

LIONEL RUFFEL

To the Depths of the Unknown

Translated by Andrew Miller

Editor's Note: This essay was written a few days before the 2024 legislative election in France, which followed President Emmanuel Macron's surprise decision to dissolve the National Assembly and force a snap election. The country was plunged into uncertainty as to whether the far right would gain control of the government for the first time since World War II.

I'm a literary scholar, born, raised, living and practicing in France.

I'm writing this text on June 24th during a political crisis that is occupying my every thought, though it would be inopportune to talk about it now since I'll be submitting this text before said crisis is resolved and it will only be published afterwards.

By the time it has been published, a new situation will surely have arisen.

I'm writing in anticipation of this new situation, while in the midst of the crisis.

I'm writing amid the limbo of the crisis, awaiting something new.

At the heart of the crisis, there are incessant crises.

Almost every tweet is a crisis and I'm foolishly awaiting something new.



I was born and raised in France in the cult of crisis and revolution, which, as they told me at school, bring about something new.

At school in the France where I was born and raised, they tell us that what we are is a series of crises and revolutions that ran from 1789 to 1871 and then continued into the next century, in 1914, 1939, 1962, and 1968.

I'm writing in the midst of a crisis, in the following century, on the outskirts of a city that is not just the capital of France, but the capital of modernity and revolution, as they told me at school.

This is where the new was invented.

Maybe the new was invented here, but it seems so very old, on those days when I march from Place de la République to Place de la Nation, passing through Place de la Bastille.

Between République and Nation, I go down old streets that must have been new a hundred and fifty years ago.

What seems new to me, on this day of crisis for the Republic and the Nation, is in fact neither République nor Nation, but the Romainville-Carnot metro station, which I'm using for the first time.

I can now get to the capital of modernity and revolution in ten minutes.

I read in my suburban town's magazine that the Romainville metro station was first conceived in 1900.

The year 1900, that was the real new.

The year 2024 is realizing a dream of something new from 1900, some 124 years later.



I was born and bred in France and taught to demonstrate as a way of expressing myself—because revolutions start in the streets, they told me at school as shivers went down my spine—and of ensuring that we never have to do it again.

I love the demonstrations that go from Place de la République to Place de la Nation, passing through Place de la Bastille. The ones that go through the west of Paris make me feel like I'm in a New Wave film.

I don't like the west of Paris.

Every time I walk through the old capital of modernity and revolution, I feel like the new lies in the east.

That's where you find République, Nation, and Bastille, all new ideas in Europe, coupled with joy, in the age of the new and the modern.

In the west, it's Place de la Concorde and the Champs-Élysées.



Which of them or us is proposing something new?

From République to Nation, passing through Bastille—and only if you go via Bastille, otherwise it doesn't work and can even be dangerous—it's always the same words that ring out: *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*—Liberty, Equality, Fraternity.

We still haven't really tried it, and there's nothing new about it.

It will truly be something new when we start saying *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité, Sororité* —Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, and Sisterhood.

When I think of this motto, which I hold dear, I think to myself that there's another, opposing motto. It too is French, but it has managed to cross the oceans and is now written in Portuguese: *ordem e progresso*, order and progress. Advocates of order have told us that they'll bring us progress, even if it means imposing it on us by force, because what drives progress is a belief in the new.

On the days when I demonstrate, these two mottos clash, like two conflicting ideas of the new.



I'm a literary scholar, born, raised, living, and practicing in France.

Whenever I hear the word “new,” I think of a line from Baudelaire: “To the depths of the Unknown to find something *new!*”

I don't remember what comes before it, but I do remember that the line closes a poem that closes a collection, and that collection is called *The Flowers of Evil*.

It's behind me, in several editions, in my library of “classics” that were also, in their time, new.

When you can quote a line off the top of your head without knowing what comes before it, it usually means you've made it say what you want it to say.

And, most of all, it has been made to say just about anything.

I'm a literary scholar, raised in France in the twentieth century, and what I learned from my education is that you have to find something new.



If you're a literary scholar born and raised in France, you know that *The Flowers of Evil* was published in the second half of a century now two centuries removed from us.

We're told that it was the collection that brought us into the modern age and that we owe it almost everything.

I'm a literary scholar, raised in France in the twentieth century, and I learned that modernity was all about finding something new.

I didn't learn that you had to go to the depths.

I didn't learn that you had to go to the depths of the unknown to find something new.

That would certainly have made the penny drop.

What I did learn was that you could avoid going to the depths of the unknown to find something new, and that was what being modern was all about.



I learned that to find something new, you could save yourself the effort. I learned that the new was the promise of an effortless world from which the new would deliver us.

I was born in France and grew up in the 1980s and '90s in the cult of the effortless new.

"Fast Cars, Clean Bodies" is what one American historian said of this affect and this period. The French translation of the title is an adaptation, but it's just as excellent: *Rouler plus vite, laver plus blanc*—Drive Faster, Wash Whiter.

I was born and raised in a country that elected a president of the Republic who still thinks we need to find something new, drive faster, wash whiter, and that we can avoid going to the depths of the unknown.

He hasn't read Baudelaire properly.



He's always saying that if it doesn't work, it's because we've misunderstood him.

So, he tells us, we have to drive faster and wash whiter. It doesn't matter, he says, whether we can find something new. We have to start again and again.

Perhaps he hasn't read Baudelaire properly.

Baudelaire, for his part, had read him without even knowing him.

He talks about him in the last two quatrains of *The Flowers of Evil*. He calls him "Death" or "old captain." He says this:

O Death, old captain, it is time! let's weigh anchor!
 This country wearies us, O Death! Let us set sail!
 Though the sea and the sky are black as ink,
 Our hearts which you know well are filled with rays of light

Pour out your poison that it may refresh us!
 This fire burns our brains so fiercely, we wish to plunge
 To the abyss' depths, Heaven or Hell, does it matter?
 To the depths of the Unknown to find something new!



"Does it matter?" That's all that was learned by the President of the country where he, like me, was born and raised.

What does it matter, as long as we find something new?

What does it matter if we have to plunge to the abyss' depths?

What does Heaven matter? What does Hell matter?

What does it matter if we pour out the poison?

What does it matter if the poison refreshes us?

What does it matter, because he has both the poison and the refreshment.

What does it matter, because he knows that our hearts are filled with rays of light.

What does it matter, because he knows that the rays of light can be extinguished, but he knows how to rekindle them.

What does it matter, because he knows that sometimes the sky and the sea are as black as ink and that this is unbearable for our hearts, filled with rays of light as they are.

What does it matter, because in his hands he holds the poison to rekindle our extinguished hearts.

What does it matter, because the poison in his hands is the hope of something new.



I was born and raised in France and despite this, I'd like to remove the reins of the new from the hands of Death and the old captain.

In the hands of Death or the old captain, to find the new you have to weigh anchor where there's only Heaven or Hell, does it matter?

In the hands of Death or the old captain, there's no new on Earth, in the Earth, with the Earth.

In the hands of Death or the old captain, it will be Heaven or Hell, does it matter?

Ships will have to set sail and some will go to Heaven, others to Hell.

In the hands of Death or the old captain, the country and the Earth are wearisome, and it will be to Heaven or Hell that we sail, does it matter?



I was born and raised in France and despite this, I'd like to remove the reins of the new from the hands of Death and the old captain.

In the hands of Death or the old captain, in the hands of the president of the country where I was born and raised, the new is sufficient in itself.

It responds to ennui.

To remove the reins of the new from the hands of Death and the old captain,
we'd have to reverse all their values.

We'd have to say that the country, which is neither nation nor homeland,
nor ethnicity, but simply land, never wearies us.

We'd have to say that it's no longer time to weigh anchor and that we
needn't set sail.

We'd have to say that we prefer the blackness of the sea and sky to ray-filled
hearts.

We'd have to say to Death, the old captain, and the president of the country
where I was born that we're going to detoxify.

We'd have to say that Heaven or Hell does matter, and that we're always the
ones taking the risks.

We'd have to say to Death, the old captain, and the president of the country
where I was born that everything matters.

Everything matters, that's the only thing we haven't tried.

Therein lies the new.

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Translation of *Les Fleurs du Mal* by William Aggeler (American Library Guild,
1954).