Benjamin's "Baudelaire," Allegory, Interpretation¹

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1. In 1938, in a "race against the war", Benjamin tried to finish a book on Baudelaire of which only the preparatory notes, now published in *Paris, Capital of the 19th Century* (=P), are available to us. Together with Benjamin's essay *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire* (=S) and his letters to Adorno, Horkheimer and Scholem (=B), these notes enable us to reconstruct Benjamin's *Baudelaire* and to define its content, particularly with regard to the question of the relation of allegory to the modern world and of the allegorical stance as a method of pursuing knowledge.

2. The starting point of Benjamin's discourse is his critique of Dilthey's and Bergson's philosophy of life and the notion of "lived experience" (or *Erlebnis*). According to Benjamin, such a philosophy is based on the assumption that it is possible to ignore the "epoch of big industries" (S 187): this is why it can theorize the vital flux, the spontaneous genesis of sensations and a form of "free choice" in the "actualization" of the latter. While *Erlebnis* refers to the ego's integrity, to a condition in which reflections and impressions correspond harmoniously, the modern era is marked by the shocks brought about by industry and the crowded cities which condemn the individual to the "progressive atrophy of experience" (S 218). The latter is, therefore, viewed by modern artists as something that is lost; it belongs to a "previous life," to the "festive days" of prehistory with regard to which the *correspondances* are but the "dates of memory" (S 216). Indeed, rather than "simultaneous correspondences such as the symbolists soon after cultivated" (S 217), in Baudelaire they are moments placed outside time which imagination tries to interweave in a network of correlations. Baudelaire is the poet of modernity because in his poetry the symbolic imagination is completely subordinate to allegorical fantasy. What makes it possible for the allegorical fantasy to utilize the *correspondances* is the "impressions'" detachment from the *Erlebnis*. In fact, allegory presupposes a detachment from nature and from naturalness. Once the possibility of a romantic correspondence between subject and object disappears, allegory cannot but carry the signs of violence which has been "necessary to dismantle the world's harmonious faade" (P 414). It seems possible at this point to deduce that the symbolic *correspondances* mime the wholeness of a relationship that is still authentic with the natural world, in the hope of reproducing the *Erlebnis*. Instead, allegory acknowledges the

decline of such a possibility in the era of high capitalism. This is why allegory is—according to Benjamin—the artistic form of modernity. Moreover, while medieval allegory utilizes as its own “historical armature” the world of antiquity and of Christianity, Baudelaire “approached reality by inverting the formula: for him allegorical experience is primary” (P 409). In other words, “the soul’s faculties, that occupy so much space in Baudelaire, are man’s memories (*Andenken*) just as medieval allegories are the gods’ memories” (P 408).

In the same way that medieval Christian allegory pertains to a pagan world which is devitalized, so is modern allegory inherent in the dead objects of an extraneous inner life that has been utterly sundered from lived experience. Even memories are mortified; they are simply an object-memory (*Das Andenken*). And if “baroque allegory sees the corpse from the outside only, Baudelaire (instead) sees it from within” (P 415). In other words: “In the 19th century, allegory moved out of the exterior world to settle in the inner one” (S 245).

Once the inner life has flowed out of the *Erlebnis*, it inevitably loses its “aura.” If the “aura” is the “distance of a look which is re-awakened in what is being contemplated,” Baudelaire makes a “decisive attempt at “mastering that look in which the magic of distance has died away” (P 396). In the *spleen* there is “no aura” (S 220), no pathos which is the result of distance. The shock experience continuously reminds modern man that the present looms over him, thereby destroying any possibility of an “aura.” From Baudelaire onwards, “the ostentation of an “aura”” becomes a characteristic of “third-rate poets” (P 475). The poetry is already transformed into a commodity.

3. Because of such a transformation and the consequent disappearance of an “aura,” Baudelaire is forced to measure one’s strength with the crisis of lyric poetry. To survive, the poet-*flâneur* is obliged to accept the market and its laws. On the one hand, he has to find a space for an inner world that is threatened more and more; on the other, he has to come to terms with the transformation of art into a commodity. In the society to which he is confined, the *interieur* and *comptoir* constitute two elements that are at the same time dialectical and complementary.

In a world that is dominated by the fetish of commodity, patrons no longer exist and only the ruthless competition of the market is in force: “It is this market that has to be conquered and not the protection of the aristocracy or of a prince or the clergy” (P 423). Baudelaire is obliged—for the first time “in the history of poetry”—to set a price on the market of his product and to become himself “his own manager.” Allegory acknowledges not only this crisis of lyrical production but also the disappearance of a social function as well as the transformation of poetry into a commodity.

In the poet-*flâneur*, melancholy is inextricably interwoven with *bouffonnerie*, with a tendency to sneering and scoffing ironically, even at himself. The poet is also a mime: “He has to play the part of a poet in front of

an audience and a society, which does not know what to do with the true poet and which recognizes him only as a mime" (S 232). From this moment onwards, the poet can no longer exclude the relationship with the public: he has to include it in his own work, thereby establishing with the reader (with this specific type of reader who belongs to an era of high capitalism) a difficult and also complex relationship based on love and hate, on sameness and difference: "hypocrite lecteur, mon semblable,—mon frère." If in the first instance, after having lost his "aura," the artist becomes one of the crowd; in the second, he takes delight in the eccentric behaviour of the mime who performs "in front of an audience that is not capable of following the sequence of events in a scene, who is aware of this fact and who does justice to this awareness in his performance".

The *flâneur* and the mime are only two images of a series of figures that Benjamin projects as his own doubles onto the scene in Paris. As in a phantasmagoria, various representatives of asociality and marginality that are obliged to come to terms with the market and the public continually follow each other: the political conspirator, the prostitute, the *chiffonnier* or the rag-a-bone-man fascinate Baudelaire. About the *chiffonnier* he writes, "*Tout ce que le grande cité a rejeté, tout ce qu'elle a perdu, tout ce qu'elle a dédaigné, tout ce qu'elle a brisé, il le catalogue, il le collectionne*" (P 441). In a sense, even the rag-and-bone-man is a collector of dead objects and of debris, even he is an allegorist; this is why Baudelaire can identify with him. But the figure which more than all the others is similar to the poet is undoubtedly the prostitute. The poet puts on sale himself, his own life, his own feelings; like the prostitute, he is at the same time a seller and a product. The choice of an allegorical form implies that he is aware of the fact that reification constitutes the social content of his own poetry.

4. When exhibiting himself on the market, the poet has to make sure that his product is attractive enough to outshine all competing products. The "*creer un poncif*" programme induced Baudelaire to be the first one to elaborate the idea of "originality which adapts itself to the market" and to define the terms of his own relationship with tradition accordingly: he "wrote some of his poems to destroy others written before him" (S 234). The pursuit of novelty met not only aesthetic requirements, but also the dialectic of commodity production which establishes that art has to be at the same time new and yet always the same.

Even allegory seems to have an intrinsic relationship—indeed one based on equivalence—with the commodity. Not only does allegory represent what the experience of modern man has been transformed into, but there also seems to be a profound homology between the allegory's structure and that of commodity. In fact, in allegory, there is no "natural mediation" between "image" and "meaning," as is exactly the case "with a commodity and its price."

However, the homology is not of a passive nature. Through allegory, in

fact, the commodity attempts to look at itself and to recognize its real nature, thereby opposing "the deceitful transformation of the world of commodities" (S 239). Self-consciousness is also a form of critical negative knowledge.

To Benjamin, the relationship between allegory and commodity deeply marks modern times. It is through allegory that Baudelaire realizes the task of "giving shape to modernity" (P 438): his historical significance lies in his being the first one to "individualize" the specificity of man who is condemned to a state of estrangement in a reified world, and also in "having provided him with an armour against the reified world" (P 438). Allegory is the result of reification which harshly imposes its own law and at the same time provides a weapon which permits defence against it.

5. The book on Baudelaire was supposed to begin with an introduction that defined "the methodical working relation with dialectical materialism in the form of a comparison between the 'salvage' and the current 'apology'" (B 751). One can deduce that Benjamin here meant to develop an important need of his philosophy: that is, the resistance to the historicist-apologetic hypotheses of the course of history that is conceived as linear and evolutionary, and the attempt at blasting the historical *continuum*.

The introduction is followed by three parts that are conceived, in a Hegelian fashion, as thesis, antithesis and synthesis. The first part was dedicated to the theory of art and to the importance of allegory in Baudelaire's poetry. The second part was about the historical and philological context. Benjamin sent this part to Adorno who harshly criticized it, and consequently it was not accepted for publication by the editorial board of "Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung." The discussion ensuing Adorno's criticism induced Benjamin to outline some interesting details on his method, and in his reply to Adorno, he explains that the second part meets a precise methodical requirement: that of preceding interpretation by a "construction . . . primarily made up of philological material" (B 793). Since in this part "factuality" predominates, the approach may seem positivistic, but in reality this is only because the criticism of the philological stance itself has to go through "the philological performance." It "pretends"—and here Benjamin refers to the first page of his essay on Goethe—"the classification of the objective contents in which the content of truth is historically discarded (B 795). And so, the lack of interpretation, which Adorno accused Benjamin of, "is in no way a *necessary* consequence of the philological procedures that predominate" in the second part (B 796); it is rather the *conditio sine qua non* of his hermeneutics.

Benjamin's hermeneutics is exactly what the third part is about. Significantly its title is *Commodity as poetic object*. It "deals with commodity represented as the realization of the allegorical vision in Baudelaire" (B 752). Not only does the poetic object tend to assume the aspect of a commodity, but even commodity production itself—this gives rise to the title of the third part—tends to assume the aspect of an artistic object, thereby taking on a "magic" quality and the "aureole" of "novelty" and "originality."

In the last part the "object" constructed in the second part is transformed into a "monad," capable of revealing the meaning of a whole epoch. The equivalence of newness and the always-the-same, of a poetic object and a commodity, and the homology between allegory and commodity constitute the true content of Benjamin's work.

6. "The description of confusion is something different from a confused description" (S 236). Allegory is therefore not just a mere reflection of reification. Its distinguishing feature presumably lies in the technique adopted by allegory. When Benjamin gives some examples, in his essay *Author as Producer*, of how tendency and quality coincide, he actually indicates a series of procedures that refer to the world of allegorical vision (even though, in this essay, he does not directly mention allegory), such as fragmentation and interruption and the relationship between the individual item and the *montage*. The allegorist undoubtedly reflects the dismemberment and the disarticulation of a reified reality, but at the same time he knows such a reality, and so he can critically represent it, thereby depriving all objects of their appearance of totality and organic unity. Allegory, therefore, is a moment of the art's self-consciousness in the modern age, and it is also a weapon which permits defence and critical demystification, particularly because of its intrinsic "destructive fury" (it is really an *appareil de la destruction*).

Moreover, if the allegory's "progressive" character lies in this destructive force, its duty is also to preserve, to "salvage:" on the one hand, it uproots the object from its context, isolating it as a monad; on the other, by doing so, it preserves it. While the particular counteracts false totality with its fragmentary nature, it also makes it possible to become acquainted with the general context from which it has been wrenched. The monad carries within itself the world from which it has been severed.

Such a world is not a mere reflection but rather the result of a reversal; it is deprived of "normality" and "naturalness," of the appearance of organicity and most of all of its apparent teleological order.

Secondly, the isolated fragment becomes part of our mode of interpreting reality and of giving it meaning. This is why the figure most similar to the allegorist is the collector, who frees the object "from all its former functions," and places it within its own space, giving it its "own" meaning. This is also the process of awareness: "The true method to become aware of objects is to represent them in our own space (and not to represent ourselves in theirs). . . . It is not us who transfer ourselves in them, but it is they who enter our life" (P 433). And so allegorization and historical knowledge are made to coincide perfectly.

7. Benjamin's writings on Baudelaire aim at defining art and the modern world, as well as their reciprocal relationship. Allegory is the form of such a relationship.

The "second nature," as defined by Marx, is the kingdom of the *flâneur* who has replaced the stars with the lights of the *Passages* and the glittering of

commodities. Benjamin's pages on the loss of an "aura," on the disappearance of nature and of "lived experience," on the shock experience, on the *flâneur*, on the greater amount of time and on the alienation which marks the way it is spent in a society governed by the homologizing fetishism of commodity have close affinities, that are certainly not incidental, with Marx's depiction of the modern world.

If the artist moves about in the space of "second nature," allegory which reflects it and is familiar with it, is at the same time a homologous form of such a reality as well as its demystification. Indeed, as we have already seen, the latter springs directly from the former. In such a way, modern allegory is the allegory of the modern world. The avantgarde's realism, which aims at becoming the art of the modern world, is eminently an allegorical form of realism.

8. According to Benjamin, "Ideas are to things as constellations are to stars" (T 19). Ideas, then, belong to an order which differs from that of things. Without things, ideas could not be, in exactly the same way that constellations could not be without the stars. Ideas, however, are not "either the contents nor the laws of things;" rather they are "their virtual objective coordination, their objective interpretation" (T 19). They confer to things a meaning that is simultaneously "objective and virtual," just as a constellation is objective and virtual.

The difference occurring between concepts and things is the same difference that occurs in language between *signifié* and *signifiant*. In other words it is an allegorical relationship.

A constellation must be legitimized by the objective presence of the stars within a certain configuration, but it also belongs to the field of subjective interpretation and social convention. Indeed, every group of stars can be "read" in differing ways and each reading will change according to the geographical region and to the historical epoch. Similarly, meanings are attributed to things and to phenomena in a manner that goes beyond any possibility of a reciprocal organicism or of any necessary correspondence and this occurs in the process of knowing, and therefore in literary criticism as well between effectual content and the content of truth, or between commentary and interpretation. A natural organic correlation, a strict deduction of the second term from the first, does not exist here; nevertheless, the "co-ordination" of phenomena given by the interpretation is "virtual," but it is not merely subjective. In the first place, they are there, like the stars before being formed into a constellation. In the second place, their "co-ordination" must have a communicative rationality, it must express an acceptable meaning that is both comprehensible as well as socially verifiable. By this reasoning, the "objective reconstruction" of the given elements is—for Benjamin—the binding premise of the hermeneutic moment. When he advises that the "iunctim" between text and interpretation must be "created in a legitimate way from a philological context" (B 796), his intent is to underscore the "legitimation" of

the content of truth from effectual content. It is certainly not a coincidence that the term used should refer to a conventional stipulation of meanings, to an "ethics of speech" from which the critic cannot, in any way, escape.

The allegorical procedure is inherently monadological. Ideas are nothing more than representations of phenomena by monads, which is to say by "constellations" of concepts. On one hand, the particular is salvaged from chaotic multiplicity, and from the historical *continuum*, by means of its insertion within a given "constellation;" on the other, the idea that is derived from it has a "totality" of monad. Every idea, says Benjamin, is a monad, because it contains an image of the world. Once the choice of a particular constellation has been made, an image of "totality" is conferred by the partial gesture of the one who assumes the responsibility of selecting it from among the rest. Thus, an image of totality unfolds before our eyes.

A connection of the kind—Baudelaire is modernity—properly belongs to the order of ideas and not to the order of things. This connection does not express the simultaneity of objective mirroring, nor does it express the symbol which organically unites the particular to the universal; rather, it is a "construction," a "virtual objective coordination." Such a "construction" obeys the law of allegory in which the particular does not coincide with the universal. Totality, for Lukács, is to be found in the object and in the capacity of high realistic art to transubstantiate it, within itself, through mirroring, with the consequence of a substantial identification of subject and object. Indeed, Lukács exalts the symbol while condemning allegory. In contrast to this, Benjamin considers allegory as a vision of the interpreter, as a wager on the meaning of history, even if the wager is not arbitrary because it is founded upon objective data that arise from an historical, philological analysis. In Lukács's world, the particular reflects the meaning of the whole course of history seen in its dynamic process and in its tension with the new. Instead, for Benjamin, the particular is viewed as a fragment that is isolated and broken off, mortified and reduced to a dead object of knowledge. Its only chance for revival occurs when it can be shaken by the very interpretation that then inserts it into the historical process through an individuation of homologous forms. Such a homology directly links avant-garde art not to a future of socialism but to the present of reification, not to a continuity of tradition but to its interruption.

Intervention into history occurs through the weapons of disclosure and negation that result from the materiality of a technique and from the form of an allegory. It does not occur through the prospectivism of ideological contents. Moreover, the problem of the recovery of heredity is not posited as the protraction of a given tradition: the historical course is marked by the horror of the dominant classes and can only be studied by going against its grain, the resultant being to splinter or fragment it, in order to salvage certain aspects of it.

If Lukács gambles on the constructive and prospective function of the

symbol, then Benjamin's trump card is that of allegory: a deconstructive and critical negative one. The idea of totality and that of planning nevertheless survive in Benjamin's thought. His notion of totality shifts and becomes modified *vis à vis* Lukács's notion; it measures itself against the crisis of contemporary thought, and immerses itself in the fragmentation of allegory; yet it does endure.

Notwithstanding the recent attempt to conscript Benjamin into postmodernism, his critique of modernity remains inscribed within categories elaborated by modernity or rather by a certain vision of modernity. In a letter, Adorno chastises him for the absence of categories of "global process" and of "mediation" (B 783). According to Adorno, Benjamin's method is characterized by an "immediate materialism" that is substantially non-Marxist. This would induce him "to refer immediately to Baudelaire's pragmatic contents", to similar elements of the social and economic history of the epoch. In reality, Benjamin would be guilty of not having inserted the single phenomenon within a *philosophy of history* capable of absorbing and explaining it. This, in effect, is the point.

In truth the conflict is not between a positivistic empiricism, or an immediate materialism, that cannot see beyond the simple phenomenal datum, and a Marxist notion of totality, as Adorno seems to believe; instead, it is a conflict between two different manners, both being characterized by historical materialism, of imagining the very notion of totality. Totality, for Adorno, is imagined along the standards of historicism: it is a "global process" whose meaning is already known to the interpreter, given that he ideologically places himself at the terminal and perspective point of his development; contrary to this, Benjamin sees totality within the monad-idea, within a "constellation" of thought which immobilizes and isolates a group of data and superimposes upon it an allegorical meaning: he is aware that a hiatus, or a difference, exists between ideas and things.

For Adorno there is, *a priori*, a harmony between the particular and the universal, between the single element and the entire sum of data, as well as between the interpreter's meaning and that of history. Benjamin, in contrast, thinks of the meaning as a risky and partial wager or bet, that is not epistemologically guaranteed even if it can be verified objectively and legitimized pragmatically. Adorno posits that knowledge of totality precedes the truth; for Benjamin it comes from the gathering of "minutiae" by breaking from a "global process" whose statute of truth and guarantee of continuity belong to the dominant classes.

In a comparison of views we can see that Lukács's historicism takes from the particular only that which enters into an image of "totality;" in Adorno's historicism the contempt for the "concrete" again reveals a strong Hegelian ascendancy whereas the anti-historicism of Benjamin strives for a materialistic and dialectic recovery of the single fragment. The "global process" of Lukács or that of Adorno annuls the detail within itself and it can, without

any hesitation, sacrifice it. Benjamin's predilection for particularity inverts the mechanism: the fragment claims its own rights beyond a teleological conceptualization of history. The "minutia" is capable of containing a fore-shortened image of totality but at the same time this image can be placed into discussion as progressive linearity and as harmonious totality. Hence, it is no longer the optic of the universal—of a presumed general interest—orienting one's vision of the particular, but it is the particularity of the object and the partiality of the subject which condition the way of imagining the universal. This particularity and this partiality of the interpreting subject are inserted in the theoretical space of research.

Benjamin further differs from Lukács and from Adorno because he remains at a distance from any ontology of history. This inversion of the way to conceptualize historicity is Benjamin's Copernican revolution within historical materialism; this is what preserves it from any metaphysics of science or from any dogmatism of historical teleology.

It does not mean that Benjamin is to be placed outside of modernity; he would rather investigate its contradictions. Certainly, he does not espouse the postmodern perspective since, in his view, the past must be inserted into the planning of our present and it must be retrieved by a leap back and a breaking motion.

For a European cultural universe in ruins, Benjamin's constellation appears as a strong nucleus of what Habermas calls the "immanent counter-argument to modernity", which is capable of radically correcting it, while keeping us aware of the risks it involves.

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Translated by Gloria Lauri and Hiroko Fudemoto.

NOTE

- 1 Quotations are translated directly from the German originals.

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