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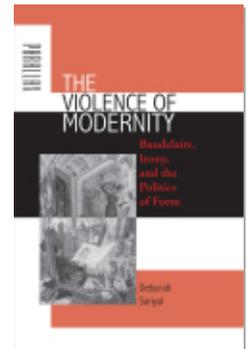
The Violence of Modernity

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

The Violence of Modernity: Baudelaire, Irony, and the Politics of Form.

Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, .

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Passages from Form to Politics

Baudelaire's *Le Spleen de Paris*

Qu'est-ce que l'art pur selon la conception moderne ? C'est créer une magie suggestive contenant à la fois l'objet et le sujet, le monde extérieur à l'artiste et l'artiste lui-même.

Baudelaire, "L'Art philosophique"

In what is celebrated as the defining gesture of literary modernism, Baudelaire declares in his essay "Théophile Gautier [I]" "La poésie ne peut pas, sous peine de mort ou de déchéance, s'assimiler à la science ou à la morale ; elle n'a pas la Vérité pour objet, elle n'a qu'Elle-même" (*OC*, 2: 113). This withdrawal of poetry from the public domain of communication, social utility, and truth claims, its redefinition as constituting its own object of reflection ("elle n'a qu'Elle-même"), seems to defend a formalist program of aesthetic autonomy that originates in Gautier's emancipation of art from moral and sociopolitical exigencies in his preface to *Mlle de Maupin* (1836) and culminates in the symbolist poetics of Mallarmé and Valéry. In this canonical narrative of modernism, Baudelaire ushers in the moment of poetry's virtual "disembodiment," its drift away from the claims of reference, materiality, and history. One need only to open the various textbooks that introduce his poetry in classrooms from the *lycée* to the university to confirm his consecration as the exemplary practitioner of *poésie pure* and of the self-reflexive aesthetic of *l'art pour l'art* that we associate with modernism. Key terms in this canonization of Baudelaire are *correspondances*, imagination as *la reine des facultés*, and *sorcellerie évocatoire* as the alchemical miracle of pure poetry. These principles form the core of his aesthetics and define his legacy for high modernism.¹

Whereas the previous chapter addressed Baudelaire's recent incarnation as poet of modernity's trauma, this more traditional account of the poet as precursor to high modernism will be my point of entry into a discussion of aesthetic form and its ideological investments in *Le Spleen de Paris*. Baudelaire's

aesthetics of *poésie pure* not only places him at the origins of a particular narrative of modernism, but also at the heart of theories of aesthetic modernity's self-reflexive attitude. According to Jürgen Habermas, the term "modernity" names a historical moment characterized by its attempt to define itself from within and to produce *sui generis* its normative principles. It is also when the aesthetic avant-garde abdicates before the demands of praxis and fails in the public sphere: "Modernity can and will no longer borrow the criteria by which it takes its orientation from the models supplied by another epoch; it has to create its normativity out of itself. Modernity sees itself cast back upon itself without any possibility of escape" (Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse*, 7). For Habermas, postromantic art's retreat from politics in the late nineteenth century is the inevitable consequence of attempting to ground subjectivity from within, and thus to conceive of aesthetic and cultural production *ex nihilo*. From Baudelaire to the surrealists, the rebellious, transgressive, and hypersensitive "spirit" of modernity neutralized standards of morality and utility, thus radically alienating art from other domains of the life-world. The Baudelairean dandy's perpetual self-fashioning, his loyalty to edicts that are entirely generated from within, and that find no echo in public consensus, is an exemplary recapitulation of modernity's failed attempt to ground normativity from itself.

This critique of modernity as a project whose incompleteness is figured in the sterile self-fashioning of the dandy is strikingly similar to Jean-Paul Sartre's indictment of the nineteenth-century literary avant-garde's withdrawal into private self-creation. Sartre's psychobiography of Baudelaire, for instance, takes the *héautontimorouménos* as its guiding motif, illustrating again and again the "puerile" strategies by which Baudelaire will attempt both to seize himself and to create himself through textual production and through the gaze of the other. This self-reflexive predicament, as we observed, is virtually enacted in the *héautontimorouménos*, an "executioner" of the self who puts to death—as it executes—its subjectivity. For Habermas and Sartre, then, the avant-garde's bid for autonomy from the public sphere was primarily reactive. Its exclusive focus on aestheticism and self-fashioning as modes of critical reflection on—and opposition to—the dominant culture merely deepened the rift between the aesthetic, moral, political, and legal spheres. Like the critique of irony's uses for the public sphere discussed in Chapter 1, the avant-garde's retreat into form is often read as leaving us with the dubious legacy of an aesthetic practice at once reified and alienated from the public domain.

In these narratives of modernity through the exemplary modernism of Baudelaire, "art for art's sake" is a compensatory retreat rather than a contesta-

tory intervention. Its formalism carves out an aesthetic realm of absolute sovereignty from within the political and economic pressures of a rapidly evolving urban context. As I suggested earlier, this view of modernism—as a crisis of representation that withdraws poetry from the realm of praxis and historicity—has been unexpectedly revitalized by trauma theory. Of course, the terms theorizing this crisis differ greatly, since one account views this withdrawal as an oppositional gesture displacing the utopian moment, while the other envisions it as a response to traumatic psychic and historical conditions. But these approaches mirror each other, insofar as the referential, communicative, and contextual dimensions of Baudelaire’s poetry are diminished, if not dissolved, whether by the deployment of a sovereign imagination or by a textual unconscious. Indeed, I would suggest that a continuous narrative binds the myth of aesthetic autonomy to the more current view of art as testimony to unrepresentable history. This chapter and the next interrogate both narratives by attending to the political valences of Baudelaire’s textualization of violence. I argue that modernism’s interrogation of reference constitutes a productive critique that resists its later conversion into testimony to ongoing trauma.

Chapter 1 invoked the critical possibilities opened up by Baudelairean irony, possibilities that emerge when texts are approached, not as symptomatic inscriptions of traumatic experience, but as forms of counterviolence that position poetry in relation to the production of historical violence. In this chapter, I examine more specifically the counterviolence harbored in categories of genre, especially when genre itself is ironically deployed as an aesthetic category with particular ideological valences. This first section attends to Baudelaire’s concept of *poésie pure*, then goes on to observe how prose poetry turns genre itself into a vehicle for extratextual critique.

If the principle of purity is upheld in Baudelaire’s theoretical writings, it is almost always compromised—if not deconstructed—in his poetic practice. As *De l’essence du rire* suggests, while the promise of *poésie pure* may haunt Baudelaire’s corpus, it nevertheless almost always emerges out of an impure, fallen, and historical discursive crucible. The most thought-provoking readers of Baudelaire have illuminated how poetry’s will to autonomous and self-reflexive formalism is repeatedly foiled by the return of the historical repressed. “Pure poetry” is inevitably contaminated by traces of the material and even economic conditions that it strives to banish from its midst. Yet are Baudelaire’s vertiginous deconstructions of aesthetic autonomy simply a *constat d’échec* of poetry’s power to co-opt and redeem history? Or can we imagine the deployment and sabotaging of “pure art” as a gesture invested with critical value?

Violence and Representation in Baudelaire

What if the bridge between poetry and the historical were constructed *through* the self-reflexive autonomy that ostensibly evacuates such concerns from poetry? In order to explore this possibility, let us turn to Baudelaire's own articulation of the relationship between pure poetry, irony and history.

Surnaturalisme et ironie

“Deux qualités littéraires fondamentales : surnaturalisme et ironie” (*OC*, 1: 658). In this cryptic definition of literature's fundamental properties, Baudelaire articulates a central tension in his literary practice that may help us to unravel the relationship between *art pur*, irony, and critique. The tension in this declaration is sparked by the ambiguous status of the conjunction *et*: is *surnaturalisme* sustained or unraveled by *ironie*? Are these terms distinct, supplementary, or interchangeable? By *surnaturalisme*, the poet designates a visionary refiguration of the world by the creative imagination, a transformation of things into sensory intensities freed from their representational function: “Le surnaturel comprend la couleur générale et l'accent, c'est-à-dire intensité, sonorité, limpidité, vibrativité, profondeur et retentissement dans l'espace et dans le temps” (*ibid.*). The vibratory deployment of sound and color across time and space vaporizes reference, creating a dense sensory and analogical network, such as the symbolic forest in “Correspondances.” Hugo Friedrich's canonical study of the transition from romanticism to modernism presents *surnaturalisme* as a key principle in Baudelaire's protosymbolist aesthetic precisely because it dissolves phenomenal reality into resonance, asserting thus the primacy of the creative imagination: “Baudelaire désigne du nom de ‘surnaturalisme’ cet art, né d'une imagination créatrice qui enlève aux choses leur ‘choséité,’ qui les réduit à des lignes, à des couleurs, à des mouvements désormais indépendants, un art qui jette sur les choses une lumière qui dissout leur réalité dans le mystère.”²

Baudelaire's *surnaturalisme* celebrates the artist's consciousness as the origin and end of the creative process, as an idealizing force that evacuates the world of its materiality, refiguring it through the metaphoric orchestration of *correspondances*. As such, *surnaturalisme* appears to harmoniously cohabit with *ironie*, understood here in its romantic sense as creativity's conquest of reality. Yet, as “L'Héautontimorouménos” suggests, there is an inevitable tension between the will to creative transcendence and the inscription of critical reflection in the artistic work. Critical reflection mutates into a *vorace ironie* that gnaws into the illusion of imagination's sovereignty over its material condi-

tions. Irony as parabasis, as the inscription of the process through which the poetic vision is constructed, unveils the gap between ideal and actuality. It keeps the poetic subjectivity in a constant oscillation or “double postulation” between *spleen et idéal*.

The tension between *supernaturalisme* and *ironie* raises questions about the nature of self-reflexivity and the status of *art pur* in Baudelaire’s poetic practice. As we saw earlier, Baudelairean irony does not empower speculative thought but, instead, topples the creative subject off its hieratic throne in a beheading whose violence is captured in the headless Pierrot of “De l’essence du rire.” The oscillation between the creative will to transcendence and the demystifying operations of irony lends Baudelaire’s oeuvre its characteristic duality (between spleen and ideal, elevation and fall), a duality traditionally mapped upon a vertical, theological axis. Yet, as we shall see, this oscillation also opens horizontal passages between poetic, political, and cultural preoccupations.

Baudelaire’s very formulation of poetry as an exclusion of all things beyond its own self-representation, “La poésie . . . n’a pas la Vérité pour objet, elle n’a qu’Elle-même,” purifies the aesthetic by evacuating the very notion of content. As Barbara Johnson has noted, this declaration syntactically enacts the exclusions that it proposes: “Que cet acte d’exclusion et de coupure . . . est en fait *constitutif* de la poésie, la syntaxe des formules baudelairiennes à ce sujet le démontre assez, par la répétition insistante du ‘ne . . . que’” (158). Its very articulation strives to carve out a space free from the material as well as moral and political pressures on literary production. The constraining, if not mutilating, tastes of a primarily bourgeois readership and a censorious régime that dragged both Flaubert and Baudelaire into court on charges of *outrage aux bonnes moeurs*; the co-optation of art as just another cultural commodity to be put into the service of utilitarianism, consumption, and pedagogical imperatives (*l’hérésie de l’enseignement*); and the obligation to sell one’s texts by the line are some of the more obvious conditions against which pure poetry defined itself.

Baudelaire’s declaration of aesthetic autonomy is directed at the postrevolutionary historical scene, the rising tide of democracy under the Second Empire’s apparent leveling out of class differences, the bourgeoisie’s unparalleled ascendancy, the acceleration of technology, urbanization, industrialism, and consumerism, and the overwhelming jostle of crowds, of *bodies*, in the streets of Haussmannized Paris. Sartre, Benjamin, Bourdieu, and Terdiman, among others, have traced how the transformation of the social field in late nineteenth-century Paris informs the literary avant-garde’s retreat from its surrounding

culture, an uneasy withdrawal that, for contributors to Gautier's *Le Parnasse contemporain*, such as Baudelaire, but also Leconte de l'Isle, Mallarmé, Banville, and Verlaine, expresses itself as an evacuation of social content from art. Pure poetry's detachment from this social context is a detachment from social content itself, from its degraded materialism and materiality. Baudelaire's gesture has thus quite rightly been read as a withdrawal of poetry from the domain of utility, circulation, and consumption, as an evacuation of content itself and a retreat into a compensatory aestheticism that safeguards artistic integrity and sovereignty. The emancipation of art from political and historical relevance is thus, paradoxically, deeply embedded in the ideological pressures of postrevolutionary society.

In light of this retreat into form, the significance of Baudelaire's participation in the 1848 revolution remains a contested terrain in criticism.³ For the moment, I shall recall some facts and leave speculation about his intentions and commitments aside. On February 22, Baudelaire had witnessed an unarmed insurgent being bayonneted by municipal soldiers as he attempted to escape; the next evening the poet was in the streets when the shooting on the boulevard des Capucines occurred. He was armed at the barricades on February 24. In Jules Buisson's account, Baudelaire fired his rifle, not for the sake of the republic, but to defy his stepfather, General Aupick, then head of the École polytechnique and representative of the conservative order that the poet sought to demolish.⁴ Under the provisional government, Baudelaire founded the *Salut public* with Champfleury, a republican journal that survived for only two issues; he adhered to Blanqui's Société républicaine, and after the April elections, was involved with a democratic, reformist journal, *La Tribune nationale*. During the bloody June days, Baudelaire fought with the insurgents on the barricades, and, an admirer of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, sought to alert the republican democratic socialist of a plot against his life.⁵ After the coup d'état of December 2, 1851, and the elections that legitimated Napoléon III's Second Empire, however, Baudelaire withdrew from the sphere of politics. Claude Pichois points out that those dates correspond to the composition of the famous lines from "Le Reniement de saint Pierre":

— Certes, je sortirai, quant à moi, satisfait
D'un monde où l'action n'est pas la soeur du rêve ; (*OC*, 1: 122)

"Le 2 décembre m'a physiquement dépolitiqué," Baudelaire told Narcisse Ancelle in the aftermath of Louis-Napoléon's coup (*Corr.*, 1: 188), indicating how deeply his retreat from politics responded to historical factors. The evac-

uation of politics from the poet's body is caused by a legitimation crisis in the body politic. Yet Baudelaire later revokes this declaration of immunity when he describes the republican spirit of 1848 as a force circulating in the collective body with the tenacity of a venereal affliction: "Nous avons tous l'esprit républicain dans les veines comme la vérole dans les os. Nous sommes Démocratisés et Syphilités" (*OC*, 2: 961). This portrait of the republican legacy as an incurable disease suffered by the poet and the body politic alike signals an ongoing tension between pure poetry and historical contamination, between the extraction of politics from the poet's body, *physiquement dépolitiqué* by history in the shape of *le 2 décembre*, and the inescapable contagion of this history's legacy. Such contradictory representations of purification and contamination obviously raise the question of the relationship between the political body and the poetic corpus. It suggests that the familiar story of Baudelaire's exorcism of politics from poetry, and his subsequent retreat into the austere conservatism of Joseph de Maistre and the logic of Edgar Allan Poe, could be told differently.

Despite the gesture of immunity inscribed in the very expression *art pur*, Baudelaire's poetry remains caught in the irresistible contagion of politics. For even after the rupture with politics declared in 1852, signs of the political continue to haunt Baudelaire's later poetic corpus with the enigmatic persistence of scars that refuse erasure. The question, then, is whether these are merely symptoms of poetry's inevitable contamination by the political, or if we can read a more intentional and contestatory relationship between poetry and politics. Let us return to the relationship between purity and impurity in Baudelaire's poetics, this time from the standpoint of genre, to see how the formal reflection on properties of genre might help us answer this question.

Contaminations: Prose Poetry

What I propose is to show how Baudelaire lies embedded in the 19th century [Baudelaire zu zeigen, wie er ins neunzehnte Jahrhundert eingebettet liegt]. The imprint he has left behind there must stand out clear and intact, like that of a stone which, having lain in the ground for decades, is one day rolled from its place.

Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (April 16, 1938)

Profondeur immense de pensée dans les locutions vulgaires, trous creusés par des générations de fourmis. Baudelaire, "Fusées," I

It is ironic that Benjamin's portrait of Baudelaire's embedding in the nineteenth century's ground should echo the poet's own vision of *lieux communs* as deep holes of collective wisdom dug by generations of ants. Benjamin's metaphor of embedding raises questions about the relationship between literature and its "ground": how is Baudelaire's poetry embedded in its historical terrain, and how do successive, historically embedded readerships in turn recover "the imprint he has left behind there"?⁶ Is the poem grounded in its cultural setting like other literary genres and cultural productions? The image of embedding, after all, characterizes a spectrum of cultural objects that Benjamin catalogues as material replica or imprints of bourgeois consciousness in the nineteenth century—the Parisian arcades, fashion, photography, journalism, and dioramas—cultural artifacts that, under scrutiny, reveal the mystifications of high capitalism, the phantasmagoria through which the bourgeoisie concealed the relations of production that sustained it as a class. Is Baudelaire's poetry to be approached as another such artifact, one that unconsciously records and bodies forth the shocks and contradictions of urban modernity?

Baudelaire's fascination with the *locution vulgaire*, the *lieu commun*, the verbal expression that has acquired wisdom, or even, historical memory in its circulation and sedimentation within the social body, betrays an awareness of what his own voice owed to such commonplaces.⁷ For if, as Benjamin proposes, his poetry made such an indelible imprint in the nineteenth century's ground, Baudelaire acutely sensed his own indelible shaping by what he purports to exclude. Nowhere is poetry's willful embrace of its surrounding terrain better illustrated than in Baudelaire's prose poetry, described in the preface to *Le Spleen de Paris* as an impure discursive space, the site of a "croisement de rapports" not only between the lyric and prosaic but also between the self and the city, the subjective and the intersubjective: "Quel est celui de nous qui n'a pas, dans ses jours d'ambition, rêvé le miracle d'une prose poétique, musicale sans rythme et sans rime, assez souple et assez heurtée pour s'adapter aux mouvements lyriques de l'âme, aux ondulations de la rêverie, aux soubresauts de la conscience ? C'est surtout de la fréquentation des villes énormes, c'est du croisement de leurs innombrables rapports que naît cet idéal obsédant" (*OC*, 2: 275–76; emphasis added). Prose poetry emerges from the crossroads of urban experience, from the multiplicity of bodies and discourses that jostle together in the public sphere. Pure poetry's descent into the commonplace is strikingly conveyed in the prose poem "Perte d'Auréole," where the consecrated poet loses his halo and quite literally *falls* into the *mauvais lieu* of the *lieu commun*.⁸

Since Suzanne Bernard's classic work on the prose poem in France, several compelling studies have suggested that prose poetry critically engages with the tradition and purposes of lyric poetry and simultaneously interrogates the power relations that constitute the social field. Barbara Johnson's *Défigurations du langage poétique* considers the prose poem as a deconstruction of the lyric's claim to unity, autonomy, and totality and implicitly proposes an isomorphic relation between poetry and capital, between rhetoric and praxis that might open up an ideological interrogation through rhetorical analysis. Sonya Stephens's study of Baudelaire examines how irony and other duplicitous discursive strategies in *Le Spleen de Paris* destructure established systems of value and meaning.⁹ Richard Terdiman's readings of Baudelaire most explicitly argue that the genre of prose poetry constitutes a counterdiscourse to the hegemonic, dominant bourgeois discourse of the Second Empire: "The prose poem needs examination *from the side of prose*: as a strategy for intervention in the dominant discursive apparatus of the nineteenth century. . . . From this perspective, the reflection on the discursive which the prose poem constituted by problematizing the entire realm of discourse appears as a sophisticated—and deeply subversive—scrutiny of its mechanisms of control, and of their points of potential fracture" (Terdiman, *Discourse/Counter-discourse*, 261).

Terdiman examines how the relatively novel genre of the prose poem harbored a particularly acute consciousness of its historicity, a consciousness that enhanced its capacity for illuminating the naturalization of cultural formations and social realities under the Second Empire. Prose poetry not only calls into question an established rhetoric of genres that defines the field of literature but also conjures up the contestatory possibilities of poetry itself, here endowed with the capacity to produce a critical genealogy of the bourgeoisie's life-world. Terdiman identifies two major strategies for such contestation: absolute counterdiscourse (such as the assertion of *poésie pure*) and recitation (such as Flaubert's *Dictionnaire des idées reçues*, a derisive catalogue of bourgeois platitudes). Yet, he notes that such a counterdiscursive endeavor was continually compromised and contaminated by the very discursive structures it sought to contest.¹⁰ But what if this contamination was a heuristic ploy rather than a symptomatic expression of the semiological disquiet generated by the symbolic crisis of imperial modernity? What if, rather than claiming a distinction between discourse and counterdiscourse, Baudelaire's *Le Spleen de Paris* explored the critical possibilities opened up by the *lack* of distinction between them?

Prosaic Scraps and Urban Debris: The Poet as Raggicker

In order to probe further into the ideological resonances of such a conception of prose poetry, let us for a moment consider Baudelaire's portrait of the poet as a *chiffonnier*, or raggicker. In sharp contrast to the Hugolian topos of the poem as ruin, Baudelaire's modern poet is cast as a *chiffonnier* who gathers up the debris disgorged by the modern industrial city. His verbal booty often takes the form of phantasmagorical rememberings sparked by haphazard encounters:

Je vais m'exercer seul à ma fantasque escrime,
Flairant dans tous les coins les hasards de la rime,
Trébuchant sur les mots comme sur les pavés
Heurtant parfois des vers depuis longtemps rêvés. ("Le Soleil," 1857)

This portrait of the poet-*chiffonnier* interweaves the production of poetry and the collection of refuse. Like the raggicker, the poet is the keeper of an urban junkyard, an alternative historian who composes the archives of urban waste:

Tout ce que la 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. Il compulse les archives de la débauche, le capharnaüm des rebuts. Il fait un triage, un choix intelligent ; il ramasse, comme un avare un trésor, les ordures qui, remâchées par la divinité de l'Industrie, deviendront des objets d'utilité ou de jouissance. . . . Il arrive hochant la tête et butant sur les pavés, comme les jeunes poètes qui passent toutes leurs journées à errer et à chercher des rimes. ("Du vin et du haschisch," in *OC*, I: 381; emphasis added)

By now, the topoi of the poet as a wandering *chiffonnier* or a drunken vagrant whose poetic inspiration intersects with fragments of urban reality are as familiar as those of the poet as a *flâneur* or a prostitute. One has to return to contemporary typologies such as the *physiologies* to appreciate the provocation of Baudelaire's analogy.¹¹ In *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes* (1861), *chiffonniers* are abject figures wholly identified with the refuse that they collect: "Voici des types monstrueux, d'ignobles figures, d'abominables moeurs : la forme, le fond, le dessus, le dessous, tout est pourri chez les chiffonniers."¹² Even in this disgusting portrait (which ends with a defense of the raggickers' humanity and a plea for their social integration), the analogy between poet and raggicker is readily discernable: just as the former sifts through the dirt of the city dreaming of "poétiques chenilles," that is to say, rubbish that can be turned into gold, the poet too will go in search of opportunities for the al-

chemical transformation of mud into gold: “Tu m’as donné ta boue et j’en ai fait de l’or” (*OC*, I: 192).

Walter Benjamin fully grasped the importance of the *chiffonnier* as an analogue for the poet, and envisioned the ragpicker’s activity as a metaphor for Baudelaire’s poetic composition, as well as for his own historical mosaic of nineteenth-century Paris:

This description is one extended metaphor for the procedure of the poet in Baudelaire’s spirit. Ragpicker or poet—the refuse concerns both, and both go about their business in solitude at times when the citizens indulge in sleeping; even the gesture is the same in both. Nadar speaks of Baudelaire’s “jerky gait” (“*pas saccadé*”). This is the gait of the poet who roams the city in search of rhyme-booty; it must also be the gait of the ragpicker who stops on his path every few moments to pick up the refuse he encounters. (Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire*, trans. Zohn, 79–80)

But Benjamin’s focus on Baudelaire as the last *lyric* poet of modernity leads him to privilege *Les Fleurs du mal* at the expense of the more obvious literary analogue for the poet-as-ragpicker, that is, the prose poems of *Le Spleen de Paris*. Baudelaire’s series of prospective titles for this collection underscore the homology between ragpicker and prose poet: “Le Promeneur solitaire,” “Le Rodeur parisien,” “Poèmes nocturnes,” “La Lueur et la fumée,” and “Petits poèmes lycanthropiques” were some of the alternate titles entertained by the poet. They convey the image of a figure cast out of Rousseau’s edenic nature and wandering through an urban world of light and fog. The poet’s incarnations as werewolf, vagrant, and solitary urban wanderer, powerfully conjure up the *chiffonnier*’s abjection, his nocturnal peregrinations in search of salvageable waste. Far from the rhetorical blossoms of *poésie pure*, both ragpicker and prose poet harvest debris from the field of urban modernity itself.

In contrast to the sovereign, subjective realm of pure poetry, then, the prose poem is offered up as a common intersubjective space, the site of a “croisement de rapports” that acknowledges figures of sympathetic or alien identification from the social content. For if the hurtling rhythm of prose poetry grasps the private experience of urban life, it also translates the thickness and motion of voices and of things that lie outside of the self. Just as the *chiffonnier* salvages what the great city as discarded, disdained and smashed (“tout ce que la grande cité a *rejeté*”), the prose poem as a genre collects the prosaic minutiae of daily life banished from the citadel of poetry (“tout ce qui se trouve exclu de l’oeuvre rythmée et rimée”). Catalogues of *choses vues*, the prose poems record what would otherwise fall outside of the city’s representa-

tion and into oblivion. The abject figures haunting the imperial splendor of Haussmann's Paris, those who inhabit "plis sinueux des grandes capitales,"—the beggar, the widow, the *saltimbanque*, the urchin, the prostitute, the *négresse*, and others cast off by capitalist modernity's ideology of progress—are uneasily hosted, if not held hostage, by these texts. The human debris of the industrial empire echo the poet's own condition as an anachronistic figure in exile.

Yet even this portrait of the poet as a melancholy witness to those exiled by modernity does not do justice to the dialectical energy of the prose poet's identifications in *Le Spleen de Paris*. To be sure, a poem such as "Le Cygne" is a powerful example of how allegory rescues "les éclopés de la vie," as Baudelaire calls them in "Les Veuves" (*OC*, 1: 292), and places them in a *musée imaginaire*.¹³ But the ironic texture of the prose poems defies a purely melancholy or nostalgic reading. The parallel between poet and ragpicker affords insight into one last but crucial aspect of the politics of Baudelaire's prose poems. Both the poet and the *chiffonnier* collect the precious debris of the modern industrial city, but the *chiffonnier* does so in order to feed this debris back into the urban machinery and its production of commodities: "il ramasse, comme un avare un trésor, les ordures qui, *remâchées par la divinité de l'Industrie, deviendront des objets d'utilité ou de jouissance*" (emphasis added). If the poet is indeed something of a symbolic *chiffonnier*, avidly gathering up the vestiges of modernity's symbolic production, Baudelaire also suggests that he fully participates in the smashing and reassimilation of this urban refuse, in the interwoven violences that make up the social fabric that the poet elsewhere claims to cut out of his poetry. As we shall see in *Le Spleen de Paris*, the poet, like the *chiffonnier*, is complicit with the social violence that names his abjection and is incorporated in the city's daily rhythm of production and consumption. Baudelaire suggests that the poet, whose victimization in terms of social legitimacy and economic survival finds its analogue in the *chiffonnier*, is also a *bourreau*, incorporated into the structural violences of the city itself.

The prose poem as Baudelaire envisioned it is a particularly apt genre for exploring *croisements de rapports*, not only between lyric expansion and urban convulsion, or the cadence of verse and the jolts of prose, but also between the poetic and the political terrains. These *tronçons* at once beckon and challenge historical embeddings. For while the prose poems offer a genealogy of their surrounding terrain, their volatile ironies pulverize the ideological vectors that organize this terrain. Exploiting the contamination of poetic discourse by the prosaic agents of the "locutions vulgaires," *Le Spleen de Paris* unsteadily

grounds itself in the commonplaces, or *lieux communs*, of the postrevolutionary historical imagination and its field of cultural productions. The inscription of such commonplaces presses into visibility the interwoven violences of the social fabric. They also illuminate the *croisement de rapport* between a violence intrinsic to art and the production of covert, symbolic violences in the social field of the Second Empire.

The following analysis of “Une Mort héroïque” examines one particular *croisement*, or transgression, that recurs in various poems such as “La Corde,” “Les Foulés,” “Assommons les pauvres !” and “L’Invitation au voyage,” where the poetic and political spheres, so often divorced in Baudelaire’s theoretical writings, gradually contaminate and mirror one another. By challenging poetry’s immunity to politics and ultimately unveiling art’s potential complicity with political power, such texts contest the absolute claims of both aesthetic and ideological sovereignty. In “Une Mort héroïque,” contamination, paradoxically enough, is what opens up the ethico-political dimension of Baudelaire’s prose poetry. The refusal of an aesthetic that would remain autonomous from the collective pathology, of a *poetically* depoliticized work, enables this poem to point toward historical shifts in the representation of political sovereignty and to probe the paths that remain open to a contestatory poetics.

Conspiratorial Poetics in Baudelaire’s “Une Mort héroïque”

“Une Mort héroïque” stages what appears to be an antagonistic struggle between the aesthetic and the political realms, embodied, respectively, in a jester and a prince. Fanciouille, the prince’s favorite jester and almost his friend, conspires against his sovereign and is denounced. He is commanded to perform in a pantomime that may win him clemency. Yet at the moment the histrion reveals himself to be a consummate artist, whose power exceeds that of his sovereign, the prince orders one of his pages to blow a whistle so shrill that it interrupts the performance and causes the artist to drop dead on stage. Despite the apparent antithesis between despot and artist—or executioner and victim—that could be inferred from the poetic plot, the boundaries between the aesthetic and the political are blurred, if not collapsed, throughout the poem. Indeed, the opposition between the prince and Fanciouille systematically inverts the exigencies of the political and aesthetic domains. Fanciouille, the court jester, is “voué par état au comique,” a condition that “despotically” impresses political ideas of liberty and nation upon his brain, and leads him into the conspiracy. The prince, himself an accomplished dreamer and aesthete, re-

verses the exigencies between the comic and the serious (a dichotomy that also opposes art to politics) by imposing a rule of “plaisir et étonnement” in his own state. The very conception of an “état,” then, is defined entirely by its transgression: Fanciouille transgresses into the political domain just as the prince transgresses into the aesthetic realm. These transgressions define their identities and positions vis-à-vis both the stage and the state, presenting from the outset the stage and the state as parallel sites for the performance of power.

These reversals between the aesthetic and political states pivot upon the reiterated disjunction between one’s “facultés” and one’s “état.” The emphasis on this recurrent disjunction is crucial, for it reveals the common goal of both artistic and political projects: the fusion of one’s inner possibilities (or imagination) and one’s outer circumstance. The artist’s embattled relationship to a given empirical predicament strives toward the imaginary fusion of “facultés” and “états” in the work of art. This coincidence between inner possibility and outer circumstance has its political analogues, for example, in republican idealism. Indeed, the infinitely renewed reconciliation of one’s faculties with one’s social conditions in a republic whose sovereignty fully reflects the collective will is the very premise of the incurable political utopianism both repudiated and perversely celebrated by Baudelaire. Several poems in *Le Spleen de Paris* are satirical deflations of this idealism and point out the irreconcilable gap between one’s “facultés” and one’s “états.” “Assommons les pauvres !” for instance, likens the beggar’s impotent gaze, “un de ces regards inoubliables qui culbuteraient les trônes, *si l’esprit remuait la matière,*” to both the poet’s idealizing imagination and the socialist theories of 1848.¹⁴ The poet’s physical assault upon the beggar demystifies such utopian celebrations of the sovereign imagination or of mind’s ability to move matter. In “Une Mort héroïque,” the authoritarian despot and the conspiring artist share the conviction that imagination can materialize itself in the world. Yet both figures are defined by the discrepancy between their imagination and their empirical circumstance. The emergence of their identities through the tension between “faculté” and “état,” rather than through identifiable roles and positions (subject and sovereign, victim and executioner, artist and despot, actor and spectator), complicates the distribution of power in the poem. The parallels between the prince and the artist-conspirator map a peculiar convergence of aesthetic and political forms of sovereignty.

Indeed, the prince initially occupies both the position of the artist who transfigures his empirical predicament into a stage for the play of his aesthetic faculties and, paradoxically, that of the disempowered political subject

thwarted by the discrepancy between his inner possibilities and his finite outer circumstances: “Le grand malheur de ce Prince fut qu’il n’eut jamais un théâtre assez vaste pour son génie. . . . L’imprévoyante Providence avait donné à celui-ci *des facultés plus grandes que ses États*” (*OC*, 1: 320; emphasis added). A similar discrepancy defines Fanciouille, whose faculties lead him astray into a state that is not his own: “Mais pour les personnes vouées par état au comique, les choses sérieuses ont de fatales attractions” (319). Moreover, when the prince summons the jester to perform for his life, Fanciouille moves from the wings of conspiracy to the center of the stage—his proper domain—to demonstrate how his imaginative, *artistic* faculties will relate to his state as the prince’s doomed *political* subject: “Il [le Prince] voulait profiter de l’occasion pour faire une expérience physiologique d’un intérêt *capital*, et vérifier jusqu’à quel point les *facultés* habituelles d’un artiste pouvaient être *altérées* ou *modifiées* par la situation extraordinaire où il se trouvait” (320; some emphases added). The *dislocation* of art and politics in the poem foregrounds their equal status as competitors for agency and ascendancy over the givenness of empirical conditions, thus calling into question the very distinction between these domains.

If Fanciouille as conspirator is reminiscent of Baudelaire during the active phase of his republicanism in 1848, the prince incarnates the sovereign indifference and aestheticism of the poet as dandy. He is “Assez indifférent relativement aux hommes et à la morale” and *therefore* “véritable artiste lui-même.” The prince thus offers a striking contrast to the alienated and impotent figurations of the artist in poems such as “Le Vieux Saltimbanque” or “Le Mauvais Vitrier.” His domain is a powerful, albeit incomplete, attempt at realizing the aesthetic ideal of *supernaturalisme* and of *art pur*. Here, however, the vehicle for an ideal transcendence of empirical conditions is the *political* state.

Baudelaire’s definition of pure art as a self-reflexive “magie suggestive contenant à la fois le sujet et l’objet, le monde extérieur à l’artiste et l’artiste lui-même” is radicalized in “Une Mort héroïque” as the inscription of the prince’s desires (“*facultés*”) upon his domain (“*états*”). The aestheticization of politics, implicit in the portrait of a state as a theater “governed” by the sovereign’s imagination, is a powerful echo of Baudelaire’s celebratory representations of the aesthetic process through the rhetoric of political sovereignty. In the Salon of 1859, for instance, imagination, “cette reine des facultés,” is an absolute sovereign that creates and governs the world (*OC*, 2: 623). The political incarnation of imagination’s power in “Une Mort héroïque,” however, is a critical moment illuminating the absolutist violence of the artistic and political sovereign. The

seamlessness of the prince's tyranny is explicitly established by the narrator's comment that "les efforts bizarres qu'il faisait pour fuir ou pour vaincre ce tyran du monde [l'Ennui] lui auraient certainement attiré, de la part d'un historien sévère, l'épithète de « monstre », s'il avait été permis, dans ses domaines, d'écrire quoi que ce fût qui ne tendît pas uniquement au plaisir ou à l'étonnement." Writing that does not conform to the royal text of pleasure and surprise and that may testify to the sovereign's monstrosity is occulted or erased just as Fanciouille's fellow conspirators are erased from life itself—"éfacés de la vie."

Still, a conspiracy did manage to form within the fissures of the royal domain, and while Fanciouille's political opposition has failed, his symbolic opposition when he appears on stage challenges the sovereign's political authority precisely because the artist's own faculties (unlike the prince's) *do* momentarily transcend his state. The locus of opposition thus shifts from the wings of conspiracy to the center of the spectacle. The prince may not have been unstaged by the conspiracy, but he is symbolically upstaged by Fanciouille during the performance.¹⁵ If aesthetic and political performances mirror each other in their common pursuit of the fusion between one's "facultés" and one's "états," Fanciouille's pantomime, a "chef d'oeuvre d'art vivant" is a triumph that eclipses the despot. The authority of his performance is even more powerful over his spectators than that of the prince over his subjects, who, after all, have conspired against him. The narrator points out the structural similarity between political and aesthetic performances when he speculates that the prince is envious of the histrion's despotic grip on his audience: "Se sentait-il vaincu dans son pouvoir de despote ? humilié dans son art de terrifier les coeurs et d'engourdir les esprits ?" Despotism, the absolute mastery over one's circumstances and subjects, is thus disclosed as common to both aesthetic and political constructions.

Fanciouille's consummate spectacle temporarily pits aesthetic mastery against political subjugation, and despite the contamination effected between these two realms, we now have a hierarchy that briefly ruptures the prince's "expérience physiologique," for the subject performing under the threat of capital punishment here incarnates his own contestatory law. Fanciouille momentarily embodies the victory of the symbolic over the political, or, rather, the victory of one's "facultés" over one's "état." His pantomime is "une parfaite idéalisation." The absolute fusion between self and ideal turns the spectacle into a transcendental buffoonery in which the histrion soars above the conditions of his performance. Portrayed by the narrator in metaphysical terms as a

defiant consciousness who infinitely recreates the world according to his own edicts, Fancioulle embodies a pure, untrammled and unrepresentable self-invention: “Fancioulle introduisait . . . le divin et le surnaturel, jusque dans les plus extravagantes bouffonneries.”¹⁶ Yet this spectacular idealization is also a powerful gesture of political defiance. Fancioulle’s bodily translation of a “paradis excluant toute idée de tombe ou de destruction” creates an imaginary state over which the prince’s power has no bearing. Transfiguring temporality into infinity, mortality into the divine and the immutable, the jester’s flawless mimesis of life becomes a contestatory fiction that masters death itself through irony (“qui bouffonnait si bien la mort”). This fiction challenges the basis of the prince’s “expérience physiologique” by disregarding its very conditions (the sovereign’s power over a subject’s life or death). Fancioulle thus performs his own “expérience physiologique”: the sublime enactment of a utopian state beyond the prince’s law.

The central question raised by the pantomime, then, is whether art can provide a lasting symbolic contestation of the ruling order. Does Fancioulle’s utopic fiction allegorize art’s transcendence of official hegemony, or does it instead suggest that art’s resistance to power is a mystification? Perhaps we should reframe the question and ask if Fancioulle’s imaginative sovereignty matches the prince’s real political power. The narrator, significantly, punctures the perfection of the pantomime’s metaphoricity (in which being fuses with fiction) by displacing the *symbolic* representation of Fancioulle’s body (as a seamless and absolute incarnation of freedom and aesthetic sovereignty) with an *allegorical* one. This subtle shift occurs in the allusion to the artist’s halo, visible to the narrator alone, “où se mêlaient, dans un étrange amalgame, les rayons de l’Art et la gloire du Martyre.” The amalgamation of art and martyrdom in what was until now a victory of metaphoricity over empirical conditions, marks a shift from symbolic to allegorical representation and interrogates the status of Fancioulle’s symbolic transcendence.¹⁷ However victorious the histrion’s transfiguration of life into fiction may be, its price is death. The doubleness of the halo prefigures the doubleness of Fancioulle’s position prior to the fatal whistle. The sovereign of his imaginary state on stage, he nevertheless remains the subject of the prince’s own experimental stage *and* state. The fragility of the fictional world, its inextricable link to a broader frame of reference including its reception, is such that a whistle of disapproval ruptures the act and executes the actor. The poem thus offers a shimmering vision of aesthetic transcendence only to revoke it.

As in “L’Héautontimorouménos,” an excursion into Edgar Allan Poe’s work

opens up the full significance of Baudelaire's decision to establish a specular relationship between artist and sovereign—hence unraveling the expected opposition between victim and executioner—and yet, to end on the artist's dethronement. Poe's "Hop Frog," published in 1849 and translated by the French poet in 1855—eight years before "Une Mort héroïque" appeared in *La Revue nationale et étrangère*—is a central intertext, if not even a "pre-text," for Baudelaire's prose poem. One could argue that a more significant intertextual translation occurs in the prose poem, which rewrites Poe's scenario in terms that irrevocably dislocate the opposition between despot and conspirator. "Hop Frog" narrates the conspiratorial revenge of a dwarf and court jester upon a tyrannical king who has struck his companion. Compelled by the king to devise an ingenious costume for his courtiers and himself for a masquerade, Hop Frog disguises them as eight chained orangutans. During the festivities, amidst the general panic caused by the appearance of the orangutans, a contraption lifts the king and his men up, and Hop Frog sets them on fire, before escaping, presumably to his native land.

Hop Frog's origins and character are as enigmatic as Fancioulle's, yet unlike Baudelaire's histrion, Poe's protagonist—a disfigured dwarf—is portrayed as utterly foreign to the court's norms. Whereas Fancioulle, as "presque un des amis du Prince," has an ambiguous proximity to power, Hop Frog, the king's property, is only a commodity, whose monstrosity enhances his value: "Sa valeur était triplée aux yeux du roi par le fait qu'il était à la fois nain et boiteux."¹⁸ In Poe's tale, the opposition between "victime" and "bourreau" is initially absolute and then systematically reversed according to a carnivalesque logic that is sustained to the last spectacular *dévoilement*, when the jester sets the king and his courtiers alight as retribution for their cruelty. Although initially Hop Frog is but a hobbling dwarf, closer to beast than man, man and beast exchange places in a neat inversion. Indeed, while the king promises the dwarf humanity in exchange for his ingenious plot—"Hop Frog ! nous ferons de toi un homme !" (177)—it is the dwarf who uses the orangutan costume to unmask the king's bestiality and thereby reclaim his humanity for himself. Baudelaire's translation of the text indicates his awareness of its ironies, for whereas Poe merely writes that the buffoon tied the king and his men together, the translation reads "On se procura une longue chaîne. D'abord on la passa autour de la taille du roi et on l'y *assujétit*" (178). Baudelaire italicizes the verb *assujétir* in a brilliant swerve that illuminates the king's unsuspecting subjugation before the dwarf and suggests that his apish disguise discloses his true status as subject.

Not only does Hop Frog engineer the script of this performance, but it is he who whistles and then vociferously asserts his status as conspirator, demystifier, and executioner before the stunned court: “Maintenant, dit-il, je vois *distinctement* de quelle espèce sont ces masques. Je vois un grand roi et ses sept conseillers privés, un roi qui ne se fait pas scrupule de frapper une fille sans défense, et ses sept conseillers, qui l’encouragent dans son atrocité. Quant à moi, je suis simplement Hop-Frog le bouffon, et *ceci est ma dernière bouffonnerie !*” (181).

Hop Frog’s denunciation is as vocal as Fanciouille’s pantomime is silent. The repeated assertion of his privileged vision and of his identity finds no echo in Baudelaire’s text, where instead, opposition—both covert in the form of the conspiracy and spectacular in the form of the dumb show—has literally been silenced. The central distinction between these two parables is symbolized by Hop Frog’s flight and conjectured return to the native land from which he was abducted. The histrion’s flight indicates a separation of spheres between his own “state” and the sovereign’s. Fanciouille, however, is part of the prince’s nation and conspires for its sake, his powers as artist structurally mirror the sovereign’s political power. Moreover, his very identity emerges only as a fluctuating tension between his “facultés” and his “états” within the prince’s domain. It is hardly surprising, given Fanciouille’s existence *as* his role, that the rupture of mimesis should lead to death. Much like the shock of laughter described in Baudelaire’s “De l’essence du rire,” the page’s whistle shatters the mime’s fictional self-representation and hurls him back into an empirical, intersubjective, and censored realm. The disjunction between “facultés” and “états,” between the imaginary contestation and its historical frame, is absolute. Baudelaire’s significant swerves from Poe’s carnivalesque logic, his contamination of the aesthetic by the political, stage the loss of a prophetic mode of denunciation and suggest the absence of an autonomous or even a distinct sphere from which social reality can be rearticulated. The utopic state for which Fanciouille conspires and that he then embodies is so fragile, so inextricably bound to the context of the performance, that the whistle of a mere page suffices to destroy it. Representation cannot sever itself from the conditions of its articulation and of its reception. The mystification of a contestation that strives for autonomy is punished by death.

Fanciouille’s fleeting metaphoric freedom is a vivid illustration of Baudelaire’s conception of “art pur” and of imagination’s absolute sovereignty over the empirical world. In sabotaging its triumph, the whistle seems to figure Baudelaire’s own “dédoublément” into the executioner and victim of an aes-

thetics of *surnaturalisme*. One could even say that Fancioulle's death figures a kind of poetic suicide, transforming the prose poem into a "gibet symbolique où pendait mon image," to quote from "Voyage à Cythère" (*OC*, I: 119). In what follows, I shall examine the alternative poetic voice that emerges from this self-decapitation and argue that the whistle interrupting Fancioulle's spectacle, like the Stendhalian "coup de pistolet au milieu d'un concert," ushers in the politics occluded by the prince's *régime*. I hope to show that the narrator refigures the oppositional politics so spectacularly—and suicidally—embodied by the mime into a conspiratorial poetics.

The narrator's ambiguous testimony reflects, *en abyme*, a general crisis of reading in the kingdom itself, where "truth" is the unreadable product of a performance of power. Indeed, the court's "esprits superficiels" are explicitly indicted for their naïve reading of the prince's plot, as a "signe évident" of his clemency. Even more striking is the audience's response to Fancioulle's performance. The mime's sublime convulsions are in turn mimed by the audience: "Les explosions de la joie et de l'admiration ébranlèrent à plusieurs reprises les voûtes de l'édifice avec l'énergie d'un tonnerre continu." The spectators' response is an immediate, visceral surrender to the performance's seduction. Their unquestioning, collective prostitution is underlined by the erotic vocabulary of *volupté*, *abandon*, *enivrement*, *convulsion*: "Chacun s'abandonna, sans inquiétude, aux voluptés multipliées que donne la vue d'un chef d'oeuvre d'art vivant."

The narrator himself participates momentarily in the court's submissive and deluded reception, for the mime's sublime incarnation of art precludes a detached and analytical reading. Significantly, the pantomime remains a mystery at the core of the text, and the narrator can only allude to the resistance of such an ineffable "physiological" experience to linguistic figuration: "Ma plume tremble, et des larmes d'une émotion toujours présente me montent aux yeux pendant que je cherche à vous décrire cette inoubliable soirée." It is an experience before which writing, and language itself, falters and is silenced, leaving the body's response (the infinitely renewed tears) as testimonies to its power.

Fancioulle's hyperbolic, unrepresentable performance and the narrator's own untranslatable witnessing, exemplify Baudelaire's conception of the *comique absolu*, a category that elucidates the competing oppositional positions in "Une Mort héroïque." Fancioulle's dumb show is a virtual reenactment of the English pantomime evoked in "De l'essence du rire." Just as the narrator's pen trembles before Fancioulle's ineffable performance, the analyst of the essay mourns his pen's inability to transcribe the spectacle's hyperbolic

vertigo: “Avec une plume tout cela est pâle et glacé. Comment la plume pourrait-elle rivaliser avec la pantomime ?” (*OC*, 2: 540).

As discussed in the preceding chapter, Baudelaire’s distinction between the *comique absolu* and the *comique significatif* hinges upon the question of legibility and translation. The absolute comic, denoting man’s superiority over nature, is akin to *l’art pur*; for it marks imagination’s transcendence of empirical conditions. The “ivresse terrible et irrésistible” performed both by the English Pierrot and Fanciouille engenders a rapturous vertigo in which the spectator is lost in the performance. Whereas the absolute comic “se présente sous une espèce une” and thus incarnates a symbolic fusion of signifier and signified that is intuitively grasped, the *comique significatif*, addressing man’s superiority over man, is a hieroglyphic, analytical, and temporal expression requiring reflection and judgment from the viewer.¹⁹

Baudelaire’s distinction between the *comique absolu* and the humbler *comique significatif* may be mapped onto the oppositional strategies of “Une Mort héroïque” to illuminate the historical significance of the narrator’s conspiratorial voice. Baudelaire characterizes the absolute comic as “Les créations fabuleuses, les êtres dont la raison, la légitimation ne peut pas être tirée du code du sens commun” (*OC*, 2: 535).²⁰ Fanciouille’s living masterpiece (“un chef d’oeuvre d’art *vivant*” [emphasis added]) opens a vision of absolute otherness. In bringing to life an experience that defies “le code du sens commun,” he voids the prince’s reign of its legitimacy and imposes his own self-legitimizing sovereignty. Yet, the visionary “ivresse” is precariously located in a historical, political, and collective reality that shatters its contestatory power.

If Fanciouille’s performance incarnates Baudelaire’s celebrated *comique absolu*, the narrator, instead, offers a different oppositional discursive strategy modeled on the *comique significatif*, one attentive both to the conditions of its articulation and its reception. As we saw in Chapter 1, the *comique significatif* is characterized by doubleness—“l’art et l’idée morale,” and by deferral—“le rire après coup.” Not only a more analytical form of communication, the *comique significatif* also addresses a common frame of reference, *le code commun*. Whereas the absolute comic personified by Fanciouille indicates man’s superiority over nature (the mime’s ability to veil the abyss of death through art), the *comique significatif* is contextual, occurring in an intersubjective realm of power relations, and hence more suited to political negotiation. It is precisely through intertextuality and irony, both of which share the structure of doubleness and deferral characteristic of the *comique significatif*, that the narrator inscribes his contestatory testimony.²¹

In contrast to the symbolic fusion of Fancioulle's pantomime, the narrator articulates the gap between an act and its possible significances, as we saw in his allegorical presentation of Fancioulle's halo. His translation of the prince's physionomical shifts juxtaposes yet another frame upon the prince's "expérience physiologique": the sovereign subject observing the jester's body becomes the object of the narrator's gaze. The narrator's privileged insights, both into the recesses of the sovereign's mind and into the doubleness of Fancioulle's spectacle (as sovereign of his imaginary state and subject of the prince) turn him into an ambiguous accomplice for both figures. An impotent witness to the scenario that unfolds, he is nevertheless its sole agent of transmission, since neither historian nor histrion may record or denounce the prince's tyranny. Yet his pen falters at every turn, trembling before the spectacle and erasing its testimony in a repeated gesture of self-censorship. Indeed, the narrator's conjectures on the prince's motives are parodically voided by remarks such as "C'est un point qui n'a jamais pu être éclairci"; "Le Prince avait-il lui-même deviné l'homicide efficacité de sa ruse ? Il est permis d'en douter"; "De telles suppositions non exactement justifiées mais non exactement injustifiables." These self-erasing speculations suggest the complex negotiations of an oppositional voice striving to be heard in a censored domain.

The final conjecture is crucial in this regard, for, through the double voice of intertextuality, it performs a complicitous subversion of the prince's discursive rule. Amidst a tyrannical reign of "plaisir et étonnement," which either coopts serious contestation or erases it, the narrator's cautious rhetoric evokes yet another critical intertext: "[Le Prince] regretta-t-il son cher et inimitable Fancioulle ? Il est doux et légitime de le croire." The citation from Horace—"Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori"—is all the more powerful for its truncation. The gaping absence of both nation and death in this formulation ("il est doux et légitime de . . . croire," that the prince regretted his jester) denounce the travesty that the capricious sovereign's stage makes of the state. The translation of *decorum* into the politically loaded term "légitime" underscores what Virginia Swain has called the "legitimation crisis" performed by the poem, a crisis that ripples out to encompass the postrevolutionary body politic.²² The fragmented Horatian intertext resurrects the "serious" national ideal for which the jester and his fellow conspirators die at the same time that the decapitation of politics is textually performed by the narrator's fragmented testimony. Such a double gesture restores the political opposition erased by the official discourse, just as the final italicized word of the poem, *faveur*, alludes to the *droits* denied to the prince's subjects ("Depuis lors, plusieurs mimes,

justement appréciés dans différents pays, sont venus jouer devant la cour de *** ; mais aucun d'eux n'a pu . . . s'élever jusqu'à la même *faveur*." The "expérience physiologique" conducted in the poem is indeed "d'un intérêt capital," for it fully implicates the head of the political body.

In his correspondence, Baudelaire makes two intriguing references to possible versions of "Une Mort héroïque." The first is in a letter to Gustave Rouland, where he alludes to a project entitled "Aperçu historique sur le Conspirateur et le Favori" (*Corr.*, 1: 405); the second, two years later, to Auguste Poulet-Malassis, announces: "Enfin j'ai fait une *nouvelle* basée sur l'hypothèse : découverte d'une conspiration par un oisif, qui la suit jusqu'à la veille de l'explosion, et qui alors tire à pile ou face pour savoir s'il la déclarera à la police" (*Corr.*, 1: 584). The prose poem retains the terms of these *ébauches*, yet departs from them at several points. The conspirator is *favoured* by the prince, and the historical parameters of the tale seem erased. Moreover, the oscillation between complicity and denunciation described in the letter to Poulet-Malassis is presented from the stance of an absolutely disengaged flâneur, who bears no allegiance to the state or to the conspirators and yet can determine the destinies of both. The narrator of the prose poem, however, is denied any direct intervention. His speculative faltering seems to mimic Fancioulle's own dying convulsions. Yet as I have argued, the narrator inscribes his own oppositional stance through the tactics of the *comique significatif*, through complicity, irony, and intertextuality. In tracing the failure of absolute aesthetic sovereignty, personified by the mime, the political state as the incarnation of an individual's despotic consciousness, one structurally akin to artistic transcendence, is also shown in all its frailty and illegitimacy.²³

"Une Mort héroïque" may be closer to the "aperçu *historique* sur le Conspirateur et le Favori" described to Rouland than it appears at first glance. The portrait of the prince's carefully crafted reign of censorship resonates with the Second Empire's tight system of surveillance (the discretionary measures of the Sûreté générale) and censorship to counter the threat of republican conspiracies.²⁴ It also puts on trial the republican ideological legacy. The utopic homology between "facultés" and "états," upheld by the revolutionaries as the cornerstone of a nascent democracy, is systematically evoked, only to be ironically suppressed in the poem. Moreover, the displacement of *droits* by the arbitrariness of *faveur* replaces the revolutionary promise of collective sovereignty with an ancien régime form of despotism, opposition to which costs the conspirators their lives. And it is precisely through a textual self-immolation, through the sabotage of aesthetic sovereignty and autonomy, that the narra-

tor—with the deftness of a textual conspirator—resuscitates in fragments the utopian politics embodied by Fanciouille.

While “Une Mort héroïque” indicts the Second Empire’s masked despotism and conspiratorially alludes to the republican ideals it co-opted or censored, the very definitions of despotism and resistance are considerably complicated. The structural complicities between aesthetic and political sovereignty collapses the very possibility of an oppositional stance toward the state’s englobing power. The fissure made by Fanciouille’s contestatory spectacle is sealed by his death, leaving the task of conspiratorial witnessing to the narrator. Yet, in an even more disturbing turn, the poem discloses a gaping absence at the heart of the mechanism of state power. Authority is cut loose from a governing agency, for both Fanciouille and the prince are ultimately subject to the vagaries of an indeterminate authority, an “imprévoyante providence.” The prince is haunted by a law greater than his own, *Ennui*: “il ne connaissait d’ennemi dangereux que l’Ennui . . . ce tyran du monde.” Similarly, Fanciouille is daemonically possessed by politics “bien qu’il puisse paraître bizarre que les idées de patrie et de liberté s’empare despotiquement du cerveau d’un histrion.” *Ennui* fractures the desired equivalence between the sovereign’s imagination and an aestheticized politics, just as the page’s whistle shatters the jester’s embodiment of a politicized fiction.

In light of this diffusion of intention and agency, it is crucial to remember that the free state beyond censorship and capital punishment performed by Fanciouille is “executed” (if indeed the whistle was of homicidal intent) not by the prince but by an unsuspecting young proxy, a blank page of sorts. This dislocation of agency also disrupts the opposition between artist and sovereign, or “victime et bourreau.” Just as Fanciouille’s political commitment is the result of floating ideological principles (of freedom and of nation) “despotically” capturing the histrion’s brain, the prince’s act of punishment is carried out without a clearly intending agent and executioner. The narrator’s question, “Le sifflet, rapide comme un glaive, avait-il réellement frustré le bourreau ?” suggests that the shrill whistle preempts the hiss of the guillotine’s blade, that censorship is akin to capital punishment. Yet the source of this punishment is displaced onto the lips of a blind executionary agent.

The displacement of individual agency by an unpredictable and mindless form of collective complicity can be traced from the beginning of the poem. The bewitched spectators’ thunderous applause before Fanciouille’s performance on stage echoes their absorption into the prince’s state; their faith in the power of signs makes them unwitting accomplices to the perpetuation of ab-

solite power, aesthetic or political. The pervasive complicity staged in the poem between the tyrant and his subjects mirrors the collective legitimation of Napoléon III's reign through a plebiscite that cloaked the empire with the mystique of popular sovereignty. The court's delighted passivity before the aesthetic and political performances of power recalls the consent of seven million Frenchmen to the legitimation of a régime whose "extraordinary measures," implemented by the discretionary powers of the Sûreté générale, led to 20,000 arrests and deportations.²⁵ Baudelaire's rage at his compatriots' blind consent to the empire's despotism is recorded in a passage that testifies to the eclipse of direct modes of opposition in the paradoxical context of an authoritarian democracy:

En somme, devant l'histoire et devant le peuple français, la grande gloire de Napoléon III aura été de prouver que le premier venu peut, en s'emparant du télégraphe et de l'Imprimerie nationale, gouverner une grande nation.

Imbéciles sont ceux qui croient que de pareilles choses peuvent s'accomplir sans la permission du peuple, — et ceux qui croient que la gloire ne peut être appuyée que sur la vertu.

Les dictateurs sont les domestiques du peuple, — rien de plus, — un foutu rôle d'ailleurs, — et la gloire est le résultat de l'adaptation d'un esprit avec la sottise nationale. (*OC*, 1: 692)

For the poet, the dislocation, or quite literally, *decapitation* of power, its dissemination into the social field, dooms the possibility of a reflective and consensual democracy. Instead, politics, like the syphilitic contagion of republicanism, has been voided of all contestatory force and has mutated into an impersonal plague, whose circulation collapses any possible distinction between despot and subject, or "dictateur" and "domestique." Neither dictator nor subject is an agent in this social organism. They are blind participants in the construction of a mass delusion—"la sottise nationale"—in the fiction of a democratic nation. Baudelaire's paradoxical vision of this authoritarian democracy, where dictator and crowds converge through new systems of representation and communication, ominously foreshadows emerging forms of power, forms that can no longer be identified and contested from a vantage point of separation and knowledge.

The decentering of power and the intricate web of complicity in "Une Mort héroïque" suggest that the dissenting voice has no room for resistance or opposition. It must choose between suicidal defiance or conspiratorial complicity. The poem ultimately points to the erasure of politics as an arena for contestation. The catastrophic vision of history and progress recorded else-

where in Baudelaire's notebooks is testimony to the poet's prescience. In his prophetic account of historical progress, Baudelaire describes the teeming urban crowds as blind accomplices to unforeseen strains of tyranny that breed in the ruins of an oppositional political culture:

Ai-je besoin de dire le *peu qu'il restera de politique* se débattrà péniblement dans l'étreinte de l'animalité générale, et que les gouvernants seront forcés, pour se maintenir et pour créer un fantôme d'ordre, de recourir à des moyens qui feraient frissonner notre humanité actuelle, pourtant si endurcie ? . . . — Ces temps sont peut-être bien proches ; qui sait même s'ils ne sont pas venus, et si l'épaississement de notre nature n'est pas le seul obstacle qui nous empêche d'apprécier le milieu dans lequel nous respirons !

Quant à moi, qui sens quelquefois en moi le ridicule d'un prophète, je sais que je n'y trouverai jamais la charité d'un médecin. Perdu dans ce vilain monde, coudoyé par les foules, je suis comme un homme lassé dont l'oeil ne voit en arrière, dans les années profondes, que désabusement et amertume, et devant lui qu'un orage où rien de neuf n'est contenu, ni enseignement, ni douleur. (*OC*, I: 666–67; emphasis added)

In 1939, Walter Benjamin's commentary on this passage elucidated its prophetic insight into the modern face of political tyranny: "Nous ne sommes déjà pas si mal placés pour convenir de la justesse de ces phrases. Il y a bien des chances qu'elles gagneront en sinistre. . . . Est-il trop audacieux de prétendre que ce sont ces mêmes foules qui, de nos jours, sont pétrées par les mains des dictateurs ?"²⁶ The convergence of archaic despotism in "Une Mort héroïque" and a disseminated circulation of power that nevertheless *conserves* the prince's absolute sovereignty suggest that it would not in turn be too audacious to trace a similar foreshadowing in Baudelaire's prose poem.

The "expérience physiologique d'un intérêt *capital*" conducted in "Une Mort héroïque" probes the pathologies of power at multiple levels, implicating the political and poetic bodies while also tracing the convergences between old and new forms of authoritarianism. The *mise en spectacle* of symbolic authority, both held and lost by Fanciouille and the prince, is a powerful interrogation of the mythic autonomy of political and aesthetic constructions. The narrator's wily rhetorical shifts in conspicuously pressing to the margins the subversive political content of the tale suggest that if no separate symbolic sphere may exist for contesting such forms of power, the voice of conspiracy, relying on the contamination of art and politics, as well as of text and intertext, can craftily inscribe its opposition. This is indeed a "capital" experience, for that which is of utmost importance can only be uttered at the cost of one's

head. If both symbolic opposition and covert conspiracy are doomed to failure, textual conspiracy, by intertwining the political and the poetic and sacrificing the dream of aesthetic autonomy, points the way to a new poetics of opposition, one that vigilantly traces the complicity between aesthetic and political performances.²⁷

The Rhetorical Legacy of the Revolution

Toute révolution a pour corollaire le massacre des innocents.

Baudelaire, quoted above a portrait of him by Nadar in 1854

Baudelaire's oeuvre is suffused with allusions to the legacy of the Revolution. His ambivalence about his past republican fervor in 1848 manifests itself in vengeful outbursts that confront the utopianism of revolutionary rhetoric with the bankruptcy of actual social and political practice. The prose poems in particular ironically recollect the linguistic vestiges of the Revolution—its vocabulary of liberty, equality, fraternity, concord, and *patrie*—in order to expose their travestied afterlife in the bourgeois order of the Second Empire. The presence of such rhetoric has frequently been read as symptomatic of a failed attempt to transcend the omnipresent and omnivorous political vocabulary of his time. Linda Orr shows, for instance, how the poet's repugnance toward 1848 (a repugnance shared by Marx and Flaubert) was a fruitless attempt to exorcise the language of Robespierre, Proudhon, and Michelet. Orr argues that such ostentatious disavowal deflects from his actual engagement in—if not co-optation by—the revolution's shameful discursive legacy: "Baudelaire protests that he is an aristocrat of art, but he knows, as Vigny did before him, that the only language possible is the one that is steeped in Rousseau and the Jacobins, twisted by contemporary democratic literature . . . Baudelaire succeeds in making us forget the degree to which his words are saturated with the ubiquitous discourse of his century."²⁸

Yet as I have tried to show, in "Une Mort héroïque" Baudelaire's ironic use of such rhetoric continually reminds us of this saturation. By displaying how even poetry is bogged down in the clichéd and defunct vocabulary of republican idealism, Baudelaire also insists on the Revolution's failure to make good on its promises.

This idiosyncratic and unreliable form of *engagement* is expressed *through* the idiom of poetic production. As Barbara Johnson puts it, Baudelaire's prose poem disfigures poetic language: "Le passage de la poésie à la prose correspond

à une amputation de tout ce qui, dans la poésie, s'érige comme unité, totalité, immortalité, puissance" (154). But these truncations of poetic discourse revive the rhetorical legacy of revolutionary history, albeit in disfigured form. Baudelaire's critique of history is conducted through a metapoetic reflection on the aesthetic process. The truncation of aesthetic unity simultaneously disrupts the illusion of social harmony perpetuated by the empire. The poems' narrators, like the *chiffonnier*, collect and ironically reframe the utopian rhetoric of 1848, showing how its legacy has been co-opted, homogenized, and short-circuited. Often this rhetoric resembles the platitudes in Flaubert's *Dictionnaire des idées reçues*: its recycled quality is made evident by italics pointing out the chasm between the blind promise of utopian rhetoric—become meaningless *lieux communs*—and the harsh realities of ongoing social and economic inequity. The *faveur* with which "Une Mort héroïque" concludes highlights the absence of rights in the prince's kingdom. In "Le Joujou du pauvre," the italicized reference to "equality" has a similar function. The poem portrays the separation between rich and poor as a barrier so impermeable that the children standing on either side of it appear to be made of an altogether different substance, for as the narrator says of the rich: "on les croirait faits d'une autre pâte que les enfants de la médiocrité ou de la pauvreté." Yet the wealthy boy briefly joins his poverty-stricken counterpart as they contemplate the latter's toy (a live rat in a box) through the property's bars: "Et les deux enfants se riaient l'un à l'autre fraternellement, avec des dents d'une égale blancheur" (*OC*, 1: 305). Their complicit, "fraternal" laughter and the equal whiteness of their teeth are obvious parodic references to the failure of equality and fraternity, and there is more than a hint of violence conveyed by teeth bared in a grin of symbolic communion over the rodent, a toy that "[I]es parents, par économie sans doute, avaient tiré . . . de la vie elle-même."²⁹

The latent, structural violence opposing the rich and the poor is obliquely unveiled in "Les Yeux des pauvres" (1864). In this prose poem, the underlying violence of economic inequity is conveyed in the failure of amorous reciprocity. The poet and his recalcitrant beloved-muse sit down to eat and drink at the very threshold dividing the wealthy and the poor, on the terrace of one of those new boulevard cafés that had turned Paris into a spectacular site for literal and vicarious consumption. They observe a destitute family pressed up against the windows, whose reactions to the splendor of the café, reflected in their eyes, are read by the poet. Yet when he seeks out confirmation of his empathy in the beloved's eyes: "Je tournais mes regards vers les vôtres, cher amour, pour y lire *ma* pensée," the comfortable piety of this correspondence is

ruptured by her snobbish response: “Ces gens-là me sont insupportables avec leurs yeux ouverts comme des portes cochères” (*OC*, 1: 318–19). She thus dismisses the entire hermeneutic circuit that emerges from the assumption that the eyes of the poor are readable texts, that the poet’s eyes can decipher these texts, and that her own eyes may in turn mirror his reading. The utopia of readability is treated as both a domestic and public affair. Just as the poet expects his thoughts to be reflected in the eyes of his beloved, he similarly congratulates himself on his ability to step into the paupers’ shoes. Such transparency, or intersubjective “correspondence,” is steeped in the revolutionary mythology. It is “un rêve qui n’a rien d’original, après tout, si ce n’est que, rêvé par tous les hommes, il n’a été réalisé par aucun” (318). The interruption of dialogue between lovers voids the premise that the poet’s negative capability overcomes the symbolic and material bars between rich and poor. The dream of communion and social harmony is fully co-opted by bourgeois consumerism, just as in the luxurious café, “toute l’histoire et toute la mythologie sont mises au service de la goinfrerie.” After all, the poet-consumer indulges in this exercise of decipherment to assuage his conscience before turning to drink his thoughts in his beloved’s eyes, and then returning—if reluctantly—to his overflowing glass of wine. The principle of *correspondances* is deployed both in its poetic and social form to unveil a structural inequity before which poetic empathy and bourgeois humanism are woefully inadequate.

The most violent *mise-en-scène* of this discrepancy between the idealism of revolutionary social thought and the ongoing reality of destitution is, of course, “Assommons les pauvres !” where the poet, bludgeoned into a theoretical stupor by the socialist literature of 1848, tumbles out of his ivory tower into the streets of Paris. He encounters a beggar, whose pleading eyes mirror both the idealist promises of utopian literature and the poet’s own idealizing imagination, in a typically Baudelairean imbrication of poetic and social idealism: “un de ces regards inoubliables qui culbuteraient les trônes, *si l’esprit remuait la matière*” (*OC*, 1: 358; emphasis added). In a Nietzschean explosion of violence, the poet expels the theoretical nonsense of the “entrepreneurs de bonheur publique” by attacking the beggar and beating him until he fights back, thus actualizing the antagonistic social relations underlying the theoretical rhetoric of equality.³⁰ Such violence, our perverse philosopher suggests, must be resuscitated and acknowledged before the “partage de la bourse” may occur.

Baudelaire’s prose poems illuminate a profound shift in the conceptualization of violence. No longer displayed in the bloody spectacles of revolutionary upheaval, violence is an invisible force woven into the very fabric of postrevo-

Violence and Representation in Baudelaire

lutionary social life. The physical blows that proliferate in the collection's explosive pieces can be read as attempts to resuscitate the hidden, structural violences that compose the social fabric: not only the "coup de poing" that initiates the cartoonish exchange of blows in "Assommons les pauvres !" but also the "coup de sifflet" that executes Fancioulle; the "coup de poing" delivered to the poet as he dreams over his soup; the "coup terrible, lourd" on the poet's door, received like a "coup de pioche dans l'estomac"; the flowerpot hurled on the glazier's windowpanes; the "coup de baton" administered to "la femme sauvage"; the "coup de tête dans l'estomac" delivered by one of the boys struggling for the remains of the poet's bread; and the violent stomp, or "coup de pied," that forever attaches the poet to "la fosse de l'idéal." These destructive blows systematically puncture each attempt at either poetic or political idealization. They stage the interlocking violence of aesthetic and political claims to mastery and closure.

Baudelaire's celebration of revolutionary destruction taps into the violence invisibly woven into the very fabric of postrevolutionary social life: "Je dis *Vive la Révolution !* comme je dirais : *Vive la Destruction ! Vive l'Expiation ! Vive le Châtiment ! Vive la Mort !*" (OC, 2: 961). The social violence so visibly displayed and acknowledged in times of radical historical crisis (the Terror, the June days) has become insidiously disarticulated under the authoritarian democracy of Napoléon III and the emergence of new modes of production and domination. In the face of this camouflaged perpetuation of violence, Baudelaire's declarations challenge the assumption that terror has ceded to collective legislation, suggesting instead that terror has taken on an altered, and perhaps even more virulent face. As the following reading of his prose poem "La Corde" suggests, Baudelaire's distorted allusions to the Revolution press into visibility the latent violence of the Second Empire and the unkept promises of the republican legacy. His critique of urban and political modernity is fully imbricated with a critique of art's own betrayal of the living, vulnerable bodies that move within the social—as well as the textual—corpus.

The Tie That Binds: Violent Commerce in "La Corde"

[L]a majorité trace un cercle formidable autour de la pensée.

Alexis de Tocqueville, *De la démocratie en Amérique*

*Les illusions — me disait mon ami, — sont aussi innombrables
peut-être que les rapports des hommes entre eux, ou des hommes avec*

les choses. Et quand l'illusion disparaît, c'est-à-dire quand nous voyons l'être ou le fait tel qu'il existe hors de nous, nous éprouvons un bizarre sentiment, compliqué moitié de regret pour le fantôme disparu, moitié de surprise agréable devant la nouveauté, devant le fait réel.

Baudelaire, "La Corde"

Baudelaire's prose poem "La Corde" (1864), inspired by the suicide of Alexandre—the young model for Édouard Manet's *L'Enfant aux cerises*—recounts how a painter takes in a little boy to pose and to do minor chores around the *atelier*. The child's initially sunny disposition gives way to mysterious bouts of melancholy and an immoderate taste for sugar and liqueurs. After threatening to send the child back to his parents, the painter goes off to take care of some business. Upon his return, he discovers that the boy has hanged himself. The painter informs the mother of the tragic news, and she begs for the remains of her son's noose. Only when the painter receives letters of solicitation from his neighbors does it dawn on him that the mother, exploiting the superstition that to own a rope with which someone has been hanged brings luck, intends to sell its pieces as profitable consolation.

"La Corde" not only demystifies the "givenness" of maternal love, by suggesting that it too has its price, but examines the nature of art's attachment to its model, leading to a broader meditation on the threads that tie together the postrevolutionary community. Like "Une Mort héroïque," it attests to Baudelaire's profound political disillusionment in the aftermath of 1848 and to a general crisis in representing the contemporary political body through the symbolic legacy of the Revolution. The "unnatural" mother of the poem points to the emergence of an entirely different conception of the social family, one whose latent violence is again revealed through the idiom of artistic production.

The alleged purpose of "La Corde" is to show that even an emotion as immutable, sacred, and "natural" as maternal love cannot be taken for granted. Indeed, the painter defends his initial blindness to the nature of the mother's request for the rope by invoking the unquestionable naturalness of the maternal instinct, an instinct that provides the foundation for the nuclear and social family alike: "S'il existe un phénomène évident, trivial, toujours semblable, et d'une nature à laquelle il soit impossible de se tromper, c'est l'amour maternel." Yet this immutable given, "l'illusion la plus *naturelle*," as the painter calls it, turns out to be the deceptive product of established cultural assumptions about the "nature" of the maternal instinct. Natural instincts and empirical phenomena, as the poem gradually discloses, are culturally produced illusions

that have acquired the status of nature over time. Initially a trial of the maternal instinct, the poem swiftly engages in a broader consideration of the natural grounds for filiation, of the *nature* of man's relationship to men and to things. From the outset, the bonds that tie the boy to the painter and to his parents are not natural or affective but economic and contractual. Seduced by the boy's appearance, the painter asks his parents to surrender their son to his care. His proprietary attitude toward the child suggests a repressed and denatured paternity, not unlike the mother's own travestied maternity: "je priai un jour ses parents, de pauvres gens, de vouloir bien me le céder." The violence of the maternal contract, it turns out, will be fully matched by that of the artistic contract.

At stake in the demystification of the "naturalness" of filial attachment, then, is a parallel demystification of the life-enhancing powers of art. Like biological reproduction, artistic production is animated by a blind, proprietary violence. The child's portraiture is an exercise in creating "l'illusion la plus naturelle," one that will have deadly repercussions on "le fait réel," the empirical fact of another's body. The violence of the aesthetic process is implicit from the very beginning of the text, when the painter recalls his initial attraction to the boy in acquisitive terms: "Ma profession de peintre me pousse à regarder attentivement les visages, les physionomies *qui s'offrent dans ma route*, et vous savez *quelle jouissance nous tirons* de cette faculté qui rend à nos yeux la vie plus vivante et plus significative que pour les autres hommes" (emphasis added). The aristocratic and appropriative thrust of the artist's perception is typical of the Baudelairean poet-flâneur of "Les Foules," who, under the guise of a poetics of charity, assumes the vacancy of all beings before his expropriating imagination: "Pour lui seul, tout est vacant" (*OC*, I: 291).³¹ A similar evacuation of the model's intrinsic properties occurs in his successive metamorphoses under the painter's brush: "Je l'ai transformé tantôt en petit bohémien, tantôt en ange, tantôt en Amour mythologique. Je lui ai fait porter le violon du vagabond, la Couronne d'Épines et les Clous de la Passion, et la Torche d'Eros. . . . Cet enfant, débarbouillé, devint charmant." At once painted and unpainted, transformed into so many conventional cultural and religious icons (several of which invoke martyrdom), the boy is a mute, plastic body washed clean to receive the painter's allegorical imprint. No instance of reported speech breaks his conspicuous silence throughout the tale. The only details that rupture the proprietary, aesthetic economy established by the painter are the child's "crises singulières de tristesse précoce." These fits, significantly, remain uninterpreted by the painter, who merely notes their literal manifestations in the boy's excessive taste for sweets and liqueurs: "un goût immodéré pour le sucre et les

liqueurs.” Melancholy, as that which exceeds cultural assumptions about childhood (“*précoces*”) and challenges the painter’s representational authority (“*crises singulières*”), erupts as an immoderate taste for the superfluous (“*le sucre et les liqueurs*”). Such illegible excesses in the painter’s artistic and domestic economy are immediately suppressed by the reestablishment of the implicit contract between artist and model, one resting upon the painter’s right to dispose of the child as he deems fit: “*je le menaçai de le renvoyer à ses parents.*”

The boy’s suicide by hanging is a grim literalization of his previous commodification and aesthetic manipulation. His dangling body, described by the painter as “*le premier objet qui frappa mes regards*” (emphasis added), bears mute testimony to the underlying violence of a social and artistic process that puts real, living bodies into circulation for profit. The nature of the relationship between model and painter is conveyed in a near-pun, “*Le dépendre n’était pas une besogne aussi facile que vous pouvez le croire.*” *Dépendre* is but a letter away from *dépeindre*, which is precisely what the painter does in his clinical account of the cadaver’s “unhanging,” suggesting the link between painting and hanging, representation and execution.

Yet the boy’s *mise-en-scène* of his own death also endows his previously imprinted body with an undecipherable opacity, a weight that challenges the painter’s representational mastery. From “*mon petit bonhomme*” and the “*compagnon de ma vie,*” the child becomes a “*petit monstre,*” a *monstrum*, or sign, that resists decipherment. It is only as a corpse that the boy is presented in active terms as excess, as opacity to the painter’s gaze and manipulation. Baudelaire conveys the fleshy resistance of the child’s body in vivid, tactile detail. Rigor mortis is so advanced by the time the painter discovers the gruesome scene that the clothes have to be cut from the child’s body: “*la rigidité cadavérique était telle, que, désespérant de fléchir les membres, nous dûmes lacérer et couper les vêtements pour les lui enlever.*” The puffiness of the boy’s face, the folds of his neck, the stiff resistance of his limbs and the dense weight of his body are ironic counterpoints to the fluidity of his previous incarnations. The boy’s implacable gaze, “*ses yeux, tout grands ouverts avec une fixité effrayante,*” contrasts with his previous plasticity. The fixity of this gaze will embed itself in the painter’s memory: “*le fantôme me fatiguait de ses grands yeux fixes.*” While “*l’illusion la plus naturelle*” ostensibly demystified in the poem is maternal love, whose “*fait réel*” appears to be the more natural instinct of greed, it is a demystification that, unbeknownst to the painter, fully implicates the artistic process itself. For the “*fait réel*” that the painter fails to acknowledge throughout the poem ultimately designates the facticity of the

child's body, its obdurate resistance to the "naturalizing" illusions that have been painted upon it.

The trial of maternal love thus fully implicates the process of artistic figuration. The underlying price of both the maternal and the artistic contracts is unveiled in all of its violence when the boy stages himself as his own *nature morte*: "le petit monstre s'était servi d'une ficelle fort mince qui était entrée profondément dans les chairs, et il fallait maintenant, avec de minces ciseaux, chercher la corde entre les deux bourrelets de l'enflure, pour lui dégager le cou." The painter's laborious extraction of the noose is mirrored by the mother's own extraction of the rope from the painter's home: "je compris pourquoi la mère tenait tant à *m'arracher* la ficelle" (emphasis added). The artist, however, disavows any responsibility for the boy's suicide, blithely dismissing a police officer's suspicious queries as motivated by "une habitude d'état de faire peur, à tout hasard, aux innocents comme aux coupables." Yet even after the necessary rites disposing of the cadaver, when the artist returns to his labors, he finds himself unable to extract the bothersome ghost from his conscience. The boy's corpse remains embedded in the folds of the artist's brain ("ce petit cadavre qui *hantait les replis* de mon cerveau" [emphasis added]) the way the rope itself was embedded in the folds of the child's flesh. That the painter is himself haunted by a repetition (*re-pli*) of the noose cutting into the boy's neck (*pli*) only reiterates the implicit connection between *peindre* and *pendre*. But the capture of matter by aesthetic form is never entirely complete, as the model's unyielding body and its continued life suggest. It leaves behind a stubborn residue that lingers in the recesses of the artist's imagination.³²

Painting is not the only artistic discipline on trial, for "La Corde" provides a general meditation on the underlying price of all art forms that transfigure living bodies and things: "vous savez quelle jouissance nous tirons de cette faculté qui rend à nos yeux la vie plus vivante et plus significative que pour les autres hommes." What animates life into signification, it would seem, is the ability to extract the intensity and coherence of illusion from the living "fait réel." The painter confides this to the silent interlocutor and author of the poem (which retains its status as reported discourse until the very end). Poetry, too, is implicated in this representational violence. This ripple of complicity becomes all the more significant when we recall that at a gathering shortly after the death of Alexandre, where Manet was present, Baudelaire read "La Corde" aloud. Baudelaire thus uttered the words attributed to the painter-figure in the poem before a silent Manet, no doubt fully exploiting the interpellative power of the poem's narrative mode as reported discourse. He thereby

reversed the relationship between the speaking painter and the silent poet in the text. This *mise-en-scène* of complicity conveys the ways in which poetry and painting converge in their potential violence toward a represented object. The *hypocrite lecteur* is here a *hypocrite spectateur*. If the painter resembles the poet, the rope also evokes the lyre's string and illuminates the violence of allegorical capture. What the boy's *nature morte* suggests is nothing less than the price of aesthetic production, the violence that art, as "l'illusion la plus naturelle," does to the body that inspires it, "le fait réel." "La Corde" is a biting parody of the vital chain of analogies between sights, sounds, and smells celebrated in *correspondances*, here frozen into a set of conventional allegorical equivalences (Christ, gypsy, and so forth) imposed on a vulnerable—though ultimately recalcitrant—human body.

"La Corde" thus reveals the discrepancy between "le fait réel" and "l'illusion la plus naturelle," between the body and its artistic representation, and between the ambiguous nature of the maternal instinct and its cultural construction. Yet the complicity established between painterly and poetic violence radiates outward to contaminate the social body itself. At stake in this demystification of art and maternity is the *corde* of *concorde*, the bonds of the social contract itself. As in "Une Mort héroïque," the critique of aesthetic production (along with human reproduction) is folded into a meditation on the implicit violence of the public sphere. The mother's betrayal of the umbilical cord radiates outward and implicates the *concorde* that binds together the larger social family. The thread weaving together the social family has quite literally fallen to pieces.

When the artist discovers the hanging body, his neighbors turn a deaf ear to his cries for help: "J'ai négligé de vous dire que j'avais vivement appelé au secours ; mais tous mes voisins avaient refusé de me venir en aide, fidèles en cela aux habitudes de l'homme civilisé, qui ne veut jamais, je ne sais pourquoi, se mêler aux affaires d'un pendu." Civilized man, Baudelaire suggests with grim humor, will only entangle himself in the affairs of the hanged in the most literal sense of the expression. For it is the rope (*l'affaire*) of the hanged, and the business (*affaires*) it enables, that define a new community, one bound (*mêlé*)—albeit anonymously—by the ritual purchase of the noose. "La Corde," then, not only puts on trial the metaphorical process through which the artist transforms his material—the bodies and things that nourish his art—but simultaneously questions the symbolic threads that bind together the postrevolutionary social fabric and the illusions they weave about the nature of man's bond with men and things.

Given Baudelaire's fascination with the bankruptcy of the Revolution's discursive legacy, it is not surprising that he found Robespierre's rhetoric, his "style de glace ardente, recuit et congelé comme l'abstraction" (*OC*, 1: 592) more worthy of interest than his actions.³³ Echoes of what the poet called his "style sentencieux dont ma jeunesse s'est enivrée" (*ibid.*) may be discerned in the most startling places. Consider, for instance, Robespierre's famous *Rapport du 18 Floréal* and its celebration of fraternal bonds tying together the universal human family: "Le véritable prêtre de l'Être suprême, c'est la nature, son temple l'univers, son culte, la vertu, ses fêtes la joie d'un grand peuple rassemblé sous ses yeux pour resserrer les doux noeuds de la fraternité universelle et pour lui présenter l'hommage des coeurs sensibles et purs."³⁴ It is tempting to hear reverberations of this imagery in the opening lines of Baudelaire's "Correspondances" and its hymn to an anthropomorphic nature: "La nature est un temple où de vivant piliers / Laisent parfois s'échapper de confuses paroles," a connection that may not be entirely fanciful if we recall that the principle of universal analogy professed in this sonnet is proposed by Robespierre as the foundation for fraternity.

The image of fraternity as a knot tying together the human family becomes particularly significant in the context of "La Corde" and its implicit scrutiny of the body politic. As the portrait of the parental figures and their neighbors suggest, "La Corde" attests to a crisis in representing a community through metaphors of natural filiation. Robespierre's "doux noeuds de la fraternité" mutate into a noose whose severed fragments, once put into circulation, foster a parody of universal brotherhood. The transparency of hearts, or Robespierre's "coeurs sensibles et purs" constituting both the etymological root and principle of *concorde*, is travestied into a cluster of anonymous transactions feeding greed and superstition.³⁵

"La Corde" offers an ironic commentary on the bankruptcy of a unified body politic, one whose underlying corruption is figured through the mother's unnatural body, her loyalty to the economic chain rather than the umbilical cord. Could we then read the child's suicide as an allegory for the slain republic? Certainly the child-martyr who dies in suicidal loyalty for the *patrie* is a familiar figure in the iconography of the Revolution. The thirteen-year old Joseph Bara, for example, died opposing the Vendée rebels and became a cult republican figure extolled by Robespierre, along with the young Agricola Viala, shot by the federates in 1793. Both children, in their intransigent and literal espousal of the Jacobin motto "Liberté, égalité, fraternité ou la mort," incarnated the ideal of Terror. Their suicidal opposition, made in the name of

the republic, and memorialized in paintings such as David's *Death of Bara*, was part of a symbolic legacy that may well have informed Baudelaire's portrait of Manet's boy model in "La Corde."³⁶

Still another sacrificial figure and scene are invoked in the poem's final, ironic gesture toward the collective consumption of the noose: Louis XVI, his decapitation and the alleged distribution of his clothing and body.³⁷ As Lynn Hunt has shown, the parsing out of the king's body and possessions—his blood, hair, and clothing—was a rite intended to disseminate his sacredness onto the people. Louis-Sébastien Mercier gives a gruesome account of the festivity surrounding the king's decapitation and the alleged circulation of his body and belongings: "Son sang coule ; c'est à qui y trempera le bout de son doigt, une plume, un morceau de papier ; l'un le goûte, et dit : *Il est bougrement salé !* Un bourreau sur le bord de l'échafaud, *vend et distribue* des petits paquets de ses cheveux ; *on achète le cordon qui les retenait* ; chacun remporte un petit fragment de ses vêtements ou un vestige sanglant de cette scène tragique. J'ai vu défiler tout le peuple se tenant sous le bras, riant, causant familièrement, comme lorsqu'on revient d'une fête."³⁸

In this spectacular rite, a community is symbolically founded and nourished by the distribution of its sovereign-victim's body. The cannibalistic imagery of Mercier's description, and the reference to the ribbon, or *cordon*, tying the king's hair, are details that resonate with the prospective circulation and consumption of the noose in "La Corde" (incidentally, we know that Baudelaire had read Mercier's *Tableaux de Paris* and found it "merveilleux" [*Corr.*, 2: 254]). Designated a "horrible et chère relique," the noose will serve as an ironic substitute for the sacred body, ushering in a community founded, not on symbolic parricide, but rather on symbolic infanticide, an anonymous community governed by the laws of commerce: "Et alors, soudainement, . . . je compris pourquoi la mère tenait tant à m'arracher la ficelle, et par quel *commerce* elle entendait se consoler" (emphasis added).

Like many of his generation, Baudelaire was fascinated by the sacrificial elements of the French Revolution, the spectacular reversibility of victim and executioner staged by the decapitation of the king. Consider for example, the following stanza from "Le Voyage," which could provide its own *pendant*, or gloss, on Mercier's account of the bloody feast consecrating the king's execution:

Le bourreau qui jouit, le martyr qui sanglote ;
La fête qu'assaisonne et parfume le sang ;
Le poison du pouvoir énervant le despote,
Et le peuple amoureux du fouet abrutissant.³⁹

Extolling somewhat theatrically the festive carnage of the Revolution, such passages resurrect the violent origins of the postrevolutionary social contract, a violence that has become clouded by the apparently benign mediocrity of Napoléon III and his authoritarian democracy. The brutality of the *lien social* is latent throughout “La Corde,” where the community, so conspicuously absent for most of the tale, virtually reconstitutes itself around the boy’s dead body and seeks to appropriate the severed fragments of his noose in a cannibalistic ritual reminiscent of the king’s execution.

Baudelaire’s distorted allusions to the Revolution’s symbolic legacy press into visibility the latent violence of the Second Empire. The poet’s later works insistently implicate the utopian vocabulary of communion, fraternity, equality, and concord with the reality of collective violence, terror and ongoing economic inequity. Nowhere is the perversion of fraternity into fratricide more clearly staged than in “Le Gâteau” (1862), published two years before “La Corde.” The prose poem details the poet’s journey through an idealized, romantic landscape. In a beatific moment of lyric elevation, the voyager, soaring on the wings of *l’universelle analogie*, succumbs to Rousseauist reflections on the essential goodness of man: “dans mon total oubli de tout le mal terrestre, j’en étais venu à ne plus trouver si ridicules les journaux qui prétendent que l’homme est né bon” (*OC*, 1: 297–98). His epiphany is brutally interrupted, however, by a typically Baudelairean fall. Having offered some bread to an urchin on the street, another little fellow, “si parfaitement semblable au premier qu’on aurait pu le prendre pour son frère jumeau,” surges out of nowhere and wrestles his “brother” to the ground. The unsuspecting narrator has engendered a vicious struggle in which the twins tear each other to pieces and literally “break bread” until only crumbs remain.⁴⁰ The poet concludes wryly, “Il y a donc un pays superbe où le pain s’appelle du *gâteau*, friandise si rare qu’elle suffit pour engendrer une guerre parfaitement fratricide !” An ironic allusion, no doubt, to the proverbial “Let them eat *brioche*” that Louis XIV’s first wife, Marie-Thérèse of Spain (and not Marie-Antoinette, as it is commonly believed) allegedly declared in the face of all-too-real hunger.⁴¹ The individual poet’s fall from an edenic correspondence between men and things finds its historical correlative in the fall from the illusion of fraternity to the reality of fratricide, from the idealism of the Revolution to the reality of the Terror.⁴²

Baudelaire’s dictum “Toute révolution a pour corollaire le massacre des innocents” is an eloquent comment on the *price* of revolution and counterrevolution, and of the murderous rites of collective purification.⁴³ Yet “La Corde” also suggests that, unlike the bloody spectacles of revolution, the violence par-

ticular to the postrevolutionary epoch is insidiously woven into the social fabric by the mercenary logic of *commerce*. Attesting to a crisis in representing the postrevolutionary collective as bound by the harmonious threads of *fraternité* and *concorde*, “La Corde” points to the emergence of an order where the logic of the market, in service of superstition, fosters its own species of terror. A possession relinquished, if not sold, by his parents, figuratively consumed by the painter, his family, and neighbors, the boy symbolically refers to the bodies and beings that suffer the price of new social modes of production and consumption. Both at the center and the margins of the relations enabled by his body, he is—significantly—barred from consumption. His “immoderate and excessive” tastes are forbidden and threatened with punishment. His suicide, then, is a powerful demystification of the underlying logic governing both aesthetic and social production. As Baudelaire trenchantly says in his notebooks: “Le commerce, c’est le prêt-à-rendu, c’est le prêt avec le sous-entendu : *Rends moi plus que je ne te donne*” (*OC*, 1: 703; emphasis added). In keeping with the spirit of the market, then, a body acquires value when it yields more than has been invested in it. “La Corde” develops this implicit premise to its conclusion: the mother makes a profit off the death of her child; the painter’s investment in his model(s) must have been amply repaid by his paintings if his “business” keeps him out for several hours at a time. As for the neighbors who solicit the rope, their everlasting good fortune will only cost them a few francs.⁴⁴ By staging himself as a *nature morte*, the boy literalizes his own reification and unveils the latent violence of a community in which a person’s body only acquires value through its *symbolic* circulation.

Baudelaire fully grasped the consequences of revolutionary upheavals in the body politic for the living and vulnerable bodies within it. As a poet-dandy and an allegorist, he knew such violence to be the material consequence of idealist systems imposing their form upon an embodied and differentiated social content. His sardonic remarks in the early days of the abortive Second Republic indicate a keen awareness of the human cost of revolutionary upheaval: “Lorsque Marat, cet homme doux, et Robespierre, cet homme propre, demandaient, celui-là trois-cent mille têtes, celui-ci, la permanence de la guillotine, ils obéissaient à l’inéluctable logique de leur système.”⁴⁵ Such declarations about the bloody realities of revolution are more than the provocative *boutades* of an aesthete thrilling in the spectacle of history. They are unflinching assessments of the price of revolution. Revolutionary utopianism, in its vision of a body politic as matter to be shaped into coherence, is almost always associated with sacrificial terror in Baudelaire’s thought. For the revolutionary—and in

this he is truly kin to the despotic artist—necessarily turns a blind eye to the human cost of transformation, to the bodies that were once attached to the three hundred thousand heads requested by Marat, that is to say, to “le fait réel.”

Even more unbearable than the spectacular despotism of the Terror for Baudelaire, however, was the headless, flabby despotism of the multitudes in postrevolutionary France. His outbursts against the formless hydra of democracy should not be dismissed as the histrionics of an aristocratic aesthete repudiating his dabbling in republican politics.⁴⁶ His disgust at the United States—described as a shapeless monster—is telling in this regard. It betrays an obscure yet prescient sense of the violences underlying a decentered, commercial metropolis: “mais *Cela* ! cette cohue de vendeurs et d’acheteurs, ce sans-nom, ce monstre sans tête, ce déporté derrière l’Océan, État !” (*OC*, 2: 327). A social field governed by the fluctuating rules of the market, politically mystified by an apparent diffusion of class antagonism, and in which “cette cohue” blindly collaborates in its own subjection—this also seems to have been Baudelaire’s thumbnail sketch of the brave new world inaugurated by the Second Empire.

In his portrait of Théophile Gautier, Baudelaire proposes a curious parallel between the utopianism of revolutionary thought and the conformism of its failed aftermath. He blames this “tyrannie contradictoire” on the fact that France and “le caractère utopique, communiste, alchimique, de tous ses cerveaux ne lui permet qu’une passion exclusive : celle des formules sociales. Ici, chacun veut ressembler à tout le monde, mais à condition que tout le monde lui ressemble” (*OC*, 2: 125). The utopian attempt to alchemically transform the world to the measure of its abstract formulae is echoed in the majority’s desire to contemplate and consume its flattering self-images in art. The revolutionary’s will to purification thus finds its degraded correlative in the bourgeoisie’s attempt to hold the multiplicity of its social and cultural environment in its conformist grip. The violence of this narcissistic self-replication is conveyed throughout Baudelaire’s poetry. The rope that hangs the boy and consecrates this anonymous community is but an example of the price of such collective transformation. The usurping twin brother of “Le Gâteau” and the malevolent, proliferating old men of “Les Sept vieillards” also recover the disquiet occulted by the apparently benign cult of universal sameness.

Let us now return to Baudelaire’s declaration that “Non seulement, je serais heureux d’être victime, mais je ne haïrais pas d’être bourreau, — pour sentir la Révolution de deux manières !” (*OC*, 2: 961). In a sense, his vocation as poet locked him into this contradictory historical predicament long before he chose

to embrace it. For the poet-dandy is the despotic figure par excellence; his sovereign imagination “executes” a recalcitrant and fragmentary reality in its image. As Pierre Pachet remarks, “Dans une société qui ne possède plus de monarque sacré mais un Empereur bénin et médiocre . . . la tyrannie est accaparée par les artistes : ils ressentent avec plus de nervosité ce qu’il y a de despotique dans la réalité . . . et en même temps exercent, en tant que nouveaux princes, le plus magnifique et plus arbitraires des pouvoirs” (Pachet, *Premier venu*, 125). And yet, as Walter Benjamin has shown, the poet-merchant is also a victim at the mercy of the market’s grip. The hanging boy of “La Corde,” whose noose suggests voicelessness made visible, is a striking avatar for this predicament. An anterior version of the poem makes this parallel more explicit, for it concludes thus: “Un mètre de corde de pendu, à cent francs le décimètre, l’un dans l’autre, chacun payant selon leurs moyens, cela fait mille francs, un réel, un efficace soulagement pour cette pauvre mère.”⁴⁷ The fate of the noose, the appraisal and circulation of its fragments, resonates with that of poetry and its circulation in the newspapers. As each decimeter of rope is worth one hundred francs, similarly, each line of Baudelaire’s prose poems fetched roughly three sous apiece. The preface to *Le Spleen de Paris* fully acknowledges that the prose poems emerge out of these new conditions for literature’s production and consumption. Advertised as a corpus that can be hacked into pieces (or *tronçons*), the format of these poems is designed to provide “admirables commodités” for the writer, editor, and reader alike as the text passes through their hands: “Considérez, je vous prie, quelles admirables commodités cette combinaison nous offre à tous, à vous, à moi et au lecteur. Nous pouvons couper où nous voulons” (*OC*, I: 275).

A textual body cut up into fragments in order to facilitate its circulation, the strings of the poetic lyre on sale for a few francs apiece, such metaphors capture some of the violence of the market’s logic, and of literature’s paradoxical implication in it. Poetry has relinquished its hieratic autonomy.⁴⁸ It is co-opted and cut up by the demands of an urban consumer culture, victimized or prostituted by its readers’ narcissistic investments. Yet, as Baudelaire also suggests throughout his oeuvre, art in its own way participates in the (dis)figuration of bodies, the capture and shaping of matter into symbolic form. Poetry’s idealizing force resonates and even colludes with cultural logics of representation that imprint a mobile and differentiated social body. That Baudelaire was able to probe the complexity of poetry’s imbrication within shifting forms of violence speaks to his ethical understanding of history. For to inhabit the oscillation between victim and executioner, alternatively and reciprocally, is

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deeply to understand the human cost of the revolutions—both spectacular and veiled—that unfold around us.

It is impossible to impose neat allegorical closure upon Baudelaire's poetry, and teasing out the possible historical significances of the poet's notorious ironies is risky business indeed. By applying pressure on the linguistic ambiguities of his prose poems and spinning out the political resonances of their imagery, I have tried to shed some light on the poet's prescient understanding of terror, not as a historical event, but rather as a force infiltrating every nerve of the postrevolutionary social body. The ritual public executions of the Terror exhibited the sacrifices that founded and consecrated a new social order. Besides sporadic resurgences that have failed to bring about the republic, these purgative violences, Baudelaire suggests, have sunk underground. A diffuse force nourishing a decapitated social organism, one of terror's most insidious new faces is commerce. The illusions bred by commerce are as innumerable as the relations between men and men, men and things, and men as things.