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# Language of shock and present experience: Benjamin as a reader of Baudelaire

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**Abstract:** This article discusses Benjamin's interpretation of Baudelaire's poetry as a key to reading modernity. Understanding the ambiguities between novelty and archaism, typical of the time, is only possible thanks to the poet's gesture of privileging radical contingency. On the one hand, the violence of unwanted encounters amid the crowd does not allow for reflection; on the other, its productive dimension makes contingency speakable. The poet's verses will make possible the encounter of the now of experience with the available past in terms of expectation: explanatory images are produced from the singularity of language. Finally, the Lacanian real is produced thanks to the understanding of the psyche as structure.

**Keywords:** Real, Shock, Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin, Psychoanalysis

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# Lenguaje del choque y experiencia presente: Benjamin lector de Baudelaire

**Resumen:** El presente trabajo aborda la interpretación que hace Benjamin de la poesía de Baudelaire, para tratarla como una clave de lectura de la modernidad. Comprender las ambigüedades entre novedad y arcaísmo, típicas de la época, solo es posible gracias al gesto del poeta de privilegiar la radical contingencia. Por un lado, la violencia de encuentros no deseados en medio de la multitud no permite la reflexión; por otro, su dimensión productiva hace que la contingencia se vuelva decible. Los versos del poeta posibilitaron el encuentro del ahora de la experiencia con el pasado disponible en cuanto expectativa: se producen imágenes explicativas partiendo de la singularidad del lenguaje. Finalmente, lo real laciano adquiere el mismo valor operatorio que el choque: se simboliza lo vivido, cuya inteligibilidad se produce gracias a la comprensión del psiquismo como estructura.

**Palabras clave:** Real, Choque, Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin, Psicoanálisis

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## 1. Introduction

Unlike Marx, Benjamin rarely uses the term “alienation”, preferring to use “phantasmagoria”. This word, however, is also easily found in the lexicon of the author of *Capital* (1983). Lukács takes Marx’s (1960, p. 110) economic analyses as “given”, in what might be seen as an overcoming of the immediate in view of the search for its socially mediated processuality. Benjamin proceeds in this way, but, innovatively, he is more interested in an imaginative detailing of the action of capital in urban life, than in “concrete descriptions” (Löwy, 1990, p. 213).

With literary analysis or obscure writers, Benjamin starts from the micro to understand their time. He makes use of a double vision—not condemning, but understanding—, betting on the interruption of infernal repetition for the advent of the new: it is double because it mortifies the phenomenon, turning it into an idea, to save it from pure contingency. Here we will approach some of his considerations on Baudelaire, which unfold in his work, to lose ourselves in the arcades, blockades, exhibitions and barricades of the *belle époque parisienne* in a virtual dialogue with the present time. Let us see how Benjamin, mediated by his interpretation of Baudelaire, perceives modern second nature. In Baudelaire’s themes, the problematic acquires the palpable vision of the lyric poet, not hiding in a “pure art”.

This article aims to follow Walter Benjamin’s reading of the poet Charles Baudelaire. In a broad sense, it is a matter of giving visibility to the present time experience through the understanding of the renewed sonnets of the French poet, starting from an analysis of Paris in the nineteenth century. This program, moreover, was shared by Baudelaire, as we read in his opusculé on modernity, dedicated to the paintings and drawings of Constantin Guy, when modernity is identified as the ephemeral, the other half of beauty, understood in this amphibious way:

You have no right to despise this transitory and fugitive element, whose metamorphoses are so frequent. By suppressing it, you inevitably fall into the void of an abstract, indefinable beauty, like that of the first woman before the original sin (Baudelaire, 1961, pp. 1163-1164).

That said, the investigation of Baudelairean images will generate a normativity proper to modernity, as the new is expressed through an excess of signs, whether in the signs of cities or in the agglomerations of people and population flows, giving rise to a nascent mass culture.

In choosing Baudelaire’s verses as a lens on time, Benjamin devotes himself to understanding not only his verses, but also, in parallel, the individual type that produced them. However, fleeing from the psychologization of personal projections, it is a matter of understanding the individual as a product of his time, with a reflective activity that also offers the poetic gesture of creation. Thus, it will be a matter of

following in the footsteps of the *flâneur* as a sign of the internal dynamics of the *socius*—a result of capitalism and yet resistant to it, he struggles to give individuality to the universalization regime in force.

If the poet and the passerby in a nineteenth-century European capital are immersed in the shocks of everyday life, their conception of beauty must feed on it. The moment of interruption of expectations, which can lead to normalization and indifference or to the gesture of creative decentering, implies a new functioning of the psyche, hence Benjamin's references to Freud and our subsequent proposal for a dialogue with Lacan.

Lacan's contributions consist in bringing the external dimension of shock to the functioning of the psyche. Literary creativity, especially that of Baudelaire, is thus also indebted to a treatment of experience that activates and expresses the unconscious as creation.

The remainder of this paper will address the following topics: (2) poetry and lyricism in nineteenth-century Paris, arriving at the experience of shock; (3) the unconscious as structure and the real as evasion; (4) poetry and visibility; (5) the figure of the *flâneur*; and (6) (inconclusive) conclusions, where we point to the openness of thought nourished by contingency, oscillating between reproduction and utopia.

## 2. Modern lyricism

Baudelaire wanted to be understood. He then addresses his “fellows”: *Hypocrite lecteur, mon semblable, mon frère* (Baudelaire, 1989, p. 3), as in the poem “To the Reader” that opens *The Flowers of Evil*. Their rickety willpower and concentration prevent or hinder the reading of lyric poetry: “What they prefer is sensual pleasures; they are familiar with the *spleen* which kills interest and receptiveness”<sup>1</sup> (Benjamin, 1994, p. 103). The poet refers to his contemporaries, the men in the street whom he encounters and greets with the famous verse already mentioned. In the second half of the nineteenth century lyric poetry was discredited, which is evident in the following facts: lyric poetry ceased to be poetry, and Baudelaire was the last poet that had great success writing lyric verses. Since the “conditions for a positive reception” of this type of poetry are “less favorable”, they say little about the reader's experience (Benjamin, 1994).

In the same cultural context, from the late nineteenth century, philosophy turned to the apprehension of what would be “true experience”. These attempts, known as the “philosophy of life”, do not start from man in society; they turn to literature, nature and myth, which Benjamin also does, but in a dialectical way. Henri Bergson

1 *Spleen* is understood as the gloomy and melancholic feeling of the late nineteenth century.

stands out among these philosophers. In *Matter and Memory* (2012), the structure of memory would be decisive for philosophical experience. Experience in this work by Bergson corresponds to “duration”.

One of Proust’s great merits might be that he tried to reproduce in “today’s social conditions” the experience described by Bergson. In Proust, Bergson’s “pure memory” becomes “involuntary memory”, as opposed to “voluntary memory”. In the French novelist, the past returns when it comes into contact with a material object, a sensation such as taste, as a reaction to the intention and machinations of intelligence (Benjamin, 1994).

Benjamin points to a “historical rivalry” between forms of communication. The old narrative gives way to information (journalistic, above all), which in turn moves toward pure sensation. This movement is reflected in experience, or rather in its “atrophy”. The narrative form differs from the others in that it does not seek to transmit knowledge, but to renew and update “tradition”: “it embeds it [knowledge] in the life of the storyteller in order to pass it on as experience to those listening” (Benjamin, 1994, p. 10). Proust’s Herculean effort is to reconstruct the storyteller, master of his labyrinths. He narrates his whole life, beginning with his own childhood. The experience that arises from this does not separate voluntary memory from involuntary memory in a definite way, since it is an account of what was experienced at some point in time.

The division between the two memory categories is the same as that between individual past and collective past. As in cults, a remembered moment is a pretext for its eternal reproduction (*idem, ibidem*). As a storyteller

(...) it is granted to him to reach back to a whole lifetime (a life, incidentally, that comprises not only his own experience but no little of the experience of others; what the storyteller knows from hearsay is added to his own) (Benjamin, 1985, p. 221).

If art implies technical mastery as a projection of purpose and also in the production of materiality or sensorial blockage, the unveiling provoked by the involuntary makes possible the advent of a new figure of technique or even its displacement: it is a procedure open to disarray. In other words, if there is intention (or rationality), it is created by its opposite, that is, the unintentional or irrational.

### 3. Unconscious structure

Benjamin draws on Freud from 1921 and his *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1975) to develop his concept of “shock”. A correlation is established between memory (in the sense of involuntary memory) and consciousness; this hypothesis is used “(...) in situations far removed from those which Freud had in mind when he wrote” (Benjamin,

1994, p. 108), since it is not a clinical matter, but rather a street subjectivation. Remembrance protects impressions, while memory disaggregates them. In this sense, memory would be a formless mass not yet actualized in consciousness.

For Freud, the stimulating process disappears in consciousness, which organizes it in a vitiated way: “Consciousness comes into being at the site of a memory trace” (Benjamin, 1994, pp. 108-109). Memory traces are all the less durable the more conscious the stimulus becomes. Involuntary memory is then precisely that which has not been consciously experienced, that which escapes the prefabricated paths we have constructed. According to Freud, this renders the conscious mind incapable of registering any memory traces (Benjamin, 1994). The conscious mind would have as its function the protection from external stimuli—external energies felt as “shocks”. When these shocks are registered by consciousness, their effect ceases to be traumatic (Benjamin, 1994).

Concerning shock and unconscious processes, in an essay devoted to literary criticism (a piece of “applied psychoanalysis” or “psychoanalytic criticism”), Jacques Lacan exercises criticism. According to him, the literary work produces an equivalent of the unconscious, approaching Benjamin’s reading of Baudelaire—making the referential code delirious. The product of the poet is thus the unseen of the vision, the unconscious of an epoch:

The work possesses the equivalent of the unconscious, an equivalent no less real than itself, since it falsifies the unconscious in its curvature. (...) the writer who produces it is no less a falsifier, if he tries to understand while it is produced (...) (Lacan, 1977, p. 15).

In these statements one can note the theme of recollection and lived experience as two moments of the temporal phenomenon of structure. Lacan’s focus on writing is an attempt to examine how the mind works. This is similar to the mythical reconstruction developed by Poe in his text *The Philosophy of Composition*. The particularity of Lacan’s critique lies in its reductionist character with respect to the writing of a text. The gesture of reduction is understood as if the writing exercise were the mere expression of a neurosis. Moreover, it points to the imitation that can be established between a literary work and the effects of the unconscious structure.

In the exercise of writing by the writer, the attempt is even to understand the “hole” created by the signifier. In this instance, meanings are emptied and dissipated—in a regime of contingency, in the same way as in unexpected encounters in the streets. Likewise, what stands out is that writing participates in the instance of the unconscious since, in the exercise of writing, there is a remainder that is stolen, remaining in an unknown place, in a hole. In other words, when the writer is writing, he/she does not know what he/she is doing, since writing assists the structure of the unconscious process.

Now, if there is an interpretation of the act of writing as an exercise, it does not have to be true or false, but it has to be just: beyond an empirical confirmation, it is a question of its functioning, which endorses the possibilities of speech. Lacan expresses this in his attack on the imitation between literary work and effects of the unconscious:

The work only exists in that curvature which is that of the structure itself. We are left then with no mere analogy. (...). It is real, and, in this sense, the work imitates nothing. It is, as fiction, a truthful structure (Lacan, 1977, p. 16).

Taking into consideration memory and its form of organization as a temporal phenomenon of structure, and following Proust, if there is an involuntary act in memory that unveils and reveals itself as intentional or irrational, it is because the act expresses the scene of a literariness in the experience of the unconscious. This literariness is the grammar that names the letter, the symptom and the enjoyment—all of them embedded in the structure of the unconscious as experience of a living language. Such an experience allows us to affirm that the organization of a written text can be understood as a structure of the unconscious. From this view follows Lacan's famous statement: "The unconscious is structured as a language" (Lacan, 1973, p. 23).

The relationship between language and psychoanalysis, particularly between language and the unconscious, leads us to probe into the concept of structure. If Lacan succeeds in asking what is it that "touches" us in the process of writing? or, still, what is the psychic economy involved in that act? or, even, where and how are our bodies touched by the "letters" of literature?, it is because there is in these questions some legitimization of the unconscious structure.

It can thus be seen that the structure of language inscribes a scriptural operation in the signifying chain, which not only produces a subject of the utterance, as an effect of meaning between links in the signifying chain, but also produces a hole that names the Real. Finally, this Real, as part of the structural link of the subject form between the symbolic, the imaginary and the real (that is, the Borromean knot<sup>2</sup>), can be the translation of a shock, which interrupts the repetition of the signifying chain, letting the new come in.

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2 The three registers—the Real (R), the Symbolic (S) and the Imaginary (I)—were introduced in 1953. Later, in the 1970s, he conceptualized them as interlinked, with reference to the topology of the Borromean knot, a topological and ternary structure. This means that the three registers are imbricated among themselves, as a relational whole in a necessary implication, with an underlying principle of equivalence that makes it possible to alternate among them. But, at the same time, each register is in itself Real, Symbolic and Imaginary. What it investigates is the modality of consistency that it presents, in the sense that, although the three registers are equivalent, the truth is that they do not eliminate their respective differences. Thus, the logic of the Borromean knot, in the 1970s, allows us to think that the basis of consistency of the nodal structure, namely, the Real, is the already unthought, the "there is", logically prior to all qualification and discernment in naming. That is why it is an "impossible": impossibility of narrating and thinking something that only happens as a "will have been". See Lacan (1975; 2011).

Another way to identify Baudelaire's lyric poetry is through the influence of the work of Edgar Allan Poe. Writing without a sender is the appropriate form for the sensation of the inexorable passing of time, the subject matter of the author of *The Flowers of Evil*. Through Poe, with the letter that is never revealed, we can affirm a sort of Lacanian poetics, pursuing the traces of language. A first level of reflection will allow Lacan to explain the functioning of the unconscious as a language. The particularity of Poe's narrative for psychoanalytic literature is the connection between metaphor, repetition and signifier. This highlights how the subject is caught up in the webs of unconscious language. But there is also an interplay of memory traces in the psychic mechanism expressed through signifying repetition in the form of metaphors. It could be said that this signifying repetition is a process of "metaphorization" and structuring of psychic reality, and that Lacan finds in writing, whose movement does not follow the rigid metaphorization of a single master signifier, but the complex and knotted articulation of multiple relations between the three registers—the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary.

This hints at the Lacanian thesis on the presence of multiple memories recorded in different types of signs in the registers interlinked in the Borromean knot. Thus, the principle that governs the schema of memory, beyond the various levels of memory transcription, is the model of the conscious and unconscious. Moreover, and returning again and again to Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* (2010), Lacan brings up the notion of "Thing" developed in *Seminar VII* (1986) to exemplify the schema of memory. For Lacan, the "Thing" denotes an "anti-writing" of the unconscious, on the basis of which the subsequent bifurcation of speech and writing can be established. If we take Lacan's analysis to the experience of shock in the Baudelairean city, the Thing, then, is the matter of shock, as the materiality of bodies in the new *polis* disorients the courses of citizens—either so that they may protect themselves from threats or, still, to unveil their possibilities of expression.

In this respect, if the unconscious is fundamentally writing and the battery of these archaic memory inscriptions precedes the first immersion of the unconscious word (*la langue*)<sup>3</sup> which translates a sort of babbling of signifiers, then and following Poe's "The Purloined Letter", there is a mechanism of transference with other speaking beings that begins with the oral side of language.

A basic aspect of Lacan's *Seminar on "The Purloined Letter"* (1966) moves the essential triggering of the story: the themes of gaze and voice. Lacan analyzes them under the title of scopic drive (gaze) and vocal drive (voice). To be precise, that unfolding of the path of the stolen letter implies the strange capacity of some characters to discover what others cannot find despite its manifest presence.

3 Term used by Lacan to account for how the mode of operation of the unconscious word occurs. In English, it would be *language*.



From this perspective, Lacan deals with three different gazes which structure Poe's drama. A first gaze is that which does not see; a second gaze is that which sees that the first gaze does not see and which, in turn, fools itself believing it has covered what it hides; and, finally, a third gaze is that which sees in the open what should be hidden. It is through these three gazes that the scopic function operates.<sup>4</sup> In parallel, the functioning of the vocal drive correlates with the theme of the gaze in the fact of the triggering of an impossible dialogue between a deaf person and one who can hear, letting appear the discursive operator of an intersubjectivity in search of a truth in the constitution of the other, embodied by the image captured in an intersubjective way and through the imaginary register. This expresses the times of the crowds, since anyone can be with such a letter, that is, everyone can be read and seen. Lacan already pointed this out in a lecture he gave in Geneva in 1975, with respect to the gaze and the embodiment or "corporealization" of the environment which, in the case of the Baudelairean city and the crowds of the Paris of his time, means that it is the gaze of the crowd that sees and captures the embodied image of the city, and through this scopic drive the crowd materializes corporeally as an image of itself and takes on weight and dimension.

#### 4. Fencing and visibility

Baudelaire incorporates shock into his experience, which can be read as the Lacanian Real, insofar as an impossible encounter not transmissible under a symbolic form, but transmissible in the artist's scream in the face of creation and its idiosyncrasy (Benjamin, 1994). The image of "self-fencing", Guy's metaphor for the poem "The Sun"<sup>5</sup>

4 Lacan deals with the subject of the gaze in several seminars. However, it is in Seminars X and XI that he discusses the scopic function as one of the four fundamental drives that constitute the unconscious. The specificity in which he deals with the gaze in *Seminar XI* has to do with the distinction between the subjectifying gaze and the physiological function of seeing, i.e., the eye. The former relates to desire and how the subject is looked at thus becoming an image of the Other. What happens there is that the subject knows that he is looked at and sees that he is looked at by other, inscribing both himself and the other in the symbolic order. It is the *fort-da* game: now you see me, now you don't. In contrast, the function of seeing points to the scopic devouring enjoyment of the unconscious Other, that is, a gaze without limit. A crossroads arises here, since the subject may not be seen, that is, the gaze may miss the subject, leaving the subject itself outside the symbolic register of desire, as the subject of desire; but, on the other hand, if there is no limit to the gaze (like the voyeurist), that is, if the devouring eye is not blinded, nothing will prevent the subject from being erased, crushed by the devouring of the Other's desire. The game, in the scopic function that has to do with the Freudian *fort-da*, implies a dialectic concealment/dis-concealment of the gaze of the other, where the other looks at the subject and the subject hides from that gaze; but, at the same time, implies that the other looks for the subject and can un-hide him on condition that he can make him not find him, uncovering the fact of "loss": "if you do not find me, you can lose me". This is where desire occurs, not only the desire of the other, but the desire of the great symbolic Other. See "La schize de l'oeil et du regard" in Lacan (1973, pp. 65-73).

5 "Through all the district's length, where from the shacks/ Hang shutters for concealing secret acts./ When shafts of sunlight strike with doubled heat/ On towns and fields, on rooftops, on the wheat,/ I practise my quaint swordsmanship alone./ Stumbling on

(Benjamin, 1994, p. 68), best defines the poet as he cuts through the shocks, resisting as he creates, sculpting with his foil a face in the big city. Contact with the masses shocks him. It is necessary to understand the masses not as “any sort of collective”, but as an “(...) amorphous crowd of passers-by, the people in the street” (Benjamin, 1994, p. 113).

The *flâneur* has the desire to lend a soul to this crowd; being in the midst of it is the experience he never tires of narrating. Such crowd is not a model for Baudelaire, whose “model” was simply present experience. Rather, it is about its “hidden figure”, its proximity to the potential reader, hypocritical as he is. The fencer strikes to make his way through the crowd, as he is and is not with it. In the poem “The Sun” we find the image of a poet in deserted neighborhoods fighting against a “phantom crowd” of words (Benjamin, 1994, p. 113). What kind of phantom crowd is this? The urban conglomerate alienated from its cultural production? The poet that, surrounded and isolated, feels incapable of expressing what he is experiencing?

Perhaps one can better understand Gide’s consideration of Baudelaire, when he claimed that his work was marked by the intermittency between image and idea, word and thing (Benjamin, 1994), as the material dimension of the word of the good Lacanian neologism, the *motérialisme* (2017). In the lecture he gave in Geneva on the symptom, Lacan develops an examination between writing, saying and language apropos of the symptom. A fundamental mode of relation between writing and trace is raised as an account that has a saying in an equivocal way. This is because the scriptural account that is said is nothing but a residue left by the language of the unconscious. This is where the symptom manifests itself as a meaning that is not interpreted correctly; rather, the meaning, in the subject, allows itself to speak as a signifier that is embodied in language. This signifier manifests itself as an embodied symptom. Therefore, the neologism *motérialisme* proposed by Lacan acquires its value when an embodiment of the word is considered as possible. The relation between *mot* (word) and [mat] (matter) -*érialisme* crystallizes in this meaningful corporeality, in so much a written trace left by language.

Then, going back to the *flâneur*, he would be the contingency of the *motérialisme* as the face of this clash between word and matter: language-producing *motérialisme*. Once displaced by speaking beings in a historical situation, the pre-existence of the word generates a location, and the word flies away. If the only (symbolic) “sense” is circulation, as would be the condition of the *flâneur*, one arrives at the conditions of

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words as over paving stones,/ Sniffing in corners all the risks of rhyme,/ To find a verse I'd dreamt of a long time./ This foster-father, fighter of chlorosis,/ Wakes in the fields the worms as well as roses;/ He sends our cares in vapour to the skies,/ And fills our minds, with honey fills the hives,/ Gives crippled men a new view of the world,/ And makes them gay and gentle as young girls./ Commands the crops to grow, and nourishes/ Them, in that heart that always flourishes!/ When, poet-like, he comes to town awhile,/ He lends a grace to things that are most vile,/ And simply, like a king, he makes the rounds/ Of all the hospitals, the palace grounds” (Baudelaire, 1989, p. 72).

circulation of modernity and its cities—far from being a mistake, shock becomes the condition of possibility of sense. Fencing strikes with improvisation and heroically makes a virtue out of necessity (Benjamin, 1994) and, with sword blows, sculpts the visible, making it visible.

The crowd is a “whim of nature”, an unintentional movement (or beyond intention) that still produces effects. What happens in the streets, in urban space, brings together individuals regardless of their classes (in traffic and on walks, for example). These are concrete and socially abstract agglomerations, since the individuals present there are isolated from their private interests, as customers around the “common object”, the commodity. This encounter is the “chance” of the mercantile economy. Totalitarianism massifies it, automating behavior; referring to Nazism, Benjamin (1994) points to the “ideology of the reconciled race” as its destiny (p. 58). A favorite subject of nineteenth-century writers, crowds (see, for example, Victor Hugo) are articulated as the audience of a poetry that is seen in its wake.

Baudelaire is the mass; he does not limit himself to describing it. For Baudelaire is the *parlêtre* (speaking being) of the narrative that gradually brings the Borromean knot into play in writing, that is, in the trace left by the language of the crowd. “The mass was the undulating veil through which Baudelaire saw Paris” (Benjamin, 1994, p. 117). The fascination with diverse human forms was also “the phantasmagoria, where he who waits spends his time” (Benjamin, 1994, p. 117) contradictorily and utterly alone. In the series of poems with the suggestive title “Parisian Paintings”, in the poem “Little Old Women”, distinguishable in the crowd is “(...) the gait that cannot keep up with the pace”, in a “heroic” gesture (Benjamin, 1994, p. 114) that preserves the will to transform the environment. Here is the poem:

In the sinuous folds of the old capitals,/ Where all, even horror, becomes  
pleasant,/ I watch, obedient to my fatal whims,/ For singular creatures, decrepit  
and charming (Baudelaire, 1989, p. 77).

In “To a Woman Passing By”, the verses construct the image of a widow who shuffles sullenly through the crowd and glances at the poet. What delights him comes from the crowd, which is neither rival nor hostile to the individual. The seduction or fascination that the inhabitant of the metropolis undergoes is a farewell forever—a great shock—, which in Benjamin’s beautiful words shines as an anti-romantic theme, namely, “love at last sight” (Benjamin, 1994, p. 43):

A lightning-flash... then night! —O fleeting beauty/ Whose glance suddenly gave  
me new life,/ Shall I see you again only in eternity?/ Far, far from here! Too late!  
Or maybe never!/ For I know not where you flee, you know not where I go, O  
you whom I would have loved, O you who knew it too! (Baudelaire, 1989, p. 80).

As mentioned above, it is possible to extract an affirmation from reification, to overcome the nausea of the evil flower. Shock forces an encounter, a practice that does not choose interlocutors. The urban mass is the whole of society gathered together, which leads to a recognition of subjectivities and evocation of justice. The poem is the locus of the encounter of city dwellers—community power. In the crowd class differences are attenuated, which makes “To a Woman Passing By” a poem about “the erotic person”, and not so much about a bourgeois in a mob. The encounter only takes place in the “never”—the impossible encounter, according to Lacan’s definition of the Real.

More precisely, in the psychoanalytic theorization proposed by Lacan, the register of the Real manifests itself in different ways. While the Real is always that which is not symbolizable (since it is the shock that leaves a fault or a hole in the symbolic register but, also, that fault “symbolizes” the constitution of the barred–divided–subject as a double image of itself, which is nothing but the imaginary register), the truth is that the Real also manifests itself as an impossible unconscious encounter between signifiers. That is why Lacan’s statement acquires meaning in that impossible place of symbolization: a signifier is what a subject represents for another signifier (Lacan, 1966). This means that the signifier is a sign of absence that refers to another sign and that, in this referring or “should be”<sup>6</sup>, does not “signify” anything. This can be illustrated by the following passage: “when the poet’s passion seems to be frustrated but in reality bursts out of him like a flame. He burns in this flame, but no Phoenix arises from it” (Benjamin, 1994, p. 43). He loses his speech, not because he is at first captivated by an image, but by “the shock with which an imperious desire suddenly overcomes a lonely man”. Thus, in big cities, love burns down stigmatized (Benjamin, 1994, p. 43).

Proust shares this view. He characterized Albertine, the beloved *cocotte*, as a Parisian woman dressed in black and pale satin; weakened in the midst of the masses, she is recognizable by a look that causes unease. Benjamin describes in his own words a long passage from Poe, who was highly influential on Baudelaire, his French translator. The fragment is from “The Man of the Crowd”. The setting is London and the narrator is a man recently cured of a serious illness who sits in a bar and plunges back into the bustle of the city. He glances at the newspaper, at the pub patrons, but most of all at the crowd passing through the street. In the evening the flow increased, and the convalescent felt an ecstasy he had never experienced before, an excitement that led him to contemplate the heads parading down the street, as if he were there.

6 In the lecture delivered in Geneva on the symptom, Lacan refers to Freud’s sentence *Soll Ich werden* meaning “should be”, alluding, not only to the I (*Ich*), but to the idea of becoming, since the verb “to be” (*Werden*) inscribed in the “should” points to going toward something. Thus, Lacan establishes a conceptual syntagma between *werden* and *becoming* (Lacan, 2017, p. 11).

The movements, the clothing, the bodily expressions, all singles out the anonymous seen through the crack. The “dialectic of *flânerie*” is the dialectic of “The Man of the Crowd”. Seen by everyone and everything, people and things, he is a suspect. This would be the scopic gaze as Lacan puts it, apropos his analysis of Poe’s “The Purloined Letter”; but, on the other hand, it would be “(...) the totally unfathomable, the hidden” (Benjamin, 1994, pp. 190). Consequently, the meaning of present experience is suddenly suspended.

The dialectic image is a microcosmos with the “key” to the macrocosmos (Konder, 2002, p. 96). The writing of history must give its physiognomy to an epoch, and Marxism appears as the great philological tool to understand the 19th century (Benjamin, 1989; N11,2; N11,6). The presence thus deployed does not shun the gaze, ceaselessly asking for interpretations; rather, it constitutes a non-totalitarian totality. The dialectical image is, therefore, capable of showing the past redeemed by the urgencies of the present; it is thought in images:

It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, an image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: it is not progression but image, suddenly emergent. Only dialectical images are genuine images, and the place where one encounters them is language (Benjamin, 1989, p. 49; N2a,3).

Baudelaire’s poems are dialectical images of their time, available to communities of readers in other times. The ancient of beauty and of the sonnet tradition that feeds on the nineteenth century.

Benjamin disagrees with Baudelaire on at least one thing. The man in the crowd is not a *flâneur*: “In him, the calm attitude has given way to the maniac” (Benjamin, 1994, p. 121). Perhaps this would happen if the *flâneur* were withdrawn from his environment, but the fact is that the *flâneur* makes his environment on a par with his walks. The *flâneur* needs free space so as not to lose his privacy; he only flanks when he steps out of the norm. There is no *flânerie* where private life predominates. The danger lies in the fact that the commodification of urban space, transformed into an interior, contains the objects of the dream of bourgeois consumption. The *flâneur* can be characterized as standing “midway” between Nante the idler on the street corners of Berlin (with no critical distance from the current and unable to make the shock positive), and the London man in the crowd, his antitheses (protected by interiority); neither leaves the place (Benjamin, 1994): they are both inside and outside the movement, because they see it as they participate in it. For him, the city

is divided into the “dialectical poles” of landscape and room (Benjamin, 1994). But what does a *flâneur* really do?

## 5 *Flânerie*: tourism or criticism?

The literary genre of “panorama literature” takes its first steps with descriptions of the French capital. Distributed in installments, these works were “the salon attire of a literature which fundamentally was designed to be sold in the streets” (Benjamin, 1994, p. 33), combining anecdotes with information and other details. Of particular interest were the installments of “physiologies”, in which everything from opera-goers to bakers were portrayed. All sorts of human portraits were sketched, on the condition that they were harmless and quiet, in keeping with the *flâneur*'s way of “botanizing on the asphalt” (Benjamin, 1994, pp. 33-34). This guy is not necessarily a “writer” nor is he a “litterateur”. He is, at best, a Beletrian highwayman, accustomed to the agitations that unite and disunite neighbors, merchants, and customers. The oft-repeated term *flâneur* is both this minstrel of chaos and a practical figure, narrated by him. Today, when people refer to the *flâneur*, he is almost never associated with literature, except in the case of Baudelaire. *Flânerie*, then, is what the literature of physiologies itself describes, namely, taking turtles for a walk in front of cafes, beating Taylor and marching indifferently to the frenetic pace of the reproduction of capital. Surrendered to space, it is in space that he perceives time (Rouanet, 1987). He remembers, in search of lost experience. The image of the labyrinthine life is realized in the city and “the *flâneur*, without knowing it, pursues this reality” (Benjamin, 1994a, p. 203). His phantasmagoria (here a bit like monomania) is to want to reach the Self of his mute interlocutors, to describe their profession, origin and habits by their physiognomies.

He discovers hidden corners in alleys and boulevards, corresponding to the phenomenon of the “trivialization of space” (Benjamin, 1994, pp. 202-203). Both openness to the new and entanglement in fetishistic confusion can be observed. Surrounded by mystery, he is always under the supremacy of incomprehension. He elaborates images of what he is, what he is not and what he can become, “(...) according to the mood of the observer. All things are more than suggestive as they appear” (Redon in Benjamin, 1994, p. 202).

From 1841, with the bourgeois monarchy, the “radically petty-bourgeois” (Benjamin, 1994, p. 34) literary genre declined. This activity only developed after Hausmann's reform and with the creation of arcades, the grandmothers of *shopping malls*. Arcades brought together all the most luxurious that production could provide, and were the right stop to find the latest novelties. With glass-covered, marble-lined walkways, the arcades had the most elegant stores imaginable. Paths are traced, passages are formed in this city within the city, “a world in miniature”, a monad. In the arcade not only the bohemian but also the *flâneur* feel at home, in his element: “the favourite

sojourn of the strollers and the smokers, the stamping ground of all sorts of little métiers, with its chronicler and its philosopher” (Benjamin, 1994, p. 35). In this space, the *flâneur* is neither in the street nor at home, but in a middle ground. Feeling the cracks of the buildings, he feels as much at home as the bourgeois in his room. The “secret political thought” (Benjamin, 1994, p. 35) behind the physiologists’ literature is to show the inexhaustible diversity of life, whose stage is made of cobblestones and is renewed day by day, not exhausted by the sinister exploitation of labor.

The physiologists described what Marx<sup>7</sup> and Engels called “the blinkers of the narrow-minded city animal” (Benjamin, 1994, p. 36). They, the physiologists, traced the phantasmagoria of Parisian life. They believed that they could distinguish professions and passions only by scrutinizing the gaze and, moreover, they believed that it was possible for anyone to establish these differences, as in a methodological analysis of rock layers by a geologist. However, “people knew one another as debtors and creditors, salesmen and customers, as employers and employees, and above all as competitors” (Benjamin, 1994, p. 37) –hence the unbalance of the phantasmagoria. A friendly and inoffensive image of fellow human beings did not promise to go very far. In this context of inhospitable absurdity, the crowd is the madhouse that protects asocial persons from their persecutors. This aspect gave rise to the detective story, whose “original social content” (Benjamin, 1994, p. 41) is the erasure of the individual’s traces in the crowd: “In times of terror, when everyone is something of a conspirator, everybody will be in a situation where he has to play detective” (Benjamin, 1994, p. 38).

The *flâneur* is this actor that involuntarily becomes a detective, which socially justifies his idleness. This new investigator learns to react to the rhythms of the city; he “catches things in flight” like an artist (Benjamin, 1994, p. 38). *Flânerie* is a class condition, which can be critically embodied. Made possible by the work of the lower classes, it corresponds, according to Rouanet (1987) to the political attitude of the middle classes marked by passivity in the face of urban turbulence and by the *laissez-faire* of the liberal economy. Socrates’ interlocutor in the polis, the idler, is reborn in the *flâneur*. The anachronism is patent, for there is no longer a Socrates or slave labor to guarantee him his leisure (Benjamin, 1994). The phantasmagoria of persecution mania would point to a cause behind the disinterest with which the *flâneur* moves through the streets (Benjamin, 1994). With the decline of the arcades, *flânerie* and the gas lamps, the last *flâneur* is already inelegant. The crowd is jammed up, blocked by another crowd: strolling is impossible.

The *flâneur* differs from the passerby because he watches over his intimacy in a large space: “His leisurely appearance as a personality is his protest against the division of labour which makes people into specialists” (Benjamin, 1994, p. 50). “The

7 In section “D”, Benjamin (1993, p. 13; D3:6) includes an account by Paul Lafargue, according to which Marx had first revealed to Engels the basis of historical materialism in a Paris café, the *Café de la Régence*, in 1848. Does Benjamin mean by this that Marx and Engels also wandered around?

place rejoices” with his approach. He would trade all his erudition for sniffing out directions like a dog (Benjamin, 1994, p. 185).

“Comfort isolates” and brings man closer to interiors, imaginary or real, which forms an automatism between man and environment (Benjamin, 1994). The man who does not accommodate to the shocks and collisions of everyday life becomes a “kaleidoscope equipped with consciousness” (Benjamin, 1994, p. 125), Baudelaire imagines, always setting thought in motion from the shock (Baudelaire, 1961). Human interdependence is gradually blunted, resulting in savagery, says Valéry (Benjamin, 1994). The explanatory basis of this social mechanism comes from Marx: the shock of the passerby in the crowd is analogous to that of the reified experience; it is one of its extensions (Benjamin, 1994).

However, there is salvation; the flower of evil has a delicate perfume that springs from the asphalt: “The scent is the inaccessible refuge of the *mémoire involontaire*” (Baudelaire, 1961, p. 135). Perfume in phlegmatic consciousness lifts the unbearable flow of time: “A scent may drown years in the odour it recalls” (Baudelaire, 1961, p. 135). In addition to Proust’s solitary choice for art, this feeling can be made the engine of a transformative practice. The verses described above are inconsolable, because no experience is possible anymore. This impossibility creates an “anger”, typical of the isolated melancholic: “Anger, with its outbursts, marks the rhythm of the second, at whose mercy the melancholic finds himself” (Benjamin, 1994, p. 87).

Finally, revolution, as Benjamin understands it, is the anger that does justice to the past, which would not be an immediate melancholy, but its overcoming movement in the return to the past. The time of this feeling of *spleen* (melancholy and sadness) is a reified time, of a conscious and concomitantly supernatural perception—not the same as historical time. The time of involuntary memory is not historical either, but it is liberating and acts on reification because it addresses a prehistory, that is, it addresses an encounter with the Real. This modality assumes as primary fact of ascertainment that there exists a “there is” before anything else; something prior to any qualification in speech, impossible to narrate: just thinking about it implies a “been” in the very suspension of the signifying structure in the unconscious. Such is its prehistorical character. The *spleen* exposes experience, and the melancholic sees himself on a natural planet, without History, but also without aura (Benjamin, 1994), and, therefore, open to the new.

## 6. Inconclusive conclusions

The *flâneur* does not pass from bohemianism to a revolutionary attitude: being separated from the working classes (Konder, 1999), there would be in Baudelaire



a “metaphysics of the provocateur” (Benjamin, 1994, p. 11), a resemblance to the political type who, because of his riotous life, is found mainly in the taverns where he plots his conspiracies<sup>8</sup>. For Baudelaire, the cobblestones of the barricades in the Paris Commune were “magic”; “magic”, yes, mentions Benjamin, because the poet did not know about the hands that put them there (Benjamin, 1994).

The human capacity for insurgency is heroism, the demystification of the present. According to Foucault (1984), it is rather an irony in the face of the norm and an investigation of the limits of the present:

Modern man, for Baudelaire, is not the man who goes off to discover himself, his secrets and his hidden truth; he is the man who tries to invent himself. This modernity does not ‘liberate man in his own being’; it compels him to face the task of producing himself (Foucault, 1994, p. 11).

However, in isolation, “we cannot suppress shocks, but we can make them explicit” (Konder, 1999, p. 100). Thus, this desire to react is accompanied by a certain melancholy, called *spleen* by Baudelaire, and which for Benjamin was the “permanence of catastrophe” (Konder, 1999, p. 100), the eternal return of the same. The crowd is a narcotic that makes the *flâneur* share the situation of the commodity. Despite his enchantment with the *flâneur*, Benjamin was aware of these limitations: “But, in conclusion, only revolution creates the free air of the city. All the air of revolutions. Revolution disenchants cities” (1994, p. 192). Compensated for the humiliations, he feels the intoxication of the commodity. Marx jokes, speculating on the soul of the commodity. Benjamin goes further: its soul would be the one endowed with the greatest empathy, “(...) for it would have to see in everyone the buyer in whose hand and house it wants to nestle” (Benjamin, 1994, pp. 51-52).

Continuous exposure to the very rapid flow of commodities makes alienation an ever-present possibility. When Baudelaire says that “For him alone [the poet], all is open; if certain places seem closed to him, it is because in his view they are not worth inspecting” (Benjamin, 1994, pp. 51-52), it is necessary to pay attention to what changes and how. According to Benjamin, this is often the voice of the commodity, which ultimately has nothing to do with empathy. It is necessary to differentiate between the relativism of the capitalist process and the capacity for transformation. Baudelaire’s inspiration is thus dead matter, inorganic matter withdrawn from commodity circulation.

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8 According to Marx, the mission of the conspirator is “to anticipate the revolutionary developmental process, to bring it artificially to a head, and improvise a revolution without the conditions for one”. “Professional conspirators” are the “alchemists of the revolution”; they share with the ancient alchemists their disorder and narrow-mindedness. Nevertheless, Marx still values them insofar as they erected and commanded the first barricades in Paris (Benjamin, 1994, pp. 15, 12).

Benjamin shrewdly points out the effect of empathy with the commodity, explaining why the problem of reification does not even arise: “insofar as a person, as labour power, is a commodity, there is no need for him to identify himself as such” (Benjamin, 1994, p. 54). Roger Caillois wrote that the ghostly representation of Paris and the great city has “(...) sufficient power over the imagination so that, in practice, its correctness is never doubted (...)”; “(...) part of the collective mental atmosphere” (in Benjamin, 1994, p. 215).

It is Baudelaire’s view that “The pleasure of being in a crowd is a mysterious expression of the enjoyment of the multiplication of numbers” (in Benjamin, 1994, p. 55). According to Benjamin, this is the point of view of the commodity. In other words, the sensibility of the petty-bourgeois poet is based on the need for consumption. Without contact with social reality, he seeks enjoyment: “(...) the period which history gave them [became] a space for passing time” (Benjamin, 1994, p. 55). Enjoyment would be all the greater the more deeply rooted it is in this society in which culture is failing and the victorious commodity shines.

Therefore, the “virtuosity” of enjoyment must take into account the identification with commodities. Does this encounter acknowledge and save or, on the contrary, does it destroy all critique through unreflective adherence? The answer is open-ended: “(...) it had to approach this destiny with a sensitivity that perceives charm even in damaged and decaying goods” (Benjamin, 1994, p. 55). The allegorist gaze of the *flâneur* produces dialectical images, establishing a constellation between the present of modernity and a past time. Its action oscillates between the old and the new, fetishism and difference, contained in the image that is not moral, not in itself, but comes from a primordial perception. In Benjamin’s words (1994), “The description of confusion is not the same as a confused description” ( p. 159): “One seeks to carry out the new experiences of the city within the framework of the old ones, transmitted by nature” (Benjamin, 1994, p. 226).

The city that is discovered is the setting of new experiences. Indeed, witnessing the birth of the alienation that still dominates us today, Marx sees an opportunity for change in the social bond. The type of society described in the *Manuscripts*, by the way, is contemporary with Baudelaire. So, perhaps for both, Marx’s quote is valid, giving a good outlook of how the worker is not totally alienated:

[S]moking, drinking, eating, etc., are no longer means of contact or means that bring together. Company, association, and conversation, which again has society as its end, are enough for them; the brotherhood of man is no mere phrase with them, but a fact of life, and the nobility of man shines upon us from their workhardened bodies (Marx, 1962, p. 158).

With these words we can conclude the examination of Baudelairean poetics, and with them we return to the sense in which we have understood the encounter

of experiences and the flows of people that structure the city, thus managing to symbolize the violence of the Real.

The discussion of the Real, as shock and as dialectical operator in Baudelaire's poetry, shows its true meaning and scope in the affirmation of the psychoanalytic character of his writing because his poetry exposes "something" that cannot be spoken; nevertheless, it can be written. That "something" impossible to say expresses the wall of his language that presents to him as his own obstacle; it manifests the register of the RSI Borromean knot through its letter-matter or, if you will, its *motérialisme* that gives rise to the relationship between letter and the figurative in his prose.

While we are aware of the implications of such a statement, this could also be attributed to the fact that this introduces a way of reading Baudelaire's lyric poetry literally, rather than literarily. All this, in order to identify the signifying logic and the experience of the letter as the law of unconscious enjoyment. Moreover, this law finds in Baudelaire a remarkable example, since the author of the *Salons and other writings on art* (1999), by placing criticism as a principle that goes above academicism, reveals not only the ironic sense that has animated his provocative zeal, typical of a *dandi*; but, moreover, in his provocation, he places his enjoyment as an impossible real which defines his pulsional object as a surplus enjoyment

It is even possible to see how Baudelaire, when he makes of critique a solitary journey, carries out a trajectory similar to the libidinal logic of the unconscious letter, which gives foundation to the phantasm and even to a phantasmagoria of the city that leads to the knotting of a symptom. Although it interpellates that which can be considered the most characteristic of Baudelaire's poetry, namely, the constant metamorphosis that gives rise to his lyric work, the truth is that this form of solitary critical journey exposes the dialectical overcoming of shock as the Real of the surplus enjoyment that appears in his writing, as well as the Real of the surplus enjoyment as the *new* that escapes all the rules of art and of criticism itself. Writing as a halt to progress is thus a producer of images of the present time. Its power of affection—beyond conscious control—and description demonstrates the effectiveness of language.

The unconscious results from the creative encounter between beings and their desires (Lacan, 2017)—hence mixtures and marks emerge in us, such as mostly past typologies, which understand the present as loss, not recognizing their own aspirations and those that assume the present as their field of investigation. Thus, the materiality of the signifier in Lacan does not follow the opposition between the sensible and the intelligible, since it operates beyond mere referentiality. The neologism *motérialisme* attempts to account for the power of subjectivation immanent to language. The non-corporeal of the word gets a body precisely when an interruption happens. Thus, contingency acquires a face—not of the other in general, but of difference, of this language-producing shock. Once displaced by speaking beings in

historical situation, the pre-existence of the word generates a location, and the word flies. If the only (symbolic) “sense” is circulation, one arrives at the conditions of circulation of modernity and its cities; the shock analyzed by Benjamin and present in Baudelaire, far from being a mistake, stands as a condition of possibility of sense, since it is not reduced to a deprivation.

In this sense, the very capacity to name phenomena, never closed objectivities, is constituted by language. The experience of modern acceleration has perhaps contributed to the unveiling of its non-essential dimension, still producing effects, in a regime of reflexivity; that is to say, one is spoken while speaking and while using a language so cutting, but equally cut off in its exercise.

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