

**MYRIADS OF MODERNITY: SAND, SEA AND CITIES IN BAUDELAIRE AND POE**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper attempts to study modernity as a continuous process ever-changing and taking its origin from the past, antiquities, archives, or ‘old ways’, either to break away from its clutches or in presenting a new worldview. As the literary productions of Baudelaire (1821-1867) and Edgar Allan Poe (1809 – 1849) could clearly establish, it is inherited from Romantics, but based on the observations of real life echoing the exhortations of the gigantic fall of antiquity. The life of the two great poets would reveal much about their intense inclination toward modernity. Despite the two poets are from different landscapes, there is an affinity in their world views and convictions.

**Keywords:** Modernism, Romantics, Antiquity, Affinity, Poets.

**INTRODUCTION**

“Everywhere he (the Guy) sought the transitory, fleeting beauty of our present life – the character of what the reader has permitted us to call modernity” – (Baudelaire, *Oeuvres*, 110)

There are many point-of-views in contextualizing modernity. It can be situated in relation to the rise of industrial society and social strata, such as elite groups, classes, the masses, gender and race. At the heart of the matter, modernity is “understood as an attempt to discover secular, rational principles of order in the physical and social world” (Cashmore, 3). It can even be traced to the fifteenth-century voyages of discovery to find the limits of the world. Dante’s ‘unreal city’, Blake’s portrayal of London city, and John Keats’ conception of ‘Beauty is truth, truth, Beauty’ are also said to be some of the early sources of modernity.

Some commentators place it with the invention of the printing press, placing the human experiences subject to the written world. There is a quest for certainty, no longer accepting religious or metaphysical doctrines; the artists centralized the role of the human mind. The modernizing world is believed to be ever progressing to an ever-higher state. There was nothing that man could not accomplish.

From the viewpoints of Nietzsche, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud and James G. Frazer, one can understand that Modernism involves a deliberate and radical break with some of the traditional bases of social organization, religion and morality. The coherent, traditional and inherited mode of literary work with the stable social order, suffered a lot to adjust itself to “the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history”, says T.S. Eliot (Abrams, 226). Hence there were movements like expressionism and surrealism, cubism, futurism and abstract expressionism to break away from representational conventions. In modernism, there was another phenomenon called avant-garde (advance-guard), which deliberately undertook in Ezra Pound’s phrase, “to make it new”.

At the same time, Classical Newtonian Physics taught for every action there is a reaction. The catastrophe of war has reacted otherwise. It shook faith in the moral basis, coherence and durability of western civilization and “raised doubts about the adequacy of traditional modes to represent the harsh realities of the post-war world” (Abrams, 226). There was a reaction to this thought also, at once, since “optimism about progress was soon met by critics the costs of transforming the world” (Cashmore, 4). Populations were terribly uprooted (‘terrible beauty is born’ as called by W.B. Yeats), community life is completely eroded and cultural values were miserably coarse. Growth of alienation, the one-sidedness of industrial revolution in the growth of machine-age, and industrial and economic exploitation posing hazards to the environment are the concerns of the artists, who tend to lean towards antiquities.

## DISCUSSION

This paper attempts to study modernity as a continuous process ever-changing and taking its origin from the past, antiquities, archives, or ‘old ways’, either to break away from its clutches or in presenting a new worldview. As the literary productions of Baudelaire (1821-1867) and Edgar Allan Poe (1809 – 1849) could clearly establish, it is inherited from Romantics, but based on the observations of real life echoing the exhortations of the gigantic fall of antiquity. As T.S. Eliot would rightly point out in his *Four Quarters*:

go, go, go, said the bird: human kind  
Cannot bear very much reality.  
Time past and time future  
What might have been and what has been  
Point to one end, which is always present. (T.S. Eliot, *Four Quarters*, 7)

The life of the two great poets would reveal much about their intense inclination toward modernity. Psychobiographical critics like Erik Erikson would establish that the incidents that happen in early childhood determine the entire life of an individual. Baudelaire's father Joseph-François Baudelaire 34 years older than his mother Caroline died during his childhood in 1827. The following year, Caroline married Lieutenant Colonel Jacques Aupick. This is a crucial moment in the life of Baudelaire. Missing the ardent love of his mother, he is left with a trauma that can explain much of the excesses in his later life.

Poe, named after the Character of William Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Edgar, was born in Boston in 1809, as the second child of David and Elizabeth. His father abandoned his family in 1810 and his mother passed away in the following year. Though orphaned Poe was not originally adopted, he was taken in by John and Francis Allan. Tension and trauma develop in Poe when there was a repeated clash between Poe and John Allen over Poe's debts over gambling and education.

Trauma developed during early childhood might explain the authors' reaction to the compelling incidents and habits in both of their life, like dressing sense, engaging in gambling, consumption of alcohol, absentmindedness, excess debts, dandyism, moving from one dwelling place to another to escape from creditors. Baudelaire, the first translator of Poe hints at the reaction towards the fleeting and ephemeral experiences of life in the so-called 'cities' and the responsibility of the artist to capture this uniqueness in artistic production, in which both the artists have excelled.

Both Poe and Baudelaire were disaffected and alienated students of a society undergoing the pressure of transition and lived on the fringes of a cynical society that was undergoing transition, in its entry to modernity. Both were living in the age of waning romanticism and emerging Realism. One could see that both writers were influenced by the unfolding of a new way of life, in the urban 'crowd' and by the industrial revolution upon art and literature.

Modernity, for Baudelaire, is a "fantastic battle" in which he "screams with fear before he is vanquished". With the deep-rooted classical art of Rome, Baudelaire felt a resistance to the natural

production of art and literature. “Even in his nervous crises”, writes Gourmont, “Baudelaire retains something healthy” (Benjamin, 97).

Images of fencing and duel are replete in Baudelaire’s writings. The symbolist Gustave Khan says that “with Baudelaire, poetic work resembled physical effort” (Benjamin, 97). Artistic elements converge into martial tools in his hands. His description of the most admirable Constantine Guys the replica of Baudelaire himself beautifully presents the resistance. Tools of the artist like the sheets of paper, his pencil, pen, and his brush turn out to be martial instruments, with which he has to enter into a fantastic battle of artistic production with a lurking fear of escape from his images. The modern artist is combative, even when he is alone:

...bent over his table, scrutinizing the sheet of paper just as intently as he does the objects around him by day; how he uses his pencil, his pen, his brush like a rapier, spurts water from his glass to the ceiling and tries his pen on his shirt; how he pursues his work swiftly and intensely, as though afraid that his images might escape him. Thus he is combative, even when alone, and parries his own blows. (Baudelaire, *Oeuvres*, Vol.2, p.334: “Le Pente de la vie modern”, sec.3).

The task of the poet would be to dig and rake the garden and reclaim the flooded soil from the time’s destructiveness:

Already the autumn of ideas has come,  
and I must dig and rake and dig again  
if I am to reclaim the flooded soil  
collapsing into holes the size of graves ( Baudelaire *L’Ennemi*, 1-4)

Edgar Allan Poe’s *The City in the Sea* would depict the city ruled by death, shrines, palaces and the “long forgotten bowers” and “time eaten towers” wearing deserted look, having lost all that is “ours”, looking gigantically down. Depicting the hideous loss of sacredness and serenity, the light doesn’t come from the sky, but from the sinister, shocking, sensational and melancholic sea:

No rays from the holy heaven come down  
On the long night-time of that town;  
But light from out the lurid sea  
Streams up the pinnacles far and free- (Poe, *The City in the Sea*, 12-15)

With closed shutters and windows shedding secret lusts, wasted and weakened neighborhood, in the beating sun, the artist is looking for opportunities for his rhyme at every street corner, stumbling

over words:

Through decrepit neighborhoods on the outskirts of town, where  
Slatted shutters hand at the windows of hovels that shelter secret lusts;

.....

I go out alone to practice my fantastical fencing,  
Scenting opportunities for rhyme on every street corner,  
Stumbling over words as though they were cobblestones,  
Sometimes knocking up against verses dreamed long ago.

(Baudelaire, *Le Soleil*, 1-8)

The violent stumbling for words and dreams of images knocking up his memory lane in his fantastic creative process gives his poetry an everlasting charm of modernity. According to Baudelaire, finally, an obsessive ideal is born as an artifact, as musical stirrings of the soul, as the undulations of reverie, above all, from the experience of giant cities, from the intersecting of their myriad relations (Baudelaire: *Oeuvres*, Vol.1, pp.405-406).

In comparison to the same strings of Baudelaire, Poe's poetry and fiction also are normally associated with the romantic and gothic scenes of lonely landscapes, marked by the decaying remains of aristocratic houses and gigantic towers. Washington Irving summarized this 'watching' or observation in solitariness, the experience that has formed the base for the works of Baudelaire and Poe. "I longed", he wrote: "to loiter about the ruined castle, to meditate on the falling tower – to escape, in short, from the commonplace realities of the present" (Zanger, 29). Much of Baudelaire and Poe's works precisely reflect this impulse.

The revealing representations of the city have emanated from the deep-rooted observations, i.e., "watching", one of the important traits of Baudelaire, a man, with absentmindedness, omitted from his portrayal. The joy of watching prevails over everything. It is the work of a flaneur, a dandy, who traversed the city absently, lost in thoughts, like Charles Dickens and William Blake. As Chesterton says about Dickens: "He was a dreamy child...walked in darkness under the lamps .... He did not go in for 'observation' ... he did not stamp these places on his mind; he stamped his mind on these places" (Chesterton, pp. 45-46).

Modernity imposes resistance to natural creation with the attitudes of Death and Suicide, resignation, flung over in the process of transition of romanticism. Modern man, the big-city dweller, feels as though he is dropped from the calendar. They are like poor souls that wander restlessly but have no history:

And minute by minute, Time engulfs me,

The way an immense snowfall engulfs a body grown stiff. (Benjamin, 200)

Modernity stands under the sign of suicide, which can be viewed not as a resignation but as a heroic passion. "It is the achievement of modernity in the realm of the passions" says Baudelaire in his letters (Benjamin, 104). In Baudelaire, it engendered the poetry of apachedom and contributed to a genre that lasted more than four decades.

Poets and novelists like Blake, Dickens, Baudelaire, and Poe find 'refuse' of society on their streets and they derive their heroic subject from their very refuse. Rag-picker made frequent appearances in these writers. The views of Baudelaire and Poe on modernity are the same in that modern art is the weakest point. Their concerns are with classical art and antiquity which is thrown away by the modern crowd. The poet's task is the task of a rag picker, collecting the treasures of the thrown-out antiquities:

Here we have a man whose job it is to gather the day's refuse in the capital everything that the big city has thrown away, everything it has lost, everything it has scorned, everything it has crushed underfoot he catalogues and collects. He collects, like a miser guarding a treasure. (Baudelaire, *Oeuvres*, Vol.1, pp.249)

If it is a rag-picker for Baudelaire, it is Chimney sweepers and soldiers in Blake. Blake's London is a bleak symbol of weakness and woe. The palace, a symbol of history and antiquity, is stained with blood:

I wander thro' each charter'd street,

.....

In every cry of every Man,

In every Infants cry of fear,

In every voice: in every ban,

The mind-forg'd manacles I hear

How the Chimney-sweepers cry

Every blackning Church appalls,

And the hapless Soldiers sigh

Runs in blood down Palace walls (Blake, *London*, 1-12)

The rag picker problematizes the inevitable “archival violence” (Derrida, 7-8). The rag picker’s diligent archiving of waste is not only a symbol for challenging existing master narratives in cultural memory, but also for the undoing of the conditions of possibility that enabled these master narratives.

In Baudelaire’s opinion, a person who is excessively absorbed in antiquity forfeits the privileges opportunity offers him. His doctrine proclaims that there are two elements of modernity; one is “a constant, immutable element and a relative, limited element cooperate to produce beauty. The latter element is supplied by the period, fashion, morality, and passions. Without this second element, the first would be unassimilable” (Benjamin, 111). Hence there is the closest link between antiquity and modernity.

‘Crowd’, one of the ever-enduring elements of modernity haunts Baudelaire with bizarre experiences. It embodies trembling of morality, shattering of towering values, and destabilization of human identity itself. T.S. Eliot, in his *The Waste Land*, when referring to the death engulfed faces of the crowd on London Bridge, he echoes the lines of Baudelaire in “The Seven Old Men,” a poem in Baudelaire’s volume of Poetry *Fleurs du mal*: “Unreal city, city full of dreams, Where ghosts in broad daylight cling to passers-by”:

Unreal City,  
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,  
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,  
I had not thought death had undone so many. (Eliot, *The Waste Land*)

In Poe’s poem the places of worship and the graveyards on the sea shore are leveled with each other, since the strange city is devoid of morality and what richness is there to loot, except the sins. In Poe, the ‘crowd’ is symbolically mentioned as the ‘gaping graves’ without life, aim or purpose, expressing the condition of life-in-death. There is hardly any inspirational gaily-jeweled dead who can tempt the waters from their bed. Hence the sea is reluctant to make move against the city:

Not the gaily-jewelled dead  
Tempt the waters from their bed;  
For no ripples curl, alas! (Poe, *The City and the Sea*, 34-36)

The elements of modernity like traffic, artificial towers, fleeting quality of the joys of life, (‘noble grief’), sense of nothingness, and killing graces of women are beautifully brought out by Baudelaire

in his poem “In Passing” (Chambers, 103). The scene depicts how modern man’s fascination for the love of a woman is lost, as she passes like a lightning, with her “jeweled hand”, clad in black (echoing “jeweled dead” of Edgar Allan Poe). One meets her around the roaring traffic:

The Traffic roared around me, deafening!  
Tall, Slender, in mourning – noble grief-  
A woman passed, and with a jeweled hand  
Gathered up in her black embroidered hem; (Baudelaire, *In Passing*, 1-4)

She was walking like a statue and he trembling like a fool, intoxicated, drunk from her eyes, the joy that killed him:

Stately yet lithe, as if a statue walked...  
And trembling like a fool, I drank from eyes  
.....  
The grace that beckons and the joy that kills. (Baudelaire, *In Passing*, 4-8)

Flashes of lightning and darkness dash on the shores of his mind, in his lifeless existence, among the ‘crowd’ in the deafening traffic. Before he could come to normalcy, it was too late. The admirable statue, the ‘lovely fugitive’ disappeared and moved elsewhere, far away from him in the crowd, before he could express his love, alas! She could know nothing of him, in spite of the fact that she too might have loved him. Hence both of their love is lost in the crowd:

Elsewhere! Too far, too late, or never at all!  
Of me you know nothing, I nothing of you  
Whom I might have loved and who knew that too! (Baudelaire, *In Passing*, 12-14)

There is a stir in the melancholic waters of the sea in Poe’s *The City and the Sea* in the last stanza, the large lifeless, inactive towers of the city are slightly moving towards eternal doom, while the dead city begins to sink “down, down” to settle under the sea. The sea finally engulfs the city indicating that Death’s city will be held in reverence in Hell, but there are no earthly grievances since the town is satisfied with the present condition of life-in- death and they are doomed to a dwelling, worse than Hell:

And when, amid no earthly moans,  
Down, down, that town shall settle hence,  
Hell, rising from a thousand thrones,  
Shall do it reverence (Poe, *The City in the Sea*, 50-53)

## CONCLUSION

Whether it is Paris or New York, both the poets have the same principles of the ‘art of seeing’. Both the poets have derived the motifs from the swarming crowds in the cities and the isolation of the people amidst the crowd, reminding and echoing Valery’s statement that “Civilization reverts to a state of savagery – that is, of isolation” (Benjamin, 190). Modernity, in both the authors, is present in the time past and in time present, as well as in time future and it is a continuous, contiguous process. The poet’s words appeal to the consciousness, with all their observations of human life, to one end, which is always present, as T.S. Eliot would vouchsafe in his *Four Quarters*:

Time present and time past  
Are both perhaps present in time future,  
And time future contained in time past.  
If all time is eternally present  
All time is unredeemable. (*Four Quarters*, “Burnt Norton”, 1-5)

As one of the influences of modernity, the machine-like man has to learn the movements of an automaton also. An absurd kind of uniformity is needed not only in the attire and behavior, but uniformity in the facial expression also, probably the familiar kind as expressed these days, “keep smiling” (Benjamin, 191). It is this principle, which could be the rock of defense for these two poets to succeed in the turbulent times of change not only in the literary but also in the societal arenas. Welcome change, the permanent feature, in the myriads of modernity, whether it is in sea, sand or cities, in art or literature. So, keep smiling!

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