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# Poetry as Rebellion: A Philosophical Reading of Evil in The Flowers of Evil

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# Abstract

This article examines the concept of evil in the works of Charles Baudelaire, with particular focus on *The Flowers of Evil*, from a philosophical and aesthetic perspective. Drawing on the interpretations of Jean-Paul Sartre and Georges Bataille, the author re-examines the relationship between ethics, freedom, and poetic creation in Baudelaire's world. While Sartre regards Baudelaire as an "arrested child," whose genius takes shape through an evasion of moral responsibility and a playful engagement with freedom, this article argues that in Baudelaire's poetry evil is not merely a negative or anti-moral force. Rather, it can become a creative, transcendent power that generates poetic consciousness. From this perspective, by challenging fixed boundaries between good and evil, Baudelaire transforms poetry into a means of transgressing the dominant order and experiencing a form of aesthetic liberation. The article further shows that Baudelaire's genius emerges from suffering, incapacity, and isolation—where failure is transformed into beauty and deprivation into creation. Finally, drawing on Baudelaire's letter to Ancelle and the concept of childlike freedom, the article concludes that Baudelaire's poetry is not only a reflection of human crisis and misery, but also an attempt to reconstruct poetic identity in a contradictory and unstable world.


# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Introducing Charles Baudelaire and the Significance of *The Flowers of Evil*

Jean-Paul Sartre, in *Baudelaire: A Critical Study* (1947), argues that Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867) is one of the founders of modern French poetry. With the publication of *The Flowers of Evil* in 1857, Baudelaire transformed the traditional structures of poetry and introduced concepts such as evil, freedom, and genius into the domain of modern poetic expression (Sartre, 1947, pp. 8, 13). At the time of its publication, the work faced censorship and legal condemnation; yet today it is regarded as one of the milestones of modern literature. Critics such as Walter Benjamin have emphasized its importance in breaking the boundary between aesthetics and modern experience (Benjamin, 1983). In *The Flowers of Evil*, evil is not merely a moral category but a creative and even transcendent force that contributes to the formation of poetic consciousness. This interpretation can also be found in the reading of Georges Bataille, who shows that when poetry takes evil as its subject, the two converge at the level of creation and ultimately merge with one another (Bataille, 1985, pp. 21–22). Within this framework, the "impossible" is not an abstract limit but a lived and boundary experience (Bataille, 1985, p. 41), and suffering becomes a passage toward knowledge (Bataille, 1985, p. 37). Thus, evil in literature is simultaneously destructive and sacred, transforming literature into a realm where the rational order is transgressed and the limits of existence are explored.

In contrast, Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist reading of Baudelaire presents him as a poet who remains in a state of "conscious childhood," experiencing freedom as a kind of game played through failure (Sartre, 1947, p. 54). This interpretation was later met with criticism, as some scholars have regarded it as a

psychological simplification of poetic experience (Hadlock, 2001, pp. 193–194; Jones, 2021). Despite these differing perspectives, most commentators agree that *The Flowers of Evil* constitutes a radical break from the moralism of nineteenth-century literature and establishes the aesthetic foundation of modern romantic and symbolist poetry (Fogle, 1957) and transforms poetry into a space for the experience of suffering, guilt, and freedom. The collection is enduringly significant not only for its stylistic innovations but also for the way it raises fundamental questions about evil, failure, and poetic consciousness—questions that open a dialogue between literature, philosophy, and modern criticism (Blanchot, 1995).

## 1.2. Statement of the Problem: Evil as Poetic Experience in Bataille's Thought and Baudelaire's Works

Charles Baudelaire, in *The Flowers of Evil*, approaches modern poetry with a new gaze, presenting evil not merely as a moral and repudiated notion but as a force that actively contributes to poetic creation. In this collection, poetry distances itself from decorative or didactic functions and becomes a space in which metaphysical, psychological, and social experiences are confronted (Catani, 2013). By placing good and evil in a tense, unstable relation, Baudelaire creates a space in which the poetic subject becomes entangled with both the external world and the conflicts within the self; and out of this struggle, a particular form of poetic awareness and beauty emerges. Meanwhile, Georges Bataille understands evil as something sacred, transcendent, and at the same time destructive—a force that, in literature, makes it possible to transgress rational order and dominant norms (Bataille, 1985, p. 6; Nicholson, 1997). From this perspective, Baudelaire's poetry is not merely a representation of suffering and decay but a form of limit-experience in which the subject moves beyond moral and social constraints. Conversely, Sartre, in his reading of Baudelaire, sees him as a poet who remains in a state of "childhood," seeking freedom not through responsibility but through evasion (Sartre, 1947, p. 69). Despite their differences, both readings emphasize a fundamental point: Baudelaire's poetry cannot be understood solely at the level of language or form. It must be seen as a field for thinking about evil, freedom, failure, and consciousness. Thus, the central question of this study is how the concept of evil in *The Flowers of Evil* exceeds the bounds of a moral theme and becomes an aesthetic and philosophical experience—one that occupies a central place in both Bataille's interpretation and Sartre's critique (Hadlock, 2001; Meltzer, 2006).

## 1.3. Research Aim and Questions

The aim of this study is to analyze and reinterpret the concept of evil in Charles Baudelaire's *The Flowers of Evil*—a concept situated at the intersection of philosophy, aesthetics, and poetic experience, and one that has long been a point of controversy in modern thought. Focusing on Georges Bataille's reading of evil as something sacred, transcendent, and creative, this article seeks to show how evil in Baudelaire's poetry moves away from its traditional position as a rejected, anti-moral force and becomes a poetic and generative power. Along this path, Jean-Paul Sartre's critique of ethics and freedom in Baudelaire's works is also examined. Through an existentialist approach, Sartre interprets evil not as a sign of poetic necessity but as an indication of avoidance of responsibility and an inability to realize freedom, portraying Baudelaire as a "child-like" poet who evades moral maturity. This article aims to show that

such a reading, while thought-provoking from the perspective of existential philosophy, simplifies Baudelaire's poetic experience in a reductionist manner and overlooks its aesthetic and metaphysical complexities. By examining the tension between subject and object, the notion of childlike genius, and the relationship between poetry and ethics, this study seeks to understand evil not merely as a moral crisis but as a poetic necessity and a transcendent experience. Such a rereading opens the possibility for a dialogue between literature, philosophy, psychology, and mysticism, offering a new perspective for understanding modern poetry and aesthetic ethics.

1. What place does evil hold in Baudelaire's poetry, and how does it transform from a rejected notion into a poetic and transcendent experience?
2. Can evil in Baudelaire's works be understood as an aesthetic necessity rather than merely a moral one?
3. How does the tension between subject and object in Baudelaire's poetry lead to the creation of poetic awareness and genius?

## 1.4. The Significance and Originality of the Article

The significance of this article lies in its reinterpretation of the concept of evil in modern poetry, particularly in the works of Charles Baudelaire—a concept situated at the intersection of philosophy, aesthetics, and poetic experience, yet often examined from predominantly moralistic or psychological perspectives in literary studies. By focusing on Georges Bataille's reading of evil as something sacred, transcendent, and creative, and by critically engaging with Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist perspective, this study offers a fresh outlook on the relationship between evil, freedom, and poetry. The primary innovation of the article is its consideration of evil not merely as a morally transgressive force but as a poetic necessity and a metaphysical experience—one that carries within itself awareness, liberation, and genius. In contrast to reductionist approaches that interpret Baudelaire's poetry as a reflection of moral crisis or existential incapacity, this article demonstrates that evil in *The Flowers of Evil* is not a sign of decline but a force for creating beauty and transcending the existing order. Furthermore, by examining the tension between subject and object and analyzing the notion of childlike genius in Baudelaire's poetry, the article creates the possibility of a dialogue between literature, philosophy, psychology, and mysticism. This multilayered approach not only leads to a renewed understanding of aesthetic ethics but also affirms the status of poetry as a transcendent and irreducible form of experience in the modern world.

## 1.5. Literature Review

The concept of evil in the works of Charles Baudelaire—particularly in *The Flowers of Evil*—has long been one of the most challenging topics in literary and philosophical studies. In this context, two prominent and contrasting approaches offered by Georges Bataille and Jean-Paul Sartre form the theoretical foundation of this article. Georges Bataille, adopting a mystical-aesthetic perspective, understands evil not as something to be rejected but as a poetic necessity and a transcendent experience. In Bataille's reading, evil in Baudelaire's poetry appears as a sacred and creative force—one that removes the poet

from the prevailing rational and moral order and leads him into a realm of liberation, pleasure, and painful awareness. Bataille interprets evil in relation to the sacred, sacrifice, and the limit-experiences of the human being, recognizing it within Baudelaire's poetry as a generative power.

In contrast, Jean-Paul Sartre (1947), in his book *Baudelaire*, approaches evil from an existentialist standpoint and interprets it as a sign of refusal of responsibility and an inability to actualize freedom. He presents Baudelaire as an immature, child-like poet who evades moral adulthood and seeks his genius in playing with freedom and denying social order. For Sartre, evil is not a poetic experience but an indication of failure in achieving self-awareness and freedom. In contemporary studies as well, some scholars interpret evil in Baudelaire's works as a reflection of moral, psychological, or social crisis, while others regard it as an aesthetic and metaphysical force. By critiquing reductionist approaches and drawing on Bataille's (1985) reading, this article seeks to redefine evil as a poetic necessity and a transcendent experience.

## 2. Analysis

# 2.1. The Dialectic of Evil and Poetry

In the collection *Les Fleurs du mal*, Charles Baudelaire presents the concept of evil not as the absolute negation of good, but as a force that is co-born and coexistent with it; a force that finds meaning only in relation to good, and it is precisely within this relation that it takes shape as poetic creation (Baudelaire, 1996, p. 23). From this perspective, poetry becomes a field for the display of ethical tensions and contradictions, and evil assumes an active and constructive role within its structure. For example, in the opening poem of the collection, "To the Reader (Au Lecteur)," Baudelaire directly implicates the audience in this shared experience of evil:

It is Ennui!—his eye brimming with an involuntary tear,

He dreams of scaffolds while puffing at his hookah.

You know him, reader, this delicate monster,

Hypocrite reader,—my likeness,—my brother! (Baudelaire, 1909, p. 5)

In this passage, evil is introduced not as something external or exceptional, but as an inner and shared experience between the poet and the reader; an experience that points to the fundamental condition of the human being in the modern world. Thus, in Baudelaire's view, evil constitutes an inseparable part of human experience and cannot simply be rejected or negated. Jean-Paul Sartre, in his analysis of Baudelaire, also emphasizes this very paradox and argues that evil, while opposing good, simultaneously affirms its existence; therefore, the relation between the two always appears in the form of a dialectical tension (Sartre, 1947, p. 23). Within such a framework, Baudelaire's poetry becomes a space for representing and reflecting upon this moral contradiction. The conscious acceptance of evil makes

possible the experience of freedom and a kind of poetic rebellion, elevating poetry beyond mere representation and raising it to a philosophical level. From this perspective, evil in Baudelaire's works is not merely a theme, but a structural principle that brings modern poetry into being out of its fundamental conflicts and tensions (Smith, 2018).

Georges Bataille's reading also largely confirms this approach. Bataille understands evil in Baudelaire's poetry as a limit-experience and even as something sacred; an experience in which "the impossible" is not an abstract boundary but itself an experience (Bataille, 1985, p. 41), and suffering becomes a passage toward knowledge (Bataille, 1985, p. 37). In his view, when poetry takes evil as its subject, the two meet at the level of creation and merge into one another (Bataille, 1985, pp. 21–22). In this way, through a conscious confrontation with the forbidden, the poet preserves his aesthetic independence and turns poetry into a realm for experiencing freedom and sovereignty. This connection between beauty, evil, and poetic experience can be observed in the poem "Hymn to Beauty (Hymne à la Beauté)," where Baudelaire asks beauty:

Do you come from Heaven or rise from the abyss,

O Beauty? Your gaze, infernal and divine,

pours out confusion and good deeds,

and for that you may be compared to wine (Baudelaire, 1909, p. 45).

In these lines, beauty simultaneously acquires both a divine and an infernal character; its origin may be heavenly or rising from the depths of hell. Thus, good and evil appear inseparably intertwined in the image of beauty. Bataille interprets this duality as a sign of poetry's capacity to encompass contradiction; a capacity that prevents poetry from being reduced to purely moral judgment and transforms it into a more complex and radical experience (Bataille, 1985, pp. 21–22). In this perspective, Baudelaire's poetry possesses both a moral and an anti-moral dimension and becomes a ground for rethinking the relationship between the human being and the world.

For this reason, "evil" in Baudelaire's poetry is neither a sign of moral downfall nor evidence of the poet's weakness of character; rather, it signifies a form of poetic consciousness that emerges from suffering, contradiction, and limit-experiences. Bataille shows that suffering is inseparable from the "sovereign experience" and that "pain becomes a passage toward knowledge" (Bataille, 1985, p. 37), and also that "the impossible" itself is an experience that brings the subject to the threshold of truth (Bataille, 1985, p. 41). Such a consciousness turns Baudelaire's poetry into a space for confronting the existential truth of the human being; a truth in which good and evil stand not in simple opposition but in a dialectical relation to one another. In this perspective, the dialectic of evil and poetry is precisely the point from which modern poetry begins. By transforming evil into a poetic force, Baudelaire frees poetry from moral reduction and turns it into a complex, transcendent, and irreducible experience within the realm of modern literature; an interpretation that, on the one hand, stands in tension with Sartre's emphasis on the

connection between evil, will, and moral responsibility (Sartre, 1947, pp. 23, 53–54), and on the other hand with Bataille's reading of the coexistence of poetry and evil, "the impossible," and "limit-experience" (Bataille, 1985, pp. 21–22, 37, 41).

## 2.2. Sartre's Moral Critique

In the book *Baudelaire* (1947), Jean-Paul Sartre portrays Baudelaire in such a way that the poet appears as a "grown child"; an individual who shaped his genius by playing with the possibilities of freedom while simultaneously refusing to accept moral responsibilities (Sartre, 1947, pp. 53–54). In Sartre's view, this childishness is a sign of a kind of existential immaturity and turns Baudelaire's poetry into a field for the display of moral failure. He argues that through his particular poetic mode of life, Baudelaire limited freedom and condemned himself to a condition of suffering, inaction, and inner torment. To clarify this perspective, Sartre refers to examples from Baudelaire's poetry. In one of the poems from the Spleen series, the poet writes: "I am like the king of a rainy country, rich but powerless, / young yet very old, who despises his tutors / and is bored with his dogs" (Baudelaire, 1909, p. 63).

This image presents the poet in a condition in which power, maturity, and efficacy have been lost and replaced by a kind of childish impotence. The poet himself sees his own self in the position of someone who flees responsibility and is trapped in suffering and ennui. Sartre considers this condition as evidence of moral failure: by refusing maturity, the poet has destroyed freedom and transformed it into something passive and torturous (Sartre, 1947, pp. 53–54). Consequently, in Sartre's reading, Baudelaire's poetry reflects his existential and moral weakness rather than the poet's aesthetic independence. This view, despite its sharpness, simplifies Baudelaire's poetic experience and overlooks the structural and aesthetic complexity of the poetry.

In contrast, Georges Bataille defends the independence of poetry and offers a completely different reading. In his view, poetry has the capacity to contain contradiction within itself without being reduced to moral judgment; for "art, even the purest art, always operates in the realm of the impossible" (Bataille, 1985, p. 22), and therefore it cannot be confined within the framework of simplistic moralization. Bataille understands Baudelaire's poetry not as a sign of failure, but as a manifestation of poetic consciousness arising from suffering, contradiction, and limit-experience; when "suffering is inseparable from sovereign experience" and "pain becomes a passage toward knowledge" (Bataille, 1985, p. 37), and also when "the impossible" is not an abstract limit but itself an experience (Bataille, 1985, p. 41). For example, in the poem "The Voyage (Le Voyage)," Baudelaire writes: "We must go to the end of boredom, to find new lands, / to drown in the abyss, Heaven or Hell, what does it matter? / To find the new, in the depths of the Unknown" (Baudelaire, 1909, p. 171).

These lines show that the poet consciously moves toward the experience of danger, contradiction, and the unknown, and it is precisely this desire to confront existential limits that becomes the source of his poetic genius. Bataille (1985) considers such movement a manifestation of aesthetic independence: poetry that is born from failure, suffering, and tension, yet ultimately becomes a philosophical and existential experience. Therefore, although Sartre's (1947) critique is significant from a moral

perspective, it lacks the capacity to explain the complexities of Baudelaire's poetry. In contrast, by emphasizing the independence of poetry, Bataille presents it as a realm for the experience of freedom and truth; a freedom that operates beyond moral criteria and transforms poetry into a ground for rethinking the relation between the human being and the world.

Ultimately, the debate between Sartre (1947) and Bataille (1985) reveals two opposing approaches to poetry: one sees poetry as a sign of moral failure, while the other regards it as the manifestation of aesthetic independence. This opposition not only highlights the historical significance of *Les Fleurs du mal*, but also shows how modern poetry emerges precisely from this very struggle between ethics and aesthetics.

## 2.3. Baudelaire's Letter to Anselm

Baudelaire's letter to Ancelle in 1866 is one of the most important documents for understanding the relationship between sincerity, deceit, and poetic consciousness in his literary project. In this letter, Baudelaire confesses that *Les Fleurs du mal* is both "pure art" and "cunning and deceit"; a confession that reveals the fundamental duality of his poetry and shows that for him poetry is simultaneously a field of aesthetics and poetic strategy (Baudelaire, 1909). Jean-Paul Sartre regards this contradiction as a sign of moral failure and uses it as evidence against the poet. In Sartre's reading, Baudelaire's confession to the duality between sincerity and deceit demonstrates that his poetry lacks ethical sincerity and is merely a reflection of his existential weakness (Sartre, 1947, pp. 53–54). For example, in the poem "The Mask (Le Masque)," Baudelaire presents an image of a beautiful but deceptive face: "Your eyes say: 'Love me, young man!' / But your mouth says: 'Beware!'" (Baudelaire, 1909, p. 53).

This contrast between invitation and warning highlights the fundamental duality of Baudelaire's poetry: a poetry in which sincerity and deceit, attraction and threat coexist side by side. Sartre regards such examples as proof that the poet is trapped in contradiction and refuses to accept moral responsibility. As a result, from his perspective, Baudelaire's letter to Ancelle testifies that *Les Fleurs du mal*, rather than being a poetic expression of truth, is a sign of moral failure and existential instability. This reading reduces the poetry to a level that overlooks its aesthetic complexity and presents it merely as a psychological and ethical reflection of the poet.

Opposing this reductive reading, Georges Bataille considers Baudelaire's letter as evidence of the independence of art. According to Bataille, poetry is capable of holding contradiction within itself without being reduced to moral judgment (Bataille, 1985, p. 22). In his view, Baudelaire's confession to the duality between "pure art" and "cunning and deceit" shows that the poet consciously lives with contradiction and transforms it into a source of creativity. An example of this approach can be found in the poem "Hymn to Beauty (Hymne à la Beauté)," where Baudelaire addresses Beauty: "Do you come from Heaven or rise from the abyss, / O Beauty? Your gaze, infernal and divine…" (Baudelaire, 1909, p. 45).

In these verses, beauty is simultaneously divine and infernal, beneficent and evil-producing, truthful and deceptive. Bataille takes this image as proof that Baudelaire's poetry is a realm of experiencing

contradiction; a contradiction that is not a product of moral weakness but the starting point of poetic consciousness. From this perspective, Baudelaire's letter is not a sign of downfall but a sign of awareness and freedom; a freedom that elevates poetry beyond the moral level and turns it into a philosophical and existential experience. Thus, the encounters of Sartre and Bataille with this letter reveal two opposing approaches to poetry: one that regards poetry as moral failure, and one that sees it as a symbol of aesthetic independence and creativity. This duality highlights the historical value of *Les Fleurs du mal* and shows that modern poetry was born from this very struggle between ethics and aesthetics.

## 2.4. Child and Freedom

Sartre, by employing the metaphor of the "child," attempts to explain the condition of freedom in Baudelaire's poetry; however, he regards this freedom not as a sign of maturity but as a mark of immaturity and ethical deficiency (Sartre, 1947, pp. 53–54). According to him, Baudelaire, by adopting a kind of childlike existence, refuses to accept responsibility and moral maturity, turning his poetry into a stage for this refusal. Within this framework, the poet remains suspended between freedom and responsibility, and this suspension transforms the poetry into a reflection of his existential weakness. In such a reading, freedom is not the realization of consciousness but an evasion of commitment (Sartre, 1947, p. 69). An example that can clarify this interpretation is the poem "The Irremediable (L'Irremédiable)," where Baudelaire presents an image of a person trapped in a dual condition: "A man goes down into a cavern, where a ray of light shines, / and he sees two eyes burning like a child's toy, / yet filled with terror" (Baudelaire, 1909, p. 157).

In this image, the childlike element blends with an experience of terror and darkness. From Sartre's perspective, such a representation shows that freedom in Baudelaire's poetic experience has been reduced to something childlike and anxiety-ridden; a freedom separated from responsibility and turned into an endless suffering. Therefore, "childishness" in Sartre's analysis is not a creative quality but a sign of stagnation at a pre-moral stage. Thus, Baudelaire's poetry, instead of being a realm of aesthetic independence, becomes a stage for the display of immaturity and moral failure.

In opposition to this interpretation, Georges Bataille offers a different reading and regards Baudelaire's childishness as the source of poetic genius (Bataille, 1985, p. 22). According to Bataille, the poet's distancing from the conventional world and adopting a "childlike" perspective on existence enables a break from habitual perceptions and access to an aesthetic insight. This childishness is not an evasion of responsibility but a conscious suspension before the established order of the world (Bataille, 1985, p. 29). For example, in the poem "Elevation (Élévation)," Baudelaire writes: "Above the valleys, above the mountains, above the forests, clouds, and seas, / beyond the sun, beyond the ether, beyond the confines of the starry spheres, / my spirit soars with ease, like a child at play." (Baudelaire, 1909, p. 17)

In these verses, the poet's spirit soars freely like a child playing, transcending the limitations of the material world. Bataille considers this image a sign that childishness is a poetic strategy for experiencing freedom; a quality that separates poetry from the realm of everyday experience and

elevates it to the domain of existential consciousness. In this reading, childishness is not a deficiency but a condition for creativity; a possibility to experience a world in which contradiction, suffering, and freedom simultaneously coexist. Therefore, the opposition between Sartre and Bataille on the metaphor of the child reveals two fundamental understandings of poetry: one regards it as a sign of moral failure and immaturity, and the other introduces it as the source of genius and aesthetic independence. This duality highlights the historical position of *Les Fleurs du mal* and shows that modern poetry precisely emerged from such tensions among ethics, freedom, and aesthetics.

## 2.5. Poet's Tragedy

From Sartre's perspective, Baudelaire's tragedy lies in his failed attempt to unify subject and object and to achieve the "impossible synthesis of being and existence," a task doomed to failure from the start (Baudelaire, 1909, pp. 11, 24, 191). In this reading, this condition signals immaturity and moral weakness, and Baudelaire, through his poetic mode of being, limits freedom and perpetuates his inner torment (Sartre, 1947, p. 158). In this view, poetry is not the realm of freedom's realization but the scene of continuous reproduction of suffering and repression. A clear example of this condition can be seen in one of the "Spleen" poems, where Baudelaire writes: "When the low, heavy sky weighs like a lid / on the spirit groaning in its prison, / and when the horizon seems like a dungeon, / pouring down a black day sadder than night" (Baudelaire, 1909, p. 145).

In this image, the external sky descends like a "heavy lid" onto the "spirit in prison," and the horizon turns into a "dungeon" that pours "a day blacker than night." This interweaving of external landscape and inner suffering shows that the poet attempts to unify the outer world and subjective experience, but the result is a suffocating and tragic condition that yields nothing but pain and failure. Sartre considers such examples as evidence that Baudelaire is trapped in a tragedy he laments but does not escape; a tragedy that instead of opening a way toward responsibility, results in a kind of evasion of commitment. Within this horizon, Baudelaire's poetry reflects existential failure and an attempt at an impossible synthesis that ultimately turns into alienation and agony. Therefore, Sartre's critique reduces the poetry to a psychological and ethical level and, despite its insight, overlooks the aesthetic complexities and philosophical depth of Baudelaire's poetic experience.

In contrast to this interpretation, Georges Bataille presents the poet's tragedy not as a deficiency but as a precondition for poetic truth (Bataille, 1985, p. 37). For him, poetry is fundamentally born from suffering, failure, and confrontation with the impossible, and it is precisely this suffering that forms the source of poetic genius. In this view, Baudelaire is not a helpless subject but a creator who consciously exposes himself to limit-experiences (Bataille, 1985, p. 41). For example, in the poem "The Voyage (Le Voyage)," he writes: "We must go to the end of boredom, to find new lands, / to drown in the abyss, Heaven or Hell, what does it matter? / To find the new, in the depths of the Unknown" (Baudelaire, 1909, p. 171).

In these verses, the poet calls himself to a conscious movement toward the "end of boredom," "drowning in the abyss," and seeking the "new" in the "depths of the Unknown." According to Bataille, this movement is not an attempt to realize a soothing synthesis but a confrontation with the impossible and

acceptance of tragedy as the necessary horizon of poetic experience. Bataille regards this approach as a sign of aesthetic independence: poetry that rises from failure and suffering but does not imprison itself at the moral or psychological level, instead becoming a philosophical and existential experience. In this reading, the poet's tragedy is not a sign of downfall but a sign of awareness that transforms poetry into the realm of an experience of freedom—freedom beyond moral criteria. Thus, the debate between Sartre and Bataille regarding the "poet's tragedy" highlights two opposing approaches to poetry: one sees it as a manifestation of moral failure and existential immaturity, and the other understands it as the source of genius, truth, and aesthetic independence. This duality cements the historical position of *Les Fleurs du mal* and shows that modern poetry emerges precisely from such tragedies and fundamental tensions among ethics, suffering, and freedom.

## 2.6. Distance and Self-Awareness

Baudelaire, contrary to the common perception that experience is immediate and unmediated, is always aware of his own gaze; this awareness creates a kind of distance between him and the world. Although this distance seems small on the surface, symbolically it becomes one of the fundamental elements of his poetic experience. Jean-Paul Sartre interprets this condition as a sign of alienation and reads it as a form of poetic weakness (Sartre, 1947, p. 24). In his view, instead of living in the world and integrating with it, the poet distances himself from it and consolidates this distance as an existential condition—a condition that ultimately results in an inability to actualize freedom. A clear example of this condition appears in the poem "The Albatross (L'Albatros)," where Baudelaire writes:

The poet is like the prince of the clouds,

who haunts the storm and laughs at the archer;

exiled on the ground, amidst jeers,

his giant wings prevent him from walking (Baudelaire, 1909, p. 15).

In this image, the poet is like the "prince of the clouds," free and powerful in the realm of the sky, but when he is on the ground, those very large wings—which symbolize his sublimity—become a hindrance to his movement. This duality between sky and earth shows that the poet exists in two opposing realms without fully belonging to either one. From Sartre's perspective, such a state indicates that the poet does not find a place in the world, transforming the distance between himself and reality into an experience of suffering and alienation. In this reading, poetic self-awareness is nothing but the awareness of this incapacity; an awareness that, instead of opening new horizons, consolidates existential failure. Therefore, Sartre's analysis, despite its psychological acuteness, reduces Baudelaire's poetry largely to an ethical and existential level and overlooks its aesthetic complexities.

Contrary to this interpretation, Georges Bataille sees distance and self-awareness not as a sign of weakness but as the essence of poetic insight (Bataille, 1985, pp. 21–22). In his view, the poet neither dissolves into the world nor simply distances himself from it; rather, through this distance, he recreates

the world in language. Distance, in this sense, is a condition for the possibility of poetic perception because only through it does everyday experience transform into a symbolic and meaningful experience. A clear example of this perspective is found in the poem “Correspondences (Correspondances),” where Baudelaire writes: “Nature is a temple where living pillars sometimes let out confused words; / man passes there through forests of symbols / that observe him with familiar eyes” (Baudelaire, 1909, p. 19).

In these lines, nature is transformed into a temple where “living pillars” speak, and man passes through “forests of symbols” that watch him with familiar eyes. Such an image shows that the poet, by distancing himself from ordinary perception, transforms the world into a network of signs and symbolic correspondences. From Bataille’s perspective, this distance is not a sign of alienation but the source of poetic awareness; a possibility that allows the poet to recreate the truth of experience in language. Thus, the confrontation between Sartre and Bataille on the topic of distance and self-awareness reveals two fundamental approaches to poetry: one views the poet’s distance from the world as a sign of failure and alienation; the other sees it as a condition for genius and poetic awareness. This duality highlights the historical place of *Les Fleurs du mal* and shows that modern poetry is precisely born from this very distance and self-awareness.

## 2.7. Consequences for Modern Poetry

The debate between Jean-Paul Sartre and Georges Bataille reveals two fundamental and opposing models for understanding poetry: while Sartre sees Baudelaire’s poetry as a sign of moral failure and existential incapacity, Bataille regards it as a manifestation of aesthetic autonomy and the possibility of a radical experience of freedom (Sartre, 1947, p. 23; Bataille, 1985, pp. 21–22). This opposition, on a broader level, also reflects the paradoxical condition of modernism; a space where poetry is simultaneously a realm of existential despair and the possibility of transcendence. Modern poetry is formed not in stability and harmony but in the tension between these two poles. A clear example of this condition can be observed in the poem “The Voyage (Le Voyage),” where Baudelaire writes: “We must go to the end of boredom, to find new lands, / to drown in the abyss, Heaven or Hell, what does it matter? / To find the new, in the depths of the Unknown” (Baudelaire, 1909, p. 171).

These lines show that modern poetry is born from the desire to experience the unknown and to cross the established boundaries of morality and rationality. The movement toward the “abyss” and the “unknown” expresses a quest that leads the poet to borderline experiences. From Sartre’s perspective, such movement is a sign of immaturity and an evasion of moral responsibility; an effort which instead of realizing freedom, results in a kind of existential failure. In contrast, Bataille considers this very movement as the source of poetic genius and sees it as the poet’s will to confront the impossible and open new horizons in human experience. Thus, this interpretative contradiction shows that modern poetry does not arise from harmony but from contradictions and fundamental tensions among ethics, freedom, and aesthetics. In this framework, *Les Fleurs du mal* stands as a prominent example of poetry that makes “evil” not merely a poetic theme but a structural principle in the formation of modern poetry.

Bataille especially emphasizes that by transforming “evil” into a poetic force, Baudelaire frees poetry from the constraints of moral judgment and elevates it into a sublime experience (Themi, 2018). In this perspective, modern poetry becomes a field for rethinking the human relationship with the world; a space where contradictions are not eliminated but accepted as the conditions for poetic experience. An example of this approach can be found in the poem “Hymn to Beauty (Hymne à la Beauté),” where Baudelaire asks beauty: “Do you come from Heaven or rise from the abyss, O Beauty? / Your gaze, infernal and divine…” (Baudelaire, 1909, p. 37).

This question, which describes beauty as both “hellish” and “divine,” shows that modern poetry, by embracing dualities such as good and evil, beauty and ugliness, becomes a deeply philosophical and existential experience. In such a horizon, poetry no longer reflects an established moral order but becomes a space for experiencing freedom and facing contradictory truths. From this viewpoint, the chief consequence of Baudelaire’s poetry for modernism is that it separates poetry from decorative and moral levels and transforms it into a metaphysical and irreducible experience. This transformation turns modern poetry into a site for fundamental tensions and contradictions and shows that poetic genius is precisely born from these very contradictions. Ultimately, *Les Fleurs du mal* can be considered a pivotal point in the history of modern poetry; a work that transforms poetry into a domain for experiencing freedom, liberation, and contradictory consciousness, opening new horizons in understanding the relationship between poetry, evil, and modernity.

## 3. Conclusion

The examination of the concept of “evil” in Charles Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du mal* shows that this concept in his poetry is not merely something rejected or immoral, but a creative force and a poetic necessity that serves the formation of an aesthetic and enlightening experience. By embracing the relativity between good and evil, Baudelaire transforms poetry into a space for rethinking the established order of the world and for experiencing freedom, moving it beyond a merely moral or decorative function. In this context, the contrast between the interpretations of Jean-Paul Sartre and Georges Bataille opens different horizons for understanding this experience: Sartre, emphasizing moral responsibility, considers Baudelaire’s poetry a sign of a kind of existential failure or escape, whereas Bataille regards “evil” as a form of the sacred and as an elevated experience that draws poetry into the realm of liberation and painful awareness (Del Nevo, 2010). The analysis of Baudelaire’s letter to Ancelle and the concept of “childlike freedom” also shows that his poetic genius takes shape in the midst of incapacity, suffering, and isolation; a place where the poet creates beauty out of failure and extracts the language of poetry from the experience of suffering. The same logic is evident in examples such as “Correspondences,” “The Albatross,” “The Voyage,” and “Hymn to Beauty;” where poetry becomes a philosophical confrontation with the world and with dualities such as beauty and ugliness, good and evil, and the divine and the infernal. From this perspective, evil in Baudelaire’s poetry is not a sign of downfall but a fundamental force for creating beauty and reclaiming poetic identity. Thus, *Les Fleurs du mal* can be considered a turning point in the history of modern poetry; a work that liberates poetry from moral and social constraints and transforms it into a transcendent, contradictory, and irreducible experience in the

modern world—an experience in which poetic genius is born from the very tensions and fundamental contradictions among evil, beauty, suffering, and freedom.

## Declarations

# Author Contribution

Both authors contributed substantially to the conception, design, and theoretical formulation of this study. FK and FAA jointly performed the philosophical analysis and close readings of Baudelaire's works. All authors participated in writing and critically revising the manuscript for intellectual content, and both approved the final manuscript for publication.

# Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this research as no data were generated or analysed.

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