

Baudelaire's Quest for 'New' in *The Flowers of Evil*

Amitabh Roy

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Abstract: Baudelaire, the most discussed Modernist city poet was a master of symbolism. He did not only follow the long nurtured symbols of traditional poetic world, rather created his own symbols which are new, interesting and enthralling. His use of images and symbols makes his poetry a complete tale of darkness and ennui. Still a hidden desire of 'new' makes him stand apart from other poets of symbolism and modernity. Baudelaire's so called dark poetry needs much closer reading and analysis in order in order to delve deep. Unlike a typical storyteller, Baudelaire does not like to express his thoughts and feelings in an explicit manner. Rather, he enjoys the poetic bliss and leaves certain things for readers to imagine. His cunning use of images and symbols give his poetry a beautiful grandeur. Though most of the critics label him 'anti-life' and worshipper of death; a careful study of his used symbols may lead a researcher towards a hidden treasure house of optimistic future. The hope of a 'new' dawn is buried under his utmost disgust, angst and sense of overwhelming despair. It is left to the readers to interpret his poems based on their own perception.

Keywords: Dark, Despair, Ennui, Symbolism, Modernity.

Baudelaire, a precursor of Symbolist movement in literature and an isolated genius of the nineteenth century France became a universally acclaimed name in the days after his death. Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* (The Flowers of Evil), a classic of modern poetry presents a new kind of images. Baudelaire's sonnet 'Correspondences' included in *Les Fleurs du Mal* is one of the seminal influence of Symbolist movement. His *spiritus mundi* is replete with dark and despondent symbols in an apparent look, but if we care to delve further, a new vision of meaning opens before our eyes. Though much attention has been paid towards the 'evil' by the critics, we should not overlook the 'flowers' that Baudelaire has found here also.

Unlike the Romantics, Baudelaire turned his back towards green meadows, charming greeneries and solitary country life. The vast sky is no more important to him like Wordsworth or Keats; his poetry is based on the hard reality of city quarters, prison house, morgue, monasteries among others. Sweetest songs of skylark and nightingale were replaced by saddest thoughts of stifled city – life. As London was to William Blake, Paris was to Baudelaire. The traumatic life experiences completed the gradual process of Baudelaire's alienation. This was the inevitable source of the images and symbols that later came to dominate Baudelaire's poetry.

Images and symbols employed by the poet can be classified in different ways, but the most convenient one is to classify them according to Baudelaire's ideas of good and evil. Baudelaire was fond of solitude from his childhood. He wrote in one of his letters to his mother that there was nothing he liked "better than to be alone". He believed in the regenerative and redemptive value of solitude. Images of monks and monasteries haunted him. He attributes Robinson Crusoe's salvation to solitude. So we read in '*Artist Unknown*'

No illustrious tombstones ornament
The lonely churchyard where I often go
to hear my heart, a muffled drum, parade
incognito. (quoted in Howard 21)

Opposed to the images of glory and purity are the images of sin. In the poem '*To the Reader*' we find beside the Devil and Satan, numerous creatures as the world appears a zoo of vices:

But here among the scorpions and the hounds,
the jackals, apes and vultures, snakes and wolves,
monsters that howl and growl and squeal and crawl
in all the squalid zoo of vices. (quoted in Howard 5)

Baudelaire's portrayal of ugly, wicked and fastidious monster presents before us a horrific picture of 'frenzied gestures' and 'savage cries'. This world of boredom and scattered filth make one feel suffocated yet with no scope for escape. Baudelaire finds the free flowing invisible 'stream of death' inevitable.

In '*To a Madonna*', he proposes to turn
the Seven Deadly Sins into keen swords
as a remorseful executioner. (quoted in Howard 64)

This image of seven deadly sins is reminiscent of Marlowe's Doctor Faustus. The damned soul of Doctor Faustus might be a parallel Baudelaire wants to draw with mankind in general. The signing of treaty between Faustus and Satan to hand over his soul might be the event that led Baudelaire to think about human destiny in general. This is not a matter of choice on part of human beings, rather a true vocation of 'self inflicted and self observed suffering' which for them is indispensable. Thus the imagery of sword and executioner become associated with sin. Images of vampire and damned women also appear in some of his poems.

Baudelaire was deeply concerned about death and a number of his poems deal with death. Tomb, corpse, worms, blood are all mentioned in the poetry of Baudelaire. An entire section of *Les Fleurs du Mal* is devoted to death which finds sufficient room in other sections too. Time is "the hidden enemy that gnaws our heart" and "feeds on the blood we lose" thereby causing our death (The Enemy). The poet does not hesitate to tell his beloved that time will make her "sleep alone beneath a marble slab" one day (Posthumous Regret). Nobody can help it as "the grave is covetous" (Autumnas). Death is violent sometimes like "the gasping of a wounded soldier left behind a lake of blood" (The Cracked Bell). Decomposition follows death and the poet gives an elaborate description of it in the 'Carrion'. Gallows, a means of violent death are mentioned in '*The Voyage to Cytherea*'. Though death is also the favourite theme of British romantics, Baudelaire's death is different. It strikes its blow hardly, does not offer any soothing effect or make anybody calm. It is portrayed as a necessary evil.

There are moments, however, when the despairing being seeks a quick death. Thus, in '*Craving for Oblivion*' we find: "Avalanche. Entomb me in your fall'. In '*The Happy Corpse*', the poet plans to dig himself "a nice deep grave" and hopes that the worms "will welcome a happy corpse". He prefers such a death to the lies of "testaments and tombstones". Death is also a escape from misery and boredom. It is also an adventure, a voyage, because

We can plunge

to Hell or Heaven – any abyss will do –

deep in the unknown to know the new. (quoted in Howard 157)

Death, atlast, is thus transformed into "old admiral" from "the hidden enemy". Baudelaire's choice of death as a major theme of his

poems reminds one of Jibanananda Das, a modern Bengali poet of the 20th century. Jibanananda, apparently choosing opposite stand in respect of his contemporaries, also told grossly about malice of city life, death, darkness and other trivial things like ‘morgue’, ‘moth’ and ‘flying fox’ among others which generally remain outside poetic imagination. Only a minute observer of ongoing life drama can pay heed to such otherwise neglected insects, human beings or inevitable but unwanted event like ‘death’. Baudelaire’s influence perhaps turned so many other poets towards such dark and gloomy representation of life.

Images of night, darkness and cold are frequent in Baudelaire, and they symbolize human suffering. This suffering is inevitable; like living in front of a mirror no matter how horrific the reflection is. In ‘*Punishment of Pride*’, night and silence appear as the punishment of blasphemy.

Night and silence were its tenants now,

as in a cellar when the key is lost. (quoted in Howard 24)

In the *Spleen* (IV), “the earth becomes a trickling dungeon” and the sun pours down “on us a daylight dingier than the dark.” There are occasions

When the sky appears in pain

and sunset no more than a wound. (quoted in Howard 79)

The traditional way of looking towards sunset is completely reversed by Baudelaire who finds ‘wound’ in it. Even the sky, so called guardian image of Romantic poetry is in pain for the poet. Such approach is not only daring but also symbolically significant.

Darkness and silence are also sources of solace to the person who is insulted and injured and craving for privacy and solitude. Thus, we find in ‘*Obsession*’, “I long for darkness, silence, nothing there” (Baudelaire 77).

As for coldness, even the sun is frozen in Baudelaire’s world:

A frozen sun hangs overhead in six months

the other six, the earth is in its shroud

no trees, no water, not one creature here

a wasteland naked as the polar north! (Baudelaire 36-37)

A poet who feels deeply about the eternal problems of human life often resorts to symbols to convey the depth of his meaning.

Baudelaire's poetry abounds in symbols. We can but discuss only some of them here. The main symbols he uses are lid, prison, port, ship, hospital, room and city. Some of these symbols are open to different interpretations and we can, in such cases, attempt only a tentative explanation of them.

City, according to Victor Brombert, offers the poet "the reassurance of lapidary stasis, as well as the spectacle of mobility and freedom. The modern metropolis, with its fugacious crowds, its hidden quarters, its horrors and its hell, becomes the symbol of a metaphysical paradox: freedom and necessity co – exist." (Brombert, 148). Baudelaire himself discovered there "astonishing harmony" as well as "tumult of human freedom" (Baudelaire, 111).

Port represents, "the ideal locus of controlled dreams and a dandyish equilibrium between movement and immobility." (Brombert, 137). So, he concludes that port is nothing more than "the setting for a safe reverie about departure". Whether such conclusion is just to a poet who wants to "plunge to Hell or Heaven" remains an open question. For Baudelaire, port may not mean an entry point especially after his escape from the journey of life. The poet with a desire of finding something new may use the image of port as a beginning of a new voyage in which he dreams of landing in a land pregnant with possibilities.

Room for Baudelaire is a room of his own. It does not offer any cosy comfort or safe harbour as seen traditionally. It is, instead, a symbol of "paralyzing ennui, of temporal oppression, of the implacable tyranny of all deadlines." In Brombert's opinion this "room becomes an asylum, an insular or monastic refuge in the metaphoric city ocean where church steeples are the masts, and the soul is in constant danger of ship wreck." Baudelaire's city poetry reflects "the anonymity of the crowd and the privacy of the room are complementary attractions" (Brombert, 137).

Baudelaire feels keenest affinities with Edgar Allan Poe who thought that all of America was a "vast prison". The same idea is expressed by the poet when he compares the sky to a lid in '*The Lid*'. It is pertinent here to note that an engraving by Goya obsessed the poet much and it depicted a victim by trying to emerge from his tomb, while evil spirits pushed down with all their might on the stone he would never be able to lift. In fact, lid, container, hospital and prison belong to the same category and represent guilt and grief of living.

Ship symbolises a longing for escape. This escape may mean departure from the problems of life, a life full of suffering and despair. It seems that escape from this world is not possible as it is a reflected existence. But, it may also mean a longing for change, for the unknown, for the infinite, for the spiritual. That the second meaning is applicable in case of Baudelaire is evident from his poems. In 'Owls', we find:

..... impassioned by passing shadows,
 man will always be scourged
 for trying to change his place. (quoted in Howard 70)

This world of materialistic craving replete with debit and credit is not the kind of world a creative heart craves for. Rather, a world devoid of materialistic day to day craving is what the poet longs to have. The poet wants spiritual existence where trivial din and bustle is absurd and alienated from worldly affairs is possible. This search is the search for eternity, free from any humdrum reality. 'Ship' is nothing but a vehicle to transport the poet to this world of immense possibilities. The poem 'Travellers' concludes with the desire to plunge "deep in the unknown to find the new." So, the ship cannot represent immobility or passivity as alleged by Victor Brombert.

Abyss is a symbol that occurs in some of his poems. The meaning of the word is not much disputed. It stands for depth as well as some major obstacle one must overcome to reach one's goal. It is frightening as well as challenging. It, therefore, represents the striving of the soul to attain its goal.

A plentiful of images and symbols are found in *Les Fleurs du Mal*. The image of flower which starts from the title of the book should not be mistaken as something indicating towards evil. Though the soil and background is of evil, Baudelaire is able to have his flowers in it. Though he had his flowers of evil in one hand, he could daringly assert on the other hand; 'I dream of new flowers.'

The soil of mournfulness and air of darkness can only produce the flowers of evil. Therefore, Baudelaire's nomenclature definitely points towards the natural process of regeneration. But when he simultaneously dreams of 'new' flowers, it should be considered as something noteworthy. The poet is not confined within the narrowness of something already produced; he wants a new beginning. This relentless quest for something 'new' makes him an iconoclast who dreams of 'paradiso' even though resides in 'inferno'. His poetry serves as 'purgatorio' through which he passes and dares to dream of heaven.

A careful study of these images and symbols establish Baudelaire as a poet of affirmation. He not only revealed the dark existence, he nurtured a silent hope of the bright dawn. He knew well that darkness of night gives birth to a new dawn. Such hidden assertion of affirmative outlook remains unnoticed by most of Baudelaire's critics. He is, therefore, easily marked as 'poet of death' or worshipper of negativity. The monarch of 'symbolism' kept his vision of 'new' dawn hidden under a garb of darkness and ennui. Unfortunately, critics do not pay attention to this hidden hint of positivity and affirmation. A close reading of his so called dark poetry reveals before us a ray of hope which is otherwise subdued by his lifelong bitter experiences and misfortune.

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