



5-2019

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Unfinished Conspiracy: From the Feuilleton to *Le Livre*

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In what likely would have been the introduction to a book tentatively titled, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in High Capitalism*,¹ Walter Benjamin puts forth a powerfully figured argument for the materialist method he's about to deploy—reminding readers why he must fight the urge to read Baudelaire for Baudelaire's sake, why he must evade the “illusion...that one can determine the social function of a material or intellectual product without reference to the circumstances and bearers of its tradition” (Benjamin 130). Though not pretending to any fixed notion of truth in his analysis, Benjamin does suggest that we will have to move beyond just a simple, or even intricately wrought, appreciation of Baudelaire's aesthetics, beyond what he calls “the matter in itself.” For,

In the case of Baudelaire, [the matter] offers itself in profusion. The sources flow as abundantly as one could wish, and where they converge to form the stream of tradition, they flow along between well-laid-out slopes as far as the eye can reach. Historical materialism is not led astray by this spectacle. It does not seek the image of the clouds in this stream, but neither does it turn away from the stream to drink “from the source” and pursue “the matter itself” behind men's backs. *Whose mills does this stream drive? Who is utilizing its power? Who dammed it?* These are questions that historical materialism asks, changing our impressions of the landscape by naming the forces that have been operative in it (Benjamin 130; my emphasis).

¹ Michael W. Jennings highlights, in the endnotes to his edition of Benjamin's writings on Baudelaire, that such a book would have contained, though in perhaps a more coherent form, Benjamin's insights on the Paris arcades in the 19th century. Though he never finished the book, he did complete portions—including the 1938 essay, titled “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire,” from which the present analysis draws extensively.

This is one place where Benjamin rather directly explains the basis for his investigation of Baudelaire—at least the one he performs in “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire,” an essay that focuses much less on exhaustive readings of poetry than on readings of the poet himself. As such, Baudelaire’s poetics provide mere context for the larger historical arguments Benjamin appears to be making, whereby a discussion of poetic form is germane insofar as it brings us closer to finding the “mills” that the former’s artistic genius drives—to locating the historical landscape, the modernity, feeding from his work. And though it is difficult to piece together exactly how Benjamin’s materialism guides his study of Baudelaire, we can observe rather easily the extent to which Benjamin pairs his analysis of the poet’s work, in both its content and form, with a reading of his class position. Writing on “the petty bourgeoisie to which Baudelaire belonged,” Benjamin observes that “this class was only at the beginning of its decline”:

Inevitably, many of its members would one day become aware of the commodity nature of their labor power. But this day had not yet come; until then, they were permitted (if one may put it this way) to pass the time... The enjoyment promised to be less limited if this class found enjoyment *of* this society possible. If it wanted to achieve virtuosity in this kind of enjoyment, it would not spurn empathizing with commodities. It had to enjoy this identification with all the pleasure and uneasiness which derived from a presentiment of its own determination as a class. Finally, it had to approach this determination with a sensitivity that perceives charm even in damaged and decaying goods. Baudelaire, who in a poem to a courtesan called her heart “bruised like a peach, ripe like her body, for the lore of love,” possessed that sensitivity. This is what made possible his enjoyment of

society as someone who had already half withdrawn from it (Benjamin 88-89; his emphasis).

In other words, Baudelaire could play the role of the commodity—he could *empathize* with them, as Benjamin puts it—precisely because his petty bourgeois subclass of poets and artists, of *flâneurs*, had not yet apprehended that their own artistic and intellectual labor would be commodified. Benjamin describes the flâneur’s feeling in the crowd as one of blissful intoxication, analogous to the experience he imagines for the commodity, flanked by potential buyers: “commodities derive the same effect from the crowd that surges around and intoxicates them” (Benjamin 86). Here we get the sense that the class position of the poet not only engendered a certain self-image, an identification with the commodity, but also inclined him to a sensitivity “that perceives charm even in damaged and decaying goods.” This is presumably why Baudelaire wrote lines like, “Je suis un vieux boudoir plein de roses fanées.” According to Benjamin, “[t]here is scarcely a single poet before Baudelaire who wrote a verse anything like” it; that is, a poem “entirely based on empathy with the material, which is dead in a dual sense...[as] inorganic matter [and as] matter that has been eliminated from the circulation process” (Benjamin 245). The metaphor of the old boudoir is the linguistic figure that quite literally brings the poet into identity with a material object; it is Baudelaire’s way of striking an alliance with an inorganic commodity, and of reflecting on his and the object’s mutually obsolete value.

This discourse on Baudelaire’s relationship with material objects, and on the language which he uses to facilitate this relationship, didn’t originate in “Paris of the Second Empire”; in the essay, Benjamin indexes the attempts of several French writers to theorize the myriad ways

language operates, ontologically, in Baudelaire's writing: "Gide noticed a very calculated disharmony between the image and the object. Rivière has emphasized how Baudelaire proceeds from the remote word—how he teaches it to tread softly as he cautiously brings it closer to the object"—et cetera (Benjamin 127). If we were to impute to Benjamin himself an equally pithy formulation on Baudelaire and language, we would probably cite his remark that "on this map [of the big city], words are given clearly designated positions, just as conspirators are given designated positions before the outbreak of a revolt. Baudelaire conspires with language itself" (126). Though spirit of this analogy no doubt lies in a comparison between Baudelaire and Blanqui (which Benjamin quite explicitly pursues in the essay), it is interesting to note how he conceptualizes Baudelaire's prosody ("like the map of a big city"), investing the poetic text with visual and spatial dimensions. If the text's organizational scheme resembles that of a city, each word is a sort of *point de repère*, swarming with—if not some kind of subversive action itself—at least the potential for it. Benjamin redoubles his emphasis on the conspiratorial work of Baudelaire's language as he examines its allegorical functioning; though Baudelaire's figurations don't immediately suggest themselves as allegories, argues Benjamin, the poet establishes them as such within the poetic text, "depending on what is involved, on which topic is in line to be reconnoitered besieged and occupied" (Benjamin 128). Baudelaire's allegories "alone have been let in on the secret. Wherever one comes across *la Mort* or *le Souvenir*, *le Repentir* or *le Mal*, one finds a locus of poetic strategy. The lightning-like flashing up of these charges—recognizable by their capitalization—in a text which does not disdain the most banal word betrays Baudelaire's hand. His technique is the technique of the putsch." Benjamin thus delineates two possible operations of language as put into play by Baudelaire, operations which only seem to meld as we

analyze them further: language functions both as the conduit through which the poet eagerly identifies with, or inhabits, the ontological status of the commodity, and as the instrument of his revolutionary calculus, the form through which he hopes to radically reimagine the world of relations between ideas and objects. By becoming the old boudoir, the poet quite obviously redefines his relationship to the object, but he also destabilizes that capitalized word that asserts itself so unexpectedly in the subtext of the line—*la Mort*, death.

What status, though, does language itself take on? It's unclear whether Benjamin is employing the city map as a metaphor for Baudelaire's prosody, or prosody as a metaphor for an urban conspiracy; in short, what's obscure here is the nature of the subversion that the poet leads. Are words, metaphors, allegorical figurations Baudelaire's vanguard, the soldiers who listen attentively as he rolls out the great prosodic map and begins to voice orders? Is their deployment throughout the prosodic city merely a stratagem, a ruse that will catch unsuspecting readers off-guard? Or does the poet hope that the verbal arrangement itself, the deliberate and nuanced organization of language, will yield something more than a strategic victory? That it will impart some more permanent changes to the architecture of the city? The tension between these two possible answers to the first question seems to have primarily to do with a more elementary, less metaphorical query: are Baudelaire's formal disruptions of allegorical meaning—in other words, his debasement of them to some kind of semantic contingency—a means to some political, revolutionary end? Or do they constitute an end in themselves?

This question—of whether language in Baudelaire could be an end unto itself, and whether language could itself be one of those objects it seems to be charged with arranging—Benjamin resolves, but not without making a serious claim about the history of French poetry.

He does this by way of a materialist critique of *l'art pour l'art*, a doctrine and practice which “give taste,” though not explicitly or self-consciously, “a dominant position in poetry” (Benjamin 132). Benjamin continues:

In *l'art pour l'art*, the poet for the first time faces language the way the buyer faces the commodity on the open market. To an extreme extent he has ceased to be familiar with the process of its production. The poets of *l'art pour l'art* are the last poets who can be said to have come “from the people.” They have nothing to say with such urgency that it could determine the coining of their words. Rather, they are forced to choose their words... The poet of *l'art pour l'art* wanted to bring *himself* to language above all else—with all the idiosyncrasies, nuances, and imponderabilities of his nature... The poet’s taste guides him in his choice of words. But the choice is made only among words which have not already been stamped by the *matter* itself—that is, which have not been included in its process of production (Benjamin 132; his emphasis).

What is fascinating here is the way Benjamin uses the language of closeness, the language that allowed Baudelaire to put himself into relation with dead or useless commodities, to describe the position of language itself. Baudelaire’s symbolically revolutionary manipulation of language becomes, in the doctrine and practice of *l'art pour l'art*, an exercise of *taste*—that which Benjamin defines more generally as an “elaborate masking of [the consumer’s] lack of expertness” (131). Phrased differently, it becomes a false sense of proximity between the commodity and its consumer. Thus we can imagine the poet of *l'art pour l'art* as a buyer of language, whose attempt to “bring *himself*” to it as a function of artistic taste reflects language’s status as a commodity. But, Benjamin reminds us, the poet’s taste, rather than guiding him to the

language in circulation—the language produced and sold on exchanges—really only brings him outside of this process, where he chooses words that are *out of* circulation. Hence Baudelaire’s prescient choice of the old boudoir as a metaphor, as a testament to his imminent exile from the ever expanding market of words; hence the basis for his identification with the dead or decaying object that has moved out of production, whose use value is obscure, and can only be recuperated through allegorization. In Benjamin’s historical imagination, Baudelaire has not yet reached where he must allegorize language itself; language is still the organizing mechanism, but not yet the object to be organized. This, however, provokes the question: if Baudelaire has initiated this historical process of self-exile into the world of *l’art pour l’art*, which poets lie at the other end?

Faithful as always to a materialist method of historicizing art, Benjamin plots the moment when “the theory of *l’art pour l’art* assumed decisive importance around 1852, at a time when the bourgeoisie sought to wrest its ‘cause’ from the hands of the writers and the poets” (132). The bourgeoisie releases the poet from his role as co-conspirator, he can no longer “be said to have come ‘from the people,’” and at the dénouement of this rupture, observes Benjamin, “we find Mallarmé and the theory of *poésie pure*.” In this *poésie pure*, “the poet has become so far removed from the cause of his that the problem of a literature without an object becomes the center of discussion,” a discussion “evident in Mallarmé’s poems, which revolve around *blanc, absence, silence, vide*.” This condition, that of having nothing *to write for*, rendered all poetry not only an implicit reflection on the poet’s inability to produce aesthetically, but also an exposition of his production process and the struggles it provoked. Mallarmé is quite openly one of, if not the defining case of, those *l’art pour l’art* poets who “have nothing to say with such urgency that it could determine the coining of their words”—we need only look to the sheer

negation performed by those *words* Benjamin ascribes to Mallarmé: *blanc, absence, silence, vide*. “To found a production process,” Benjamin continues, “on such a basic renunciation of all the manifest experiences of [a particular class] engenders specific and considerable difficulties—difficulties that make poetry highly esoteric” (Benjamin 132-33). The idea of blank, objectless referentiality that Benjamin evokes here diverges from his reading of Baudelaire’s allegorical aesthetics, which appropriated “experiences of the neurasthenic, of the big-city dweller, and of the retail customer” to represent commodification (including that of language itself) and the poet’s own, attending sense of alienation. We can hear echoes of Benjamin’s reading of Mallarmé in Fredric Jameson’s work, whose “conception of the modernist text” imagines it as “the production and the protest of the isolated individual,” that deploys a “logic of sign systems as so many private languages (‘styles’) and private religions” (Jameson 135). He even cites Mallarmé’s concept of the *Le Livre* as “the fundamental formulation” of an “aesthetic project” unavailable to “social or collective realization.”

One way of responding to the historicizing projects undertaken by Benjamin and Jameson might be through Barbara Johnson’s deconstructionist reading of Mallarmé’s system of so-called “private languages”—a reading which seems almost to rework Benjamin’s valuation of words like *vide, silence*, etc. Johnson observes, in her book *The Critical Difference*, that:

What is revolutionary in Mallarmé’s poetics is less the elimination of the ‘object’ than this very type of construction of a systematic set of self-emptying non-intuitive meanings. Mallarmé’s famous obscurity lies not in his devious befogging of the obvious but in his radical transformation of intelligibility itself through the ceaseless production of seemingly mutually exclusive readings of the same piece of language. *This* is what

constitutes Mallarmé's break with referentiality, and not the simple abolition of the object, which would still be an entirely referential gesture. Reference is not denied here but *suspended* (Johnson 65).

Images of *vide* and *blanc* haunt Mallarmé's poetry not to remind us of the chasm separating the modern poet from mimetic representation; indeed, as Johnson affirms, such negative ideals would themselves become the objects of the poem's representation—they would remain within the same referential schema, only signifying differently. Instead, Mallarmé reorders signification entirely, valuing and revaluing certain words, while scattering the markers of a text's intelligibility in a move similar to the one suggested by *Un coup de dés* (literally, a throw of the dice). Referents are never absent, but only challenging to find and piece together according to whatever mad logic the poet has given their arrangement.

Let us, however, take a moment to pause and appreciate our juxtaposition of Benjamin and Johnson's respective observations on referentiality in Baudelaire and Mallarmé. Both poets seem to be working in the private languages which Jameson believes to have made modernist art unavailable to "social and collective realization." Just as Johnson finds words like *vide*, *blanc*, *silence* in Mallarmé to be the architects of a new semiotic system, which itself engenders a certain relationship to objects rather than eliminates them entirely—Benjamin finds in Baudelaire's deployment of words like "*la Mort* or *le Souvenir*, *le Repentir* or *le Mal*" a locus of poetic strategy." Recall that Benjamin's figuration of this strategy—"the lightning-like flashing up of these charges" is precisely that which "does not disdain the most banal word," which robs these words of their intuitive banality and reprograms them within the semiotic scheme of the text. Per Benjamin and Johnson's analyses, neither Baudelaire nor Mallarmé is willing to

exclude objects from their textual constructions of meaning: rather than engage in a kind of solipsistic dance with their own words (what Mallarmé does, according to Benjamin, in his complaints of being able to write only about literature itself), both might be seen to initiate a certain “break with referentiality” that wouldn’t eliminate the role of poetry in constructing some kind of objective *relationality* but instead complicate it through manipulations of poetic language.

Granted, for Johnson, Mallarmé’s systems of signification do not quite take on the figurative character of a putsch, as they do for Benjamin vis-à-vis Baudelaire. Instead, what Johnson constructs is a sort of apparatus charged with “ceaseless production of seemingly mutually exclusive readings of the same piece of language.” To this we can credit a “radical transformation of intelligibility,” a reintegration of objects into language that relies not on language’s referential proximity to them—but its capacity to radically reorganize them, to supplant the referential with an entirely new architecture. This seems, then, an effort on the part of Mallarmé much less to bring himself “closer to language,” as Benjamin might suggest, than to take up Baudelaire’s unfinished conspiracy with it.

How, though, might this apparatus look? Benjamin furnishes the city map as an extremely generative way of thinking about Baudelaire’s prosody, and by extension, about his conspiracy with language. But the city map appears to serve only as an analogy. In other words, Benjamin doesn’t really engage it for its *textuality*, for the suggestion that there is an important link between the cartographic plan of a city, the linguistic conspirators scattered throughout, the social and political organization they evoke—and textual organization itself, the literal configuration of words on a page. Yet latent throughout his essay on Baudelaire is a concern not just with the influence of print and newspaper culture on the literary marketplace of 19th century

Paris, but with how this culture occasioned a certain relationship between artists and their visual, spatial and material environment. Here Benjamin quotes from *Bévue Parisiennes* (Parisian Blunders), a book by Baron Gaston de Flotte which chronicled various mistakes made by Parisian newspapers:

“The custom of taking an aperitif...arose with the boulevard press. When there were only the large, serious papers...cocktail hours were unknown. The cocktail hour is the logical consequence of the ‘Paris timetable’ and of city gossip.” Through coffeehouse life, editors became accustomed to the rhythm of the news service even before its machinery had been developed...The assimilation of a man of letters to the society in which he lived took place on the boulevard...[where] he kept himself in readiness for the next incident witticism, or rumor... On the boulevards he spent hours of idleness, which he displayed before people as part of his working hours (Benjamin 61).

Benjamin couples the man of letter’s strategic habitation of the boulevard, his familiarity with its rhythms, with the fact that the *feuilleton*, the literary section of a newspaper, “provided a market for *belles-lettres*” (59). There was thus no way of sorting out the print culture of literary production from the customs and rituals it occasioned throughout the space of the city; the idleness of the man of letters, his attention and assimilation to these rhythms of urban life had as much to do with his artistic success than did his writing. Furthermore, the mutually constitutive relationship between the *feuilleton* and *flânerie* seems to have derived, at least in part, from the typographical arrangement of the section. Privately sponsored news items or *réclames*, Benjamin notes, “appeared in the editorial section of the newspaper, referring to a book that had been advertised the day before or in the same issue” (Benjamin 60). What were essentially ads, then,

“enabled a newspaper to have a different look every day—an appearance that was cleverly varied when the pages were made up and constituted part of the paper’s attractiveness.” As an important side note, we might remark how Benjamin’s materialism—his look beyond just the text of the *feuilleton* into the circumstances of its production and reception—allows us to see how intimately intertwined literary production was with both print culture and urban customs in 19th-century Paris. As such, he quite obviously provides the historical framework necessary to a comprehensive reading of Baudelaire’s poems. I would suggest, however, that this framework is even more necessary to any reading of Mallarmé’s oeuvre, specifically those works that force us to consider the textuality not only of the poem itself, but also of our political and ontological conceptions of urban space and the objects that populate it.

Look no further for evidence of this necessity than the first lines of the prose poem, “Le Démon de l’analogie,” where Mallarmé asks, “[d]es paroles inconnues chantèrent-elles sur vos lèvres, lambeaux maudits d’une phrase absurde ?” Not only does the poet ascribe the words their own vitality, as cursed fragments that sing, but he also juxtaposes them with the beginning of the prose poem’s narration, which describes, just after posing the question of the words’ fragmented agitation, the physical movement of the poet, out from his apartments onto the street: “Je sortis de mon appartement avec la sensation propre d’une aile glissant sur les cordes d’un instrument, traînante et légère” (*Poésies et autres textes* 276). Haunting him throughout the poem, we soon learn, is the resonance of some foreign voice uttering what are presumably the “paroles inconnues”: “la pénultième est morte.” Just before the narrator ceases to describe his movement throughout the city, he offers yet another juxtaposition of his physical steps and a cognitive

event, having to do with these “paroles inconnues,” these “lambeaux maudits d’une phrase absurde”:

Je fis des pas dans la rue et reconnus en le son nul la corde tendue de l’instrument de musique, qui était oublié et que le glorieux Souvenir certainement venait de visiter de son aile ou d’une palme et, le doigt sur l’artifice du mystère, je souris et implorai de vœux intellectuels une spéculation différente.

In his edition of Mallarmé’s *Poésies et autres textes*, Jean-Luc Steinmetz observes that this particular *Souvenir* “est allegorisé, comme chez Poe ou chez Baudelaire.” If, indeed, the capitalized *Souvenir* is a signpost for allegory, as one would find it in a short prose fiction by Edgar Allan Poe or a poem by Baudelaire, what could be its allegorical functioning here? We know that *le Souvenir* has just visited a few strokes “de son aile ou d’une palme” on the taut string of a forgotten musical instrument, which in turn seems to have produced the sound transposed onto the page, the chord matched by the voice uttering “la Pénultième est morte.” As these words continue to pester the narrator, the diegetic frame of the text recedes from his urban surroundings, recounting instead his imagination of the words and their possible meaning. He complains of the words’ malicious disruption of his “noble faculté poétique” until he pronounces them himself—only to be met with a harrowing sense of “effroi.” Suddenly, the narration returns to physical space, taking in the poet’s immediate surroundings, of which the most distressing is an object which his hand appears to be grasping: “je sentis que j’avais, ma main réfléchi par un vitrage de boutique y faisant le geste d’une caresse qui descend sur quelque chose, la voix même (*Poésies et autres textes* 277). Followed by this sense of effroi is a much more explicit

apprehension of exactly where the poet is, which at the same time seems to contain the frightful voice, to give it a material, objective consistency in the form of an old string instrument:

Mais où s'installe l'irrécusable intervention du surnaturel, et le commencement de l'angoisse sous laquelle agonise mon esprit naguère seigneur c'est quand je vis, levant les yeux, dans la rue des antiquaires instinctivement suivie, que j'étais devant la boutique d'un luthier vendeur de vieux instruments pendus au mur, et, à terre, des palmes jaunes et les ailes enfouies en l'ombre, d'oiseaux anciens. Je m'enfuis, bizarre, personne condamnée à porter probablement le deuil de l'inexplicable Pénultième.

The second *point de repère* on the map of Mallarmé's narrative poem is thus the old shop of a luthier somewhere along the "rue des antiquaires," where we find the once forgotten string instrument that *le Souvenir*, personified as a bird, had visited with strokes of its great wing. The narrator implies that he had followed this "rue des antiquaires" without any sort of conscious determination, that he only now perceives the set of old instruments which lie in his immediate field of vision. What sort of terror could be plaguing the narrator, as he subconsciously moves throughout the city, his ears tuned to the spatial or typographic organization of words— independent, yet sung by an instrument that he perceives frightfully in a shop window? What phenomenology of commodification, what kinds of empathy, what form of relations between objects does this scene register? What allegorical or analogical faculty revives this dead, forgotten instrument that itself chants, by some "irrécusable intervention du surnaturel," the death of *la Pénultième*?

If there is one concept, form or even object that could contain this confusion, that could plot the intricacy of these relations, between space, things and subjects—it would be *le Livre*.

“Le pliage est,” wrote Mallarmé in an essay titled “Le Livre, Instrument Spirituel,” “vis-à-vis de la feuille imprimée grande, un indice, quasi religieux ; qui ne frappe pas autant que son tassement, en épaisseur, formant le minuscule tombeau, certes, de l’âme” (Divagations 275). Mallarmé quantifies *le Livre* as the end of everything—that is, the locus at which the use value of everything (“tout au monde”) would somehow culminate. Of course, the notion that a singular, universal teleology exists in the book—specifically, in the folding of its pages, its totally contingent yet significant manner of presentation—presents as absurd. Yet there is some historical basis, Benjamin’s essay might tell us, in a mode of thinking which resembles Mallarmé’s musings on *le Livre*. After all, the most telling analogy Mallarmé can contrive for *le Livre* is a newspaper, with its feuilleton “commandant la généralité des colonnes,” with its printing process that brings “des commodités à l’écrivain” (Divagations 275-76). In fact, the reader’s first contact with *le Livre* as an object, rather than as just a concept deployed by Mallarmé, occurs by way of a serendipitous gust of wind. The poet observes his now estranged newspaper spread its pages over a bed of flowers—a scene Mallarmé’s language treats, tellingly, with almost religious significance:

Sur un banc de jardin, où mainte publication en sa nouveauté, je me réjouis si l’air, en passant, entr’ouvre et, au hasard, anime, d’aspects, l’extérieur du livre. Plusieurs, à quoi, tant l’aperçu jaillit, personne depuis qu’on lut, peut-être n’a pensé. L’occasion de le faire, donc ; quand, aisé, libéré, le journal semble tout remplacer : le mien, même, que j’écartai, s’envole près de roses, jaloux de couvrir leur ardent et orgueilleux conciliabule.

Développé parmi le massif, je le laisserai, aussi les paroles fleurs à leur mutisme : et,

techniquement, me propose, de noter comment ce lambeau diffère du livre, lui suprême.

Un journal reste le point de départ ; outre que la littérature s’y décharge à souhait.

Mallarmé’s enigmatic style, his syntax that just barely resembles a coherent prose narrative, holds throughout the poem. His ideational encounter with the book, as well as the tiny fragments of narrated experience that constitute our cursory knowledge of it, I believe, speak to a historical truth that Benjamin has partially uncovered in his readings of Baudelaire. In a world where newspapers set the rhythm for the daily life of the bourgeoisie and where representations of that daily life set the agenda for newspapers, where the poet must play the role of flâneur and fester idly amongst a crowd in order to sell his labor to an audience, where language, through the feuilleton, becomes an agent of commodification of other objects and itself—it is no wonder that Mallarmé has produced, if only in his mind, an apparatus under which all of these converge. If we can establish this objective, historically available rationale, then the logical next step for our analysis should be to answer the question that Barbara Johnson’s analysis, in conversation with Benjamin’s, seems to pose: that is, in what ways can Mallarmé’s “construction of a systematic set of self-emptying non-intuitive meanings” be “revolutionary”? The aim, then, of the rest of the analysis will be to define how Mallarmé’s poetics, including his conception of *le Livre*, attempted to radically redefine the relationship between the poet and the material objects around him—especially those that were dead, dying, *out of circulation*.

II. “A Better Reader of Poe”: Mallarmé and the Prose Poem

“To-day I wear these chains, and am here! To-morrow I shall be fetterless!—but where?”
— Edgar Allen Poe, “The Imp of the Perverse”

“Having learned English simply to be a better reader of Poe” is the fascinating qualifier which at once very roundly summarizes Mallarmé’s interest in the English language and, perhaps more importantly, opens up a window of inquiry into the relationship between the French poet and his English muse, the *poète maudit par excellence*. Mallarmé relates this detail in a letter to Paul Verlaine which seems also to function as an autobiography, where he mentions “the verse and prose pieces I wrote in my youth and those that followed and echoed them,” as well as his yet unfinished attempt to write *le Livre* (the “Book”), conceived as the “orphic explanation of the Earth...the poet’s only duty and the literary mechanism par excellence” (*Divagations* 2-3; tr. Barbara Johnson).² Judging from the order of details in which Mallarmé presents the chronology of his artistic career to Verlaine, we might come to think that the former’s intimacy with Poe’s works was a boon not just for his employment as an English teacher but also for his major works of poetry and prose, not to mention the critical work (i.e., the critical poems in *Divagations*)³ that seems to have elevated Mallarmé to the status of literary or linguistic theorist.

Yet even if Poe’s haunted genius did loom over much of Mallarmé’s artistic career, this genius remains less explicitly worked out in a few of his critical texts—including *Crise de Vers* (“Crisis of Verse”) and *La Musique et Les Lettres* (“Music and Letters”), where the poet’s observations of “crisis” or rupture in literary history focus namely on Hugo and Baudelaire.

² The “Autobiography” from which I quote doesn’t actually comprise the original text of *Divagations*; Johnson, however, has added it to her translation of the latter.

³ Barbara Johnson labels them thus in the note to her translation of *Divagations*.

Furthermore, it's in Baudelaire's intertexts that critical readers of Mallarmé like Barbara Johnson have primarily vested the latter's occupation with literary history. *La Musique et Les Lettres*, for instance, stages according to Johnson "la dichotomie elle-même entre le thyrses de Baudelaire et celui de Mallarmé —la distance entre les deux auteurs et l'espace interprétatif qui les relie et qui les relit" (*Défigurations du langage poétique* 180; Johnson's italics). For Johnson, this dichotomy provides a curious refiguration of Baudelaire's *thyrses*, the symbol of, among other possible meanings, a complex intertextual relationship between Baudelaire and Mallarmé in what concerns their respective notions of the *différence* or *indifférence* demarcating prose from poetry.

What Johnson rigorously establishes in *Défigurations* is the extent to which Mallarmé's critical poems *Crise de Vers* and *La Musique et Les Lettres*, and the prose poem "The Demon of Analogy" (*Le Démon de l'analogie*), meditate on the possibility of distinguishing between prose and poetry, as well as the ability of language, poetic or "prosaic," to talk about itself at all (that is, through criticism). More importantly, as Johnson's analysis indicates throughout, Mallarmé is keen to talk about the history of verse and literature by personifying them—we need only look to the Baudelairien *thyrses*, or the declaration, in *Crise de Vers*, that Hugo "était le vers personnellement." What do we do then, with a specter like Poe, who figures so prominently in the Mallarméan corpus yet remains absent from two theoretical texts or critical poems that crystallize, or perhaps further obscure, Mallarmé's conception of verse, its history, and the crisis it seemed to be experiencing? In what follows, I provide an analysis that puts into relief the centrality of Poe to Mallarmé's attempts at defining a crisis in verse via the prose poem, focusing on the dense, intertextual relationship between Mallarmé's *Le Démon de l'analogie* and Poe's "Imp of the Perverse."

As Johnson observes in *Défigurations*, Mallarmé's prose poems have figured little in most critics' considerations of the poet's œuvre—an observation that seems striking when we compare it to the last chapter of her book, devoted entirely to a reading of *Le Démon de l'analogie*, originally published under the title of *La Pénultième* in Mallarmé's 1893 collection of verse and prose (*Vers et Prose*) that he sent to Villiers de L'Isle-Adam (*Poésies et autres textes* 276). To situate her own reading of the prose poem, Johnson pulls from critical accounts that affirm her valuation of the text: one calls *Le Démon* “une œuvre clé pour comprendre Mallarmé” (*Défigurations* 195). Yet it's the text's paradoxical status as “une œuvre clé pour comprendre” which is simultaneously “incompréhensible” that provokes Johnson to uncover Mallarmé's metatextual gambit. She writes: “A la fois incompréhensible et clé de la compréhension, surnaturel et banal, ce texte pose ainsi d'emblée la double question du rapport, d'une part, de la critique et du texte, et d'autre part, du rapport inhérent de l'étrange et du familier, de la clarté et de l'obscurité” (196). “Incompréhensible,” for all its banality, seems to be the word most likely to capture the sense of *Le Démon*: even though the poem takes the form of a syntactically legible prose narrative, it's hard to tell what, if anything, actually happens. If we were to isolate its plot, we would perhaps find the the story of a man who wanders the streets after leaving his apartment, hears the words “la pénultième est morte” repeated constantly by some voice in his head, articulates the words himself, then realizes the mysterious voice in his head is actually his own—awakening just after “dans la rue des antiquaires... devant la boutique d'un luthier vendeur de vieux instruments pendus au mur” (*Poésies* 278). Of course, the repeated phrase lacks any sort of referential context; what “la pénultième” is remains obscure even as the narrator knows that, at its surface, it's a lexical term signifying “l'avant-dernière syllabe des vocables.” We do

know, however, that the subject of the phrase, *la pénultième*, “finit le vers,” while the predicate, *est morte*, “se détacha de la suspension fatidique plus inutilement en le vide de signification.” These two statements form a strange paradox, as Johnson observes via Roger Dragonetti. That is, “La pénultième” is supposed to have finished the verse, but it obviously doesn’t: the predicate “est morte” does, even as it allegedly floats in some void of signification (“en le vide de signification”) (Johnson 206-207). Yet if “La pénultième” finishes the verse, must it not also be dead, as the statement “La Pénultième est morte” would imply? In which case, then, the imaginary verse consigns the predicate half of the declaration, “est morte,” to the semantic waste bin: its significative value is nil. Such is the case, unless we reverse the meaning of “en le vide de signification”: rather than suggest that “est morte” is devoid of signification, perhaps signification is itself the void, the emptiness, in which the words “est morte” roam, detached from any kind of “suspension fatidique.” Johnson, in her translation of the poem, seems to confirm this ambiguity: “*Is Dead* / floated free within the fateful pause, the signifying void, more uselessly in the absence of all signification” (*Divagations* 17; her italics). As we can see, there remains a noticeable tension between the “signifying void” and the “absence of all signification”—a semantic tension that Mallarmé renders literal later in the poem. Through the image of “la corde tendue de l’instrument de musique,” the poet begins to stage this tension. As the narrator himself finishes reading the words “La pénultième,” *en fin de vers* (that is, just before he’s about to read the continuation of the phrase, “est morte”), he confesses to finding in the silence after *Pénultième*

une pénible jouissance : « La Pénultième » puis la corde de l’instrument, si tendue en l’oubli sur le son *nul*, cassait sans doute et j’ajoutais en matière d’oraison : « Est morte. »

Je ne discontinuai pas de tenter un retour à des pensées de prédilection, alléguant, pour me calmer, que, certes, pénultième est le terme du lexique qui signifie l'avant-dernière syllabe des vocables, et son apparition, le reste mal abjuré d'un labeur de linguistique par lequel quotidiennement sanglote de s'interrompre ma noble faculté poétique : la sonorité même et l'air de mensonge assumé par la hâte de la facile affirmation étaient une cause de tourment. Harcelé, je résolus de laisser les mots de triste nature errer eux-mêmes sur ma bouche, et j'allai murmurant avec l'intonation susceptible de condoléance : « La Pénultième est morte, elle est morte, bien morte, la désespérée Pénultième », croyant par là satisfaire l'inquiétude...

The imagery seems to be most effective here if we imagine a string that tightens in sync with the poet's articulation of each syllable, with *nul*, or the penultimate syllable of *pénultième*, effecting a certain climax, after which begins a "pénible jouissance," and then—*la cassure*. The forgetful delectation provoked by *nul* and its ensuing silence inevitably become a sort of eulogy, the prosaic rendering of a conclusion that didn't need to be said, that is painfully redundant.

Here we recall the tension between the *signifying void* and the *void of signification*: in the *nul*, in the *silence*, in the *blanc* that finishes the verse—followed by the prosaic "est morte," the words that embody the absence of signification. The ending of the verse in "La Pénultième" is thus a pseudo-ending, one that Johnson situates in Mallarmé's pronouncement, in *La Musique et Les Lettres*, that "toute prose... vaut en tant qu'un vers rompu": "Si donc le vers, ici, est rompu, c'est que, précisément, *le silence est brisé*. En effet, si la corde de l'instrument est figurée par le son nul, qu'est-ce qu'un « son nul », précisément, un silence? Cette cassure de la corde... finit non pas par produire un bruit mais par disséminer le silence, par désarticuler dans le texte toute

récupération de sens” (Johnson 206-207). This dissemination of silence, Johnson goes on to suggest, is thus what Mallarmé means to evoke when he identifies prose as *vers rompu*; further, it’s under the aegis of this identity that the discrete pieces of Johnson’s argument come into place. Working from an understanding of rhyme as the crucial signpost of an alexandrine’s ending, she demonstrates how Mallarmé, a poet very much within the tradition of French verse, saw the agreement of fragmented lines via rhyme as more or less equivalent to that between fragments which form an idea—a complicated though clever way of connecting the prosaic gesture of the line in *Le Démon* with the crisis of verse Mallarmé himself had apprehended (Johnson 209).

Through a few, extraordinary acts of reading Mallarmé’s putatively incomprehensible text, Johnson leaves scant open ends. Yet she ends with a provocative observation on rhyme, as Mallarmé’s understands its function within the poem and within the less defined concept of the idea. She then extends this observation to the recurring problem of dubious separation between poetry and the critical language we use to talk about it, *le métalangage* which dominates throughout Mallarmé’s critical poems. These are Johnson’s closing words:

La critique, en réalité ne s’ajoute pas au texte comme son *explication*, mais seulement comme sa *rime*. Voilà ce que dramatise le texte du *Démon de l’analogie*: tout lecteur (y compris l’auteur de ces lignes) qui tente de dire à *quoi rime* un texte, ne peut qu’y juxtaposer dans un nouvel « équilibre momentané et double à la façon du vol », le vers rompu de sa propre lecture (Johnson 211; her emphasis).

The poet can’t qualify the verse that he finishes with *pénultième* without hearing the sonority and the “air de mensonge” assumed by such an easy, self-presenting observation—that the verse is

dead. Repeating the phrase over and over, the narrator attempts to beat from it every last bit of signification—he explains that *la pénultième* is simply a lexical term while regretting the occupation of his “noble faculté poétique” with such a banal declaration. What shocks the poet into a feeling of *effroi*, however, is the realization that he now possesses the voice that originally uttered the haunting phrase: “j’avais, ma main réfléchi par un vitrage de boutique y faisant le geste d’une caresse qui descend sur quelque chose, la voix même (la première, qui indubitablement avait été l’unique).” Implying that the poet himself is handling the strange voice that speaks, the relative clause “qui descend” harks back to the first few lines of the poem, where he hears “une voix,” presumably distinct from his own, “prononçant les mots [*La pénultième est morte*] d’un ton descendant.” The present participle morphs into a relative clause, suggesting that what was imagined as an external, estranged voice has actually been the poet’s all along. It’s worth noting alongside this the imagery that Mallarmé uses when he conjures the strange voice; the narrator describes “la sensation propre d’une aile glissant sur les cordes d’un instrument.” What great contrast, then, between the skating wing and the image which appears at the end of the poem, as the narrator stands before the window of a shop selling old instruments and sees “à terre, des palmes jaunes et les ailes enfouies en l’ombre, d’oiseaux anciens.” The poet escapes from the eerie scene, condemned, however, to bear “le deuil de l’inexplicable Pénultième”—an ending which Johnson interprets sagaciously as Mallarmé’s way of qualifying the entire poem as “inexplicable” (the penultimate word). With such a formulation, we see that the poem both does and does not end on the penultimate—it does, to the extent that the word “Pénultième” is itself the last word, but doesn’t, given that the suggestion of an ultimate *pénultième* is a contradiction in terms. And so yet another tension emerges: that between the semantic definition of the word

pénultième and the manifestation of the word as a sound, a linguistic unit, unto itself. “La pénultième,” as it literally finishes the poetic line, lingers in the gaping hole of signification torn open by the poem—it contains the feeling of a “mensonge,” of artifice, yet continues to signify by virtue of its sonority.

This tension, though manifesting differently throughout the poem, recurs as much in the text as it does in our analysis: it is, rightly, the problem which frames *Le Démon de l’analogie*. It begins to sound in the very first line, as Mallarmé asks us if “Des paroles inconnues chantèrent-elles sur vos lèvres, lambeaux maudits d’une phrase absurde?” We get again the image of rogue words inhabiting the poet’s mouth, as he resolves to let these frightening strangers err “eux-mêmes sur ma bouche.” The sense of alienation that precedes the poet’s fright—the alienation that has some weird, “inexplicable” connection to his enunciation of “une phrase absurde”—also entertains a palpable, intertextual resonance with Poe’s similarly named tale, the “Imp of the Perverse” (in French: *Le Démon de la perversité*). As Jean-Luc Steinmetz observes in his edition of *Poésies et autres textes*, “« Le Démon de l’analogie » renvoie manifestement à un conte d’Edgar Poe, « Le Démon de la perversité », traduit ensuite par Baudelaire...” (*Poésies* 276). One of the key structural similarities of the two texts is their narrative ambiguity, yet while Mallarmé’s text contains little extrapolation from the direct perception of the narrator, “Imp of the Perverse” begins with an elongated “consideration of the faculties and impulses—of the prima mobile of the human soul” that phrenologists and moralists alike have attempted. “In the pure arrogance of the reason,” Poe assures us, “we have all overlooked” arguably the most “radical primitive, irreducible sentiment” (Poe 1). Still suspending the announcement of this sentiment, Poe continues, ironically, to treat its obviousness: “The idea of *it* has never occurred

to us, simply because of its supererogation.” What Poe evokes is something so obvious that we’ve shed scarcely a moment to think about it. He then unleashes a digression that continues for quite a bit, expounding the essential flaw in the way humans have constituted their understanding of *human* faculties. Finally, we get the revelation of what this mysterious sentiment actually is, though a sort of counterfactual reimagining of the history of phrenology: “Induction, a posteriori, would have brought phrenology to admit, as an innate and primitive principle of human action, a paradoxical something, which we may call perverseness, for want of a more characteristic term” (Poe 2). Though we are still *wanting* a more characteristic term, a more apt name for something that should have been so easy to induce, we’ve at least welcomed the notion of the perverse into our acquaintance. Poe attempts to crystallize this notion by distinguishing it resolutely from the “combativeness of phrenology,” but what strikes readers most in this crystallization is the first example through which he more vividly introduces it to readers. “No one,” Poe declares,

who trustingly consults and thoroughly questions his own soul, will be disposed to deny the entire radicalness of the propensity in question. It is not more *incomprehensible* than distinctive. There lives no man who at some period has not been tormented, for example, by an earnest desire to tantalize a listener by circumlocution. The speaker is aware that he displeases; he has every intention to please, he is usually curt, precise, and clear, the *most laconic and luminous language is struggling for utterance upon his tongue*, it is only with difficulty that he restrains himself from giving it flow; he dreads and deprecates the anger of him whom he addresses; yet, the thought strikes him, that by certain involutions and parentheses this anger may be engendered. That single thought is enough. The impulse increases to a wish, the wish to a desire, the desire to an

uncontrollable longing, and the longing (to the deep regret and mortification of the speaker, and in defiance of all consequences) is indulged (Poe 2-3; emphasis mine).

How bizarre it is that for want of a more characteristic term, Poe characterizes “perverseness” as an almost *inexplicable* impulse towards circumlocution. There is nothing that mortifies a speaker more than his verbosity, yet he denies with sadistic pleasure the “most laconic and luminous language” to tantalize readers with jargon. He holds in suspension some chimerical insight at the expense of listeners, or indeed, if Poe finds himself wont to practice such perverse circumlocution, at the expense of *readers* as well. At this point, Poe has already suggested that defining perversity would be an act of supererogation—why then does he labor to produce an example of perversity that roots the term in prolixity, itself a supererogative desire? The whole example suggests that Poe’s tale isn’t so much an attempt to introduce or explicate perversity but to bore readers with unnecessary words. Why else would he take so long to explain a concept that is so apparent, so immediately inducible?

Unsurprisingly, Poe carries on with his explanation, adducing a few other, overdetermined examples (Why do we put off a task we know needs to get done? Why do we feel the impulse to stand near a cliff?) He finally does complete the long roundabout to his own narrative, but not without explaining to readers why he had to be “prolix”:

Examine these similar actions as we will, we shall find them resulting solely from the spirit of the Perverse. We perpetrate them because we feel that we should not. Beyond or behind this there is no intelligible principle; and we might, indeed, deem this perverseness a direct instigation of the Arch-Fiend, were it not occasionally known to operate in furtherance of good. I have said thus much, that in some measure I may

answer your question, that I may explain to you why I am here, that I may assign to you something that shall have at least the faint aspect of a cause for my wearing these fetters, and for my tenanting this cell of the condemned.

Though it might be difficult to notice amidst this unexpected divulgence of the narrator's condemnation, there is actually something of a reversal here in the logical order of Poe's concept of perversity: what originally could have been arrived at only by *a posteriori* induction now seems to be assimilable through a deductive process. The actions Poe adduces as examples of perversity appear as perverse only by deduction from the principle itself. Otherwise, we might confuse what he means by perversity in the context of the tale: indeed, it isn't the crime itself that Poe qualifies as perverse, or resulting from a perverse impulse, even though it involves the murder of some victim (presumably related to the narrator) for financial gain. Counterintuitively, it's in the description of the murder where Poe chooses not to relate specifics, to "vex [us] with impertinent details" or "describe the easy artifices by which" he commits the act (Poe 4). In fact, the "imp of the perverse" doesn't bid the narrator's complicity until the end of the tale, when he recounts how "some invisible fiend...struck me with his broad palm upon the back. The long imprisoned secret burst forth from my soul. They say that I spoke with a distinct enunciation, but with marked emphasis and passionate hurry, as if in dread of interruption before concluding the brief, but pregnant sentences that consigned me to the hangman and to hell" (Poe 5). Perversity, Poe intimates, is what coaxes his condemned narrator towards an act of unconscious speech and self-betrayal. The story thus narrates two crimes: at the diegetic level, the protagonist's effusive prolixity in confessing his murder; at the textual level, the detours he takes in explaining to readers both what perversity is and its role in his demise.

But what exactly is the perverse? Is it an unspoken, though universal desire to murder, to steal, to annoy? Or does it inhere in some other action, as Poe's tale seems to suggest? If coining the idea of the perverse indulges the same perverse impulse that leads us to burden "laconic and luminous language" with "involutions and parentheses," then the very thought process which acquaints us with perversity seems totally unnecessary. What is really perverse, then, about the "Imp of the Perverse" is the text's own self-denial—the fact that it cannibalizes its own existence as a prose text. If we replace "laconic and luminous language" with *poetry*, the metatextual crux of Poe's tale becomes clear: his move towards prose is a move towards a perverse literary impulse to tantalize, to say more than what needs to be said. The fact that we could have apprehended the perverse through induction alone invalidates the text's work of deduction, of its move from a principle to textual examples—what essentially constitutes the work of literary criticism. Directly or indirectly, this is precisely what allows Johnson to constitute "une *crise du métalangage*" chez Mallarmé. In beginning to elaborate this crisis, Johnson recognizes a certain "genre de père-versité" operative in the critical work of *Crise de Vers*, departing from Mallarmé's profession, at the time of Hugo's death, that the latter "était le vers personnellement":

"si le nom de Hugo, en d'autres termes, désigne moins une personne qu'une *personnification du vers*, alors tuer Hugo, ce n'est tuer qu'une *figure*, un Père-Vers. Ce qui ne veut pas dire que le meurtre mallarméen de Hugo soit un meurtre « innocent » : au contraire, c'est précisément à travers ce genre de « père-versité » que la poésie met à nu la structure essentiellement linguistique, fondamentalement figurée, de toute violence œdipienne" (Johnson 173; her emphasis).

For Johnson, Mallarmé's pronouncement of Hugo's death represents a means of positioning his own writing within the lineage of French "pères de vers." What Mallarmé recognizes, however, is that the mere notions of a "père de vers," or of a literary tradition, are themselves constructed and reified through a certain kind of linguistic work. He catches prose criticism in the act of talking about poetry through encoded figures that are really poetic. Thus Mallarmé locates perversity in the figurative act of personifying verse.

With this in mind, we might return to *Le Démon de l'analogie*, reinterpreting the absurd phrase, "La pénultième est morte," as a meditation on poetic language. "La pénultième" clearly has a linguistic function in the context of the poem; it signifies *about* language. Hence the poet's vain attempts to reassure himself that "La pénultième" is only a "terme du lexique"; hence his "secret espoir de l'ensevelir en l'amplification de la psalmodie." Yet despite these attempts, he realizes, "d'une magie aisément déductible et nerveuse," that he, the poet, with his "noble faculté poétique," has been pronouncing the perverse, prosaic words all along: he need only look into the glass of the shop window to deduce his complicity.

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