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The key to Baudelaire's political position is the image of "petrified unrest," ("erstarre Unruhe") constant disquiet which "knows no development": "Petrified unrest is also the formula for the image of Baudelaire's own life [...]"¹ In the Baroque era, when allegorical perception was similarly tied to an understanding of political action as conspiracy (the court intriguer²), "the image of petrified unrest" was provided by "the desolate confusion of the place of skulls"³ But *sui generis* to the experience of capitalism, the hollowness that the Baroque had found in outer nature now invades the inner world. Thus: "Baroque allegory sees the corpse only from the outside. Baudelaire sees it also from the inside."⁴ This means that he experienced the death of the soul in the still-living body, and read material history as a world already "sinking into rigor mortis."⁵ It means that for Baudelaire, "Strindberg's thought" is binding: "Hell is not something that lies ahead for us, but *this life here*"⁶

The difference helps explain Baudelaire's reactions in the following incident. Impressed by a sixteenth-century woodcut reproduced in Hyacinthe Langlois' book on the history of the dance of death (figure 6.9), Baudelaire instructed Bracquemond in 1858 to draw a frontispiece for the second edition of *Les fleurs du mal*, using this woodcut as a model.

[Baudelaire's] instructions: "A skeleton that forms a tree with the legs and ribs forming the trunk, the arms outstretched in a cross sprouting leaves and buds, and sheltering several rows of poisonous plants in small pots spaced apart as in a greenhouse."⁷

Bracquemond's design (figure 6.10), although quite true to the model's main image, displeased Baudelaire greatly. Benjamin writes:

Bracquemond evidently raised difficulties, and mistook the intention of the poet in that he concealed the pelvis of the skeleton with flowers and didn't treat the arms like tree branches. Moreover, according to Baudelaire, the artist does not know what a skeleton like a tree should look like and also doesn't have an eye for how vices are to be

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represented as flowers.⁸

“In the end a portrait of the poet by Bracquemond was substituted” and the project was abandoned.⁹ It was taken up again, however, by Félicien Rops in 1866, as the design for the frontispiece of Baudelaire’s *Epaves*. Baudelaire considered the new version (figure 6.11) a success, and accepted it.

“To interrupt the course of the world—that was the deepest will of Baudelaire,”¹⁰ and in this sense he went beyond the passive melancholy of the Baroque allegorists. “The allegory of Baudelaire bears—in opposition to the Baroque—the traces of anger needed to break into this world and lay its harmonious structures in ruins.”¹¹ But if Baudelaire succeeded in this, and if in his refusal of the Christian solution of spiritual resurrection he remained more faithful to the new nature than the Baroque allegorists had to the old,¹² he knew no recourse but to “hold onto the ruins.”¹³

The destructive impulse of Baudelaire is nowhere interested in getting rid of that which declines. That comes to expression in allegory, and it is this which constitutes its regressive tendency. On the other hand, however, precisely in its destructive fervor, allegory is concerned with the banishment of the illusory appearance that proceeds out of every “given order,” be it of art or of life, as if from the transfiguring order of the totality or the organic, making it appear bearable. And that is the progressive tendency of allegory.¹⁴

In the Arcades project Benjamin himself practiced allegory against myth. But he was aware of its “regressive tendency.” The *PassagenWerk* was to avoid not only the “betrayal of nature” involved in the spiritual transcendence of the Baroque Christian allegorists, but also that political resignation of Baudelaire and his contemporaries which ultimately ontologizes the emptiness of the historical experience of the commodity, the new as the always-the-same. It needed to demonstrate that far more violence than Baudelaire’s “allegorical intention” was required in order to redeem the material world.

The course of history as it is represented in the concept of catastrophe has in fact no more claim on the thinking man than the kaleidoscope in the hand of a child which collapses everything ordered into new order with every turn. The justness of this image is well founded. The concepts of the rulers have

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always been the mirror thanks to which the image of an “order” was established. -The kaleidoscope must be smashed.¹⁵

Footnotes

¹ V, p. 414 (J55a, 5). Gottfried Keller attaches this phrase to the image of the shield of Medusa, which he sees as an image of “lostjustice, lost happiness” ; This image is evoked at the close of Baudelaire’s “La Destruction” (V, p. 402 [J50a, 5]). Again, Benjamin avoids psychologistic explanations, interpreting the theme of sexual impotence in Baudelaire as emblematic of social impotence. Similarly: “ In the pose of a recipient of charity Baudelaire tested uninterruptedly the example set by bourgeois society. His arbitrarily induced (if not arbitrarily sustained) dependency on his mother had not only a cause emphasized by psychoanalysis, but a social one” (V, p. 427 [J61 , 7]).

² See section 3 above.

³ *Trauerspiel study*, cited V, p. 410 (J54, 5).

⁴ “Zentralpark,” I, p. 684.

⁵ “Zentralpark,” I, p. 682.

⁶ “Zentralpark,” I, p. 683.

⁷ V, p. 352 (J26, 2).

⁸ V, p. 352 (J26, 2).

⁹ V, p. 352 (J26, 2).

¹⁰ V, p. 401 (J50, 2).

¹¹ “Zentralpark,” I, p. 671.

¹² Benjamin cites a verse by Verhaeren (1904): “And of what consequence are the evils and demented hours/And vats of vice in which the city ferments/If someday.../A new Christ arises, sculpted in light/Who lifts humanity toward him/And baptizes it by the fire of the stars?” Benjamin comments: “Baudelaire knows no such perspectives. His concept of the fragility of the metropolis is the source of the permanence of the poems which he has inscribed on Paris” (“Das Paris des Second Empire bei Baudelaire,” I, p. 586; cf. V, p. [J76, 6])

¹³ V, p. 415 (J56, 1).

¹⁴ V, p. 417 (J57, 3; also J56, 1).

¹⁵ “Zentralpark,” I, p. 660 (cf. p. 1139).