

# Images of Women in the Modern City: The Poetics of Charles Baudelaire's Anamnestic Space

KOMURA Toshiaki

女性描写と現代都市：  
シャルル・ボードレールの記憶空間とその詩学

古村敏明

## Abstract

In his classic essay entitled “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” Georg Simmel observes how the “intensification of emotional life due to the swift and continuous shift of external and internal stimuli” in urban life results in a “blasé outlook.” Likewise, various theorists have portrayed the modern city as a place of mental impoverishment and depersonalized emotional life. But if the metropolis impoverishes one’s cognition and emotion, how does poetry flourish in its environment? A re-examination of Walter Benjamin’s reading of the poetry of Charles Baudelaire, a quintessential urban poet of the nineteenth century, reveals one plausible answer. The city dialectically resuscitates one’s interiority by offering its exteriorities to be one’s memory storage; through this process, exteriorities and interiorities are amalgamated, and the city becomes an anamnestic space. The proliferation of objects and sensory stimuli in the city devalues the outside world; as a protective response, one’s subjectivity undergoes an inward retreat and a compensatory hypertrophy. To counter that, a poet seeks to import meaning from the external space—the streets, buildings, people—and while this importation of meaning is, in truth, a subjective assignation, it nonetheless redeems lost meanings in both the external and internal worlds.

The hallmark of the experience of urban life is less a phantasmagoria than the desensitized consciousness, which screens out quotidian distractions. Benjamin theorizes that the crowd epitomizes the “shock experience” of the modern city. Baudelaire’s *Tableaux Parisiens* largely tunes out the crowd, while portraying what stands out from it. In poems such as “À une passante” and “Le Cygne,” images of women function as the socially engineered otherness that infuses meaning to the otherwise devalued, fragmented cityscape. This paper examines how the images of women, the city, and memory interact with one another to counteract the effects of urban melancholia in Baudelaire’s *Tableaux Parisiens*.

**Keywords:** Charles Baudelaire, memory, city, *Les Fleurs du Mal*,  
Walter Benjamin

## 要 旨

「メトロポリスと精神生活」におけるゲオルク・ジンメルの言説に代表されるように、外的及び内的変化が絶え間なく起こる現代都市は、精神の疲弊と感情の無個性化を引き起こすと説く思想家は多い。大都市が認知と感情を窮乏させるとしたら、その環境で詩はどのように生まれうるのか？ ヴァルター・ベンヤミンによるシャルル・ボードレールの詩の解釈を再考察すると、この問いへの答えの一つが現れる。ベンヤミンは、群衆が現代都市の「衝撃体験」の典型であると説くが、ボードレールの「パリの風景」は群衆を描くより、群衆を背景とし、その中で目を引く存在を描く。「通行人」や「白鳥」といった詩は、目を引く存在としてそこで描かれる女性に、社会的に作られた他者性を吹き込むことで、肥大した主観と拒絶された外界の弁証を介し、意味を失い断片化した都市風景に新しい意味をもたらす。これは、何人も同じ様相の男性老人が出現する「七人の老人」などで見られる、同一性・没個性の描写とは対照を成す。ボードレールの「パリの風景」における、女性の描写、現代都市、記憶といった要素の相互作用と、都市性メランコリアとの関係性を、本論文は考察する。

**キーワード：**シャルル・ボードレール、記憶、都市、パリの風景、ヴァルター・ベンヤミン

In his classic essay entitled “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” Georg Simmel observes how the “intensification of emotional life due to the swift and continuous shift of external and internal stimuli” in urban life results in a “blasé outlook” (Simmel 70, 73). Likewise, various theorists have portrayed the modern city as a place conducive to mental impoverishment and depersonalized emotional life; for instance, in “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” Walter Benjamin claims that the mechanism of urban life “eliminates certain modes of behavior and emotions,” and potentially brings people “closer to mechanization” (Benjamin 2003, 328). If, however, the metropolis impoverishes one’s cognition and emotion, how does it make poetry—a saturation of senses, or a luminescence of experience, as Virginia Woolf would characterize it—possible, or even flourish, in its environment, as it has done? A re-examination of Benjamin’s reading of the poetry of Charles Baudelaire, one of the quintessential urban poets of the nineteenth century, reveals one plausible answer: the city dialectically resuscitates one’s interiority by offering its exteriorities to be one’s memory storage, whereby the city amalgamates exteriorities and interiorities to turn itself into a type of anamnestic space. While the proliferation of objects and sensory stimuli in the city does devalue the outside world, mechanization of the human subject is only a superficial effect; underneath the appearance of the “blasé” mentality, one’s subjectivity undergoes a compensatory hypertrophying, an inward retreat into solipsism, as a protective response. This suspension of external nourishment is what leads to one’s mental impoverishment. To counter that, a poet seeks to import meaning from the external space—the streets, buildings, people—and while this importation of meaning is, in truth, a subjective assignation, it nonetheless redeems lost meanings in both the external and internal worlds.

The process of the inward retreat into solipsism, which is the underlying cause of mental impoverishment in urban life, begins when one encounters an

excess of the elements of “change” and “strange”—a set of rhyming words that once fascinated so many of the Victorian writers, including Alfred Lord Tennyson, as modern metropolises multiplied in that era. The rhyme captures the essentiality of the urban space: a space that is “the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent” (Baudelaire 1995, 13). Simmel theorizes that human cognition works by detecting differences (Simmel 70), and the excess of such differences, which results from rapid changes in the city, can, if unregulated, wear out and disorient human sensorium. In such an environment, the consciousness protects itself by becoming more vigilant in screening out excess stimuli, as Benjamin claims in “On Some Motifs”; Benjamin cites, as a premise of his argument, the importance that Sigmund Freud places on the function of the consciousness as “protection of stimuli,” which Freud considers to be “almost more important than the reception of stimuli” (Benjamin 2003, 317). Therefore, for a city dweller, the experience of urban life is not the kaleidoscopic phantasmagoria that it is commonly considered to be, and the archetypal image of a city-dweller as someone who “desires rest but is always on the move” is largely a myth (Sharpe 1). While an infrequent visitor to the metropolis—such as William Wordsworth, who portrays London as a pandemonium of sorts—would find it disorienting, the consciousness of a city-dweller is conditioned to screen out quotidian distractions, for human adaptability prompts the consciousness to desensitize itself.

For Benjamin, the crowd epitomizes the sense of change and strange that is the defining characteristic of the modern city; therefore, seeing the crowd becomes a type of “shock” experience. Noting that the crowd is so omnipresent as to become an assumed presence in Baudelaire’s works, Benjamin discusses Baudelaire’s sonnet entitled “À une passante” as a typology of the way in which a city-dweller experiences the “shock” of the crowd. A retracing of Benjamin’s reading of Baudelaire’s poem exposes several implications of the desensitized consciousness, an early-stage symptom of the inward retreat into solipsism:

Around me roared the nearly deafening street.  
Tall, slim, in mourning, in majestic grief,  
A woman passed me, with a splendid hand  
Lifting and swinging her festoon and hem;

Nimble and stately, statuesque of leg,  
I, shaking like an addict, from her eye,  
Black sky, spawner of hurricanes, drank in  
Sweetness that fascinates, pleasure that kills.

One lightning flash... then night! Sweet fugitive  
Whose glance has made me suddenly reborn,  
Will we not meet again this side of death?

Far from this place! too late! *never* perhaps!  
Neither one knowing where the other goes,  
O you I might have loved, as well you know! (Baudelaire 189: 1-14)

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

Agile et noble, avec sa jambe de statue.  
Moi, je buvais, crispé comme un extravagant,  
Dans son œil, ciel livide où germe l'ouragan,  
La douceur qui fascine et le plaisir qui tue.

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

Ailleurs, bien loin d'ici! trop tard! jamais peut-être!  
Car j'ignore où tu fuis, tu ne sais où je vais,  
Ô toi que j'eusse aimée, ô toi qui le savais!] (1-14)

Benjamin observes that “the crowd is nowhere named in either word or phrase” in this poem but that “all the action hinges on it, just as the progress of a sailboat depends on the wind” (Benjamin 2003, 323). The poem does portray the crowd, but just in two words, “rue assourdissante.” The mass undergoes a metonymic collapse and becomes the noisy street itself: the mass recedes into the viewer’s subconscious, into the background.

Out of the anonymous crowd, the lyric speaker notices one person: a woman in a mourning veil. This selective cognition can be explained by what Simmel refers to as the simplification of sensory reception. Since there are so many people in the crowd, one cannot possibly take an interest in each individual; one therefore notices only what fascinates. Benjamin elaborates on this simplification of sensory data as follows:

What this sonnet conveys is simply this: far from experiencing the crowd as an opposing, antagonistic element, the city dweller discovers in the crowd what fascinates him. The delight of the urban poet is love—not at first sight, but at last sight. It is an eternal farewell, which coincides in the poem with the moment of enchantment. Thus, the sonnet deploys the figure of shock, indeed of catastrophe. But the nature of the poet’s emotions has been affected as well. What makes

his body contract in a tremor— “*crispé comme un extravagant*,” Baudelaire says—is not the rapture of a man whose every fiber is suffused with eros; rather, it is like the sexual shock that can beset a lonely man.... This is the gaze... of the object of a love which only a city dweller experiences, which Baudelaire captures for poetry, and which one might not infrequently characterize as being spared, rather than denied, fulfillment. (Benjamin 2003, 324)

The first sentence of this excerpt is straightforward enough. Surrounded by an inordinate number of strange elements, city dwellers, in order to prevent a potential sensory overload, do not see all the individuals that comprise the crowd. Instead, they see only what interests them; they see what they want to see. In other words, what one sees in the crowd is the reflection of one’s desires, feelings, thoughts, in that the selection of the cognitive reception is an individualized response—a rubric of oneself. The “eye,” or what one sees, becomes a synecdoche of the “I,” or what one is.

Benjamin explains how the image of this veiled woman accentuates the “shock” experience for the lyric speaker, but the precise effect of this “shock” remains rather cryptic: “The delight of the urban poet is love—not at first sight, but at last sight... an eternal farewell, which coincides in the poem with the moment of enchantment.” The “eternal farewell” is a likely reference to this line of the poem: “*Ne te verrai-je plus que dans l’éternité?*” A passerby in a large city is someone one would likely never encounter again. Hence, this line—“shall I see you again only in eternity?”—appears, at first, to be a rhetorical question, although it is certainly ambiguous enough to trouble translators; James McGowan’s translation keeps the rhetorical question, with only a change from “eternity” to “death”—“Will we not meet again this side of death?”—while Richard Howard turns it into a philosophical inquiry, which still is



unanswerable and essentially rhetorical—"But where / is life—not this side of eternity?" (Howard 98). If taken as a rhetorical question, the line is merely a way of saying that it is impossible for the speaker and the woman to meet again because there is no such thing as "eternity" for mortals. If we were to assume a linear progression of temporality, one present moment of this encounter would be lost forever: the present instantly becomes the past, like a lute whose sound fades the moment it is played, and the past is only accessible through retrospection.

But if the said line is not meant to be a rhetorical question—that is, the line means literally that the speaker would see her in "eternity"—then linear temporality is not what Baudelaire's speaker has in mind. If one were to define a human being as a collection of memories, our memory would be our coherence, and the particular configuration of the pieces of memory would become the narrative that constitutes our identity. It is suggestive enough that Benjamin's interpretation of the Baudelaire line as an "eternal farewell" is based on this premise. An act of farewell presupposes the act of the encounter, and for an eternal farewell, there must be an eternal encounter as well. The corniest way of phrasing this sentiment might be something along the line of "You'll live forever in my heart," even if it hardly catches the nuances that Benjamin has in mind; here, Benjamin envisions a concept of memory similar to that of Proust, who claims that the past is situated "somewhere beyond the reach of the intellect and in its field of operations, in some material objects..., though we have no idea which one it is. And whether we come upon this object before we die, or whether we never encounter it, depends entirely on chance" (Proust 44). In other words, memories are stored in space and are conjured up in the subject's consciousness by happenstance.

To claim that memories physically reside in any object outside of one's brain sounds unscientific, even mystical or superstitious; rather, Proust

suggests that space becomes a trigger for recollection, as though it is a repository of memories. Especially in a city where there is an excess of stimuli, there certainly are experiences where a long-forgotten memory is somehow conjured up in reaction to the unlikeliest catalyst. One instance of such anamnestic experience occupies the first pages of *A la Recherche du temps perdu*: the taste of madeleine transports the narrator into the past, an indistinct memory of the town of Combray where he had spent part of his childhood. This instance of reminiscence tells us two things: first, a sensory reception can trigger recollection; and secondly, memories are spatial in nature—that is, visual imagery tends to accompany memories, in that memories are associated with space, with the places or the contexts of the remembered events or people. Benjamin observes that the “veil [that the city] has covertly woven out of our lives shows the images of people less than those of the sites of our encounters with others or ourselves” (Benjamin 1978, 30). In this regard, the effect of the city-space is anamnestic, whereby sites become triggers of memory-retrieval.

The Proustian model of anamnestic spatiality prompts the reader to regard Baudelaire’s question—“shall I see you again only in eternity?”—as non-rhetorical. The lyric speaker of “À une passante” would be transported back to this encounter with the woman again and again, whenever he recovers from some unspecified sensory trigger the memory of that moment, the “here and now,” which exists “nowhere” in linear temporality but is potentially everywhere in the spatial expanse. Given the potentiality of memories to be conjured and re-conjured indefinitely upon encounters with some stimuli, it feels as though the memories live in eternity. If one were to liken this situation to a computer network, it would be that the subject’s hard-drive, suffering a data overload, transfers its data to some other computer or cloud. The only rub is that the subject computer has no idea which file is stored where, but the files

pop up randomly from time to time. In effect, the files are nowhere, lost, while at the same time existent.

The feeling of strangeness, the sense of discontinuities and disorientation—these archetypal human responses to metropolis plausibly originate from this loss of the “here and now.” In this conceptualization, the present can only be recovered through recollection; memories—the building blocks of human interiority—are potentially anywhere and nowhere and, if recollected, are not necessarily sequential or whole. This interplay of “change and strange,” “I and eye,” and “here and now and nowhere” is the mechanism of various phenomena routinely associated with modernity, such as fragmentation, multiple and shifting perspectives or personalities, and the like. The modern subjects are “fragmented” because what makes them who they are—memories—are fragmented. Human perspectives and resultant personalities are multiple and shifting because the pieces of memories that comprise them are fragmented, shifting, conflicting, at times lost, at times found, and otherwise generally multi-faceted.

This mechanism of human perspective, which the poem “À une passante” suggests according to Benjamin’s reading of it, is delineated more fully and explicitly in another one of Baudelaire’s poems, “Le Cygne.” Immediately in the opening stanzas, the premise of “change and strange” in the city-space emerges in this poetic setting:

Andromache, I think of you! This meagre stream,  
This melancholy mirror where had once shone forth  
The giant majesty of all your widowhood,  
This fraudulent Simois, fed by bitter tears,

Has quickened suddenly my fertile memory  
As I was walking through the modern Carrousel.  
The old Paris is gone (the form a city takes  
More quickly shifts, alas, than does the mortal heart)... (173, 175: 1-8)

[Andromache, je pense à vous! Ce petit fleuve,  
Pauvre et triste miroir où jadis resplendit  
L'immense majesté de vos douleurs de veuve,  
Ce Simois menteur qui par vos pleurs grandit,

A fécondé soudain ma mémoire fertile,  
Comme je traversais le nouveau Carrousel.  
Le vieux Paris n'est plus (la forme d'une ville  
Change plus vite, hélas! que le cœur d'un mortel)...] (1-8)

“Le vieux Paris” is gone because it was completely done over, especially on the right bank of the Seine, under the supervision of Baron Haussmann in the nineteenth century; this transformation is still largely visible in present-day Paris, in the form of wide boulevards. As the lyric speaker walks through the “new” and strange Carrousel, he sees a Paris that has changed so rapidly—the town changes faster than the mortal heart, he says—that he hardly recognizes it. He feels as though he is out of place, and this feeling of estrangement leads him to liken his condition to that of an exile, a foreigner, invoking an allusion to an archetypal exile figure in Greek mythology: Andromache.

Joseph Brodsky describes the condition of exiles as “retrospective” beings (Brodsky 6). The exiles often cling to the past, with excessive retrospection overshadowing their present reality. The lyric speaker of “Le Cygne,” too, defines his condition through recollections. Given the comparative nature of

human cognition, the understanding of new phenomena comes by way of comparison to some other, already familiar phenomena. One could say that human beings in general are largely retrospective, but in exiles, retrospection gains a larger significance in that the present reality becomes an occasion for a trip back to the past. For the lyric speaker of “Le Cygne,” it means that the act of looking at the present state of the “meager stream” takes him back to the past when it used to be more majestic. The same applies to Andromache; in exile after the defeat of Troy, Andromache sees a “meager stream” and is reminded of the river Simois of her native land. The present view of the diminutive creek, both for Andromache and for the Baudelairean speaker, becomes the pathway into the past.

The aforementioned observation by Benjamin that “the city dweller discovers in the crowd what fascinates him” explains why this stream is the first thing the speaker sees: the stream is of interest to him because it gives him what he desires, which is a return to the past. The stream, in other words, is the mirror that reflects back the image of the viewer: what one sees or notices in the city is the reflection of one’s subjectivity. The “eye” becomes the proxy of the “I,” which leads to the speaker’s next utterance:

I picture in my head the busy camp of huts,  
And heaps of rough-hewn columns, capitals and shafts,  
The grass, the giant blocks made green by puddle-stain,  
Reflected in the glaze, the jumbled bric-à-brac. (175: 9-12)

[Je ne vois qu’en esprit tout ce camp de baraques,  
Ces tas de chapiteaux ébauchés et de fûts,  
Les herbes, les gros blocs verdis par l’eau des flaques,  
Et, brillant aux carreaux, le bric-à-brac confus.] (9-12)

In these lines, Baudelaire enacts the speaker's self-absorption impeccably: here, the speaker finds himself in the world of "esprit," where he sees the past that has been wiped out in linear temporality. Nostalgia is one type of inward retreat—a lingering attachment to memories in which retrospection hypertrophies and overshadows the present reality. The notion of "exile" often assumes a possibility that the exile might return to his or her homeland someday, or at least the presence of the homeland the exile could return to; however, a temporal displacement—or a loss of the sites of the memories—precludes any possibility of homecoming in a literal sense. In that regard, Andromache is a fitting allegory; since her homeland has been destroyed and she herself is in captivity, she would never be able to go back home. The "here and now" of her past is nowhere to be found in the "here and now" of the present. Likewise, the Paris the speaker knew "is gone."

The flipside of the supposition, however, is that since "foreign" is defined as an antithesis to "home," the dissolution of "home" makes the label of "foreign" obsolete as well. Expatriates often express that having no home means that one could potentially find one's home anywhere. Likewise, Andromache could find in any river the memory of Simois; with the loss of the homeland, the river Simois as a signifier loses the purpose of its attachment to the actual river in Troy, the signified Simois. The *point de capiton*, through which the subject is "sewn" to the signifier, is undone. Since the *point de capiton* functions as a "rigid designator"—the signifier maintaining its identity through all variations of its signified (Žižek 100)—its undoing means that Andromache can reattach the signifier Simois to any of the potential signifieds as she strives to adapt to the present environment, the motley of objects that are strange and, hence, meaningless to her.

This reconstruction of the system of signification is, in reality, a subjective assignation of signification, and it is a product of one's internal retreat.

Nonetheless, it marks the beginning of the act of meaning-making in a place that is devoid of meaningful associations. In the fifth stanza, Baudelaire portrays, as another figure of “exile,” a swan toddling on the pavement, having escaped from the menagerie. The speaker witnesses the swan’s struggle to make sense of the strange elements it has not encountered before:

A swan, who had escaped from his captivity,  
And scuffing his splayed feet along the paving stones,  
He trailed his white array of feathers in the dirt.  
Close by a dried out ditch, the bird opened his beak,

Flapping excitedly, bathing his wings in dust,  
And said, with heart possessed by lakes he once had loved:  
‘Water, when will you rain? Thunder, when will you roar?’  
I see this hapless creature, sad and fatal myth... (175: 17-24)

[Un cygne qui s’était évadé de sa cage,  
Et, de ses pieds palmés frottant le pavé sec,  
Sur le sol raboteux traînait son blanc plumage.  
Près d’un ruisseau sans eau la bête ouvrant le bec

Baignait nerveusement ses ailes dans la poudre,  
Et disait, le cœur plein de son beau lac natal:  
‘Eau, quand donc pleuvras-tu? quand tonneras-tu, foudre?’  
Je vois ce malheureux, mythe étrange et fatal...] (17-24)

No longer on the lake, the swan must now learn how to live on the land, reattaching its mode of behavior and identity to suit its present condition. In

line 21, the depiction of the swan “bathing in the dust” exudes pathos of a struggle that a displaced subject undergoes in the transit stages of floating signifiers. The swan, unsettled and nervous in the strange environment, reverts to what it knows—bathing, the routine mode of behavior in the water—but on the land, it is an action that only soils the swan’s “blanc plumage.” Even though “bathing” is intended to be an act of reclaiming the swan’s identity in the water, it instead becomes, on the land, an act that further muddles the swan’s identity, since, through that act, one distinguishing feature of a swan—white feathers—turns into an unrecognizable color. There has been a change in the system of signification; what used to make sense to the swan no longer does.

In the absence of meaning, in the lack of it, there arises a desire, a wanting, for a meaning. In Early Modern English, the words “want” and “lack” were synonymous; like the words themselves, the concepts of “lack” and “want” are imminently intertwined. If, as discussed earlier, human comprehension of new phenomena were a comparative process between new phenomena that a subject wants to understand and other phenomena that the subject is already familiar with, one would attempt to fill the void of meaning by searching for a similar, already-known phenomenon that could account for the new phenomenon. In other words, the process of meaning-making is a retrospective and retroactive one, where one necessarily makes an inward movement, into the past, the memory. Another modern poet invested in the theme of spatiality, Elizabeth Bishop frames the question thus: how can perception be separated from “introspection” and “retrospection” (Anderson 161)? Baudelaire’s poem suggests that one cannot separate perception from introspection and retrospection: perception must be forged from within.

But the inward retreat of solipsistic imprisonment is incapable of creating new meanings on its own; for that reason, the swan, with its “heart possessed”



by the past, can only resort to its previous mode of behavior despite the fact that it only deepens its bewilderment—the only frame of perception it has is that of the life in the water, the one that fails on the land. While the way of seeing must be established from within the subject, the system of meaning-making has to be imported from outside of the self. Even when one finds oneself in the inward retreat of hypertrophied retrospection that shuts off links with the external world, there still remains one medium that connects the subject with the outside world: language. For Baudelaire’s speaker in “Le Cygne,” the process of meaning-making occurs in the type of language he shares with the narratives of the past: allegory, or “mythe” (174.24). The first stanza in the second section of the poem delineates this instance of a subject in the process of meaning-making through allegoresis:

Paris may change, but in my melancholy mood,  
Nothing has budged! New palaces, blocks, scaffoldings,  
Old neighborhoods, are allegorical for me,  
And my dear memories are heavier than stone. (175: 29–32)

[Paris change! mais rien dans ma mélancolie  
N’a bougé! palais neufs, échafaudages, blocs,  
Vieux faubourgs, tout pour moi devient allégorie  
Et mes chers souvenirs sont plus lourds que des rocs.] (29–32)

Allegories are, by their nature, arbitrary and subjective in that there is no intrinsic correspondence between the meaning and its expression. Therefore, the assignation of allegories itself is a subjective process; when a subject has to see the world as allegories, one may say that the subject is immersed in his or her subjectivity—which is the very definition of solipsism. For that reason,

even though Paris may change, the speaker's disposition—of “*mélancolie*”—is firm-fixed; the two versions of realities head in separate vectors, signaling a divergence of subjective reality from the external one. The speaker's memories are heavier than stones, and stones, here, have both literal and figurative meanings: “stones” as a symbol of heavy items, to hyperbolize the heaviness of his “memories”; and “stones” as a material of many of the buildings and structures in Paris. It suggests that the speaker's internal reality—his memories—has more weight, or credibility, than the externally manifested objects do. Furthermore, Baudelaire meticulously uses the possessive to emphasize that those memories belong to the speaker—“*mes chers souvenirs*.” Here, the “memories” need to be the speaker's subjective ones, not the collective memories of humanity or those of other people.

Although the assignation of allegorical meaning is an arbitrary and perhaps even solipsistic process, the expression of that allegory brings back together the two previously diverged realities, subjective and external: the metaphorical figures this poem invokes bridge the gap between them. By invoking *Andromache*, Baudelaire situates his allegorical narrative in the realm of intertextuality—that is, Baudelaire appropriates the myth that Virgil appropriates from the Greek, in order to make sense of and express the feeling of estrangement one feels in a modern city. In a sense, a portion of the collective linguistic consciousness in each individual—such as summoned by the intertextual invocation of *Andromache* in “*Le Cygne*”—provides the subject with a potential escape from hypertrophied subjectivity. It is largely understood that mythology originated from human attempts to tame the brute force of incomprehensible crises: an effort to cast a light in the darkness so as to make sense of the world, or an attempt to piece together disparate fragments of memories into some type of order to make the incomprehensible comprehensible. If literature serves any purpose, it embodies an effort to

impose an ordering principle on the disorder of life—an effort that Gregory Orr calls “an Aristotelean agon of disorder and order” (Orr 31). And an allegorical intertextuality is a particular kind of narrative in that a comparison is a cognitive act of bringing two unrelated things together to illuminate the meanings of one or both; it is an act of meaning-making through the importation of meanings from the external space.

“Le Cygne” is a poem comprised of a series of metaphors, several of which are sustained enough to qualify as allegories; the speaker likens his situation to those of Andromache, the swan, and various other displaced figures in foreign lands, as a method of coping with the strange changes that he cannot make sense of. New palaces, streets, or suburbs all become an “allégorie” to the speaker, and two implications arise from this perception of cityscape as “allegorical”: first, it means that these “palaces,” “blocks,” and other buildings are mysteries and need to be interpreted as though they are a text, if they were to have any meanings; and secondly, it suggests that, through metaphor and allegory, the poem can assign meanings to these strange changes in Paris, which would otherwise remain confounding. Critics have claimed that a modern city has two purposes, practical and symbolic: on the one hand, a city is “the aggregate of its built, its street full of houses and buildings”; and on the other hand, with “all those houses and buildings, the squares, the bridges and the avenues, the gardens and the parks, it... become [s] a repository for the thoughts, the feelings and the emotion of the people in its midst” (Blanchard 5). Through abundance of figurative associations, these elements of cityscape acquire symbolic meanings, in addition to their practical purposes for which they are built.

In sum, the intertextual nature of allegory is what enables the speaker to restore meanings to the otherwise meaningless objects in the strangely changed Paris, which had previously lost their meanings as their sheer

proliferation had forced the human consciousness to screen them out. Production of poetry in an urban setting is made possible in this tenuous balance between the subjective and the collective: one's hypertrophied and solipsistic subjectivity finds an external outlet in intertextuality, as one manifestation of the collective linguistic consciousness, and re-establishes its connection to the outside world through this common, sharable language. One's fragments of memories, which are "stored" in unspecified places all over the city space, gain communicable symbolic meanings by appropriating past narratives from the collective linguistic consciousness. Endowed with new meanings, the external world resuscitates its power to fascinate the writers, and, in turn, the writers, too, regain their capacity to attune their sensibilities to the "luminescence of experience" as they have done before.

In this process of meaning-restoration—which starts with a state of melancholy, solipsism, loss of meaning, and ends in the reconstruction of the meaningful universe through allegory—there is a strong echo of one of Benjamin's earlier works entitled *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Although this earlier work primarily covers obscure seventeenth century German dramatists and does not refer specifically to Baudelaire's poems, many of its main ideas and themes are found in "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire." The kernel of the thesis Benjamin proposes in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* is that melancholia is a gaze, a way of seeing the world through fragmented subjectivity that perceives objects as allegories (Benjamin 1998, 183). The melancholic, who perceives his world as a fallen one reduced to a mass of devalued, meaningless fragments, assigns through allegory arbitrary meanings to the otherwise meaningless fragments, and this subjective assignation of meanings reconstructs the experience of the original world, culminating in the redemptive restoration (Benjamin 1998, 142-235). By applying this mechanism to Baudelaire's Parisian poems, the reader would see that city dwellers' worlds

become a mass of meaningless fragments amidst the proliferation of objects and sensory stimuli in the city, as their consciousness screens out those objects and stimuli. By stonewalling external objects, one retreats inwardly into hypertrophied subjectivity, at which point one may attempt to reconstruct the experience of the original world by assigning, through the sharable language of allegoresis, arbitrary meanings to the otherwise meaningless fragments. In the case of "Le Cygne," the "meaningless objects" would be the city undergoing a massive reconstruction; the speaker's lingering attachment to the past would be the retreat into hypertrophied subjectivity; and the allegorical narratives discover their manifestations in the collective linguistic consciousness, such as Andromache seeing Simois in a tiny stream. In this manner, the "cygne" becomes a "signe" on which a subject can attach a meaning of his or her choice, and from there, the system of signification in his or her world gets reconstructed. When one encounters a phenomenon that cannot be made sense of from the reservoir of one's own life experiences, one seeks other templates of stories to liken the otherwise incomprehensible phenomenon to, in an attempt to conceptualize it by means of comparison or analogy. The modern city is a space rife with experiences that trigger a continuous mental task of conceptualization and re-conceptualization, through recollection and comparison.

A writer's need to reach for the external world to nourish his or her sensibilities originates in the layer of anxiety latent in the subjective gaze of modern city life, which Benjamin's conceptualization of melancholia reveals: solipsism, a symptom found in both melancholia and modern city life, is ultimately a self-defeating philosophy in that if the self, which confirms its existence in relation to the presence of the other, were the only thing that exists, it too would necessarily cease to be. Poetry is born neither in the hypertrophied subjectivity devoid of external stimuli, nor in the atrophied

internal life, the state of depersonalization. It is important for Baudelaire that the key figures of Parisian shock experiences—the passerby in “À une passante,” Andromache in “Le Cygne,” and various other presences such as the red-haired beggar girl, the little old ladies, and the kind-hearted servant—are women. For Baudelaire, what signifies the exteriority is the socially engineered otherness of the female subject. The departure from his own male gaze creates an extrinsic, and hence more objective, vantage point. Baudelaire’s poetry is not free from self-serving narcissism, and some of its imagistic portrayals of women can be characterized as, in modern English parlance, creepy to the twenty-first century sensibilities. On one level, it is objectification, the exploitation of the “other” as nourishment for the self. But on another level, it is a foreshadowing of the twentieth and twenty-first century subjectivation, whereby what was considered to be the “otherness” in the patriarchal nineteenth century becomes, in later times, a breakthrough of the self-same boredom of the male-centric space. In a reflective rereading of Baudelaire’s poetry, that qualifies as a portrayal of difference and differentiation; it is a proto-celebration of diversity as a source of creativity, a communal rejuvenation and reinvention of poetic sensibilities.

In Baudelaire’s cityscape, the images of women function as a force of personalization. This function becomes more evident when contrasted against the depersonalizing force of the male shock figures in *Tableaux Parisiens*. Whereas female Parisian figures break through the Baudelairean speaker’s stimuli screening because of their distinct presence and perceived otherness, the male counterpart does the opposite: they effect a type of self-enclosure and self-dissolution. The poem that exemplifies this self-erasing mechanism is “Les Sept Vieillards.” “Les Sept Vieillards” presents a first-person speaker who, while strolling in the street, witnesses seven identical old men, doppelgangers of one another. The encounter with seven old men is a type of “shock”

experience; it is a strange occurrence in need of an explication. The seven old men stand out in the crowd because of their strangeness. A singular of these old men is peculiar enough; they are portrayed as a Judas look-alike, a Wandering Jew of sorts, with bilious eyes, sword-like beards, a perpendicular spine: otherworldly. But the essence of their strangeness—what actually makes them distinguishable in the crowd—is their similitude. The seven old men stand out because they are all identical: they symbolize sameness.

The practice of differentiation is rooted in the desire for self-definition, for defining what is foreign defines what is self. The band of seven identical old men brews anxiety in the speaker because it triggers a fear of the potential loss of subjective space, the sanctity of individual existence. The speaker is disturbed and lost—his “soul tossed, and tossed, an outworn wreck, / Mastless, upon a monstrous, shoreless sea” (51-52)—because confirming the sameness among individuals threatens the integrity and coherence of the selfhood. For a writer to maintain the sensibilities to capture the luminescence of experience, there needs to be a degree of subjectivity in the assignation or selection of meanings and its language. The figure of seven old men threatens the critical myths, of differentiation, individuality, singularity, originality: the essential ingredients of selfhood.

The vision of the seven old men triggers a realization that one’s self could be just another part of the anonymous, undifferentiated mass. This anxiety of self-erasure is palpable in the following passage, which portrays the seven old men’s apparent timelessness—another sign of a universe without demarcation or differentiation:

To what conspiracy was I exposed,  
What wicked chance humiliated me?

For one by one I counted seven times  
Multiples of this sinister old man!

Those who would laugh at my frenetic state,  
Who are not seized by a fraternal chill,  
Must ponder that, despite their feebleness,  
These monsters smacked of all eternity!

Could I still live and look upon the eighth  
Relentless twin, fatal, disgusting freak,  
Trick Phoenix, son and father of himself?  
—I turned my back on this parade from Hell.

Bedazzled, like a double-visioned drunk,  
I staggered home and shut the door, aghast,  
Shaking and sick, the spirit feverous,  
Struck by this mystery, this absurdity! (179, 181: 33-48)

[A quel complot infâme étais-je donc en butte,  
Ou quel méchant hasard ainsi m'humiliait?  
Car je comptai sept fois, de minute en minute,  
Ce sinistre vieillard qui se multipliait!

Que celui-là qui rit de mon inquiétude,  
Et qui n'est pas saisi d'un frisson fraternel  
Songe bien que malgré tant de décrépitude  
Ces sept monstres hideux avaient l'air éternel!



Aurais-je, sans mourir, contemplé le huitième,  
Sosie inexorable, ironique et fatal,  
Dégoûtant Phénix, fils et père de lui-même?  
— Mais je tournai le dos au cortège infernal.

Exaspéré comme un ivrogne qui voit double,  
Je rentraï, je fermai ma porte, épouvanté,  
Malade et morfondu, l'esprit fiévreux et trouble,  
Blessé par le mystère et par l'absurdité!]

(33-48)

The seven old men are like a phoenix, rising from its own ashes—its own father and son. It means there is no one else in its family line—there is no “other.” The totalizing absence of non-self annihilates the self as well. Phoenix, in a sense, becomes an allegory of the anxiety of the undifferentiated collectivity, where all “selves” dissipate into one Phoenix from which all is born. Like self-enclosure, self-erasure is a type of internal impoverishment that makes poetry impossible. Rather, in this case, it is not so much an impoverishment as a disappearance of the concept of the self altogether.

The modern city is a structured space that lends itself to the primacy of subjectivity, but its excess, or hyperactivity of subjectivity, triggers the defense mechanism of the consciousness: cognitive simplification that screens out stimuli and triggers a solipsistic withdrawal. Solipsistic imprisonment is the state of hyper-subjectivation that both embodies and exposes this simultaneous yet anti-directional effort to both streamline and aggrandize cognitive activities. Depersonalization is a by-product of this inward movement: an external view of the internally withdrawn subject. In the modern cityscape, antithetical elements—the self and the other, the familiar and the strange, the collective and the individual—undergo a complex

interplay, fluctuating constantly in a homeostatic, compensatory manner, without losing their demarcations: the self as the “I” or the “eye”; the present moment existent in the “here-and-now” or “nowhere”; and a sense of lack, inadequacy, fueling the desire for a more complete self-construction. What Baudelaire’s poetry tells us is that, in this environment, poetry flourishes by maintaining an intricate balance between the subjective and the collective.

## References

- Anderson, Linda. “The Story of the Eye: Elizabeth Bishop and the Limits of the Visual.” *Elizabeth Bishop: Poet of the Periphery*, edited by Linda Anderson, Newcastle, Bloodaxe Books, 2002, pp. 159–74.
- Balibar, Etienne. “Subjection and Subjectivation.” *Supposing the Subject*, edited by Joan Copjec, Verso, 1994, pp. 1–15.
- Baudelaire, Charles. *The Flower of Evil*. Translated by James McGowan, Oxford UP, 1993.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Les Fleurs du Mal*. Translated by Richard Howard, David R. Godine, 1983.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*. Translated by Jonathan Mayne, London, Phaidon Press, 1995.
- Benjamin, Walter. *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Translated by John Osborne, Verso, 1998.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Reflections*. Edited by Peter Demetz, translated by Edmund Jephcott, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978.
- \_\_\_\_\_. “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire.” *Walter Benjamin: The Selected Writings*, vol. 4, edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, Belknap, 2003, pp. 313–55.
- Blanchard, Marc Eli. *In Search of the City: Engels, Baudelaire, Rimbaud*. Anma Libri, 1985.
- Brodsky, Joseph. “The Condition We Call Exile.” *Altogether Elsewhere: Writers on Exile*, edited by Marc Robinson, Faber and Faber, 1994, pp. 2–11.
- Orr, Gregory. “The Interrupted Scheme: Some Thoughts on Disorder and Order in the Lives of Poets and the Lives of Poems.” *Written in Water, Written in Stone*, edited by Martin Lammon, U of Michigan P, 1996, pp. 30–36.
- Proust, Marcel. *A la recherche du temps perdu*. Paris, Pléiade, 1962.
- Sharpe, William Chapman. *Unreal Cities: Urban Figuration in Wordsworth, Baudelaire,*

- Whitman, Eliot, and Williams*. Johns Hopkins UP, 1990.
- Simmel, Georg. "The Metropolis and Mental Life." *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, edited by Neil Leach, Routledge, 1997, pp. 69–79.
- Zizek, Slavoj. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. Verso, 1989.

