, found a piece of the final section of the cantata (Bloom, Prix de Rome 282). The piece that remains of the cantata today is thought to be a fragment left over from the only copy Berlioz kept for his own private collection after burning all the copies kept for public exposure. In an amazing coincidence and a telling one, this last remaining part of the symphony reflects the final incendiary scene of the story in which Sardanapalus’ kingdom goes up in flames. In this passage, Berlioz has not only written music that is heavily influenced by Byron’s poetry, but he also inserted a poetic passage at the end to close his orchestration:

In the thousands of combinations that are possible with the monumental orchestra I have just described there would reside a harmonic richness, a variety of timbres, and a series of contrasts comparable to nothing that has been accomplished in the art of music up to the present day. Above all, this orchestra would have an incalculable melodic, expressive, and rhythmic power, a penetrating force that has no equal, a prodigious sensitivity to nuances of ensemble and detail. Its repose would be majestic, like the calm of the sea; its fury would resemble the hurricanes of the tropics; its explosivity, the eruptions of a volcano. Here would be heard the cries and murmurs and mysterious noises of a virgin forest, the shouts and prayers and songs of triumph or grief of a people with expansive minds, ardent hearts, and fiery emotions. Its solemn silence would be awe-inspiring, and the most fearless souls would tremble on feeling its swelling crescendo roar forth like a sublime and immense conflagration.

(Bloom, Prix de Rome 296)
Berlioz opens this poetic passage by expressing the artistic liberty of working in the particular medium of orchestration. He does not feel hindered or confined by form, but instead argues that a vast number of possibilities are produced by the particular artistic form of music, more specifically orchestration. Through the very bridling of this artistic freedom, Berlioz determines that he will produce a piece of music that is entirely new, groundbreaking, and more complex than anything heard before. His artistic freedom, Berlioz believes, will lend him the capacity to create an art form that is richer and more dynamic, due to his ability to experiment with form and musical structure. Berlioz argues that in order for his vision of revolutionary artistic growth to be properly carried out, the orchestra must be the most sophisticated in the world. The orchestra must be subtle enough to translate the many nuances of the piece. In this passage, Berlioz seems to be consciously highlighting his own involvement in the synthesis of the arts. In the opening of a symphony that synthesizes painting, poetry, and music, he points out his own freedom to do so.
CHAPTER II

Artistic Synthesis of the 1850s: Wagner and Baudelaire

“Wagner was not a musician by instinct. He shows this by abandoning all lawfulness and, more precisely, all style in music in order to turn it into what he required, theatrical rhetoric, a means of expression, of underscoring gestures, of suggestion, of the psychologically picturesque…. He is the Victor Hugo of music as language. Always presupposing that one first allows that under certain circumstances music may not be music but language, instrument, ancilla dramaturgica.” - Nietzsche

Friedrich Nietzsche expresses the deep synthesis of the arts exemplified in the operatic works of the German opera composer Richard Wilhelm Wagner (1818-1883). He notes Wagner’s rejection of a traditional sense of order for a new sense of “lawfulness.” Wagner is compared to the decadent French poet Victor Hugo, who is notorious for his highly visual written works: “Here Nietzsche employs a concept that had been common in the theory of decadence since Nisard, who, as we recall, accused Victor Hugo of painting with words, that is, of using words to obtain effects characteristic of an art other than poetry” (Calinescu 191). Like Hugo’s poetry that paints, Wagner’s music speaks like language. Wagner was not only a lover and collector of music, but also a great admirer of poetry and the written word. Most often composers of opera would compose the score themselves and hire someone to write
the libretto; however, Wagner, fascinated by both the melodic and poetic components of opera, composed both his musical scores and librettos himself. He also compiled a vast personal library that contained collections from his most coveted writers. One of the authors that occupied a large space in that library was the English romantic poet George Gordon Byron. Wagner admired Byron and his poetry, deeming him “the only true poet of this century who watched and described contemporary events” (Rather 257). Having read extensively Byron’s many different works, Wagner incorporated many of the themes and ideas from Byron’s poetry into his own work, using them to develop his operas both structurally and thematically. The theme running throughout Byron’s poetry that seems most central to Wagner’s operas and essays is his philosophy concerning human eros and the cultivation of the erotic self. The thematic similarity between Byron and Wagner’s work, in particular his opera Die Walküre, helps to explain the recurrence of provocatively controversial subject matter that results from the complete synthesis of the arts in this latter period of romanticism.

I begin this chapter with a discussion of two of Lord Byron’s poems, The Bride of Abydos and Manfred, both of which contain love relations between siblings. Exemplified in both these works is the Byronic hero’s desire to unite with his Byronic heroine. I argue that the love relationships between the siblings depicted in Byron’s poems parallel the relationship between the twins Sieglinde and Siegmund in Wagner’s opera Die Walküre from his cycle of four operas Der Ring des Nibelungen. This opera contains a number of leitmotifs, or as Wagner referred to them, “Grundthemas” (grand ideas) or “Motivs” that reflect the themes found in Byron’s
poetry. Amongst these themes are: a desire for unity amongst the characters, which is discovered through incestuous relationships masking a self-love; realization of ideal love in death; and a movement towards totality in formal structure. Further, Sieglinde and Siegmund’s love relationship, as an attempt to unify two souls into one, is paralleled by a similar relationship between melody and poetry, which combine in order to form a total art as the absolute drama.

I then turn to Charles Baudelaire, the artist who most deeply embraced artistic synthesis. Like the works produced in the earlier period of romanticism, Baudelaire’s hybridization of different art forms is aligned with scandalous, perverse, passionate subject matter that deals with issues of sexuality, urbanity, and indeterminacy. His poetry exemplifies an attempt to portray the decadent world of nineteenth-century Paris and at the same time to escape into the heightened reality of dream. Baudelaire’s poetry is the most extreme version we have of the artistic synthesis that began in the earlier period of romanticism. His work exhibits both a complete immersion into artistic synthesis, as well as synthesis of human sense, together producing new and provocative subject matter that deals most explicitly with the subjects discussed by Delacroix, Byron, and Hector Berlioz. Baudelaire explains that the phenomenon of artistic synthesis is common to his time:

> It is an inevitable result of decadence that every art today reveals a desire to encroach upon neighboring arts, and the painters introduce musical scales, sculptors use color, writers use the plastic means, and other artists, those who concern us today, display a kind of encyclopedic philosophy in the plastic arts themselves. (Calinescu 166)

Heavily influenced by Wagner’s compositions, Baudelaire internalized the philosophies of artistic synthesis embodied in Wagner’s “Gesumkunstwert.”
Baudelaire admired Wagner’s operas as a total art form: “Speaking of Wagner in 1861, Baudelaire specifically praised the German composer for his conception of “dramatic art” as the “reunion, the coincidence of several arts,” that is, “l’art par excellence, le plus synthétique et le plus parfait” (Calinescu 166). In admiration of Wagner’s drive toward a synthesis of the arts, Baudelaire attempted to achieve a similar effect in his own poetry. This artistic synthesis went hand in hand with his interest in themes of morbidity, eroticism, death, and decay, as well as hybridization of human sense and synaesthesia.

Byron’s life, particularly his love-life, was highly controversial. He adored the nightlife of London, sharing absinthe with his friends in the local bars, and his love affairs (sometimes with prostitutes) were often short-lived. At one stage in his life Byron was involved in an incestuous relationship with his twenty-nine year old half-sister, Augusta Leigh. Although rumors have circulated that he invented this relationship in order to shock his audience, most evidence suggests that the affair did in fact take place. The affair (if real) began in the summer of 1813. Within the next few months Byron began producing poetry that presented incestuous love relationships between siblings (Rapf 641). In December of 1813, Bryon published The Bride of Abydos, which involves a love relationship that holds similarities to his affair with Augusta. The year 1819 brought about Byron’s closet drama Manfred, which also exhibited similar themes. Both poems exemplify the scandalous themes and ideas concerning eroticism running throughout Byron’s poetry that would later affect Wagner’s compositions.

The Bride of Abydos exemplifies Byron's treatment of erotic love, in which he
stresses the spiritual value of incestuous relationships. Scholars have pointed to the origin of this rather controversial idea concerning sibling incest in Byron's concern with the Byronic hero and his male-centered form of narcissistic self-love. They argue that Byron believed self-love to be the greatest and purest form of love possible since the object never shifts. The object of this love cannot deceive or cause pain, as it is not active as an external agent, and it therefore is ideal. As Joanna Rapf states, "in Byron's fallen world, self-love is the only enduring love possible without guilt" (Rapf 643). This, she concludes, is due to the intrinsic purity of self-love, which cannot lead to guilt or the more "base" human sentiments, since it is devoid of the sexual act and thus clean of sin. Although this love will eventually be realized externally, its internal source acts as its pillar and support. This self-love yearns to be consummated and brought to life, therefore one must search for another physical being who can act as a sexual partner and at the same time parallel the interiority of the Byronic hero. The Byronic hero, who in Byron's world is always the subject, must find and seduce the object of his love, she that best exemplifies his ideal woman because of her likeness to his own being. The Byronic heroine, in her physical resemblance and similar cognitive behavior, is the woman of the same blood and spirit, his sister. She is desirable in that her soul reflects his. An erotic love relationship between such a man and his ideal woman must be formed in order to combat any type of baser love in which there exists no real connection between the two partners. Thus according to Byron, one of the purest and most ideal forms of love possible for his Byronic hero is that love which exists between siblings, brought out of the context of familial love and into the context of erotic love (Wagner 642).

In *The Bride of Abydos* the hero, Selim, falls in love with his half-sister,
Zuleika. Selim is presented as a strong Byronic hero, a lover of nature and poetry. In Byron’s poetry, the Byronic hero is the personification of the ideal, narcissistic selfish man who seeks the selfless Byronic heroine. Without the love of the Byronic heroine, the Byronic hero ultimately dies. Selim is not vilified by Byron for his controversial affair, but is portrayed as honorable and sensible. Byron renders Selim a victim rather than a villain, as he dies in the end unable to carry on his love affair with Zuleika. The siblings engage in an incestuous love affair that they hide from Zuleika’s father, Pasha Giaffar:

Who hath not proved how feebly words essay
To fix one spark of Beauty's heavenly ray?
Who doth not feel, until his failing sight
Faints into dimness with its own delight,
His changing cheek, his sinking heart confess
The might — the majesty of Loveliness?
Such was Zuleika — such around her shone
The nameless charms unmark'd by her alone;
The light of love, the purity of grace,
The mind, the Music breathing from her face,
The heart whose softness harmonized the whole
And, oh! that eye was in itself a Soul! (169-180)

In this passage the emphasis is placed on the beauty of Zuleika, the ideal Byronic heroine. For Selim, Zuleika possesses the desired attributes of both purity and grace. She is passionate, soulful, and beautiful. He notes the majesty of her "Loveliness" through capitalization, stressing the magnitude and significance of her beauty. The line "the heart whose softness harmonized the whole" suggests the power behind her femininity, which allows him to experience a sense of harmony and completeness. Byron refers directly here to the musicality of Zuleika's heart, which produces a sense of unity through its harmonious quality. With "the Music breathing from her face," Zuleika exudes creative powers. The musical aspect of her being motivates Selim's
pursuit of Zuleika, which ultimately transforms itself into a quest for his own creative side.

The portrayal of Zuleika in *The Bride of Abydos* demonstrates her importance in completing not only Selim's soul but also his creative half. As Rapf explains, Byron believed the creative process within man to be intrinsically feminine. The ability to produce art could be accessed by the man's process of locating his feminine side. Art, like the music that breathes from Zuleika's face, springs from the side of man that is feminine, sentimental, and most attached to emotion and feeling. Rapf explains the female: "She externalizes what he feels internally" (Rapf 640). Although Selim's self-love has been externally located through the consummation of his love with Zuleika, the importance of the love relation lies within the interiority of the man. For Rapf, this process of individuation involves a man, who in a dream-like state, is able to discover the female personification of his unconscious. The Byronic hero struggles to annihilate the side of him that blocks his feminine side from fully flourishing and allowing the creative process to adjourn. As in *The Bride of Abydos*, in which Selim's soul is further completed by consummating his love with Zuleika, the Byronic hero's attempt to uncover and relish his creative side acts as a means of further self-discovery and an opening up of something larger within. Zuleika and music seem to merge into one being, and Selim's journey becomes a conjoined pursuit of love and artistic capability.

The two lovers consummate their love, but they are soon discovered by Zuleika's angry father. Selim is shot down by hired men of Pasha Giaffir, and Zuleika dies shortly afterward of a broken heart. Such is the typical plot for the Byronic heroine, who must die since the pair cannot live without one another. The Byronic
hero requires the Byronic heroine to complete his other half, while the Byronic heroine does not hold enough agency on her own to exist individually. The love between Byron's two characters, too controversial for society, must extend beyond the boundaries of society into death. Only in the realm of the "other-worldly" may their love exist.

Like The Bride of Abydos, Byron's dramatic poem Manfred contains a love relationship between a Byronic hero and heroine who seem to mirror one another. "Manfred" is a dramatic poem written from 1816-1817, and is characteristic of the English romantic closet dramas being produced at the time. The poem follows the story of Manfred, a noble living in seclusion in the Bernese Alps. Hidden away in the mountains, Manfred is left to the company of seven different spirits whom he pursues in order to magically forget the death of Astarte, the woman he loves most in the world. Some believe the relationship between Manfred and Astarte to have been incestuous from his descriptions of her and from his tortured and weary state after her death. In Act II of the poem, Manfred describes Astarte as similar to himself in physical appearance, as a sister; however, she is softer and more beautiful:

She was like me in lineaments -- her eyes,
Her hair, her features, all, to the very tone
Even of her voice, they said were like to mine;
But soften'd all, and temper'd into beauty;
She had the same lone thoughts and wanderings,
The quest of hidden knowledge, and a mind
To comprehend the universe: nor these
Alone, but with them gentler powers than mine,
Pity, and smiles, and tears -- which I had not;
And tenderness -- but that I had for her;
Humility -- and that I never had.
Her faults were mine -- her virtues were her own— .
(II.ii.105-117)
Manfred describes Astarte as a mirror of his own soul, reflecting his own physical attributes and sentiments, while at the same time possessing qualities he does not. She embodies the feminine, softer side Byron believed to be man’s key to creative productivity. The fact that Manfred and Astarte’s relationship is set in the past reflects his idea that irreplaceable sympathetic love between siblings springs from shared early childhood experience. Manfred and Astarte’s love is inspired by fond shared memories that lead to an ideal love understood as a total sympathetic fusion between the two lovers.

Even though Manfred places Astarte on a pedestal in his praise of her beauty and her parallel desire to uncover the mysteries of the universe, this sympathetic love is still primarily male-focused, arising as it does from the self-love of the Byronic hero and his desire to find his other half and access his creative side. Rapf argues that the Byronic heroine, in this case Astarte, exists merely to aid the Byronic hero in his wants and needs. She writes:

Here is Byron’s ideal woman, beautiful, stern, ‘a lioness, though tame,’ loyal to her lover above all else, her dark, fixed eye reflecting firmness of purpose. She has no important independent existence, but as a complement to her hero she is indispensible: he crumbles without her, or like Juan, is doomed to a lonely life of exile, and escape from shattered dreams, a wandering after nothing in particular… These women seek nothing for themselves except to serve and satisfy a single man. Each is as selfless as the Byronic hero is selfish… Where on the surface he appears hard, she appears soft. (Rapf 640)
This quotation is especially relevant to *Manfred* since Astarte holds little to no agency on her own, as she is dead from the start of the poem. Her only purpose is to aid Manfred in his search for self-discovery. Astarte’s individual existence is irrelevant, but her existence in aiding her Byronic hero is crucial. The selflessness of the Byronic heroine allows her to merge with her Byronic hero. Her specific characteristics do not stand out on their own, but merge with his, creating a synthesis of two beings in which the man alone benefits. The Byronic heroine is continually described as soft or delicate, not possessing individual strength on her own, but complementing Manfred by providing the delicate femininity that he lacks. Such hybridization is possible, due to her inherent selflessness.

Astarte has the ability to provide Manfred with the music that he searches for, the creative voice that he lacks:

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Hear me, hear me --
Astarte! my beloved! speak to me:
I have so much endured -- so much endure --
Look on me! the grave hath not changed thee more
Than I am changed for thee. Thou lovedst me
Too much, as I loved thee: we were not made
To torture thus each other, though it were
The deadliest sin to love as we have loved.
Say that thou loath'st me not -- that I do bear
This punishment for both -- that thou wilt be
One of the blessed -- and that I shall die,
For hitherto all hateful things conspire
To bind me in existence -- in a life
Which makes me shrink from immortality --
A future like the past. I cannot rest.
I know not what I ask, nor what I seek:
I feel but what thou art -- and what I am;
And I would hear yet once before I perish
The voice which was my music -- Speak to me!
For I have call'd on thee in the still night,
Startled the slumbering birds from the hush'd boughs,  
And woke the mountain wolves, and made the caves  
Acquainted with thy vainly echoed name. (120-142)

Manfred beckons for Astarte to speak to him, her voice containing the music his soul searches for: “Speak to me! I have wandered o’er the earth / And never found thy likeness—Speak to me!” (II.iv.144-45). The implication of the unconventionality of their love relationship is implied in the line “The deadliest sin to love as we have loved,” possibly implying an incestuous or shockingly unconventional union. Although sinful, Manfred desperately requires Astarte’s love. He is tortured by her absence: “The voice which was my music—Speak to me! / For I have call’d on thee in the still night, / Startled the slumbering birds from the hush’d / And woke the mountain wolves” (II.iv.135-138). Manfred yearns to hear her voice as he has wandered the earth in search of finding it. In his search, he is not able to find a woman like Astarte: “I have wandered o’er the earth / And never found thy likeness” (II.iv.145). Astarte, alone in her similitude to Manfred, is the only woman who can fulfill Manfred’s desire. Byron’s use of repetition and exclamation demonstrates his turmoil over retrieving Astarte’s lost voice. In particular the last lines demonstrate his anxious state: “but let me hear thee once-- / This once—once more!” (II.iii.149-150). The repetition of “once” demonstrates his desperation to hear her voice again, even if it is just one more time. The Byronic hero, in order to form a union with his creative voice, seeks to form an erotic love relationship or union with his heroine. Indeed, this becomes his primary and almost monomaniacal aim, an obsessive singular pursuit: “I fear them not, and feel for thee alone—” (II.iv.147). Jerome McGann discusses the emphasis Byron places on the hero's pursuit of such an erotic love: "Erotic passion functions through extreme self-consciousness. To experience it properly requires to
know the passion, to be on fire at once in the body and in the mind. The fires are to be deliberately set and carefully maintained at the most intense level... The poetry instructs one to choose an abandonment to the sovereignty of Eros” (McGann 163). Manfred truly does submit himself to this pursuit of eros as he strives to rediscover the musicality of Astarte's voice.

Manfred's pursuit of Astarte is motivated by the fact that she mirrors him while at the same time possessing qualities he does not. His quest for her love seems to be a quest for his lost half. Jonathan David Gross argues that Byron's poetry reflects man's ever-constant journey to discover a sense of completion or wholeness. Byron's life-long quest is to re-visit the period before the division of man: "He explains that our ancestors were spherical balls consisting of two conjoined persons. Punished by the gods for their arrogance, they were split down the middle 'like a flastfish'; man was separated from man, woman from woman, and man from woman. Each of us searches for our lost half. Eros is the search for wholeness” (Gross 2). Byron himself once said, “Man's greatest tragedy is that he can conceive of a perfection he cannot attain.” Manfred’s pursuit of Astarte seems to be a part of Byron’s own desire to retrieve a sense of unity. His pursuit of wholeness manifests itself in an erotic love relationship with the woman who best exemplifies the Byronic hero’s other half that was lost with the division of man. An erotic relationship formed with this other half is an attempt to revisit this prior state of unity. The Byronic hero’s quest for unity seems also to involve his search for artistic and creative inspiration. In both The Bride of Abydos and Manfred, the Byronic heroes are drawn to the musicality of the Byronic heroine’s voices. Both Zuleika and Astarte seem to embody a certain creative capacity the Byronic hero lacks on his own. If the Byronic hero
consummates his love with his heroine, he is at the same time consummating his love with his creative side, turning himself into a true artist with full creative capabilities.

A similar type of erotic love and pursuit of unity are emphasized in Wagner’s operas. His opera *Die Walküre*, part of *The Ring Cycle* exemplifies these themes, containing a love relationship between siblings that is portrayed as a form of true and pure love existing to combat the falsity of standard marriage relationships. *The Ring Cycle* is a sequence of four operas written over the course of twenty-six years, from 1848 to 1874. The second opera in the cycle, *Die Walküre*, involves an incestuous love relationship between twins, Siegmund and Sieglinde. The name Siegmund translates as “victory protector or shield”, and Sieglinde as “gentle victory.” The names recall Byron’s definition of the characteristically male and female traits exemplified by the Byronic hero and heroine. The male is more unyielding, intellectual, and practical in nature, whereas the female is more emotional, sentimental, and soft.

Siegmund and Sieglinde share the same parents, but grew up separately. Once reunited, the twins fall in love, and stay in love, long after their realization that they share the same father. Siegmund first comes to Sieglinde as a wandering visitor at her doorstep. She invites him in, drugs her husband Hunding into a deep sleep, and beckons Siegmund to come sit by the fire. He tells her his entire life story, how he came home one day to find his mother had been killed and his twin sister abducted. Sieglinde shares with Siegmund the story of her oppressive marriage with Hunding. She claims that she never loved Hunding, but rather was forced into a marriage with him against her will. While her wedding celebration was being held, an old man appeared and drove a sword into the trunk of an ash tree near their home. The man
who possesses the strength to withdraw the sword from the tree will release Sieglinde from her loveless marriage to Hunding. Sieglinde and Siegmund soon realize that they are deeply in love with one another; however, they are not yet aware of their familial relation, though Sieglinde recognizes a certain similarity to herself in Siegmund. He seems to have the same physical characteristics and the same quality to his voice. The two reflect each other in similitude. The “true” essence of his relation to Sieglinde comes to Siegmund in a dream:

Love decoyed the spring.
In our hearts
it was hidden deep;
now it smiles joyfully at the light.
The sister as bride
is freed by her brother.
In ruins lies
all that kept them apart.
Joyfully the young couple
greet one another.
Love and Spring are united. (I.iii)

Sieg mund draws the sword out of the tree in one effortless pull, winning Sieglinde as his prize for his physical prowess. The pulling of the sword out of the tree seems to symbolize the consummation of their love. The sword is a phallic symbol, and its withdrawal from the tree an explicit representation of the siblings’ sexual union. The love between Siegmund and Sieglinde is the only relationship in the opera whose depth and purity remains unquestioned by the lovers themselves. The strength of their love is drawn from their similitude to one another. Sieglinde expresses his delight at finding his likeness in Siegmund:

In the stream I’ve seen
my own likeness;
and now I see it again.
As once it appeared in the water
so now you show me my likeness. (I.iii)

Siegmund responds: “You are the likeness / that I hid in myself” (I.iii). Their love is a foil to the marriage relationship between Sieglinde and Hunding, which is both loveless and oppressive. Wagner’s portrayal of Sieglinde and Hunding’s marriage in the opera demonstrates his disapproval of standard bourgeois marriage. He viewed these types of relationships as devoid of any true or passionate love, since they were usually formed for reasons of social mobility. Sieglinde is determined to escape this type of loveless marriage. She is willing to put her life in danger by engaging in a socially unconventional relationship because her love for Siegmund is pure and cannot be denied.

The twins Siegmund and Sieglinde are not only alienated from society, but are also attacked with violence by the people who are meant to act as their guardians. Wotan, father of Siegmund and Sieglinde, begs his Valkyrie daughter, Brünnhilde, to protect Siegmund in his fight against Hunding. However, Fricka, Wotan’s wife, is guardian of wedlock and preserver of the sanctity of marriage. She sees Siegmund and Sieglinde’s relationship as an obstruction of the rights of marriage due to its incestuous nature, and thus inherently sinful. Brünnhilde decides to try to protect Siegmund despite her father’s threats, and blesses his sword before his battle with Hunding. Wotan, angry at his daughter Brünnhilde for disobeying his orders, shatters Siegmund’s sword, killing Siegmund in the process. Brünnhilde carries Sieglinde away on horseback into the mountains where they discover she is pregnant with Siegmund’s child, Siegfried. At the end of the opera, Brünnhilde is punished for trying to help Siegmund and thus supporting an incestuous relationship.
The love that exists between Siegmund and Sieglinde mirrors Byron’s definition of ideal love, since it is sprung from true and pure emotion, and since, like the love between Selim and Zuleika, it is too great to exist within the boundaries of society. Further, Fricka seems to be an embodiment of the tight restrictions put on love relationships in the romantic period by the enforcement of strict marriage rules. Wagner saw marriage as merely a contract between two people. Real love, however, he saw as a true joining together of two souls whose combined forces would create a greater sense of wholeness and unity. The consummation of Siegmund and Sieglinde’s love results not immediately in death, but in the production of a child, Siegfried. Siegfried becomes the protagonist for the next two operas in the cycle. Strong and willful, he embodies the ideal of masculinity and is similar to the Byronic hero. However, Siegfried dies at the end of the cycle, and his funeral is a long, drawn-out ceremony, demonstrating the significance of his death. Siegfried’s death seems to represent the impossibility of Sieglinde and Siegmund’s love existing in the human world. Their love cannot be sustained past one generation of offspring. Like the sibling characters in the poems of Byron, their love can only be fully realized in a realm existing beyond the earthly: in death.

Not only the subject matter, but also the formal structure of Wagner’s opera *Die Walküre* reiterates the themes of erotic love presented by Byron (Figure 7). Wagner wished to extinguish the differences between poetry and melody by bringing them into the same medium. Although they contain certain similarities, one normally thinks of song as being characteristically different from speech. What Wagner is attempting to accomplish by marrying together poetry and song is to find or create that which is not strictly one or the other, but rather a synthesis of the two art forms, a
form that lies between speech and song. His ideal musical line neither exploits nor highlights one component of the drama over the other. Therefore Wagner writes vocal lines that are vocally flexible and that respond to subtleties of the poetic lines. One can see this type of relationship between melody and poetry in Act III, Scene III of *Die Walküre*:

**BRÜNNHILDE**

Was it so shameful
what I did
that you punish my misdeed so shamefully?
Was it so base
what I did to you
that you so profoundly debase me?

Was it so dishonourable
what I did
that my offence now robs me of honour?

Oh, speak, father.
Look me in the eyes.
Silence you rage,
control your anger,
and clearly explain to me
my hidden guilt
which has blindly and stubbornly forced you
to abandon your favourite child. (1-17)

The first stanza of the libretto is accompanied by a melody that is soft, subdued, and continuous. The melodic line does not include any sudden breaks or pauses. The melody seems to reflect Brünnhilde’s state of contemplation. Wafting over the voice of Brünnhilde is the melodic line, emphasizing her words as a part of her stream of consciousness. The flexibility of the melody imitates speech in that it does not pause or break in choppy or abrupt ways. This is known as “endless melody;” it is
Figure 7. Wagner, Richard. *Die Walküre score*. Rome 1968.
incredibly difficult to determine where the melody should end, since the melodic line
is meant to reflect the patterns of speech, which are not broken up with constant rests
or pauses. The melody of the second stanza is remarkably different from that of the
first stanza. This music reaches a much higher register and is much louder in volume.
The second stanza is accompanied by a vibrant and lush melodic line, which works in
conjunction with Brünnhilde’s speech, demonstrating the desperation and passion
behind her pleas to her father, Wotan. By joining the melody and poetry together into
a relationship in which they work towards the same goal of unity, Wagner is not
placing one element above the other, but is demonstrating the vital importance of both
existing as equals in creating an absolute drama.

In Wagner’s essay “The Artwork of the Future” he discusses the relationship
between melody and poetry within the operatic field. He begins the discussion with a
question, “Has the poet to restrict himself in presence of the musician, and the
musician in presence of the poet?” (Wagner 231). He concludes no, that self-
restriction of one medium for the sake of another can only result in “the drama’s
death” (Wagner 231). This type of relationship will never flourish in music, since it
never has within the framework of human relations. A true relationship is not built on
self-restraint, but on love: “If poet and musician, however, do not restrict each other,
but rouse each other’s powers into highest might, by love; if in this love they are all
that ever they can be; if they mutually go under in the offering that each brings
each—the offering of his very highest potence—then the drama in its highest
plentitude is born” (Wagner 232).

Wagner thus viewed constructed bourgeois marriage as a meaningless
institution, since he saw the only intent behind this type of union as social mobility.
Bourgeois marriage was devoid of true emotional content; therefore, actions made on its behalf were reprehensible. Instead, Wagner valued an ideal love that, like an absolute drama, was built on true emotion, where motives behind action made on behalf of this more complete union were derived from sentiment.

For Wagner, the medium in which poetry and melody could come together in a perfect union was an absolute drama, which he describes as the most perfect artwork since it is an entire realization of all components of art. Wagner viewed drama as the highest form of art since it most accurately reflects the human condition, emphasizing both human emotion and intellect, thus helping us to better understand the world. He writes, “The drama, as the most perfect artwork, differs from all other forms of poetry in just this—that in it the aim is lifted into utmost imperceptibility by its *entire realization*…The poet’s can-ning, however, is the complete ascension of the aim into the artwork, the *emotionalizing of the intellect*” (Wagner 189). Wagner believed that at one point in history, poetry and melody were one and the same. Born out of the same place, they grew up independently, flourishing on their own, until one day they were re-united again to produce the “absolute drama.” In an earlier essay in his collection, “On Music and Drama,” Wagner describes this blending of music and poetry as a natural phenomenon. Out of the possible fates for poetry, Wagner argues that there are “two ways open to poetry” (Wagner 154). The one that is most convincing for Wagner is “an inner blending with music, with that music whose infinite faculty has been disclosed to us by the symphony of Haydn, or Mozart, and Beethoven” (Wagner 154). Here Wagner explicitly separates the music of the romantic period from the eighteenth-century, neo-classical symphony. For Wagner, the symphony was too ordered, too focused on technique, and further, was not a
medium in which poetry and melody could conjoin to create his desired balance between emotion and intellect. Such artistic excellence, however, Wagner believed could only be produced when poetry and melody combined in the same medium: “But it can succeed in the hands of none but that poet who is fully alive to music’s tendency and exhaustible faculty of expression, and therefore drafts his poem in such a fashion that it may penetrate the finest fibers of the musical tissue, and the spoken thought entirely dissolve into the feeling” (Wagner 188).

As the quotations I have been discussing suggest, the combining of melody and poetry can also be seen as an attempt to forever unite human emotion with the intellect. Melody is female, sympathetic, and sentimental; it represents the emotional component of art, just as the female represents the creative side of man. Word, or poetry is male, rational, logical, and intellectual. By joining together melody and poetry in a union of marriage, Wagner proves that emotions are not separate from the intellect. L.J. Rather discusses Wagner’s assigning of genders to different elements of musical composition. Included in Wagner’s theory of the absolute drama is his idea that both word and tone take on gender. According to Wagner, word is male and tone is female (Rather 259).

The philosophies found in Wagner’s collection of essays “On Music and Drama” concerning melody and the poetry speak to the union of the twins, Siegmund and Sieglinde, in Die Walküre. Like the twins who were both fathered by Wotan, melody and poetry were born out of the same place. They both grow up separately from one another, but are united at the end in a union of love. Once that love has been consummated, the melody and poetry are able to create the truest form of drama, whereas Wagner believed the siblings are able to produce offspring that would unite
them into one being. This synthesis of poetry and melody parallels Wagner’s theory of the “Gesamtkunstwerk,” which literally translates as “a synthesis of art-work.” Wagner’s theory refers directly to the idea of an operatic performance that includes music, visual art and drama. He believed a collaboration of all these art forms into one total work of art to be the greatest and most effective means of artistic expression. In order to most accurately portray the human condition and the complexity of human emotion, one could not rely solely on one art form. Instead, a combining of all the art forms must occur, with a particular attention to the musical element. For Wagner, the operatic stage seemed the most appropriate medium for translating his idea of a total work of art. He implemented the plastic arts by hiring celebrated artists such as Pablo Picasso to design the sets for many of his operas. He incorporated poetry by crafting the librettos himself, and melody by composing the scores. Together, opera represented an extreme version of the synthesis of the arts stemming from the earlier period of romanticism of the 1830s. The ideas concerning artistic synthesis suggested by Delacroix and Berlioz culminate in Wagner’s idea of “Gesamtkunstwerk” in a great and highly acute merging of the arts.

Often referred to as a modernist, a romantic, a symbolist, and a decadent all at once, the nineteenth-century French poet Baudelaire (1821-1867) produced a body of work exemplary of the synthesis of the arts begun in the 1830s (Figure 8). Born in Paris, Baudelaire spent most of his days there, with some schooling in Lyon, and he was greatly influenced by the vast changes that took place within the city over the course of his lifetime. Baudelaire’s career did not flourish until the latter half of his life when his most famous collection of poetry, *Les Fleurs du Mal* was published in
Figure 8. Gustave Courbet. *Portrait of Baudelaire*. 1847.
1857. He first gained recognition for his written critique of the Paris Salon and later for his writings about the romantic painter Delacroix. Although the most modern of the artists discussed in this thesis, Baudelaire valued aspects of the romantic tradition, particularly concerning poetic technique and form. Baudelaire internalizes the traditions of poetic form characteristic of the romantic period by consciously guarding their philosophies of meter and by allowing these notions to produce new and highly provocative subject matter. Baudelaire also adapts the ideas surrounding artistic synthesis initiated by Berlioz, Delacroix, and Wagner; however, he brings these philosophies to greater fruition through the creation of his consciously musical poetry, the implementation of scientific and metaphysical philosophies such as synaesthesia, and his experimentation with more radically scandalous and provocative subject matter. Through his study of the painterly techniques of Delacroix and the philosophy of Wagner concerning the “Gesamtkunswert,” Baudelaire brings artistic synthesis to an extreme by adapting ideas concerning the cross-fertilization of artistic form and using them to engender a highly shocking subject matter that reflected both the Modern Paris of his age and a desire to escape the material world into dream.

Twenty years his junior, the young poet looked up to Delacroix, considering him a revolutionary and an exceptionally gifted painter before many of his time. Baudelaire wrote two collections of essays Art in Paris: 1845-1862 and The Painter of Modern Times, in which he describes in great detail the character and works of the painter. Baudelaire viewed Delacroix as a literary painter, often more appreciated by writers than by painters. He believed Delacroix had the ability to transform images into words through his use of brilliant color and expressive style, and that his implementation of allegorical figures from literature and history added to the
“literary” effect of Delacroix’s paintings. Baudelaire called Delacroix the “painter-poet,” as he believed his paintings transcended their subject matter to inspire great feeling and emotion in the viewer. Delacroix was able to achieve this effect partially through his choice of ethereal subject. As Baudelaire describes in his essay “The Life and Work of Eugene Delacroix,” he felt a kinship or brotherhood with Delacroix due to their common “love of the great, the national, the immense and the universal” (Baudelaire 42). Baudelaire argues that,

Delacroix, to the glory of our age, has interpreted better than anyone else…. the invisible, the impalpable, the dream, the nerves, the soul; and this he has done—allow me, please, to emphasize this point—with no other means but colour and contour; he has done it better than anyone else—he has done it with the perfection of a consummate painter, with the exactitude of a subtle writer, with the eloquence of an impassioned musician. (Baudelaire 43)

Baudelaire then points to the artistic synthesis found in Delacroix’s art, asserting that it was closely aligned with and attuned to the overall synthesis of the arts characteristic of the time. He writes: “It is, moreover one of the characteristic symptoms of the spiritual condition of our age that the arts aspire not to take one another’s place, at least reciprocally to lend one another new powers” (Baudelaire 43).

Initially, Les Fleurs du Mal was poorly received, and in July 1857 the book was denounced as offensive to public morality, leading to the prosecution of Baudelaire and his publisher Auguste Poulet-Malassis (Shapiro xxii). The collection contained subject matter that touched upon themes and ideas of death, morbidity, eroticism, and decay and that initially rendered six of the poems in the collection unfit
for print. As the title of the collection expresses, “he was obsessed with the notion of evil, and to accept or reject it he had first to express it” (Shapiro xxi). In the collection Baudelaire constantly battles between good and evil, spiritual love and sensuality, to capture the decadent exoticism of Parisian life, and, conversely, to find a heightened sense of beauty and fantasy that allows him to depart from the modern world of Paris developing around him. Walter Benjamin notes in reference to Baudelaire:

“Knowledge of the world had not been enough for him; he wanted to know its good and evil sides as well” (Benjamin 27).

Baudelaire’s choice of scandalous and controversial subject matter is exhibited in his poem “Invitation to the Voyage,” in which he adopts the theme of sibling incest found in Byron and Wagner’s works. In this poem he describes an adventure to an exotic land with his beloved sister:

Imagine, ma petite,
Dear sister mine, how sweet were we to go
and take our pleasure—
Leisurely, you and I—
To live, to love, to die
Off in that land made to your measure!
A land whose suns’ moist rays,
Through the skies’ misty haze,
Hold quite the same dark charms for me
As do your scheming eyes
When they, in their like wise,
Shine through your tears, perfidiously.

There all is order, naught amiss:
Comfort and beauty, calm and bliss.

Treasure galore—ornate,
Time-glossed—would decorate
Our chamber, where the rarest blooms
Would blend their lavish scent,
Heady and opulent,
With wisps of amber-like perfumes;
Where all the Orient’s
Splendid, rich ornaments—
Deep mirrors, ceilings fine—would each,
In confidential tone,
Speak to the soul alone
In its own sweet and secret speech.

There all is order, naught amiss:
Comfort and beauty, calm and bliss.

See how the ships, asleep—
They who would ply the deep!—
Line the canals: to satisfy
Your merest whim they come
From far-flung heathendom
And skim the seven seas. –On high,
The sunset’s rays enfold
In hyacinth and gold,
Field and canal; and, with the night,
As shadows gently fall,
Behold! Life sleeps, and all
Lies bathed in warmth and evening light.

There all is order, naught amiss:
Comfort and beauty, calm and bliss.

The poem describes Baudelaire’s imagined, hypothetical world, in which he escapes “To live, to love, to die” with his “Dear sister.” Baudelaire addresses his sister as a lover, connecting his love to death and to an ideal, imagined world. Part of his fantasy consists of dying with his sister in this alternate reality he refers to as an ambiguously located foreign land: “To live, to love, to die.” The imagined landscape in Baudelaire’s poem is sensuous and dream-like. Baudelaire lends the reader no hint to the actual geographical location of the land he describes, identifying it fully with the world of dream. The “skies’ misty haze” creates a muddled sense of abstraction.

Further, the sister he describes has “scheming eyes” that “Shine through your tears,
perfidiously.” His sister holds “dark charms” and is associated with treachery and mischief, seeming to embodying the Dionysian spirit herself. A lust for the exotic demonstrated earlier by Delacroix is presented in the third stanza of the poem. Baudelaire describes a land with “Treasure galore—ornate” that is both “lavish” and “opulent.” He delves into an exotic world of human sense with “lavish scent” and “amber-like perfumes.” He refers to “the Orient” and its “Splendid, rich ornaments—demonstrating his lust for foreign lands and the many luxuries they behold.

Baudelaire has often been labeled a poet of the Decadent movement for the artificiality and perversity of much of his poetry. The effect of artifice is produced through his choice of subject matter and through his exaggeration of the romantic notion of art for art’s sake. His most coveted subjects in his poetry were the decadent nightlife of Paris, the eroticism surrounding the urban prostitute, and the exotic nature of urban life. As well as his choice of subject matter, Baudelaire embodied decadent ideals by taking to an even greater extreme the idea of art for art’s sake, transforming it into a philosophy of life for art’s sake. Walter Benjamin likens him to Wagner in these terms: “They rally round the banner of l’art pour l’art. From this watchword derives the conception of the total work of art—the Gesamtkunstwerk…. Baudelaire succumbs to the rage for Wagner” (Benjamin 42). Both the idea of life for art’s sake, and the philosophy centered on a total work of art, represent a shift toward a philosophy centered on even greater extremes of artifice. Baudelaire also achieved a life for art’s sake effect by bringing himself fully into the process of artistic creation, where the artist and the product merge into one: “Despite Baudelaire’s guises of persona and critical dicta of artifice and artificiality, of artistic freedom from the self, in no poet with whom I am familiar is there a more constant correlation between the
person and the poem” (Shapiro xv). As in Delacroix’s adaptation of Byron’s poem in his painting *The Death of Sardanapalus*, the artist’s emotional response to the subject matter merges with the stylization of the piece, producing an art that adheres to traditions of form but that is highly affected by the personal characteristics and responses of the artist himself.

Baudelaire created imagined worlds into which he could escape by forming heightened sensory experiences, in which he synthesized the different art forms. His poetry represented ideas of artistic synthesis and the universalizing effect of a total work of art. By creating a world in which human senses pertaining to each art form merge, he is engendering a realm of heightened perception. Baudelaire believed the beauty of Delacroix’s paintings stemmed from their “poetic” nature, and he sought to adapt painterly and musical characteristics in his poetry, in order to produce a total sensory experience for the reader. He thus created poetic lines that are at once incredibly melodious and visceral in their visionary scope, combining music and poetry in a way that was modeled on a Wagnerian view of artistic synthesis. In his poem from *Les Fleurs du Mal* titled “The Former Life,” Baudelaire inserts both highly visual and musical imagery into the poetic line:

```
Long did I live beneath vast colonnades—
Inflamed by sea sun’s myriad rays, agleam—
Whose straight, tall, stately pillars made them seem
Like basalt grottoes in the twilight shades.

Sky patterns changed with every fall and rise;
Each surging swell that mingled solemnly
Its thunderous chords, in mystic harmony
With sunsets’ hues reflected in my eyes.

There did I languish in a sensuous calm
Amid the azure-splendored skies and waves,
```
Pampered by naked, pungent-scented slaves,

Who fanned my languid brow with fronds of palm
To ease my secret anguish; their one care,
To plumb the hidden depths of my despair.

The poem describes Baudelaire’s ideal world of heightened sensory experience. He paints a picture for the reader of the sky with his poetic line. The patterns of the sky are described as fluid and harmonious like music: “Each surging swell that mingled solemnly / Its thunderous chords, in mystic harmony” (6-7). The surging swell of the sky suggests a musical line that is not evenly ordered, but vibrant and tumultuous. Cryptic chords produced by the sky’s patterns are connected to the “sunsets’ hues” in “mystic harmony.” Baudelaire emphasizes the painterly aspect of this poem in his description of the colors of the sunset. He does not name the colors of the sky, but refers to its range of hues, which are reflected in his own eyes. The hues bring in a wide spectrum of color, allowing for the imagination to fill in the exact picture. These colors are contingent upon the perception of the poet and the imagination of the reader. Reflected in his own eyes, the scene is occurring internally within the artist as well as out in nature. The sunset’s colors are subject to Baudelaire’s individual perspective, as is a sunset’s colors when painted by a painter. The place depicted in the poem, where music and color combine, acts as a heightened sensory experience for both Baudelaire and the reader. To further emphasize his withdrawal into this heightened sensory experience, Baudelaire sacrifices his own vitality in order to merge with the environment: “There did I languish in sensuous calm… pampered by naked, pungent-scented slaves” (9, 11).

Another of Baudelaire’s poems demonstrating the adaptation of musicality into the poetic line is a later poem in the collection titled “Music”:
Often, music engulfs me like a sea;  
    I set my course, afar,  
Mist-canopied, through vast infinity,  
    Toward my dim, distant star;  

Proud-bosomed, at the bar I stand, upright,  
    Lungs puffed like panoply  
Of sails, and ride the swelling waves that night  
    Veils and conceals from me;  

I feel within me all quivering woes  
    Born to a vessel’s soul:  
Over the deep abyss, when tempest blows  

    Or breeze wafts mild, I roll.  
I pitch… Or when the sea’s calm, glassy air  
    Mirrors my own despair!  

This poem is a description of Baudelaire’s experience listening to music. He describes the experience as an overpowering one, in which he is transported to other places and mediums by the music’s all-encompassing force, which “engulfs me like a sea.” The poet is transported through the music to cryptic, a-temporal landscapes: “I set my course, afar, / Mist-canopied, through vast infinity” (2-3). However, the place he wishes to reach is both “distant” and “dim,” and possibly unreachable. Baudelaire seems to be in search of himself as well as the world, his self reflected in the universe he travels into. Again, Baudelaire has entered a reality of heightened sensory perception. His fantasy begins as he rides the musical “swelling waves.” Baudelaire acknowledges how Delacroix, whom he greatly admired, also valued a total loss into the world of music: “In his delightful study of Chopin, Liszt puts Delacroix among the poet-musician’s most assiduous visitors, and tells how he loved to fall into deep reverie at the strains of that tenuous and impassioned music which is like a brilliant bird fluttering above the horrors of an abyss” (60). Through his experience engaging
with the music, Baudelaire is able to universalize his understanding; he feels within
him “all the quivering woes / Born to a vessel’s soul” (9-10). The word “vessel” can
mean a boat, ship or star-ship, but it can also mean a blood vessel, which transports
blood throughout the body of an organism. However, due to the ambiguity of the use
of “vessel” combined with the last line of the poem “Or breeze wafts mild, I roll,” the
body (ship or human) could be seen as analogous to the human soul. Therefore
Baudelaire is the ship riding the waves, and the waves are really the music that
transports his soul. Baudelaire then could feel the pain of the ship or he could feel the
human pain exposed by the universalizing power of the music. The last stanza
contains a pun: “I pitch… Or when the sea’s calm, glassy air / Mirrors my own
despair!” (13-14). Baudelaire turns “pitch,” a musical term for the fundamental
frequency of a sound, into a verb describing his own actions. “I pitch” suggests a
complete hybridization of Baudelaire and the music, in which they carry out the same
function. However, the fact that Baudelaire “pitches” implies that his immersion into
the music is stronger, and that he has taken on musical characteristics. Again,
Baudelaire seems to lose a certain grasp of consciousness, allowing him elevation
into a heightened sensory experience. The music completely envelops Baudelaire and
mirrors his own sentiments.

Another way in which Baudelaire achieves a heightened sensory experience as
Wagner did in his total work of art is through Baudelaire’s adaptation of scientific
philosophies to metaphysical ideas concerning human perception. In one of his poems
in *Les Fleurs du Mal*, “Correspondences,” Baudelaire introduces the idea of
synaesthesia. He further emphasizes the central principle of artistic synthesis brought
about by Delacroix, Wagner, and Berlioz by adapting the modern conception of
cross-sensory experience into his work. In this way, the poem parallels the cross-fertilization of different artistic categories characteristic of 1830s Paris. His poem “Correspondences” reads:

All Nature is a pillared temple where,  
At times, live columns mutter words unclear;  
Forests of symbols  
Watch Man pass, and peer  
With intimate glance and a familiar air.

Like distant, long-drawn calls that seem to be  
Obscurely, deeply blended into one—  
Vast as the dark of night and day’s bright sun—  
Sound, perfumes, hues echo in harmony.

Perfumes! Some fresh and cool, like babies’ skin,  
Mellow as oboes, green as meadows; some  
Rich and exultant, decadent as sin,

Infinite in expanse—like benzoin gum,  
Incense and amber, musk and Benjamin—  
Sing flesh bliss, and soul’s delight therein.

Baudelaire opens the poem by referring to the existence of a realm of heightened perception in which the world can seem distorted: “All Nature is a pillared temple where / At times, columns mutter words unclear.” Baudelaire makes the rather unusual choice of referring to nature as a temple, which is a manmade object. He takes agency over nature, attempting to understand it by placing it within the human sphere. This is a highly decadent notion, transforming nature into a man-made object. Baudelaire attempts to understand nature through the application of symbols: “Forests of symbols / Watch Man pass and peer.” Baudelaire imposes meaning on the forests in an attempt to understand nature. However, instead of man watching nature, nature watches man, demonstrating man’s inability to fully understand nature. In a sense, the
symbols are alive and hold agency over man. Next Baudelaire attempts to render the
mystifying experience of nature universally accessible by addressing a universal
audience, which further underlines the importance of unity, stressed later in the poem.
In the second stanza, nature’s “long-drawn calls” are “deeply blended into one”—the
image is that of many different voices joined in harmony, resulting in a combined
singular voice, which resounds more clearly than each distinct voice on its own. This
voice is “vast as the dark of night and day’s bright sun— / Sound, perfumes, hues echo
in harmony.” The harmony seems thus to extend, breaking down the boundaries
between physical characteristics of human sense perception. Aural, visual, and
olfactory senses merge or combine, resulting in one harmonious, conclusive, and
whole experience. Baudelaire seems to stress the musicality of line nine, beginning it
with the aural sense through sound, and having the three senses culminate in an echo.
He uses asyndeton, the tight compression of the line, to add punch, emphasis, and
intensity. The line heightens the sense of expectation for the next line, which begins
with “Perfumes!” The third stanza continues the theme of synthesizing the senses,
once again placing the importance on the aural. The “perfumes,” followed by an
emphatic exclamation point, are described paradoxically as “Mellow as oboes,” using
language traditionally ascribed to music or sound to define the essence of an olfactory
sensation. The perfumes also carry a visual representation, as they are “green as
meadows.” By assigning visual and aural attributes to the nose, Baudelaire throws out
linguistic rules, breaking down semantic meaning and at the same time symbolizing
the tearing down of the classical boundaries between the arts. He describes the new
overall liberation or cross-fertilization of the arts through his allowance of sound,
color, and scent to merge.
This freedom reflects the possibility of music associating with poetry, and painting with music, and finally all art forms coming together to produce one overall effect or experience. In this heightened spectrum sound has color and painting has different tonal harmonies. The poem ends with a feeling of liberation and transcendence. The last line suggests a correspondence between flesh and soul: “Sing flesh bliss, and soul’s delight therein.” Through escape into the world of senses, one is able to transcend the ordinary and reach a place of beauty and pleasure in which there is a total union of body and soul. One is granted a higher scope of power by being able to access different sensations from the senses. By being able to hear color, for example, one’s world of perception is heightened and expanded. One enters into a world dominated by the artist who, Baudelaire believed, embodied a greater sensitivity to the world. Synaesthesia is said to “put the reader in contact with a forceful sensory presence, a primitive wholeness or synthesis of impression” (Hassan, 439). Synaesthesia becomes a scientific way of synthesizing. Both exemplify a desire for a total sensory experience in which a heightened reality emerges.
The themes and ideas surrounding artistic synthesis in the two periods of romanticism of the 1830s and the 1850s culminated in the modern decadent movement. The movement has been described in these terms: “in literature, name loosely applied to those 19th-century, fin-de-siècle European authors who sought inspiration, both in their lives and in their writings, in aestheticism and in all the more or less morbid and macabre expressions of human emotion. In reaction to the naturalism of the European realists, the decadents espoused that art should exist for its own sake, independent of moral and social concerns” (Columbia Encyclopedia 5th Ed. 731). Indeed, the decadent movement embodied a rejection of the matters of the state and of political affairs in favor of a complete immersion into the world of art.

The notion of decadence has existed since antiquity. The Greeks believed society cyclically progressed into a state of decay: “the Greeks speculated on the models of ideal schemata of states or social forms, from which they derived a necessary, a temporal succession applicable to any event whatever. The resultant laws were “laws of decadence rather than of development” (Emile Brehier): they represent change as a fall from an ideal primitive state conceived in terms of myth; political states do not improve, they become corrupted; and the history of governments is a history of decadence. Here we perceive the core of the Greeks’ feelings about time: it was experienced as a “degenerescence”—the notion of a continuous progress was unheard of” (Calinescu 152). The French poet Charles Baudelaire aligns himself with the heroes of antiquity, comparing their difficulties to his own. His admiration for
antiquity helped shape his notion of the modern hero: “The hero is the true subject of la modernité. In other words, it takes a heroic constitution to live modernity” (Benjamin 103). Baudelaire saw the trials and tribulations of the modern city as similar to the difficulties and obstacles faced by the classical heroes. He was particularly interested in Roman antiquity, adapting certain heroes from classical myths, such as the female characters Delphine and Hippolyte, portrayed as amorous lesbians in his thirty-ninth poem of Les Fleurs du Mal, which he considered titling Les Lesbiennes (Benjamin 119). His admiration of classical antiquity links him with Wagner, whom he deeply admired and with whom he aligned himself in his efforts to create the “Gesamtkunswert.”

The modern decadents, including French poets like Baudelaire and Victor Hugo, and English writers such as Oscar Wilde, Walter Pater, Aubrey Beardsley, Arthur Symons, and Ernest Dowson, explore a synthesis of the arts as well as inverted, morally ambivalent, morbid, subject matter that highlights the idea of art and artifice over the natural and the real. In decadent art and literature, the imagination completely dominates the artistic process, culminating in a loss of reason, rationality, and ultimately what I see as an extinction of the Apollonian ideal. Matieu Calinescu explains this phenomenon: “Imagination, when it is no longer under the control of reason, loses sight of the whole reality and of the actual hierarchy of things, focusing on details” (Calinescu 161). The utter abandonment of control into an imaginative world of chaos is often highly seductive, and thus considered dangerous. Such placement of art over society becomes a monomaniacal task, inevitably leaving the artist detached from the world in a powerfully isolating way. Such dislocation from the world allows the artist entrance into the unconscious world of fantasy and
dream. Such apathy towards the state and society at large perverts the order and cohesive structure of a working society, and thus results in disorder, chaos, and often violence.

The modern decadents valued artifice as their principal, overarching aesthetic. Their attraction to artifice in part stemmed from the romantic attention to morbid subject matter discussed in this thesis. Like the romantics mentioned in the preceding chapters, the decadents had a keen interest in the perverse, the morbid, and the exotic. Further, the decadents believed fully in the power of the artist’s imagination to transform an object into beauty. The object prior to its transformation by the hand of the artist is natural and therefore considered ugly or undesirable. The artist’s main objective thus becomes to shape and ultimately invert the natural object: “The cult of artificiality, as expounded in À Rebours, is based on an exclusively negative-destructive imagination. Des Esseintes is not really trying to isolate himself from nature; it would be more correct to say that his attitudes are dictated by his consuming desire to thwart, chastise, and finally humiliate nature” (Calinescu 172). According to the decadents, a flower, an odor, or a woman could be transformed into an object of artifice. In fact, the decadents “wished real flowers would imitate artificial ones” (Calinescu 172). In this way, total agency fell into the hands of the artist.

The decadents believed in the idea of art for art’s sake, or even more extremely, life for art’s sake, in which art existed as its own entity, separate and distinct from the natural world. The word “artificial” connotes creation by art rather than nature. Thus art was seen as an entity unto itself, not a reflection of nature. The Oxford English Dictionary provides two definitions for the word “artifice,” “The action of an artificer; the making of something by art or skill; craftsmanship,
workmanship; the work of an artificer; manual or mechanical work,” and “Human skill or workmanship as opposed to nature or a natural phenomenon.” “Artificiality” is “Craftsmanship,” expressing the decadent view of the artificial as “opposed to nature,” susceptible to the means of human craftsmanship, and thus not largely affected by natural phenomena.

Baudelaire, for example, uses his vivacious and active imagination, which had transformative power, to create an artificial aesthetic: “His cult of artificiality is a cult of the perverse. The total aesthete will therefore congratulate himself whenever he is able to make outside or inner nature deviate from its norms and laws. Attracted by all that is aberrant, his imagination will voluptuously explore the realm of the abnormal in search of beauty that is supposed to be both anti-natural and absolutely new” (Calinescu 172). Baudelaire was thus drawn to the artificial cityscape of Paris over the natural landscape of the country. This preference for the urbane is exemplified in much of his poetry. He becomes a translator of the world he inhabits, often displacing his melancholy moods and emotions onto the descriptions of the Paris landscape. Baudelaire’s reverence for the urban landscape, as well as his desire to escape into a world of dream is demonstrated in his poem entitled “Landscape,” in which he gazes not at the sky stretching over a meadow or forest, but one hovering over an iron-clad cityscape.

Baudelaire begins the poem by aligning it with Virgil’s eclogues, also known as the Bucolics: “To craft my eclogues in chaste, proper wise” (1). Virgil adapted the form for his ten poems from Theocritus, a Sicilian poet from 280 B.C.E. Theocritus introduces the format known as pastoral in his work Idyls. The collection of poems was a response to the period of drastic change and turmoil in Rome Virgil witnessed
between 42 and 39 B.C.E. The text is notorious for merging politics and eroticism. Also, Virgil developed a reputation during the Middle Ages for being a sorceror with supernatural powers (J.W. MacKail, Eclogues of Virgil). In “Landscape” Baudelaire refers to his poem as similar to Virgil’s eclogues, reacting to the turmoil of 1850s Parisian life. Baudelaire expresses his desire to reach to the past through gazing at the cityscape around him. He wishes “to lie outspread against the skies / Like olden-day astrologers” (3). His sky is not the sky of the countryside or the rural pastoral, but of the urban landscape: “Hard by church towers, rising high” (4). The landscape he admires is hard, dour, and solemn—referring to the booming industrialization and expansion of the city by Haussmann. The buildings reach high into the sky, as if extending into infinity: “The chimneys, steeples, reaching to the blue” (8), which “Meditate on the heavens’ eternity” (10). The buildings have an ethereal air, Baudelaire suggesting their capacity to reach into a world inaccessible to humans. The buildings’ perspective is greater than ours due to the buildings’ grand height, which lends it more visibility: “How sweet, to pierce the haze and see, afar” (11). Through his portrayal of the buildings, Baudelaire attempts to form a connection between the inner and outer, the lower and the higher, the tangible and the intangible. Each side presented encapsulates its own mystery, but their combining force presents a chance of achieving clarity.

The landscape is not a classically beautiful landscape containing perfect, symmetrical images from nature, but a bewitched landscape with grey smoke and tall buildings. Baudelaire desires to witness the “curling smoke; the pale moon’s witching spell” (14). The curling smoke again is a reference to the industrialization of Paris. The witching spell may be a reference to the supernatural myths surrounding Virgil’s
name. There is a sense of eternality again emphasized in the line: “Here will I watch each summer, spring, and fall” (15). The city is not a passing or fleeting landscape, but his home. A sense of permanence and belonging characterizes Baudelaire’s description of the city.

However, in the last stanza, Baudelaire expresses his desire to escape the urban world he inhabits to enter a world of dream: “I shall close all the doors and shutters tight, / And build my fairy castles in the night. / Then will I be transported in my dreams” (17-19). Here one sees the constant paradox haunting Baudelaire’s poetry. Although he engages with Parisian life, he is equally attracted to a domain stretching outside human consciousness, into the sphere of dream. Through immersion into reverie, Baudelaire escapes the industrialization and urban sprawl of Paris and enters an idyllic, pastoral world. This dream world is utopian and eternal: “Kisses galore, birds singing endlessly” (22), acting as a refuge from death and the plights of the material world. No one can rouse him from this place of reverie: “In vain / Will riot below, storm my windowpane” (23-24). He finds life and immortality in this dream world, as well as escape from the confines of the city.

Similarly, Aubrey Beardsley’s poem “The Ballad of a Barber” embodies the decadent aversion to natural beauty and adherence to artifice. “The Ballad of a Barber” tells the tale of an infamous barber: “The King, the Queen, and all the Court, / To no one else would trust their hair” (5-6). The barber transforms his clients into creatures of beauty through artificial means. The high stature of the people who attend his shop expresses his powers of transformation. The “reigning belles” of line seven “Owed their successes to his care.” The most coveted women owe their beauty to the high level of craftsmanship of the barber. Beardsley describes the barber’s
work as “his art,” which he would craft through the use of “All powders, paints, and subtle dyes” (17-18). The power is fully in the hands of the barber, as he is the agent of his art and his subjects.

Stanza six describes the Barber’s work as a magical means of transformation, merging the craftsmanship of the artist with the supernatural means of metamorphosis: “The curling irons in his hand / Almost grew quick enough to speak, / The razor was a magic wand / That understood the softest cheek” (21-24). This stanza stresses the power behind the barber’s ability to shape the beauty of his clients. His artistic ability is so strong, he is able to transform the unaesthetic into the aesthetic using magic, which has no boundaries. The barber has full command and control over his subjects until he meets the princess, who is naturally beautiful: “a pretty child, / Thirteen years old, or thereabout. / She was as joyous and as wild / As spring flowers when the sun is out” (37-40). The princess depicted is not only pulchritudinous, but naturally so, and is not reliant on the barber to create her beauty. She is compared to “spring flowers” and is both wild and joyous as is nature. Her joy comes as naturally as sun comes to a healthy spring flower.

The barber is rendered incapable of performance on confronting the girl’s beauty, unable to apply artifice to its antithesis: natural beauty. He thus begins to destroy his artist’s tools around him, breaking a bottle of cologne in his hands. This act is self-destructive and injurious to his art. As he destroys the bottle of cologne, once used as a product of transformation, he cuts his hand in a violent act: “Caroussel’s cut was sharp and deep.” He leaves his shop “softly as a dream / That leaves a sleeper to his sleep” (63-64). His work had encompassed the creation of illusion, relying on artifice to mask the natural. Unable to continue in the same
manner, he leaves his work in the same illusory sense, unattached to the real or the tangible world. He leaves softly as a dream, his actions reflecting the nature of his work. The tangible beauty of the young princess leaves him no further means of manipulation or creation, his vision destroyed. Its authenticity leaves no room for fantasy, and thus the barber is rendered useless as an artist. Beardsley expresses his own fear of emasculation as an artist through the debilitation of the barber. He demonstrates his aversion to the confiscation of his tools on confronting an inexplicable subject incapable of objectification. The subject surpasses the artist in its intense natural realism, reversing the prior power dynamic in which the artist had control over his art. The barber is ultimately hanged in his town for his reaction to the princess. His confrontation with natural beauty kills him; rendered useless as an artist, he has no further purpose. Once the artist is deactivated and destroyed, his life is no longer sustainable. The barber is the decadent poet who, relying fully on artifice, cannot work, or further live, in a natural world he cannot transform to his artistic vision.

“The Ballad of a Barber” presents two female archetypes central to decadent literature. As in Beardsley’s poem, the desirable woman is she who most closely resembles the art object. Her beauty is artificial, her natural identity hidden behind a mask of makeup and heavy perfumes. The decadents portray and desire women they are capable of objectifying. These women are like figures in a painting whose physical appearance is subject to the whim of the artist as she is merely his creation.

Arthur Symon’s poem “Javanese Dancers” contains one of these archetypal women. The subject of the poem is a mysterious and seductive dancer performing on stage. Within the first line the dancer is associated with artificial objects: “Twitched
strings, the clang of metal, beaten drums” (1). The sounds coming from the stage are cold, metallic, and disquieting. There is something unnatural and cloying about the use of “twitched,” “metal,” and “beaten” as Symon’s chosen adjectives in describing the setting of the poem. The word “twitched” connotes a feeling of physical uneasiness, even deformity. “Metal” brings a cold and inhuman air to the first few lines, while “beaten” hints at abuse or maltreatment. Though the object of this abuse is the drum, the use of “beaten” establishes an environment that seems violent, negative, and possibly dangerous. The dancer is heavily disguised by makeup: “Smiling between her painted lids” (5). She is like the customers in Beardsley’s “The Ballad of the Barber” who are transformed from their natural state through artificial means. Further, Beardsley describes her smile as “Motionless, unintelligible” (6). It is an unusual choice to describe a dancer, who is constantly in motion, as motionless. Beardsley attempts to render the dancer lifeless, perverting her natural function. The dancer’s smile is again described as lifeless in the fourth stanza, as, “inanimate” (14), her eyes “monotonously still” (13). In portraying the dancer in a position of stasis, Symons depicts the dancer as a corpse. Her agency is stripped away, and she becomes part of the perfumed, exotic world of the artificial and the non-living. She does not carry importance as an active agent, as there remains no action throughout the duration of the poem. Rather she is a half-dead spectacle onto which the spectator can displace his own fantasies.

However, her corpse-like body makes her desirable, as she is both mysterious and seductive, and also completely powerless in her objectification. Symons describes the action on stage: “The little amber-coloured dancers move, / Like little painted figures on a screen” (17-18). Her only power is derived from her ability to invoke a
reaction in the audience member who gazes upon her lifeless form. Therefore she is referred to in a condescending tone as a “little painted figure,” both artificial (painted) and of no real importance (little and figures). She embodies a possibility for fantasy as the art object lends power to the artist, powerless in its presence. Audience members are able to place their own fantasies onto the dancer because of her lifelessness, increasing their potential for dream and fantasy through the vitality of the imagination. As Baudelaire writes, woman “lives spiritually in the imaginations that she haunts” (Symons 49).

In decadent literature, once a woman becomes an active agent, she obtains the possibility of acquiring the same amount of power as the man, and is thus dangerous. This woman, who is natural, is depicted as false, weak, and cavalier. The love relations depicted in decadent poetry are often sick, slightly perverted, or ignominious once the woman has equal power. The man wishes to remain dominant in order to objectify the woman as the art object, fulfilling his artistic thirst. Unlike the dancer who is detached from ordinary life and human relation, the woman capable of a love relationship is also capable of deceit and dishonesty. Once brought out from the imaginary world, “woman” becomes a source of evil and destruction.

This archetypal fatal woman is depicted in Symon’s poem, “Episode of a Night of May.” The poem contains a heavy use of artificial light, which seems to color the entire mood of the poem. The first line of the poem reads, “The coloured lanterns lit the trees, the grass” (1). Here nature is modified by artificial light, thus changing the initial mood of the scene from one that is natural and healthy, to one that is somewhat tainted or sick. The trees and grass appear in a different light than they would if the sun were hitting them, the source of light in this instance false and
artificial, further removing the setting from the natural world. The use of “coloured lanterns” predominates the artificial over the natural. Further, the objects in the poem are inconstant, creating a sense of unease. The coloured lanterns of the first stanza create “rays” that “dappled like a delicate breeze / Each wine-illumined glass” (4-5). The light does not consistently illuminate an object as would the sun, but instead changes the appearance of the wine glasses depending on the movement of the trees. Dappled light is spotty and not whole, and is capable of changing the original appearance of an object. Here the object being transformed is a wine glass, suggesting intoxication. In the second stanza Symons describes the same light in a more direct manner: “The pink light flickered, and a shadow ran / Along the ground as couples came and went” (6-7). Both the light and the couples are unstable entities within the poem. The light is constantly going on and off, creating a chaotic feeling of impermanence. The couples drift through the poem like a fleeting dream enters the mind when asleep and vanishes once awake again. The mood set by Symons of inconstancy and artifice acts in opposition to the natural and the stable.

In the third stanza Symons focuses on a couple linked arm and arm. In the first line of the stanza they are smiling, but Symons abruptly disrupts the closeness of the couple, describing their smiles in the second line of the stanza as “chilly.” The man and the woman become incapable of speaking to one another, and like the flickering pink light, the couple’s “words came few, / And pauses fell at whiles” (11-12). There is a cold disconnect between the couple, their smiles reflecting the static night air. The woman remains depleted of emotion, seemingly complacent and accepting of their quiet hostility. Her boredom is passive and impassionate as “she yawned prettily,” accepting in a ladylike manner the man’s silence. The man, in a bathetic
attempt to revive the romance, lights a cigar, pours more wine, and gazes at the landscape. Symons mocks the common interests of the bourgeoisie including a passive and slightly disinterested focus on “the newest opera” (17) or “Alphonse Daudet’s last romance” (19). The couple’s relationship resembles Daudet’s novels: bourgeois, lacking in originality, and ultimately false. The couple attempts to discuss grandiose subjects such as “Love, Immortality,” but “the talk ran down / To these mere lees” (21). The couple ends up in “tortured ennui” and pursues “hollow speech.” The woman again yawns, but this time it is to “hide a frown” (23). The couple is in a state of agonizing disinterest, boredom, and depression. They are aggravated by each other’s presence, yet instead of caring “to say / The word that mars a perfect night of May” (26-27) and relieve one another from the deadening silence, the couple remains quiet and artificially polite.

Three levels of artificiality are depicted in this poem. The first is the artificial quality of the light, which sets a false and inverted environment by perverting nature. The artificial light is also inconstant, suggesting a lack of substance or sustainability. The second layer of artificiality is the falsity surrounding the couple’s love for each other. The couple attempts to rectify their relationship by bringing up bourgeois topics of conversation, but instead of embracing one another, the couple becomes cold, disinterested, and bitter. The third level of artificiality lies in the couple’s inability to confront each other. Their silence demonstrates their unwillingness to communicate their true sentiments. Symons makes a clear separation here between sensuality and love. The sensuality of the dancer in his poem “Javanese Dancers” is a desirable and powerful force, the dancer disguised by an artificial mask of makeup and perfume. Conversely, the love between the man and woman in “Episode of a
Night of May” is false and thus undesirable in that it lacks true sentiment and is supported by deceit crafted through silence. Therefore the artificiality of the dancer is a desirable form of artificiality associated with art and the masking of nature, whereas the lack of depth involved in the couple’s relationship is an undesirable form of artificiality. In these two poems, Symons presents the reader with two archetypal women. The dancer is the desirable woman who exists within a sustainable medium, and the average woman is the detested woman whose power is too great. In this instance, sensuality and love are completely separated. Sensuality is associated with the aesthetics of the dancer: perfume, color, exoticism, morbidity, cruelty, and perversion, all of which are desirable to the decadents. Love, on the other hand, is associated with the mundane and ordinary, falsity and bathos.

Decadent writers were not the only artists of the period who portrayed prostitutes, dancers, and heavily made-up women in their work. Painters of the same Movement produced portraits of women in elaborate costumes, using bright and evocative colors to portray their brass artificiality. The nineteenth-century French painter Toulouse Lautrec is an example of such a painter. Lautrec constantly visited brothels, moving in with prostitutes for weeks at a time. He used these women as art objects, choosing to paint these prostitutes in their working environments in order to reveal the connection between their work and their characters. The prostitutes of Paris thus became useful art objects for Lautrec due to their powerless situations, allowing him to manipulate the prostitute to his vision.

Lautrec spent most of his adult life in Montmartre in Paris, at the time the center of cabaret. He was a frequenter of the Moulin Rouge and created a lithograph in 1891 entitled “Moulin Rouge: La Goulue.” In this lithograph Lautrec portrays a
female dancer of the Moulin Rouge entertaining an almost completely darkened audience. She is the only object in the lithograph depicted in color, besides the bright yellow lights in the background, automatically associating the dancer with the artificial lights. The blackened audience forms a circle around the dancer in the foreground of the poster. One man, an audience member, passes the whole scene with an air of disgust. He closes his eyes to the scene and holds up his right hand in dismissal of the dancer, refusing to associate himself with the rest of the audience. The dancer remains the central focal point of the lithograph with her bright red stockings, high heels, flowing white skirt, poka-dot top, and very blonde hair in an elaborate up-do. She is by far the most extravagantly made-up person in the scene and is the audience’s main focus. The dancer, la Goulou, is performing the scandalous chahut a “can can” type dance in which her right leg is extended upwards in the air. She is immediately sexualized by the provocative position of her legs and her elaborate and suggestive costume, which flares up exposing her undergarments to the audience. Her face, on the other hand, carries an expression of grief and pain. She is pale and looks exhausted; her eyes appear to be half-closed and encircled by black lines. Her mouth is turned downwards in a slight frown, though she looks more sad and life-less than angry. Her face is strikingly juxtaposed with her body, which is animated and in motion.

Unlike the dancer in Symon’s poem, “The Javanese Dancer” whose face is fully disguised by heavy makeup, la Goulou’s face is openly exposed. However, both women are connected in their full or partial stasis. The brightly lit yellow lights in the background of Lautrec’s lithograph help to display the perversity of the scene. The contrast between the dancer’s body and face suggests a complete disconnect between
her personal will and her situation. La Goulou’s agency stripped away, she is a puppet whose objective becomes to please. The man passing in the foreground rejects a more personal relationship with the dancer, refusing to gaze upon her as she dances. She is thus left a stilted, weakened object sustained only by the movement of her feet. Lautrec treats women similarly to Symons and Beardsley, who objectify these women by stripping them of their humanity.

The morbid and erotic subject matter portrayed in the works of the decadents mentioned above are a result of the artistic revolutions in artistic form stemming from the romantic period. The decadent period brings the controversial subject matter produced by Byron, Berlioz, Delacroix, Wagner, and Baudelaire to a greater extreme by further abandoning tradition and convention, and continuing the immersion into dream and the unconscious. The romantic fascination with death, sexuality, and indeterminacy is heightened in this period.
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