Beyond Ab-Dichtung:

Reading Benjamin’s “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire”

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[...] On the roof
Of an itinerant vehicle I sate,
With vulgar men about me, trivial forms
Of houses, pavement, streets, of men and things,--
Mean shapes on every side: but, at the instant,
When to myself it fairly might be said,
The threshold now is overpast, (how strange
That aught external to the living mind
Should have such mighty sway! yet so it was),
A weight of ages did at once descend
Upon my heart; no thought embodied, no
Distinct remembrances, but weight and power,--
Power growing under weight: alas! I feel
That I am trifling [...]


Für Männer
Überzeugen ist unfruchtbar.

(Einbahnstraße, Krit. Ausg. 13)

Is it not as if an author wrote 166 folio volumes and the reader read and read, just as when someone observes and observes nature but does not discover that the meaning of this enormous work lies in the reader himself?

(Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, tr. Howard and Edna Hong, 247)

This reading is still evolving. It is at this point strictly focused on the essay “Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire,” not on Benjamin’s very much larger Baudelaire project in its entirety.

Also, I approach this text at this point mainly as a reader of Kafka rather than Baudelaire.
I will begin with two prefatory sections that supply some minimal framing for the reading itself. The first of these will briefly look at Benjamin’s comments about literary criticism. The second one brings key aspects of Benjamin’s reception of Franz Kafka’s work into play, which I consider crucial for a reading Benjamin’s entire later work. The (still evolving) reading of the Baudelaire-essay will then follow. For the discussion of key citations in the latter part of the essay, we will have to rely on our discussion.

1. Literary Criticism à la Benjamin

Benjamin, as has often been cited, “stated categorically that he wanted to be considered ‘the premiere critic of German literature,’ adding that he could accomplish this only if he were to ‘recreate criticism as a genre’” (Jennings 1987, p. 5, quoting a 1930 letter from WB to Scholem¹). Not only are Benjamin’s ambitions thus focused on the genre of Literaturkritik, but the ambition and scope he associates with that genre itself is incomparably greater than what we ordinarily associate with “literary criticism.” So what is “literary criticism” à la Benjamin? In One-Way Street, we find thirteen theses on what he calls the “technique” or “technology” of the critic (“Die Technik des Kritikers in dreizehn Thesen,” Einbahnstraße, 35-36). The critic, writes Benjamin, should be a strategist, take sides, and “speak in the language of the artists” („in der Sprache der Artisten reden”). If it speaks the language of the artists, then, the work of the critic is itself literary. Thesis X posits that “Polemics is to annihilate a book in only a few of its sentences. […] Only the one who can annihilate can also critique” („Polemik heißt, ein Buch in

wenigen seiner Sätze vernichten. [...] Nur wer vernichten kann, kann kritisieren”; emphasis mine). The point of criticism is not admiration. Instead, the work is the “bared/ unsheathed/ shiny/ blank weapon in the battle of spirits” (the „blanke Waffe in dem Kampfe der Geister“). He goes on to suggest that we take on the work “lovingly like a cannibal who is prepping an infant for himself.” („so liebevoll vornehmen], wie ein Kannibale sich einen Säugling zurüstet.“) For the masses of readers, finally, Benjamin seems to have very little use: The public, he writes, must always be proven wrong, and yet should always feel represented by the critic. („Das Publikum muss stets Unrecht erhalten und sich doch immer durch den Kritiker vertreten fühlen.“) And finally: the art of the critic is to coin slogans or maxims without betraying the ideas („Schlagworte zu prägen ohne die Ideen zu verraten“).

We can thus get a lot of useful advice from Benjamin on how to go about literary criticism in general—and about a critique of his own work in particular. After what we have just read, though, one thing is certain: clearly, we cannot expect that Benjamin’s texts will tell us straightforwardly what their author is up to. Rather, we will have to develop an appetite (and possibly a strong stomach) for taking on his poetic strategies. Let us clarify some of the consequences of what we have just read for our procedure. If the work itself is the bared or “blanke” weapon in the battle of spirits, then that weapon is not brought to the work from the outside. Rather, the work itself can cut more than one way. The “annihilation” that we must be able to bring about in order to consider ourselves critics proper, therefore, also is not brought about by saying things about the work. The sentences of the work themselves are the weapon. The battle cannot be decided by pointing at the text and what it seems to ‘say’ as ‘evidence.’ Instead, the battle is won when the text is claimed by and for a new reading. We must change the spirit in which the same words are read. What is annihilated (vernichtet) in such
a case, then, is also not so much the text per se, but the spirit in which it used to be read. Such a conception of criticism has profound consequences for our thinking about what a text is and, for that matter, what reading is and does. For our thinking about the text, this means that its sentences have an entirely different function than what is commonly assumed. They do not transport any ‘content.’ Rather, the perception of ‘content’ is itself only upheld by a certain way of reading, and it may change or disappear in light of a different reading.

To sum up: critique that is worth the name has nothing to do with the appreciation and enjoyment of Benjamin’s ‘art,’ nor is it about docilely trying to figure out what the author is trying to tell us. It is not about deciphering what a text says, but rather what it does. And yet more importantly: about what we can do with and about it. Criticism that deserves the name brings about a catastrophe: it flips the work and subjects it to a new angle, a new perspective, claims it for a new reading.

Precisely because he knows that this can happen, however, the construction of Benjamin’s text is designed to reduce the probability of such catastrophe. To this end, it is designed to invite the crowd into a disempowered and mechanical reading. Benjamin’s poetic strategy, his literary weaving of the text, his Dichtung, or so I will argue, is actually an Ab-Dichtung—a protective sealing—against the reading that could catastrophize his text.

As readers, we have the opposite interest. A strong critical reading of Benjamin’s texts is the only way—short of the other one of not reading him at all—to re-assert our very spirit in and through his own “texts. “Eine neue Sprache muß eine neue Gangart haben, und diese Gangart hat sie nur, wenn ein neuer Geist sie bewohnt.” (IB, Kritische Schriften, 263) Only if
we learn to discern how Benjamin’s texts are engineered to keep his readers in their place can we reclaim our minds and lives. It will be a ghostly, spectral battle.

2. INTRODUCTION: KAFKA AND THE CONVERSION OF LITERATURE INTO THEORY

The work of Franz Kafka was a central point of reference for Benjamin. And Kafka’s work is legendary for both attracting and rewarding intense exegetical efforts. His texts tantalize their readers. They are incessantly interpreted and have generated reams of books on library shelves as well as prompted comments about the ‘black hole’ of Kafka-criticism. As much as they elicit interpretations, they are also commonly felt to resist any entirely settled reading. It is as if something systematically escaped their readers. As if there were always some remainder, something they are not getting, something that makes readings and readers fall short of truly getting a grip on these texts. His work tends to remain in fundamental ways cryptic.

Notwithstanding some important differences that remain to be specified, I would argue that Benjamin’s work is elusive in very similar ways, and that this is not a coincidence, but rather due to the fact that Benjamin consciously learned from Kafka’s strategies and developed them further for his own purposes. What, then, are some of the poetic strategies that Benjamin saw in Kafka, and that he may have adapted to his own needs?

One of these, I would argue, is what we might term parabolic displacement. In a diary entry from May/June 1931, Benjamin writes:

Kafka, scheint mir, ist davon beherrscht, daß er überhaupt keinen Vorgang in unserem Sinn unentstellt darstellen kann. Mit andern Worten, alles, was er beschreibt, macht Aussagen über etwas anderes als sich selber.

(GS II, 3, 1204)
Kafka, it seems to me, is ruled by the fact that he cannot represent any process at all without displacement \textit{[unentsellt]} in our sense. In other words: everything he describes makes statements about something other than itself. [transl. SIG]

The Chinese Wall is not the Chinese Wall, and the Castle is not a castle. Everything Kafka describes makes statements about something other than itself.

A second feature about Kafka’s writing practice that Benjamin notes, and that is directly related to the first, is this: “It is his goal to eliminate the present throughout” (“Es kommt ihm darauf an, die Gegenwart durchaus zu eliminieren.” GS II, 3, 1265) How does one eliminate the present? One does so, I would argue, but avoiding the \textit{textual acknowledgement} of or opening for the assertion of a readerly presence. And indeed, Kafka’s novels in particular rely for their very existence as longer texts on the elimination of first person narrative, as well as only very limited and targeted use of other deictic elements – such as “here,” “now,” “I,” or even “this”. To illustrate where this strategy culminates it may be useful to recall the magnificent Bürgel-chapter in Kafka’s novel \textit{The Castle}: K. has finally made it into the presence of a castle official: he has stumbled into his hotel room, woken up the official, whose name is Bürgel, in the middle of the night, and he has even been invited to sit on Bürgel’s bed. In that situation, Bürgel launches into a long monologue that – in hypothetical mode and exclusively third-person narrative – explains in minute detail the very situation they find themselves in: if an applicant were to find himself in a hotel room, having woken up a castle official, such an official would be helpless to resist any request by the applicant, indeed, would wish for nothing more than grant whatever the applicant asked for ... etc. etc. But this monologue, this amazing ongoing invitation to make his request, washes over K. without any effect. Because at that point, K. is sound asleep and incapable not only of noticing what is being said, but especially oblivious to the fact that it might \textit{concern him}. 
To eliminate the present, then, is to eliminate the words by which I would be able to address you. It is a way to make one’s readers lose consciousness, to put them to sleep.

Parabolic displacement and the elimination of indexicals, and thus of a textual landing place for a “present” are very closely related and indeed interdependent strategies. It is precisely by withholding acknowledgement of the readers’ presence, by sealing his text off completely, that Benjamin can develop a purely disconnected parabolic discourse that, much like Bürgel’s, can revolve entirely around his readers while at the same time keeping these completely oblivious to that fact. The main characteristic of the actual hero of this book is that he forgets himself (“der Gegenstand dieses Prozesses, ja der eigentliche Held dieses ungläublichen Buches [...] dessen [...] Haupteigenschaft ja ist, dass er sich selbst vergisst [...]”;

Benjamin quoting Willy Haas, GS II, 429; emphasis mine, SIG).

But Benjamin did more than borrow: he wanted to improve on Kafka. Benjamin ultimately considered Kafka’s work a failure in one particular and very specific respect. In his 1934 article “Franz Kafka,” he writes:

Gescheitert ist sein großartiger Versuch, die Dichtung in die Lehre zu überführen, und als Parabel ihr die Haltbarkeit und Unscheinbarkeit zurückzugeben, die im Angesicht der Vernunft ihm als die einzig geziemende erschienen ist.

(GS II, p. 427-8)

Unsuccessful was his grandiose attempt to convert literature into theory [Dichtung in die Lehre zu überführen], and to restore to it [her] as parable the stability and inconspicuousness/ unreflectiveness [Unscheinbarkeit] which, in the face of reason, appeared to him as the only proper one.

(Translation SIG; cf. also WB, Selected Writings, vol. 2, 808)\(^3\)

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\(^3\) In the Selected Writings, this passage is translated as follows: “He did fail in his grandiose attempt to convert poetry into teachings, to turn it into parable and restore to it the stability and unpretentiousness which, in the face of reason, seemed to him the only appropriate thing for it. No other writer has obeyed the commandment ‘Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image’ so faithfully.” (SW, vol. 2, 808)
I propose that it was Benjamin’s project to make good on the attempt in which he felt Kafka did not succeed: to convert poetry or literature (Dichtung) into theory; to put literary techniques—including the combination of parabolic writing and the ‘elimination of the present’ à la Kafka—into the service of theory or teaching (Lehre). If we assume this as a hypothesis, then we can expect Benjamin’s essay to function, like Kafka’s writing, as parable as well. Which is to say: everything in Benjamin’s text will be making statements about something other than itself (“alles, was er beschreibt, macht Aussagen über etwas anderes als sich selber.” GS II, 3, 1204). But we can also expect this parabolic functioning of the theoretical text to remain unscheinbar: inconspicuous, “un-shineable.” To achieve this, it will eliminate any element that might signal to readers that what they are reading may concern them. If the parabolic nature of the text remains inconspicuous in this way, then readers will likely not notice this quality of the text, and will fail to adjust their reading strategies accordingly. If they fail to realize that everything they read makes statements not only about something other than itself—and that it may even be making statements precisely about them—such readers will read that text straightforwardly as representing what it seems to represent. They will strive to decipher what they read as ‘content’ rather than parable, and they will forget themselves.

The reception specifically of Benjamin’s later essays—starting at least from the “Little History of Photography” and including the essay I would like to focus on today: “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire”—has so far failed to explore their parabolic or dimension. These texts present themselves as “histories,” yet they are in fact, or so I will argue, a type of Literaturkritik that is indeed currently not even on our radar. Benjamin’s Baudelaire-Essay is a work of literary criticism not in the sense of a criticism that takes literature as its object (as in: it is an
essay ‘about Baudelaire’), but rather as a type of critique or criticism that is itself literary, that uses literary strategies to work towards the goal of turning poetry/literature/poiesis into theory, Dichtung in Lehre zu überführen. To discover how Benjamin re-invented literary criticism, we will have to reinvent our own way of reading. And above all, we have to wake up as readers.

Benjamin himself was a powerful reader, whose transformative, allegorizing, indeed mortifying gaze Adorno famously likened to that of Medusa. In fact, he is not just a reader, but a re-reader, a meta-reader. Much speculation has revolved around the “construction” of his later essays, which are built out of citations he selected from the vast collection he compiled in and for his Arcades project. “The Rebus becomes the model of his philosophy” (“Das Rebus wird zur Modell seiner Philosophie”) writes Adorno (Prismen, 284). Reading the late essays, then, we must learn to read parabolically, to read a rebus. Benjamin’s work is not so much a mode of writing than of citing. He, who almost never showed his hand (“[E]r, der kaum je mit aufgedeckten Karten spielte” Adorno, Prismen, 290) is not the author discursive texts, but an engineer of puzzles, of constructions made out of citations. His communication is almost never direct. His late essays become readable only at a meta-level, at the level where he engineers modes of repetition.

3. ON SOME MOTIFS IN BENJAMIN

The essay “On some Motifs in Baudelaire” is part of Benjamin’s late work. Published in January 1940, it was (together with the “Theses on the Concept of History”) one of the last texts he worked on. Ostensibly, it is “about” Baudelaire’s poetry, the decay of aura, 19th-century Paris, and more generally the experience of the “urban masses” in the modern

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4 „Der Blick seiner Philosophie ist medusisch.“ (Adorno, Prismen, p. 289)
metropolis—topics that have become veritable mantras of Benjamin criticism. As Michael Jennings puts it: “Benjamin’s essay accords unusual emphasis, then, to the social and economic determinants of [Kafka’s— but we can also add: Baudelaire’s] experience.”(Jennings 1988, p. 43) But after even our cursory introduction on Benjamin’s approach to writing and criticism, we have to ask what those “social and economic determinants” turn into when we look at them with the Medusa’s gaze, and turn them into rebus and parable. It is very unlikely that his texts will hand us ‘content.’ Let us read his essay with a sharp eye for the construction it develops, and most importantly, let us not to forget ourselves.

Luckily, we will have some help in trying to decipher what Benjamin is up to. For if it was indeed his goal to create Lehre, then his text will not only strive to protect itself against catastrophe, and do so most likely by putting his readers to sleep, but it will also explain how it goes about doing that. Thus, as long as we truly read it, that text will supply everything we need to know in order to understand how its magic works, and thus everything we need to know to “liquidate” that very magic.5

Aura

One of the central concepts that we need to re-read in order to understand how a text could be designed manipulate its own readers is the term “Aura.” This may be one of the most successful of Benjamin’s Schlagworte. Just about anyone who has heard of Benjamin will be

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able to produce it. Here is the definition (in its first version—the way it emerged in the “Little History of Photography”):

Was ist eigentlich Aura? Ein sonderbares Gespinst von Raum und Zeit: einmalige Erscheinung einer Ferne, so nah sie sein mag. An einem Sommermittag ruhend einem Gebirgszug am Horizont oder einem Zweig folgen, der seinen Schatten auf den Betrachter wirft, bis der Augenblick oder die Stunde Teil an ihrer Erscheinung hat – das heißt die Aura dieser Berge, dieses Zweiges atmen. (GS II, 1, 378)

What is aura, anyway? A strange [literally: “sunder-able”] weave of space and time: unique appearance of a distance, as close as it/she may be. On a summer’s noon, at rest, following a mountain ridge on the horizon or a branch that casts its/his shadow on the observer/spectator, until the moment or the hour participate in its/her appearance – that is to breathe the aura of these mountains, this branch[ing]. (transl. SIG)

Let begin with the line that defines aura is the “appearance of distance, as close as it/she may be.” Michael Jennings’ comments can stand in for the established reading of this ‘definition’:

This cryptic definition compresses a fair amount of information. A work of art may be said to have an aura if it claims a unique status based less on quality, use value, or worth per se than on its figurative distance from the beholder. I say figurative, since, as the definition intimates, this distance is not primarily a space between painting and viewer or text and reader but the creation of a psychological inapproachability—and authority—claimed on the basis of its position within a tradition. The distance that intrudes between work and viewer is most often a temporal distance: the auratic texts are sanctioned by inclusion in a time-tested canon.

(Jennings 1987, 168)

In that reading, then, the word “Aura” describes the effect that a canonical work of art has on its audience. It creates a certain “psychological inapproachability” (Unnahbarkeit) “on the basis of its position within a tradition” and thanks to its “inclusion in a time-tested canon.”

According to that interpretation, distance is created, then, by the awe with which audiences respond to the cultic authority of works.6 This, however— or so I argue—is to put the cart

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6 Jennings cites the second version of the definition that occurs in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility,” rather than in the Photography-essay, which invites this reading more than the original context where the definition emerged.
before the horse. Canonical status is the result of aura, not its cause. Aura—the ability to create a sense of inapproachability—is the reason why works such as those by Kafka and Benjamin gain canonical status in the first place. The question Jennings fails to ask (and therefore also fails to answer) is the question we must focus on above all else: how does the auratic work do this? If we assume that that “cryptic definition” of “aura” indeed describes not the result it brings about in the long run—awe-inspiring canonical status—but rather the rhetorical procedure by which it does so, then what is that procedure? How does, for instance, Benjamin’s Baudelaire-essay go about creating the appearance of distance and thus inapproachability? How does it engineer aura? The answer, as I will try to show, has much to do with the poetic strategies that Kafka’s texts and those of the later Benjamin have in common.

First Branching: Closeness and Distance

The first sentence of the Baudelaire-essay immediately thematizes reading. More specifically, it raises the question whether or not an audience still knows how to read poetry:

“Baudelaire hat mit Lesern gerechnet, die die Lektüre von Lyrik vor Schwierigkeiten stellt.”
(GS I, 2, 607) We can read this to say that “Baudelaire counted on readers for whom it was difficult to read poetry.” 7 Harry Zohn’s translation (in SW) even adds a visual dimension:

“Baudelaire envisaged readers to whom the reading of lyric poetry would present difficulties.”
(SW 4, 313; emphasis mine, SIG) Read in this way, the sentence as a statement about a 19th-century poet: when Baudelaire was writing, the general public was not very attuned to lyric poetry any more. That reading is clearly invited by Benjamin’s essay, and it is also the usual

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7 I owe the idea to translate hat ...gerechnet as „counted on“ to Ekaterina Petrova.
one. It makes the sentence refer to something very distant. But we can also translate the verb “gerechnet” differently, since “mit etwas rechnen” also means to “calculate with something.” That is, this very first sentence of the essay also alerts us to a more calculating relationship of the poet and to his readers. And if we add a pinch of parable and some self-reflection or self-consciousness as readers to this, then this sentence is possibly not only about Baudelaire, but also and at least as much about Benjamin himself, his own readers, and thus of immediate concern for us. In other words: we could also translate: “[Benjamin, just like] Baudelaire, made his calculations with readers for whom the reading of poetry would present difficulties.” The next sentence continues in the same vein. Not much willpower or concentration is to be expected, we read, from an audience that is more interested in concrete, sensuous pleasures:

An diese Leser wendet sich das einleitende Gedicht der ‘Fleurs du mal.’ Mit ihrer Willenskraft und also auch wohl ihrem Konzentrationsvermögen ist es nicht weit her [...] (GS I, 2, 607; emphasis mine, SIG)

These readers are addressed by the introductory poem of the “Fleurs du mal.” Their willpower and probably also their ability to concentrate are nothing to write home about [literally: “not from far away”].\(^8\)

From the first few sentences, then, readers are centrally in the picture, and we as actual readers have choices about how to read not only that sentence, but the whole essay that follows. We can either assume that it makes statements

- about something distant. That is, we can read it historically as a statement about social history and a long-dead poet: Baudelaire did not expect much from his 19th-century readers.

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\(^8\) “The introductory poem of Les Fleurs du mal is addressed to these readers. Willpower and the ability to concentrate are not their strong points.” (SW 4, 313)
Or we can read it parabolically. In that case, everything in this essay would make statements about something other than itself, and indeed might refer to something very close. In that case, the sentence tells these readers—i.e. its own readers, i.e. us—point-blank that it is banking on our lack of concentration and willpower, our taste for sensuous pleasures, and just in general on our under-developed literary reading skills. This second reading is invited by the similarity that flashes up when readers read about reading, but it is otherwise discouraged by the fact that the sentences give no other indication of any parabolic functioning. That is, the latter remains unscheinbar.

We can follow either what is distant or what is close—the mountain ridge or the branch. The historical reading directs our gazes into the distance, both temporally and spatially, and suggests that we forget about ourselves and send our imaginations off into the Paris of the 19th century. As a result, the much “closer” reading that is right under our noses, and according to which this text is a discourse about its relation with these readers, the ones reading it right now, dissolves and disappears.

This loss is fatal for any attempt to read this text strongly and as a critic, because this is the only place (or so I argue) where Benjamin’s project truly coheres. To lose awareness of what is “close” in this way is indeed “as if the reader read and read [...] but does not discover that the meaning of this enormous work lies in the reader himself”.

This first branching, then, is a rhetorical and utterly operational bifurcation designed to turn closeness into an “appearance of distance.” By distracting us from ourselves and our own embodied presence, it sets out to weave time and space, and to cast its shadow on the

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spectators. In this reading, then, Benjamin’s essay, begins by throwing down the gauntlet to us: it appears from the start as a dare to its own readers, a challenge to our willpower and concentration, our ability to actually read the literary and parabolic dimensions of that text. Will we be asleep like K. in Bürgel’s bed, or can we wake up to the fact that his entire project revolves around us? And if we do, what would be the consequences?

Citation

The Baudelaire-essay is part of the Arcades Project. For the reading I am proposing here, it makes sense to recall for a moment what that means. The vast collection of quotes Benjamin accumulated—the materials about Paris, the 19th century, the crowd, aura, photography, industrial production, fashion, gaslighting, and all the rest—serve as the archive on which Benjamin drew in writing his later essays. These late essays are constructed out of mosaics of citations. These citations, however, are selected not for what they “say,” but for what else they can say. That is, they are selected in view of the new significations they can produce, the functions they can take on in the emerging new context, the rebus-text that is being created as they are being cited. To clarify this, recall what Benjamin writes in his essay “On the Mimetic Faculty.” Benjamin’s concept of the “mimetic faculty,” first of all, is related to what we have been calling the “parabolic” dimension of writing, since it concerns the embodied and imitative relationship of humans to their environment, but also and especially to language. If readers relate mimetically to what they are confronted with, then there is a good

10 As an aside, it is worth noting that there was, of course, one reader who was insistently and famously unable to read the literary dimensions of Benjamin’s texts, unable to see anything but philosophy and historical materialism. That was Adorno, who rejected the earlier draft of the Baudelaire-project and sent Benjamin, who was in dire financial straits at the time, back to the drawing board to revise the text. [details, ref.]
chance that their experience and their self-image can be strongly shaped by the text they read."

This is precisely the potentiality Benjamin banks on. The “semiotic,” he writes, is only needed as a carrier for what the act of citation is really about: the “flame” of mimetic [parabolic] signification:

Alles Mimetische der Sprache kann vielmehr, der Flamme ähnlich, nur an einer Art von Träger in Erscheinung treten. Dieser Träger ist das Semiotische. So ist der Sinnzusammenhang der Wörter oder Sätze der Träger, an dem erst blitzartig die Ähnlichkeit in Erscheinung tritt.

(“Über das mimetische Vermögen,” GS, II, 1, 213)

|Similar to a flame, everything mimetic in language can only appear on a kind of carrier. This carrier is the semiotic. Thus, the sense of the words or sentences is the carrier on which the similarity only appears in a flash.

Chances are that Benjamin is not just theorizing into the blue here, but rather is, in this key essay, describing precisely the literary or rhetorical strategies that govern his own work, and the Arcades Project and the essays that grew out of it in particular. I will leave open for now the possible need to clarify the distinction between the “mimetic” in its similarity or difference from what we have preliminarily called the “parabolic” reading. In either case, though, we will need to pay attention not only to the “similarities” that might flash up as we read Benjamin’s

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11 Elsewhere, I have shown that Benjamin is intensely aware of this possibility, and of the embodied presence of writer or reader before the readable surface more generally. Cf. my “Aura di San Pellegrino: Anmerkungen zu Benjamin Ms. 931,” Benjamin-Studien REF

10 Cf. Edmund Jephcott’s translation in SW 2,722: “Rather, the mimetic element in language can, like a flame, manifest itself only through a kind of bearer. This bearer is the semiotic element. Thus, the nexus of meaning of words or sentences is the bearer through which, like a flash, similarity appears.”

See also the corresponding passage in “Lehre vom Ähnlichen”: “Diese, wenn man so will magische Seite der Sprache wie der Schrift läuft aber nicht beziehungslos neben der andern, der semiotischen, einher. Alles Mimetische der Sprache ist vielmehr eine fundierte Intention, die überhaupt nur an etwas Fremdem, eben dem Semiotischen, Mitteilenden in der Sprache als ihrem Fundus in Erscheinung treten kann. So ist der buchstäbliche Text der Schrift, in dem einzig und allein sich das Vexier-

text. And we must ask how the citations function as citations in his text: what mode of repetition do they enact and encourage?

Contact with the Reader

And yet, in a situation where the majority of readers will not be up to the challenge of reading his poetry, Baudelaire (writes Benjamin, for whom the same is true,) nevertheless “wanted to be understood”:


[Baudelaire] wanted to be understood: he dedicated his book to those who are similar to him. The poem to the reader closes with the apostrophe: ’Hypocrite lecteur, – mon semblable, – mon frère.’

Baudelaire’s poem (as well as, we may add, Benjamin’s essay) is thus not directed at a general audience, but rather addressed to a selected reader, much like Mandelstam’s interlocutor (in his essay “О собеседнике”), “and to someone who is “similar to him.”

“Contact” with the experience of the reader becomes the exception:

Wenn die Bedingungen für die Aufnahme lyrischer Dichtungen ungünstiger geworden sind, so liegt es nahe, sich vorzustellen, dass die lyrische Poesie nur noch ausnahmsweise den Kontakt mit der Erfahrung der Leser wahrte. (GS I, 2, 608)

If the conditions for the reception of lyric poetry have become less favorable, it seems to make sense [literally: “lies near”] to imagine that lyric poetry maintains contact with the experience of the readers only in exceptional cases. (translation SIG)

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13 In Benjamin’s own translation of Baudelaire’s poem, the apostrophe reads, “Freund – Hypokrit – mein Leser – mein Erwählter!” (Benjamin, Tableaux Parisiens, 100), that is: “Friend – Hypocrite – my reader – my chosen one!” The relation of “brotherhood” with the reader is translated from kinship to an elective affinity. The masculine gendering, however, is not affected by that change (Leser, Erwählter).

14 “If conditions for a positive reception of lyric poetry have become less favorable, it is reasonable to assume that only in rare instances does lyric poetry accord with the experiences of readers.” (SW 4.344)
Poetry (and again, by analogy, Benjamin’s essay) will only establish contact with the experience of his readers in rare, exceptional circumstances. The rule will be the opposite: avoidance of such contact. Let us leave open for now the question of what exactly it might mean for poetry to make “contact” with the experience of the reader until we have gained a clearer sense of how this ‘exception’ is managed in and by the text, and what options remain open to us as readers to establish such “contact.” But let us also take note of the extreme importance of what is at stake here: the “experience of the reader” is our own experience, and thus something regarding which we cannot cede initiative to any particular text. Rather, we need to be attuned to the ways in which the text attempts to shape our experience, and what use we can make of our reading to shape the text in turn.

Second Branching: Image vs. Action: Two Turns taken by Experience

Exception or not, from here on Benjamin proceeds (still in the first section) to thematize precisely this: the “experience” of (what we can reasonably assume to be at least also) the experience of his readers. He introduces this topic with a brief note about the emergence of Lebensphilosophie at the end of the 19th century, which in its quest to retrieve an authentic or “true” experience—as opposed to the “genormten, denaturierten Dasein der zivilisierten Massen” (the “standardized, denatured existence of the masses”)—turns to poetry, nature, and even myth, and which ends in an affiliation with fascism. Selected against that scenario, the next piece in Benjamin’s evolving mosaic is Bergson’s Matière et mémoire, which he sees as ‘rising above’ (“erhebt sich über”) these others.

Instead of flatly juxtaposing a “true experience” to the “denatured” one of the masses, Bergson distinguishes two different types of memory: one that repeats, and one that imagines.
The first of these is an action, the second is a representation. This distinction in itself already broadens the frame to include both representations and how we relate to them. Bergson uses the example of a lesson or a skill learned by heart over a longer period of time: we do not remember the countless lessons and hours of practice. Instead, our memory of these lessons takes the form of an action that we can perform quite mechanically: we can recite the poem by heart, or play a piece on the piano. But perhaps at one of our lessons, however, something unusual happened. We therefore may remember that lesson as a specific event: in this case, memory takes the form of a representation.

It would have been easy to cite Bergson directly on this, yet Benjamin does not do so. Rather, he puts that distinction to work in his own text. On the one hand, he invokes the probabilistic, cumulative quality of experience, its emergence out of many small impacts that are often not even consciously perceived, but through which lessons are learned. Are we to be taught a lesson without even being conscious of it?

Indeed, experience is a matter of tradition, in collective as in private life. It forms less from individual elements firmly fixed in memory than from accumulated, often not conscious data that flow together in memory. Are we to be taught a lesson without even being conscious of it?

\[\text{In der Tat ist die Erfahrung eine Sache der Tradition, im kollektiven wie im privaten Leben. Sie bildet sich weniger aus einzelnen in der Erinnerung streng fixierten Gegebenheiten denn aus gehäuften, oft nicht bewussten Daten, die im Gedächtnis zusammenfließen. (GS I, 2, 608)}\]

\[
\text{Indeed, experience is a matter of tradition, in collective as in private life. It forms less from individual elements firmly fixed in memory than from accumulated, often not conscious data that flow together in memory. (Translation SIG)}\]

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5 “De ces deux mémoires, dont l’une imagine et dont l’autre répète, la seconde peut suppléer la première et souvent même en donner l’illusion.” (Matière et mémoire, 87); “On peut même aller plus loin, et dire que la conscience nous révèle entre ces deux genres de souvenir une différence profonde, une différence de nature. Le souvenir de telle lecture déterminée est une représentation, et une représentation seulement; il tient dans une intuition de l’esprit que je puis, à mon gré, allonger ou raccourcir; je lui assigne une durée arbitraire: rien ne m’empêche de l’embrasser tout d’un coup, comme dans un tableau. Au contraire, le souvenir de la leçon apprise, même quand je me borne à répéter cette leçon intérieurement, exige un temps bien déterminé, le même qu’il faut pour développer un à un, ne fût-ce qu’en imagination, tous le mouvement d’articulation nécessaires; ce n’est donc plus une représentation, c’est une action.” (Matière et mémoire, 85)

10 Zohn, SW 4. 344: Experience is indeed a matter of tradition, in collective existence as private life. It is the product less of facts firmly anchored in memory than of accumulated and frequently unconscious data that flow together in memory. (Gedächtnis),”
From this process of creating a durable “experience,” Benjamin proceeds to a scene that is clearly about memory as representation. In some ways, this new bifurcation seems akin to the earlier one between ‘historical’ and ‘parabolic’ reading with which we began. It is preceded, however, by the apodictic assertion to ‘determine experience historically’ is that the last thing on Bergson’s mind. How, then, are we to situate the two layers into which we see experience separating in this next passage? Here is what Benjamin goes on to say:

Er meidet dadurch [i.e. by resisting a historical determination of experience] vor allem und wesentlich, derjenigen Erfahrung nähertreten, aus der seine eigene Philosophie entstanden ist, oder vielmehr gegen die sie entboten wurde. Es ist die unwirtliche, blendende der Epoche der großen Industrie. Dem Auge, das sich vor dieser Erfahrung schließt, stellt sich eine Erfahrung komplementärer Art als deren gleichsam spontanes Nachbild ein. Bergsons Philosophie ist ein Versuch, dieses Nachbild zu detaillieren und festzuhalten. Sie gibt derart mittelbar einen Hinweis auf die Erfahrung, die Baudelaire unverstellt, in der Gestalt seines Lesers, vor Augen tritt.

(GS I, 2, 609)

Thereby, he avoids above all and in essence to come near that experience from which his own philosophy arose, or rather, against which it [she] was pitted. It is the inhospitable, blinding one of the epoch of big industry. To the eye that closes itself to this experience, an experience of a complementary kind appears as its quasi-spontaneous afterimage. Bergson’s philosophy is an attempt to detail this afterimage and to take hold of it. In this way, it [she] hints indirectly at the experience that stands unobstructed before Baudelaire’s eyes in the shape of his reader. [transl. SIG]

Again, Benjamin does not cite Bergson directly. Instead, he focuses on the action of creating an image, and that action in his text is put in the service of an effort of resisting a different

17 „Of course, the historical determination of memory is not at all Bergson’s intention. On the contrary, he rejects any historical determination of memory. He thus manages to stay clear of that experience from which his own philosophy evolved, or, rather, in reaction to which it arose. It was the alienating, blinding experience of the age of large-scale industrialism. In shutting out this experience, the eye perceives a complementary experience—in the form of its spontaneous afterimage, as it were. Bergson’s philosophy represents an attempt to specify this afterimage and fix it as a permanent record. His philosophy thus indirectly furnishes a clue to the experience which presented itself undistorted to Baudelaire’s eyes, in the figure of his reader.” (SW 4, 34)
type of experience. The afterimage (Nachbild) appears to the eye that closes itself to an “inhospitable, blinding” experience of the “era of big industry.”

We thus have two elements inspired by Bergson (and we can expect having to be alert to the textual equivalent of both as Benjamin’s essay proceeds): one is the cumulative accrual of textual elements that remain below the threshold of conscious perception that coalesce in memory. The other results in the creation of an quasi-“spontaneous” (after)image. The second bifurcation that announces itself here, then, superimposes a phantasmagoric image over an inhospitable and blinding experience. By adding the tag of “epoch of big industry,” Benjamin gestures to his Marxist friends and readers, and invites the very historical interpretation of experience that he has just ruled out for Bergson. Also, the adjective “blinding” suggests that something else is at stake, and this something has, I propose, more to do with poetics than with social history. What Benjamin’s whole essay strives to exclude is the very reflexivity and readerly consciousness that is associated with the mirroring function of indexicals—the same elements that he excludes to make the parable unscheinbar. As readers close their eyes to the ways in which this text concerns them, they lose consciousness and go to sleep, much like K. in Bürgel’s bed, and start dreaming a Nachbild.

At the risk of getting ahead of myself, because we are still early in the essay, and the impacts have not yet had a chance to accumulate, let us note the pronouns that are, in the German text, associated with these processes and in particular with the image that emerges from that subconscious accumulation:

- “She forms less from individual elements firmly fixed in memory [Erinnerung] than from accumulated, often not conscious data that flow together in memory [Gedächtnis].“
• “Thereby, he avoids above all and in essence to come near that experience […] against which she was pitted”; and finally:

• “In this way, she hints indirectly at the experience that stands unobstructed before Baudelaire’s eyes in the shape of his reader.”

Feminine pronouns are clustering first around the very notion of unconscious clustering, the experience created by it, and around the creation of a phantasmagoric afterimage that is pitted against an inhospitable and blinding experience. The mechanical action of producing that image may thus very well be the lesson that readers are being taught subliminally by Benjamin’s text, much in keeping with Bergson comment that “De ces deux mémoires, dont l’une imagine et dont l’autre répète, la seconde peut suppléer la première et souvent même en donner l’illusion.” (“Of these two memories, of which one imagines and the other repeats, the second can supplement and often even create the illusion of the first.” Matière et mémoire, 87).

That illusion, the phantasmagoric image that is subliminally prepared here seems to take the form of a she—much like the photograph of the nameless fishwife in the “Little History of Photography”¹⁸ that served to distract the viewer from the mirroring qualities of the Daguerreotype. Baudelaire’s preferred reader, by contrast is, as we recall, “similar to him.”

The readers’ experience is being rhetorically and subliminally constructed to split “spontaneously” along gender lines.

The next two pieces Benjamin adds to his evolving mosaic come from Proust (plus the functioning of information in newspapers vs. storytelling) and Freud / Reik. Both of these confirm that by now we are supposed to have lost consciousness as well as voluntary control over the images that we produce.

¹⁸ Cf. my as yet unpublished essay „Benjamin’s Shadow.“
Mémoire involontaire

With Proust, Bergson’s mémoire pure—i.e. the image-making memory—becomes a “mémoire involontaire,” withdrawing the creation of images from control by the will, and more generally, problematizing our access to our own experience:

Es ist nach Proust dem Zufall anheimgegeben, ob der einzelne von sich selbst ein Bild bekommt, ob er sich seiner Erfahrung bemächtigen kann. (GS I, 2, 610)

According to Proust it is a matter of chance whether [or not] the individual gains an image of himself, whether he can seize hold of his experience. [Translation SIG\[19\]]

As Benjamin proceeds, the division into two types of experience resurfaces, now re-cast as the one between newspaper writing on the one hand, and storytelling on the other. Benjamin first adduces the example of information in newspapers. It has the effect of “sealing” (abdichten) the events in such a way that they no longer have contact with the experience of the reader:

Hätte die Presse es darauf abgesehen, daß der Leser sich ihre Informationen als einen Teil seiner Erfahrung zu eigen macht, so würde sie ihren Zweck nicht erreichen. Aber ihre Absicht ist die umgekehrte und wird erreicht. Sie besteht darin, die Ereignisse gegen den Bereich abzudichten, in dem sie die Erfahrung des Lesers betreffen könnten. Die Grundsätze journalistischer Information (Neuigkeit, Kürze, Verständlichkeit und vor allem Zusammenhanglosigkeit der einzelnen Nachrichten untereinander) tragen zu diesem Erfolg genauso [611] wie der Umbruch und wie die Sprachgebarung. (GS I, 2, 610-611; emphasis mine, SIG)

If the press intended for the reader to make its information his own as a part of his experience, it would not achieve its goal. But its intention is the opposite and is achieved. It consists in sealing the events off [abdichten] against the realm where they might concern the experience of the reader. The principles of journalistic information (novelty, brevity, comprehensibility and above all the in-coherence of the individual news items amongst themselves) contribute to this success just as much as the layout

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\[19\] “According to Proust, it is a matter of chance whether an individual forms an image of himself, whether he can take hold of his experience.” (SW 4, 315)
Umbruch, also folding?/ overturning? and the linguistic habitus \[Sprachgebarung\].
(transl. SIG\textsuperscript{m})

It is hard to overlook the fact that the linguistic habitus attributed to these newspapers is strangely reminiscent of Benjamin’s own insistent habit of constructing mosaics out of citations that present themselves as “information,” but which are also very carefully designed not to connect directly to the readers’ experience, and which do not exactly go out of their way to explain to us how they are connected. Benjamin’s own text creates such a ‘sealed off’\(\text{(abgedichtet)}\) realm where readers lose their ability to recognize things that concern their own experience. Against this arises another counter-vision much like the Nachbild in the previous section, except that this time it is more like a Vorbild— the chimera of “tradition”\textsuperscript{m} and of storytelling \(\text{(Erzählung)}\), projected into the past as the earlier one, against which all these other forms of communication now stand out as if against their back-ground:

\begin{quote}
Alle diese Formen heben sich ihrerseits von der Erzählung ab; \textit{sie} ist eine der ältesten Formen der Mitteilung. \textit{Sie} legt es nicht darauf an, das pure An-sich des Geschehenen zu übermitteln \(\text{(wie die Information das tut)}\); \textit{sie} senkt es dem Leben des Berichtenden ein, um es als Erfahrung den Hörern mitzugeben. So haftet an \textit{ihr} die Spur des Erzählenden wie die Spur der Töpferhand an der Tonschale. (GS 1, 2, 6n; emphasis mine, SIG)
\end{quote}

All of these forms in turn stand out in contrast to storytelling; \textit{she} is one of the oldest forms of communication \(\text{(Mitteilung)}\). \textit{She} does not intend to transmit the pure in-itself of what happened \(\text{(the way information does)}\); \textit{she} embeds it in the life of the who reports in order to pass it on to the listeners as experience. This the trace of the narrator clings to \textit{her} like the trace of the potter’s hand on the clay bowl.

\begin{quote}
\text{(translation and emphasis: SIG)}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{20} „If it were the intention of the press to have the reader assimilate the information it supplies as part of his own experience, it would not achieve its purpose. But its intention is just the opposite, and it is achieved: to isolate events from the realm in which \textsuperscript{316} they could affect the experience of the reader. The principles of journalistic information \(\text{\{newness, brevity, clarity, and, above all, lack of connection between the individual news items\}}\) contribute much to this as the layout of the pages and the style of writing.” (SW 4, 355f.)

\textsuperscript{21} „Die Abdichtung der Information gegen die Erfahrung hängt weiter daran, daß die erstere nicht in die ‘Tradition’ eingeht. Die Zeitungen erscheinen in großen Auflagen. Kein Leser verfügt so leicht über etwas, was sich der andere ‘von ihm erzählen’ ließe. – Historisch besteht eine Konkurrenz zwischen den verschiedenen Formen der Mitteilung. In der Ablösung der älteren Relation durch die Information, der Information durch die Sensation spiegelt sich die zunehmende Verkümmerung der Erfahrung wider.”
As we can see, that second realm is, in Benjamin’s text, once again populated by anaphorically clustering feminine pronouns. “She” has nothing to do with conveying the “pure in-itself” of events, because, as the oldest form of communication, “she” allows for the preservation of traces for the very reason that “she” gives access to the life and experiences of narrators and listeners. In short: the invocation of the gender difference allows for readers to be subliminally manipulated in ways that embeds traces not in the text they read, but in their own lives, their own experiences.

**Consciousness vs. Trace**

The section that follows is probably one of the more famous of the essay (together with the one citing Baudelaire’s poem *Le soleil* that follows right after it). It picks up what was left behind as a “waste product” from Bergson and Proust: the *mémoire de l’intelligence* (Proust’s term for the opposite of his *mémoire involontaire*). Thus consciousness returns as a topic of discussion far enough into the essay that readers are meant to have thoroughly lost that very consciousness, lulled into a deep sleep by a text designed to seal them off from their own experience:

Auf der Suche nach einer gehaltvolleren Bestimmung dessen, was als Abfallprodukt der Bergsonschen Theorie in Prousts mémoire de l’intelligence erscheint, ist es geraten, auf Freud zurückzugehen. Im Jahre 1921 erschien der Essai „Jenseits des Lustprinzips,“ der eine Korrelation zwischen dem Gedächtnis (im Sinne der mémoire involontaire) und dem Bewußtsein aufstellt. Sie hat die Gestalt einer Hypothese. Die Überlegungen, die sich im Folgenden an sie anschließen, werden nicht die Aufgabe haben, sie zu beweisen. Sie werden sich begnügen müssen, die Fruchtbarkeit derselben für Sachverhalte zu überprüfen, die weit von denen abliegen, die Freud bei seiner Konzeption gegenwärtig gewesen sind.”

(GS 1,2, 612)

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22 “In seeking a more substantial definition of what appears in Proust’s *mémoire de l’intelligence* as a by-product of Bergson’s theory, we would do well to go back to Freud.” (etc)” (SW 4, 36)
In search of a more substantial determination of what, as a waste product of Bergson’s theory, appears as Proust’s mémoire de l’intelligence, it is advisable to go back to Freud. In the year 1921 appeared the essay “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” which posits a correlation between memory (in the sense of the mémoire involontaire) and consciousness. It/She takes the form of a hypothesis. The considerations that attach to it/her in what follows will not have the task of proving it/her. It will have to suffice for them to test it/her fertility for situations [Sachverhalte] that are far afield from the ones that were present to Freud in his conception. (Translation SIG)

At this point in Benjamin’s construction, then, we are set to move “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” and to return to considering the functions of consciousness. That is, Benjamin’s essay will now risk leaving behind the dynamics of pleasure by stepping out onto the scene of a potentially ungendered scene of sheer reflexivity and consciousness.

“Consciousness,” as we have already argued, is not only a psychoanalytic principle, but also a poetic and textual one, and it is precisely this feature that Kafka, and Benjamin in his footsteps, strove to “eliminate throughout.” It is also what Benjamin studiously avoids in writing his own essay.

Baudelaire, on the other hand, does not avoid indexicals, noons, and mirrors in the least. And this is the point of Benjamin’s remark that Baudelaire placed the shock-experience at the center of his artistic work (“hat also die Chockerfahrung ins Herz seiner artistischen Arbeit hineingestellt”). How Baudelaire manages to write poetry from a place that would seem to defy the leaving of any trace, and that also would seem to have lost poetic “fertility,” is one of the questions and challenges that interest Benjamin in his essay. But as usual, the

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24 This is indeed a very interesting contrast between Baudelaire and Kafka that I cannot explore further here—although to my mind it can be explained to some degree by the fact that Baudelaire writes poem, not novels. In
challenge is not only Baudelaire’s, but also his own. Benjamin’s essay pursues a hybrid strategy: like Kafka’s novels, its mode of operation is parabolic. It articulates a commentary about its own strategies in relation to the shaping of our readerly experience. Like Kafka’s novels, it avoids open indexicals, thus “sealing” that parabolic dimension off from his readers’ experience. But like Baudelaire, he actually also places that very reflexivity at the heart of his own work. Therefore, there is one exception to that ban on indexicals: citations. The first stanza of the poem “Le Soleil,” cited in the section that follows, is one of these glaring exceptions.

Peak Achievement of Reflection: “Le soleil” and “À une passante”

A high degree of reflexivity is on display in the next two sections and in the two poems that are prominently cited in them. These two citations of Baudelaire’s poems epitomize and bring to a head the two strands of the argument that Benjamin (but also Baudelaire himself) separates out in terms of gender. The “peak achievement of reflection” (“Spitzenleistung der Reflexion;” Zohn translates: “peak achievement of the intellect,” SW 4, 319) would, as Benjamin explains at the beginning of section IV, be the following:


(GS I, 2, 615)

Kafka’s production, the ban on the “present” only applies to his three novels. Short texts that are narrated in the first person remain short for precisely that reason.
The greater the share of the shock moment in the individual impressions, the more ceaselessly consciousness must—in the interest of protection against [appeal, attractiveness, stimulus]—be on the alert, the greater the success with which it operates, the less they enter into experience [Erfahrung]; the more they fulfill the concept of an experienced instance [Erlebnis]. Perhaps one can ultimately see the unique specific achievement of the shock-defense in this: to assign the event—at the expense of the integrity of its content—a precise temporal point in consciousness. This would be a peak achievement of reflection. It/She would turn the event into an experienced instance. [Translation SIG]

This “peak achievement of reflection” and the conversion of reflection into an image and an experienced instance [Erlebnis], I submit, is what is achieved by the citation of À une passante (see below)

***But at this point, I am out of time and it is time for triage. I need to break off the detailed reading, proceed to a more impressionistic presentation, and rely on our discussion to tease out the function of the two other important Baudelaire quotes. And on your patience with a very unfinished text ...***

Le soleil

“Le soleil” marks the first one of the key acts of citation in Benjamin’s essay. The poem is written in the first person and set at the classic temporal topos for self-reflexive, intense, and indeed threatening and dangerous reading—high noon. The very noon, incidentally, that also is the setting for the aura definition, which latter is, of course, deployed precisely to break the threat of a ‘high noon of reading’ that could catastrophize the work. But the poem also dramatizes a scenario of high self-reflexivity in every other respect—including and especially the self-reflexive act of citation. All of the traces (traits) are doubled, the “I” stumbles “over words as though they were cobblestones,” sniffing out rhymes and dreams. This scenario of
(sun)shine breaks completely with the otherwise iron regime of Unscheinbarkeit in Benjamin’s essay. And it can do so, I would argue, precisely because it is a citation. The latter, very much like Benjamin’s whole article, benefits from the inconspicuousness created by reading habits that lead us to look for the “reference” of this passage in “history,” and that therefore have us attribute any “I” we find cited to the author of the text (i.e. Baudelaire). Thus lead us to overlook the “second”—the parabolic and citational—level, the layer of conscious repetition. Under such circumstances, the author of the citation, the one who is designing the rebus-text, remains invisible, incognito. Here is the section of the poem that Benjamin cites:

Le long du vieux faubourg, où pendent aux masures
Les persiennes, abri des secrètes luxures,
Quand le soleil cruel frappe à traits redoublés
Sur la ville et les champs, sur les toits et les blés,
Je vais m’exercer seul à ma fantasque escrime,
Flairant dans tous les coins les hasards de la rime,
Trébuchant sur les mots comme sur les pavés
Heurtant parfois des vers depuis longtemps rêvés.

(GS I, 2616-617)

[Through decrepit neighborhoods on the outskirts of town, where
Slatted shutters hang at the windows of hovels that shelter secret lusts;
At a time when the cruel sun beats down with redoubled force
On city and countryside, on rooftops and cornfields,
I go out alone to practice my fantastical fencing,
Scenting chances for rhyme on every street corner,
Stumbling over words as though they were cobblestones,
Sometimes knocking up against verses dreamed long ago.]

(SW 4, 320)

Much in keeping with its highly reflexive setting, these lines function in Benjamin’s text, too, not merely as a poem by Baudelaire (which after all has three stanzas!), but as a citation in his own text. To perceive this effect, we need to read the “I” speaking in this text as referring to Benjamin rather than Baudelaire, and thus as a moment of self-portraiture of Benjamin himself. It may be “the only passage […] that shows him at his poetic work,” seeking out the
parabolic potential and the “rhymes” between text passages in the Arcades Project, testing their overtones and potentialities for citation that may be activated in a different context (“das ist wohl die einzige Stelle der “Fleurs du mal”, die ihn bei der poetischen Arbeit zeigt” GS I, 2616). We are observing someone—indeed ourselves!—in the mirror, “alone, parrying his [our] own blows” (“allein, und pariert seine eigenen Stöße” GS I, 2616).

À une passante

But reflection, consciousness not only threatens the creation of experience and memory traces, it also can, for that very reason, also serve as a defense against shocks. In the citation of the next poem (in ways that still need to be more thoroughly articulated …), the many earlier impacts of the many she’s finally coalesce into an image. Experience becomes an *Erlebnis* and in a “peak achievement of reflection,” is assigned “a precise temporal point in consciousness.” But more than that, to the eye of this female figure is also assigned the dangerous reading that threatens hurricanes, makes the “I” “extravagant” – makes it exceed the cocoon of authorship — and sets it free in a non-auratic reading that annihilates the previous one. That reading, bundled into an image, is sent off far, far away, and far away, especially, from *here.*

À une passante

La rue assourdissante autour de moi hurlait.
Longue, mince, en grand deuil, douleur majestueuse,
Une femme passa, d’une main fastueuse
Soulevant, balançant le feston et l’ourlet;

25 “Nach Freud nähme das Bewußtsein als solches überhaupt keine Gedächtnisspuren auf. Dagegen hätte es eine andere Funktion, die von Bedeutung ist. Es hätte als Reizschutz aufzutreten.” (GS I, 613)
Agile et noble, avec sa jambe de statue.
Moi, je buvais, crispé comme un extravagant,
Dans son oeil, ciel livide où germe l'ouragan,
La douceur qui fascine et le plaisir qui tue.

Un éclair... puis la nuit! — Fugitive beauté
Dont le regard m'a fait soudainement renaître,
Ne te verrai-je plus que dans l'éternité?

Ailleurs, bien loin d'ici! trop tard! jamais peut-être!
Car j'ignore où tu fuis, tu ne sais où je vais,
Ô toi que j'eusse aimée, ô toi qui le savais!

[To a passer-by]

The deafening street was screaming all around me.
Tall, slender, in deep mourning – majestic grief –
A woman made her way past, with fastidious hand
Raising and swaying her skirt-border and hem;

Agile and noble, with her statue’s limbs.
And me, I drank, contorted like a wild eccentric
From her eye that livid sky which gives birth to hurricanes,
Gentleness that fascinates, pleasure that kills.

A lightning-flash ... then night! O fleeting beauty
Whose glance suddenly gave me new life,
Shall I see you again only in eternity?

Far, far from here! Too late! Or maybe never?
For I know not where you flee, you know not where I go,
O you whom I would have loved, O you who knew it, too!

(SW 4, 323-324)
Einer Dame

Geheul der Straße dröhnte rings im Raum.
Hoch schlank tiefschwarz, in ungemäinem Leide
Schritt eine Frau vorbei, die Hand am Kleide
Hob majestatisch den gerafften Saum;

Gemessen und belebt, ihr Knie gegossen.
Und ich verfiel in Krampf und Siechtum an
Dies Aug’ den fahlen Himmel vorm Orkan
Und habe Lust zum Tode dran genossen.

Ein Blitz, dann Nacht! Die Flüchtige, nicht leiht
Sie sich dem Werdenden an ihrem Schimmer.
Seh ich dich nur noch in der Ewigkeit?

Weit fort von hier! vielleicht auch nimmer?
Verborgen dir mein Weg und mir wohin du mußt
O du die mir bestimmt, o du die es gewußt!

Translation: Walter Benjamin (Tableaux Parisiens, p. 57)

I cannot show this in detail right now, but the section right after this one is the one where Benjamin cites Poe on the London crowds, who now walk mechanically, like automata, as if they had lost their souls.

Conclusion: Perte d’aureole

We have seen so far that the appearance of distance is created, among other things, by the fact that the texts presents itself as a 3rd-person account of “information” about Baudelaire, even as it develops, primarily or at the same time, a parabolic theoretical account of direct concern to Benjamin’s readers. Maintaining the text in the 3rd person is what keeps that account unscheinbar. This technique is what Benjamin arguably borrows from Kafka. Kafka also, secondly, and also according to Benjamin, strives to “eliminate the present throughout.” The “present,” however, is the here, the now, the I and you, and even this. This latter
decision—the switch to third-person narration, as a side-effect automatically also includes, at least in German, but also English, the emergence of gender as part of the construction. By crossing out the “I”, we automatically activate the “he/ she” distinction. Benjamin famously argues that he writes better German than most writers of his generation because he has for 20 years been observing the small rule not to use the first-person pronoun “except in letters.”

He neglects to mention that one other instance in which he does use the word: in citations. In the last section of the Baudelaire-essay, then, we find one more of the prominent moments where the first-person pronoun appears many times in a citation: after the two poems just discussed, Benjamin now quotes Baudelaire’s prose text *Perte d’aureole* in its entirety. This small text has also been much commented on, and usually is taken as an illustration of the loss of aura in the big city.

I invite you to consider that citation, once again, not merely as a piece of text that Benjamin brings by as evidence for a point about Baudelaire. Rather, let us ask what Benjamin is saying or better yet, doing when he cites this passage? The passage begins with an expression of surprise to find the interlocutor “here”:

> “What do I see, my dear fellow? You—here? I find you in a place of ill repute [*dans un mauvais lieu*]—a man who sips quintessences, who consumes ambrosia? Really! I couldn’t be more surprised!”

Given the complete ban on any such indexically open word in Benjamin’s whole text, this surprise is indeed warranted. We can thus situate the whole encounter itself “here”—and thus indeed in the place where auras are lost, and where “death” threatens from all sides. And to nobody’s surprise, the person addressed responds by telling that he just lost his “aureole.”

> “You know, my dear fellow, how afraid I am of horses and carriages. A short while ago, I was hurrying across the boulevard, and amid that churning chaos in which

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26 GS VI, 475; SW 2, 603
death comes galloping at you from all sides at once I must have made an awkward movement, for the halo slipped off my head and fell into the mire of the macadam. I didn’t have the courage to pick it up, and decided that it hurts less to lose one’s insignia than to have one’s bones broken. Furthermore, I said to myself, every cloud has a silver lining. Now I can go about incognito, do bad things, and indulge in vulgar behavior like ordinary mortals. So here I am, just like you!”

The text positively revels in indexicals: *now I can go about incognito, I said to myself … here I am, just like you.* The interlocutor suggests to “the poet,” as this second speaker is usually identified, that he may want to report the loss of his halo.

“But you ought to report the loss of your halo or inquire at the lost-and-found office.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it. I like it here. You’re the only person who has recognized me. Besides, dignity bores me. And it amuses me to think that some bad poet will pick up the halo and straightaway adorn himself with it. There’s nothing I like better than to make someone happy—especially if the happy fellow is someone I can laugh at. Just picture X wearing it, or Y! Won’t that be funny?” (SW 4, 342)

27 The scene, then, dramatizes an encounter that takes place in a “mauvais lieu” – a “bad place.”

That bad place is here. So how come it is suddenly not a problem any more to meet here, how come the second speaker even goes so far as to say: “I like it here” – *Je me trouve bien ici* – and delights in the anonymity this place affords: “Now I can go about incognito, do bad things, and indulge in vulgar behavior like ordinary mortals. So here I am, just like you!”

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What has defused the explosive dangers of this place? How did the second speaker manage to cross the street? How come death seems no longer to be threatening “from all sides”? The “poet” (or Benjamin) has managed to make it through the rabble and crowd of ordinary readers and reached his elected interlocutor, someone who has several characteristics: a very literal, not to say pedestrian relationship to everything discussed—all the way to suggesting that the poet report the loss of his halo to the lost and found. The interlocutor is secondly also very unselfconscious, that is, he treats the place where the two meet like any other city street, and probably is flattered by the suggestion: “You’re the only one who recognized me.” (“Nur Sie haben mich erkannt.”) And finally: both that friend and reader and the poet address each other in masculine forms. The dialogue, then, models the role and even writes the lines for a multiply domesticated reader. That very modeling of the interaction is the secret of the speaker’s / citer’s reassurance. As long as all that happens here and now when I cite a text is predicated on the recognition (Anerkennung) of the author as the one who wrote it, and to whom everything is attributed as the source of anything we find in the text, the very reflexivity in reading that posed the danger has been defused. Far from being lost, the protective aura of the author is actually fully restored and now even covers the author of the citation. “Annihilation” has been kept at bay. Nor will that docile interlocutor who follows his script know the difference. When he is told that the poet’s halo or aureole is lost, he will oblige by believing that it is indeed the case.

For readers who do not share this trust in what “the poet” says, or, more to the point, for a literary critic in search of sentences that would allow her to catastrophize the text, that can be drawn as the blank weapon in the battle of the spirits—where does this reader go? Where is the sentence that can be subjected to a reading from a new angle, one that will allow us to
reclaim our own spirit, and, drawing a deep breath, *come to language* (“aufatmend zur Sprache kommen”; Ingeborg Bachmann)?

We find that sentence at the very end of Benjamin’s essay.

**A Heavenly Body without Atmosphere**

The concluding sentences of the Baudelaire-essay are:

[Baudelaire] hat den Preis bezeichnet, um welchen die Sensation der Moderne zu haben ist: die Zertrümmerung der Aura im Chockerlebnis. Das Einverständnis mit dieser Zertrümmerung ist ihn teuer zu stehen gekommen. Es ist aber das Gesetz seiner Poesie. *Sie steht am Himmel des zweiten Kaiserreiches als ‚ein Gestirn ohne Atmosphäre.’*"  

(†GS I, 2653)

He has designated the price at which the sensation of modernity can be had: the demolition of aura in the shock-experience. To agree to this demolition has cost him dearly. But it is the law of his poetry. *It/She stands in the sky of the Second Empire as a ‘heavenly body without atmosphere.’* (Transl. and emphasis mine, SIG)

As Ingeborg Bachmann writes in the sentence we have cited above: “A new language must have a new gait, and this gait it/she will only have if a new spirit inhabits it/ her.” (“Eine neue Sprache muß eine neue Gangart haben, und diese Gangart hat sie nur, wenn ein neuer Geist sie bewohnt.” IB, *Kritische Schriften*, 263)

That new spirit ignites the moment we take in

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28 This passage about the “Gestirn” – the „star“ or “heavenly body without an atmosphere“ is a quote from Nietzsche. Benjamin informs us in a footnote. If we follow the reference, we find the following passage:


(Friedrich Nietzsche, KSA I, 298)

Everything that is alive needs an atmosphere around itself; a mystery-laden mist; when you take away that envelope from him, when you condemn a religion, an art, a genius, to orbiting as a heavenly body without an atmosphere: then do not be surprised if it will wither soon, become hard and infertile. That’s how it is with all great things,

“that never will succeed without some delusion.”

as Hans Sachs says in the *Meistersingers.* (Transl. SIG)
Benjamin’s whole “construction” and realize that it depends utterly and completely on our obliviousness to the gendered binarism that creates an entirely docile and domesticated male-gendered reader, who is a slave in the service of the Benjamin-the-author, and her, with whom the reading capable of demolishing his aura was associated, to be sent “loin, loin, d’ici.” It is she who now re-emerges in the sky above his Second Empire, as a heavenly body without atmosphere: die Sonne.