Writing Poetry Against the Grain: Or, What Can Be Seen in "Les Yeux des pauvres"

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Perhaps more dramatically foregrounded in the prose poems than in the verse of *Les Fleurs du mal*,[1] the Paris of the Second Empire emerges as the nucleus around which the collection of prose poems (posthumously) entitled *Le Spleen de Paris* forms. It is an assemblage of texts where the tectonic plates of spleen and ideal seem to drift into one another, and where the threads binding urban poverty and art emerge frequently enough for one astute critic to have dubbed it "le livre des pauvres."[2] Finally, *Le Spleen de Paris* insists—as much as ever—on the critical link between literature and politics, between writing as a form of resistance to domination, to the erasure of memory, and as a kind of archive of the aspirations and violence of the 1848 revolution. In this essay, we seek to make a minor contribution to an already considerable and impressive scholarship on "Les Yeux des pauvres" by foregrounding the following claim(s): first, the poem's discretely persistent gesturing towards its historical situation reveals a complex and subversive intervention of the "literary" into the ideological, of text into context, that leaves the Second Empire "myth" proclaiming the new Paris to be a democratic space in principle open to all in a pile of rubble by the poem's *excipit*. The following reading proposes an interrogation of the relationship between the spectacle of absolute poverty and that of Second Empire Parisian nightlife, which considers both as metonymic designations for violence within social relations and history to which the text is anything but "imperméable." Second, here, as in texts such as "Assommons les pauvres," "La Fausse monnaie," or "Un plaisant," where the sphere of the social emerges in disfigured guises out of a blind-spot in the narrative which we might call "idiocy" (or, being radically self-absorbed), Baudelaire's prose poem operates as the site of what we propose to conceptualize as a form of ideological dispossession: that is, a discursive practice foregrounding the

material dispossession of the poor in Haussmann's Paris, and complicating a form of subjectivity we might call "literary" (that is, the posture of a subject apt to passively, if somewhat philanthropically, consume the misery engendered by the process of production). Though it has been suggested that "Les Yeux des pauvres" may be read as a melancholic reflection on the impossibility of the Romantic ideal of spiritual communion in the era of modernity;[3] a kind of apologia of imperial Paris's broad bedazzling boulevards; or even a bitter post-lyrical re-writing of *Les Fleurs du mal*'s "La Beauté" (where the poet's muse has eyes like "de purs miroirs qui font les choses plus belles"), we would like to place such accounts temporarily in suspense, without for as much displacing them, and argue that the female companion's reaction merely renders so visible as to *crever les yeux* that which is covert or unstated in the narrator's (curiously dehumanizing) compassion. Rather than an invitation to "feast our eyes" on the spectacle of Second Empire poverty, then, "Les Yeux des pauvres" is a poem that ironically sign-posts the ways in which poverty itself, like Paris, has been transformed into an object of consumption.

In the following pages, we will highlight, in descending order of spectacularity (from most to least striking), three components in "Les Yeux des pauvres" in order to draw out a relationship between the rubble surrounding the café, the *peuple* in the street, and a mode of writing that resists the injunction to forget the violence of the 1848 revolution in favor of the glittery desolation of the Second Empire. They are: a moment (the exchange between the narrator and his companion); an element (the description of the café mural); and a detail (the rubble). Taken together, they constitute the hard traumatic kernel haunting the kitschy splendor of the Haussmannian café, and by extension the whole *orgie impériale* of Second Empire Paris. Before turning an ear to the "communication breakdown" between the narrator and his companion, therefore, let us turn our gaze to allegory and mythology in a Parisian café.

Signs of the Times: Baudelaire's *Désastrologie*

One possible response to the question, "what is seen in the eyes of the poor?" is easily enough arrived at: the poor contemplate the conjunctive splendor *and* misery of Haussmann's Paris. In the gaudy opulence of the Parisian café, they see the site of their necessary expulsion, the "primal scene" of their exclusion from the space of a city where goods and capital flow freely, but where the movement of certain categories of people are submitted to strict surveillance, regulation, and discipline (indeed, as one critic has suggested,

the fact that the café is referred to as a house may be a mischievous *lapsus calami*, reminding the reader in 1864 of a time when the poor could afford to inhabit Paris *intra muros* and thereby of the loss of community that lay at the heart of post-1848 Paris).[4]

In and around this *café neuf*, though, reside two figures of what we might term the text's unconscious logic of "dis-astrology": that is, a displaced constellation, or network, of meaning in the text that may appear liminal enough to pass unnoticed, but which binds past to present (as well as the interior to the exterior, the personal to the collective) in order to signal an unspoken disaster in the text of history which it is up to an actively engaged reader to disinter. Let us consider two basic instances of figuration: on the one hand, the mythological figure of Ganymede, and, on the other, the allegorized "Lune" (note the capitalized "l") *inspiring* the bizarrely beautiful eyes of the narrator's companion/Muse.

We might pause and consider why it is that, at the moment the language of the prose poem most self-consciously draws attention to its status as a rhetorical tissue of tropes (the metonymic reduction of the female companion to "yeux" inspired by an allegorized "Lune"), we find an allusion to the zodiac. One way of accounting for this apparent oddity is to see in the zodiac a basic allegory of the human drive to narrative, to the creation of something like universal meaning and order (*kosmos*) out of the apparent chaos of the present. There is a more localized horizon to which one might look, however—one which both alludes to and eludes the poem's relationship to its historical situation. Ganymede, after all, may indeed be a well-known figure of mythology (and masculine beauty)—he also happens to figure in the constellation *Aquarius* (February). If we think about this figure of "la mythologie au service de la goinfrerie" as a rhetorical inscription of both time and meaning in the poem that exceeds simple ekphrastic description, that is, as a node of meaningfulness, an enunciation which weaves the present of the text to a historical time which remains implicit (or unnamable) in it,[5] it will perhaps come as no great surprise that the astrological sign dominated by the moon (*inspiré par la Lune*) is none other than Cancer (June).

Thus, buried at the heart of two crucial moments of the poem, between the moment we enter the gaudy, garish *café neuf*, and the moment where the narrator turns to seek refuge in the eyes of his companion, we find references to the landmark months of the 1848 revolution: February, month of utopian effusion and hopes, when, as Dolf Oehler puts it, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat had nothing but "des regards amoureux" for each other;[6] and June, when a working-class revolt erupted over the closure of the

national workshops. The conjunction of these two months led, of course, to a bloody civil war which essentially put an end to the dream of the Social Republic, irremediably split France into two, bitter classes, and ultimately paved the way to power for the "decayed roué" known as Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte. (As Richard D. E. Burton persuasively demonstrates, the repression of the February revolution by the *parti de l'ordre* was also particularly devastating for Baudelaire.)[7]

Perhaps, then, the hatred announced at the aggressive outset, or *attaque*, of the poem, with its jarring, and one would suppose ironic, lyrical apostrophe ("*Ah*! Vous voulez savoir pourquoi je vous hais aujourd'hui"), approximately constitutes something like an admission that these two form a much more harmonious couple than the narrator might like to admit.[8] With his emphasis on what, at first glance, strikes the eye as heart-stirring compassion, and her callous indifference to human suffering, it is tempting to consider the masculine narrator as a stand-in for the fraternal feelings that bound the bourgeoisie and the proletariat in February, with the much-resented companion metaphorically signaling the "street-cleaning" operations of June 1848. Yet is not her openly aggressive gesture of social domination preceded, if not prepared, by his rhetorical shattering of the integrity of the poor *qua* human presence? Though the narrator's companion is more dramatically open in her disdain for *ces gens-là*, and in that respect presents an easier target for moral condemnation, it is precisely for this reason that her reaction may constitute something like an interpretative *leurre*. The trap we ought to be wary of falling into may reside in assuming the reader can unproblematically identify with the narrator's point-of-view. For there is something more—or every bit as—systematic in the narrator's reduction of this homeless family of beggars to a series of metonymic cuts and fragments obeying an inflationary economic logic (three faces, six eyes) which pays off in a purely formal "admiration *égale*" (unless we are to take "admirer" in the etymological sense of *ad-mirare*: contemplation of something incomprehensible or astonishing). What Baudelaire asks us to consider is not so much a scene in which the well-off feel no compassion for the impoverished. Rather, we contemplate a scene in which this very pity is an over-determined part of the cause of the problem, not its emotive by-product. In effect, the male narrator is caught in a kind of *fol engrenage* of reification, abstraction, and over-generalization, absurdly reading the forced mobility of homelessness as an inverted scene—or perhaps faulty reproduction, parody—of domestic bourgeois normativity (one of the senses contained in the etymon *mendum* is precisely "erreur de copie"): "[le père]

faisait office de *bonne* et faisait prendre à ses enfants l'air du soir."[9] Yet the narrator's obscene(ly insensitive) failure to decipher accurately, or rather his projection of an all-too-legible fantasy into, the eyes of the poor in the third and fourth paragraph of the prose poem opens up an ironic gap in the text. It constructs something like a *speculum* in which the reader momentarily catches a glimpse of perspective itself—that is, of the very act of looking, gazing, or reading from a particular class perspective from which the narrator seeks to domesticate the irruption of absolute poverty into the space of the text. It is, to be sure, a perspective which accommodatingly makes room for "pity" and "un *peu* [de] honte." Yet it is also structurally shot-through with tropes of fragmentation, infantilization, abstraction, and feminization—so many strategic ways of containing (social) difference to which the narrator submits not just the poor *famille d'yeux*, but his companion too.[10] Perhaps we might best understand the emphasis on the possessive determinant "*ma*" along precisely such lines: the narrator is not interested in finding compassion equal, or similar, to his own in the inscrutable eyes of his companion, but a mirror (narcissistically?) reflecting *his admirable* sensitivity. (One wonders, finally, if this companion, addressed in the formal "vous," doesn't share more than unconscious disdain, or *misos*, with the poor in the eyes of the narrator—perhaps, like the modern wage-earning worker, she too has nothing more than her living labor power, her body, to sell on the market place of the street.)[11]

Ultimately, we don't emerge from this exchange knowing anything more than that we should perhaps re-read this text ironically, as radically *questionable*. Can we really say that the reason the narrator *hates* the companion with whom he so recently shared an idyllic day has to do with her insensitivity, much less the mind-numbing romantic platitude of not being able to find "une autre selon [s]es désirs"? Perhaps, rather, what the narrator of "Les Yeux des pauvres" cannot endure is simply the fact that he gets the silent message of his desire back from her gaze in inverted form, as the well-known Lacanian precept runs.[12] What is so unbearable may perhaps be little more than the fact that, despite the luxurious complexity of his inner life, he and she form two parts of the same problem that goes by the name of "class struggle" in post-1848 Europe. (Benjamin was among the first readers of Baudelaire to understand that philanthropy was always also a covert form of class struggle, and *misérabilisme* a means of accommodating literature to the task of symbolically reproducing social relations.)[13] If we follow Terry Eagleton's thinking on "Literature" as a mode of subjectivation—that is, as a means of producing "subjects" in the two-fold sense of "top-

ics" to write about in literature *and* the very inner, subjective life, ideas, conceptions, and relations of those doing the reading of literature[14]—we might say that Baudelaire's narrator is an eminently "literary subject," if not an allegory of the average nineteenth-century reader of *misérabilist* social pornography: he momentarily *feels* a kind of free-floating sense of pity ("ce soir-là"), but no sense of solidarity, complicity, or responsibility towards the other in particular.

In effect, that which the narrator might be said to despise in his companion is simply the fact that she gives away the rules to the game concerning class and spatial relations in *le nouveau Paris*: the very ground upon which the narrator's vapid sentimentalism and formal egalitarianism is possible is one of raw violence—the fact that while in theory the sidewalk is public space, in practice, all of Paris is private property, if not a spectacle for those with the money-power and leisure time to consume it. His (non)response to the scene of brute, social dispossession is a perfectly literary response (it thus links the question of representation more broadly to the question of class): collected, introspective, nuanced, creative even. However, the narrator's estheticizing response ("que c'est beau, que c'est beau") is by the same token visibly skeptical of the collective. (There is also an intriguing kind of grammar of reification structuring the "*on* dirait que tout l'or du pauvre monde est venu se porter sur ces murs"—a phrase where the only discernible agent is [expropriated?] money, *tout l'or du pauvre monde*.)[15] Turning to his companion is a way of apotropaically asserting that this scene *ne le regarde pas*. It's none of his "business." *Her* response may be more legible as class violence, as a kind of rudimentary injustice. But it would be unwise of us to overlook the way in which her response insists on seeing things clearly. There is a kind of "*si*, cela vous regarde" contained in her demand: "Ne pourriez-*vous* prier le Maître de les éloigner. . . ."

We might thus surmise that his hatred is triggered by the simple fact that she forces him to acknowledge both his unconscious disdain (*misos*) for the poor *and* his complicity in their expulsion from the city that is at the base of the socio-spatial order; *his* unspoken, taboo, *incommunicable* preference that his/their privileged class position be neither troubled nor afflicted by the presence (and whatever it signifies) of "ces gens-là," this human garbage to be swept off the sidewalk, into the gutter, out of sight.

Let us theorize this act of "giving away the game" as a distinctly Baudelairian "ideological dispossession"—a move corresponding to the moment in a text when, as Dolf Oehler suggests, the reader is dealt "a crushing blow" such that s/he can no longer continue to mistake their projections for real-

ity without a serious, and violent, psychic effort of repression (29). What makes this symbolic form of dispossession devastating is that it "lands a blow" at two levels simultaneously: first, at the level of constituted ideology where imaginary identifications circulate in a specular, inter-subjective economy; second, at the level of constitutive ideology—that is, at the significantly more important level where such identifications are made possible to begin with. *Mutatis mutandis*, this distinction (enlisted via Slavoj Žižek)[16] is comparable to the gap separating the Freudian *Ideal-ich* (the ideal-ego) from the *Ich-ideal* (the ego-ideal). Simply put, the first has to do with how we identify with others whom we should like to resemble, and the second has to do with how we do/don't identify with ourselves (as good, likeable, moral agents). Both of these instances are left in ruins by the end of Baudelaire's prose poem. Stripped of his literary/imaginary solidarity with the oppressed, shown to be oddly calculating and even potentially callous himself, the one thing the text's representative bourgeois reader of urban poverty and social injustice *cannot* do is keep playing this narrative game. Although the narrator attempts to domesticate this traumatic shattering of the legibility of his ideological universe by transporting it into the naturalized domain of gender difference (and dead-letter *poncifs*),[17] the reader is invited to see this displacement as one that is logically inconsistent, and is ultimately left in turn in a kind of state of dispossession, contemplating a deadlock that only the invention of radically different forms of subjectivity and social links might resolve. As readers, we are ultimately left wondering what sort of order makes possible the disorder, injustice, and human wreckage we behold in the eyes of the poor?

History . . . and Mythology?

If the *gravois*, the rubble, delimits the space of both a history of excess (*goinfrerie*) and the excess of history (*tout plein encore*), then we ought to try to account for the difference and tension between history and *mythology*, and perhaps indeed think of them as being implied in one another in the same way that the past and the present, the old (*le gravois*) and the new (*le café neuf . . . un boulevard neuf*) mutually bring one another into legibility. Within the café, we find a rhythmically bumpy, asyndetic description, or perhaps inventory, of the new Paris—a newness paradoxically undercut by a kind of structural tension between the monotonously recurring determinants and the chaotic accumulation of heterogeneous objects: "les murs . . . les nappes, les ors, les pages, les chiens, les nymphes, les Ganymèdes, la petite amphore, l'obélisque. . . ." We might read this entire

paragraph as an allegory of the Second Empire: that is, of violent origins arriving at an end, or erasure, of history under the ordered concision of the apodictic line: "toute l'histoire et toute la mythologie mises au service de la goinfrerie." Playing on the disjunction between grammatical order and semantic disorder—where the anaphoric homogeneity of the sentence encodes a discursive impoverishment prosodically over-determined by an interior *rime pauvre* binding *mytholog**ie*** to *goinfrer**ie***—the poet thus manages to highlight the apparent gap of incompatibility that stretches between the mythic and the historic.

Still, such an interval may contain a deeper signification, one having less to do with the epistemological discrepancy between mythology and history, and more to do with their aesthetic ties *qua* narrative forms. "Toute l'histoire et toute la mythologie" in the service of greedy appetites ironically performs an illicit act of commemoration and critique, drawing our attention to a tense junction of history and myth (i.e., to history as narrative of the past more or less "in the true"). On the one hand, it suggests that under the Second Empire, the threshold between mythology and history has been so blurred as to render the latter little more than a discursive support legitimizing dominant power relations. On the other hand, it reminds the reader that no *historical* figure did more to legitimize the political fortunes of *Napoléon le petit*, at least in the "ardeur de [ses] début[s]" than the mythic *Napoléon le grand*. Through an intricate play of displacement and condensation, Baudelaire illustrates the rudimentary oppositional force residing in the simple act of citing a dominant discourse while opening up fissures of difference within its folds. He does no more than repeat the gesture at the heart of all Second Empire propaganda: the nephew as continuation of the Uncle. But in so doing, he allows the reader to *historicize* the Second Empire, to establish unpredictable connections between the past and the present, between the spaces of everyday life and political violence. He potentially reminds the reader of the Emperor's protean capacity to be "all things to all people," and to see a contingent farce, a myth more grotesque than intimidating, where the hegemonic discourse would have us uncritically bedazzled before the auratic majesty of power.[18]

In one sense, then, Baudelaire does little more in this passage than repeat, albeit in distorted form, Second Empire propaganda (i.e., Napoléon III is the return of the mythic Napoléon I, thereby marking the continuity of historical progress). This pseudo-citation takes place, however, in a passage which refuses to let the reader disavow the metonymic trace of an original violence,

pre-dating and making possible the present: the rubble at the foundation of the current social edifice is quite simply a residue of history that stubbornly refuses to be converted into propaganda. It recalls that the history of the *Grand Empire* and that of the Second do indeed share, if nothing else, the dubious distinction of emerging out of *coups* which overthrew a Republic. This rubble at the base of the Second Empire's "splendeur inachevée" is, then, in some sense allegorical, an eminently Baudelairian *correspondence*: it is the ruin of history itself—the violence of the past as it continues to hound those surviving and grappling with its legacy in the present.

The Rubble and the *Pöbel*

Un café neuf . . . tout plein de gravois

For Geraldine Freidman, the café in "Les Yeux des pauvres" functions not so much as a referential testimony of what the sight-seer might behold in *le nouveau Paris* as it designates the very site at which the political violence of the Second Empire and of Haussmannization materially embody themselves in the text. Following Friedman's perspicuous insight that "urban planning," in Baudelaire's poem, is a barely "disguised tool of political repression" (Freidman 325), we would like to suggest that one element which reveals how this "disguise" works in the text is the rubble strangely described as "filling" the café. Rather than an aesthetic *effet de réel*, its presence might be better understood as an "effet *du* reel" (in the Lacanian sense)—that is, as a kind of semiotic symptom troubling the pall of amnesia which Napoléon and his prefect sought to throw over the city; a blot signaling the return of a repressed social *Ding* to (textual) consciousness.

Peering into this spectacle of conspicuous consumption, Baudelaire's vagabond family takes in the spatio-temporal coincidence of the café's present (questionable) splendor *and* the trace of an eradicated past: *encore tout plein de gravois*. Indeed, for Marie Maclean, the rubble of the café serves as the ghostly reminder that the poor previously lived in Paris, if not as the trace of this family's erstwhile lodgings.[19] In Maclean's perceptive account, then, there is a direct relation between the rubble in the café (as metonym of Haussmannization) and the rabble outside it. Baudelaire might, in this account, come so remarkably close to echoing paragraph 244 from Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* that it is worth citing the latter:

> When the standard of living of a large mass of people falls below a certain subsistence level—[. . .] necessary for a member of society [. . .]

> the result is the creation of a *rabble of paupers* [*Pöbel*]. At the same time, this brings with it, at the other end of the social scale, conditions which greatly facilitate the concentration of disproportionate wealth in a few hands.[20]

Whether we call it the *canaille*, the *classe dangereuse*, or the *foule* (as opposed to the *peuple*), this rabble is not identical to the poor, but rather something infinitely more disruptive: "poverty's [threatening] combination of capacity and incapacity [. . .], mark[ing] the place of something within the process of production that could transform or destroy it."[21] The rabble is Hegel's name for a dangerous supplement to the World Historical Spirit incarnated in the rationality of the State that could risk bringing down the whole social edifice if a proper solution—e.g., shipping them off to colonies—were not found for the excessively glaring, intolerable contradiction of their mere existence as social rejects. The poverty of the rabble poses a serious problem to the rationality, or the *sense*, of the social whole to the extent that it generates subjects and positions within society whose entire function seems to simply be signposting a senseless wrong done by one part of society to another for the sake of economic convenience:

> Poverty in itself does not turn people into a rabble; a rabble is created only when there is joined to poverty a *disposition of the mind*, an inner indignation against the rich, against society, against the government, etc. [. . .]. Against nature a human being can claim no right, but once society is established, poverty immediately takes the form of a wrong done to one class [*Klasse*] by another. (Hegel 221)

As Žižek suggests, we have here what we might call (*pace* Hegel himself), a Hegelian theory of insurrection (430–37). It runs thus: if the Hegelian postulate that the state is the actualization of the absolute rationality of Spirit is to hold in the face of poverty, then it follows that revolt against it can be justified if one's position *qua* subject in society consists in being uncounted in it. Such a subject, whether it goes by the name of *pöbel,* the *peuple*, or the *sans-part* may not necessarily revolt in the face of their immiseration. (Indeed, as Jennifer Bajorek remarks, the great arcana of capital is not *how* it brings about the present state of affairs—it does so through accumulation by dispossession—but rather *why* it does not meet with more resistance.)[22] However, whether they rise up or not is in some sense irrelevant: such revolts would in any case always already be, to borrow from a poet writing in the wake of Baudelaire, *révoltes logiques* (Rimbaud). "Man"

may not be able to claim rights against nature, but once society is established, poverty represents an inexcusable violence taking the form of what Marx calls, in his critique of Hegel's "Philosophy of Right," "wrong as such": i.e., the intolerable, contradictory exclusion of the poor from *social* life—the life of human activity, of human morality, of human *enjoyment* (what he calls the life of species-being).[23] The subject of this wrong, which could go just as easily by the Rancièrian appellation of *le sans-part*, is paradoxically universal precisely to the degree that it is deprived of any *particular* position in the social. Like Baudelaire's vagabond family, insisting on the radical in-commonness of public space by simply occupying it with no other aim other than being-there as a kind of rudimentary human right—the "right to have rights," as it were—this wronged subject undergoes a loss of humanity and meaningless suffering which might be understood to be the very embodiment of the scandal of private property. It is, in a word, the proletariat (etymologically, those who have no property other than their children, or power to reproduce).

Conclusion—Writing Poetry, Against the Grain

Let us conclude with a suggestion as to the sort of theoretical frame one might construct around the potentially disruptive political dimension of Baudelaire's prose poem. Namely, we would like to suggest that "Les Yeux des pauvres" reads as an exemplary case of a materialist poetics, or, to prevail upon Benjamin, a poetry written "against the grain."[24] Far from a "poetry of the boulevard"—the celebration of history's victors—a materialist poetics would "see" the present and the past together as part of a continuously unfurling disaster, and envision the future, quite literally through the eyes of the poor, adopting, if not exactly the point of view of the oppressed, then at least opening up the possibility of empathy and solidarity with the vast, anonymous masses of history's *laissés-pour-compte*. It is in its own way the counter-narrative of those for whom the "creative destruction" of progress is destruction *tout court*, for whom the field of history is a field of ruins with no guarantee of redemption or sublation into a meaningful narrative ("mes chers souvenirs [sont] plus lourds que des rocs" writes the poet in "Le Cygne"). What Baudelaire's "Les Yeux des pauvres" asks us to contemplate is the nineteenth-century narrative of progress (i.e., of a cleaner, safer, more democratic city) as at least *potentially* beheld from the perspective of those trampled underneath history's triumphal procession. Baudelaire's Paris may be the sort of singularly exciting site wrapped in invisible mystery that he

wrote about in the salon of 1846, but by the 1860s he asks us to contemplate the urban space as also a kind of nocturnal hell rife with haunting encounters. We see a Paris impossible to write in the singular. There are at least two Paris—on the one hand, the glittery site where art and history are in the auratic service of the powerful (and powerful appetites); and on the other, a city made up of the poor, the politically disenfranchised, the exiled, the pollution in the city which already so preoccupied the poet in, say, "Le Cygne" or "Le Crépuscule du soir."

What we see in the eyes of the poor, then, might be thought of as the return of Haussmannization's repressed violence—the violence of one class conquering another, *its* other, under the cover of improvements, rationalizations, "strategic embellishments," progress. The "dark side of Haussmannization," as David Harvey points out, is simply the dark side of capitalism's pre-history: "so-called primitive accumulation"; economic dispossession, political marginalization, the enclosure of the social commons, if not *the common* (in the sense of labor power and nature itself *qua* possibility of value), and the symbolic *foreclosure* of the poor from space of being-together. Such were the necessary conditions for achieving "the new urban world on the wreckage of the old."[25] Perhaps, then, one of the (many) reasons a nineteenth-century oddity such as Charles Baudelaire continues to meaningfully haunt our own era (which one critic has termed the age of the "planet of the slums") has to do with this despondently ironic representation of the present, torn between the aspirations and discourses associated with "progress" and the terrifying human devastation of the process known as Haussmannization (understood as an abbreviated designation for capital). Like his contemporary, Karl Marx, Baudelaire's account of the present, his "vision" of progress is in the first instance a critically dialectical one. It takes pains to (and pleasure in) point(ing) out the blind spots in facile, bourgeois ideologies of progress and insists on the bitter discrepancy between the facts of civilization and the realities of society (the Marxian allegory of progress is, if not a delicate monster dreaming of scaffolds while smoking a hookah, then at least a distinctly Baudelairian monstrosity: a "hideous pagan idol, who would not but drink nectar from the skulls of the slain").[26]

In "Les Yeux des pauvres," poetry constitutes a critical process brushing against the grain of the present and recalling indeed that the origins of today's cultural monuments are dripping head to foot in mud and blood (Benjamin 256–57). For Baudelaire, this meant creating a meaningful (if not immediately apparent) link between the bloody catastrophe of 1848 and the

less visible, but more systematic, more prosaic violence underpinning the glorified excess, the *goinfrerie*, and the *lex oblivionis* (the law of forgetting) of Second Empire propaganda. It is a use of "history" against the mythologies, or perhaps the mythomania, of the powerful; a critical genealogy of the given insisting that the way the present *appears* to us is intimately bound up with the violence of the past. One might suppose that both the poor *and* the narrator are theoretically aware of the relation binding them to one another, even if the narrative instance seeks to disavow this knowledge by projecting a reading *into* the eyes of the poor that aesthetically alters the content of their gaze into a pair of perfectly symmetric, if redundant, hexametric hemistiches, as though the space of the prose poem were still haunted by some lyrical dream, or some possibility of the lyric which the prose form cannot contain, which overflows its brim (note the insistent liquid phoneme *r* in "on di*r*ait que tout l'*or* du pauv*re* . . . se p*ort*[e] s*ur* ses m*urs*). The eyes of the poor are imagined as full of those intensifiers signposting lyric effusion "[Q]ue c'est beau! que c'est beau!" The ugly reality of restrictive social determinants and qualities ("pas comme nous") and grammatico-rhetorical qualifications ("on dirait . . . mais") don't so much lurk behind this (hackneyed?) aestheticism as they are predicated by it. It is not without irony that, by drawing attention to a spectacularly bad example of (mis)reading, to a narrator who seeks refuge from the traumatic split of class-struggle (and language) in the vacuous matter-of-factness of clichés (*cf.*, the poem's final, self-regarding platitude), Baudelaire also draws attention to the centrality, pitfalls, and aporias of reading as such, and to the potential risks involved in mistaking one's perspective or projections for a faithful map of reality (which may just be one helpful way of thinking about ideology). The city is an ever-porous "fourmillière [qui] ouvre ses issus" full of dreams, specters, and the nightmares of history which no "Master" can ever completely keep at bay, nor from returning to the site of their destitution.

Perhaps ultimately what we see in this exchange of gazes in the space of the city—whether it goes by the name of Haussmanization or the Medusa's head of History—whatever it is the narrator sees staring back at him in the "eyes of the poor," is perhaps best glossed by a line from Racine's *Phèdre* (speaking of tragedies that pivot on a misunderstood look): perhaps in the bold, unbearable eyes of the poor, one simply sees (a) ruin (to-come) writ large.[27] Perhaps, finally, such a ruin goes by the name of revolution.

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Notes

1. See Ross Chambers, "Are Baudelaire's 'Tableaux parisiens' about Paris?," in *Referring in Literature*, ed. Whiteside and Issacharoff (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1987), 95–110.

2. Patrick Labarthe, "'Le Spleen de Paris' ou le livre des pauvres," *Hommage à Claude Pichois: Nerval, Baudelaire, Colette* (Paris: Klincksieck, 2000), 99–118.

3. See, J. A. Hiddleston, *Baudelaire and "Le Spleen de Paris"* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 36–37.

4. "Primal scenes, for Baudelaire as later on for Freud," notes Marshal Berman, "cannot be idyllic. [. . .] [A]t the climax of the scene, repressed reality creaks through." Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: the Experience of Modernity* (London: Penguin Books, 1988), 152–3. See also Steve Murphy, *Logiques du dernier Baudelaire: Lectures du "Spleen de Paris"* (Paris: Champion Classiques, 2003), 270–72. On the relation between rates of rent in the Parisian property markets and the urban projects of Baron Haussmann, see David Harvey, *Paris: Capital of Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 125–40.

5. On this metadiscursive distinction between meaning (*énoncé*) and meaningfulness (*énonciation*), cf. Ross Chambers, *Meaning and Meaningfulness: Studies in the Analysis and Interpretation of Texts* (Lexington KY: French Forum Publishers, 1979), 102–35.

6. Dolf Oehler, *Le Spleen contre l'oubli*, *juin 1848: Baudelaire, Flaubert, Heine, Herzen* (Paris: Payot, 1996), 28.

7. See his *Baudelaire and the Second Republic: Writing and Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

8. See, Ross Chambers, "Baudelaire's Paris," *The Cambridge Companion to Baudelaire*, ed. Rosemary Lloyd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Dolf Oehler, "Baudelaire's Politics," ibid.; Geraldine Friedman, "Baudelaire's Theory of Practice: Difference and Ideology in *Les Yeux des pauvres*," *PMLA* 104, no. 3 (May 1989): 320; Jonathan Monroe, "Baudelaire's Poor: the Poem in Prose and the Social Reinscription of the Lyric," *Stanford French Review* 9, no. 2 (1985), 169–88; and Murphy, *op. cit.*, 270–72.

9. Anne-Emmanuelle Berger, *Scènes d'aumône: misère et poésie au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Champion, 2004), 222.

10. As Berger points out, feminizing and infantilizing the poor, positing them as a kind of silent subject (*infans*) of pure lack, is a kind of ideological invariant of nineteenth-century "pauperographie" (43).

11. We might be even more on guard once we consider the infratextual implications of the poet's choice of the adjective "attendri" for describing his sensitivity to the plight of the poor: "j'étais attendri par cette *famille d'yeux*." The only other occurrences of the sememe "attendri" in the prose poems are in "Les Bons chiens," and applied to an encounter with the poor is in (the equally ironic and subversive) "Assommons les pauvres," where the narrator beats the daylights out of a beggar with "l'énergie obstinée des cuisiniers qui veulent *attendrir un beefteack*" (emphasis added).

12. As Žižek recalls, "the *objet a* is, at its most elementary, what I see in the other's gaze [. . .] is not some transcendent property, *but the inscription into it of my own desire*." Slavoj Žižek, *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012), 666.

13. Walter Benjamin, "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century" and "The Artist as Producer," in *Reflections* (New York: Schocken, 2007), 160 and 230–32.

14. Terry Eagleton, "The Subject of Literature," *Cultural Critique* 2 (Winter 1985–1986), 96.

15. This very aestheticism thus sutures the text to its social conditions of production, highlighting a discursive operation that fetishizes the circulation of money, problematizes the question of agency, and naturalizes relations of domination which create archipelagos of exclusion ("[c'est] pour des gens pas comme nous").

16. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 105–7.

17. A gesture which, not coincidentally, points to the very political tracks it is attempting to cover up. Following Adorno, Oehler argues that, in Second Empire literature, the putatively *dépolitiqué* private sphere is often meant to be read as an allegorical displacement of the public. Dolf Oehler, "Les ressources de l'allégorie: 'A une passante,'" in *Lectures de Baudelaire: "Les Fleurs du mal,"* ed. Steve Murphy (Paris: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2002), 64.

18. Murphy notes a revealing nexus of blindness and stupefaction in the description of the café: le café *étincelait*, le gaz *éclairait de toutes ses forces* les murs *aveuglants,* les nappes *éblouissantes,* etc. (251).

19. Marie Maclean, *Narrative as Performance: The Baudelairian Experiment* (London: Routledge, 1988), 116.

20. G. W. F. Hegel, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 221.

21. Patrick Greaney, *Untimely Beggar: Poverty and Power from Baudelaire to Benjamin* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 25.

22. Jennifer Bajorek, *Counterfeit Capital: Poetic Labor and Revolutionary Irony* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 75.

23. "The individual *is* the *social being,*" writes Marx in the 1844 manuscripts. "Man's individual and species-being are not two distinct things." *Marx and Engels: Selected Works* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1968), 350.

24. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1968), 253–64.

25. David Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (London: Verso, 2012), 16.

26. Karl Marx, "The Future Results of British Rule in India," *The New York Daily Tribune*, Friday 07/22/1853. http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1853/07/22.htm. Consulted June 18, 2013.

27. Racine, *Phèdre*, Acte III, scène 3, l. 910.