

Charles Baudelaire: a specular interplay between poetry and the city¹

Charles Baudelaire: um jogo especular entre poesia e cidade

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the relationship between Charles Baudelaire's poetry and the urban transformation of nineteenth-century Paris. Considering the context of Haussmann's reforms and the new dimensions of modern life, it analyzes how the poet, through prose poetry, constructs scenes that reveal the sensory experience of modernity. The study highlights how Baudelaire turns urban everyday life – its contradictions, marginalized figures, and shifting atmospheres – into aesthetic material, shaping a mirror of modern existence. Drawing on authors such as Walter Benjamin, Marshall Berman, and Arnold Hauser, the article discusses the baudelairean specular interplay between poetry and the city, as well as his influence on modern and Symbolist poetry.

Keywords: Charles Baudelaire. Modernity. Paris. Poetry. City.

RESUMO

Este artigo investiga a relação entre a poesia de Charles Baudelaire e a transformação urbana de Paris no século XIX. A partir do contexto das reformas haussmannianas e das novas dimensões da vida moderna, analisa-se como o poeta constrói, por meio da prosa poética, cenas que revelam a experiência sensível da modernidade. O estudo evidencia o modo como Baudelaire transforma o cotidiano urbano – suas contradições, personagens marginalizadas e atmosferas cambiantes – em matéria estética, configurando um espelho da vida moderna. A partir de autores como Walter Benjamin, Marshall Berman e Arnold Hauser, discute-se o jogo especular baudelaireano entre poesia e cidade, bem como sua influência na poesia moderna e Simbolista.

Palavras-chave: Charles Baudelaire. Modernidade. Paris. Poesia. Cidade.

INTRODUCTION

Charles Pierre Baudelaire was born in Paris in 1821, during the Bourbon Restoration. He spent most of his life in the city, closely observing developments in its political, social, and cultural life, although politics itself was not a subject he explored in depth. Baudelaire's

¹ The English version of this article was translated from the original Portuguese with the assistance of ChatGPT (OpenAI), including the translation of direct quotations (prose and poetry) and of book and poem titles. The translation was reviewed by the author, who assumes full responsibility for its final content.

² All quotations have been translated directly from the original Portuguese-language article. The editions cited, as well as the corresponding page numbers, refer to the sources listed in the bibliography of the original Portuguese text.

place in the nineteenth century is primarily associated with his critical perspective on the transformations taking place in Paris and, more broadly, throughout the world. As a poet, he developed a new way of portraying society and modern urban life.

An analysis of his work reveals a contradictory, unconventional, and strange figure who, through his poetry, exposed the realities of everyday life – the turmoil, opulence, hardships, and moods of the city. The reviled author of *Les Fleurs du mal* (*The Flowers of Evil*) influenced the works of poets such as Paul Verlaine, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Arthur Rimbaud. Baudelaire, also known for *The Painter of Modern Life*, *Paris Spleen* (*Little Poems in Prose*), and *My Heart Laid Bare*, came to be regarded as an important critic and prophet of modern civilization.

This article proposes a reflection on Charles Baudelaire's poetry through the metaphor of a specular interplay between poetry and the city. The specular interplay is understood here as an interpretive lens through which to examine the relationship between literary form and the urban experience of modernity, marked by unequal processes of visibility and concealment. To this end, the article begins with a historical overview aimed at understanding how this urban experience took shape. It then explores the language developed by Baudelaire in his prose poems, an innovative literary form through which he portrayed the city. The following section delves further into Baudelaire's poetic universe, examining the elements that structure his work and the figures he brought into the scene of Parisian urban life.

THE NEW DIMENSIONS OF EVERYDAY LIFE

Paris in the second half of the nineteenth century was transformed by a series of technological innovations and economic developments that altered everyday life. Louis Bonaparte, who became Emperor Napoleon III after the coup d'état of 1851, proved to be an effective administrator, fostering France's growth during the period that became known as the Second Empire.

The following quotation from the historian and sociologist Arnold Hauser (1998, p. 788) provides the historical context: "People's homes, means of transportation, methods of lighting, food, and clothing underwent more radical changes than in all the centuries since the beginning of modern urban civilization." In practical terms, this meant that a new rhythm was imposed upon modern everyday life. The development of communication and transportation increasingly homogenized space, while time became accelerated and

simultaneous. The transformations taking place in cities and in people's daily lives have altered perceptions of time and space. Places that had once seemed distant and distinct were brought closer together. As David Harvey observes (1992, p. 238): "the certainty of absolute space and place was replaced by the insecurities of a shifting relative space, in which events in one place could have immediate and far-reaching effects on many others." This reflection is consistent with what was occurring throughout Europe, where political and economic revolutions were simultaneously affecting the entire continent.

The homogenizing power of money was a driving force behind the processes that transformed the European continent into a more unified whole through new railways and waterways, facilitating the circulation of goods and trade between countries. Progress was eliminating spatial barriers, mastering space and imposing its transformations. Modernization unfolded as a process of transformation that annihilated space through time.

This period of prosperity could not have been conceived without the participation of the industrial and commercial bourgeoisie. Paris was being transformed into a modern metropolis, a center not only of art and culture but also of luxury and entertainment. Commerce expanded and attracted young talent. Department stores, restaurants, cafés, and theaters opened throughout the city. The atmosphere of sophistication and spectacle pervaded Paris. The arcades, a major modern innovation, with their shops, display windows, mirrors, and lighting, became the stage upon which the actors of this new urban scene paraded.

The urban reforms carried out by Georges-Eugène Haussmann, then Prefect of the Seine, virtually rebuilt Paris through the construction of the *boulevards*, the most important undertaking of the urban redevelopment project. According to Marshall Berman (1986, p. 145), "[...] the new Parisian *boulevard* was the most spectacular urban innovation of the nineteenth century, a decisive point of departure for the modernization of the traditional city." This remodeling of the city was intended to improve traffic circulation and provide new housing to meet the demands of a growing population.

It is important to emphasize that Haussmann's project was inseparable from real-estate speculation and the pursuit of profit; it was also intended to protect the city against civil unrest and barricades, since military troops could move efficiently through the newly opened thoroughfares. What few observers recognized was that Haussmann's urban restructuring did not benefit everyone. To make way for the new buildings and avenues, narrow streets and old, impoverished neighborhoods were demolished, and their populations

were displaced to the outskirts of the city. The image of power and glamour reflected by the *boulevards* concealed the segregating character of Haussmann's project, which drove the impoverished population away from the city center and presented the public with a limited image of the new Paris.

At the same time that the new buildings were being inaugurated with great fanfare, celebrating the reign of the bourgeoisie, *la vie parisienne* became famous throughout the world, reinforcing the modern idea of simultaneity. The cafés with their elegant terraces, the promenades along the sidewalks of tree-lined *boulevards*, the bridges, opera houses, and grand artistic monuments cast a seductive glow over the city. The visible reality, structured by the power of money, was reflected everywhere: whoever walked through the streets of Paris displaying the symbols of wealth and progress saw their own reflection in shop windows, mirrors, and even puddles of water.

This description reveals the first visibility of the Parisian urban experience: a city whose spatial organization, marked by its *boulevards*, is inseparable from its profoundly unequal social structure.

BAUDELAIRE AND THE PROSE POEMS

It was against this urban backdrop that Baudelaire produced a series of prose poems for the Parisian press, later collected under the title *Le Spleen de Paris*. In the dedication to his friend Arsène Houssaye, which opens the posthumously published *Petits Poèmes en prose* (*Little Poems in Prose*), Baudelaire expresses his enthusiasm for the innovation embodied in these texts (1976, p. 14):

Which of us, in his ambitious moments, has not dreamed of the miracle of a poetic prose, musical, without rhythm and without rhyme, supple enough and rich enough in contrasts to adapt itself to the lyrical movements of the soul, the undulations of reverie, and the sudden jolts of consciousness?³

What impelled poets of the late nineteenth century to experiment with poetic prose was the search for an art capable of intensifying reality. A precursor of this form was Aloysius Bertrand, a poet greatly admired by Baudelaire. Baudelaire's desire to experiment with poetic prose in his observation of the city arose from his understanding that this form of writing was adaptable and capable of changing from moment to moment, with a rhythm

³ As traduções das citações diretas presentes neste artigo (inclusive dos poemas) foram realizadas pela autora, com o auxílio do Chat GPT, a partir dos originais presentes na versão em português. A autora é responsável pela versão final.

that could mold itself to the miscellany of life.

The poems reveal Baudelaire as the great urban writer he was. Confronted with a city undergoing profound transformation, poetic prose provided the aesthetic response he needed to unveil reality before him. Attentive to every element of everyday life, Baudelaire created striking portraits of French society under the Second Empire. As Marshall Berman argues (1986, p. 144):

What Baudelaire seeks to communicate through this language, above all, is what I shall call primal modern scenes: experiences that arise from the concrete everyday life of the Paris of Bonaparte and Haussmann yet are imbued with a mythical resonance and depth that propel them beyond their own time and place, transforming them into archetypes of modern life.

In one of these modern scenes, *La Chambre double* (*The Double Room*), Baudelaire dreams of an ideal place of repose (1976, p. 25):

A room that resembles a reverie, a truly “spiritual” room, where the stagnant atmosphere is delicately tinged with pink and blue.

There the soul bathes in indolence, perfumed with regret and desire. There is something twilight-like about it, bluish and softly pink; a dream of voluptuousness during an eclipse.

[...] No! There are no longer minutes, no longer seconds! Time has disappeared; Eternity reigns, an eternity made of delights!

But a terrible, heavy blow resounded at the door, and, as in infernal dreams, I felt as though I had received the blow of a pickaxe in the stomach.

And then a Specter entered. It is a bailiff who comes to torture me in the name of the law, an infamous concubine who comes to lament her misery and add the trivialities of her life to the sorrows of mine; or the messenger of a newspaper editor demanding the continuation of a manuscript.

[...] Oh, yes! Time has reappeared; Time now reigns as sovereign; and with that hideous old man has returned his entire demonic procession of Memories, Regrets, Spasms, Terrors, Anguish, Nightmares, Rages, and Neuroses. I assure you that the seconds are now strongly and solemnly marked, and each one, springing from the clock, says: – “I am Life, unbearable, implacable Life.”

In this scene, the room is divided between reverie and sudden disturbance; the dream cannot withstand the tyranny of time, which allows the individual no moment of contemplation and continually imposes itself as the time of work, responsibilities, and obligations.

Another scene of Parisian life that did not escape Baudelaire’s observation was the redevelopment of the city. Once the city had been opened up by its immense *boulevards*, social contrasts became explicit, exposing its afflictions within the new glamorous

environment. The poet brought these contrasts to light in *Les Yeux des pauvres* (*The Eyes of the Poor*). The poem depicts a poor family standing on a newly inaugurated *boulevard*, where traces of demolition still remain, before an elegant café in which a young couple in love is seated. The ragged family gazes in wonder at its luxurious interior. The young man describes the scene (1976, p. 70):

On the sidewalk before us stood a poor man of about forty, with a weary face and a partly greying beard, holding a little boy by one hand and carrying on his other arm a tiny creature still too frail to walk.

This scene unveils the city's new organization, which brought everyone into contact with the contradictions of modern life. The poorest inhabitants, who had been displaced to distant neighborhoods, came to the *boulevards* to see the new constructions. At that moment, class differences were laid bare. The illuminated city made the wealth of the bourgeoisie shine, but Baudelaire's poetic prose mirrors the suffering of the less privileged by showing that the eyes of the poor reflect a wealth in which they cannot share.

At this point, literary form encounters the urban experience of modernity, and no one could have accomplished this task better than Baudelaire. Baudelaire (1976, p. 71) paid close attention to all these differences and, above all, to the human feelings they aroused. The young couple at the café did not react in the same way to the poor family. The young man continues:

Not only was I moved by this family of eyes, but I also felt somewhat ashamed of our glasses and bottles, larger than our thirst. [...] when you said to me:

– How unbearable those people are, with their eyes wide open like carriage gates! Couldn't you ask the owner of the café to send them away?

Baudelaire's critical attitude toward society certainly aligned his sympathies with those of the young man, who feels compassion for the poor family, while the young woman would rather not see them. We can observe that the two ways of looking described in the text are related to the political and ideological divisions that prevailed at the time. As Berman observes (1986, p. 149): "If barricades were erected on the *boulevard* – as indeed happened in 1871, seven years after the poem appeared and four years after Baudelaire's death – the lovers might very well have found themselves on opposite sides." In this passage, Berman is referring to the Paris Commune, a revolutionary government that took control of the city for approximately two months in 1871.

The innovative form of urban poetic prose, combined with Baudelaire's artistic

sensitivity, resulted in timeless portraits of a world in which everything was beginning to be forgotten with increasing speed.

THE POET, THE HEROIC FENCER, AND ENNUI

Baudelaire's poetic production began in his youth, in the streets of Paris. He sought to conquer them through *flânerie*. He devoted himself to this task with tremendous determination, since the inspiration for his poetry sometimes arose from reveries at street corners. The difficulty of creating poetry out of such elements justified the effort required to bring it into being.

In the poem *Le Soleil (The Sun)*, from *Les Fleurs du mal (The Flowers of Evil)*, Baudelaire describes the poet's craft and compares poetic creation to a struggle in which we perceive only its charm, overlooking the violence inherent in it (1984, p. 224):

Along the outskirts where, beneath the eaves, / Shutters reveal their tawdry secret pleasures, / When the sun strikes, imposing and hostile, / On city and countryside, on rooftops and wheat, / I set about practicing my strange fencing, / Sniffing everywhere for the accidents of rhyme, / Stumbling over words as though over obstacles, / Or coming upon some long-imagined verse.

In this poem, fencing appears as the poet's art of overcoming the obstacles involved in constructing verse and giving spatial form to dreams. With sword, pencil, or pen, he duels with everything he sees and everything he feels in order to bring the work into being on the page. This art unfolds in the city, where the poet sniffs out, stumbles over, or encounters the elements from which his verses will emerge. This rhythm of work was also celebrated in prose poems. The artist's effort was suited to the new experience of time. For this purpose, a poetic prose became necessary, one that, according to Baudelaire (1976, p. 14), "arises from frequenting cities and from the intersection of their innumerable relations." The city presented itself as contradictory, unequal, and ever-changing, and Baudelaire experienced it in its entirety.

According to Benjamin (1985), the image of the fencer in a *state of reverie* emerges as a characteristic of Baudelaire that had not, however, appeared in the figure of the *flâneur*. Baudelaire (1996, p. 20) defined the *flâneur* as "the passionate observer, [for whom] it is an immense joy to make his dwelling in the multitude, in the undulating, in movement, in the fleeting, and in the infinite." Until this point, this figure had been guided by an acute power of observation that transformed him into a kind of detective.

Yet descriptions of the city produced in a state of reverie could only be created by

someone who moved through the city as though standing outside it – absent, lost in his own thoughts or concerns. It was from this image Baudelaire created of himself as an artist – the fencer engaged in a constant struggle to create his work and attain glory – that his vision of the hero emerged. As Berman explains (1986, p. 140), “the crucial point of modern heroism, as Baudelaire sees it here, is that it emerges in conflict, in situations of conflict that permeate everyday life in the modern world.” Thus, for Baudelaire, whether in the realm of art or in people’s everyday lives, regardless of social class, living in the modern world requires a heroic struggle.

Another structural element of Baudelaire’s poetics is existential ennui, expressed in his work through the English word *spleen*. In *Au Lecteur (To the Reader)*, the poem that opens *Les Fleurs du mal* (1984, p. 82-83), Baudelaire refers to this monster familiar to us all:

Yet among the hounds, panthers, and jackals,
Monkeys and scorpions, vultures and snakes,
The monsters that growl, bark, or groan,
The infamous menagerie of our vices,
There is one more hideous, wicked, and foul!
Though it makes neither gestures nor cries,
It would gladly reduce the earth to ruins
And swallow the world in a single yawn.
It is Ennui! – its eyes forever filled with tears,
Smoking its hookah, it dreams of the scaffold.
You know it well, reader, this delicate monster,
Hypocritical reader, my equal, my brother!

Elsewhere in *Les Fleurs du mal* (1984, p. 213), Baudelaire wrote three other poems under the title *Spleen*, in which he also addresses this state of mind:

When the sky hangs heavy like a grave and somber lid
Upon the groaning spirit where ennui alone remains,
And embraces the entire circle of the horizon,
Pouring down a black day sadder than the night; [...]
The bells suddenly leap about in madness,
Hurling their dreadful cries toward the sky,
Like wandering spirits without a home,
Beginning to groan with relentless persistence.

Baudelaire’s existential ennui was absorbed by the generation that followed him. His poetry anticipated the Symbolist movement, which emerged as a literary school in 1886. Among its most celebrated poets were Verlaine, Mallarmé, and Rimbaud, and according to Hauser (1998, p. 909), Baudelaire exerted “the most profound and fertile influence on the movement.” In *Antologia da Poesia Francesa* (1999, p. 29), Cláudio

Veiga discusses Baudelaire's importance for the poets who came after him:

Of Baudelaire, the father of modern poetry and of these three masters, Paul Valéry would say: "Baudelaire's greatest glory is undoubtedly to have engendered several poets of the highest order. Verlaine, Mallarmé, and Rimbaud would not have become what they were without having read *Les Fleurs du mal* at the decisive age [...]. While Verlaine and Rimbaud continued Baudelaire in the realm of feeling and sensation, Mallarmé extended his legacy in terms of perfection and poetic purity."

This generation perceived itself as living through a period of intellectual decadence. Added to this were the decline of the Second Empire, insecurity, and fear of life: everything intoxicated them; everything was an abyss. What distressed them was the difficulty of formulating concepts capable of grasping reality. The Symbolists sought to escape from reality into the unknown; what they saw displeased them, and a profound cultural malaise. In the following passage, Rimbaud (1997, p. 22-23) embodies the artist who lives on the margins, in conflict with society:

Here I am on the provincial shore. Let the cities blaze with light at night. My day is done; I am leaving Europe. The sea air will burn my lungs; unknown climates will toughen me. To swim, crush the grass, hunt, above all smoke; to drink strong liquors like molten metal, as our ancestors did around the fire.
I shall return with limbs of iron, dark skin, and a furious gaze; judging by my appearance, they will think me of a strong race. I shall have money; I shall be idle and brutal. Women care for fierce invalids returning from tropical countries. I shall enter politics. I shall be saved.
For now I am damned; I abhor my homeland. The best thing is a deeply drunken sleep upon the shore.

After the publication of *Les Fleurs du mal*, Baudelaire became associated with the figure of the *poète maudit*, or "accursed poet," as a result of the scandal and legal proceedings provoked by the work. His relationship with bohemian life can be understood as a way of experiencing urban modernity, marked by excess and tension, rather than simply as an escape from reality. A habitué of cafés and marginal milieus, Baudelaire led an unstable life marked by financial difficulties and health problems. According to Hauser (1998, p. 919), "Rimbaud [...] is Baudelaire's only legitimate heir, the only one who understands the master's imaginary journeys and transforms into a way of life what, before him, had merely been excursions into the world of bohemia."

As a man of letters, Baudelaire preferred the street to the office. In his youth, his routine consisted of wandering through Paris composing verses. As he grew older, declining health and financial difficulties – particularly the pursuit of creditors – prevented him from practicing *flânerie* as frequently. Material hardship eventually overwhelmed him. In a letter

to his mother written in 1853, quoted by Walter Benjamin (1985, p. 96), he describes the circumstances in which he was living:

I have become so accustomed to physical suffering, I know so well how to manage with two shirts, a pair of torn trousers, and a jacket through which the wind blows, and I am so practiced at patching worn-out shoes with straw or even paper, that I almost feel only moral suffering as such. Nevertheless, I must confess that I have frankly reached the point where I no longer make sudden movements or walk very much, for fear of tearing my clothes even further.

The poet withdrew into solitude, feeling himself condemned within a society certain of its victories. Baudelaire broke not only with bourgeois society but with France more generally. In *Mon cœur mis à nu* (*My Heart Laid Bare*), he wrote (1981, p. 80): “I am bored in France, above all because everyone there resembles Voltaire.” In invoking Voltaire, Baudelaire criticizes the predominance of Enlightenment rationalism in French society, which, in his view, impoverished spiritual experience and contributed to the ennui and dissatisfaction of modern man.

The literary market required writers to establish themselves in the city and engage in a constant struggle to meet the demands of the bourgeoisie in exchange for its surplus wealth. Baudelaire’s position as a man of letters, critically opposed to the established social order, contributed to his precarious social condition. He consistently encountered difficulties in bringing his work to market and, throughout his life, never achieved the fortune enjoyed by some writers of his time.

Faced with the terrible conditions of human existence, the hero emerges once again, now in the figure of the person who possesses nothing. Factory workers, impoverished peasants, humble elderly people – in short, the entire poor population of the city that frequented public gardens and parks – possessed a heroism of their own, one that could also be found among those who inhabited the city’s underworld. Criminals, pimps, and prostitutes provided material for the poet’s work and were transformed into heroes.

According to Hauser (1998, p. 916), Baudelaire’s sympathy for the prostitute appears as the expression of an inhibited and anguished relationship with love. Baudelaire believed that *faire l’amour, c’est faire le mal* – to make love is to do evil. For him, love is the essence of the forbidden, the fall of man, the irreparable loss of innocence. The prostitute, marginal and rebellious, practices a form of love that is not spiritual and that also stands in opposition to the bourgeois social order; it is amoral. In fact, this view expresses a revolt against bourgeois society and the morality of the bourgeois family. Hauser regards the prostitute as

the female counterpart of the artist because, cold and impassive, she observes the passions she arouses. Moreover, there is an affinity between artist and prostitute in the selling of their work. Both sell it cheaply in a world where money buys everything, where everything is prostituted. Baudelaire recognizes this position of the artist in the poem *To the Reader*. He also referred to it in a poem about a street prostitute that was not included in *Les Fleurs du mal* (Benjamin, 1985, p. 64): “To have shoes, she sold her soul; / But the good Lord would laugh if, faced with such infamy, I played the hypocrite and imitated the Lord / I, who sell my thought and wish to be an author.”

When Baudelaire set out to portray all these figures devoid of glamour and chose them as the most heroic subject of modern life, he also sought to place himself, as a poet, in a heroic position by demonstrating his ability to extract poetry from such an environment.

THE SPECULAR INTERPLAY BETWEEN POETRY AND THE CITY

This article examined how Charles Baudelaire’s poetry relates to the city of Paris by reflecting the unequal processes of visibility and concealment that characterize the urban experience of modernity. Modernity, as a cultural and symbolic experience lived through the concrete transformations of modernization, is perceived, felt, and interpreted in unequal ways, which is reflected in different forms of representation of urban life.

Baudelaire apprehends this contradiction and, through an innovative language, succeeds in portraying both the visible reality of the city, dominant and structuring, and rendered invisible, subordinate, and segregated reality.

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