Baudelaire
AND THE POETICS OF MODERNITY

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THE process of symbolization begins when one thing is used to stand for something else. A stone thrown into a pit for the purpose of counting whatever sort of objects may be considered a primitive symbol. A link is thereby forged between items that have nothing to do with each other in the nature of things, simply by virtue of the one’s being made to take the place of the other. Some such model as this generally informs the notion of the symbol current in linguistics and semiotics and in a broad spectrum of empirical disciplines where phenomena of signification are studied scientifically. The aspect of the symbol that is stressed in these fields is its arbitrariness or conventionality and the fact that it is not the object it symbolizes, but just some substitute for it in the object’s absence.  

For poets, and generally in aesthetic theory, the symbolic has quite a different meaning. The symbol distinguishes itself from other types of signs (or as against the sign altogether) by virtue of its making concretely present the thing it signifies. This function of presencing has consistently been described in the language of “participation,” with the implication that the symbol is actually a part of the larger whole it represents—pars pro toto. In Coleridge’s famous formulation, the symbol “always partakes of the reality which it renders intelligible; and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part in that unity of which it is the representative.” Consequently, in aesthetics the idea of the symbol has tended to imply an intrinsic affinity with what is symbolized (to the point of being it, at least in part) and often the fundamental unity of all things—all things
The Linguistic Turning of the Symbol

The symbolic universe, all things are interconnected, and all are interwoven: from the smallest atom to the vast expanse of the universe. These interconnectednesses, if not recognized, can lead to confusion and misunderstandings. In order to account for this interconnectedness, we must understand the symbolic universe, and how it interacts with the physical world.

In the symbolic universe, the symbols are not just representations of physical objects, but are also representations of ideas and concepts. These ideas and concepts are interconnected, and the symbols that represent them are also interconnected. This interconnectedness is what makes the symbolic universe so powerful and so essential to our understanding of the world.

In this section, we will explore the ways in which symbols are interconnected, and how they interact with the physical world. We will also examine the role of the symbolic universe in our understanding of the world, and how it can be used to help us make sense of the complex and interconnected world around us.

The Symbolic Universe

The symbolic universe is a complex system of interconnected symbols, ideas, and concepts. These symbols are not just representations of physical objects, but are also representations of ideas and concepts. These ideas and concepts are interconnected, and the symbols that represent them are also interconnected. This interconnectedness is what makes the symbolic universe so powerful and so essential to our understanding of the world.

In order to fully understand the symbolic universe, we must first understand the role of symbols in our lives. Symbols are not just representations of physical objects, but are also representations of ideas and concepts. These ideas and concepts are interconnected, and the symbols that represent them are also interconnected. This interconnectedness is what makes the symbolic universe so powerful and so essential to our understanding of the world.

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The linguistic turning of the symbol

The linguistic turning of the symbol is a fundamental concept in the philosophy of language. It refers to the process by which symbols acquire meaning through use and interpretation. This turning is not static; it evolves over time as new contexts and usages are encountered.

The linguistic turning of the symbol is crucial for understanding how language and thought are interconnected. Symbols, whether verbal or non-verbal, are more than mere signs; they carry meaning that is constructed through the relationships they form with other symbols and the practices in which they are embedded.

The process of the linguistic turning of the symbol is often described as a dialectic between the symbol's original meaning and the new meanings it acquires through use. This dialectic is characterized by the open-endedness of meaning, which allows symbols to adapt to new contexts and to carry different meanings in different situations.

In the philosophy of language, the linguistic turning of the symbol is a key concept for understanding the dynamic nature of language and its role in shaping our understanding of the world. It highlights the importance of context and usage in determining the meaning of symbols, and underscores the interdependence of language and thought.
The Linguistic Turn of the Symbol

The initial conception of the symbol, as a sign or emblem, is始于 the idea of metaphor, through which the symbol is considered to stand for something else. This is the most straightforward, literal interpretation of the symbol. However, in a more complex and nuanced manner, the symbol is viewed as a means of conveying deeper meanings and associations. The symbol is not just a representational device, but rather an active participant in the creation of meaning. This process involves the interplay of various cognitive and linguistic mechanisms, such as metaphor, metonymy, and polysemy.

The Symbol's Role in Communication

Symbols play a crucial role in communication, functioning as carriers of meaning. They can convey ideas, emotions, and relationships, thereby facilitating understanding and interaction. In this sense, symbols are not just vehicles for information, but also tools for creating and shaping reality. By examining the symbolic nature of language, we can gain insights into the ways in which we construct and perceive the world around us.

The Symbol in Literature

In literature, symbols are often used to convey deeper meanings and emotions. They can symbolize abstract concepts, such as love, death, or the passage of time. Through symbolism, authors can create a rich, multi-layered discourse that resonates with readers on a deeper level. Symbols can also serve as focal points for exploration, allowing writers to delve into complex themes and issues. The study of literature is, to a large extent, the study of symbolism, as authors use symbols to communicate their ideas and engage with their audiences.

The Symbol in Philosophy

In philosophy, the symbol is often considered to be a fundamental concept. It is through symbols that we are able to reflect on our own existence and the world around us. Symbols allow us to articulate our thoughts and experiences in a way that transcends the limitations of language. They provide a means for exploring the nature of reality, the possibility of knowledge, and the relationship between the self and the world. The study of symbols in philosophy helps us to understand the complex dynamics of human consciousness and the role of language in shaping our perceptions.

The Symbol in Science

In the sciences, symbols are used to represent concepts, processes, and relationships. They are essential tools for the formulation of theories and the communication of scientific knowledge. Through symbols, scientists are able to condense complex information into manageable forms, allowing for a clearer understanding and more efficient transmission of ideas. The use of symbols in science is not just a matter of convenience; it is a fundamental aspect of how we organize and make sense of the world. The study of symbols in science can provide insights into the nature of scientific thought and the ways in which we construct knowledge.

The Symbol in Religion

In religious contexts, symbols are often deeply rooted in cultural and historical traditions. They carry a rich tapestry of meanings and connotations, conveying the essence of spiritual beliefs and practices. Symbols are used to represent divine beings, sacred events, or abstract concepts such as love, justice, or the afterlife. Through symbols, religious communities are able to articulate their beliefs and connect with the divine. The study of symbols in religion helps us to understand the role of symbols in shaping religious narratives and the ways in which they are used to mediate between the human and the divine.

The Symbol in Art

In the realm of art, symbols play a vital role in the creation of meaning. They are used to evoke emotions, convey ideas, and create visual narratives. Symbols can be simple or complex, abstract or concrete, and are often open to interpretation. Through symbols, artists are able to engage with the viewer, inviting them to participate in the meaning-making process. The study of symbols in art helps us to understand the ways in which symbols are used to communicate and explore the human experience.

The Symbol in Language

In language, symbols are the building blocks of meaning. They are the units of speech that convey information, express emotions, and create relationships. Through language, symbols are used to construct narratives, describe the world, and express thoughts. The study of symbols in language helps us to understand the ways in which language is used to create and maintain social connections, and the role of language in shaping our perception of the world.

The Symbol in Politics

In political contexts, symbols are used to represent values, ideologies, and power. They are often employed to mobilize support, communicate messages, and influence public opinion. Symbols can be powerful tools for generating solidarity and reinforcing political identities. Through symbols, political movements are able to create a sense of common purpose and shared struggle. The study of symbols in politics helps us to understand the ways in which symbols are used to articulate and mobilize political agendas.
The linguistic turn of the symbol

not only a local structure or moment of the universe: it entails equally a

more global insight into the world. The global symbolic vision of the identity

of all languages, the common denominator of the relation between reality and

symbol, the complementary function of the map to the territory, and

the function of the territorial map to the map, are all implied by the observation

of the symbolic world. The symbolic world, in turn, is a dynamic and

interconnected—as it introjects the real into the symbolic and

the symbolic into the real. It is in this process of cultural

transfer that the symbolic world becomes a dynamic system of

reflection, integrating the experience of the real into the

symbolic world and the symbolic world into the experience of

the real. This process of cultural transfer is what we call the

transformation of the symbolic world.

"One can only perceive the symbolic world as a

way of describing the world, as a system of symbols, as a

universal language, as a system of signs, as a

system of meanings, as a system of ideas, as a

system of concepts, as a system of categories, as a

system of thought, as a system of reality, as a

system of the real world, as a system of the symbolic

world, as a system of the cultural world, as a

system of the psychological world."

This process of cultural transfer is what we call the

transformation of the symbolic world.
shattering into autonomous fragments, since each individual element is wholly self-contained, indeed is in itself all-containing. The totally relational identity characteristic of language and therefore also of a linguistic universe turns into an equally total self-sufficiency of every particle, since each is endowed with an absolute identity already in itself, unconditioned by any external relations—all relations having become internal to it. In symbolism, everything has become language, but as a result language no longer mediates anything extra-linguistic. Without any real content, language becomes purely image or, as is suggested by other forms of symbolist art, purely musical incantation: it is unbounded, but is lacking in any rule or concept such as only an external limit could provide, and this leads eventually to language’s being threatened even in its own internal cohesion.

The breakup of language and of everything in language was to be overtly pursued by Baudelaire’s poetic successors, and it has been discovered retrospectively as subtext in Baudelaire himself by recent critics, especially in Benjamin’s wake. It can be understood as resulting ineluctably from the logic and dynamic of the symbol itself, with its absolute exigencies of identity, presence and immediacy, achieved no longer just by means of, but actually in and as, language. For once language has totally penetrated nature, leaving no remainder, nature is turned wholly into artifice. Nature can no longer supply the paradigm of organic unity after which language models itself in romanticism. Rather, everything becomes subject to the nature of language as an artificial synthesis with no substance in itself and therefore in a constant state of dissolution. When the universal identity forged by the symbol turns into an identity of all with language itself, the symbolic order of things is poised to collapse in upon itself, to implode in an uncontrolled proliferation of pure form. Baudelaire’s transmission of the romantic doctrine of the symbol radicalizes and in effect reverses it, resulting in its no longer effecting union with all that is, but rather causing an alienation from nature and the real. Although he at times embraces the idea of a harmoniously ordered universe of natural correspondences, he lays the groundwork for its undoing and by the symbol, which becomes the dynamite that explodes the universe eventually into Mallarmé’s constellations of unmasterable chance. Precisely these disintegrative implications of the unrestricted identification of all with language have manifested themselves persistently in the course and direction of symbolist poetry in its development ever since Baudelaire. (For sometimes contrasting views on this descent, see Charles Altieri.)

Baudelaire was a believer in the identificatory power of the symbol, and he remained the undisputed master of this creative faculty for the symbolist poets that followed him. Yet he did not believe in the all-embracing, benevolent Nature in which symbols were supposed to be embedded, and into which they beckoned invitingly, binding all things, including whoever could interpret them, together into one whole. For Baudelaire, this romantic dream had become a nightmare and, consequently, the symbol, in significant ways, sinister. Indeed, he was haunted by the symbol and its solicitations to communion with a Nature that he loathed. In “Obsession,” Baudelaire recoils from nature, from its great forests which frighten him, as do cathedrals with their windy organs (“Grands bois, vous m’effrayez comme des cathédrales; / Vous hurlez comme l’orgue”). He would like the night to be without stars, for their light speaks to him, and it is a known language, whereas he is in search rather of the empty, the black and naked, what is divested of signs and therefore devoid of significance:

Comme tu me plaïrais, ô nuit! sans ces étoiles
Dont la lumière parle un langage connu!
Car je cherche le vide, et le noir, et le nu! (OC 1:75)

[How you would please me, O night, without these stars / whose light speaks a known language! / For I seek the empty, the black and the naked!]

This constitutes an anguished palinode that effectively retracts the soul’s enchantment with the sweet native language of things in “L’Invitation au voyage.” Here Baudelaire is horrified of nature and its language, indeed of nature as language, and not because it is strange but because it is all too familiar. The “regards familiers” of “Correspondances” reappear in order to become terrifying. The forest is experienced as a cathedral whose significance is frightfully overdetermined, rather than as the mysteriously alluring temple of “Correspondances.” Nature now is already fully codified: the cries of the woods that reply to one another out of their depths (“Répondent les échos de vos De profundis”) are already articulated as a church liturgy. They are natural rites in a manner reminiscent of “Correspondances,” but now
precisely their symbolic force makes them a negative, indeed a nightmare experience.

Baudelaire is repelled not so directly by nature as by the significance of nature, which is a form of human culture, indeed a language. The ocean's waves, with their heaving and tumult, are execrable because they are already found by the mind within itself ("Je te hais, Océan! tes bonds et tes tumultes, / Mon esprit les retrouve en lui"), just as the defeated man's bitter laugh full of sobs and insults is found in the enormous laugh of the sea. Even night fails to be other, and darkness—"les ténèbres"—consists in canvases ("des toiles") painted on, or to be painted on, by human signs. Nature offers no escape from the human, and the human has become just as abhorrent as the natural. The symbolic-linguistic mechanism that reduces everything to language is at the bottom of this viciously circular mirroring, since everything that can be reached through language is reduced to identity. All that is known is known through the identity of signs circulating in the linguistic system: it is all too familiar and too wretched, in effect a prison house of language from which there is no exit.

Of course, what Baudelaire loathes at bottom is himself, because that is what he sees at the bottom of Nature. He begins the desperate struggle to escape himself by crying out after the name of "the other" that is still the watchword of so much of French, left-bank culture today. What he is trying to escape is the viciously narcissistic self-reflexivity of the symbolist quest that is palpable in a poem like "La Chevelure," in which the poet imagines plunging his amorous head into the black ocean in which "the other" is enclosed:

Je plongerai ma tête amoureuse d'ivresse
Dans ce noir océan où l'autre est enfermé... (OC 1:26)

The "other" is sought in desperation in order to escape the self, but it is indeed already an other that is "enclosed" (enfermé). It risks being confounded with the blackness of the self's own spleen. In the universe of total identity there is really no escaping the self. The seeker necessarily voyages endlessly in quest of le nouveau and l'inconnu. The absolute identity of everything is the truth of the symbol that Baudelaire found himself imprisoned by and from which he chafes to escape. All this he bequeathed to his poetic posterity.

Baudelaire adopts the symbol as a basic strategy but denaturalizes and also denatures it in the process. The universal identification of each with all that is characteristic of symbolic vision and the basis for the correspondences of things takes a peculiar turn when the identification of all things in the symbol is taken to be an identity of all with language. This is, in effect, what the symbolists explicitly do, rendering manifest the revolution in poetic language brought about in nuce by Baudelaire. It means that the identities of the symbolist vision, rather than being natural, indeed the deep structure or essence of nature, turn out to be purely artificial, indeed nothing but language. There is still an all-pervading logic of identity, but it takes on a very different significance, in important ways just the opposite of the significance it had in romanticism. The natural order of things is no longer reassuring and restorative, healing human breaches and diseases. The order of things is only linguistic and therefore only a reflection of the human world of cultural artifacts and in fact already infected with the sickness of the self.

Baudelaire pursues to its furthest limits the logic of identity inhering in the symbol. He identifies everything with everything else. But the result he obtains is not oneness with the mystery of nature and the universe (even though he leaves some traces of a suffering longing for an encounter with the Other or the Unknown), but rather an expansion of language so as to actually encompass everything, beyond simply serving as the instrument of establishing the symbolic identity of all being. It remains only for this linguistic mechanism to expose itself as such, and to collapse for lack of external support, in order to produce the brilliant artificial parodies and chance constellations of subsequent symbolism. Thus is set the program that symbolist poets, eminently Rimbaud and Mallarmé, were to follow. It is the linguistic turning and totalizing of the symbol achieved substantially by Baudelaire that constitutes the premise for the shattering even of language itself, no longer held intact by anything beyond it, that was to be pursued to its furthest extremes by later symbolist poets.

The identification of everything with language has remained an absolutely central preoccupation of French poetry and poetics in the twentieth century. It is at issue, for example, in the way Francis Ponge's Le Parti pris des choses hovers between treating words as natural things and then again ruthlessly unmasking this fiction and fighting against language in the name of "la chose même," which escapes it. Yet, given the double aspect of the symbolism inaugurated by Baudelaire's poetry, whereby the breaking down
of language, which collapses from within, belongs together with the absorption by language of the world of things and its becoming itself a thing (acquiring thereby also the thing's vulnerability to amorcelation, dismem-berment, and dissolution), even this sort of resistance to the idealizations inherent in language suggests in indirect ways how subsequent poets continue to remain Baudelaire's heirs. For although Baudelaire stands as the great poet of mysterious and profound unity in the symbol, in which domain "Tout n'est qu'ordre et beauté / Luxe, calme et volupté" [All is but order and beauty / Luxury, calm and voluptuousness], it is nevertheless possible to see how this complete freedom from discord and all external constraint contains the seeds of its own destruction—of the shattering of language as total system into infinite disunity and limitless dis-semination. This is the decisive creative innovation that makes Baudelaire's poetry so seminal for symbolist poetry in its widest ramifications.