

BAUDELAIRE'S EXPERIMENTS WITH TIME

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What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish ? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images

T.S.Eliot, *The Waste Land*

Readers have come to associate Baudelaire with black beauty, hashish; and sordid images of corruption, decay and evil. But these images were only refuges for a tormented man. Torn between an idealism that made him profoundly religious and a sensualism that was intensely candid, Baudelaire was in no fit condition to meet the challenges of life. An unhappy childhood and a step-father had added much of bitterness to his life. Hungering for love and understanding, he learnt to respond with a stubborn resistance to his step-father's military discipline. Foiled in his attempts to bring the young man under control, this step-father, Colonel Aupick, decided to send him away to India. Baudelaire made the journey upto Mauritius, which was then a French colony, and would go no further. He drank in all the exotic beauty of the island, which came to symbolize for him the sensuousness of the East. Then he returned to his homeland to declare that he was of age and to claim his patrimony. But he quickly squandered away the property that he inherited, and came face to face with life in the raw which the Bohemian Quartier Latin offers. But this also made him think that he was free to experiment with life and to dedicate himself to art.

Baudelaire was the first European poet to show an intense awareness of, and concern with, the condition of modern man. He conceived of modern man as surrounded by a heap of broken beliefs, the debris of shattered systems. Amidst that rubble he found and reared those *fleurs du mal* which have not faded for us even to-day. The *fleurs* are the symbols of the desire to experiment in life and in writing, and of the desire. They are rooted in a profound *ennui*, which Baudelaire seeks to escape. In his attempts to diagnose his own suffering, he tried to gain a better understanding of its causes. He felt that the chief cause of his suffering was the contradictory pull of past and future which prevented him from exploiting or enjoying his life (= the present). He is particularly obsessed by the past, which brings with it the remembrance of sins committed, and contaminates the present. Instead of helping man in his dealings with life, the past is an evil which stifles him, and like *un nuage affreux*, cuts him off from the real Modern man, whom the poet exemplifies, thus isolated from the flow of life, becomes a stranger to the world in which he lives, an alien incapable of action. In that condition all effort becomes futile, and man is no better than a lifeless object lost in the desert of silent, unfamiliar things. It is this experience that Baudelaire expresses imagistically in a poem like "La Cloche Fêlée". The suffering and stifling of the self under a weight of remorse is the condition of *ennui*, which in a more virulent form becomes *spleen*. There are several poems which express this mood of spleen. Spleen, which according to the poet, is the very essence of evil is presented in lurid colours, and is represented as the typical malady of modern life. The connection of spleen with the past leads Baudelaire to meditate on the nature of time.

What is the nature of time? That is a question more likely to interest a philosopher or a scientist than a poet. Yet Baudelaire was almost obsessed with the problem of time. He considered time was at the root of all the happenings in man's life. When Baudelaire contemplated the emptiness in his own and in modern man's life, he felt this emptiness could be traced to a sense of frustration, of being trapped in time. He sees a continual threat in the clock,

Horloge ! dieu sinistre, effrayant, impossible,
Dont le doigt nous menace et nous dit: 'Souviens-toi.'¹

In poem after poem, Baudelaire speaks of the destructive power of time; "Le Temps mange la vie" It is time which has condemned man to falsehood, error and *ennui*. In viewing time as a part of reality, Baudelaire seems to anticipate the modern scientists' concept of time as the fourth dimension of reality. But, Baudelaire asks, could man never get free from the bondage to time? In despair, the poet defies

.... l'ennemi vigilante et funeste,
Le temps!²

In his prose-poem, "La chambre double", Baudelaire imagines what would happen if one could get away from this dimension of time. He gives us two views of a single situation, an ordinary living room with and without the time element. First, we have the room in its time-less aspect. Everything appears strange, the curtains and the furniture different from anything we know of in daily life:

Les meubles ont des formes allongées, prostrées, alonguies. Les meubles ont l'air de rever; on les dirait douées d'une vie somnambulique.... ..

Ici tout a la suffisante clarté et la délicieuse obscurité de l'harmonie.³ This dream-like qualities, the beauty and clarity, are the result of the absence of but one element to which we are accustomed, namely time. The magic and solitude of this state of freedom from time gives place to another. The magic is shattered by a knock at the door, which brings in the detested bailiff. With his entry the world of familiarity returns. This change is also brought home to the poet by the ticking of the clock:

Oui ! le temps règne: il a répris sa brutelle dictature.

The awareness of time brings with it memory, and memory brings in the past.

The poem suggests the distinction of two kinds of time, giving rise to two kinds of experience. The first experience is one in which the present moment has been frozen into eternity, resulting in paradisiacal bliss and vision. This state of happiness cannot be sustained for long: the poet falls back into the other experience, depressing and frightful. He is continuously aware of the clock signalling the minutes of present which are slipping into the past thus ever increasing its pressure. But the experience of escape from *ennui* and the past makes him fondly hope for another opportunity to escape from clock-time. In the poem "Le voyage", he conceives of such an attempt at freedom in the journey of a consciousness made in defiance of time and space,

Nous voulons voyager sans vapeur et sans voile!
Faites, pour égayer l'ennui de nos prisons,⁴

and reaching a different kind of time and of reality. The perception of a time other than that measured by clocks has important and far-reaching implications for Baudelaire. It was a step toward that transcendental reality which was the goal of the Symbolist poets of the time. The Symbolist imagination "dédaigne la représentation nette et lumineuse du monde extérieure,"⁵ because it aspired to something beyond the present, the here and now. To Baudelaire, nature was "un forêt de symboles" through which he passed towards a higher

reality. He was convinced that dreams free men from the pressures of clock-time, and give him a glimpse into that reality which is beyond the material world: "le bon sens nous dit que les choses de la terre n'existent que bien peu, et que la vraie réalité n'est que dans les rêves."⁶ Thus Baudelaire revolted against Newtonian Physics which regarded the objective world constituted by "the vast mathematical system whose regular motions according to mechanical principles"⁷ was the source of our knowledge of reality, and which associated material reality with the common view of time as a linear progression. Baudelaire believed that the poet has a special insight into reality, but that insight tends to get lost or rubbed off when he flows along the stream of time. The monotonous insistence of clock-time induces in him the mood of *ennui*. Baudelaire sought a release from this mood by an emergence into a new time, continuous and eternally present. The consciousness of this new time opens up a vista of things co-existing on parallel planes of reality. We have a glimpse of such a consciousness at work in "La chambre double." The difference between the two kinds of time and of the two kinds of reality is brought out by Baudelaire with great difficulty. He distinguishes, for instance, two conditions, "d'un élément éternel, invariable, dont la qualité est excessivement difficile à déterminer, et d'un élément relatif, circonstanciel."⁸ It is interesting to note that later both philosophy and science gave credence to what seemed in Baudelaire mere speculation. The visionary time, of which Baudelaire is not able to give a complete explanation in discursive terms, finds a parallel in Bergson's exposition of *la durée*. The *durée* has no 'before' or 'after'; it is a continuous 'present.' Bergson compares it to music, where each note is separate, yet dependent for its effect on all the other notes, "une phrase musicale qui serait toujours sur le point de finir et sans cesse se modifierait tous sa totalité par l'addition de quelque note nouvelle."⁹ The *durée* helps to gather all the experiences we have had, whether we had been conscious of them or not. It arranges all the moments of experience into a simultaneous order (—thus the past becomes present—) which is always in the making.

Bergson distinguished between two faculties in man — intellect and intuition. The former concerns itself with quantitative factors, while the latter enables us to experience everything qualitatively. Intuition gives us access to the *durée*, or what Baudelaire called *le moment*. Reality is what we experience through the *durée*. The *durée* helps the poet to get free from the sense of linear progression in time, and to become aware of the new time in which the divisions of past, present and future yield to a simultaneity in which the *moment* becomes a microcosm of eternity. Such attitudes to reality were latter

strengthened by Einsteinian Physics which posits an extralogical universe where causality and time are no longer certitudes.

It is worth noting that Baudelaire insists that the disastrous effects of chronological time can be transcended only by utilizing time, by willed action in time and within the limits of the poet's human condition "On ne peut oublier le temps qu'en se'en servant."¹⁰ In our own times Eliot has expressed a similar standpoint when he says, 'Only through time time is conquered.'¹¹ The journey of the poetic consciousness, in its attempt to conquer time, leads the poet towards the abyss of the Unknown, which he seeks to explore,

Plonger au fond du gouffre, Enfer ou Ciel, qu'importe ?
Au fond de l' Inconnu .

But, *le gouffre* did not claim Baudelaire, nor did he get transfixed on its brink. Knowledge of the Unknown was not his goal, but only a step in his attainment of greater understanding of reality. He did not dwell on the *idéal*, like Mallarmé. He was no visionary devoted to absolute reality, nor did he seek to communicate to the reader a vision in all its purity, because, perhaps, he felt, like Eliot later, that "human kind/cannot bear very much reality." Though Baudelaire had an interest in the spiritual, his search for reality was not that of a philosopher or a mystic. His concern with reality was that of an artist, and he was still a man speaking to men. Baudelaire believed that he had no right to cut himself off from life as it is lived by men: "Quiconque n'accepte pas les conditions de la vie, vend son ame." He thus resolutely accepted the actualities, however sordid and painful they might be, and tried to integrate them into his vision. That is why we find in Baudelaire's poetry that curious mixture of spirituality and sordid urban imagery. This may seem paradoxical to the reader. But Baudelaire had a special use for urban imagery, which became a sort of lever to the timeless reality. He found a great deal of ugliness, vice, and suffering in the city of Paris which was, in his times, passing through a process of rapid, unplanned industrialization. Baudelaire felt, at one stage of his career, that only by a complete acceptance of the harsh details of the sensuous world, particularly its ugliness and suffering, could he transcend them. His technique of transforming urban images into *états d'ame* which gave him awareness of a deeper reality, added a new dimension to his poetry. As Eliot has said,

"it is not merely in the use of imagery of the sordid life of a great metropolis but in the elevation of such imagery to the first *intensity* — presenting it as it is, and yet making it represent something much more

than itself — that Baudelaire has created a mode of release and expression for other men.”¹²

Both Laforgue and Eliot were strongly influenced by Baudelaire in their use of urban imagery.

Baudelaire's experiments in defying time and in transcending the sensorial details of city life resulted in other new techniques too, and provided the basis for a new aesthetic. We have, for instance, the simultaneity of the Symbolist poem in place of the sequence of narrative poetry. Instead of events following one another, one after the other, thus implying an order representing past, present, and future, we have the extended moment of modern poems. In W.B. Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium", for instance, the journey of the soul leads to the song of the golden bird which comprises "what is past, or passing, or to come" and blends them into the simultaneous order of the "artifice of eternity". In T.S.Eliot's "The Waste Land", Tiresias finds a continuity of past, present, and future, for he has "foresuffered all." That is the Baudelairean *moment*, and that — what Tiresias sees — is as Eliot tells us in a note, "the substance of the poem," The simultaneity of past, present, and future, and the intensity of images in "The Waste Land" has suggested to many readers its likeness to dream or nightmare. The simultaneous order and intensity of dream was deliberately sought by Baudelaire. "Le reve," according to him, gives the poet "un puissance superieure" which leaps to a profound awareness:

Le reve, absurde, imprevu sans rapport ni connexion avec la caractere, vie et les passions du dormeur! ce reve... represente, le cote surnaturel de la vie.¹³

Baudelaire's "la reve", which he associates with the spiritual aspect of man's life, is not to be confused with Freud's dream-activity of the subconscious. It is a combination of mental and perceptual activities. That is why Baudelaire speaks of conscious dreaming with full awareness. "La reve", with the poet fully in command, induces a growth or movement towards a state of mind in which experience and awareness of experience become one. Thus, dream became one of the avenues leading to Reality.

The chief purpose of Baudelaire's experiments with time was to go beyond the sequential imperatives of action ('and then, and then') to the eternal present ('the now, now, now') of consciousness. Baudelaire's search for the continuum of reality can also be seen as a quest for the paradisaical. "The end of art," says Northrop Frye, "is the recovery of paradise."¹⁴ The quest for paradise may be related to Christian lapsarian doctrines of the loss of innocence,

or of what Baudelaire has referred to as loss of "le vert paradis des amours enfantine." ('Moesta et Errabunda') The fall from the paradisaical state can also be interpreted in mythic terms. Myth distinguishes between "sacred" and "profane" time. The first is associated with the world of perfection, the second with the world of history. Myth too refers to a fall of man from sacred into profane time as a result of displeasing some divine being.¹⁵ Man always seeks to recover sacred time. Baudelaire may be regarded as exemplifying such a search.

Notes and References

1. Charles Baudelaire, "L' horloge", from *Les Fleurs du mal*, p.320. (Trans.): "The clock! a god sinister, frightful, impossible,/Whose finger menacingly points to us: 'remember.'"
2. Baudelaire, "Enivrez-vous", from *Spleen de Paris*, p.226. (Trans.): "the gloomy and vigilant enemy,/Time!"
3. Baudelaire, "Le Chambre Double," from *The Penguin Book of French Verse*, Book 3, pages 176-178; (Trans.): "The pieces of furniture have shapes stretched out, prostrate, languid. The pieces of furniture have the air of dreaming; one would say they were endowed with a sleep-walker's life...Here everything has the sufficient light and the delectable darkness of harmony."
4. Baudelaire, "Le Voyage", from *The Penguin Book*, 3,p.175, (Trans.) "Let us go on a voyage without steam or sail,/Made to escape from the ennus of our prisons."
5. Theodule Ribot, *Essai sur l' imagination creatrice*, (Paris, 1900), p.369. (Trans.): "disdains the exact and luminous representation of the external world."
6. Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, (Paris, 1968), p.345 - referred to henceforth as OC. Trans. "Commonsense tells us that the things of the earth exist but very little, and that true reality lies only in dreams."
7. E.A.Burtt, "The Metaphysical Foundations of Science", quoted by Basil Willey, in *The Seventeenth Century Background*, Peregrine Books, p.18.
8. Baudelaire, *L'art romantique* p.210: trans. "of an element eternal, invariable, whose quality is extremely difficult to determine, and of an element relative, circumstantial."
9. Henri Bergson, *Essai sur les données Immediates*, p.89. Trans. "a musical phrase which was always on the

point of completion, but was modified in the totality of the composition by the addition of each new note."

10. Baudelaire, *Mon coeur mis a nu*, OC, p.1234; trans. "One cannot forget time, within which we work."
11. T.S. Eliot, *Burnt Norton*, II, 90.
12. T.S. Eliot *Selected Essays*, (Faber), p.426.
13. Baudelaire, *Fuées*, OC, p.1136; trans. "Dream, absurd and unexpected,
14. Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, (Princeton), p.371.
15. Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, London, 1964. Also, *Myths, Rites, Symbols-A Mircea Eliade Reader*, edited by W. C. Beame and W. G. Doty, (Harper & Row), 1976

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