

Perception of beauty and evil in Baudelaire's “*Les Fleurs Du Mal*”

ROUNAK MAHTAB

Assistant Professor of French
Gauhati University, Guwahati (Assam) India

ABSTRACT

In an attempt to depict the social reality of the degenerate state of the 19th century Parisian society in his poetic collection “*Les Fleurs du mal*” (1857), Charles Baudelaire propounded his own theory of aesthetics which revolutionized the poésie of his times. He deviated from the traditional perception of beauty by displaying to the world the beauty of evil while juxtaposing these two opposites. This article seeks to reflect on how Baudelaire perceived beauty in different forms of ugliness as seen through his subjective kaleidoscope.

Key Words : Beauty, Evil, Perception, Aesthetics

INTRODUCTION

Baudelaire's poetic masterpiece *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857) has been interpreted from various perspectives over the years. While some critics have dwelled at length about his obsession with evil there are others who have discovered that this evil has its roots in beauty. In other words the poet perceived beauty in ugliness.

The realism of Baudelaire is bitter and gruesome which at times shocks his readers. This is because he wanted to depict things the way they were in the contemporary French society which was steeped in debauchery behind the decent veil of civilization. This made him portray with intensity certain aspects of life ignored by the poetic traditions of his times. As a result the poems in *Les Fleurs du Mal* are full of unsavory images of vice and crime which are unsettling to the readers.

Baudelaire's unconventional attitude towards beauty is born out of the belief that to be able to appreciate beauty in objects, they (objects) don't have to be necessarily beautiful. Beauty is associated with subjective feelings evoked by momentary passions. Therefore absolute and eternal beauty does not exist. For example the poem *Tableaux Parisiens* describes “the poor, drunkards, flaunting prostitutes and faded old ladies-yet manages to find beauty in the anonymous setting of their lives” (Clarke 1995).

The apparently morbid and sinister world as described in *Les Fleurs du Mal* convinces the readers that here the poet describes his quest in search of an elusive happiness which epitomizes the general human predicament of modern civilization. And as he himself states that the poems in this collection cannot be read in isolation, each has to be understood and appreciated in its relation

to the one that precedes it and the one that follows. Here emerges the interlink or the co-existence of beauty and evil, the two opposites forming an inseparable whole.

« C'est en faisant le mal et surtout le mal que Baudelaire arrive au Bien » (It is by doing evil and especially evil that Baudelaire arrives at the Good), (Sartre, 1957). The following lines from *Epigraphe pour un Livre Condamné* testify to the co-existence of good and evil where each element is often understood in opposition to the other:

“Peaceful and bucolic reader,
Sober, naïve and good-living,
Throw this Saturnine book,
Orgiastic and melancholic.
.....
Curious, suffering soul,
Travelling in search of paradise,
Pity me! Or I will curse you!”

Here the reader is immediately struck by the confounding dualism, oscillating between evil and ideal beauty, both being intimately associated. Thus the oxymoronic nature of Baudelairean art becomes obvious to the readers. This explains a relatively simple notion that evil in Baudelaire, does not have an autonomous existence but only tied to its opposite. Thus on the one hand there is the neoplatonic ideal of beauty and on the other, the value of evil which acquires its meaning only from its distance with the illusion of a world of essence perceived by the inner eyes of the poet, the attainment of which is his only goal.

The Evil of Baudelaire does not therefore oppose the Ideal of Beauty, and the drama of this work lies in the fact that Evil is a necessary step in the appreciation of Beauty. The title of the work (*The Flowers of Evil*), itself being of an oxymoronic nature could be illuminated in this light. The *Flowers of Evil* are thus the disturbing symbol of this painful, poisonous but essential Beauty, which is the ultimate objective of the Baudelairean quest and philosophical research. In his poems Beauty in itself brings nothing to the reader. There is beauty only after disgrace and shame, and evil is the foundation of this disgrace.

Thus in a style typical of the symbolists within the framework of the doctrines of the Parnassians the inherent dualism of the poems in *Les Fleurs du Mal* will manifest itself gradually in the widening space between the ideal beauty and the means to achieve it. This is seen in the poem *Spleen* where the slow movement towards Beauty is found to be disturbed by its sinister opposite *Ennui* (boredom). The introductory poem in *Les Fleurs du Mal* entitled “*Au Lecteur*” further substantiates this notion. Here the poet depicts an absurd and disturbing animalia that keeps gnawing at his consciousness. However, despite the poet’s belief that “It’s the Devil who holds the threads that move us!” (*Au Lecteur*), and that the suppressed animality of our beings keeps us from achieving our highest aspirations, there persists this Evil which is eating away at us even more:

“It’s the Boredom! -the eye charged with involuntary cries,
He dreams of scaffolds by smoking his houka.
You know him, reader, this delicate monster,
-Hypocrite reader!-my similar,-my brother !”

The Baudelairean evil has at least has two meanings that initially seem rather contradictory. It is something which is opposed to Beauty while being a constituent matter for its creation. (“ I kneaded some mud and I made gold” (*Bribes*). This contradiction is further represented in the poem *Au Lecteur* by the splendid imagery of a disturbing fauna that swarms in the heart of the

poet, personifying not only his vices but also his propensity to create Beauty. Thus despite the fact that it is Ennui, i.e. boredom that immobilizes the poet, preventing him from accessing the Ideal, this immobilization actually offers a very powerful dynamic, which will push the poet to create the Beautiful by trying to escape the bitter immobility of everyday life.

One can also refer to another poem, "Le Guignon". This poem expresses with force the primordial dualism existing between the heaviness of Ennui and the poet's aspiration for Beauty:

"To lift a weight so
Sisyphus, it would take your courage!
Though we work with a good heart,
Art is long and Time is fleeting".

Thus, the first source of Baudelairean Evil might be that which is born out of the consciousness that Beauty is immortal and time is fleeting. This observation urges the poet to seize a world of spirits where time has no more hold, where he will finally meet the ideal Beauty. From then on, the poet's spirit separates from his body which remains pegged to time, and therefore to decrepitude, the source of vice.

So Baudelaire, wants to recreate a world that could be described as Platonic, an ideal world which is fundamentally opposed to the mortal world. Thus, two spheres clash strongly: the world here below, inhabited by boredom and Evil, in which the body remains immersed in vices while struggling with time. And the world above, the world of the spirit, inhabited by the Ideal of perennial Beauty, not conquered neither by death nor decay. And the poet is the bridge uniting these two hostile worlds that are necessarily anchored in one another. Evil, which thus participates in this world below, is as temporal as others that inhabit it. The poet thus makes Beauty say in the poem *La Beauté* :

"I am beautiful, O mortals, like a dream of stone,
And my breast, where everyone has bruised in turn,
Is made to inspire in the poet a love eternal and dumb as matter".

Logically, the Baudelairean Evil viewed from a purely literary perspective; is related to the earth and finds expression in a disturbing imagery of the underground fauna. Whether it be cat or viper, this Evil is related to time, and therefore to death, but it is also the initiator of the quest for Beauty, without carrying a moral message. It does not make the poet perform cruel acts, nor does it lead him to hell. It simply remains there in the form of an appalling awareness of passing time triggering perpetual despair which is the source of all vices:

"Three thousand six hundred times an hour, the Second
Whispers: Remember! - Fast with his voice
Insect, Now says: I'm old,
And I pumped your life with my filthy trunk! (*L'Horloge*)

Since this evil is the initiator of Vice, Ennui, despair, and the springboard of the quest towards the Beautiful, we can very logically remark that its fundamental function is to symbolize the terrestrial world as perceived by Baudelaire, this world which opposes the infinite and perfect visions of the Ideal of Beauty. However Baudelaire does not surrender to the Evil. Rather he lets it intensify his search for the Ideal which has become a part of his acute consciousness without losing sight of the powers of time and Evil:

Whether you come from heaven or hell, what does it matter?
O beauty! Huge monster, scary, ingenuous! (*Hymne à la Beauté*)

Therefore, we can say that by living through the consciousness of time and evil, travelling

beyond Ennui and mundanity of worldly life, crossing the threshold of death, following the thread that leads to Beauty, the poet arrives at the perfect world of essence, thereby revolutionizing the literature of his time. Evil seems to have existed only to offer the poet an awareness of his limits and the weight of his body.

But above all, the Evil existed only to lead the poet into an inexorable quest for Beauty transcending the limits of time:

"O Death, old captain, it's time!
This country bores us, O Death! Apparitions!
If the sky and the sea are black like ink,
Our hearts that you know are full of rays!

Pour us your poison so that it comforts us!
We want; so much that fire burns our brains,
Diving at the bottom of the abyss, Hell or Heaven, what does it matter?
At the bottom of the Unknown to find new". (Le Voyage) !

Such is the oxymoronic nature of Baudelaire's evil which carries in itself not only its own finiteness, but also suffers its own loss to give birth to the most paradoxical beauty, which is an agonizing experience (fire burns our brains).

Hence to conclude we can say that without experiencing Evil Baudelaire cannot perceive beauty. These two opposite forces complement each other to help him continue his indefinite journey into the depths of the unknown, in search of the new, which always alludes him. It's the Evil which gives concrete shape to his perception of Beauty and therefore slowly works its way into the realm of the unknown to obtain infinite beauty as envisaged by the poet.

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