

## On the Banks of a New Lethe: Commodification and Experience in Benjamin's Baudelaire Book

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When the American painter R. B. Kitai imagined Walter Benjamin's Paris, he painted Benjamin sitting with Charles Baudelaire in an ambiguous space above which rise both an arcade and what Benjamin himself called "an open sky of cloudless blue"<sup>1</sup>—perhaps that same blank sky that hangs over the Paris of Baudelaire's "Le cygne." Kitai's painting, "The Autumn of Central Paris. After Walter Benjamin," catches Benjamin between projects. Benjamin had worked, if at first intermittently but then with increasing intensity, since the late 1920s on a massive history of the mid-nineteenth century in France, which bore the working title *The Arcades Project* (*die Passagen-Arbeit*). Benjamin found himself, after about 1935, under pressure from the Institute for Social Research to produce in a publishable form some portion of the vast material he had assembled for *The Arcades Project*. He began in 1937 to extract and reorganize material from his accumulation of citations, commentary, and reflections—that is, from *The Arcades Project*—toward

1. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), N1,5. Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically as *AP* and by convolute.

a book on Charles Baudelaire. He thus quite literally left the arcades and took Baudelaire with him. The arcades had, of course, served in Benjamin's notes toward his primal history (*Urgeschichte*) of the nineteenth century as the organizing metaphor, the figure and historical form around which the entire complex of social, cultural, political, and scientific history would have rotated.<sup>2</sup> Drawing extensively on *The Arcades* materials, Benjamin began to organize his texts not around an architectural form but around the figure of a single poet. He extracted several hundred pages of material from his notes and reorganized them into a book draft with three major sections, each of which in turn contained multiple chapters, with *The Arcades* fragments ordered as he would finally use them. This project, bearing the working title *Charles Baudelaire, A Lyric Poet in the Age of High Capitalism*, is, more than ten years after its discovery by Giorgio Agamben, still readable—in any language—only in a kind of samizdat version: to read Benjamin's book draft, one needs to reassemble—that is, cut and paste—a selection of passages from *The Arcades*.<sup>3</sup>

Why take such pains for what is, after all, for two thirds of its length only an advanced draft? Because the experience of reading the text that results from this reordering is fundamentally different from that of reading *The Arcades*. Obviously enough, the focus and, to a certain extent, rhetorical trajectories of the project changed. The book draft stands today as a pioneering effort to recast our image of Baudelaire and his historical moment. Baudelaire emerges for the first time as the quintessential modern—alienated, spatially displaced, saturnine. Much of this effect is achieved through a Copernican reorientation of the historical formation in which the poet is

2. Benjamin's most succinct definition of primal history occurs in *The Arcades*, N3a,2: "Primal history of the nineteenth century'—this would be of no interest if it were understood to mean that forms of primal history are to be recovered among the inventory of the nineteenth century. Only where the nineteenth century would be presented as original form of primal history—in a form, that is to say, in which the whole of primal history groups itself anew in images appropriate to that century—only there does the concept of a primal history of the nineteenth century have meaning." For a reading of this passage, see Michael Jennings, *Dialectical Images: Walter Benjamin's Theory of Literary Criticism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987), 204–11.

3. Giorgio Agamben and I hope to edit and publish an English-language version of the Baudelaire book in the near future, but that will depend on cooperation from Benjamin's German editors, who have so far blocked publication in any language. For an important and philologically precise evaluation of the unpublished Baudelaire materials, see Michel d'Espagne and Michael Werner, "Vom Passagen-Projekt zum *Baudelaire*: Neue Handschriften zum Spätwerk Walter Benjamin," *Deutsche Vierteljahresschrift*, no. 4 (1984): 593–657.

presented. The classical studies that preceded Benjamin's text had highlighted the early Baudelaire: his ties to Romanticism, the Swedenborgian mysticism of the *correspondances*, the flights into reverie, elation, and the ideal. Benjamin's reading emphasizes for the first time the other element of the dualism Baudelaire evokes in the section of *Les fleurs du mal* titled "Spleen and Ideal": Baudelaire's melancholy, his self-understanding as flotsam and jetsam on the tides of modernity. Benjamin's text achieves this by revealing Baudelaire as the preeminent poet of the urban capitalist metropolis. He is the flaneur, strolling through the mercantile arcades at a pace dictated by a turtle on a leash, a ragpicker, collecting images of that which has been discarded by the denizens of the metropolitan jungle. And Benjamin relates these features to historical processes: the flaneur's pace protests against the accelerating tempo at which urban life must be experienced; the ragpicker's accumulation of unrelated detritus from all walks of Parisian life figures nothing else but the division of labor, a prime cause of the fragmentation of that human experience. The book emphasizes, then, the same overriding concerns so evident in *The Arcades Project*: the rise of commodity fetishism in the big city and a concomitant dehumanization under capitalism. Baudelaire's lyric poetry, writes Benjamin, "breaks in its destructive energy not only . . . with the nature of poetic inspiration; it breaks—due to its evocation of the city—not only with the rural nature of the idyll, but it breaks—due to the heroic determination with which it makes poetry at home at the heart of reification—with the nature of the things. It stands at the place at which the nature of things is overpowered and transformed by human nature."<sup>4</sup>

Beyond these thematic shifts, the Baudelaire book has a narrative and rhetorical coherence absent over large stretches of the text published as *The Arcades Project*—which, after all, was Benjamin's provisionally ordered quarry of material from which he would have written his history.<sup>5</sup> Or, to put it another way, the Baudelaire book provides an astonishing optic through which to study *The Arcades*, an optic that offers a perspective different from those offered by the Exposés Benjamin wrote in 1935 and 1939.<sup>6</sup> The Baudelaire book, even in its fragmentary form, is in fact the definitive

4. Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 8 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972–91), 1:1152.

5. Howard Eiland, in a recent conversation, has argued that Benjamin shaped the beginning sections of certain convolutes with this kind of narrative and rhetorical coherence in mind.

6. Both Exposés are included in *The Arcades Project*, the first as "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century," the second as "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century," *AP*, 3–26.

statement of Benjamin's maturity. He himself referred to the completed section of the book, "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire," as "a miniature model," indeed a "very exact model," of the structure of the intended text on the arcades.<sup>7</sup>

Before moving to the main lines of my argument, though, I need to point out that there are very real costs associated with our leaving *The Arcades* and following Baudelaire out and into the open air. When we open the covers of *The Arcades*, we are greeted by the splendid mutterings of thousands of voices of the dead; this has always struck me as a moment not unlike that lovely sequence in Wim Wenders's *Der Himmel über Berlin* when the angels enter the *Staatsbibliothek* and hear the hum of those hundreds of internalized voices. The Baudelaire book reduces those voices in number and in complexity, and this is a grievous loss, for those voices—raised in song, in recitation, in stupefied admiration, in protest, in agony—have always seemed among the most fascinating, and the least understood, aspects of *The Arcades Project*. Paris, too, disappears as built environment and as text, as does much of the social and political history of the arcades themselves. The question needs to be asked, then: When we turn from *The Arcades* to *Baudelaire*, do we gain in clarity and theoretical punch what we lose in breadth and complexity?

Because the Baudelaire book is so seldom discussed, some sense of its structure may prove useful. The book has three sections. The first is entitled "Baudelaire as Allegorist." Benjamin is concerned here primarily with an analysis of the formal elements of Baudelaire's poetry, and especially with the *structural* logic that ties it to the baroque mourning plays, for whose stature as cognitive media of a special sort Benjamin had argued in his *Origin of the German Mourning Play* of 1924.<sup>8</sup> This first section includes chapters called "Reception," "Affective Apparatus," "Aesthetic Passion," "Allegory," and "Melancholy." The second section—the only one completed—is entitled "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire"; it explores Baudelaire's many guises—as conspirator, flaneur, ragpicker, and hero—and examines the confluences and repetitions of antiquity and modernity in Baudelaire and indeed in French society in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>9</sup> The third section bears the title "The Commodity as Poetic Object" and

7. Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995–2002), 6:64, 131.

8. Published as *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: New Left Books, 1977).

9. This section was first published in English in *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the*

contains chapters on the commodity, the *nouveauté*, eternal return, spleen, loss of the aura, *Jugendstil*, and tradition. In what follows, I will focus on this third section because it contains, as Benjamin stated clearly, the theoretical armature of the entire project.<sup>10</sup>

As I have suggested rather elliptically so far, the Baudelaire book taken as a whole was meant to present a large-scale theory of modern experience. The particular exigencies of Benjamin's life and writing prevented the full development of that theoretical model, and its adumbration in this fragmentary text will remain its most extensive and cogent formulation. A very little bit of philology may be in order here. The middle section of the Baudelaire book, the essay we know as "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire," was, in effect, rejected by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer.<sup>11</sup> They urged Benjamin to develop the central section of that central section—you begin to get a sense for the dizzying reductions to which *The Arcades* material was subjected in the late 1930s—and this urging led to the essay "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire." This latter essay retains, from the larger project, the emphasis on a theory of experience. In "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," Benjamin points repeatedly to the *structure* of experience in the mid-nineteenth century, remarking that it may be conceived in analogy to the structure of industrial work or gambling. But there are important ellipses at key moments of the essay. Early on, Benjamin jumps vertiginously from the notion of shock experience to a discussion of Baudelaire's poetry, with no hint of how that poetry is produced by shock, fixes the shock experience, or, with a few exceptions, thematizes it. When, late in the essay, Benjamin adduces his older concept of the aura in its relation to Baudelaire's work, it is similarly unclear as to just what it is that allows Baudelaire's work to shatter the aura or contribute to its decline. These ellipses are simply blank spaces in an argument produced by the more or less violent excisions of material from the larger corpus of the Baudelaire book.

The essay is primarily known for the very explicit formulation of the theory of experience with which it commences. Benjamin discriminates—

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*Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: New Left Books, 1972). A revised and annotated version of the essay is forthcoming in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, ed. Michael Jennings and Howard Eiland (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

10. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe*, 6:186.

11. For an account of the debate between Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno—speaking for the editorial group at the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*—on this essay, see Jennings, *Dialectical Images*, 30–41.

in a formulation now given very wide currency—between long experience (*Erfahrung*) and isolated experience (*Erlebnis*). Long experience is presented as a coherent body of knowledge and wisdom that is not merely retainable in human memory but transmissible from generation to generation. The essay “The Storyteller,” with its rather nostalgic evocation of a pre-capitalist era, adduces oral literature as the privileged form of such transmission. Isolated experience, on the other hand, emerges in “On Some Motifs” as a form of experience bound to the shocks experienced by the stroller in the urban mass; isolated experience, far from being retainable or transmissible, is in fact parried by consciousness and leaves a trace in the unconscious. This somewhat labored interweaving of ideas from Freud, Theodor Reik, and, much to Adorno’s dismay, Georg Simmel, is generally taken to be the consummate expression of Benjamin’s long-developed theory of experience.

A reading of the full text of the Baudelaire *book* reveals this aspect of Benjamin’s theory as a partial argument with limited applicability. The bourgeois stroller’s shock experience in the urban mass is a specific and limited form of a more generally conditioned experience. The terms *long experience* and *isolated experience* developed in “On Some Motifs” do, of course, provide a conceptual map for conceiving one particular relationship within the innate structure of human experience; yet the theory adumbrated there says very little about the possible *objects* of that experience. And in every prior major articulation of Benjamin’s theory, those objects had played an important role in the determination of the structure of experience. It is this combination of innate structure and potential object that had preoccupied Benjamin from the time of his earliest meditations on experience in the years of the First World War; this combination can be said to determine, in fact, Benjamin’s contribution to a twentieth-century cultural theory of experience.

It is important that we understand that Benjamin’s theory of experience is, in important respects, opposed to a Kantian theory of experience, that is, to a theory of experience that proceeds from an articulation of the *structure* of human understanding. From his very earliest attempts to produce a philosophically informed theory, the period between 1912 and 1914, Benjamin emphasized the structures of historical time that produced particular potential objects of human experience. Benjamin can write in 1914 of “a particular condition, in which history appears to be concentrated in a single focal point . . . the elements of the ultimate condition do not manifest themselves as formless progressive tendencies, but are deeply rooted in every present in the form of the most endangered, excoriated, and ridiculed

ideas and products of the creative mind.”<sup>12</sup> Benjamin emphasizes here the materiality of these noetically charged fragments, their availability to ordinary experience. Benjamin completed his pre-Marxist theory of things as privileged bearers of knowledge in what we might call his epistemological trilogy: his dissertation, *On the Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism*, the essay “Goethe’s Elective Affinities,” and the “epistemo-critical preface” to *The Origin of German Mourning Drama*. I can sketch this development only in the greatest possible abbreviation here. In the dissertation, the Romantic fragment, as defined by Friedrich Schlegel, emerges as an intensive totality, one that could subsume vast, and vastly significant, realms of knowledge. In the essay on Goethe’s novel, Benjamin develops the notion of a “truth content” in texts, a notion bound to Goethe’s theory of the *Urphänomen*. And in the preface to the book on the *Trauerspiel*, he theorizes the notion of the *Ursprung*, or origin, as an image of “true nature” that leaps from the flux of history into that constellation Benjamin calls the “idea.”<sup>13</sup>

A key fragment from *The Arcades* attests to the ongoing importance of this idea complex for Benjamin’s theories of experience and knowledge under capitalism:

In studying Simmel’s presentation of Goethe’s concept of truth, I realized quite clearly that my concept of origin in the book on the *Trauerspiel* is a strict and compelling transfer of this first principle of Goethe’s from the realm of nature to that of history. Origins—the concept of the primal event, carried over from the pagan context of nature into the Jewish contexts of history. In the arcades project, I am dealing with an explanation of origins, too. That is to say, I pursue the origins of the forms and changes in the Paris arcades from their beginning to their decline, and grasp them through the economic facts. (*AP*, N,2a,4)

It is from this kernel that Benjamin will develop his theory of the dialectical image, to which he attributes a revelatory and revolutionary importance. The things that seem to be plucked from their context in the period and forced into an often uncomfortable proximity to other, seemingly unrelated objects and images hold an explosive charge in that they contain within themselves not only a diagram of their previous and projected development but also an image of an experience untainted by historical life under capitalism.

12. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 1:37.

13. For a full discussion of this development, see Jennings, *Dialectical Images*, 125–38.

As I hope this all too brief constellation of Benjamin's ideas on things as objects of experience suggests, any important theory of experience in the late Benjamin that does not address the issue of the appropriate *objects* of experience is simply incomplete. It should thus come as no surprise that the book on Baudelaire argues with remarkable intensity that the structure of human experience in the mid-nineteenth century was, without exception, determined by the nature of its most prevalent object: the commodity. Benjamin had insisted very early on in his work on *The Arcades* that his understanding of commodity fetishism would play a determinative role in his project. In a letter to Adorno dated 12 December 1938, in which he attempts to save "The Paris of the Second Empire," and thus the Baudelaire book project as a whole, from rejection, he characterizes the central theoretical notion of part 3 of the book as "the empathy with the soul of the commodity."<sup>14</sup> We can mark a three-year period—from the composition of the first Exposé of *The Arcades Project* in 1935 through the initial draft of the Baudelaire book and the completion of "The Paris of the Second Empire"—as a phase in Benjamin's career in which the commodity form played a central role in his theory of experience.

In his last phase, the one following the completion of "On Some Motifs," the category of phantasmagoria largely replaces the commodity as analytical tool. Adorno, in a letter dated 10 November 1938, defending the rejection of "The Paris of the Second Empire," had insisted that the absence of the category of phantasmagoria in that essay seriously compromises the work. It is perhaps not coincidental that, in the 1939 Exposé to *The Arcades*, Benjamin carefully delimits his use of the term *commodity*, identifying commodities largely with their role in the great world exhibitions; *phantasmagoria* largely replaces the former as the central category of the theory of experience. Compared to the specificity of Benjamin's analysis of the commodity in the Baudelaire book, the term *phantasmagoria* emerges here as a general theoretical concept more congenial to Adorno and Horkheimer, a term wholly free of the "facticity" for which they rejected Benjamin's first Baudelaire essay. As I hope to show in what follows, the notion of phantasmagoria is tied to notions of collective psychology, a position Benjamin increasingly came to associate with protofascist writers such as Ludwig Klages and Carl Jung.

In the Baudelaire book, Benjamin thus makes it abundantly clear that the objective conditions confronting experience under urban capitalism are

14. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe*, 6:190.



not, in the first place, the urban crowd—which is, from the standpoint of experience, an optical device, an apparatus—but rather a pervasive structure formed by the mass production and dissemination of commodities. The key methodological term for the Baudelaire book is thus neither long experience nor isolated experience nor shock: It is the antinomy of the new and the eversame that inheres in commodities and their circulation and, by expressive extension, in the very nature of modern experience as repetition.

The primary vehicle of Benjamin's analysis of the commodity form and its effects is the *nouveauté*, or luxury good, in its relation to fashion. The *nouveauté* is the ideal exemplification of the antithetical qualities of the commodity in that it manifests not just its eversameness but especially its necessary semblance (*Schein*) of newness. These qualities are marshaled and disseminated on a mass basis by fashion, and it is in the analysis of fashion that Benjamin's critique becomes most corrosive. In one of the most often reworked sections of *The Arcades*—which would certainly have occupied a prominent position on the chapter on the *nouveauté*, and which was to be the first paragraph in one of the chapters of the Baudelaire book—Benjamin approximates the form of the *Denkbild*, or figure of thought, that had represented a key stylistic and philosophical form for Benjamin, starting with *One Way Street*.

Here fashion has opened the business of dialectical exchange between woman and ware—between carnal pleasure and the corpse. The clerk, death, tall and loutish, measures the century by the yard, plays the mannequin himself so as to save costs, and manages single-handedly the liquidation that in French is called *révolution*. For fashion was never anything other than the parody of the motley cadaver, provocation of death through woman, and bitter colloquy with decay whispered between shrill bursts of mechanical laughter. That is fashion. And that is why she changes so quickly; she titillates death and is already something different, something new, as he casts about to crush her. For a hundred years she holds her own against him. Now, finally, she is on the point of quitting the field. But he establishes on the banks of a new Lethe, which rolls its asphalt stream through arcades, the armature of the whores as trophy. (*AP*, B1,4)

Benjamin here marks fashion as the full realization of the anorganic and life-threatening aspects of the commodity. “To grasp the significance of *nouveauté* it is necessary to go back to novelty in everyday life. Why does everyone share the newest thing with everyone else? Presumably, to triumph over

the dead" (*AP*, D5a,5). Benjamin seldom offers so quotidian an example of his theory, but this tidbit suggests the full attraction of the semblance of novelty as well as its ability to delude us regarding its relation to death. Not just the prostitute, then, but, more generally, fashion itself has about it that often-cited sex appeal of the anorganic, an irrational force that pulls men and women down—in a kind of latter-day elective affinity—toward the elements and toward death. In this hollowed-out and lifeless world, even revolution is nothing more than one more violent rotation of the business cycle, another clearance sale in human meaning and life. "In that which is newest the face of the world never alters, this newest remains, in every respect, the same. This constitutes the eternity of hell" (*AP*, S1,5). And the way into hell leads through the arcades, which make a cameo appearance here as the stage on which a modern street becomes not just the site of seduction but the Lethe, where all reification is indeed a forgetting.

More scandalous than the attribution to fashion of a deathly lustrousness, though, is the central aesthetic claim of Benjamin's book: that Baudelaire's poetry does not merely *represent* commodification and consumption, does not merely name for the first time a new class of objects—a realization to which Théophile Gautier already came—but that this poetry is itself determined "bis auf den Grund" by the commodity form itself.

I'd like to offer a brief excursus here. Recent historians of nineteenth-century France, such as Michael Miller and Philip Nord, have repeatedly confirmed Benjamin's assertions in *The Arcades Project* that the era saw an astonishingly rapid increase in the production and circulation of commodities, in short, in consumption, locating this explosion in the shift from shops and mid-size stores to the *grands magasins*.<sup>15</sup> Given the major changes that such a development brought with it, not only in the stores and in homes but, through advertising, to the street and public life, it is remarkable how seldom the features of the production, distribution, and consumption of commodities came to representation in culture. Historians love to adduce Émile Zola as evidence that these changes were registered and analyzed, but there is presumably a limit to the number of times that one novel, *Aux Bonheurs des Dames*, can be adduced as evidence, for that is the only significant literary representation of this complex. In painting, the situation is little different. T. J. Clark and others have looked at the paintings of the world exhibitions by Édouard Manet and the impressionists, and there has been some dis-

15. See Michael Miller, *The Bon Marché: Bourgeois Culture and the Department Store* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981); and Philip Nord, *Paris Shopkeepers and the Politics of Resentment* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986).

cussion of Edgar Degas's series at the milliner's shop, but here, too, there is a strikingly inverse relationship between the omnipresence of consumption as a social fact and its direct representation in art.<sup>16</sup>

Benjamin offers surprisingly clear, if scandalous and allegorical, justifications for just this absence of representation. Just as he argues that Baudelaire's impotence is the physiological manifestation of the bourgeois class's psychological discomfort at the thought of bringing children into the world they were creating, he also states directly that the ruling classes were compelled both to accelerate the production process and to suppress the fact of its existence, a suppression that limited its direct representation. The result is a coded, never thematic, but deeply formal relationship of art to its object.

In the chapter entitled "The Commodity," Benjamin makes of Marx his accomplice in the construction of a theory of refractory, commodity-determined art. He cites Marx to the effect that "value converts every product into a social hieroglyphic" (*AP*, X4,3); value wraps commodities in opaque veils and shields their nature and effects from straightforward experience. Benjamin insists—and this, and not the later attribution of a shock character, is the key move in his argument—that Baudelaire's poetry converts social hieroglyphics into art. "Around the middle of the century, the conditions of artistic production underwent a change. This change consisted of the fact that for the first time the form of the commodity imposed itself on the work of art. . . . Particularly vulnerable was . . . the lyric" (*AP*, J60,6). And in one of those montages of contemporary reactions of which Benjamin was a master, he claims in turn that the poems of the *Fleurs du mal* were produced under conditions determined by the mass production and circulation of commodities, and indeed were shaped by them: specialization, serialization, and the display typical of marketing. The result was an aesthetic form that shared and indeed intensified the essential features of the commodity. As Baudelaire himself put it in perhaps the best-known phrase from the Salon of 1859, a phrase that would have occupied a pivotal role in the chapter on the *nouveauté*, "Imagination decomposes all creation . . . it creates a new world, it creates the sensation of newness" (*AP*, J34a,1). If Baudelaire's sentence does not specifically address the relations between art and commodity, it is nonetheless remarkable for its anticipation of the commodity's primary effect.

Benjamin's analysis of the aesthetic role of the *Schein des Neuen*,

16. See especially T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (New York: Knopf, 1984).

the semblance of newness, is complex, and like nearly all the key conceptual nodes of *The Arcades*, it cuts two ways: The commodity form of art has both positive and negative implications, and is marked both by blindness and by insight. First, and most obviously, the appearance of newness is pernicious; it is the building block of phantasmagoria. In order to develop this argument, Benjamin draws in the chapter on the *nouveauté* on central categories of his early aesthetics, not so much to deploy them directly as to refunction them in light of his most recent thought. In a kind of potted natural history of *Schein*—that lustrous semblance that first emerged in Benjamin's thought in the early 1920s—Benjamin argues that the concept of semblance, originally derived from idealist aesthetics, is at base a natural category that has been usurped and overcome by the economics of the commodity. Nature had always been, Benjamin asserts here, as he had in the essay on the elective affinities, the privileged refuge of historical semblance. This notion has its origins in Benjamin's profound rejection of all things natural, an immanent disposition deepened and lent intellectual weight by his reading of Hermann Cohen. But in the nineteenth century, the deceptive, seductive appearance of nature has been trumped by the seductive luster of newness that inheres in the commodity form and, by extension from it, in the work of art. Works of art thus only replicate and disseminate historical semblance as parody and concentration of its effects. And semblance is not the only central aesthetic category in Benjamin's arsenal that undergoes a seismic shift due to its forced proximity to the commodity form: The very notion of aura is reconceived in the Baudelaire book in analogy to the commodity—it is now not so much the appearance of a distance, no matter how near it may seem, as the appearance of a seductive newness, however eversame the work may appear.

At the same time, Benjamin characterizes Baudelaire's wresting of the sensation of newness from the unchanging misery of the Second Empire as something positive and indeed even heroic. This argument is perhaps more tortuous and harder to work out than the negative argument I have outlined above. It starts from Benjamin's much discussed critique of the concept of progress, a critique that he finds limned already in Baudelaire. He attributes to Baudelaire, in fact, that central attestation of *The Arcades* as a whole: "The concept of progress must be grounded in the idea of catastrophe. That things are 'status quo' is the catastrophe."<sup>17</sup> Baudelaire was privy to a deep sense of the emptiness and stagnation of time. The mani-

17. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1:583.

festation of this recognition is spleen, which Benjamin calls the feeling that corresponds to catastrophe in permanence. And spleen itself gives rise to a series of poems whose temporality Proust first noted as “a strange sectioning of time.”

The entirety of the first part of the Baudelaire book is given over to a presentation of the aesthetic device that corresponds to this splenetic disposition: allegory. If, in spleen, Baudelaire sought “to interrupt the course of the world,” then his weapon of preference was an allegory directed against “the harmonious facade of the world that surrounded him” (*AP*, J50,2; J55a,3). This ability to unmask the given order, with its illusion of totality and organic wholeness, is the progressive tendency of allegory (*AP*, J57,3).

In the concluding third section of the book, one line of this argument runs toward the role of allegory in the destruction of the aura, a road I will not pursue here. Another line leads past the examination of commodities in their singularity and toward the cumulative effect of networks of commodities, toward the notion of phantasmagoria. In one of the most astonishing moves in a corpus well known for its astonishing moves, Benjamin ties his analysis of phantasmagoria to the evocation of a trinitarian grouping that would have presided over the work as a whole, to Baudelaire, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Auguste Blanqui. What might have bound, in Benjamin’s imagination, these three figures from such disparate realms of endeavor? A preliminary answer begins with a glance at the role of the stars in the Baudelaire book.

Of the many allegorical elements of Baudelaire’s poetry accorded prominent positions in Benjamin’s analysis, pride of place must fall to the figuration of the stars. However, rather than fixing the stars in Baudelaire as the late Romantic markers of a visual prospect onto infinity and the absolute, Benjamin tears them back to earth, reduces their distance, by claiming that they, too, bear the marks of commodification. “The stars in Baudelaire are the rebus-image of the commodity; the eternal return of the same in great masses” (*AP*, J62,5). Here we have the first link, the scandalous claim that Baudelaire’s figuration of the stars is tied ideationally to that major idea complex in Nietzsche we know as the eternal return. This first use of the term *eternal return* launches Benjamin into the final stages of his argument. It has long been known that he privileges Baudelaire as the quintessential modern, but not because he somehow rises above his age. As Benjamin wrote to Gershom Scholem in 1938, he intended the Baudelaire book to show not how Baudelaire hovered above his contemporaries but rather how he lay *embedded* in the nineteenth century. The materiality of this figure is striking; Benjamin goes on to speak of the hollow impression left in the ground—

his text—when the stone that had been embedded—Baudelaire—is taken away. Baudelaire’s heroism consists in his willingness to allow the structure of modernity to be inscribed not just in his verse but on his body and, through his body, on the very ground. Baudelaire becomes, in another telling phrase, the secret agent of the destruction of his own class.

This newfound materiality, coupled with the explicitly martial rhetoric of the figure of the secret agent, provides the subtle linkage to the last figure of the trinity, Blanqui. Blanqui is that professional insurrectionist who had the distinction of being incarcerated for each major upheaval of the French nineteenth century: for the revolutions of 1830 and 1848, and finally for the Commune. It was in his last cell that he wrote the cosmological speculation *L'éternité par les astres* (Eternity for the stars), a text astonishing for its admixture of audacity and utter banality. Benjamin calls it theological “insofar as hell is a subject of theology.” “At the same time, it is the complement of the society to which Blanqui, in his old age, was forced to concede victory. . . . It is an unconditional surrender, but it is simultaneously the most terrible indictment of a society that projects this image of the cosmos—understood as an image of itself—across the heavens” (*AP*, D5a,6).

The central arguments of the Baudelaire book take their final shape, then, not through the analysis of popular culture and the built environment that would have characterized *The Arcades* but through a bifocal reading of a series of texts produced by a few great figures. The penultimate fragment in the final chapter of the book, “Tradition,” reads as follows:

The ideologies of the rulers are by their nature more changeable than the ideas of the oppressed. For not only must they, like the ideas of the latter, adapt each time to the situation of social conflict, but they must glorify that situation as fundamentally harmonious. . . . To undertake to “salvage” the great figures of the bourgeoisie means, not least, to conceive them in this most unstable dimension of their operation, and precisely from out of that to extract, to cite, what has remained inconspicuously buried beneath—being, as it was, of so little help to the powerful. To bring together Baudelaire and Blanqui means removing the bushel that is covering the light. (*AP*, J77,1)

The key phrase here is Benjamin’s interest in “the most unstable dimension of [the] operation” of these great bourgeoisie. The puzzling, aggravating assertion that would have organized the final chapters of the Baudelaire book runs as follows: Benjamin claims that, for all three of his key figures, this unstable dimension consists in the construction of *cosmological alle-*

gories. And these allegories—Baudelaire's stars, Nietzsche's eternal return, and Blanqui's eternity by the stars—themselves reveal in a compelling manner the fissures and incoherencies in the harmonious facade created and maintained by capital.

The final pages of the Baudelaire book thus stage a series of productive, or progressive, phantasmagorias, if I may be allowed to stray into oxymoron. Baudelaire's allegory of the stars makes of his poetry a conjuration of the phantasmagoria of modernity—with its main feature, the appearance of newness—from the misery of the Second Empire. It is progressive not as analysis or revelation but as a device that condenses and exacerbates central, if hidden, features of time as sameness and repetition. Similarly, Nietzsche's idea of the eternal return conjures the "phantasmagoria of happiness of the Gründerjahre," conjures, as Nietzsche would have it in *The Gay Science*, a human "favorably inclined to [himself] and to life, so as to long for nothing more ardently than for this last eternal sanctioning and sealing."<sup>18</sup> These phantasmagorias are the product of crisis but have the unusual ability to identify and intensify that crisis itself.

The idea of eternal recurrence transforms the historical event itself into a mass-produced article. But this conception also displays in another respect—on its reverse side, one could say—a trace of the economic circumstances to which it owes its sudden actuality. This was manifest at the moment when the security of conditions of life was considerably diminished through an accelerated succession of crises. The idea of eternal recurrence derived its luster from the fact that it was no longer possible, in all circumstances, to expect a recurrence of conditions across any interval of time shorter than that provided by eternity. The quotidian constellations quite gradually began to be less quotidian. Quite gradually their recurrence became a little less frequent, and there could arise in consequence the obscure presentiment that henceforth one must rest content with cosmic constellations. (*AP*, J62a,2)

This obscure presentiment corresponds to that most unstable dimension of bourgeois class operations: It produces productive phantasmagorias, phantasmagorias that acknowledge their commodity character yet point back to the actual conditions that produced them. As such they are a necessary

18. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974), section 341.

prelude to the awakening from the bad dream of capitalism. An epoch does not simply awaken from the bad dream of history: It must have its uneasy sleep punctuated by a nightmare vision of a cruelty sufficient to awaken the dead. It is in this sense that Benjamin can characterize the buried man as “the transcendental subject of history” (*AP*, J57,5).

In the 1939 Exposé, Benjamin calls Blanqui’s book “one last cosmic phantasmagoria which implicitly comprehends the severest critique of all the others.” He ascribes to Blanqui’s text “an extreme hallucinatory power” (*AP*, 25). Blanqui’s phantasmagoria shows a society, or so Benjamin hoped, about to be nudged by this horror out of its long, phantasmagoric sleep and to awaken not—as had Benjamin’s allegorist at the end of the book on the *Trauerspiel*—in the redeemed world but in a world conscious of its own structures, mechanisms, and possibilities. Benjamin, of course, knew that this had not happened, that it might not happen on publication of his own major work, which is in no sense a progressive phantasmagoria—the study of the arcades. Yet he clung, against the intellectual fashion of his own age, to that hope granted only the hopeless. No one was more aware of the labyrinth of textuality; certainly no one with that awareness combined it with a greater hope that the world might change. At the risk of incurring the charge of nostalgia, though presumably not of fashionableness, I close with Benjamin’s own words: “In every true work of art there is a place where, for one who removes there, it blows cool like the wind of a coming dawn. From this it follows that art, which has often been considered refractory to every relation with progress, can provide its true definition. Progress is not based in the continuity of elapsing time but in its interferences: where the truly new makes itself felt for the first time with the sobriety of dawn” (*AP*, N9a,7). The experience of modernity theorized in Benjamin’s book on Baudelaire is, then, much more than a series of shocks to be parried and repressed. It is instead a complex model in which human experience is determined by the repetition and eversameness of the commodity form. The paradoxical hope of overcoming delusion, however intermittently, of attaining to a form of experience that might enable the recognition of truth, might reside precisely in those interferences—in Benjamin’s “progressive phantasmagorias.”