

## A POETICS OF SHARING: POLITICAL ECONOMY IN A PROSE POEM BY BAUDELAIRE

Kevin Newmark (Boston College)

*The rehabilitation of aesthetics that is undertaken by Jacques Rancière for a thinking of both art and politics is as stylistically refreshing as it is philosophically appealing. The combination of vast scholarship and lively polemic that underpins all his analyses also lends his celebration of democracy, equality and humanity a persuasiveness that is difficult to resist. This paper examines how Rancière's understanding of "the aesthetics of politics" differs from that of Walter Benjamin, especially in terms of Benjamin's elaboration of the change sustained by "experience" in modernity. It considers how reading a prose poem by Baudelaire throws into relief what is at stake in this difference.*

Of all the pronouncements made during the 20<sup>th</sup> century about the dubious relationship between art and politics, it is arguably Walter Benjamin's famous affirmation at the end of his 1936 essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility," that has engendered the most diverse and complex legacy for future thinking. "To the aesthetification of politics that is driven forward by fascism," Benjamin wrote there, "communism responds with the politicization of art." Cited by Jacques Derrida in *The Truth in Painting* as a "legend" or caption to which one ought to return in the future, it is also mentioned by Jacques Rancière at a crucial moment in his essay "Aesthetics as Politics."<sup>1</sup> But nothing could be more different than the ways that Rancière and Derrida regard this shared reference to Benjamin. For Derrida, who in fact re-

---

<sup>1</sup> See Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility," in *Illuminations*, (tr.) H. Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), 242; Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, (tr.) G. Bennington (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987), 181; and Jacques Rancière, "Aesthetics as Politics," in *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, (tr.) S. Corcoran (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), 24–25. Hereafter, Benjamin's text will be referred to parenthetically in the text as WA and Rancière's as AP.

turned to confront Benjamin over and over again in other writings, Benjamin's text always required reading and re-reading, extending into the future. On the contrary, Benjamin belongs to a series of thinkers that Rancière is careful to relegate to the past in order to demarcate all the more forcefully his own work. "The aesthetics of politics" that he has in mind, Rancière insists on more than one occasion, "operates at a complete remove from the forms of staging power and mass mobilization which Benjamin referred to as the 'aestheticization of politics'...."

Why this should be the case is hinted at in an earlier text by Rancière when he says: "The persistent success of Benjamin's theses on art in the age of mechanical reproduction is undoubtedly due to the crossing-over they allow for between the categories of Marxist materialist explanation and those of Heideggerian ontology."<sup>2</sup> But these categories of Marxist and Heideggerian explanation belong to an outmoded way of thinking that Rancière associates with "modernity," an "incoherent label" whose main function consists in "masking the specificity" of what he calls "the aesthetic regime." (PA, 24) It is as a response to the way both the notion of modernity and its reversal in "post-modernity" serve to obscure a clear understanding of the transformations of art as well as its relations to political experience that Rancière promulgates his own understanding of "the aesthetic regime." To the degree that Rancière associates thinkers such as Marx, Freud, Heidegger, Benjamin, Adorno, Althusser, Lacan, Lyotard and Derrida with either modern "masks" or post-modern "smokescreens," they also fall subject to one of Rancière's most familiar gestures. Not only does "the aesthetic regime" provide a better means for thinking the relation of aesthetics and politics that these thinkers address through other terms, but it is actually the "aesthetic regime" that explains how their own thinking about politics and aesthetics was made possible in the first place. No doubt, at least some of the current interest in and excitement about Rancière can be attributed to the way his writings combine massive doses of erudition with just this sort of casual dismissiveness. Especially when it comes to the vexed—and vexing—question of the relation between art and politics, it is difficult to resist Rancière's implicit suggestion that the more one knows about the history

---

<sup>2</sup> See Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, (tr.) G. Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004), 31. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as PA.

of its reception, the less one is persuaded that any genuine progress has been made in dealing with the challenges it offers.

Hence the refreshing note of impatience that rings out in all of Rancière's writing. Coupled with a dazzling capacity to summarise the most complexly structured events, arguments, positions or artworks in just a few brief strokes, his encyclopedic command of philosophy, literature, art, aesthetic theory and history allows him to elaborate a highly appealing understanding of "the aesthetic regime" and to propose it as a credible alternative to nearly everyone else's thinking of crucial notions such as democracy, equality and freedom. Nonetheless, credibility may itself constitute one of the most overdetermined and least reliable of factors implicated in the coming together of aesthetics and politics. The capacity to make one believe in the reality of what, for the moment, remains a mere desire or fiction, for instance, has been one of the most coercively powerful forces operative within recent political history, and there is less reason than ever to depend on it without further ado as a means for achieving greater emancipation. Where could one find decisive confirmation that the aesthetic regime of the arts championed by Rancière is indeed "the true name" for what he scornfully characterises and then discards as "the incoherent label" under which different versions of modernity have offered their "simplistic historical account of the tradition of the new"? (PA, 24–25)

Since "modernity" was, in fact, one of the key terms through which Benjamin articulated his own understanding of the relation between politics and art, it is not surprising that Rancière so adamantly distances himself from Benjamin's use of these terms. But how, exactly, does Rancière reformulate the political and, especially, the way the aesthetic and the political necessarily converge with each other? Interestingly enough, the reference to Benjamin is made in the course of Rancière's attempt to explain what he means by politics and, especially, by the way politics, along with aesthetics, always has to be understood on the basis of what he terms *le partage du sensible*, a dense French expression which has often been translated as "the distribution of the sensible." "Politics," as Rancière understands it, "is not the exercise of, or struggle for, power. It is the configuration of a specific space, the framing of a particular sphere of experience, of objects posited as common and as pertaining to a common decision." (AP, 24) Each of these terms—power, experience, decision—invokes a rich philosophical network of concepts

that would warrant a long and patient analysis in its own right. It is, of course, the central term, that of *experience*, that provides the all-important link between *power* on the one hand and *decision* on the other. For, lacking any reference to a field of experience, the concept of decision would become meaningless, and occurrences of power would, as a result, remain inassimilable to anything like either an “exercise” or a “struggle,” since in both cases it is what Rancière calls a configuration, space, frame or sphere of experience that functions as a prerequisite for taking the measure of the origin and effects of that which actually has the power to occur in decisive fashion.

It is into this frame of experience, moreover, that Rancière must, as a strict philosophical necessity, place his corollary invocation of the political *subject* in whom is then vested the power of decision: “[Politics] is the configuration of a specific space, the framing of a particular sphere of experience, of objects posited as common and as pertaining to a common decision, of *subjects* recognized as capable of designating these objects and putting forward arguments about them.” The ultimate decision will always be the one that recognises the subject’s access to power through speech: to posit a world of objects is possible here only by virtue of the powers of speech through which subjects can both designate and subsequently argue about that world which has been established in common among them.

*Le partage du sensible* is therefore another way of designating an experience of speaking subjects that is simultaneously political and aesthetic. The distribution of the sensible is *aesthetic* to the precise extent that it is a marking out of a specific time and space that can be recognised, or felt, only through a reframing of whatever world of subjects and objects might otherwise have remained invisible and possibly uncontested without it. It is in this sense that, according to Rancière, the distribution of the sensible is also always a redistribution of the sensible: what we call aesthetic practices and forms can occur only by suspending, and thus offering alternatives to, any given distribution, or *partitioning*, of the sensible world of subjects and objects. Such redistributions of the sensible are *political* as well as aesthetic because they also always involve a possible reapportioning of the roles, or *participation*, open to those subjects whose designations of objects and the decisions pertaining to their meaning can, on the one hand, be heard, and, on the other hand, be refused to those subjects whose speech has not yet been granted a

hearing and thus endowed with meaning. Moreover, in French, the verb *partager* means both “to share” and “to divide,” or “to separate.” *Le partage du sensible*, then, is a remarkably economical way of designating the phenomenal world of time and space, whose meaning at any given moment is *shared* in common between some subjects, as well as the division, or *decision*, which always separates that shared world from other subjects who, as a consequence, must experience that particular distribution of the sensible very differently, as exclusion.

To draw attention to the specific way that the French language, through its expression of *le partage du sensible*, frames the aesthetic and political experience of the sensible world by designating at once both the *sharing* that is held in common among certain equals and the *decision* that necessarily separates these equals from others is implicitly to introduce another of Rancière’s key terms, *dissensus*. To designate the world of objects held in common, or shared, with the French term *le partage* is thus, already, in a manner of speaking, to *argue* about the distribution of this sensible world, for there is in the word itself, *partager*, a radical *dissensus* or gap between, on the one hand, its sense as a sharing in common and, on the other, its sense as a decision, or cut, that divides, separates and excludes. One sense is by no means *equal* to the other, despite the fact of their sharing and being held in common by the very same designation. But what can we call this peculiar configuration, space, frame or sphere of *experience* opened by dissensus that becomes legible within the French expression *le partage du sensible* whenever it is brought to our attention, in other words, made *legible*? Since it belongs to specific features that are to be found exclusively within the idiom of the *French* language, and which have occurred there more or less fortuitously in the first place and are thus only more or less precarious and provisional, could we not say with a certain justification that the singular *partage*, which underwrites *le partage du sensible* as an operation that is always both aesthetic and political, is itself an operation founded in *poetics*? As that which names what is most proper to and shared in common by only one particular idiom, and as that which at the same time decisively separates what is proper to its own idiom from everything else that is not and can never be exactly *equal* to it, is *poetry* not ultimately the most general and inclusive designation for *le partage* that characterises all the other distributions and redistributions of subjects and objects in the sensible world—in other words, the world of political meaning (*sens*) as well as

of aesthetic sensation (*sens*)? Furthermore, to the degree that such an experience of poetics, accessible only through the rhetorical structures of a given language, is reducible to neither the time nor space of any common *object* in the phenomenal world, its direction (*sens*), if it has one, may no longer be determined according to the political and the aesthetic in Rancière's sense. And for the same reasons, such a poetics of "sharing" may no longer be reducible to a recognisable concept of the *subject* or the kind of *experience* that is commonly made intelligible through such terms or concepts.

It is at this point that a return to Walter Benjamin might prove fruitful. For Benjamin's approach to the question of aesthetics and politics always passed through a consideration of the *poetic* effects left on history by the advent of modernity. And these effects were precisely those that transformed once and for all the traditional concept of *experience* as well as the kind of political and aesthetic *subject* that could, from then on, be defined by it. It should be recalled that Benjamin made his pronouncement about the aesthetification of politics in the course of a reflection on *authenticity*. Artworks can become thoroughly political, Benjamin suggests, only "in the instant that authenticity ceases to be the criterion of aesthetic production." (WA, 224) Authenticity (*die Echtheit*), Benjamin explains earlier in the essay, refers to the aura of the artwork that, in the age of its mechanical reproducibility, withers, wastes away or atrophies: *verkümmert*. (WA, 221) Now, up to this point, Benjamin's remark is in no way incompatible with Rancière's understanding of the aesthetic regime—what Benjamin calls the loss of aura, Rancière identifies with the "dismantling" of the ethical and mimetic orders that he always associates with the aesthetic regime, though of course Benjamin's loss of aura and Rancière's dismantling of ethical and mimetic orders are valorized oppositely (negatively and positively respectively). Indeed, and according to a tropological pattern of *chiasmus* that recurs to the point of obsession in Rancière's writing, the concept of the aesthetic regime can legitimately be considered a *reversal* of Benjamin's model. "In order for the mechanical arts to be able to confer visibility on anonymous individuals," Rancière writes, "they first need to be recognized as arts." (PA, 32) Contrary to the position attributed to Benjamin by Rancière, then, the anonymous masses did not become visible as a result of the mechanical art of photography; photography became an art only because it revealed the masses. Thus, concludes Rancière, "we can even reverse

[Benjamin's] formula: it is because the anonymous became the subject matter of art that the act of recording such a subject matter can be an art." But Benjamin's understanding of the loss of aura in modernity is not nearly so straightforward as this, and it therefore does not lend itself to such simple chiasmic reversals between art and the masses, or aesthetics and politics—or, finally, between mechanical reproducibility and free innovation.

For Benjamin, the loss of aesthetic aura is associated not only with the "authenticity" of the artwork, but, just as much as or even more, with a loss of authenticity afflicting all *experience*, and it therefore touches on the status of the human as such. As we know from Benjamin's 1939 "Motifs" essay on Charles Baudelaire, the most comprehensive term for this loss of authenticity or aura is historical "change." But the change in this case is the all-important alteration or *Veränderung* sustained by the very structure of the subject's historical experience, *Erfahrung*, as it comes down to us from tradition. To the aura of the artwork that in the age of mechanical reproducibility withers or *verkümmert*, therefore, corresponds in modernity an increasing wasting away of experience in general, what Benjamin refers to as *die zunehmende Verkümmierung der Erfahrung*.<sup>3</sup> Where experience in its traditional sense has withered away to almost nothing, art *must* be politicised precisely to the extent that its true historical condition as politics, and no longer as magic or religion, becomes everywhere *vulnerable* to the most baneful aesthetic distortions and manipulations. Ultimately, what distinguishes Benjamin from Rancière is just this emphasis on the unconditional vulnerability of *both* art and politics to a historical change that could affect the very possibility of human experience.

For it is only by preserving intact the traditional concept of such experience that Rancière can celebrate the *loss* of aura as a reversal and thus as a corresponding *gain* in emancipation. For Rancière, it is the liberation from the ethical and representative regimes of art that inaugurates a new experience of the commonplace, *le quelconque*, which can be shared *equally* in democracy. As a foundational axiom that is not open

---

<sup>3</sup> See "Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire," in *Illuminationen* (Frankfurt Am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), 189; translated as "On Some Motifs in Beaudelaire," in *The Writer of Modern Life*, (ed.) M. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 174. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as MB.

to critical questioning, this experience of human equality has to ground Rancière's entire discourse—including the concept of aesthetic experience. Equality in Rancière is therefore not a philosophical topic for investigation; rather, it functions as a theological article of faith. Always equal to itself no matter how different its configurations, “the particular sphere of experience” constituted by *le partage du sensible* can undergo a process of infinite variation, but it does not in itself appear divisible as an “experience.” Quoting Schiller's famous dictum in his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*—“Man is only completely human when he plays”—Rancière then reformulates its meaning in the following terms: “There exists a *specific sensory experience* that holds the promise of both a new world of Art and a new life for individuals and the community, namely the *aesthetic*.”<sup>4</sup> The aesthetic thus becomes, in its turn, the unifying category that must guarantee the coherence of “man” as a specific experience that is both artistic *and* political, even though division, *dissensus* and separation constitute the medium in which such experience always takes place. The challenge, according to Rancière, lies in how the “specificity” of aesthetic experience can lead at once to the idea of a pure world of art *and* to the self-suppression of art in life. The entire question of the “politics of aesthetics”—in other words, Rancière's aesthetic regime of art—revolves in this way around the *and* that always brings together an experience of art with that of politics: “The aesthetic experience,” Rancière continues, “is effective inasmuch as it is the experience of that *and* [which] grounds the autonomy of art, [though only] to the extent that it connects it to the hope of ‘changing life’....” (AR, 116) Only by maintaining this “knot” as an “unresolved tension” between an idea of art and an idea of politics can the aesthetic regime remain an *experience* of that *and*—which also carries the burden of maintaining the unbreakable link between democracy, equality and fraternity in Rancière.

---

<sup>4</sup> See Jacques Rancière, “The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes,” in *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, (tr.) S. Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2010), 115 (emphasis added). Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as AR. The reference to Schiller is to *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, (ed. and tr.) E. Wilkinson and L. Willoughby (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), Letter XV, esp. 107–09. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as AE. Rancière gives another version of the same argument in “Aesthetics as Politics.”



Benjamin's formulation of the relation between aesthetics and politics, however, is different precisely to the extent that it takes seriously the alteration to the concept of *experience* that has been sustained in modernity. And this alteration cannot avoid having important consequences for everything that it touches—including the experience of human equality. For what is the status of an *equality* that can be *experienced* historically only in the self-alienating and therefore inhuman mode of mechanical reproducibility? That is the *political* situation that Benjamin diagnoses in the mid-1930s as the aesthetic fascism to which “communism” is to respond. But that is also, in the same years, the *poetic* situation that Benjamin identifies as the historical experience of modernity to which Baudelaire's texts had *already* furnished a remarkable response. If it remains difficult to verify how the forces of today's “communisms”—including the “aesthetic” and “inactual” version offered by Rancière<sup>5</sup>—will be able to respond historically to such an experience of politics, then it becomes all the more imperative to ask how a reading of Baudelaire's poetry can be made effectively political from inside his writing. To do so, however, first requires a detailed examination of Benjamin's analysis of the way *experience* has changed in modernity, as well as of the way this change becomes legible in Baudelaire's poetry. To reframe one of Rancière's favourite techniques, one could say that the aesthetic regime is thinkable as a mere *reversal* of Benjamin only by pretending that the radical *dissensus* at the heart of historical experience might itself be turned into an *aesthetic experience*. For it was precisely such a model of simple *reversibility* that, according to Benjamin, was once and for all interrupted and made impossible by Baudelaire's poetic inscription of modernity.

As is well known, the change in experience that Benjamin associates with Baudelaire's poetry is specified in part three of the “Motifs” essay in a reference to the phenomenon of *shock*: “The question arises as to how lyric poetry can be grounded in an experience, *in einer Erfahrung fundiert*, for which living through shock, *das Chockerlebnis*, has become the norm.” (MB, 177) It is this peculiar convergence, or *threshold*, in which the lived-experience of shock (*Chockerlebnis*) encounters poetic experience (*die dichterische Erfahrung*), that Benjamin will characterise

---

<sup>5</sup> See Jacques Rancière, “Communism: From Actuality to Inactuality,” in *Dissensus*.

as the unusually *historical* dimension of Baudelaire's poetry. Because Baudelaire's poetry marks the site of this change in experience—the irreversible passage from *Erfahrung* to *Erlebnis*, from the integrating experience of a collective tradition to the withering of such experience in the disparate shocks of modernity—it becomes historical in an exemplary way. “His work is not only to be determined as something historical,” Benjamin writes, “the way every other can be; rather his work intended itself this way and understood itself as such.” (MB, 177–78) Exactly what Benjamin means by the distinction he introduces here between two types of “historicity” is not spelled out, but certain elements of his thought can be surmised from his other remarks. For one thing, he suggests that *Erlebnis* represents a way of parrying the shock of modernity by living through it (*erleben*) rather than actually experiencing it (*erfahren*) in the full sense of the term. Every work of modernity is historical in the sense that it is obliged to endure the shock that everywhere besets it, though it does so only by fending it off, thus making it expire or dissolve before it ever reaches the level of truly historical memory (*Gedächtnis*). For this reason, modernity could not in such works be said to “occur” historically for knowledge or thought, since the *Erlebnis* of shock would be precisely that act of self-protective resistance by which the historical event of shock is prevented from being registered as a genuine *Erfahrung*. What makes Baudelaire's writing into something at once strange and remarkable—Benjamin says—is how he works against just such a resistance to history, a resistance that in modernity has become everywhere prevalent, by *liberating* his literary texts from the defensive stance of mere *Erlebnisse* (*die Emanzipation von Erlebnissen*). Baudelaire's poetic production is given an assignment (*eine Aufgabe*), continues Benjamin; his mission was to install poems into the blank spots that hovered before him—*es haben ihm Leerstellen vorgeschwebt, in die er seine Gedichte engesetzt hat*. In short, by writing his poems into the empty spaces left in history by the repetitive shocks of modernity, Baudelaire manages to *free* his poetic production from the recurrent living-through shock (*Chockerlebnisse*) that now characterises modernity as well as every historical object of knowledge. Baudelaire's poetry is therefore historical in a special sense because it *inscribes* those places of history that true shock might otherwise have dissolved into mere blanks (*Leerstellen*). Poetry is not, in Baudelaire's case, one aesthetic experience among others, a given means for reframing the empty spaces left in

the wake of historical shock either by elegising them or by celebrating something else in their stead; rather, poetry is a name for those features of language thanks to which alone the blank shocks of historical experience can be endowed with what Benjamin calls their legibility, their recognisability, their knowability.

The originality of this aspect of Baudelaire's historicity is confirmed in the following section of the essay, part four, where Benjamin starts out again from the stark opposition between *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*, only to undo it in a surprising twist that results in neither *Erlebnis* nor *Erfahrung* remaining the same. Whereas it is the possibility of any future *Erfahrung* that is from now on threatened by the shock factor that in modernity tends to reduce all experience to the status of a mere *Erlebnis*, it was the unique achievement of Baudelaire's poetry, Benjamin insists, to have provided this shock with its own *experience*: "Thus," writes Benjamin, as though it were the most natural conclusion imaginable, "Baudelaire placed the shock experience, *die Chockerfahrung*, at the heart of his artistic labor." (MB, 178) But since shock occurs always and only as the shattering of *Erfahrung* into *Erlebnis*, it becomes exceedingly difficult to see how Baudelaire's poetry was, in fact, able to give this *Erlebnis* of disintegration the status of *Erfahrung* within itself. If, as Benjamin goes on to say in the following paragraph, "the experience of shock, *die Erfahrung des Chocks*, belongs among those that became determining for Baudelaire's singular technique, his literary signature or *Faktur*," then where, exactly, in this poetic production should we look for and be able to find those shocks whose occurrence would otherwise have simply disappeared without a trace?

At this point in his argument, Benjamin has recourse to two French literary authorities, André Gide and Jacques Rivière, to help identify the sites where the shocks of history are inscribed within Baudelaire's poetry. For Gide, according to Benjamin, such shock is evident in the spacing and slippages, the *Intermittenzen*, which serve to dislocate the poetic image from the idea, the word from the thing; for Rivière, the shock resides in the subterranean blasts, or *Stösse*, by which Baudelaire's poetry is shaken (*von denen der Baudelairesche Vers erschüttert wird*). Benjamin goes on to claim that this shock-effect can be further determined as "a word that... buckle[s] and collapse[s] in on itself" (*als stürze ein Wort in sich zusammen*), and that such "frail or brittle words" (*solche*

*hinfalligen Worte*) can actually be pointed out with some precision in specific poems.

It was, of course, precisely this tendency of words to collapse that Benjamin had identified thirteen years earlier, in his 1926 study of the German Baroque, as one of the rhetorical structures of *allegory*. Within such writing, Benjamin had noted in his *Habilitationsschrift* “a basic motif (*Grundmotiv*) of the allegorical point of view is made to emerge.... In anagrams, onomatopoeic figures and numerous rhetorical devices of different types, the word, the syllable, and the sound, freed from every traditional meaning (*emanzipiert von jeder hergebrachten Sinnverbindung*), will strut forward as a thing to be allegorically exploited in its own right. The language of the Baroque is at all times rocked (*ist allezeit erschüttert*) by the rebellion of its elements....”<sup>6</sup> Much work still remains to be done in determining the relation between Benjamin’s study of allegory and his commentaries on the allegorical dimension of Baudelaire’s poetic production. But in both cases, one thing becomes clear: the attribute of “modernity” used to characterise a specific historical condition in its irreducible difference is also associated with a particular linguistic theory and practice. For Benjamin, language is the privileged site on which genuinely historical occurrences leave their most legible trace, acquiring through such traces their best chance of achieving future recognisability. And in modernity, the site of these traces is also always a site of shock—the historical experience of disarticulation that can be experienced only as the disarticulation of language in the *emancipation*, collapse or rebellion of its most brittle elements. Emancipation for Benjamin is not exclusively, or even primordially, a human experience; it is first of all a linguistic effect—as opposed to an aesthetic phenomenon—that must be encountered and accounted for as such if it is to become truly historical and thus political.

What interests us in the present context is less the two or three *lyric* examples that Benjamin simply takes from Rivière in the “Motifs” essay to illustrate the allegorical principle underpinning *Les Fleurs du Mal* than the comment he makes about Baudelaire’s poetry immediately afterwards: “To do justice to these covert laws outside the verse as well (*Diesen verborgenen Gesetzhkeiten auch ausserhalb des Verses ihr*

---

<sup>6</sup> See Walter Benjamin, *The Origin German Tragic Drama*, (tr.) J. Osborne (London: NLB, 1977), 207.

*Recht werden zu lassen*) was the aim that Baudelaire was to pursue in *Le Spleen de Paris*—his poetry in prose.” Now Benjamin does not often or at length refer to Baudelaire’s prose poems. The fact that he here embeds the reference in a constellation composed of both a system of laws (*die Gesetzhkeiten*) and the administrative process within which such laws can be rendered justice (*das Recht*) offers a rare opportunity for following up on his suggestion at the end of the essay on mechanical reproducibility that art must be politicised. Rather than all too quickly, and mechanically, assuming that the vocabulary of law and justice must be taken in a restricted and exclusively *metaphorical* manner when it appears in the context of reading poetry—an assumption which would, in effect, contribute to the aesthetification of politics that Benjamin warns against—we would do well to take seriously Benjamin’s invitation to consider poetry and its linguistic operations from a genuinely *political* standpoint.

For it is in this way that Benjamin actually confirms what critics have for a long time suspected, though often without being able to account for it adequately: Baudelaire’s prose poetry is political to the precise extent that it brings out the prosaic elements that already govern his lyric poetry, however “covertly” such a prosaic law appears to govern them. If the law of modern experience is ultimately determined by shock, then one will have to learn to recognise this hidden law in each and every one of its instances—in the verse poetry to be sure, but also *ausserhalb des Verses*. Beyond lyric poetry, Benjamin asserts, it is necessary to give the laws of modern shock their due, and that means, first of all, that such laws must be considered outside the formal and semantic limits that are by convention and tradition assigned to lyric poetry. This, according to Benjamin, was Baudelaire’s main objective in writing his poetry in prose—to expose the art of poetry to the points of its articulation with the prosaic, that is to say, the social, economic and political forces that are themselves historically conditioned by the shock experience. Because the disintegration of art’s aura in modernity is also tied to the wasting away of historical experience, Baudelaire’s *poésie* can be truly *prosaic* only by doing justice to this law of shock in which art and politics necessarily share and interpenetrate. But in distinction to fascism, which seeks to distract the masses from true shock by presenting the aesthetic spectacle of total mobilisation in its place, and in so doing also conveys the political illusion of aesthetic totalisation, Baudelaire’s

poetry allows the jolts that rock modernity to its core to become transparent in the singularity of their actual historical occurrence.

Hence, says Benjamin (in the same section of the “Motifs” essay from which we have been quoting), the urban masses that lie everywhere hidden in Baudelaire’s writing can share in no common element; they form no simple identity, much less a totality of such identities. “There can be no question of a particular class or of any sort of structured collective, since there is nothing here but the amorphous crowd of passers-by, the throngs in the streets.” (MB, 180) As a result of the shock that shatters the identity of all social and political experience, the urban masses become a crowd that forever passes by without achieving the wholeness of any form (*die amorphe Menge der Passanten*). It is in this way that the uncanny shape in which the poet encounters the passage of such crowds remains strangely devoid of humanity (*menschenleer*), which is to say, it takes the inhuman, or better, non- or a-human form of a *ghost*. “To be sure,” Benjamin concludes, “the neighborhoods through which the poet makes his way are deserted (*menschenleer*). But the secret constellation is no doubt to be taken this way: the phantom crowd, *die Geistermenge*, of words, fragments, beginnings or scraps of verse.” (MB, 181) In the shocking law that causes the integrity of words to buckle and collapse, the historical experience of socio-economic fragmentation whose very amorphousness clamours everywhere for justice must ultimately be discerned. Such is the covert lesson offered by a critical reading of *Le Spleen de Paris*, Baudelaire’s prose poems. At this point, we are, as Rancière himself admits, at the furthest remove from an “aesthetics of politics” in his sense. The *experience* of history, as Benjamin reads its remnants in the language of Baudelaire, can no longer be described by an empirical principle such as the “human,” nor can the concept of “equality” any longer be simply taken for granted. For Benjamin, the time and space of history cannot be made to depend upon an unquestioned “presupposition.” If history can be designated and thus made accessible to thought and speech, it can only be as a text of inscriptions in which the ghostly traces, or *Geistermenge*, of singular forces always, again, demand to be recognised and read.

\*\*\*

### ***Le Joujou du Pauvre***

*Je veux donner l'idée d'un divertissement innocent. Il y a si peu d'amusements qui ne soient pas coupables !*

*Quand vous sortirez le matin avec l'intention décidée de flâner sur les grandes routes, remplissez vos poches de petites inventions d'un sol, - telles que le polichinelle plat mû par un seul fil, les forgerons qui battent l'enclume, le cavalier et son cheval dont la queue est un sifflet, - et le long des cabarets, au pied des arbres, faites-en hommage aux enfants inconnus et pauvres que vous rencontrerez. Vous verrez leurs yeux s'agrandir démesurément. D'abord ils n'oseront pas prendre; ils douteront de leur bonheur. Puis leurs mains agripperont vivement le cadeau, et ils s'enfuiront comme font les chats qui vont manger loin de vous le morceau que vous leur avez donné, ayant appris à se défier de l'homme.*

*Sur une route, derrière la grille d'un vaste jardin, au bout duquel apparaissait la blancheur d'un joli château frappé par le soleil, se tenait un enfant beau et frais, habillé de ces vêtements de campagne si pleins de coquetterie.*

*Le luxe, l'insouciance et le spectacle habituel de la richesse, rendent ces enfants-là si jolis, qu'on les croirait faits d'une autre pâte que les enfants de la médiocrité ou de la pauvreté.*

*A côté de lui, gisait sur l'herbe un joujou splendide, aussi frais que son maître, verni, doré, vêtu d'une robe pourpre, et couvert de plumets et de verroteries. Mais l'enfant ne s'occupait pas de son joujou préféré, et voici ce qu'il regardait:*

*De l'autre côté de la grille, sur la route, entre les chardons et les orties, il y avait un autre enfant, pâle, chétif, fuligineux, un de ces marmots-parias dont un œil impartial découvrirait la beauté, si, comme l'œil du connaisseur devine une peinture idéale sous un vernis de carrossier, il le nettoyait de la répugnante patine de la misère.*

*A travers ces barreaux symboliques séparant deux mondes, la grande route et le château, l'enfant pauvre montrait à l'enfant riche son propre joujou, que celui-ci examinait avidement comme un objet rare et inconnu. Or, ce joujou, que le petit souillon agaçait, agitait et secouait dans une boîte grillée, c'était un rat vivant ! Les parents, par économie sans doute, avaient tiré le joujou de la vie elle-même.*

*Et les deux enfants se riaient l'un à l'autre fraternellement, avec des dents d'une égale blancheur.*

### **The Poor Child's Toy**

I would like to give an idea of an innocent diversion. There are so few amusements that are not culpable!

When you go out in the morning, having decided to take a stroll along the open roads, fill your pockets with little one-penny contrivances—such as a flat paper puppet hanging on a single string, blacksmiths striking an anvil, the rider on his horse whose tail is a whistle—and in front of the cabarets or underneath the trees, offer them as gifts to the poor, unknown children you are bound to come across. You will see their eyes grow enormously wide. At first, not believing their good fortune, they won't dare to take them. Then they will quickly grab the present in their hands, and they will flee, just as cats go far away to eat the morsel you have given them, having learned to distrust man.

On a road, behind the iron fence of a vast garden, at the end of which appeared a pretty white chateau shining in the sun, stood a child, fresh and beautiful, dressed in one of those country outfits that are so charming.

Luxury, insouciance and the habitual spectacle of wealth render these children so pretty that one could believe they were made from a different substance than children of poverty or mediocrity.

Next to him, lying on the grass, was a splendid toy, just as fresh as its master, polished, coated in gold, wearing a purple robe, and covered with plumes and glass beads. But the child was paying no attention to his favourite toy, and this is what he was looking at:

On the other side of the iron fence, in the road, among the thistles and the nettles, there was another child, pale, puny and sooty, one of those urchin-pariahs in whom an impartial eye would be able to discover



beauty, if, just as the eye of the connoisseur divines an ideal painting beneath a coachmaker's varnish, it were to clean from him the repugnant patina of misery.

Between those symbolic bars separating two worlds—the open road and the chateau—the poor child was showing the rich child his own toy, which the rich child examined avidly, as though it were a rare and unknown object. Now, this toy, which the filthy little child was poking, prodding and shaking inside the bars of a cage, was a live rat! The parents, no doubt as a measure of thrift, had plucked the toy from life itself.

And the two children were laughing at each other fraternally, with teeth of *equal* whiteness.

\*\*\*

At first sight, few prose poems in the collection of Baudelaire's *Spleen de Paris* seem to have less to do with the aimless commotion of the amorphous crowds that Benjamin describes in his "Motifs" essay than "*Le Joujou du Pauvre*" ("The Poor Child's Toy").<sup>7</sup> On the contrary, the most remarkable aspect of the text is its clear and sharp focus on two individuals, each of whom appears to embody a distinct class of opposing socio-economic interests: the rich and the poor, or the bourgeois and the proletarian. As is easily noted, what lends the anecdote piquancy and makes it a truly Baudelairean *poème en prose* is the tension produced when a commonplace of political philosophy is put to the test and stretched to its limits. For what the poem is actually about is the pragmatic tendency, for the sake of social and political stability, to reduce an inherently *dissensual* core that divides the polity at its root to a simple conflict between two opposed but symmetrical classes that can be brought together into a state of consensual equivalence and illusory harmony. The obvious intertext is Rousseau's ninth "*Rêverie*," where, against a background of unrelieved difference, "everything on earth is in a state of perpetual flux" (*tout est sur la terre dans un flux continuel*). Rousseau suggests that "an essence of humanity" (*l'humanité pure*) might be found in "the nearly *equal sharing*" (*le partage presque égal*)

---

<sup>7</sup> See Charles Baudelaire, "*Le Joujou du Pauvre*," in *Oeuvres Complètes*, (ed.) Claude Pichois (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1975), 304–05. My translation.

of at least one quality among all individuals. Now, the specific quality shared in common by all members of humanity, it turns out, is the capacity that both Schiller and Rancière also single out: the capacity for *aesthetic play*. At the centre of the text, Rousseau restages a game (*un jeu*) that is played by a community of young girls—a game within a game; the merry go ’round of girls at play provides Rousseau with an aesthetic spectacle from which he then deduces the basic political principle of *equality*.<sup>8</sup> In this strictly pre-Kantian reverie, aesthetic play thus provides the common experience that promises to unify all human subjects across their otherwise insurmountable differences. In that tiny qualifier “*presque*,” however—*almost* or *nearly* equal—lies the problematic legacy that Rousseau’s concept of equality bequeaths to all subsequent aesthetic and political theory. Baudelaire’s “*Joujou du Pauvre*” merits our attention precisely because it returns to this familiar concept of the universal equality of aesthetic detachment, though from a post-revolutionary standpoint that also puts its most fundamental premises into question.

From the start, the first-person narrator makes clear how the poem should be read. The story is intended to give a theory of the aesthetic as free play: “I would like to give an idea of an innocent diversion.” The speaker, in agreement with Kant, suggests that aesthetic judgements of taste are “innocent” to the degree they are separate from a determinate aim that coincides either with pleasure or knowledge, the French word *divertissement* indicating, among other things, the necessary “turning away” or detour from the cognitive and moral judgements always involved in aesthetic experience. Lyric poetry (*le vers*) is itself just such a diversion, so the prose version of poetry thus becomes a critical supplement that reflects analytically upon the conditions and modalities of the gratuitous nature of verse. It is this theoretical dimension of Baudelaire’s prose poem, moreover, that underpins its first full paragraph, whose own *hypothetical* character—midway between empirical reality and poetic fiction—is marked by the future tense in which the prose meditation has to be carried out: *When you go out in the morning.... You will see their eyes open wide.... They won’t dare take the toys.... They won’t believe their good fortune*, etc. According to this aes-

---

<sup>8</sup> See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “*Les Rêveries du Promeneur Solitaire*,” in *Oeuvres Complètes*, (ed.) B. Gagnebin and M. Raymond (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1959), 1085, 1091, 1097.

thetic theory or *idée*, the work of art is not in the first place historical, or political for that matter, since it comes into existence only at the moment that history—understood here as both nature, *underneath the trees*, and culture, *in front of the cabarets*—is interrupted in favour of a new type of activity: the toy (or lyric poem) that, for its own sake, inaugurates a *diversion* of attention away from everything but itself. Hence, the emphasis on the child, who is not only a figure of innocence but also of a being whose freedom consists in not yet, or no longer, being subject to the constraints of natural and social history. The gesture that defines the child, as the artist, is the one that places it among those who “will flee,” in other words, *suspend* the social and political frameworks from which they necessarily mark themselves off. At the same time, however, the text also hints that the aesthetic distance that separates the aesthetic from the political is itself a political act, since taking the “toy” out of the reigning socio-political space is paired here with “learning to *distrust*” human society.

But rather than developing the theoretical model of an aesthetic regime that is at once artistic and political, simultaneously “innocent” and “revolutionary,” Baudelaire’s text veers off into an altogether different register. The second half of “*Le Joujou du Pauvre*,” divided into six staccato-like paragraphs, now elides both the first-person narrator and the hypothetical mode of its opening theoretical statement. How are we to read this portion of the poem, which goes on to relate an entirely new story in the past tense? Is the second half of the text meant as the record of a historical fact that illustrates and supports the first half? Or is the poem now entering a realm of pure fiction, creating an illusion that serves to interrupt and thus divert the theoretical statement from coming to a satisfactory conclusion in its own right? The question, however frivolous it may seem, matters a great deal for a critical reading of any theoretical discourse, including Rancière’s. For it points to a possible *discrepancy* between theory, fact and fiction, in other words, between Rancière’s own theory about the symmetrical relation between the aesthetic as politics and the aesthetic as art. If, as in Baudelaire’s text, it is difficult to say whether a given theoretical statement leads back to factual history or toward more speculative fictions, then the status of that theory becomes highly volatile and dubious. In this case, what is finally at stake is the status of the human and the kind of equality that such a concept could ground or be grounded in.

And it is the confrontation with this particular complication that becomes unavoidable in reading the second half of “The Poor Child’s Toy.” Whether the latter half is meant as history or as fiction, its openly disruptive impact on the theoretical commonplace, or *idée* enunciated at the start of the text, is certain. For only the most cognitively innocent or politically corrupt reader can fail to note that the aesthetic example in the second half in no way coincides with the theory proposed in the first part. Nor does it take long to identify the source of the glaring discrepancy between them. It is money—the least disinterested, the most uncontrollable political and aesthetic reality imaginable—that spoils the hypothetical status of free play. Once the second part introduces and then looks through the bars of an iron fence that separates the open road from the exclusive world of the chateau, all sorts of travesty and perversion become possible, not only between art and politics, but also between theory and fiction, equal and unequal, human and un-human.

For neither was money wholly absent from the first part of the text, though it appeared there in such an understated fashion that its unsettling potential could remain safely out of sight. From the beginning, access to the aesthetic was possible only by way of an inaugural investment: the toys that are to be *given freely* must first be purchased by an exchange of *currency*, even though the amount in question is negligible—these are “penny toys.” In the second part of the text, however, the problematic nature of money comes into full view. The aesthetic attribute par excellence, the “beauty,” named as such in the second part, does not enter the text by reference to fine art. Rather, it appears first in connection to a posh and showy residence, described as “a *pretty* chateau,” which is itself the locus of “luxury, insouciance and the habitual spectacle of wealth.” And the rich child standing in front of the chateau, originally described simply as “beautiful,” is later called “pretty”—the same aesthetic attribute that was applied to the chateau. More disturbing still, the child’s beauty does not result from its humanity; rather, what *makes* such children pretty is simply the repetitive, mechanical display of *wealth*. As a regulated economy of form and spectacle, wealth makes the aesthetic into a political practice that actually *divides* humanity: “Luxury, insouciance and the habitual spectacle of wealth render these children so pretty that one could believe they were *made from a different substance* than children of poverty or mediocrity.” In Baudelaire as read by Benjamin rather than Rancière, the aesthetic is by no means a stable

category, since it always signifies inequality as well as equality, the human as well as that which is not yet or is no longer human. And as this particular text makes clear, it is not *a priori* possible to tell them apart, since the *means* of instituting the difference, *money*, is also the *effect* that serves to render such difference inoperative.

Moreover, it is the sudden revelation of this underlying instability or *amorphousness* that Benjamin associates with the “law” of Baudelaire’s *prose* poems. Such a revelation occurs by reading the artful manner in which “The Poor Child’s Toy” ultimately relates the impoverished child to the rich one. In a socio-political regime where money rules, both children turn out to be mere boy-toys, commodities reduced to the status of aesthetic objects of contemplation. Associated first with the chateau, the rich boy, *fresh and beautiful*, is then compared to his mass-produced toy: “Next to him, lying on the grass, was a splendid toy, *just as fresh* as its master, polished (*verni*), coated in gold [and] wearing a purple robe.” What makes both the toy and the boy *fresh*, of course, is disclosed by the French adjective *verni*, the highly polished surface that endows an object with aesthetic *Schein*, or appearance, in the first place. Like the repetitive spectacle of wealth, the appearance of “beauty” is a mechanically reproducible aura whose illusory content, equal to that of paper money, was the constant object of Benjamin’s critical analysis. The aesthetic, it turns out, is a mode of signification rather than a particular signified—and it has to be a pointing out, a designating of the distribution of the sensible world, before it can be applied to anything sensuous “in itself.”<sup>9</sup> As such, it is also a technical device by which a given

---

<sup>9</sup> By insisting on a pure dualism between form and matter, Rancière avoids the complication posed by the non-sensuous and non-intelligible, i.e., a-morphous and thus *ghostly* “mechanical reproducibility” that Benjamin encounters in Baudelaire’s writing. Citing Schiller, Rancière writes: “Aesthetic free play involves the *abolition* of the opposition between *form* and *matter*, between activity and passivity. This is also the *abolition* between a *full humanity* and a *sub-humanity*. Aesthetic free play and universality of the judgment of taste define a new kind of *liberty* and *equality* that is no longer abstract but *sensible*.... This is why it bears within it the promise of a ‘new art of living’ of individuals and the community, the promise of a new *humanity*....” See “The Monument and its Confidences,” in *Dissensus*, 176 (emphasis added). In Letter XIII (AE, 84–85), Schiller does not speak of an “abolition” of the opposition between form and matter, but rather of their “reciprocal reversibility” (*Wechselwirkung*). It is

effect, for instance the appearance, or *Erscheinung*, of *experience*, *equality* or *humanity*, can be achieved independently of its own machine-like principle of constitution and reproduction.

Furthermore, since art is a *techné*, it is equally at home on both sides of any dividing line, fence or cage; it is just as able, just as free to make poverty into an exhibition of so-called “beauty” as it is wealth, equally capable of representing death as life, or the un-human as the human. As Benjamin says about the spectacle of total war, the experience of self-alienation finally reaches a point where the “human” (*die Menschheit*) can undergo its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order. (WA, 242) “The Poor Child’s Toy” reveals this potential of the aesthetic when its polish is applied to the poor boy as a “*patina* of misery.” To the “impartial eye” of the connoisseur or art dealer, even filth and deprivation can become a patina or *verniss* suggesting human “beauty.” As soon as it is designated as such, the appearance of misery makes the poor child into an object of aesthetic enjoyment for the spectator—i.e., the *theoretician* of the aesthetic—just as much as the rich child and his gleaming toy. The specific aesthetic device used to achieve this transfiguration of poverty is the rhetorical trope of negation—the *reversal* that is precisely the trope preferred by Rancière. What the poor boy *lacks* on the surface, the *Schein* of beauty possessed by the highly polished skin of the rich boy (and toy), is now *granted* to him as an inner and, therefore, more essential property—the hidden beauty of “an *ideal* painting” that is assumed to exist beneath the filthy *verniss* that covers him. Such, too, is the *equality* presupposed by Rancière’s aesthetic—a presupposition that, however desirable, however admirable as a hypothetical goal, remains to be demonstrated as a principle of aesthetic and political actuality.

In Baudelaire’s treatment of just such a hypothesis, moreover, the meaning of *equality* does not remain intact for long. The rich boy has all that he desires, but his beauty may be only skin-deep. On the other hand, the poor boy, despite all his material deprivations, is pre-

---

symptomatic that Rancière reads *reversibility* as a means of overcoming opposition (*Entgegensetzung*). To think aesthetic “spectacle” as mechanical reproducibility rather than as Rancière’s “unprecedented sensorium in which the hierarchies are abolished,” is to confront its actual conditions of possibility rather than to celebrate its merely hypothetical and thus dubious effects.

sumed to possess an ideal quality of beauty that we cannot see. The poetic device that makes inner “beauty” appear *equal* to the outer spectacle of “wealth” is *metaphor*, the rhetorical trope that underlies both Schiller’s and Rancière’s “aesthetics of politics.” The hidden beauty of Baudelaire’s poor child is thus related to the manifest beauty of the rich child *just as* the outer beauty of an aesthetic object (a *painting*) is related to its *ideal* meaning. Of course, the poor boy is not rendered any less poor, miserable or deprived in fact; but by virtue of the trope as *Schein*, he *appears* sufficiently compensated for this poverty by receiving in return, on “loan,” as it were, the “same” attribute of aesthetic beauty that characterises the *appearance* of his rich counterpart. Thus, and whatever the socio-economic inequalities that still separate them, the two boys on opposite sides of the fence end up, at least from the “ideal” of political aesthetics, as “equals.” The aesthetic model of politics has been so poetically enhanced by this point that any remaining differences between the two figures fade from view, neatly concealed beneath purely formal patterns of negation, exchange and, eventually, equivalence. Far from constituting an “innocent” aesthetic diversion and/or a reliably “revolutionary” politics, such “games” are indeed the most common currency in which today’s social and political ideologies conduct their transactions.

At least, that would be the rather banal and obvious conclusion to draw here if it weren’t for the last two paragraphs, in which the truly prosaic element in Baudelaire’s poetry responds to the aesthetification of politics with a wholly unexpected politicisation of art. It does so, moreover, as Benjamin suggested, by rendering justice to the law of shock lying at the heart of all genuinely historical experience, aesthetic and economic, as well as political. This, of course, is the shock that occurs with the introduction of the rat. But the rat does not disrupt aesthetic illusions or the kind of political economics that go hand and hand with them merely on account of its animal, and therefore wild but containable, nature. That people often behave toward one another like animals, that art is just as liable to become a fetishistic object of exchange as any other commodity, are just two more clichés to add to all the other aesthetic and political demystifications performed by the text as toy. The boys’ shared laughter, the ironising of the revolutionary slogan *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, by basing the *fraternité* of the two boys on the superficial equality of their white teeth—a corollary of the aesthetic *Schein*, or

*whiteness* that characterises the chateau and its economy of commodity exchange—is merely relative and not ultimately disruptive, especially in view of all the other reversals in the text. For it nevertheless promises an “inner” *fraternité* that will one day be equal to, but different from, the suspended potential of the boys’ teeth to rip each other apart.

The rat possesses real power because it, like the money and unlike the aesthetic, is not based on an inside/outside model of metaphorical appearance and ideal meaning. In terms of both money and the rat, the boys are *in fact* equal—equally at the disposition of money (as reproducible *Schein*) and the rat (as reproducible play). For both the rat and the money can be used as a means of *converting* all differences into equivalences, thus *making* the boys into an *appearance*, or certificate, of *equality*. The rat, in all its viciousness, is a pure signifier; it designates the “beauty” of aesthetic *play* in which the boys’ common humanity can be shared and made manifest, despite its own ugliness. What makes the rat, like the money, truly wild and threatening, however, is that, *tiré de la vie elle-même*, taken from life at the same time that this withdrawal is itself remarked and thus made to come “alive” all by itself, it now exists (*vivant*) in a wholly uncanny mode—*like a rare and unknown object*—that can no longer be determined on the basis of either organic or inorganic, animal or human, sensuous or intelligible criteria. As the linguistic inscription of an “experience” belonging neither to nature nor to consciousness, the rat as toy, or the toy as rat (or the rat as currency, for that matter), discloses a dimension of “life” that lay hidden—rare and unknown—within all the other elements and functions of the text, though it ultimately depends on none of them for its own unpredictable power. As such, Baudelaire’s rat stands for no distinct class, no collective, no human identity. It is a singular instance of Benjamin’s phantom but unstoppable crowd in which every meaningful identity suddenly loses its shape, becomes so poor and amorphous that it collapses into itself, like a word that buckles and falls to pieces—like the word “rat,” in fact, which ultimately frees itself from the signifying cage in which it has been penned up here. For the rat is inseparable from the a-semantic particles in which *fraternité* first achieves form and then puts on a spectacle, inseparable, too, from the aesthetic and political concept of determinate similitude that the prose poem constructs, and which becomes dangerously untenable from the moment it is shown to be haunted by the free play of this unholy rat. The art of the rat—the anagrammatic explosiveness that



Benjamin always associated with an allegorical as opposed to an aesthetic principle of signification—shocks to the precise extent that it renders justice to the prosaic law of the letter. This covert poetics shares the ground with every known political and aesthetic concept, and makes them all tremble uncontrollably. Without warning, its convulsive laugh can shake free and break out of any symbolic bars intended to keep it at a safe distance from whatever we have a vested interest in thinking we know or desire, including human equality. We are always free, of course, not to pay too much attention to such a rat; but in that case, it may just be the rat that has the last laugh.

*kevin.newmark@bc.edu*