

Blessed to be Cursed? Four Poems in Defense of Poets from the Lair of Baudelaire

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In page after page of his revolutionary "*Fleurs du Mal*" (*Flowers of Evil*, 1857 & 1868 – a title not quite representative of the great variety of poems running the entire gamut of the human mind), Baudelaire effortlessly rendered the three octaves of heaven, hell and earth of human existence. Like a great Usher opening the door to modernity, this alchemist extraordinaire, a brilliant student of Latin and French masters trained classically to achieve enviable command of the metrical apparatus of the French verse form. Baudelaire though, more than any restless romantic rebel before him, with the possible exception of Vigny, displayed an all encompassing empathy with the subalterns of the world. Over the kaleidoscopic expanse of his masterpiece, one finds him invoking, pursuing, reclaiming, challenging, denying, raging and rebelling against God and on numerous instances, in mock anger to his Lord's silence, he 'praises', God's adversary, Lucifer!

Doubt or faith, order or anarchy, spleen or ideal, body or soul social wrecks or legendary artists, nature or women, this modern Dante has painted it all. Long before Rimbaud and Apollinaire, he felt and expressed the alienation, the anguish and the sufferings of the city dweller, while securing for himself a position as a subtle symbolist far ahead of his time. To expand upon a phrase by Geoffrey Brereton, I would argue that he was classical in training, romantic in spirit, realist in vision and symbolist by technique – a complete poet if ever there was one.

The incredibly gifted, versatile Rabindranath Tagore, owner and keeper of many a greener garden of happier flowers, the permanent strain of the harp/*tanpura* accompanying many a blessed soul's song in the journey of life, is said to have been repulsed in his fine oriental, Bengali and Victorian sensibility by some of Baudelaire's darker and bolder poems. Victor Hugo however extolled the merits of the collection by saying "your *fleurs du mal* shine and sparkle like stars. I applaud your vigorous spirit with all my heart."

The purpose of this article is not to gild again the lily, but to explore a series of four specific poems by our lyricist in *limbo* – for such had been the original title (*Limbes*) of the book that shook the world, no less than the Sepoy mutiny or Darwin's theory of evolution (all in the same eventful year of 1857), before Baudelaire accepted his friend Hippolyte Babou's suggestion and gave it the name the world knows it by. Each of the poems to be discussed here, registers a basic common premise/leitmotif- a lofty, spiritualized idealization of the poetic self, alternating with a moving martyred depiction of the same.

Through these four poems of great significance, namely: “*Bénédiction*” (*Benediction*); “*L’Albatros*” (*The Albatross*); “*La Béatrice*” (“*The*” *Beatrice*) and “*Sur Le Tasse en prison d’Eugène Delacroix*” (On “*the*” *Tasso in prison painted by Eugene Delacroix*), he lets the reader in on the essential secrets of his self, his self-pity, the sense of his true religion, his *raison d’être*, his salvation and his abiding pride. These self-referential, ‘meta’ poems compose, in a way, the primary chains or rings in the cellular configuration of his œuvre, the kernel of his world, the sanctum sanctorum in the citadel of his architext, from which Charles emerges on to the arena of society and history to take his place as Baudelaire.

In this essay, centered around the four aforesaid poems, I will be analyzing his narcissistic self-idealization of the poet as seer-pioneer, reliving the disillusionments with the real world and his horror and disgust at its vulgarity, mediocrity and materialistic nature. The article will also not fail to mention in passing, two predecessors - kindred souls - of Baudelaire: Lamartine the father of French romanticism, in the context of his “*Ferrare*” (an amazingly and it may be added, unusually bitter poem from a master poet of nature and spirituality, dealing with the same theme of the persecution of Tasso) and Vigny, the stoical, toughened, vanguard poet of ideas more than of feelings.

Judging by the way “*Bénédiction*” opens, it might seem rather to qualify for the title “*Malédiction*”, but that would have been an antiphrase in the overall context of the long poem which elaborates on the poet’s self-pity, only to subvert it at the end by a celebration of the poet. The seventy-six verse poem is the gateway to the collection, being the very first one in the first section “*Spleen et Idéal*” unless one considers the disconcertingly mocking “*Au lecteur*” (*To the reader*), as being already the first great poem of the collection.

Before revealing his array of creations, at the very outset, the creator first determines his own position, his own coordinates in the cosmology and the immediate surrounding sociology. In so doing, he reminds us, in a flash, of the first title of the book: *Limbes* (*Hanging in Limbo*)! For he harbours no illusions about a poet’s place in the world, nor does he allow societal judgement to challenge his supreme self-confidence or weaken his belief in the Divine order whereby poets are guests of honour feasting alongside Saints.

In the first of the four clearly discernible movements (stanzas 1-5), he depicts the horror and almost comical, blasphemous remonstrations of the poet’s mother at having been chosen to bring him into the world: “*Sa mère épouvantée et pleine de blasphème/ Crispe ses poings vers Dieu*” (*His terrified blasphemous mother/ Raises her clenched fists towards god*) while making it clear that it is “*par un décret des puissances suprêmes, (....by a decree of the powers supreme)*” that “*Le Poète apparaît en ce monde ennuyé*” (*The poet is born into this dreary world*). All that needs to be noted here is the undying resentment of Baudelaire – who otherwise had the profoundest love and respect for his mother, in whose arms he would die --at her remarriage to colonel Aupick, when he was but six years old. Baudelaire’s unfulfilled wish to be accepted and appreciated by her, is well-known. Not for the faint-hearted are these lines from the iconoclast rebel who then clamours thus for attention: “*Et, ne comprenant pas les desseins éternels,/ Elle-même prépare au fond de la Géhenne/ Les bûchers consacrés aux crimes maternels*” (*And*

comprehending not the superior designs/ Herself sets at the bottom of hell / Funeral pyres reserved for maternal crimes! And yet the cherubic child thus forsaken innocently establishes his special bonds with the elements, playing and talking to them in his flights of imagination, goes into a trance while innocently and unwittingly singing of the way of the cross and finds beauty and taste in everything evoking pitiful sighs and silent tears in his guardian angel and fear and sadistic attitudes in his tormentors who take pleasure in "mixing ash and spitting in the bread and wine destined for his mouth". The mention of the cross and the obvious religious connotations of bread and wine, of great significance to all Christians, reinforce further the idea of the sacred and difficult mission of poets in imitating the martyrdom of original pathfinder of humanity and rebel on the Cross.

Having depicted a hysterical mother-figure and a perfidious, philistine humanity he yet loved, Baudelaire seems determined to perfect his theory of the perfect and complete isolation of the poet as he systematically severs the last mortal attachment of man, by taking on next, the figure of wife/woman (st.10-13). The latter, while initially revelling in the poet's "impious farces" ("*farces impies*"), his sacrilegious idolatry of her down- to-earth self, tires of him and finally "*tears out his heart*" full of obsessive love for her and disdainfully throws it on the ground for her favourite beast to feed.

The shocking sanguinary imagery of these stanzas bring out Baudelaire's residual romanticism. But like the soul, *it does not die*. It only gets transformed and in the final six stanzas, Baudelaire reveals his magical alchemy as he *romanticises* again - for one last time - the idea of divine selection of the poet. The poet who is chosen to experience all manner of torments which he rationalizes, as a Jansenist like him would, in affirming his faith not only in the subtlety of God's design but also in the worth of man's art. This is the final myth and I will further argue, while reading the poem on Tasso which is one of the final poems in the "*Epigraphes*" section, that between the alpha and the omega of his magnum opus, through all the broken dreams and shattered myths, this is one belief of his that sustained him. The crown of thorns is replaced by a crown of light as addressing God in a moving *janantik* (apostrophe), he affirms his conviction in the final reward in "*.....ce beau diadème éblouissant et clair.... il ne sera fait que de pure lumière,*" (*this dazzling clear diadem... will only be of pure light*). Such is the profound intent of this poet.

L'Albatros, the next poem in the collection, itself seems like an *enjambement* of *Benediction* as it continues the same theme of the special gift of the painters of the soul for flying freely in the firmament of dreams and ideas and their ineptitude and predicament on land with judgemental attitudes. The weaving of an intertextual mesh has already begun between the two poems and with two more on the same broad subject to follow, "*La Béatrice*" ("*The*" *Beatrice*), the 115th and the "*Sur Le Tasse en prison d'Eugène Delacroix*" (*On* "*the*" *Tasso in prison*), the 146th poem. The weft and warp of overlapping and common "themes" between poems placed at the very beginning and at the furthest end of the book lend consistency to Baudelaire's conscious construction of an elite identity for poets.

Albatross, the bird with the longest wingspan captured by the crew of civilization's coaster, is a powerful allegory of the free-spirited myriad-minded

man of imagination, who, shares - probably under delusion - humanity's apparent love of the beauty of the unending journey towards the unknown (*voyage* and *nouveauté*). Journey and novelty being two of the favourite themes of Baudelaire), it happily accompanies the ship of human endeavour : "*...vastes oiseaux des mers, / Qui suivent, indolents compagnons de voyage, / Le navire glissant sur les gouffres amers.*" (*huge birds of the seas/Who follow, as indolent co-passengers of the trip,/The ship gliding over merciless abyss*). The use of the adjective "vast" for the bird and the noun "gouffres" (chasm/abyss) for the sea is significant as the power in the wings of imagination and its ability to re-form the world are what keep at bay the thought of meaninglessness in a godless world.

In fact, in another much quoted poem in the same collection, namely "*Le gouffre*" (*The abyss*) Baudelaire mentions Pascal's philosophical doubts that he himself was often subject to when he would shudder to see "*l'infini par toutes les fenêtres*" (*the infinite through all the windows*) and because "*poetry is the willing and temporary suspension of disbelief*",- the flying prowess of the poet-Albatros is what provides a countervailing *forcé*. With an almost masochistic glee, Baudelaire then portrays the clumsiness and alienation of the natural "flier" among the "crawlers", using a plethora of adjectives with negative connotations, as many as seven in the condensed space of just seven verses (v. 6-12) to be precise : "*maladroits*" (*clumsy*), "*honteux*" (*ashamed*), "*gauche*" (*clumsy*), "*veule*" (*spineless*), "*comique*" (*comical*), "*laid*" (*ugly*) and "*infirmes*" (*crippled*).

However, there never being any final humility-tinted genuine "apology" for artists, especially for wordsmiths in the Baudelairean oeuvre, we know that this sand castle of others' perspectives so meticulously built up, is only towards a grand demolition by the poet's pride in his own art. Baudelaire does not fail to remind us in the antithetical last stanza: "*Le Poète est semblable au prince des nuées/ Qui hante la tempête et se rit de l'archer;/ Exilé sur le sol au milieu des huées, / Ses ailes de géant l'empêchent de marcher*" (*The poet is like the prince of cloudy skies/ He flies through tempests, the archer he mocks / But grounded - amidst jeers, hisses, cries,/ His gigantic wings would not allow him to walk*). The bird's-eye view defeats yet again the worm's-eye view. Importantly, as opposed to "*Bénédiction*", where the poet is *free to suffer* among a callous, uncaring humanity, with L'Albatros, the politically significant themes, (even if in allegorical terms), of captivity and enslavement emerge more clearly. They prepare the readers' mind for the inevitable parallelism between the trapped/caged bird of boundless freedom of imagination in this poem and the incarcerated megapoet of the Renaissance, author of "*Gerusalemme Liberata*", Torquato Tasso depicted in the final poem to be analyzed.

As noted before, despite a long journey through the collection that sees one journey past three different sections (*Spleen et Idéal*, *Tableaux parisiens* and the third section which gives the book its name, namely "*Fleurs du Mal*") Baudelaire's deep-seated anger, dejection and sense of betrayal - as much from a philistine, prudish public as from (should I add, as an Indian drawing on his *Mahabharata*) their *Shikhandi*, the most beloved woman instigating them to ridicule- keep resurfacing with even more anguish, bitterness and ferocity, as in "*La Béatrice*" ("The" Beatrice). The name of the most idealized Eternal Feminine sung by one of the greatest epic poets ever, provides the title, with the noteworthy

addition of a definite article added as a homage to the poet's own hate, at the cost of classic grammar. This also shows the great self-esteem in which Baudelaire held himself, because Dante is no mere local folk legend of true love, but a model, a demiurge and a major shaper of Western literature.

"*La Béatrice*", a very personal poem, written in the first person, depicts the poet in his solitary promenades in communion with nature, complaining about life's imperfections and deceptions. The surrounding urban milieu however expectedly resembles Dante's hell rather than Wordsworth's christianized green heaven of bliss: "...*cendreux, calcinés, sans verdure*" (*ashen, burnt-out, bereft of greenery*). Against this infernal urban decor, mirroring no doubt the cynical, wasted and twisted landscape of the human mind, caught between the lost world of romance and faith, and the emerging one enslaved by the reductionist logic of science, a remarkably sensitive poet forges his thoughts in the quest for truth.

However, his soliloquy triggers the landing *en masse* of "*démons vicieux/ Semblables à des nains cruels et curieux*" (vicious demons/ Resembling cruel and curious gnomes), understandably both disgruntled critics and the common public of the day, reminding one of the furious sadistic mobs of "Benediction" or the frivolous sailors of "Albatross" or, as shall be seen, the tormentors of the allegedly 'bipolar' Tasso. Baudelaire then proceeds, as in his other poems of the same series, to make the artist the target of a fusillade of merciless mockery by the 'herd,' who, besides calling the poet a jobless actor, a scamp and a rogue, also labels him a caricature and a shadow of Hamlet.

The poet and the critic Banville had once remarked that the three Shakespeares of his century were Baudelaire in literature, Delacroix in art and Berlioz in music. Great admirer of the tragedies of Shakespeare, as of Poe and Byron, Baudelaire etches in teasingly, well-known idiosyncracies of Hamlet the narrator-poet's appearance as reported by the rabble: "*Le regard indécis et les cheveux au vent*" (*With indecision in his eye and his hair flying in the wind..*).

Over the first twenty-two verses, the poet broods in a minor key over his pain of having to contend with his rivals and critics, outsiders all. However, while he declares his pride to be "as lofty as the mountains, rising far above the clouds and the demons", his voice reaching a crescendo, a perceptible shrillness infiltrates it. Something seems to crack inside him as he wonders at the "*crime that yet did not make the sun waver*" ("*..crime qui n'a pas fait chanceler le soleil*"), when he finds his "Beatrice" joining in, encouraging and inciting the "obscene gang" to deride him. Jeanne Duval, the "inspiration" also for "*Le vampire*" (*The vampire*) as well as several other poems of Baudelaire, is supposedly the treacherous one.

Here, let us pause to remember the biblical hypertext from the "Book of Judges" about the invincible semitic hero and his archetypal devious Philistine lady-love: that of Delilah's betrayal of Samson to the Philistines that Baudelaire's kindred soul and predecessor Alfred de Vigny had retold with telling empathy in his poem "*La colère de Samson*" (*The wrath of Samson*).

To discern the silhouettes and make the connection between the sets (Beatrice) Jeanne Duval / Delilah on one hand and (Dante) Baudelaire / Samson on the other, is fairly facile. Daring to go a little further, one remembers Plato's suspicion

of poets, the notion of apathy towards art and culture associated with the word 'Philistine' in modern times, the romanticised modern 'Jewish' identity of exile, the persecution of 'decadent' writers under totalitarian regimes in the name of collective good, and the plight of dissident poets right up to the post modern. Baudelaire's poem seems to be from no particular age or with reference to any specific political system -republic, monarchy or dictatorship. The true artist's voice is an angst-ridden soul's cry for total freedom that no state could deliver or allow.

The observation above brings us to the final poem in this cycle of poems that constitute "a new aplogie" for poets, namely "*Sur Le Tasse en prison d'Eugène Delacroix*" (*On "Tasso in prison" painted by Eugène Delacroix*). Torquato Tasso, poet of the "Rinaldo", "Aminta" and most famously "Jerusalem Delivered", apart from Lamartine, as mentioned early in this essay, influenced many other writers such as Ronsard, Philip Sidney, Milton, Goethe and Byron, a dozen great composers of the likes of Brahms, Liszt, Vivaldi, Rossini and Monteverdi and painters such as Tintoretto, Van Dyck, Poussin and Delacroix. The last named, Baudelaire's contemporary and great friend, also inspired Baudelaire's poem, the masterpiece "Dante and Virgil in hell" (1822). Of the other men of various branches of arts, while most of the above named artists converted to music or committed to canvas parts of Tasso's monumental poems, Goethe would pen a play on his life (*Torquato Tasso*, 1790) while Lord Byron paid his tribute through his poem "*The Lament of Tasso*", regarding Tasso's stay at the St. Anna hospital in Ferrara.

It is generally held that excessive worry about critics' views on his beloved "*Gerusalemme Liberata*", paranoia with regard to the Inquisition which might find some parts of that epic poem heretical, and jealousy and hostilities in the court of his protector the Duke of Ferrara Alfonso II d'Este, had made Tasso's reason falter. The final and violent breakup with the duke with regard to a perceived slight led to the powerful duke's decision to incarcerate him. Baudelaire's blessed Albatross, in a final transmogrification now becomes the caged tormented soul of Tasso. The title itself seems richly coded: since *Croix* means cross in French, one could read it in other ways- "*Sur Le Tasse.....Delacroix*" "On the Tasso of the cross," or with a minor modification "*Sur le Tasse sur...lacroix*" ("On the Tasso on the cross").

Deep sympathy drips from each word of the first two stanzas that describe the forlorn, slovenly and demoralized Tasso, and the demons of doubt and fear playing havoc with his reason. In the third, Baudelaire calls him a genius and by the final one, his sympathy borders on empathy: "*Ce rêveur que l'horreur de son logis réveille, / Voilà bien ton emblème, Ame aux songes obscures, / Que le Réel étouffe entre ces quatre murs !*" (*This dreamer awakened by his horrible abode/ Thy emblem behold, O Soul with vague dreams/ That Reality chokes between its four walls*). Baudelaire's pondered composition, with relatively more detachment, obsessively dwells, for the fourth time at least¹, on the tortured mind of that species of elite martyrs- poets, and their persecution by a vulgar mass. However Lamartine's "Ferrare (improvised upon coming out of Tasso's cell)" is a more spontaneous and inclusive theory of the suffering of all pioneers. Lamartine

names in his roll of honour an astronomer (Galileo), a soldier-cum-poet (Sir Philip Sidney), God (JC) and “us”, meaning “*tout génie*” (*all gifted people*), as is the wont of an egotistic romantic poet displaying respectful self-identification with these bearers of crosses. Lamartine scoffs at the common man who demands enlightenment from God and yet fails to recognize and love “his torches”. It is not known whether Baudelaire had read Lamartine’s poem but the similarity of thought and general response to Tasso’s predicament are indeed striking.

However, when it comes to similarity and connectivity of themes amongst the four poems of Baudelaire that we are concerned with here, the table² below offers a comparative structure of common themes through which Baudelaire establishes and self-consciously asserts his poetic identity.

Finally, (to mention what can be the subject of a wider study), Alfred de Vigny’s novel *Stello* and play *Chatterton*, as well as much of his poetry may also have inspired Baudelaire to interweave a unique poetic texture of agonizing pain and fiery pride.

(*All the translations of the verses quoted in the article are also by the author of the present article)

Endnotes

¹ At least two other poems merit mention in these endnotes, for unlike the four discussed, their guarded symbolism and treatment of martyrs in general, do not render them predominantly or explicitly poet-specific: “*Le flambeau vivant*” (“*The flaming torch*” the 43rd poem of the collection in the “*Spleen et Idéal*” section) and the famous “*Le cygne*” (*The swan*), 89th poem in the section “*Tableaux parisiens*” (*Scenes of Paris*), dedicated to Hugo, are poems of this nature.

Themes & thematic commonalities				
Major themes dealt with in the poems				
Poem	Theme 1	Theme 2	Theme 3	Theme 4
“Benediction” (Ben.)	Horror of a mother	The vampire woman, poet’s Muse	Cruelty of a philistine crowd	Ascendance, glory and final victory of the poet
“The Albatross” (Al.)	Plight of the captured bird, cruelty/sadistic attitude of the crowd	Inaptitude/clumsiness / exile	Power, mobility, grace, pride, reign of a poet in the realm of imagination	
(The) “Beatrice” (Bea.)	Soliloquy of the discontented poet	Fusillade of detractors	Supreme pride & self-confidence of poet, sure of his final triumph	Instigation of philistines by “Beatrice” (beloved / vampire)
“On (the) Tasso in prison” (Tas.)	Mental torture of the incarcerated poet by a voyeuristic crowd	Paranoia, confusion, hallucinations caused by doubt & fear	Dreamer suffocated by reality	Self-identification by Baudelaire
Thematic commonalities/similarities/ overlappings in the poems under discussion :				
Ben./Al. => 3/1 & 4/3; Ben./Bea.=> 2/4 & 3/2; Ben./Tas.=>3/1;				
Al./Bea.=> 1/2 & 3/3; Al./Tas. => 1/1; Bea./Tas.=> 2/1				

As borne out by the table above, each poem shares at least one of the themes with at least one other poem, but the dominant theme of unkind criticism and general apathy of the public runs through them all.

In saluting his own heroes as well as the archetypal figure of the Poet as seer, Baudelaire seems to reaffirm his steely resolve to wrest his own legitimate place among them, his eyes fixed on immortality.

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