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**Journal**

Paroles gelées, 31(1)

**ISSN**

1094-7264

**Author**

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**Publication Date**

2018

**DOI**

10.5070/PG7311035337

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# “Ceux-là Qui Partent pour Partir”: Travel as Relinquishment in Charles Baudelaire’s *Le Voyage*

Vedran Catovic\*

In this essay, I offer an interpretation of Charles Baudelaire’s famous poem *Le voyage*. I comment on the poem’s composition and structure, as well as highlight its conclusive and testamentary role in the *Fleurs du mal*. I account for the poem’s extreme and defiant content to demonstrate that the placement of *Le voyage* at the very end of the collection is all the more important, given Baudelaire’s apocalyptic temperament. The essay is not only an interpretation of a single poem, but an attempt to describe and evaluate Baudelaire’s sensibility and poetics in a work where they are articulated with great poignancy and candor.

I organize my commentary around two main axes. In section 3, I discuss the presence of Manichaeism in Baudelaire’s work. I contend that Manichaean dualism shapes in a subtle but decisive way Baudelaire’s vision in *Le Voyage* and is the cause of the poet’s rejection of the material world, particularly in sections IV and VI of the poem. Then, in section 4, I show that this radical, dualistic temperament fuels Baudelaire’s hostile attitude toward the Enlightenment, which has significant consequences for the message of *Le Voyage* and the *Fleurs du mal* more broadly. Drawing from Marcel Proust’s description of Baudelaire’s suspension of empathy, I argue that the anti-Enlightenment and anti-humanist attitude of the poem play a crucial role in its provocative aesthetic, and contribute to its relevance and modernity, in spite of its ostensibly reactionary tenor. Finally, in sections 2 and 5, I frame the discussion by underscoring the uncompromising severity of Baudelaire’s artistic message.

I read the poem not as a celebration of travel, but rather as a thoroughly staged recantation of it. I argue that, by showing the vanity of earthly travel, the poem sets the stage for the ultimate voyage of departure. The poem calls for a relinquishment of earthly life, and it effectively concludes

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the *Fleurs du mal* by bringing the poet to the frontiers of the metaphysical and the otherworldly. In section 2, I argue that disenchantment with travel leads the poet toward relinquishment of earthly existence. Then, in section 5, I contend that the poem makes a radical call for another, metaphysical journey, and ends with a promise of transcendental recovery. I align my interpretation with Erich Auerbach's study of the *Fleurs du mal*, but conclude that in spite of its "horror" and "ugliness" so accurately described by Auerbach, Baudelaire's poetry remains a powerful and inspiring expression of human craving for transcendence and transformation.

### THE VANITY OF EARTHLY VOYAGE

In *Le voyage*, Baudelaire accounts for his *essence choisie*, to use the words of Jean Paul Sartre.<sup>1</sup> The poet explains and justifies rather explicitly his views and life choices in this poem. He spitefully parades his willful existential wallowing, his conscious and masochistic encumbering of his own life, and, very importantly, he expresses his yearning for absolute travel or escape. Thus we meet Baudelaire at his most radical and profound. Jean-Pierre Richard has interpreted Baudelaire's work as hinged upon the structure of verticality, of *gouffre*, from which, an intense sense of profundity (*profondeur*) arises.<sup>2</sup> *Le voyage* no doubt makes for the poet's most eager effort to sound the depths of his creation.

Composed of eight sections, the poem seethes with the desire for travel, movement, and change. This yearning stands in stark contrast to many static poems in the *Fleurs du mal* that are spitefully wallowing in existential stalemate, another one of Baudelaire's aesthetic ideals: dead, metallic and immobile beauty. Stephen Werner remarks that travel was Baudelaire's "deepest poetic instinct," and a "commanding interest" running through his whole oeuvre.<sup>3</sup> Travel was indeed an abiding passion and motivation, and one of the key themes of the *Fleurs du mal*.

*Le voyage* is all about this hunger. In this poem, the world is measured not by its objective size, but by the appetite of the traveler. The world is perhaps small in one's mature perspective, but it is huge for the great appetite of a child enamored of maps and engravings:

*Pour l'enfant, amoureux de cartes et d'estampes,  
L'univers est égal à son vaste appétit.*

It is childlike curiosity that leads the poet to embark on the journey, taking the reader in as well. "Nous partons" and "nous allons," says the poet, and the journey is already on the way.<sup>4</sup>

The poem portrays a curious gallery of adventurers. It includes exiles, escaping their “patrie infâme,” and “astrologists” whose stars appear to be the eyes of a woman (“Astrologues noyé dans les yeux d’une femme”). These travelers are spurred by an urgent need for change and breakthrough. Their location must be left behind, and a new world must be discovered. Still, among various travelers with their various motives for traveling, it is those who embark on journey for journey’s sake who receive the poet’s highest praise:

*Mais les vrais voyageurs sont ceux-là seuls qui partent  
Pour partir; cœurs légers, semblables aux ballons,  
De leur fatalité jamais ils ne s’écarterent,  
Et, sans savoir pourquoi, disent toujours: Allons !*

It is “ceux-là . . . qui partent pour partir” who seem to grasp the dark impulse for travel. Their lightheartedness (their “cœurs légers”), the ostensible lack of purpose to their journey (for they depart “sans savoir pourquoi”), makes them “les vrais voyageurs.” The comparison of “cœurs légers” to the balloons evokes precisely this kind of spontaneous, easy-going spirit of adventure. It is easy to depart, because the act of departure contains the very purpose of travel. There is no utilitarian aim or goal attached to it; there is no “why” to traveling.

The subtle implication, of course, is that travel is futile. Early in the poem, the eagerness and curiosity are too strong, and so the mere act of travel seems to contain its own purpose. However, as the poem develops, disenchantment gradually sets in. As we shall see, the paradoxical coexistence of the yearning for a metaphysical breakthrough with the awareness of the existential void is crucial to Baudelaire’s artistic temperament. Therefore, while the travelers in the beginning of the poem dream of

*De vastes voluptés, changeantes, inconnues,  
Et dont l’esprit humain n’a jamais su le nom !*

The poem gradually reveals their disillusionment and disappointment.

Moreover, *Le Voyage* is not a celebration of travel, but rather a meticulously staged recantation of it. Louis Aguetant suggests that the poem is a palinode (*palinodie*), that is, a retraction of the glorification of travel expressed elsewhere in the *Fleurs du mal*.<sup>5</sup> He takes the poem to be about “la vanité du voyage.”<sup>6</sup> *Le voyage* thus tackles the opposite subject—that of disappointment and disillusionment with travel. And so, the poem oscillates between its sheer enthusiasm, and the disenchantment and destruction underneath.

There is a great yearning for abandoning the known world. There is a desire to renounce the underwhelming earthly existence in favor of the discovery of something different and better. The voices in the poem are dreaming of a journey that effaces the boundaries and limitations of reality. The travelers crave to hurl themselves audaciously and self-destructively into an otherworldly adventure. *Le Voyage* thus becomes a metaphor of transcendence and evasion. In the next section, I will show that this urge for evasion has roots in a particularly interesting element of Baudelaire's poetics, namely, in Manichaeism. At the heart of Baudelaire's unfavorable judgment of material reality is a sentiment—that never grows into a creed or doctrine—that the material world is a realm of Satan and evil. This Manichaean perspective infuses Baudelaire's temperament and is at the root of the poet's rejection of the earthly existence. In the second half of *Le Voyage*, this rejection becomes particularly acute, and reaches culmination and conclusion, both poetically and philosophically.

#### BAUDELAIRE'S MANICHAISM AS A SOURCE OF REJECTION OF THE EARTHLY EXISTENCE

Georges Bonneville makes a compelling claim that Baudelaire's sensibility contained spontaneous, instinctual elements of Manichaeism, Gnosticism, and heretical Christianity.<sup>7</sup> All of these, according to Bonneville, colored the poet's artistic temperament without ever ossifying into an ideological adherence or a systematic set of beliefs. Baudelaire did not believe firmly in such teachings, but they all inflected various elements of his mindset, such as the apocalyptic worldview, the doctrine of the fall of man, the sense of original sin, the duality and equality of good and evil, spirit and the matter, God and Satan. Most important is the belief that this world belongs to Satan. Bonneville explains that "Si Baudelaire, dans *Les fleurs du mal*, ne nous dit pas qui a créé le monde, en revanche il est bien évident que Satan y règne."<sup>8</sup> In Baudelaire's perspective, "tout devient logique en ce bas monde dès qu'on se réfère à Satan."<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, sections IV and VI of *Le Voyage* provide an extensive catalog of the world's material riches. In these sections, we see Manichaean dualism at work; a negative evaluation of the illusory opulence of matter is clearly displayed. Only the naive and uninitiated can find charm and excitement in the material splendor of rich and exotic destinations. Those who perceive matter as evil cannot but see the two sections of the poem as a testimony to the insignificance of the material world and to the futility of voyage in the physical realm.

Sections IV and VI thus make a long “report,” a travelogue of sorts, in response to the desirous prompts of sections III and V (section V consists of a mere hemistich uttered with childlike curiosity: “Et puis, et puis encore?”). In these sections, the voice in the poem changes from that of the “speaker” of the collection, from Baudelaire-the-poet, to that of an impersonal, anonymous, and large group of voyagers who have come back home from a very long journey, and are willing to satisfy the curiosity of their audience with all sorts of exciting and exotic tales. Walter Putnam observes that in these sections the poet “occupies a role analogous to that of the storyteller whom by his art, takes his readers or listeners away from the present to another time or place.”<sup>10</sup>

However, this is precisely the point at which the Manichaean refutation of earthly existence takes place. Rather than enthusing the audience with marvelous imagery and wondrous tales, the “storytelling” unfolds as a sequence of scathing and challenging stanzas that espouse a stark worldview and refute the deceptive splendor of the sights and scenes described. Putnam is right to see traces of subtle irony in the narration of this new, impersonal speaker or storyteller. What is more, Jules Romains detects the presence of an insulting irony (“cette ironie outrageante”) that is extended to women and men alike, to the audience in the poem, as well as to the reader.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the irony is gradually intensified through the two sections. At first it is subtle and understated, brought about by the difference in experience and insight between the world-weary travelers and the childishly curious audience. In section VI, however, the irony evolves into outright and confrontational sarcasm.

The unnamed, unspecified travelers tell a tale of disappointment, of saturation with the world and its “wonders.” To be sure, they do provide a list of the awe-inspiring and exotic things that they have seen, which includes “Les plus riches cités, les plus grands paysages,” “des idoles à trompe,” “des trônes constellés de bijoux lumineux,” “des palais ouvragés dont la féerique pompe / serait pour vos banquiers un rêve ruineux,” and even “des costumes qui sont pour les yeux une ivresse.” The list is unapologetic in its naive exoticism. It offers just the kind of promises that the eager listeners, stuck in their predictable and well-known surroundings, would like to hear. However, the actual experience of the voyagers is disenchanting. They confess:

... malgré bien des chocs et d'imprévus désastres,  
 Nous nous sommes souvent ennuyés, comme ici.

Hence, for all its appeal, the journey offers but transient pleasures, “des chocs et d'imprévus désastres” which nevertheless result in boredom—the familiar, homely boredom of “ici.” The exotic, “oriental” dream of Romanticism collapses, and its ephemeral charms evaporate as boredom, vexation, and spleen take hold. The language of the poem reflects this, as the elevated tone of the beginning of the report declines into the bathos of the conclusion.

And so, just as the curiosity of the eager audience is aroused by the aforementioned images, the sixth section ensues: a sequence of masterfully strung stanzas showcasing the “Manichaeen” Baudelaire at his most vitriolic and confrontational. This section is a somber chronicle, an unapologetic enumeration of the final insights and revelations, as if the poet were leaving a testament to a disinterested (and therefore unsympathetic) reader from another world, and not addressing the lowly humans whose minds he scornfully depicts as “cerveaux enfantins.”

The first stanza of section VI reads:

*Pour ne pas oublier la chose capitale,  
Nous avons vu partout, et sans l'avoir cherché,  
Du haut jusques en bas de l'échelle fatale,  
Le spectacle ennuyeux de l'immortel péché :*

The main thing, as it turns out, is “le spectacle ennuyeux de l'immortel péché.” Again, the image fits well within the Gnostic or Manichaeen framework. Humankind is under the spell of sensual pleasure, of “l'immortel péché” that reigns over the material and evil world. Although Baudelaire often flirts with evil and even embraces it elsewhere, a stern sense of moral judgment is evident here. Baudelaire’s sinners in *Le Voyage* are of conspicuously banal nature, and the sin encompasses the whole of humanity, without exception (“Du haut jusques en bas de l'échelle fatale”). Notwithstanding the immortality that is granted to it, the lowliness of the sin excludes any hope of recovery or redemption. It is another example of the “ironie outrageante” noted by Romans, and, as Putnam observes, a “scathing portrait of the horrors of the world” in which the sin outlives the sinners and is omnipotent and omnipresent.<sup>12</sup> Aguetant hears the voice of a “moraliste chrétien” speaking here with singular force and severity. The tone is indeed apocalyptic, reminiscent of that of a jeremiad. There is a sense of escalation and intensification in the verses that seem to run up their own “échelle fatale.”

Furthermore, the “degrading representation of sex,” as Erich Auerbach has observed, and the tendency to equate the flesh, especially the female

body and the conventional feminine beauty with temptation and sin stand in “violent opposition” to the spirit of the Enlightenment, and add to the Manichaeic dualism that sets the tone of the poem.<sup>13</sup> The second stanza of section VI presents an overtly misogynist image:

*La femme, esclave vile, orgueilleuse et stupide,  
Sans rire s’adorant et s’aimant sans dégoût.*

The emphasis seems to be on the vanity and complacency, on excessive self-love of woman (“Sans rire s’adorant et s’aimant sans dégoût”). In the same stanza, however, man is seen as “tyran goulu, paillard, dur et cupide,” and, at the same time, as “esclave de l’esclave” (that is, of woman). Throughout this section, humankind is consumed and infatuated with aimless, self-serving and abusive power. The despots are exasperated by “le poison du pouvoir,” and the people is enamored of “le fouet abrutissant,” which comes to embody this blind and abusive power. The purpose of all these offensive images is to demonstrate the triumph of evil, as if in a Manichaeic scheme. It is a static view of reality that is spitefully opposed to the notion of enlightened progress. Humanity cannot progress because it is in the hands of, and in need of, “l’immortel péché” and “le fouet abrutissant.” The final line of section VI concludes resignedly:

*Tel est du globe entier l’éternel bulletin.*

Hence, evil powers rule an earthly existence that must be relinquished. The endless voyage takes Baudelaire’s travelers nowhere. It certainly does not take them out of the enchanted world of evil matter and flesh. As we can see, this enclosed, horrifyingly hermetic realm is premised on a set of curiously outdated, even backward set of tenets and ideas. Yet, it is precisely in acknowledging them that we begin to appreciate the profound and disturbing message of the poem, as well as to identify Baudelaire’s key lines of attack. In the following section, I will discuss Baudelaire’s anti-Enlightenment and the poet’s intellectual anti-modernism as focal points of his artistic sensibility, and a surprising, but key ingredient of his poetic relevance and modernity.

### BAUDELAIRE’S ANTI-ENLIGHTENMENT

In the preceding discussion, I traced a sweeping, universalizing gesture, the poem’s unapologetic generalization about existence that is the exact opposite of the Enlightenment’s meliorist proposition that the gradual and rationally founded progress of humankind is possible. In words of Aguetant, Baudelaire showcases “l’unité essentielle de l’homme;” even if this unity is



not achieved through universalist appeals to commonality and humanness, but rather through appeals to the banality and sameness of humankind.<sup>14</sup> As Aguetant indicates, the rich differences of humanity exist only for the superficial observer, and they evaporate under a more profound look. In *Le Voyage*, the voice of the poet emerges as antithetical to that of the enlightened philosopher and teacher. It is the voice of the stern *moraliste classique*, as Aguetant remarks.<sup>15</sup>

This denial of the Enlightenment perspective is essential for the poem's—and, by extension, the collection's—dark subtext. The progress and the light of reason are rejected with malice and conviction. It is argued that human nature is irreducibly irrational. It is sin, “l’immortel péché,” that is its true measure, not the moderation of cultured pleasure. The senses prevail over reason. Blasphemy and heresy prevail over deist composure.

The key portion of the poem that speaks to this effect is again to be found in section VI. All religions, including Christianity, are brought to the same plane. They are all trying to reach the heavens (“toutes escaladant le ciel”), but are all brought down to the same mundane level and ridiculed for being delusional. Perversely, the tolerance between religions is reached not on the grounds of rational recognition of the beauty and inherent meaning of another creed, but on the grounds of blasphemous revolt against God. Unity and tolerance are attained through spiteful rebellion:

*L'Humanité bavarde, ivre de son génie,  
Et, folle maintenant comme elle était jadis,  
Criant à Dieu, dans sa furibonde agonie:  
“Ô mon semblable, mon maître, je te maudis !”*

It is in madness and drunkenness that humanity finds its “unité essentielle.” The claim that humanity is “folle maintenant comme elle était jadis” supports the notion of Baudelaire’s anti-Enlightenment perspective, his provocative endorsement of the dark and irrational side of being at the expense of a balanced and moderate perspective. Moreover, this rejection of Enlightenment is all the more resolute, given that, intellectually, Baudelaire was able to grasp and appreciate the rational point of view. I will discuss this question more thoroughly below, but for now it is important to stress the express rejection of moderate solutions and civil compromises at play in the powerful stanza cited above. The *rimes croisées* convey a particularly powerful effect, bringing together the words “génie” and “agonie” (so it is the sensual suffering that corresponds to the genius, not rational and methodical labor), and, even more poignantly, the words “jadis” and “maudis.” It is in perpetual

madness and resistance that humanity approaches its *maître*, that it becomes God's *semblable*. The image is clearly irreverent, and stands in contrast to the Enlightenment's optimism.

Still, the prevailing impression is that the poet is not so much seriously espousing these views as he is instrumentalizing them in the service of a particular rhetorical and aesthetic effect. Baudelaire is profoundly ironic and he is playing a subtle and powerful game here. He is half-adopting the stern moralism he does not fully believe in to cast a deprecatory shadow on his targets—progress, democracy, Enlightenment. His assumed position is backward, anachronistic, and reactionary, but his actual perspective is that of a maverick. In fact, his dark and ominous oracles enhance his poetic modernity, while his vicious refutations reflect our modern discontents and doubts about civilized life.

This ability to cast a cold, dehumanized glance at kindred creatures is therefore one of the fundamental traits of the Baudelairean—and by extension modern—sensibility. In *Le voyage*, it is brought to a disturbing and uncompromising culmination. Less fierce manifestations of the same spirit figure throughout the poet's oeuvre and become more prominent in his later works, especially in the prose poems.

Marcel Proust wrote with great discernment about this feature of Baudelaire's artistry. He elucidates the peculiar effect of the emotionally detached attitude adopted by the poet. This attitude, according to Proust, is a mark of a new type of literary genius. Proust suggests that, rather than being unable to emotionally respond to the sights of suffering and misery, the poet simply decided to channel them out of his art, sensing the powerful, strengthening effect that their absence would have on his verses. His vision is "si puissante, mais d'où toute expression de sensibilité est absente, que des esprits purement ironiques et amoureux de couleur, des cœurs vraiment durs peuvent s'en délecter."<sup>16</sup> Let us note once more the important use of irony as the key trait of this artistic sensibility. One needs to be rough and callous in spite of being aware of the inadequacy of such responses, and one should not give in to sentimental appeals in order to approach a certain artistic truthfulness that surpasses mere compassion. Proust concisely concludes: "Peut-être cette subordination de la sensibilité à la vérité, à l'expression, est-elle au fond une marque de génie, de la force de l'art supérieure à la pitié individuelle."<sup>17</sup> Thus, the sensitivity of the artist as well as the reader's sensitivity to the artist's work is not to be gauged by the "individual" pity or empathy shown for the sights and scenes represented. To the contrary, it is a matter of subordinating one's sensibilities to

the dark, disquieting truth of “l’art supérieur” that does not spare and does not recoil from any cruel detail.

In the first two sections, we have seen the role that Manichaeism played in the formation of Baudelaire’s worldview and aesthetic values. We have also seen how the poet’s Manichaean affinity was conducive to categorical refusal of the dominant progressionist and enlightened notions of his time. I have argued that Baudelaire’s rejection of the Enlightenment is based not only on the poet’s convictions, but also on the underlying understanding of the power of detached, dehumanized denial in spite of one’s better judgment. I have supported this by referring to Marcel Proust’s incisive explanation of the new type of literary talent and aesthetic sensibility engendered by Baudelaire.

This sensibility has a clear purpose within the aesthetic framework of the *Fleurs du mal*, but nowhere is it more prominent than in *Le voyage*. Its prominence accounts for the extreme nature of the poem’s conclusion. In the following section, I discuss the concluding section of *Le Voyage*, and show how it leads the poet toward his final breakthrough—the journey into the otherworldly and the Unknown.

#### IN SEARCH OF THE NEW

“Amer savoir, celui qu’on tire du voyage!,” proclaims the first verse of section VII. The world is “monotone et petit.” It offers but a single demoralizing image: “Une oasis d’horreur dans un désert d’ennui !” In such a situation, should one escape from the world, should one relinquish it at long last?

. . . *Si tu peux rester, reste;*  
*Pars, s’il le faut . . .*

Slowly, the prospect of the final journey arises. The familiar hunger and resolve reappear, but this time they lead not to an earthly destination, but to the frontiers of the metaphysical.

The final section is made up of two of Baudelaire’s farewell stanzas, two of his finest and best known. In them the poet reaches the paradoxical pinnacle of his “decadence,” and invites the reader to join in. The final journey is one of unconditional surrender and utter relinquishment. There is no way back, nor need for it. The famous address to death (“Mort, vieux capitaine”) in section VIII is concluded with the invocation to:

*Plonger au fond du gouffre, Enfer ou Ciel, qu’importe ?*  
*Au fond de l’Inconnu pour trouver du nouveau !*

That is the final thought, and the final promise of the *Fleurs du mal*. Acceptance of death is followed by a plunge into the Unknown and otherworldly novelty.

While it is impossible to determine the exact meaning of this *nouveau*, the ending is the unique place in the poem where there is a sense of optimism, a sense of promise and hope. The last couplet is a strong gesture of simultaneous rejection of everything that has been encountered before and of eager acceptance of the promising newness. Aguettant is right to characterize this final outshining as a hope devoid of faith, and certainly devoid of the longing for Christian salvation. He describes it as “espoir absolument agnostique,” as “le cri supreme du blasé.”<sup>18</sup> This agnostic hope is brought about by death, as the conjuration “verse-nous ton poison” suggests, and as such it has nothing to do with life whose joys and sufferings have been exhausted already.

However, this is not only a point where *Le voyage* ends, it is a point where the whole collection is recapitulated. All this invites a long look back to the beginning of the collection. The *Fleurs du mal* opens with a powerful, provocative address to the reader: the great poem *Au lecteur*. In fact, in section VI of *Le voyage* there is a verse, “Ô mon semblable, mon maître, je te maudis !”, which harkens back to the well-known apostrophe in *Au lecteur*, where the poet is describing a monster of human vice that is “plus laid, plus méchant, plus immonde” than any other:

*C'est l'Ennui ! L'oeil chargé d'un pleur involontaire,  
Il rêve d'échafauds en fumant son houka.  
Tu le connais, lecteur, ce monstre délicat,  
— Hypocrite lecteur,—mon semblable,—mon frère !*<sup>19</sup>

This address to *mon semblable*—first the reader, and then the “master,” or God—is a powerful “transposition,” as Putnam calls it, that imposes the association of the two poems and, then, in the final section of *Le voyage*, begs the question of outcome, of journey’s final destination.<sup>20</sup> It has begun with the reader’s idle and playful reveries of scaffolds and death, but how does it end now that death has been embraced and the journey has come to an end?

The ending of *Le voyage* calls for an outright and unequivocal acknowledgment of its profound, disturbing, and pessimistic testament. There is no middle way through the *Fleurs du mal* that would tame the evil without embracing it, or compartmentalize the demonic seduction and beauty of the book into mere “aesthetics.” The collection ends on a serious, not a playful, note.

Erich Auerbach in particular drew radical conclusions about Baudelaire's poetics. Rather than trying to mollify Baudelaire's poetics and restore them within the Enlightenment framework of learned culture within which he operated, Auerbach acknowledged and described the frank brutality of Baudelaire's decadence and pessimism. He maintained that Baudelaire's poetry is "horrible," that for this poet "there is no way out and there must not be" (unless it is death, as in the end of *Le Voyage*, one might add).<sup>21</sup> The poet of the *Fleurs du mal*:

hates the time in which he lives, he despises its tendencies and ideals: progress and wealth, liberty and equality; he shrinks back from its pleasures; he hates living nature, its vitality and fertility; he hates love, in so far it is 'natural.' He opposes all that with passionate contempt—which is rather enhanced by his consciousness of not having ever seriously experienced many of the things he despises.<sup>22</sup>

His poetry is horrible, and "its world is an ugly jail, with no other comfort but visionary and demonic inebriation."<sup>23</sup> Almost everywhere in the *Fleurs du mal*, "debasement and degradation are strongly and ruthlessly expressed; desire changes the desirer into a slave of Hell; nor has the object of desire, the beloved, any human and moral dignity; it is insensible, vicious, cruel by ennui, sterile, destructive."<sup>24</sup> Oddly, sometimes this book full of horror "is better understood by those who are stricken with horror [such as the detractors of Baudelaire], even though it infuriates them, than by those who do not give vent to anything but to their delight with the author's art."<sup>25</sup> But the poems of "so actual a meaning and so bitter a beauty" cannot be merely admired for their "art." The art is then lost, the actual aesthetics missed—not misunderstood, but altogether missed and lost on us—unless we depart from the recognition of Baudelaire's unapologetic and unremitting horror. It is part and parcel of the aesthetic and formal perfection of the poetry. A lot of Baudelaire's poetry could be rightly described as decadent and depraved, but its grasp is too powerful and its tenor too frank to be dismissed.

Furthermore, the poet's unique position in literary history cannot be accounted for without taking into consideration his existential condition and the tight, organic tie between this condition and his oeuvre, between his life and his art. As Gérard Conio incisively remarked, "Baudelaire a refusé d'aliéner l'art à la vie, parce que l'art, loin de se pétrifier dans une forme pure, était pour lui la vie même."<sup>26</sup> Conio explains further:

*Dans le cas de Baudelaire, son plus grand malheur a été sa plus grande chance. Les singularités de son histoire individuelle ont coïncidé si exactement avec les transformations politiques et sociales de l'histoire collective que les rapports entre sa vie et sa création l'ont marginalisé de son temps, mais ont fait de lui un phare pour l'avenir. C'est pourquoi aussi, tout en ouvrant la voie aux futures avant-gardes artistiques et poétiques du XXe siècle, Baudelaire est resté un homme seul, sans école, sans disciple, sans vraie postérité.*<sup>27</sup>

This unique position helps explain the formal perfectionism and traditional poetic skill of Baudelaire, as well as his transgressive and groundbreaking tendencies—in other words, his full mastery of conventional forms, and his constant (equal parts subtle and violent) breaking of them. It also helps explain the new content, the new and unforeseen ideas and images, as well as the attitudes that made the *Fleurs du mal* the hallmark of modernity. It is not just about decadence, or morbidity, or the peculiar, “satanic” concoction of “triviality and exaltation,” so characteristic of Baudelaire, in words of Nikola Kovač.<sup>28</sup> Above and beyond the poet’s innovations and provocations, there is a level of human candor and defiance that is virtually without precedent. In that, Baudelaire is comparable to Arthur Schopenhauer. Indeed, there is a significant overlap between the worldviews of the two near-contemporaries.

Thomas Mann wrote about Schopenhauer’s “combined melancholy and pride in the human race,” of his pessimism, and “his insight into the overweening power of instinct and the derogation of the one-time godlike reason, mind, and intellect,” all of which was, according to Mann, “anti-classic and in its essence inhumane.”<sup>29</sup> Mann also noted the paradox of Schopenhauer’s “classic, pellucid prose, employed to lighten the darkest and lowest purlieus of being,” his “proud misanthropy, which never belies his reverence for the idea of the human being,” and concluded that “what I call his pessimistic humanity seems to me to herald the temper of a future time.”<sup>30</sup>

This applies to Baudelaire as well. Like Schopenhauer’s “classic, pellucid prose,” so “anti-classic and in its essence inhumane,” Baudelaire’s classic, pellucid poetics, so anti-classical and inhumane in their spirit, stand as a unique expression of an uncompromising emotional, intellectual, and artistic honesty. It all comes together in *Le Voyage*, which can be seen as the poet’s testament. Baudelaire’s remorseless dismissal of earthly life testifies to his existential despair, but also to his need for something new, unknown and better. And, just as it provided transient comfort during his terrestrial searches, voyage remains the poet’s only means of exploring the

otherworldly. It takes him “au fond du gouffre,” and allows him to discover, or hope to discover, the New.

## CONCLUSION

This essay traced the development of *Le Voyage* without imposing a rigid argument or thesis on it. It is an interpretation of the poem, not an argument about its ultimate meaning. Therefore, it was important to retain a certain degree of openness and flexibility to my reading, and not to beat the verses into a predetermined course or scheme. That being said, I made a number of specific claims about the background of the poem and its meaning.

At the basic level, the poem expresses the poet’s discontent with earthly life and travel, and leads him to relinquish both in favor of an unspecified, even mystical promise of a transcendental voyage. Sections IV and VI of the collection demonstrate the futility of chasing the “metaphysical fantoms” in the physical world, to borrow the phrase of Miroslav Krleža.<sup>31</sup> The earthly journeys always end in disenchantment, so the final two sections of the poem (sections VII and VIII) enact the poet’s final departure (at first bitter, but then hopeful), and show his longing to plunge into the abyss of the Unknown in order to find the New (“plonger. . . au fond de l’Inconnu pour trouver du nouveau”). Importantly, the reader is invited to take part in the same journey, which combines the opening and the final poems of the collection—*Au Lecteur* and *Le Voyage*—and gives a sense of closure to the *Fleurs du mal*.

My interpretation draws on several important determinants of Baudelaire’s artistic sensibility and worldview. By developing Georges Bonneville’s analysis of the presence of Manichaeic influences in Baudelaire, I explained the roots of the poet’s negative and dismissive attitude toward the material world and earthly existence. Baudelaire’s spontaneous Manichaeism explains his distrustful attitude toward humankind and points to another determinant of his artistic temperament—his regressive and recalcitrant anti-Enlightenment perspective. I argued that, problematic aspects of such an attitude notwithstanding, its extremity and candor allow for the stimulating effect of the verses and invite the reader to entertain and accept the pessimistic worldview thus espoused. In this vein, Baudelaire’s poetry is akin to the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer. Finally, drawing from Marcel Proust’s and Erich Auerbach’s analyses of Baudelaire’s work, I underscored the artist’s emotional detachment and dehumanized “horror” as key elements of his lasting and disturbing legacy. These innovative, if often misguided, attitudes result in poetry of unprecedented audacity and honesty, and continue to invite contradictory and thoughtful responses.

## Notes

1. See Jean Paul Sartre, *Baudelaire* (Gallimard 1963).
2. See Jean-Pierre Richard, *Poésie et profondeur* (Éditions du Seuil 1955).
3. See Stephen Werner, *Absolute Travel: A Study of Baudelaire, Huysmans, Roussel and Proust* (Summa Publications 2010), 18.
4. All quotes from *Le voyage* come from Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal* (Gallimard 1999), 252-258.
5. Louis Aguetant, *Lecture de Baudelaire: Vie. Psychologie. Poétique*, 197.
6. Aguetant, *Lecture de Baudelaire*, 207.
7. Georges Bonneville, *Baudelaire, Les Fleurs du mal* (Hatier 1984), 57-60.
8. Bonneville, *Baudelaire*, 58.
9. *Ibid.*, 58.
10. Walter Putnam, "Myth, Metaphor, and Music in *Le Voyage*," in *Understanding Les Fleurs du Mal: Critical Readings*, ed. William J. Thompson (Vanderbilt University Press 1997), 209.
11. Jules Romains, "Postface," in Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du mal suivies de Petits poèmes en prose* (Bordas 1949), 338.
12. Putnam, "Myth, Metaphor, and Music in *Le Voyage*," 209.
13. Erich Auerbach, "The Esthetic Dignity of the *Fleurs du Mal*," *Hopkins Review* 4.1 (January 1950), 39.
14. Aguetant, 208.
15. *Ibid.*, 208.
16. See Marcel Proust, *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, 129
17. Proust, *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, 130.
18. Aguetant, 217.
19. Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du mal*, 38.
20. Putnam.
21. Auerbach, 41-42.
22. *Ibid.*, 41-42.
23. *Ibid.*, 45.
24. *Ibid.*, 38.
25. *Ibid.*, 45.
26. Gérard Conio, *Baudelaire: Etude de Les Fleurs du Mal* (Marabout 1993).
27. Conio, *Baudelaire*, 496.
28. Nikola Kovač, "Pogovor," in Charles Baudelaire, *Cvije e zla*, trans. Marko Vesovic (Zid 2000), 174.



29. Thomas Mann, *Essays of Three Decades*, ed. H. T. Lowe-Porter (A.A. Knopf 1947), 409.
30. Mann, *Essays of Three Decades*, 409.
31. Kovač, "Pogovor," 167.