

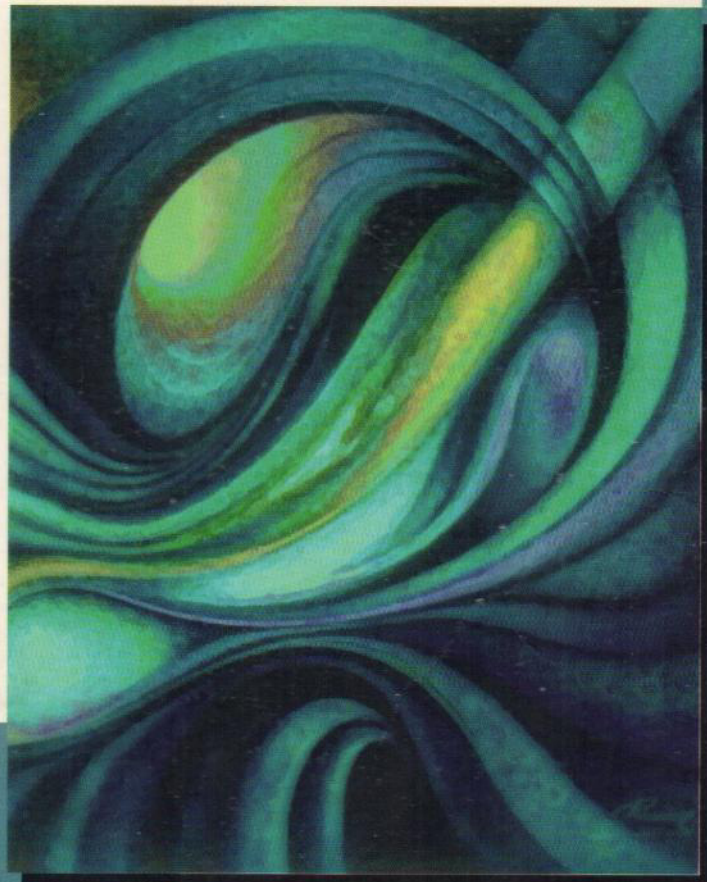
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Assertion of Life in Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* with Special Reference to his 'Voyage' Poems

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Baudelaire's biography displays "almost everything that makes life not worth living".¹ He was denied parental love and care as his father died at six and he could not adjust with his stepfather. He was unhappy at school and the women who encountered him in life were mostly exploiting. Though his father left a legacy, circumstances forced him to live like a pauper. His literary merits were recognized only after his death and the publisher who was sympathetic to him turned bankrupt. Thus subjected to nervous tensions, he developed a temperament, which is generally described as morbid.

Critics tend to relate his work to his personal life and temperament and label it as anti-life. Aldous Huxley and Lionel Johnson call him a 'dread Satanist', while G.T. Clapton discovers a 'tragic Sophist' in him. Eric Auerbach declares: "He invoked the forces of faith and transcendence only in so far as they could be used as weapons against life, or as symbols of escape."² But the harshest criticism of Baudelaire seems to have been penned by Abu Sayeed Aiyub who finds his deepest feelings devoid of objectivity, that is, unreal and goes on to call him a woman-hater, misanthrope and escapist.³ Eliot⁴ and Brereton⁵ have defended him against most of such criticism, but it would be better to have a fresh look on his work and draw our own conclusions.

Earlier poets in France, with the exception of Villon, cared for the bright aspect of life only. Baudelaire had a keen eye for the dark and ugly. So nothing that was gloomy, evil and annoying escaped his notice. He himself declared: "In my universe there is no light, you will find only

squalor and boredom. In my world, you will experience overwhelming sense of evil.

Besides the theme of hurrying time, the theme of spleen occurs again and again in his poetry. Spleen is a condition also known as ennui and degout. It is the 'fastidious monster' of the searing apostrophe 'To the Reader' which introduces the 'Les Fleurs du Mal'. It is one of the forces, which paralyse virtue, activity and life itself. Irony, remorse, irremediable these are the key words in the poetry of Baudelaire.

Death is the subject matter of at least fifteen poems in the 'Les Fleurs du Mal' as no less than ten poems in sections other than 'Death' refer directly to death. Darkness, isolation and despair appear and reappear in his poems. Thus, he says in the opening stanza of the poem 'The Enemy'

My youth was nothing but a lowering storm
occasionally lanced by sudden suns;
torrential rains have done their work so well
that no fruit ripens in my garden now.⁶

In a similar vein he laments in 'De Profundis Clamavi':

A frozen sun hangs overhead 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!⁷

In 'The Irreparable' he asks how 'the martyrs of the road' will find their way and concludes with the sad remark: "No creature made of flesh will come to me!"⁸ The above suffices to show that though his world is dark or because of it, he wants to get out of darkness.

Similarly, when Baudelaire speaks about whores, vampire, vermin, heap of rubbish, sinking corpse, etc. we cannot conclude that he hates them. He is aware of the fact that 'sinful cravings' do not lead to satisfaction, that 'Lesbos' and 'Damned Women' are sinning against him and his pity cannot save them.⁹ It is, first of all, a spiritual impotence that makes the poet attend to the evil and the ugly too. He is inspired by the sun that visits "palace and hospital" alike¹⁰ and does not spare even "licentious beds".¹¹ Secondly, he held that beauty could be distilled out of "ugliness as beauty to him was a flame of fire generated by the spiritual shock the artist received and such a shock could come even from objects considered ugly".¹²

Like darkness, abyss and confinement are the constant worries of Baudelaire. Abyss means rest to the dead, it awakens fear of falling or sinking in the living. Even Icarus finds his "pinions fail".¹³ Haunted by "unending nightmares on unending dark", man finds himself confined in the space by "Numbers and Beings".¹⁴ In one of Baudelaire's poems the sky becomes the "black lid of that enormous pot in which innumerable generations boil".¹⁵ In the other "the skies are low and heavy as a lid" and the "earth becomes a trickling dungeon".¹⁶ Is it not natural then to strive for light and freedom?

The poet gives his answer in the well-known poem 'owls'. The wise in the world learn from the posture of owls to shun "motion and commotion" but that is not the way of ordinary mortals:

...impassioned by passing shadows,
man will always be scourged
for trying to change his place.¹⁷

Generally, this poem is taken to be a gospel of immobility and other poems are interpreted accordingly. But the meaning is quite clear; man cannot help moving onward or upward, even though he has to suffer for it. Icarus and albatross move upward, travelers in a ship move onward.

What makes the movement difficult is the frailty of human beings who feel "two simultaneous and contradictory attractions—one towards God and one towards Satan". So a conflict between aspirations and reality becomes inevitable. It is not without the reason, therefore, that the first section of the 'Les Fleurs du Mal' is called 'Spleen and Ideal'. Subsequent sections indicate varying experiences and moods the traveler called human being gathers at different stages.

The poet notes that Satan uses women sometimes to lead men astray, which we find in the poem 'Destruction'. His experiences in love are far from happy:

In love I've sought an hour's oblivion—
but love to me is a pallet stuffed with pins
that drains away my blood for whores to drink!
(The Fountain of Blood)¹⁸

That explains the reality about the woman-hater Baudelaire is alleged to be. May I add here that holy people like Shankaracharya have called woman 'a door to Hell'?

What incites Baudelaire to revolt against God and Jesus in his deep concern for human race in general and the dispossessed and deprived in particular. Anybody who cares to read 'Saint Peter's Denial' and 'Abel & Cain' will not dispute it. 'Satan's Litanies' betrays his sympathy for the outcast, the despised. How can we brand such a poet misanthrope? The poet declares in the 'Saint Peter's Denial'; "I shall be satisfied to quit/ a world where action is no kin to dreams."¹⁹ Therefore, it becomes difficult to take him for a partisan of inaction.

The opening line of one of the voyage poem 'Man and Sea' significantly says: "Man—a free man—always loves the sea."²⁰ It is motion that makes him compare a charming woman to a fine ship in the poem, 'The Fine Ship':

Walk, and your wide skirts swirl with every step,
as if a fine ship had put out to sea
under full sail, riding the waves
to a gentle rhythm, indolent and slow.²¹

We cannot dismiss the fact that the idea of voyage occurs in some of his well-known poems. In the poem 'Moesta et Errabunda' he asks his beloved if she does not sometimes long to escape from the "black sea", namely, "the filth of the city" to "a virgin sea". He himself wants to go to "the innocent paradise of timid joys" and says:

'Far from regret, from crime, from suffering,
by wheel or sail, just take me anywhere'²²

In 'Invitation to the Voyage' he invites his beloved to live together in a world of bliss. The picture of that world shows the ideal he seeks:

All is order there, and elegance
pleasure, peace, and opulence.²³

It is refrain that occurs thrice in the poem and leaves no doubt that the voyage is that of love life and its goal is conjugal bliss.

'A Voyage to Cythera' describes a journey to an island supposed to be green with myrtle and full of roses in bloom. The ship sails under a cloudless sky and dazzling sun. The poet feels extremely happy as the journey begins. But all his illusions about the fabulous island are shattered to pieces as he lands on it and finds it barrenest of all lands. He discovers there the corpse of a hanged man, which is being eaten by birds and beasts. That turns everything "bloody and black" for the poet. He identifies the corpse with his own image and cries out:

On Aphrodite's island all I found
was a token gallows where my image hung...
Lord give me strength and courage to behold
My body and my heart without disgust!²⁴

The voyage here is obviously symbolic and depicts the end that awaits the life of sensuous pleasures. It also expresses the remorse for the life the poet himself has led.

Critics like Victor Brombert have found nothing but "passivity", "non-occurrence of voyage" and "false departure" in the voyage poems.²⁵ The discussion so far, I think, has demonstrated that such criticism is wide of the mark. The voyage in the poems is symbolic and the poems are not chronicles, but simply the records of his feelings and aspirations. Charges of inaction and immobility have some relevance to social activist; they hardly mean anything to a literary critic.

'Travellers', the last poem in the section 'Death' was suitably chosen in the second edition of the 'Les Fleurs du Mal' to conclude the book. It records the poet's preparedness for the final, inevitable journey, that is, death. It also sums up the experiences of human life. Desires lead people from place to place but the El Dorado or the Promised Land simply eludes them and the truth they arrive at is that human beings are but "Oases of fear in the wasteland of ennui". Attempts to cheat time are futile and the desire to "forget the prison of our days" is strong. So the poet welcomes the 'old admiral' Death and implores him:

...this country wearies us. Put out to sea!
What if the waves and winds are black as ink,
Our hearts are filled with light.²⁶

The fact that the "hearts are filled with light" indicates that the last journey is not going to be full of despair. The poet feels assured of the mercy of God that alone can save him. The poem ends with a courageous note:

...we can plunge
to Hell or Heaven—any abyss will do—
deep in the Unknown to find the new!²⁷

Hell and Heaven here stand for pain and pleasure respectively and show the poet's indifference to both. He knows that suffering is "the best and purest essence which prepares the strong in spirit for divine delight", that pain is the "nobility upon which Hell itself cannot encroach".²⁸

Obviously suffering has brought light to his heart and given him courage to plunge in the unknown.

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