

Baudelaire's "Dark Zone": The *Poème en Prose* As Social Hieroglyph; or The Beginning and the End of Commodity Aesthetics

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I) Becoming Prose

Lyric poetry collides with the prose of history in Baudelaire's *Petits poèmes en prose* (1869).¹ Of the fifty prose poems assembled in the collection, "Perte d'auréole", or "Halo Lost", makes the collision explicit. The poem is narrated by an angel – one of Baudelaire's many surrogates in the work – who allegorizes the poet's new situation under modern capitalism's inhospitable conditions:

Just now, as I was crossing the boulevard, and hopping in the mud, in quite a hurry, through the shifting chaos where death comes galloping from all sides at once, my halo slipped off my head, in one abrupt movement, into the mire of the macadam. I didn't have the guts to pick it up. I considered it less disagreeable to lose my insignia than to break my bones. And anyways, I said to myself, misfortune is good for something. Now I can walk about incognito, commit foul acts, and indulge in debauchery like ordinary mortals. So here I am, just like you, as you can see!²

As Walter Benjamin notes, the lost halo in Baudelaire's prose poem resembles the artwork's aura, whose historical "decay" he famously describes in relation to the ascendancy of commodity production, under the influence of which the poet becomes vulnerable to the market and the artwork loses its authority. What Benjamin does *not* address, however, is how the *Petits poèmes en prose*, as a singular poetic experiment, realizes a consequential effect of the aura's erosion on lyric form.

In the letter to his prospective editor at *La Presse*, Arsène Houssaye, a letter that would eventually become the preface to the *Petits poèmes en prose*, Baudelaire refers to his prosaic project as one informed by lyric values. "Which of us has not," he writes, "in his ambitious days, dreamed of the miracle of a poetic prose, musical without rhythm and without rhyme, supple enough and choppy enough to fit the soul's lyrical movements."³ But even without this letter to underscore the lyric ambition of Baudelaire's late experiment, it's curious that Benjamin's reference to "Halo Lost" in *The Arcades Project* is one of the few mentions of a *poème en prose* in all of his writing on the poet. And when Benjamin argues for this one poem's inestimable significance, he does so without saying anything at all about Baudelaire's innovative form. "The significance of the prose poem 'Perte d'auréole' cannot be overestimated. First of all, there is the remarkable pertinence of the fact that it spotlights the threat to the aura posed by the experience of shock."⁴ For Benjamin, the poem's importance rests in its *thematic* treatment of aura's decay, as well as its registration of "the experience of shock," which captures an effect of the disrupted social relations under modernity – mass-production and urban development – and the unharnessed excess of stimuli accompanying such disruptions: "the shifting chaos where death comes galloping from all sides." By way of this image, the poem registers the entropic drift of modern urban life. More specifically, it allegorizes real ruptures in social time and space that accompany the intensification of commodity production during the Second Empire, when, according to Benjamin, "the objects of our most intimate use have increasingly become mass-produced," and historical events become manufactured "articles."⁵

Benjamin extends his reflections on the thematics of shock further in his late work 'Central Park' by linking the poet's psychological fragility to economic forces, "the accelerated succession of crises," which destroys "the security of the conditions of life" ('CP', 36). David Harvey analyzes these crises and conditions in his own study of Second Empire Paris, referring after Marx to the "geographical expansion and acceleration in the circulation of capital," and to Haussmann's plans to overhaul the city, which "wiped out some communities" and "punched gaping holes in others and sponsored much gentrification, dislocation, and removal."⁶ Indeed, Haussmann's ambition to materialize a total break with the past threatened everything, even memory, and this offers historical ground for Benjamin's idea of the "experience of shock," which may suggest nothing less than a transformation in the structure of experience itself.

It's under these conditions, then, that the angel-narrator of "Halo Lost" loses his sign of distinction, his "insignia" [*insignes*], or badge, and like the city poet circulating among buyers and sellers, newspapermen and laborers, there is no longer anything to secure his survival, let alone his dignity and cultural prestige. Rather than protest or mourn his loss, however, Baudelaire's angel accepts his fallen condition "into the mire of the macadam." By resigning himself in this way, the poem registers an awareness that the traditional artwork or poem could no longer claim a unique value, and that aesthetic authenticity – in this case, the elevated status of lyric poetry – had become incompatible with modern experience, whose transformation, Benjamin argues, was inseparable from the domination of life by the commodity, and the disfiguration of social relations by the dynamics of capitalist production. This incompatibility is especially germane to lyric, whose claim to sing the intensity of present experience, the fullness of time in song, had come into contradiction with an increasingly mediated social reality, if not with the liquidation of time itself. For Benjamin, this liquidation manifests as the repetition of empty moments – concretized in the repetitive motion of industrial production – each instance of which had become an "eternity" separating one from "the security of the conditions of life."⁷ Thus the present becomes isolated, cut-off from its history, negating the continuities of past and future traditionally ensured by a present tense pregnant with both. And yet, the poet-narrator's manner of parrying the "experience of shock," and the apparent reconciliation to his new circumstances in "Halo Lost," also prepares a prophylactic against lyric poetry's social inconsequence, some modest protection against the immediate obsolescence threatening everything that failed to command an exchange-value. Instead of clinging to the halo and nourishing a melancholy identification with its loss, the poem's angel *sans auréole* recognizes the halo's loss as a critical event, perhaps even an *opportunity*.

Just as the poem's narrator affirms his new status as a commoner – "so here I am, just like you" – Baudelaire's new literary form, the *poème en prose*, affirms lyric's prosaic situation. By cross-dressing as common prose, modern poetry insinuates itself within the newly dominant system of commodity exchange where it finds a way to go on circulating. But this formal masquerade – challenging in advance Mallarmé's injunction that poetry exempt itself from all channels of circulation contaminated by journalistic *reportage* – like the poet's "incognito," is dialectical insofar as it simultaneously betrays and preserves poetry's social mobility, allowing poet and poem alike to do strange commerce with the "foul acts" and "debauchery" that describe the most common economic behavior under modern capitalism – *selling* – which not even the most militant of poets could definitively defy in good faith. It's as if by avowing his inescapable rapport with such "foul acts," and by working with that relationship as thematic and formal material, poetry might stand a chance under modernity.⁸

Consonant with the angel's logic, the *poème en prose* offers an unlikely illustration of aesthetic survival as Theodor Adorno describes it in *Aesthetic Theory*: "To survive reality, at its most extreme and grim," Adorno writes, "artworks that do not want to sell themselves as consolation must equate themselves with that reality."⁹ While artworks – or poems – committed to their integrity and their survival under inhospitable conditions must refuse to cover-up or assuage the damaged social ecology that issues them, they must nevertheless secure a place for themselves, if only as a "negative imprint" of the world against which they protest. They must, in other words, find a way to make their own constitutive illegibility – for example, their strained expression of transformed experience – legible, reflecting society while maintaining their irreducible difference, or non-identity, vis-à-vis the very thing they reflect. This is what Adorno refers to as the autonomy of the serious work of art, that is, the autonomy to accurately express the erosion of autonomy. Even in its effort to preserve some semblance of freedom, the poem can't disavow its *heteronomy*, or its unfree entanglement with a sales economy predicated on the equivalence of values. But rather than "equating" itself with a new modern reality *per se*, Baudelaire's *poème en prose*, as I will go on to show, performs a complex masquerade characterized by its *resemblance* to the structure of equivalence that governs exchange.

What makes the *poème en prose* an unlikely candidate for the sort of aesthetic survival that Adorno privileges is precisely its prosaic quality, its lack of seriousness due either to the new form's humdrumness, its charade, or its expediency for consumption. Baudelaire himself refers to his innovation as an "admirable convenience" [*commodité*] in the letter to Houssaye. "*Quelles admirables commodités,*" he writes, arguing for the ease his new poems will offer the reader. And yet, these qualities may, in the end, be indissociable from Adorno's notion of the serious and autonomous. Indeed, by intimating the *poème en prose*'s generic promiscuity with the market, "Halo Lost" dramatizes one mode of persistence for poetry after having lost the unique modality ascribed to it by tradition. While auratic lyric often appears to realize its historical transformation under modernity by amplifying rather than negating its claim to authenticity, as in the case of

Mallarmé, lyric poetry's survival can also be understood dialectically to inhere in the appearance of its own self-sacrifice, its *becoming prose*.

"Halo Lost" no doubt thematizes this becoming, but it's not alone among the poems in Baudelaire's collection that draw attention to poetry's future. "The Artist's *Confiteor*," for example, performs the poet's surrender to history, even as it expresses the narrator's desire to escape the movement of time that will otherwise lead the poet to ruin and the poem to the sort of prosaic "disfiguration" allegorized by the *poème en prose* as a form. This concession is complicated, however, by other poems in the collection which imagine the poet's conundrum differently. Thus, in poems like "Crowds" and "Let's Beat Up the Poor!," the dynamic of social surrender is reversed as the narrator, rather than performing in the role of the conquered poet, becomes an agent of aggression, underscoring the lyric subject's implication in the violence it assails.¹⁰ Finally, with respect to the prosaic form itself, one can read Baudelaire's innovation as a species of defrocked lyric in "Halo Lost," but then as "a sacerdotal emblem in the hand of priests" in "The Thyrses", itself a metaphor for Baudelaire's formal experiment with its "straight line and its arabesque line, intention and expression, tautness of the will and sinuousness of the word, unity of aim and variety of means."¹¹ These inversions only begin to suggest the complexities of the *Petits poèmes en prose* – indeed, its success as a project hinges on its ability to activate its own contradictions – illustrating the dialectics of survival that constitute the work's formal and thematic core.

As an experiment in both prosaics and lyric, the *Petits poèmes en prose* occupies a murky place among Baudelaire's complete works. Despite the instability and ambivalence that mark its inception, the "prose poem" persists today as a recognized genre, with its own canons, anthologies, and journals; and yet, Baudelaire's *poème en prose* is in many ways irreducible to the genre it is typically said to have originated.¹² Moreover, the generic specificity of the *Petits poèmes en prose* presents something of an inassimilable problem within the history of the genre it names. But the difficulties posed by Baudelaire's late innovation have less to do with the taxonomic conundrums that attend the identification of literary genres than with deeper contradictions embedded in the *poème en prose*'s aesthetic response to the crisis of commodity production and the latter's encroachment on poetic form.

The profit driven daily newspaper is one critical scene of this encroachment, and it offered Baudelaire both a stage and a model. In what follows, I'll propose a prolegomenon for a reading of the *Petits poèmes en prose* as a dialectical project whereby a new literary genre, promoted by Baudelaire himself for its immediate accessibility and narrative simplicity, its convenience and transparency, finds its non-identical equivalent in a form of social abstraction that mirrors the commodity form in general, and the profit driven daily more specifically, registering poetry's collision with the massification of print culture in unexpected ways. This very particular collision is accompanied by a more general crisis of capital which generated a range of symptomatic effects and a multivalent chain of consequences, from overproduction to social upheaval.¹³ At the center of the crisis is a newly dominant expression of social value, the commodity, whose salient characteristic, according to Marx, is the concrete *appearance* of an otherwise supersensory process of exchange not immediately available to perception. It's worth recalling Marx's well-rehearsed analysis of the commodity form and the mystification of value: "A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties. So far as it is a use-value, there is nothing mysterious about it [...] but as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a sensible supersensible thing [*ein sinnlich übersinnliches Ding*]."¹⁴ For Marx, objectivity is as immaterial and abstract as it is concrete: "Not an atom of matter enters into the objectivity of commodities as values" (C, 168). And in an aphoristic peroration he writes, "value, therefore, does not have its description branded on its forehead; it rather transforms every product of labor into a social hieroglyphic. Later on, one tries to decipher the hieroglyphic" (C, 167-8). With its "semblance of objectivity," the commodity is a social abstraction, and as such it maintains a fugitive relation to experience and perception.

Are there grounds for reading Baudelaire's late innovation as a "social hieroglyph"? If so, how are we to decipher it? While the relation of Baudelaire's *verse* to the commodity has been treated at length, hieroglyphic abstraction is not typically associated with the *poème en prose*, whose appearance rather suggests transparent narrative unburdened by the difficulties often associated with formal concerns.¹⁵ Yet in his letter to Houssaye,

Baudelaire himself explicitly acknowledges the significance of abstraction for his late lyric experiment. Comparing his own form to the form of one of his privileged models, *Gaspard de la nuit*, where Louis “Aloysius” Bertrand tried, in his own words, “to create a new genre of prose,” Baudelaire told his friend and editor that he had aimed “to apply to the description of modern life, or rather *a more abstract modern life*, the procedure that [Bertrand] had applied to the painting of an older form of life” [my emphasis].¹⁶ It’s astonishing how Baudelaire links the prosaic and the abstract in his description of his *poèmes en prose*, a relation that had already materialized in the explosion of commodified journalism and its profit-driven circulation, which *La Presse*, more than any other newspaper, had successfully commandeered.¹⁷

Although Baudelaire’s letter to Houssaye is best known for the famous description of his new prose – “musical without rhythm and without rhyme” – the significance of the letter, if only for my purposes here, lies in Baudelaire’s ability to marshal attributes of the newspaper to help him sell his poems. As I’ll discuss at length below, Baudelaire insists not only on the *poème en prose* as an *admirable commodité*, but also on its amenability to fragmentation – “chop it up into fragments, and you’ll see how each of them is able to stand alone” – as if these predications were among his new genre’s most appealing qualities.¹⁸ Baudelaire’s description of his work transmits an understanding of the newspaper not only as a socio-cultural form, but also as an *aesthetic* one. In his discussion of newspaper culture in *Discourse / Counter-Discourse*, Richard Terdiman captures this relationship between aesthetic form and social function in the mass daily:

Newspapers trained their readers in the apprehension of detached, independent, reified, decontextualized “articles” – and the ambiguity of the term (which might mean either an element of newspaper format, a “news item,” or an element of commercial transaction, a “commodity”) is itself significant. It will prove impossible to disengage these two elements of the newspaper’s functionality – imparting information, selling goods – from each other. [...] Randomly juxtaposed in the orderly columns of pages 1 through 4, items of news, publicity, comment and information (which in these nineteenth-century dailies all appeared in pretty much the same typographical monotony) simultaneously confronted and studiously ignored each other. The form of the newspaper projects no thought or expectation of their harmonization or resolution, no notion that collectively they might make sense. It instructs us in the apparently irreducible fragmentation of daily experience, and by its normalization prepares us to live it. (122-5)¹⁹

Decontextualization, disjunction, fragmentation, isolation: the newspaper involves all of these, as does the commodity more generally. Aesthetic form and economic form, far from being antithetical, correspond to one another in ways that render them inseparable. Newspapers are not only constituted by decontextualized, disjointed, fragmented, and isolated social relations, they function in the construction of those relations. Accordingly, we might think of the profit driven mass daily as a kind of meta-commodity, one which participates in, while commenting on, the production of time and the experience of space through which other commodities circulate, as well as the subjectivities that perceive these things.²⁰

As I’ll go on to show upon returning to the letter to Houssaye in the final section below, Baudelaire himself intimates how the *Petits poèmes en prose* is governed by the industrial logic of the profit driven daily newspaper, whose organization materializes contradictory temporalities sedimenting in social space. Space on the page, of course, comes with a price tag, and is bought by advertisers whose own capital is itself a function of time-bound labor. Concomitantly, the time of reading finds a new unit of measure in the compressed news article, like the *fait divers*, or social interest story, which Baudelaire appears to have taken as a model. Rather than eternal verities at once self-evident and universal, time and space emerge in the *Petits poèmes en prose* replete with social and aesthetic implication. This is perhaps most obvious in the work’s thematic register. In prose poems like “The Clock,” for example, time is a violent medium to be escaped. Here, the narrator experiences time as vast and solemn, “always the same, huge as space, without divisions into minutes or seconds – an immobile time not marked on clocks, and yet light as a sigh, swift as a glance.”²¹ Similarly in “The Double Room,” “there are no more minutes, there are no more seconds!” and “time has disappeared,” like a negation of time’s simultaneous materialization and mystification in the newspaper, which participates in the creation of the modern sense of contemporaneity whereby events seem to take place concurrently in social space, while the spatio-temporal relations between them are systematically obscured.²² Indeed, the profit driven daily and the *Petits poèmes en prose* both contain what Benjamin refers to “the temporal abyss in things” (“CP”, 47), although Benjamin doesn’t locate this abyss in either the newspaper or the *poème en*

prose.²³ And this only begins to suggest how the prosaic transparencies of Baudelaire's late experiment dissimulate fundamental opacities.

Just as the narrator in "Halo Lost" drifts in and out of the urban crowd, the *poème en prose* circulates through the common world of journalism. The formal provocation of Baudelaire's innovation was actually conditioned, in part, by the disrepute into which prose had fallen, degraded, as it were, by the journalistic *reportage* that helped to constitute the public sphere during the Second Empire. Under these conditions, a poem in prose transgressed a law of genre, one of whose functions it was to police the distinction between elevated and popular forms.²⁴ The diminutive "petits" in the work's title arguably acknowledges, even while minimizing, an awareness of this transgression – as if it were apologizing for a little *faux pas* – transmitting an affect in stark contrast to the sort of bold incitement often associated with artistic innovation. Like an alibi for a provocation defeated in advance, "petits" quietly announces poetry's diminished potency as well as its increased vulnerability to historical processes at a moment when capitalist modernity was transforming the very nature of individual experience and expression. The *Petits poèmes en prose* might even be said to mark the quasi beginning of an avant-garde counter-tradition whose point of departure is an implicit recognition of poetry's *weakness*.²⁵

But "weakness" harbors many affects, from shame to disgust, whose ambivalence – by which I mean the affect's potential to attach itself to contradictory aims – stimulates seemingly irreconcilable tendencies.²⁶ So while Baudelaire nourished a deep disgust with the mass daily – "I can't understand how a pure hand could ever touch a newspaper without a shudder of disgust," he wrote in one of the more notorious squibs of *Mon coeur mis à nu* – he found in the newspaper not only a sworn enemy, but also a co-conspirator, whose form he unwittingly appropriated, if not conscientiously imitated.²⁷ Thus while modern lyric would go on to assert an autonomy beyond language's degraded function, the *Petits poèmes en prose* accomplishes this in advance, albeit unexpectedly and paradoxically, as poem and commodity collapse in an internal identification while persisting as external disparities.

II) De Man's 'Dark Zone'

My case for the historical specificity of Baudelaire's experiment in genre moves by way of two theorists of the modern, Paul de Man and Adorno himself, whose respective analyses of aesthetic autonomy under the sign of modernity are often understood to be categorically opposed. Both de Man and Adorno consider the work of Baudelaire as a point of departure for modern lyric, but they do so while reading the poet's *modernité* against seemingly antithetical horizons: lyric's discontinuity with history, its diminished reference and increased opacity, for de Man; and for Adorno, lyric's embeddedness in economic processes, its immanent reference to the social, and its link to reification. My argument, however, is that these two horizons converge in the *Petits poèmes en prose*, making it a remarkable, and remarkably under-examined, object for an inquiry into the commodity's relation to aesthetic form under an emergent "high capitalism."

In "Lyric and Modernity," Paul de Man curiously refers to the *Petits poèmes en prose* as an allegorical form exemplary of modern poetry's diminished referential function, a function characterized by the poem's tendency to *derealize* its subject matter by allowing the familiar links between lyric's language and a lived social world to erode. Mallarmé's poems are often cited as paradigmatic of this tendency; and yet, de Man identifies Baudelaire's *poème en prose* as coming close to "being no longer representational" in advance of Mallarmé.

The truly allegorical, later Baudelaire of the *Petits poèmes en prose* never stopped haunting Mallarmé, though he may have tried to exorcise his presence. Here was, in fact, the example of a poetry that came close to being no longer representational but that remained for him entirely enigmatic. The darkness of this hidden center obscures later allusions to Baudelaire, including the *Tombeau* poem devoted to the author of the *Fleurs du Mal*. Far from being an older kinsman who sent him on his way, Baudelaire, or, at least the most significant aspect of Baudelaire, was for him a dark zone into which he could never penetrate. The same is true, in different ways, of the view of Baudelaire held by Rimbaud and the surrealists.²⁸

Just when a modern poetic form appears most accessible – indeed, *prosaic* – de Man reads Baudelaire’s late innovation as dark, and resistant to apprehension, as if the *Petits poèmes en prose* somehow exceeds the logic of signification. But while suggesting something singular about the *poème en prose* as a form, de Man’s gnomic gesture toward the “truly allegorical” Baudelaire eschews any substantive exegetical support, making it difficult to grasp the distinction between this particular darkness and the more general darkness often associated with Baudelaire’s work in its entirety. Moreover, the substitution of metaphorical conceits like “dark zone” and “hidden center” for one of de Man’s most important critical categories – “allegory” – renders his description of Baudelaire’s innovation all the more strange as it slides immediately into figurative language. Nevertheless, the reference to Baudelaire’s late experimental form as allegory bears within it a compelling insight.

De Man’s treatment of allegory is notoriously idiosyncratic, and while this is not the place to treat its difficulties at length, a gloss of de Man’s master-trope will be useful. Allegory, for de Man, denotes that mode of non-mimetic figuration disjoined from an organic world of transparent meanings. As he argues in “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” allegory can’t resolve itself in the false immediacy of identification. “Whereas the symbol postulates the possibility of an identity or identification, allegory designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin, and, renouncing the nostalgia and the desire to coincide, it establishes its language in the void of this temporal difference” (BI, 207). Unlike the unification and instantaneity of the symbol, allegory contains the loss of its own object, and can sustain a narrative of its own disjunction over time. By describing the *Petits poèmes en prose* as allegorical and enigmatic, de Man unexpectedly suggests that there is an impasse in signification, a radical discontinuity between work and world, at the heart of Baudelaire’s late innovation, where communication would otherwise appear to occur without frustration.

One can often hear in de Man’s ideas concerning allegory those of Benjamin, who, according to de Man, “defined allegory as a void ‘that signifies precisely the non-being of what it represents’” (BI, 35), and Benjamin’s ideas about allegory help inform the significance of de Man’s comment regarding Baudelaire’s “dark zone.” In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, for example, Benjamin described allegory as materializing the historical erosion of a sign’s relation to its referent in the world. Thus allegory contradicts the continuous passing of historical time, and records instead the time of meaning’s dislocation. Rather than expressing the immediate fullness of the present, allegory, for Benjamin, registers the loss of immanent meaning as an effect of time’s disjunctive penetration of experience, and history’s collapse into a present isolated from past and future. In other words, allegory bespeaks a world of privation while transforming present things into degraded signs whose living content has been lost.²⁹

Under the Second Empire, Benjamin argues, allegory lent expression to a crisis in representation coextensive with the domination of social life by the commodity, which itself deploys its own allegorical form. As he notes in ‘Central Park’, “The introduction of allegory answers in a far more meaningful way the same crisis of art which, around 1852, the theory of *l’art pour l’art* was intended to counter” (‘CP’, 34).³⁰ According to Benjamin, allegory’s exaggerated representation of universal concepts and feelings materializes meaning’s dissolution under the spell of commodity production, as opposed to *l’art pour l’art*, which further dematerializes and mystifies it. Allegory thus formalizes the decay of meaning that corresponds with an estrangement from the real connections and relations informing everyday life.

It’s significant that while de Man often argues against “nonlinguistic referential models” of interpretation, that is, against history as referent, Benjamin considers allegory to be a dialectical form that can’t be understood in isolation vis-à-vis the social forces from which it nonetheless attempts to sever itself. By contrast, de Man’s grasp of Baudelaire’s late allegorical form can’t allow for any extrinsic or historical thing with which the *poème en prose* might correspond. And yet, for Benjamin, allegory opens onto history’s scars and contradictions.³¹ “That which is touched by the allegorical intention,” Benjamin writes, “is torn from the context of life’s interconnections,” and allegory organizes itself around that tear.³² The crisis turns on abstraction – being torn from context – and one characteristic of the “crisis in art” to which allegory responds is nothing less than art’s increasing proximity to the commodity. Benjamin refers to this new proximity of merchandise and artwork in Baudelaire by way of a chiasmus, identifying the commodity’s transformation into a poetic object with the poem’s transformation into a commodity. Whereas allegory answers this crisis by concretizing forms of modern alienation, *l’art pour l’art* responds by withdrawing the artwork from normative modes of sensory perception and representation, as if a mode of abstraction could govern itself on its own autonomous terms. Noting the inadequacy of *l’art pour l’art*, Benjamin refers to this aesthetic tendency as the commodity’s unwitting accomplice, if not an unintended mimetic response to the

commodity's supersensibility, or "production for production's sake," insofar as both *l'art pour l'art* and the commodity create an illusion of their own self-sufficiency, their own autonomy, their own immediacy. Allegory, on the other hand, potentiates the demystification of that illusion.

At the same time, for Benjamin, the commodity is itself a kind of unwitting allegory in which the organic material of history and the living labor of communication have hemorrhaged. Hence the insight that "the devaluation of the world of things in allegory is surpassed within the world of things itself by the commodity."³³ This recalls Marx's analysis of the commodity's double aspect: at once obvious *and* strange, trivial *and* theological (C, 163). Where the commodity reigns, not even lyric poetry is immune to the social abstraction of value – *the dissolution of meaning* – insofar as the forces of production penetrate all social material, including language and poetic form, most obviously through the massification of print culture. And in post-1848 Paris, the commodity's effects on language use could be readily felt in journalistic *reportage* where the false immediacy of denotative fact and referential statement masks an increasingly mediated relation to the world, abetting the illusion of transparent communication.³⁴

The *Petits poèmes en prose* responds to this phenomenon by formalizing a convergence of the "trivial" and the "strange" in a manner that sheds light on de Man's insight. It's important to keep in mind how the *fait divers* – that often sensational column of "news," crime, gossip, or scandal, and a regular feature of the mass daily newspaper – offered Baudelaire an important model. Benjamin himself notes the importance of this journalistic form: "For Baudelaire, the *fait divers* is the yeast that causes the great urban masses to rise in his imagination" (SW4, 178). That Baudelaire may have allowed this yeast to arouse not only his imagination, but the *poème en prose* as a form, goes unremarked, however. Indeed, Baudelaire's late experiment appeared in mass dailies like *La Presse*, where the relation, however strained, between poem and model would have been more apparent. And yet, what de Man calls Baudelaire's "dark zone" would seem to suggest something opposed to this: an aesthetic form *resistant* to the communicative norms of journalistic writing, and not a form kin to journalism itself.

It is, however, precisely the strain between these two poles of linguistic operation – transparent representation ("obvious" and "trivial") ensuring the appearance of continuity with normative meaning; and, the break with representation ("strange" and "theological") threatening meaning even in the most prosaic of utterances – neither of which can be isolated, that accounts for one of modern poetry's critical tensions, and this is the explicit concern of "Lyric and Modernity." Unexpectedly – unless, of course, one has been reading this tension dialectically all along – the seeming incommensurability of these polarities masks their hidden correspondence, which is a constitutive feature of the commodity itself. This becomes apparent when one considers, together with Marx, how the commodity mystifies its own referential communication with the world, occulting the social relations that make it what it is. The appearance of transparency in both the *poème en prose* and the commodity is thus an appearance haunted by the relations of production that mediate its reception, and this may be the specter of Baudelaire's late form that Mallarmé, according to de Man, could never exorcise.

On the surface, then, the *Petits poèmes en prose* neither resists the encroachment of the commodity, nor breaks with representation. As a form, it appears to present few of the challenges associated with modern poetry. In fact, the *poème en prose* boasts its own manner of avoiding such challenges as one of its selling points, and this is what makes it such an "admirable convenience". Although diminished reference is not a feature one generally associates with Baudelaire's prose poems, whose short narratives seem to fulfill language's promise to communicate rather than betray it, de Man nevertheless suggests that Baudelaire's prosaic innovation comes close to realizing modernity's aesthetic imperative: it is, he says, "a poetry that came close to being no longer representational." According to "Lyric and Modernity," Baudelaire's late aesthetic reflex, despite all appearances to the contrary, is characterized in the *poème en prose* by the poem's allegorical loss of its object.

What sense are we to make of this now? Perhaps de Man's remark intimates the idea that the tension or discrepancy between the representational and the non-representational, the transparent and the opaque, the trivial and the strange, informs Baudelaire's late difficulty, in which case one might approach Baudelaire's "dark zone" as a figural site – a formal void, or *nonsite* – where the antithetical limits of communicative exchange and non-representation converge as mutually constituting and interfering imperatives, at once social and aesthetic. The "dark zone" would thus be where the exchange relation that defines the economic world of things masquerades as the meaningful communication of information among citizens. Such a convergence of opposites would minimize the distance between the two limits while simultaneously underscoring the

contradictory vocations of the modern poem, which performs these things in one and the same gesture. In Baudelaire's *poèmes en prose*, in other words, the appearance of transparency becomes an opacity we can't entirely grasp.

It would be useful here to recall how the larger argument of "Lyric and Modernity" takes aim at a method of literary historicism that typically assimilates Baudelaire to a familiar genealogy of modern poetry whereby late nineteenth-century advances made by Rimbaud and Mallarmé – advances characterized by heightened obscurity and diminished reference – get linked to Baudelaire by a continuous line of descent. According to this "bad" historicism, the later poets are erroneously read with "the assumption that the movement of lyric poetry away from representation is a historical process that dates back to Baudelaire as well as being the very movement of modernity" (*BI*, 183). Rather than imagining a genetic movement toward a fully achieved rupture with the world, de Man argues that the non-reference associated with modern poetics occurs already full-blown in Baudelaire, specifically in the *Petits poèmes en prose*. While this proposition remains unexplained in "Lyric and Modernity," we can glimpse in it the convergence of the two horizons of modernist poetics – the poem's break with representation, and its collision with the commodity – and this may be another way of referring to the vicissitudes of poetry's *reification* without referring to it at all.

According to de Man, then, non-referential rupture is *not* the teleological end toward which modern lyric moves ineluctably in time as it retreats further and further away from the social logic of monetary exchange and its communicative circuits. If it were, Baudelaire would offer only the initial stirrings of a progressive trajectory. Instead, de Man argues that a certain allegorical loss of reference inaugurates literary modernism at its inception. But this "origin" can only go on to originate *nothing*. Indeed, the *poème en prose*, as the realization of what we might think of as Baudelaire's "late style," may have been too formally singular – too historically specific – to have engendered anything at all, let alone a literary genre, and this sterility, has everything to do with the "truly allegorical" performance itself.³⁵

There is no "beyond formalism" in de Man's method, no ignoring the inassimilable residue that clings to literary form after any act of interpretation, and his allegories of reading reiterate the perennial impossibility of moving beyond the *aporia* that obtains between the primacy of form and so-called "extrinsic" history.³⁶ With the *Petits poèmes en prose*, Baudelaire offers an imaginary solution to this problem, which may help us to grasp de Man's curious comment regarding it. The enigma de Man locates in Baudelaire's prose poems may well be the manner whereby the familiar dualism between intrinsic aesthetic form and the extra-aesthetic dimension of social production breaks down in the work, in "the darkness of [its] hidden center." In other words, the semblance of thematic transparency in the *poèmes en prose* actually *obscures* their real social content. My argument with de Man here – however productive his aphoristic reading of Baudelaire may be – is that his formalism *isn't formalist enough* to grasp the significance of the *poème en prose* as form.

In other words, without acknowledging the historical-material substratum of the *Petits poèmes en prose* – the disjointed time of commodity production under the Second Empire – de Man's recourse to an allegorical mode of reading whose limit is the radical irreconcilability between literary form and historical conditions, can only succeed in ensuring that the real significance of Baudelaire's innovation remains veiled in metaphorical darkness which obscures nothing less than history itself.³⁷ And yet the dissolution of meaning – what Benjamin would refer to as the ruin of everyday connectedness articulated in allegory – is nothing less than a historical reflex, if not a radically mimetic response to crisis. If the commodity form is, in the last instance, the extrinsic thing – *the catastrophe* – that Baudelaire's prose poems imitate, de Man's mode of reading *senses* profoundly how "the truly allegorical, later Baudelaire of the *Petits poèmes en prose*" nearly severs his ties with representation once and for all insofar as the commodity itself abandons its own referentiality while materializing its disassociation with the system of wage-labor upon which its significance depends. But "Lyric and Modernity" is unable to explain how or why this is the case, if only because the move toward identifying this particular content would mean risking precisely the kind of referential reduction – or "thematic reading" – that de Man's entire allegory of interpretation aims to debunk. And so, while de Man's essay perceives the radical dimensions of Baudelaire's late experiment, the social material constitutive of the *poème en prose* as an allegorical form remains beyond its insight.³⁸

III) Adorno's Convergence and the Vicissitudes of Use

Despite his commitment to aesthetic experiment, Adorno doesn't make any critical claims about Baudelaire's "prosaic" innovation; and yet, Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* speaks to the *Petits poèmes en prose* without really speaking *about* this work at all. This is because Adorno attends closely to the commodity dimension of Baudelaire's poetry, pursuing a very different inquiry from that of de Man. For Adorno, the falsifications of the exchange relation penetrate modern lyric's remotest core.³⁹ Whereas de Man argues that the "non-linguistic referential model" is always adventitious – there can be no extrinsic meaning – for Adorno the socio-material substratum of cultural production is fundamental for understanding what modern poetry is in its very essence. More specifically, Adorno's treatment of the artwork's relation to the commodity in *Aesthetic Theory* illuminates how Baudelaire's late experiment, in a manner qualitatively different than the verse of *Les Fleurs du mal*, registers the social processes that threaten lyric most insofar as the *poèmes en prose* assimilate themselves to profit driven print where the achievement of lyric spontaneity, the sense of immediacy one has when the poet sings "the undulations of reverie, the jolts of consciousness," converges with the total mediation of the individual voice by language and society alike, and real social relations are erased within the very medium of communication itself.⁴⁰

Keeping in mind de Man's insight into Baudelaire's "dark zone," I want to continue pressuring the problem of the *poème en prose* as both allegory and commodity. Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* unexpectedly foregrounds precisely what de Man's reference to Baudelaire in "Lyric and Modernity" elides, while also offering a way to think through the limits of that reference. In order to understand Adorno's critique of the artwork's relation to society, however, we'll need to move beyond the crude reductions that read him as setting art's autonomy – its seeming independence from social function – in simple opposition to the commodity's degradation, as this commonplace is incompatible with *Aesthetic Theory*, whose dialectical approach to cultural production resists any such flattening. For Adorno, the artwork's autonomy emerges as a distorted mirror image of the commodity, whose value, according to Marx, "manifests itself as something totally independent of use-value" (C, 128). At stake in Adorno's analysis, then, are the mutually implicated relations between the "high" artwork and the "low" commodity, relations that are fundamental to my reading of the *Petits poèmes en prose*.

Early in *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno brings the kinship between artwork and commodity into focus, and he does so by way of Baudelaire:

Only by immersing its autonomy in society's *imagerie* can art surmount the heteronomous market. Art is modern through mimesis of the hardened and the alienated; only thereby, and not by the refusal of a mute reality, does art become eloquent; this is why art no longer tolerates the innocuous. Baudelaire neither railed against nor portrayed reification; he protested against it in the experience of its archetypes, and the medium of this experience is the poetic form. This raises him supremely above late romantic sentimentality. The power of his work is that it syncopates the overwhelming objectivity of the commodity character – which wipes out any human trace – with the objectivity of the work in itself, anterior to the living subject: The absolute artwork converges with the absolute commodity. (AT, 31)

This is a crucial passage, not only for what it has to say about Baudelaire, but apropos of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* as a whole.⁴¹ According to the logic of Adorno's dialectic, commodity and artwork are mediated by the same totality – or "society" – and thus they harbor a submerged identity, with each term persisting in and through its opposite. Adorno goes on to suggest that the elevated artwork and the degraded commodity actually converge when each fulfills the logic of its form. With "absolute," Adorno pushes the ideologies of both the commodity and the aesthetic to their respective limits – and perhaps this is the same limit – where the categories of "use" and "uselessness" breakdown: as absolutes, the commodity and the artwork would each achieve a particular *uselessness* by negating, absolutely, the already negated category of use-value in a world where use-value has been canceled by, and simultaneously preserved as, exchange-value. It's worth noting how Marx describes exchange-value in the *Grundrisse* as "a generality, in which all individuality and peculiarity are negated and extinguished."⁴² Exchange-value annuls the particularity of use-value; and yet, for an object to be without exchange-value means that it is equally, though oppositely, useless, if only in the sense of being *worthless*. In other words, to be with or without exchange-value means to be differently

without use-value. And so, whether a thing possesses exchange-value or is dispossessed by it, use-value remains occulted.

Adorno is suggesting that when value becomes a function of general exchange, the achievement of “uselessness” on the part of both the commodity and the artwork – an achievement requiring only that the commodity and the artwork remain absolutely faithful to their formal logics – would augur the reinvention of use itself, and the *absolute negation of exchange-value*, thereby signaling a revolutionized society, or a world beyond the contradictions of capital upon which the dichotomous concepts of “use” and “uselessness” depend. One of Adorno’s presuppositions is that, under capitalism, a residue of use persists, however disfigured, or damaged, in commodity and artwork alike, despite the subsumption of use-value by exchange-value in the commodity, and despite the ideological fantasy of purposelessness in the artwork. But this residue of use resembles nothing we can imagine insofar as the absolute commodity, like the absolute work of art, would have to abandon every remaining trace of *being for the world* when the world’s criteria for usefulness are none other than the criteria for sales according to which all living labor has been appropriated.

No doubt, these dialectical propositions contain a dizzying set of mirroring effects, as the commodity and the modern artwork dissimulate opposing relations to use: the commodity *seeming* to exist usefully for the world as it is, the artwork *seeming* to exist uselessly for the world we’ve failed to make. Whereas the commodity appears purposeful by disguising the fact that its use-value has been overwritten by abstract exchange-value, the serious artwork disavows its purposefulness when purpose is measured in terms of instrumental value and meaning. Instead, the artwork nourishes a dream of uselessness, disguising its most purposeful challenge to the reified concept of use itself. Both commodity and artwork can then be said to disfigure use, but in their absolute forms they would go beyond themselves, canceling their own damaged forms of use and value once and for all.

In *Aesthetic Theory*, then, the artwork persists under inimical conditions of economic exchange by *miming* the commodity’s mode of abstraction and its negation of usefulness. This is how the artwork or poem imitates “the hardened and the alienated.” Baudelaire’s *Petits poèmes en prose* can thus be said to make its “protest against reification” at the level of poetic form paradoxically by fulfilling the latent promise of reification – the transfiguration of use – and by yielding entirely to the social *imagerie*, that reservoir of all that appears most immediate to experience but which is simultaneously most alienated from life. Although the commodity abandons the world as soon as exchange usurps the prerogatives of use, as it does in Marx’s theory of value, use-value maintains itself negatively in the commodity nonetheless, be it as an inextinguishable residue, a latent potential, or even a social fiction. If this were not the case, the commodity could not support its own exchange-value, which is use-value’s parasite. That is, the commodity requires its own delusion of usefulness in order to circulate. Equally and oppositely, the modern artwork, having descended from *l’art pour l’art*, accedes to an appearance of uselessness – gratuitous, unreasonable, unnecessary – this being art’s masterful semblance. And yet, something of use remains in the artwork, too, if only in its irreducible difference vis-à-vis the world of exchange where commodities, by contrast, must keep up the appearance of living use despite their having become a function of dead labor. It is in shedding that appearance that the artwork remains purposeful, if only by protesting against the dominant hierarchy of values, society’s ontological ground, and by provoking the crucial question – *what is “use”?* – as if for the first time.

The mood of Adorno’s speculation is subjunctive. He argues that the logic of exchange remains constitutive of commodity and artwork alike, and were this logic to arrive at its apotheosis, the two would actually *fulfill* the promise of use precisely by negating the *terminus mundi* of the exchange relation, completing themselves in a uselessness that would reinstate use absolutely in the form of a transformed world, a world free of domination, something Adorno’s negative dialectic can’t positively propose, but which animates his thinking nonetheless, like the “standpoint of redemption” from whose point of view “responsible philosophy” contemplates everything in the face of despair.⁴³

The figure of “convergence” remains significant, especially because Adorno first invokes it in relation to Baudelaire. Like de Man, Adorno implicitly takes issue with the sort of literary historicism that posits an ultimate horizon or “destiny” – whether understood as non-reference or the commodity itself – toward which modern lyric would approach asymptotically over time. Just as de Man locates the modern break with reference in Baudelaire, Adorno similarly locates the convergence of artwork and commodity by way of modern poetry’s inaugural poet. Moreover, Adorno’s convergence must be read as a form of rupture, while de Man’s allegorical rupture can only be understood as a form of convergence. Although both readings are attentive to the same phenomenon, only Adorno registers that phenomenon unmistakably as a socio-historical

event. Nevertheless, each argument contributes something critical to our understanding by naming what the other fails to acknowledge: whereas de Man refers to the exceptional status of the *Petits poèmes en prose* without examining their intimate rapport with the commodity, Adorno theorizes the commodity dimension of Baudelaire's poetry without addressing the specificity of the poet's late innovation where this convergence finds one of its most remarkable expression.

It is important to recall that for Adorno, autonomous art submits to the world *radically* – that is, at its very root – in order to create something that won't reduce to the world as it is. Along these lines, one can argue that Baudelaire's poetry makes itself vulnerable to reification in order to activate a margin of resistance within the world of society's *imagerie* where identity conceals its own non-identity. While this is a familiar Adornian formulation, the *Petits poèmes en prose* allows us to grasp the concept insofar as the poet's late work preserves its aesthetic distance from the world of exchange, while simultaneously yielding to its imperatives.

The difference of artworks from the empirical world, their semblance character, is constituted out of the empirical world and in opposition to it. If for the sake of their own concept artworks wanted absolutely to destroy this reference back to the empirical world, they would wipe out their own premise. Art is indeed infinitely difficult in that it must transcend its concept in order to fulfill it; yet in this process where it comes to resemble reality it assimilates itself to that reification against which it protests. (AT, 103)

It is precisely its own peculiar semblance character that the artwork refuses to relinquish, and this is where it diverges from the commodity, which disavows its semblance character in order to appear identical to the world. The artwork or poem can't admit an absolute break with "this reference back to the empirical world" – back to reification itself – without betraying its reason for being. Pushing beyond the status of non-representation for de Man, then, Adorno's concept of aesthetic autonomy is dialectical and bears within itself a non-representational reference to social production.

But what does it mean for art simultaneously to fulfill and transcend its own concept? Art faithful to its own concept *qua* art would, for Adorno, risk the very guarantees that ensure the artwork's status as a stable object of reception in a world where reception itself converges with consumption. According to Adorno, under conditions when human relations are dominated by the principle of exchange, art categorically negates its own self-evidence in order to remain faithful to its promise for a world beyond the domination of capital. The artwork consonant with this promise would be obliged to challenge the commonsense of its own self-evident appearance. It is enough to recall the opening sentence of *Aesthetic Theory*: "It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore, not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist" (AT, 1). Adorno is taking aim at the fundamental assumptions about art: its *a priori* givenness as an object and its reliability as a category of analysis, its good conscience and its innocent purpose. Together, these propositions suggest the stakes of Adorno's critical theory according to which the artwork is charged with the task of assisting thought in going beyond the conceptual logics of identity and exchange. The logic that art must transcend is none other than the logic that ensures its own intelligible place within society. At its limit, then, rather than oppose the commodity absolutely as the aesthetic ideology of *l'art pour l'art* would have it, art must annul the distinction between itself and the commodity insofar as this distinction is governed by the division of social labor responsible for making and remaking the world as it is. But this distinction is also the foundational division upon which the self-consciousness of the modern artwork establishes itself. The superseding of this seemingly insuperable distinction – a distinction that is the ontological ground of art itself – would be tantamount to art's own negation. Art that would, in Adorno's phrase, remain faithful to its own concept would thus be an art committed to a form of self-negating *praxis*, an auto-immolation whereby art would paradoxically realize its vocation.

Accordingly, art can have no sustained rapport with that form of historicism called "progress," which simply renews the present's claims on the future. Progress is always *historicist* because it presupposes an identification with both the past and the future mediated by a present that identifies itself in both. Adorno argues that there can be nothing self-evident about an artwork resistant to these identifications, insofar as such a work, at its limit, would also be committed to disavowing its own identity from the point of view of an unthinkable future, one that escapes all available forms of conceptualization.⁴⁴ Modern art's notorious "difficulty" would thus be a utopian effect of the artwork's contradictory longing for its own non-identity. The contradictions living in this difficulty only deepen, however, insofar as the modern artwork, or poem,

concentrates and makes legible a logic of non-identity already present to it – reification itself – which renders things *as if* they were immediately available to thought, but whose alienations and hardenings, while appearing to us as transparent identities, are denegations of the commodity's real social content.

Recapitulating the idea concerning the convergence of artwork and commodity in the final section of *Aesthetic Theory*, "Society," Adorno writes,

Scarcely anything is done or produced in artworks that does not have its model, however latently, in social production. The binding force of artworks, beyond the jurisdiction of their immanence, originates in this affinity. If artworks are in fact absolute commodities in that they are a social product that has rejected every semblance of existing for society, a semblance to which commodities otherwise urgently cling, the determining relation of production, the commodity form, enters the artwork equally with the social force of production and the antagonism between the two. The absolute commodity would be free of the ideology inherent in the commodity form, which pretends to exist for-another, whereas ironically it is something merely for-itself. (*Aesthetic Theory*, 236)

The ideology in question is the ideology of value, which distorts use beyond recognition. By dispelling the illusion of existing for society, artworks preserve the promise of use in a world that would otherwise destroy it. Within this critical frame, then, the becoming-legible of uselessness by way of aesthetic form anticipates the longed for overcoming of both the modern artwork and the commodity, if only by the total reinvention of use. Rather than dissimulating the "mute reality" of reified nature, Adorno argues that art enables us to hear that reality, as if for the first time. Recalling again Marx's analysis of the commodity as a "social hieroglyph" whose trivial appearance conceals an inaccessible abstraction – the abstract value of labor time – one can note the correspondence here between the commodity's lack of self-evidence and the modern artwork's opacity. Although it might be difficult to imagine art's profundity coinciding with the commodity's triviality, Adorno's proposition suggests that art's semblance of an abstract depth is nothing less than the surfacing of a concrete expropriation. By the same chiasmatic turn, the commodity's appearance as a concrete surface would conceal an excavated hollow lurking in its depth. It follows then that the artwork or poem can never be what it appears to be. If it were identical to its own appearance, it would only preserve its affirmative status within the ideological frameworks that determine its limits. Ideology is only served by the containment of art within the terms of its own self-evidence, undermining art's utopian promise as the placeholder for a world "beyond" ideology's ability to identify.

Returning, then, to the *Petits poèmes en prose*, how are we to understand the concrete specificity of Baudelaire's late formal experiment within the terms of aesthetic modernity? While de Man refers to this as something of an enigma, it remains counterintuitive to think of the *poème en prose* as the aesthetic form abstraction assumes when lyric responds to its modern conditions. Unlike the verse poems in *Les Fleurs du mal*, with which Baudelaire's reputation as modernity's first experimental poet is typically associated, the *Petits poèmes en prose* appears to be faithful to normative protocols of denotative communication and concrete social reference. Whereas the verse poems arguably preserve lyric's elevated status, or "aura," even when threatened by the corrosiveness of their own degraded content – all the corpses, vampires, and prostitutes, like so many emblems of the commodified world – Baudelaire's prosaic innovation submits to the conditions of the aura's decay without reserve, modeling itself on the social production of communication, and sacrificing lyric's traditional prestige to the protocols of a print culture that have penetrated lyric's material and its form.

As I mentioned above, many of Baudelaire's prose poems touch on the conditions of this submission thematically – among them, "The Artist's *Confiteor*," "Solitude," and "Crowds" – but "Halo Lost" addresses this situation most directly.⁴⁵ "And I'm glad to think," the poem's angel explains, "that some bad poet will pick it [the poet's halo] up and insolently stick it on his head. Make someone happy, what a delight! And especially a happy someone I can laugh at!"⁴⁶ The authority – or aura – associated with the halo has been reduced to a cheaply won sign, something any poet can imitate with ease, but only at one's own expense. Allegorizing the formal collision of lyric and history, "Halo Lost" argues that the loss of the halo marks a moment when a poem's unique and inimitable distinction can only be achieved by way of sentimental imitation, reducing the halo itself to the level of risible kitsch. Hence, Benjamin's comment regarding the poem: "Extraordinarily decisive, moreover, is the ending, which makes the exhibition of the aura from now on an affair of fifth-rate poets."⁴⁷ Indeed, ongoing belief in the meaning the halo once conferred now signals

little more than the poet's non-contemporaneity, and a refusal to register current conditions: characteristics of the "bad poet". "Halo Lost" goes so far as to mock the attitude of the poet who would believe in his ongoing claim to authenticity. The loss is irreversible, and the halo's recuperation can only be a sham.

Baudelaire's defrocked poet nonetheless perseveres, and he does so by adopting a cunning masquerade. Similarly, the *poème en prose* adopts its cunning aesthetic strategy. Rather than imitating the aura *per se*, Baudelaire's late innovation imitates the aura's negation in the commodity, where a kind of "phony aura" recrudesces around the latter's own mimicry of use-value. And just as the commodity imitates use, the poet, according to Benjamin, "plays the role of 'poet' before an auditorium and a society which already has no further need of the real thing, and which allows him an area in which to perform only as mime." ('CP', 36). This is how the *poème en prose* achieves an inversion of that auratic halo: not the authentic experience of a unique distance, as Benjamin once formulated it, but rather the estrangement of what is most familiar. Whereas the bad poet can only imitate aura while still believing in the self-evidence of art's halo of authenticity and uniqueness as if historical conditions hadn't irrevocably compromised its integrity, the angel poet mimics the aura's loss, donning the prosaic mask beneath which something singular remains radically inassimilable to exchange-value. And it's in that inassimilable remainder that a residue of aura clings.

In Baudelaire's *poème en prose*, what is most "enigmatical" – the "dark zone" of a real material opacity – has migrated into the formal recesses of the poem, while its exterior maintains a disarming appearance, in order that the new form might better negotiate its journalistic environment. So while the lyric poem finds itself disenchanting, mystification persists in the commodity form as familiarity itself. Like the fallen angel, lyric perseveres under the most inhospitable conditions by comporting itself incognito – *in prose* – an imaginary solution Baudelaire devises in response to the contradictions of his own activity. The *Petits poèmes en prose* thereby offers a paradoxical performance of aura's entanglements with the commodity, a complex mirroring of negations which disrupt any stable generic value, as prosaic reference is contradicted by the intractability of its own appearance.

In Adornian terms, Baudelaire's lyric poetry, in this late phase, activates a negatively dialectical surrender to the social conditions that threaten it. Moving through its own antithesis, the *poème en prose* immerses its autonomy in the market as a strategy that allows it to persevere within those conditions while remaining faithful to its concept as art. To immerse poetry in the "heteronomous market," however, is to make it vulnerable to the market's defining feature: *exchange-value*, or the systematic mystification of concrete meaning under capitalism, whereby a thing's particular use is subsumed by its universalizing social function, or *price*. It's precisely in the *Petits poèmes en prose* that lyric finds itself reformed in relation to the most prosaic logic of exchange, a logic that materializes "the temporal abyss in things" in the saleable units of space on the pages of the mass profit dailies where many of the *poèmes en prose* first appeared. Baudelaire's innovation thus preserves its reference back to the empirical world in a complex dissimulation of the object's referential function, registering a new mode of social abstraction at the level of poetry's form.

IV) "Chop It up in Fragments," or *Quelles admirables commodités!*

Far from originating the sort of diminished reference that would come to be associated with a properly modernist poetics, the poems of Baudelaire's late lyric experiment imitated the *fait divers* of the mass dailies, where diminished reference was a characteristic feature of *reportage*. But according to Baudelaire's own account, his innovative imitation escaped his own mastery; it may have even been an *error* – an effect of contingency – something he professes in the prefatory letter to Houssaye accompanying his submission to *La Presse* (1862). "As soon as I had begun the labor," Baudelaire writes, "I noticed that not only did I remain quite far from my mysterious and brilliant model [Louis Bertrand's *Gaspard de la nuit*] but more than that, I was making something (if it can be called *some thing*) peculiarly different, an accident of which anyone other than I would probably be proud [...]"⁴⁸ Taking aim at one model, he seems to have inadvertently stumbled upon another. No doubt, the remark is thick with Baudelaire's irony regarding his project, and this only deepens the work's masquerade. But while his manner of confessing an "error" may be disingenuous, it nevertheless corresponds with the real stakes of his formal innovation.

In the prose poem's encounter with its own material situation, the new form exposes itself to a real confusion between freedom and necessity, art and accident. As Adorno writes, "The truth of artworks depends on whether they succeed at absorbing into their immanent necessity what is not identical with the concept,

what is according to that concept accidental" (AT, 101). In these terms, Baudelaire seems to be referring to an "accident" that becomes the work's formal foundation. The "concept" Adorno refers to here is that of art itself, and what is non-identical with that concept might be thought of as *contingency*. Baudelaire's happy accident thus lends formal expression to the innovation's "necessity" under conditions of unfreedom, where contingencies of every sort – the "freeplay" of the market – masquerade as freedom itself. Similarly, the profit driven newspaper formalizes all the contingent effects of that freeplay in a manner that creates the appearance of necessity by suppressing the promise of other social forms.

But whether or not the new genre exceeded the poet's intentions, its form was anything but arbitrary. Indeed, the form of the *poème en prose* was entirely motivated – pressured by the world around it – and Baudelaire makes its motivating determinants explicit in the same letter by drawing specific attention to the formal features of his "prosaicized" lyric: fragmentation, exchangeable parts, and convenience for consumption.

I am sending you a small work about which one could fairly say that it has neither head nor tail, since everything in it is both head and tail, alternately and reciprocally. Consider, if you will, what admirable convenience this arrangement offers everyone, you, me, and the reader. We can cut wherever we want – I, my reverie, you, the manuscript, and the reader his reading – because I don't bind the restive will to the interminable thread of some superfluous plot. Remove one vertebra, and the two pieces of the twisted fantasy easily rejoin one another. Chop it up into fragments, and you'll see how each of them is able to stand alone.⁴⁹

Baudelaire's description can, of course, be explained by his hope that Houssaye will *buy* his work, which is saleable, he argues, because the *Petits poèmes en prose* has incorporated into its structure an exchange logic that articulates itself by way of an aesthetic form whose abstraction inheres in the constitutive likeness it bears to the very thing it repels. One can violate the work any way one likes, even break it down to its constituent parts, and one will actually be obeying the law that governs the poetry, rather than transgressing the sanctioned protocols of reading. The fragment is thematized in Baudelaire's letter not as an auratic element resistant to reification, but as a salient feature of the newspaper itself, and a model of accessibility and ease. By way of the fragment, then, the experimental *poème en prose* enacts its negative mimesis of the commodity form and the logic of the profit driven daily. At the same time, it's by way of Baudelaire's textualization of social fragmentation that the new form responds critically to this logic at the level of poetic technique, protesting against reification by submitting to its effects, thereby breaking the spell of the commodity's aestheticized illusion – what Robert Kaufman refers to as *aestheticist delusion* – by registering those effects and making them legible through an articulation of the poem's formal difference.⁵⁰

As allegorical forms, both Baudelaire's *Petits poèmes en prose* and the commodity bear the scars of history in their formal gaps and fulsome voids; and as dialectical forms, they reflect and decipher one another like a pair of mirrors making those gaps and voids visible, without reference to any final code or meaning. Just as our understanding of the *poème en prose*'s masquerade – whereby the poem disguises its particular artifice in the unassuming prose of the mass dailies – depends on our understanding of the commodity, whose own artifice is thereby thrown into some relief; our understanding of the commodity's masquerade – whereby social relations are occulted by mass produced things – finds its articulation in the *poème en prose*, whose poetic form imprints society's contradictions as poignantly as any realist novel.

Explicitly opposed to the novel's "superfluous plot" [*intrigue superflue*], Baudelaire's narrativity in the *Poèmes en prose* abjures the conventions of novelistic prose and instead adopts a structure of isolable and exchangeable parts, suspending coherent linear progression by foregrounding the substitution of paradigmatic equivalents. Rather than endorsing syntagmatic integration and the coherent organization of singular moments, each individual *poème en prose* performs the narrator's relationship to everyday life without linking, let alone analyzing, that performance in relation larger social processes. So while a diagetic temporality governs the movement of any given sentence, narrative effects remain isolated and seemingly unrelated to other discrete effects except insofar as they are mediated by the whole, a critical caveat whose implications may well go unperceived from moment to moment. This offers a compelling and yet unexpected illustration of what Benjamin has referred to as the "allegorical way of seeing," whereby a thing appears sundered from the connectedness of everyday life, which is "simultaneously shattered and preserved."

Although the form of the *poème en prose* mimics characteristics of the newspaper's mechanical reproduction, Baudelaire imagined his new genre accommodating itself [*s'adapter*] to "the soul's lyrical movements, the undulations of reverie, the jolts of consciousness." The poet thus aims to reconcile the illusion of lyric's timelessness with the time-bound prose of history without disavowing the alienation and reification upon which the *Petits poèmes en prose* formally depends, and this accommodation performs a new "fact" of lyric poetry: "the soul's lyrical movements" are most mediated when they sound as if they were being communicated without any formal mediation at all.

Baudelaire's *poème en prose* is doubly stitched to historical time. On the one hand, its very medium is the time of organized social relations. This temporality materializes in the mass daily – the prose poems' estranged print environment – where disjunctions in time and space are neutralized and contained by the commodified object, which, while appearing synchronous and unified, nonetheless harbors a "temporal abyss." Moreover, this mirrors the way the diachronicity of wage-labor finds itself occluded, be it in the timeless appearance of any one commodity, or in the synchronic display of commodities that is the market itself. At the same time, the *poème en prose* depicts its own social milieu with a kind of quasi-transparency, thereby proposing an immediate continuity with its historical situation, the world of the Second Empire, which the *Petits poèmes en prose* represents thematically as its various narrators bear witness to, and participate in, all kinds of social violations, from French colonial oppression ("Crowds") and class warfare ("Let's Beat Up the Poor!"), to random acts of uncontrolled rancor aroused by inhospitable urban conditions ("The Bad Glazier"). More precisely, Baudelaire's prose poems enact a critique of progress in the reiterated emphasis on historical time as an injurious *social* category and an agent of violence ("The Double Room" and "Get Drunk").

The rapprochement between a lyric subject in flight from history and a prosaic subject embedded in historical time is therefore contradictory to the core. De Man's shorthand comment referring to Baudelaire's allegorical "dark zone" yields an understanding of how such alienation persists within the very material of the *poème en prose*, separating it from itself along a kind socio-temporal fault characteristic of the commodity form, which cleaves the object from the objective time governing its own history. Most important here is the way Baudelaire's *poème en prose* struggles by way of innovation to preserve some measure of its formal autonomy, annexing a diminished space for self-determined cultural production by adopting an antagonistic economic logic. This underscores the contradiction that attends innovation's "newness" and suggests one way in which modern aesthetic experiment lends form to what otherwise escapes social intelligibility. While lyric adopts a critical stance toward "the next new thing" – which is nothing more than the ongoing return of the commodity form itself – the aesthetic becomes an agent lending shape to emergent social phenomena.⁵¹

Unlike "the newest thing," or *nouveauté*, which like "the news" gives way to its own obsolescence and substitution, "the new" as such appears abstract in its very concreteness, cut-off from its own history and everything familiar. A materialist conception of "the new" might find an unexpected homologue in the fragmented part produced by the factory worker whose divided activity maintains the most abstract relation to the total process in which it functions. The part alone, in its inaccessible relation to the whole, appears irreducible to what is known; it resembles nothing familiar, even as it bears the imprimatur of an entire system of production that extends beyond cognition's reach. Its sudden appearance *as if* from outside that system might then suggest a species of "the new." Put somewhat differently, "the new" can be said to be alienated from the conditions that make it what it is, while simultaneously registering those conditions in an unprecedented way. Baudelaire's *poème en prose* thus realizes Rimbaud's modern imperative that the unknown be made legible by way of new forms while at the same time remaining unavailable for literary "progress."⁵² The difficulty here is that the "unknown" registered by the *Petits poèmes en prose* is the most *prosaic* feature of everyday life under the Second Empire: the consolidation of commodity production and the domination of the social by exchange-value. This may well be the "sensible supersensible thing" whose lineaments Baudelaire's *poème en prose* enables us to sense unexpectedly and concretely.

Insofar as the newspaper materialized the prosaic *as such*, it functioned to naturalize the new rhythms of "everyday" life, the material traces of which disappeared into the regular appearance and disappearance of events. In the mass daily, newness was already intimately related to disposability. What's new today you can throw away tomorrow, and this is what makes the news. Baudelaire, of course, argues on behalf of his prose poems' formal features – their appeal to narrative, their transparent sentences, and consumable paragraphs – which are functions of the emergent demands for convenience and merchandisable ephemera, demands the newspaper itself cultivated and reinforced. While the irony of Baudelaire's sales pitch to Houssaye may have

been corrosive, it nevertheless illuminates the social logic of his late experiment, whether or not that reasoning was in fact Baudelaire's own. Regardless of the poet's intention, then, the *poème en prose* imitates a form designed for mass accessibility, a form that had a role to play in the shaping of a modern consciousness.

This genre of imitation suggests a consequential shift in the privileged object of modern lyric poetry. Whereas "nature" was once the unrivalled object of poetic mimesis, it is the *naturalized* production of the commodity, a kind of "second nature," that lyric poetry would now be obliged to imitate in the interest of its own survival, thereby negatively reflecting the commodity's performance of "nature" and exchange-value's imitation of all that is natural. For Baudelaire, this naturalized object is "a more abstract modern life," and within the ecology of this abstract life-world, the commodity is the instrument and index of a kind of social violence characterized by the dissimulation of its own constitutive features: non-reference, fragmentation, mystification and disjunction. Rather than resisting forms of commodification in which real human relations disappear, fragmentation and disjunction, as Baudelaire practiced them in the *poème en prose*, take the hardened and the alienated as their model, performing aesthetic difference precisely by way of this strategy of resemblance.⁵³ Baudelaire accounts for this complex strategy in the opening line of his prefatory letter to Houssaye when he offers what is arguably the critical key to understanding his book, which he states "has neither head nor tail, since everything in it is both head and tail, *alternately and reciprocally*" (my emphasis). Baudelaire is referring to the order-defying suppleness of his "little work" [*petit ouvrage*] and its general reader-friendliness, which lends itself conveniently to fragmented and disjunctive reading. More importantly, though, this formulation brings into focus a much deeper form of doubleness that characterizes every aspect of the experiment: its dialectical apprehension of "a more abstract modern life."

The significance of the letter's opening line can't be overestimated: everything about this work, including the letter itself, is both itself and its opposite, alternately and reciprocally. Rather than calculated duplicity, I would liken this to *dialectics*, and like a consummate dialectician, Baudelaire prescribes an approach to his work that would recognize opposites simultaneously – affirmation and negation, identity and non-identity – acknowledging contradiction to be as essential to the work's construction as it is to a reading that would adequately understand it. In order to be faithful to this dialectic, one can't assume anything in the work to be self-evident, not least the approbation of its disordered organization. Even Baudelaire's privileging of the fragment conceals an insight into the architecture of the *Petits poèmes en prose*. For despite his insistence to the contrary – "chop it into fragments, and you'll see how each of them can stand alone" – no single "fragment" can be understood in isolation, just as no one *poème en prose* can contain the total set of relations of which it is a function. Yes, the so-called fragments have their individual integrity, but they also enter into complex relations with one another, so that the meaning of the whole further informs the significance of each part. For example, the disillusioned idealism of the volume's first *poème en prose*, "The Stranger" [*L'Étranger*], can't be adequately understood outside its relation to the realism of the following poem, "The Old Woman's Despair" [*Le Désespoir de la vieille*]. Similarly, the critique of abstract beauty in "The Artist's Confitéor" [*Le Confitéor de l'artiste*] must be read together with the concrete reference to colonialism in "Crowds" [*Les Foules*] with which it corresponds, just as the historically motivated self-reference to the *poème en prose* in "Halo Lost" must be read together with the more aestheticized reference to the new form in "The Thyrsus" [*Le Thyrsus*]. Such critical correspondences traverse the work, making for a complex whole that argues against the aesthetic strategy of discrete parts that Baudelaire promotes in his letter to Houssaye.

And so, while aesthetic fragmentation may be a feature of the diminished reference often associated with modern lyric's formal protocols, it is also characteristic of the modern poem's nearness to the commodity, and finds its historical ground in the abstraction of everyday life under modernity. In the *Petits poèmes en prose*, Baudelaire presents us with an early insight into fragmentation's social conditions. Rather than opposing the forces of commodity production that were then encroaching on the authentic lyric voice, fragmentation becomes a technique by way of which Baudelaire manages to surmount those forces formally by mimicking their effects. Contemporary poetic techniques that maintain the fragment as a kind of luminous shard, or as a privileged unit of composition around which a residue of aura – or charged distance – may persist, but they also obscure this early critical moment in the genealogy of poetic fragmentation in Baudelaire.⁵⁴ Indeed, what is forgotten is that the residual aura that clings to the poetic fragment is reflected in the abstract process of generating exchange-value, and its so-called autonomy may have been first realized in the reified part in the production process. When isolated from the total operation to which it must ultimately yield, any component of production will seem entirely strange and unfamiliar – like "the new" – and analogous to the linguistic

fragment isolated from discourse. But it was a social technology – if not industrialization itself – that rendered the fragment in this way, and as Adorno argues, aesthetic technique is always heteronomous vis-à-vis such technologies, at once amplifying their means, and resisting their ends.⁵⁵ Even when aestheticized and divorced from any coherent strategy, technique brings with it the very history of production that the self-conscious claim of the artwork would ideally abjure. Baudelaire's late innovation can then be said to contain the aesthetic internalization of fragmentation, making an otherwise illegible, although constitutive, feature of social production legible as it finds itself transfigured by poetic form. Both so-called horizons of lyric poetry's adventure under modernity – hermetic fragmentation and degraded commodification – thus propose their own convergence at *modernité's* point of departure, and this may well be the non-linguistic referent, or extrinsic meaning, animating Baudelaire's "dark zone."

What in the end, then, is at stake in failing to take Baudelaire's more prosaic innovation into account when describing or assessing the crisis in modern lyric subjectivity? By neglecting the *poèmes en prose*, critical readings of Baudelaire lose sight of a text in which all the dialectical tensions between "the new" and the ever-same, between aura and mechanical reproduction, between the uselessness of *l'art pour l'art* and the instrumentality of commercial culture, become critically volatile. At the same time, a reading of the *poèmes en prose* that attends to the aesthetic value of Baudelaire's "fragmentation" on formal grounds without linking that value to socio-economic processes risks not sensing what's at stake in the work. By reading the specificity of Baudelaire's *Petits poèmes en prose* as an originary instantiation of what is now a familiar genre, the social complexity of his late experiment gets reduced to terms that are *ours*, as if the poet were speaking to *us* with his fragmentary stutter. Such an approach risks the excesses of historicism – against which de Man marshals his critique – whereby the past, in its so-called progressive movement, would appear to edify the present, which in turn imagines itself as having progressed "beyond" that past. Despite this semblance of transparency, however, the *poème en prose* negates its own appearance of immediate reference insofar as that semblance is mediated by a society of opaque forms. By embracing its own heteronomy, Baudelaire's *poème en prose* paradoxically realizes the diminished zone of autonomy available to lyric whereby it might render something legible that normative conditions of communication otherwise mask. What this form of autonomous poetry makes visible may be as modest as its own diminished margin of mobility within the antagonistic system of production where lyric persists *and* resists. To open the figure still further, this margin may be likened to a particular *fault* in the system's ideas about itself, like the so-called "great divide" between the advanced artwork and the commodity, a fault that the *Petits poèmes en prose* demonstrates to be an error. This may not be a parochial concern of criticism, but rather a concern crucial to an understanding of poetry's social vocation today.

Notes

I am indebted to Richard Terdiman, Judith Goldman, and Marc Schachter, for their generous and instructive responses to early drafts of this article.

¹ Published posthumously, two years after Baudelaire's death, the *Petits poèmes en prose* also bears the name *Le Spleen de Paris*. Because my argument focuses specifically on the social significance of the work's formal difficulty, I've chosen to use the collection's generic title throughout this article, rather than its thematic alternative. Early versions of the first of these *poèmes en prose* first appeared in 1855, and they continued to appear sporadically during the last decade of Baudelaire's life. For a complete publishing history of the poems that comprise the volume, see Edward K. Kaplan, *Baudelaire's Prose Poems: The Esthetic, the Ethical, and the Religious* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990), 175-181.

² Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Claude Pichois (Paris: Pléiade, 1975): 1:352. Translation modified from *The Parisian Prowler*, trans. Edward K. Kaplan (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997), 113.

³ *Œuvres complètes*, 1:275-276. For a translation of this letter, see *The Parisian Prowler*, 129. There was, of course, a rich tradition of poetic prose [*prose poétique*] that preceded Baudelaire's particular innovation, and

Suzanne Bernard refers to this tradition as the prehistory of the *poème en prose* and discusses it at length in her classic study, *Le Poème en prose de Baudelaire jusqu' à nos jours* (Paris: Librairie Nizet, 1988).

⁴ *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 375. For Benjamin's canonical treatment of "aura," see 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,' in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. and introduced by Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969). See also, 'Little History of Photography,' in *Selected Writings, volume 2, 1927-1934* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 507-530.

⁵ See 'Central Park', trans. Lloyd Spencer, *New German Critique* 34 (Winter 1985): 36. Hereafter, references to 'Central Park' will appear as 'CP' in the main body of this article.

⁶ See David Harvey, *Paris, Capital of Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2003) 93-4.

⁷ According to Benjamin, "eternity" becomes the smallest imaginable increment of time separating the present from conditions of security. Thus, the fullness of time converges with the emptiness of an endless succession of such increments. See 'Central Park', and also 'Blanqui,' in *Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938-1949* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 93-4.

⁸ For a thorough analysis of the *situatedness* of the prose poem in nineteenth-century print culture, see Richard Terdiman, *Discourse/Counter-Discourse: The Theory and Practice of Symbolic Resistance in 19th-Century France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

⁹ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 39. Hereafter, references to *Aesthetic Theory* will appear as *AT*.

¹⁰ For sustained readings of these poems, see Rob Halpern, *The Politics of Autonomy: Social Engagement and Aesthetic Value from the Romantic Fragment to the Poème en Prose*, dissertation, University of California, Santa Cruz, 2006.

¹¹ *Œuvres complètes* 1:335-6. *Parisian Prowler*, 87, translation modified. For a reading of 'Le Tyrse' that references its central place in the reception of the *poème en prose*, see Sonya Stephens *Baudelaire's Prose Poems: The Practice and Politics of Irony* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 36-45.

¹² For a comprehensive genealogy of the genre that posits Baudelaire as an origin, see Suzanne Barnard's classic study *Le Poème en prose de Baudelaire jusqu' à nos jours* (Paris: Librairie Nizet, 1988).

¹³ According to Harvey, post-1848 Paris was "caught in the aftermath of the deepest and most widespread crisis of capital yet experienced. [...] The city had seen many an economic crisis before, usually triggered by natural calamity or war. But this one was different. [...] This was a full-fledged crisis of capitalist accumulation, in which massive surpluses of capital and labor power lay side by side with apparently no way to reunite them in profitable union." *Paris, Capital of Modernity*, 93-4.

¹⁴ See Karl Marx, *Capital* vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London, 1976), 163; final phrase modified. Hereafter, all references to volume 1 of *Capital* will appear as *C*.

¹⁵ For several important treatments of Baudelaire and the commodity form, in addition to Walter Benjamin's *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, see Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, trans. Ronald L. Martinez, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); and, Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin, or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London: NLB, 1981).

¹⁶ *Œuvres complètes*, 1:275-276, my translation. For Bertrand's reference to his "new genre of prose," see Louis Bertrand's 1837 letter to David d'Angers, in Louis "Aloysius" Bertrand, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Helen Hart Poggenberg (Paris : Honoré Champion, 2000), 900. For a sustained examination of Bertrand's project, see Halpern, *The Politics of Autonomy: Social Engagement and Aesthetic Value from the Romantic Fragment to the Poème en Prose*; chapters 2, 3, and 4 of which are devoted Louis Bertrand.

¹⁷ As Benjamin notes in 'The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire,' "In 1824, there were 47,000 newspaper subscribers in Paris; in 1836, there were 70,000; and in 1846, there were 200,000. Girardin's paper *La Presse*, played a decisive part in this rise." *Selected Writings, Volume 4*, 163. Deepening our understanding of the role ascribed to *La Presse* in a footnote to this same passage, Benjamin continues, "*La Presse* brought a number of innovations: it mixed traditional coverage of politics and the arts with elements of fashion, gossip, and scandal, and, above all, introduced the *roman-feuilleton*, the serial novel, which supplied a new mass readership with escapism, adventure and sentimentality" (73). See also, *Making the News: Modernity & the Mass Press in Nineteenth-Century France*, eds. Dean de la Motte and Jeannene M. Przyblyski (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999).

¹⁸ *Œuvres complètes*, 1:275-276; my translation.

¹⁹ In 'Some Motifs on Baudelaire,' Benjamin identifies the commodity-like dimension of the newspaper as well, while describing the way it "isolate[s] events from the realm in which they could affect the experience of the reader. The principles of journalistic information (newness, brevity, clarity, and, above all, lack of connection between the individual news items) contribute as much to this as the layout of the pages and the style of writing." *Selected Writing 4*, 315-6. Also cited in Terdiman, 125.

²⁰ I'm indebted to Judith Goldman for her suggestion to consider the newspaper as a "meta-commodity".

²¹ *Œuvres complètes* 1:299; *The Parisian Prowler*, 34.

²² *Œuvres complètes* 1: 280; *The Parisian Prowler*, 6.

²³ In a prefatory essay preceding his translation of Benjamin's 'Central Park', Lloyd Spencer refers to the newspaper as a product of technology (mechanical reproduction) and capital (wage-labor). Technology "speeds everything up but enslaves human beings to its abstract mechanical rhythms," while capital "measures human effort in abstract labor time," and together they "conspire to trap consciousness under the burden of an interminable, empty present." I would only go on to add that this suggests just the sort of consciousness, with all its jolts and shocks, that Baudelaire imagined his new form accommodating. See Lloyd Spencer, 'Allegory in the World of the Commodity: The Importance of *Central Park*,' in *New German Critique* 34 (Winter 1985): 61.

²⁴ Without mentioning either Baudelaire or the newspaper, Théodore de Banville was arguably responding to both when he discredited the very idea of a *poème en prose* with strained philological rigor: « le mot Poésie, en grec ποιησις, action de faire, fabrication, vient du verbe ποιειν faire, fabriquer, façonner; un poème, ποιημα, est donc ce qui est fait et qui par conséquent n'est plus à faire [...] il est impossible d'imaginer une prose, si parfaite quelle soit, à laquelle on ne puisse rien ajouter ou rien retrancher; elle est donc toujours à faire, et par conséquent n'est jamais (le) ποιημα. » *Petit traité de poésie française* (Paris : impr. de A. Le Clère, 1872), 4-5.

²⁵ For an excellent analysis of aesthetic "weakness" under modernity by way of such an unlikely group as Takashi Murakami, Hello Kitty, Gertrude Stein, Francis Ponge, and Theodor Adorno, see Sianne Ngai, 'The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde,' *Critical Inquiry* (Summer 2005): 811-847.

²⁶ For an important analysis of the political implications of an affect's "ambivalence," see Paolo Virno, 'The Ambivalence of Disenchantment,' in *Radical Thought in Italy*, eds. Virno and Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: U Minnesota Press, 1996).

²⁷ Charles Baudelaire, *Intimate Journals*, trans. Christopher Isherwood (San Francisco: City Lights, 1983), 91: translation modified.

²⁸ See *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 184. Hereafter, references to *Blindness and Insight* will appear as *BI* in the main body of the article.

²⁹ For Benjamin's most sustained discussion of allegory, see 'Allegory and Trauerspiel' in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborn (London, 1977), 159-235.

³⁰ Among Baudelaire's poems in verse, 'Le Cygne' (1859) captures this poignantly. Beginning with the title's homonymic pun on the word *sign* [*le signe*], the poem draws attention thematically and formally to the way civic dispossession becomes a problem of representation: "Paris changes! Only in my melancholy / nothing moves! New palaces, blocks, scaffolds, / old suburbs, everything becomes allegory to me / And my most cherished memories are heavier than stones." The poem responds to a concrete social catastrophe – the modern urbanization of Paris – in the process of its becoming a crisis of social abstraction. This civic emergency makes new demands on the function of signification to which Baudelaire's use of allegory responds. For a beautiful reading of 'Le Cygne' as the staging of the disoriented sign, see Richard Terdiman's 'Baudelaire's 'Le Cygne': Memory, History and the Sign,' in *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis* (Ithaca, 1993).

³¹ "Nonlinguistic referential models" of interpretation would posit a poem's meaning outside the linguistic register of the text itself. Such models generate "extrinsic" references toward which, de Man argues, students of literary history typically gravitate in "flight from language" and its irresolvable semiological conundrums. See *Allegories of Reading*, 79.

³² I follow Spencer's translation. *New German Critique* 34 (Winter 1985): 33-34. Jephcott and Eiland translate the passage as follows: "That which the allegorical intention has fixed upon is sundered from the customary contexts of life." *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, 169.

³³ *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, 163-164. De Man himself drew attention to this. See 'Reading and History,' in *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986): "For [Benjamin], allegory is best compared to a commodity; it has, as he puts it in a term taken from Marx, *Warencharakter*, 'matter that is death in a double sense and thus anorganic.' [...] Everyone has always know that allegory, like the commodity and unlike aesthetic delight, is, as Hegel puts it, 'icy and barren'" (67-68).

³⁴ Thomas Keenan's rhetorical reading of Marx's analysis moves out of de Man, and it's useful for understanding the function of abstraction in the commodity: "commodity exchange is not something visible, not sensory, not something to see or feel. It has nothing sensible or phenomenal about it, nothing 'real' as philosophy or political economy has interpreted reality (within oppositions such as matter/spirit, essence/appearance, real/ideal, etc.)." And a bit further on, Keenan continues, "Value is always value in a relation, in an exchange. [...] What 'allows' exchange to happen is neither the labors nor the uses nor the things themselves but their abstracts, abstractions, operating as tokens (practical necessities) in a relation. Being alike is being abstract." See, 'The Point is to (Ex)Change It: Reading *Capital* Rhetorically,' in *Fables of Responsibility: Aberrations and Predicaments in Ethics and Politics* (Stanford, 1997), 122-3.

³⁵ This formal dysphoria in Baudelaire's late innovation accords with Adorno's analysis of "late style," which Lyn Hejinian usefully describes in terms of a work's "resistance in the form of discord – a refusal or failure to

effect internal harmony; resistance in the form of untimeliness – anachronicity; resistance in the form of incongruity – being out of place, a refusal or failure to fit into or achieve harmony with external conditions.” See Hejinian, ‘Positions of the Sun: Latitudes and Lucy Church Amiably,’ *ucberkeleyenglish.blogspot.com*, (24 May 2009), <http://ucberkeleyenglish.blogspot.com/2009/05/professor-lyn-hejinians-positions-of.html>, accessed 20 July 2009.

³⁶ For de Man’s account of this problem see, in particular ‘Semiology and Rhetoric,’ in *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

³⁷ The reason for de Man’s limitations here are effectively hard-wired into the essay’s orientation, if not into the logic of de Man’s entire enterprise of reading with its characteristic appeal to “literature as such” at the expense of literature’s socio-historical conditions of possibility: “hence the stress on literary categories and dimensions *that exist independently of historical contingencies*” and “modernity thus conceived as a general and theoretical *rather than historical theme*” [my emphases]. *BI*, 167.

³⁸ Fredric Jameson unwittingly reproduces de Man’s blindness – or at least that dimension of it which turns on the specificity of the prose poems – in his sustained reading of ‘Lyric and Modernity’ in *A Singular Modernity* (New York: Verso, 2002). Commenting on de Man’s *Blindness and Insight*, he writes: “These essays, rich with lateral implications that make them multiple theoretical and ideological statements, have most commonly been flattened out and simplified into a plausible misreading (or perhaps I should say some first, possible, yet less interesting, reading) which would see in them yet another instance of that construction of aesthetic autonomy” (106). This sentence includes a footnote where Jameson refers specifically to de Man’s reading of “the unique incomprehensibility of Baudelaire as a ‘dark zone’ in literary history” as one of the “lateral implications” he will go on to enumerate (232). Jameson wants to account for the idiosyncratic privilege de Man ascribes to allegory, a privilege comparable, he suggests, to that ascribed to “capitalism” by Marxist criticism. Both, he argues, are narrative tropes by which to read the entire adventure of history. Jameson’s reading of de Man is rich, but when it comes to accounting for what de Man refers to as “the darkness of this hidden center” in Baudelaire, he overlooks the fact that it is, in de Man’s words, the “truly allegorical, later Baudelaire of the *Petits poèmes en prose*” to which ‘Lyric and Modernity’ refers in the cited passage. While Jameson wants to draw attention to the theoretical and ideological implications of de Man’s reading of “the unique incomprehensibility of Baudelaire’s ‘dark zone,’” his own reading elides the specificity of de Man’s generic reference. As if Baudelaire’s *oeuvre* coincided with this zone in its entirety, Jameson fails to note that it is the prose poems of the later Baudelaire in particular that de Man calls “truly allegorical” here, and in doing so, he misses an opportunity to further substantiate his critique.

³⁹ See Theodor Adorno, ‘On Lyric Poetry and Society,’ in Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen, vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

⁴⁰ Capturing beautifully this Adornian insight, Thom Donovan writes: “In lyric intensities we discover an interval not beyond mediation but produced through it, where we are stamped by the time of others, by the loss of what remains as measure.” See Thom Donovan, ‘Bare Life,’ *Jacket Magazine*, 37 (2009), <http://jacketmagazine.com/37/r-halpern-brady-rb-donovan.shtml>, accessed 21 July 2009.

⁴¹ In the ‘Exposé of 1939,’ Benjamin comes remarkably close to this formulation: “Newness is a quality independent of the use value of the commodity. It is the source of that illusion of which fashion is the tireless purveyor. The fact that art’s last line of resistance should coincide with the commodity’s advanced line of attack – this had to remain hidden from Baudelaire.” See *Arcades Project*, 22. Adorno, however, will exploit this insight further, reading in “newness” the convergence of “abstraction” and “exchange-value,” and the dialectical interpenetration of aesthetic and commodity forms.

⁴² See Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus, (New York: Penguin, 1973), 157.

⁴³ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (New York: Verso, 1978), 247.

⁴⁴ This is consonant with Benjamin's own critique of historicism, like that in 'On the Concept of History,' as well as his related critiques of interpretations of literary history that presuppose an idea of progress. See, for example, 'Central Park': "In Baudelaire, it is very important that for Baudelaire the 'new' makes no contribution to progress. In general one finds in Baudelaire hardly any attempt to come to terms with the conception of progress in a serious way. It is above all the 'belief in progress' which he persecutes with his hate, as if it were heresy, false doctrine, rather than a simple error." See Benjamin, 'Central Park', 53. For 'On the Concept of History,' see *Selected Writings* 4, 389-400.

⁴⁵ For my sustained readings of all of these poems, see *The Politics of Autonomy: Social Engagement and Aesthetic Value from the Romantic Fragment to the Poème en Prose*, chapters 6 and 7.

⁴⁶ *Œuvres complètes* 1:352; *Parisian Prowler*, 113.

⁴⁷ *The Arcades Project*, 375.

⁴⁸ *Œuvres complètes*, 1:275-276, *The Parisian Prowler*, 130, translation modified.

⁴⁹ *Œuvres complètes*, 1:275-276, my translation.

⁵⁰ "Art or semblance, the argument goes, is critical precisely in its formal character of aesthetic *illusion*, as opposed to unknowing *aestheticist delusion*. In marking itself as illusion [...] in advertising its illusion character to its audience, art signals the interaction and interdependence of, but also the difference between itself and the world, whereas aestheticist delusion tends toward the collapse of the different identities [...]" (author's emphases). Robert Kaufman, 'Lyric Commodity Critique, Benjamin Adorno Marx, Baudelaire Baudelaire Baudelaire,' *PMLA*, 123: 1 (January 2008): 210.

⁵¹ I echo Robert Kaufman's reading of the relation between the aesthetic and the new: "'the new' here being understood ultimately as the not-yet-grasped features of the modern of production and, in fact, of all that is emergent in the social" which is in turn referred to as those "aspects of the social that have been obscured." See Robert Kaufman, 'Aura Still,' *October* 99 (Winter 2002): 45-80.

⁵² In his famous *lettre du Voyant*, Rimbaud anticipates de Man's critique in 'Lyric and Modernity' that Baudelaire "is not the father of modern poetry" by disavowing the relation between his own work and Baudelaire's: "Baudelaire is the first seer, the king of poets, a real god. But he lived in a world that was too artistic, and the forms for which he's praised are really pretty small-minded. The invention of the unknown demands new forms." Rimbaud's letter to Paul Demeny, May 15, 1871, my translation. See *Oeuvres Complètes*, ed. Antoine Adam (Paris : Pléiade, 1972), 253. Despite Rimbaud's own elaboration of the *poème en prose* in *Illuminations*, his manner of delinking his project from that of his forerunner suggests something unwittingly accurate.

⁵³ To imitate in such a way is to engage in what Benjamin refers to *The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire* as "a kind of mimesis of death." See *Selected Writings* vol. 4, 51. While Benjamin is clearly *not* thinking about the *Petits poèmes en prose* here, the idea lends itself to the late innovation along the lines I've been pursuing here.

⁵⁴ One possible genealogy of the poetic fragment would begin with Friedrich Schlegel's theorization of the primacy of the fragment, and its use by others affiliated with the Romanticism born at Jena. But this early elaboration is not continuous with later moments of the fragment's recuperation. Baudelaire's own recourse to fragmentation in his letter to Houssaye might then appear as an unwitting parody of Schlegel's elevated concept. Here I would argue that techniques like disjunction and fragmentation cannot adequately anchor

advanced aesthetic practice if those practices aim to remain critical. In this sense, the relationship between recuperative uses of the fragment might accord with the temporality of the avant-garde as discussed by Hal Foster. Accordingly, the use of a technique by successive generations of artists performs a critique of its previous deployments. See 'Who's Afraid of the Neo-Avant-Garde?' in *Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996).

⁵⁵ See *Aesthetic Theory*, 216-219.