

Ransom! Baudelaire and Distributive Injustice

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Abstract: Baudelaire's poem "The Ransom" composed in 1848-9 and often judged to be one of his weaker poems, belongs to a corpus that decries material impoverishment, depredation and violence toward the poor, and that helped earn Baudelaire the sobriquet "poet of the people." A poem in the spirit of the July Monarchy, and of 1848, it joins Baudelaire to the company of the realist school of Courbet and Champfleury and to the larger radical confraternity of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. In this essay the poem serves as point of departure for designating *ransom* as a political mode of economic, political and moral violence involving extortion, hostage-taking, and the perversion of economic reason within systems of distributive injustice. Drafted in obvious counterpoint to John Rawls's principle of "distributive justice" - applied by Rawls to the "fair" allocation of material goods, and to tolerance of inequality only to the ends of the greater good for the least advantaged - distributive injustice is developed as a political concept and aesthetic praxis tied to Baudelairean irony. It is activated in response to Baudelaire's topoi of the unjust portion, the unequal share, luxury as a violent extraction of capital from human labor, the uncivilly divided commons and the social damages of passive injustice.

Keywords: Baudelaire, capitalism, ransom, distributive injustice, equality, irony, violence

La Rançon

L'homme a, pour payer sa rançon,
Deux champs au tuf profond et riche,
Qu'il faut qu'il remue et défriche
Avec le fer de la raison;

Pour obtenir la moindre rose,
Pour extorquer quelques épis,
Des pleurs salés de son front gris
Sans cesse il faut qu'il arrose.

L'un est l'Art, et l'autre l'Amour
- Pour rendre le juge propice,
Lorsque de la stricte justice
Paraîtra le terrible jour,

Il faudra lui montrer des granges
Pleines de moissons, et des fleurs
Dont les formes et les couleurs
Gagnent le suffrage des Anges.¹

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¹ Baudelaire 1975, p. 173.

[Mais pour que rien ne soit jeté
Qui serve à payer l'esclavage,
Elles grossiront l'apanage
De la commune liberté]²

The Ransom

To pay his ransom, Man must take
Two fields of tufa, deep and rich,
And use the tools of reason, which
Are all he has, to dig and rake;

To grow a rose of shortest stem,
To wrest a few pathetic ears,
His grey head sheds its salty tears,
Which he must use to water them:

One field is Art, the other, Love
But then, in order that he may
Persuade the court, that awful day
Judgement is rendered from above,

He must display his barns, that teem
With harvest crops, with corn and grapes
And flowers of the shades and shapes
To earn the Angels' high esteem.³

Suppressed Strophe (as rendered by T.J. Clark)

[But that nothing should be sown
which would go to pay for slavery
They will swell the property
of the Common liberty.⁴

Francis Scarfe's prosaic translation:

To pay his ransom with, Man has two fields of deep rich soil, which
he must cultivate with the blade of Reason.

To nurse the smallest rose, to wring a few ears of corn from
the earth, he must water them ceaselessly with the salt tears of his
ashen brow.

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2 Ibid. p. 1159. The proofs of *Les Epaves* contained this additional stanza.

3 Baudelaire 2008, pp. 317 and 319. Further references to the McGowan translations will appear in the text abbreviated JM. Unless otherwise noted the translations are mine. I have drawn on different translations depending on how well they bring out a stylistic nuance or idea with specific relevance to my readings.

4 Clark 1973, p. 206. Further references to this work will appear in the text abbreviated AB.

One is Art, and the other is Love. In order to propitiate the Judge when the terrible day of Justice dawns, he will have to show him barns full of harvested crops, and flowers whose forms and colours win the approval of the Angels.⁵

T.J. Clark's paraphrase of the poem:

"Man to pay his ransom, must till the fields of Art and Love with the ploughshare of reason - a ceaseless struggle, sweat pouring from his brow. At the Last Judgment he must show grain but also flowers - a plain harvest alongside a crop which will win favor by its forms and colors, or its food value." (AB 167).

Baudelaire's "*La Rançon*" [The Ransom] composed in 1848-9 and often judged to be one of his weaker poems, figures among the *Pièces diverses* of *Les Epaves*. It belongs to a corpus – including standouts like "Le Squelette laboureur," "Assomons les pauvres," "Le Vieux Saltimbanque," "Le Mauvais Vitrier," "Le Joujou des pauvres" and "Le Vin des chiffoniers" - that decries material impoverishment, depredation and violence toward the poor, and that helped earn Baudelaire the sobriquet "poet of the people." A poem in the spirit of the July Monarchy, and of 1848, it joins Baudelaire to the company of the realist school of Courbet and Champfleury and to the larger radical confraternity of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon.⁶

In what follows, the poem will serve as a point of departure for designating *ransom* as a political mode of economic, political and moral violence involving extortion, hostage-taking, and the perversion of economic reason within systems of distributive injustice. Drafted in obvious counterpoint to John Rawls's principle of "distributive justice" - applied by Rawls to the fair allocation of material goods, and to tolerance of inequality only to the ends of the greater good for the least advantaged - distributive *in*justice is not a term in common circulation in politico-legal theory, nor does it have any clear aesthetic purchase.⁷ But

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5 Baudelaire 1986, p. 301. Further references to this edition will appear under the abbreviation BCV.

6 Anti-Proudhonianism was turned on Baudelaire, as seen in Jean Wallon's review of "Limbes" (the early title for *Les Fleurs du mal*): "They are doubtless Socialist verses, and in consequence bad verses. Yet another new disciple of Proudhon.... For the last few months everybody seems to have lost his head... everyone has rushed into Socialism - without seeing that Socialism is the absolute negation of art." (AB163)

7 Rawls 1971. In an essay "Types of Justice," revised in 2020 in the wake of the post-Floyd racial justice movements, Michelle Maiese offers a succinct account of some of the conflicting notions of fairness, equity, need and resource allocation that beset the concept of distributive justice and its pragmatic applications, particularly in economics, law, social choice and social contract theory:

Distributive justice, or economic justice, is concerned with giving all members of society a "fair share" of the benefits and resources available. However, while everyone might agree that wealth should be distributed fairly, there is much disagreement about what counts as a "fair

it aptly describes – and this is how I will be using it - Baudelaire's topoi of the unjust portion, the unequal share, luxury as a violent extraction of capital from human labor, the uncivilly divided commons and the social damages of "passive injustice," a phrase coined by Judith Shklar to emphasize the legal cost (in moral terms) of bystander syndrome.⁸ A locus of Baudelairean irony, distributive injustice engenders an ironic politics straddling what Baudelaire called his "mitigated Socialism" (born of his youthful support for the bloody worker uprisings of 1848), and the insufferable conservatism of the *juste milieu*, associated by François Pierre Guillaume Guizot, prime minister under Louis-Philippe, with a policy positioned "against all excesses, absolute principles, and extreme principles."⁹

Baudelaire sits in a broad continuum of thinkers who questioned the ethico-political foundations of property-ownership, entitlement, and wealth distribution, ranging from Proudhon and Karl Marx, to, in the twentieth century, Rawls and Peter Singer (whose idea of "one world" attempts to correct for Rawls's questionable assumption that under the "veil of ignorance" - a hypothetical all-things-being-equal condition -

share." Some possible criteria of distribution are equity, equality, and need. (Equity means that one's rewards should be equal to one's contributions to a society, while "equality" means that everyone gets the same amount, regardless of their input. Distribution on the basis of need means that people who need more will get more, while people who need less will get less.) Fair allocation of resources, or distributive justice, is crucial to the stability of a society and the well-being of its members. Different people will define "fair" differently: some will say that fairness is equity; others equality; still others, need.

Maiese 2003.

8 Political philosopher Judith Shklar analyzes how "passive injustice" operates in Giotto's allegory "Injustice" [*Ingiustizia*]:

"The face of Giotto's Injustice is cold and cruel with small, fanglike teeth at the sides of the mouth. He wears a judge's or ruler's cap, but it is turned backward and in his hand is a nasty pruning hook, not a scepter or miter. As he has sown no doubt so shall he reap, for some of the trees that surround him are rooted in the soil beneath his feet where crime flourishes. Around him is a gate in ruin, but under him we see the real character of passive injustice. There is a theft, a rape, and a murder. Two soldiers watch this scene and do nothing, and neither does the ruler. The woods, always a dangerous place, are unguarded; they are the place where the sort of men who prosper under passive injustice can be as violent as they please. They have a cruel tyrant to govern them, but he and they deserve, indeed engender, each other. The trees around these figures are not the 'fruit of the Spirit' but 'the work of the flesh,' as Paul wrote in his list of sins, and they are not just sown by active injustice but by a government that passively lets it happen. It is a perfect illustration of Justice Brennan's impassioned dissent from the appalling DeShaney decision: 'Inaction can be every bit as abusive of power as action, oppression can result when a State undertakes a vital duty and then ignores it.'

Unlike some of Giotto's other vices, Injustice does not appear to suffer at all; he seems completely affectless." Shklar 1985, pp. 47-48. Reading Shklar with Baudelaire we gain a heightened sense of how allegories of injustice, including passive injustice, are embedded in everyday life and ordinary vices. Throughout Baudelaire's writings – which show how political crimes and forms of ransom-taking manifest at the micropolitical level – we are made to feel the hypocrisy of the bystander who experiences moral repulsion but refuses to intervene.

9 As cited in Boime 2004), p. 272.

individuals will opt for a system of welfare beneficial to the worst-off).¹⁰ To this group we would add Derrida, whose reading of Baudelaire's prose poem "La Fausse Monnaie," [Counterfeit Money] in *Donner le temps* [*Given Time*], exposes "the madness of economic reason under capitalism" conveyed by Baudelaire's striking images of loose and false change, of coins "singularly and minutely distributed" among trouser and waistcoat pockets, or a rich man's effort to "win paradise economically" to pick up gratis the certificate of a charitable man" by dashing the beggar with false coin.¹¹ Like "La Fausse Monnaie," "La Rançon" condemns the accounting system of pay-offs and cheats in which religion and capitalism are equally and reciprocally mired.

In describing the tribute to be paid on Judgment Day, "The Ransom" takes aim at "The Parable of the Sower" with its credo that God recompenses those who endure against adversity, avoid the temptations of riches, and harvest the fruits of their labor. The first stanza, which introduces a laborer tilling his fields, is something of a pastiche of George Sand's *La Mare au Diable* (1846).¹² Sand's celebrated "*roman champêtre*" opened with a meditation on Hans Holbein the Younger's *Simulacres de la Mort*, [*Images of Death*], a group of engravings circa 1526 featuring Death's dance with everyone from peasants to kings, bishops, monks, judges, lawyers and more. In *Death and the Plowman* Holbein's laborer is old, his clothes are tattered, and his nags are skin and bone. The only lively figure in this scene of sweat and desperate toil is a skeleton whipping the horses into motion. (In the poem from *Les Tableaux parisiens* - "Le Squelette laboureur" (1859) - Baudelaire would meld laborer and skeleton in a single figure, "dragged out of the boneyard," and condemned to having "to scrape the sullen earth, and shove a heavy spade beneath our bleeding naked feet" for eternity.)¹³ Sand treats Holbein's grim sixteenth century allegory of unrelenting, infinite labor with indignation, using it to chastise her own era for doing so little to rectify economic injustice. In the past the rich bought indulgences and drank to ward off death, now they empower their government to buy them protection

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10 Singer 2004

11 Derrida 1992, p. 34.

12 Baudelaire despised Sand's moralism, deriding her mercilessly in Section 27 of *My Heart Laid Bare*: "I cannot think of this stupid creature without a certain shudder of horror. If I ran into her, I could not resist tossing a font of holy water on her head." see Baudelaire 2022, p. 123. Further references to this work will appear in the text abbreviated LF.

13 Baudelaire's most celebrated poem about a skeleton was "Danse Macabre" (XCVII in *Tableaux parisiens*), featuring a prostitute-coquette. Her artfully styled hair and fancy clothes deflect attention from her cavernous eye sockets, hairless skull and frail vertebra. She forms a couple with the skeletal laborer, insofar as both have bony frames that attest to starvation and exploitation. The narrator implicates society at large when he remarks, "Pourtant, qui n'a serré dans ses bras un squelette, / Et qui ne s'est nourri des choses du tombeau?" OC I op. cit. pp. 97-98. ["Yet who has never held a skeleton in his arms/who has never fed on the carrion of the grave?" Scarfe translation BCV, 194].

against rebellious peasants, fortifying the ranks of soldiers and jailors instead of advancing economic justice. Sand reserves special ire for artists (she is presumed to be targeting Eugène Sue's 1842 *Les Mystères de Paris*), who sensationally exploit the spectacle of the poor:

Sans doute il est lugubre de consumer ses forces et ses jours à fender le sein de cette terre jalouse, qui se fait arracher les trésors de sa fécondité, lorsqu'un morceau de pain le plus noir et le plus grossier est, à la fin de la journée, l'unique recompense et l'unique profit attachés à un si dur labeur. Ces richesses qui couvrent le sol, ces moissons, ces fruits, ces bestiaux orgueilleux qui s'engraissent dans les longues herbes, sont la propriété de quelques-uns et les instruments de la fatigue et de l'esclavage du plus grand nombre.

... en voyant la douleur des hommes qui peuplent ce paradis de la terre, l'artiste au coeur droit et humain est troublé au milieu de sa jouissance. Le bonheur serait là où l'esprit, le coeur et les bras, travaillant de concert sous l'oeil de la Providence, une sainte harmonie existerait entre la munificence de Dieu et les ravissements de l'âme humaine. C'est alors qu'au lieu de la piteuse et affreuse mort, marchant dans son sillon, le fouet à la main, le peintre d'allégories pourrait placer à ces côtés un ange radieux, semant à pleines mains le blé béni sur le sillon fumant.¹⁴

It is doubtless lugubrious to spend one's force and one's days splitting open the jealous earth, that yields the treasures of fecundity so reluctantly; the blackest, roughest morsel of bread is, at day's end, the only recompense, the only profit rewarding this hard labor. The riches that cover the earth, the harvests, fruits, and proud beasts who fatten themselves on the long grass, are the property of the privileged few, but the instruments of fatigue and slavery for the many.

(...) On seeing the suffering of those who populate this earthly paradise, the artist who is upright and human becomes troubled in the midst of his pleasure. Happiness would be where spirit, heart and strength come together under the eye of Providence, a blessed harmony would exist then between God's munificence and the joys of the human spirit. Instead of woeful, frightful Death, trawling the furrow, his whip in hand, the painter of allegories should place a radiant Angel by the laborer's side, throwing handfuls of blessed grain into the humid furrow.

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14 Sand 1995, pp. 13, 15. Influenced by Baudelaire's poems, the "danse macabre" became especially popular in art during the 1860s: Alfred Rethel, Grandville, Champfleury and Félicien Rops each did works featuring the theme.

Despite his misogynist aversion to Sand, Baudelaire would appropriate vocabulary from this text along with the theme of unjust recompense. And like Sand, he would subject the figure of the artist to ridicule as one who professes indignation over the laborer's toil while taking refuge in the aesthetic spheres of *otium* and *l'art pour l'art*.

"The Ransom" appeared in 1857 five years after it was rejected by *La Revue de Paris*. It was deemed too controversial to publish so soon after Napoleon III's *coup d'état*, especially the version that included that last stanza - ultimately suppressed - which invoked "the commons of liberty." T.J. Clark detects in the rich, ambiguous connotations of *commune libérée* the special force that Baudelaire attached to the word *commun* between 1848 and 1852, which extended to "the terrible equality of the common grave." (AB 169) Showcasing Baudelaire at his most militant, "The Ransom" is a poem infused with undercurrents of insurrectional violence that belie the sweet promise of reward for Art and Love. Its rhetoric of ransom and extortion challenges the justice of a system in which bounty is wrung from the worker by a punishing authority. The laborer must pay dear: having worked so hard to cultivate every rose and ear of corn he must turn his produce over or forfeit his grace. Blackmailed by God (fronting for the landowner), he is forced into paying ransom for his salvation.

The theodicy projected in this poem is indebted to Proudhon's influential *Système des contradictions économiques ou Philosophie de la misère* (1846), where Proudhon notoriously proclaimed: "For God is stupidity and cowardice; God is hypocrisy and lies; God is tyranny and wretchedness; God is Evil." Glossing these phrases T.J. Clark notes: "There is a God, and Man aspires towards him. But God in turn is jealous of his own creation, 'jealous of Adam', 'tyrant of Prometheus'. Knowledge and society are won in spite of God, against his trickery and opposition ... And the world itself is God's trap, the place where He becomes evil, in a sordid contest with his creatures." (AB 168) "Many men," Clark concludes, had accused their God of cruelty; what *they* [Proudhon and Baudelaire] did was take the accusation to its logical conclusion." (AB 168). "The Ransom" belongs to the space of this "logical conclusion" where God and man are locked into scoring wins and losses; where God metes out penalties whose severity is the measure of His jealousy and petty resentment, and where men draw on the economy of divine Evil to power their revolutionary revenge. Ransoming, in this context becomes the ruse of the defective, fallen sovereign who abandons the sublimity and impartial application of just laws and the dignity of his remote perch, to descend to the level of humans. In proving to behave "just like us" he relinquishes the authority of divine moral economy and unleashes the democratic demiurge.

Clark recalls us to the vexed issue of Baudelairean politics, which in recent criticism has been downplayed within a broader ethical

turn indebted to Walter Benjamin's Baudelaire. This ethical approach foregrounds trauma, violence, modernity, lyric, *techne*, dialectics and irony - above all irony. Kevin McLaughlin's densely argued essay "On Poetic Reason of State: Benjamin, Baudelaire, and the Multitudes" distills ethical irony from the Benjaminian concept of *Erlebnissen*, [translated as short-lived experience] which breaks down the ego's auto-affective mechanisms of defense and induces "liberation from the protective custody of a life of self-preservation."¹⁵ "If lyric, he writes, is traditionally understood to constitute a poetic genre defined by subjectivity and intersubjectivity, reason of state in Baudelaire's poetry dictates the violation of this constitutional principle in order to preserve the mediacy of a relation that is not subjectively determined."¹⁶ This ethics of mediacy, made possible by the role of poetic force in the "emancipation from experiences," and enabling a paradoxical preservation of the "transience of all states," helps produce a non-proprietary subject, emancipated from history and punctual death duties, leased in time, no longer historically heritaged, or morally propertied and leveraged.

For Debarati Sanyal, in *The Violence of Modernity: Baudelaire, Irony, and the Politics of Form*, irony forges the path to recovering "the ideological valences of modernism's retreat into form, in the hopes of reenergizing literature's spirit of critique vis-a-vis historical violence."¹⁷ Sanyal concentrates on the distance Baudelaire would take from his youthful revolutionary idealism. The punches and strikes that course through the prose poems, the rhetorical violence, the beating delivered by poetic phrasing and rhythm, the obsession with victim and executioner, the self-flagellating, self-evacuating narrative voice, are so many brutally ironic formal disfigurements of revolutionary ideals. She argues that throughout the later writings irony functions as "a textual violence and a historical counterviolence." (VM 29) This is most clearly brought out in the prose poem "Assommons les pauvres!" [Let's Beat up the Poor] 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." (VM 81) The works of the later, post-revolutionary Baudelaire, Sanyal argues further, "insistently implicate the utopian vocabulary of communion, fraternity, equality and concord with the reality of collective violence, terror and ongoing economic inequity." (VM 90). Seen through this lens, Baudelaire could be said to have ransomed the revolutionary social contract and

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15 McLaughlin 2014, p. 248.

16 Ibid. p. 264.

17 For Sanyal 2006, p. 4. Further references to this work will appear in the text abbreviated VM.

its ideal of equitable social, political and economic distribution, for the sake of wallowing in the pleasure of savaging Second Empire pretense to benign rule of law, popular democracy, and refined aesthetic taste. If the Revolution survives as a post-revolutionary, counter-violent effect, it is in the guise of *Nachträglichkeit*, the *après-coup* that quite literally takes hold *after the coup* of Louis-Napoleon. Manifest no longer in demonstrations or *attentâts* that target official representatives of an authoritarian regime, the revolutionary demiurge is diverted into impolitic outbursts of vicious laughter, anger, shouts and fisticuffs outside the moral economy of *lex talionis*. As Richard Sieburth notes, after 1861, when an encounter with the writings of conservative Catholic thinker Joseph de Maistre reignited Baudelaire's religious fervor, "the modes he now favored were rancorous irony, outright insult, or provocative farce (*bouffonnerie*)." (LF 22) We see this in the comic cruelty and explosions of cynical reason that figure in *My Heart Laid Bare*, especially those fragments that single out 1848 for "ridicule." Here, the folly of idealism, the base instincts of revolutionary motivation, and the futility of contesting Napoleonic state power are reviewed in the pitiless rear-view mirror of retrospection:

My inebriation in 1848.

What was the nature of this inebriation?

Thirst for revenge. Taking *natural* pleasure in demolition." (114)

(...)

My fury at the coup d'état. How many times I came under fire.

Another Bonaparte! Shame!

And nonetheless everything quieted down. Is not the president well within his rights?

What the emperor Napoleon III is. What he is worth. Come up with an explanation of his nature, as an instrument of Providence. (115)

(...)The only charming thing about 1848 was that it achieved the heights of Ridiculousness" ["1848 ne fut charmant que par l'excès même du Ridicule."]

(LF 115)

Ridicule, levied as a kind of payback or ransom exacted as the price of fighting for equality and justice, is the dominant mode of irony in late Baudelaire, the Baudelaire who was self-avowedly spineless and lacking in all political conviction. But as Slavoj Žižek has argued recently with respect to "the comedy of terrors" which we are seeing play out in the convergence of extreme racial injustice and the necrocapitalist maneuvers of old-school authoritarian nation-states, irony, humor, and *bouffonnerie* must never be underestimated as a means of overturning mastery and fomenting political change.¹⁸

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18 Žižek 2022.

“La Fausse monnaie” offers a perfect example of how a runaway “ha, ha, ha” gets the better of the smug bourgeois who tells a story at the expense of his Samaritan colleague, revealed to have knowingly passed off counterfeit coin to a mendicant. The narrator initially credits his friend with an economic calculus of “everybody wins:” the beggar believes he has received a windfall, while the alms-giver enriches himself *and* earns a moral reward from God for his act of charity. Perhaps, the narrator muses, he was also hoping to derive surplus enjoyment (“criminelle jouissance”) from the hypothetical “event” of the beggar’s arrest and imprisonment. (OC I, 324). And yet when questioned about his motive, the friend looks the narrator squarely in the eye and declares without apparent guile: “there is no sweeter pleasure than to surprise a man by giving him more than he hopes for.” This produces consternation on the part of the narrator. For while he was prepared to accept, however inexcusably, his friend’s perverse delight in scamming the beggar, he simply can’t countenance this *prima facie* stupidity: “On n’est jamais excusable d’être méchant, mais il y a quelque mérite à savoir qu’on l’est; le plus irréparable des vices est de *faire le mal par bêtise*.” [To be mean is never excusable, but there is some merit in knowing that one is; the most irreparable of vices is *to do evil out of stupidity*, my emphasis]. The moral of the would seem to be summed up here: better an evil capitalist swindler than a *bien pensant* philanthropist who falls for his own myth of his betterment of the poor. But if one rereads story from a contemporary vantage – retracing the chain of events connecting George Floyd’s putative attempt to pass off a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill, to his police murder, to the Black Lives Matter protests that anger over his death detonated worldwide, we see more clearly the revolutionary workings of ironic reflux in this text. For as the narrator projects his friend’s desire for “an event” that could lead to disaster, or some other, as yet unforeseen consequence [“créer un événement dans la vie de ce pauvre diable, peut-être même de connaître les conséquences, funestes ou autres”], he makes possible the very conditions of that event’s appearance: the abolition of benefactor privilege and, along with it, the justificatory procedures of cost-benefit calculation that keep distributive injustice in place. (OC I, 324)

It is just this revolutionary reserve, unleashed by the volatile mechanics of irony, that Jennifer Bajorek brings out in *Counterfeit Capital: Poetic Labor and Revolutionary Irony*. Seeking to reclaim irony from its “near total repression in political thought,” Bajorek looks to Walter Benjamin’s identification (in *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*) of irony with the production of “capital itself.”¹⁹

... Benjamin posits in language a kind of material underworld, from which everything else bubbles up: meaning, reference, the value that enters infinitely into calculation, and which is infinitely

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19 Bajorek 2009, p. 25. Further references to this work will appear in the text abbreviated CC.

capitalizable.... he is the first to thematize a relation between language and economy that would be more than just analogical, and thus to theorize allegory as the figural and even the ideological precipitate of a given productive mode.” (CC 73)

The failure of Benjamin's political project, she contends, lies in his fixation on the allegorical commodity. It is Baudelaire, far more than Benjamin who “goes beyond the replication of structures of commodity fetishism to something like the textual equivalent of capital” thus more fully realizing capital's ironic potential. (CC 74) “As a consummate theorist of capital's interference at every level of human life and as a contemporary of Marx's, he is the first to ... address in a single breath both the challenges posed by capital to the possibilities for changing things and the singular resources of literature for meeting these challenges.” (CC ii) Irony becomes, then, the fulfillment of capitalism's revolutionary interference with its own brute, profit-driven ends. Triggering mechanisms of shock, jolt, and parry, it throws up obstacles that arrest the calculated clock time of capitalized labor and expropriative accumulation. Completing the picture of Baudelairean irony as self-sabotaging capital in Bajorek's reading is her discussion of Marx's theory of “so-called primitive [*ursprüngliche*] accumulation,” where the violence of expropriation is of a piece with Baudelairean ransoming, itself cast as a terrorizing political technology of extortion and social death. Following Marx, Bajorek homes in on the naturalized violence of distributive injustice: How, Bajorek queries, “did it happen that the capitalist got to be a capitalist, the wage laborer – a wage laborer? ...how did some people get to have more property than others ... and thus a greater share of the means of production – more tools, more money, and thus the means to buy the labor power of certain other people, who have less, or even none, of these things? (CC 74) These questions are anything but simple or naïve. They go to the heart of what is least fathomable about capitalism's intractable division between haves and have-nots. Benjamin brings out this point in relation to Baudelaire's poem “Abel et Caïn,” where the lines “Race d'Abel, dors, bois et mange;/Dieu te sourit complaisamment./Race de Caïn, dans la fange/Rampe et meurs misérablement.” [Race of Abel, sleep, drink, and eat;/God smiles on you indulgently/Race of Cain, in the mire/Grovel and die miserably] are taken as a blunt articulation of the absurdity of a logic that consigns an entire class to destitution: “Cain, the ancestor of the disinherited, appears as a founder of a race, and this race can be none other than the proletariat (...) It is the race of those who possess no commodity but their labor power.”²⁰ To understand how rank inequality and the political violence that sustains it come not only to be naturalized but also consecrated (the Protestant ethic being perhaps the

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20 Benjamin 2006, pp. 55-56.

most blatant theological hat-trick), it is necessary to expose the *actually existing* violence of capital accumulation.²¹ Citing Marx - “Accumulation always requires the transformation of a portion of the surplus product into capital” – Bajorek goes through, blow by painful blow, the specific violences that make such “transformation” possible:

The engine behind the concept of history at work here is the rampant injustice of capital’s brutal and bloody ‘prehistory.’ How did some people get more? They took it – by theft, forcible expropriation, bloody legislation, the branding of so-called vagabonds with red-hot irons, the slicing off of ears. (...) [As Marx writes in *Capital*] In [real or] actual history, it is a notorious fact that conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, in short, violence, play the greatest part. (...) And this history, the history of [the freedmen’s] expropriation, is written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire.” (CC 75)

Theft, forcible expropriation, enslavement, robbery –all are constitutive of the ransom economy that enables primitive accumulation by indenturing workers and enslaved people for eternity. In this picture, Baudelaire has more than a supporting role to play in Marx’s depiction of the wage-laborer as model of ransomed life. While satirizing “liberal platitudes about equality, which were apparently already laughable in Baudelaire’s time”), he literalizes, through vivid physical descriptions and scenes, capitalism’s dependency on extortionate, arbitrarily administered violence. (CC 90). Repressive control of marginal people and vulnerable workers, depictions of necrophilic feeding frenzies by the rich off the bodies of the poor, gross income inequality, these forms of harm are directly tallied with police violence, the collateral damage of unbridled consumption, and the costs in mental health brought on by *rentier* entitlement and possessive individualism. With coruscating irony Baudelaire foregrounds not just an allegory of society’s consumerist Fall into modernity (a predominant theme in Benjamin’s “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire” and its subsequent interpretations), but the moral travesty of capital’s accounting system, which tallies sums extracted in pounds of flesh. In “Les Sept Viellards” [The Seven Old Men]), for example, we infer the history of back-breaking toil from the not so much bent “as *broken*” body of an old man whose “spine formed so sharp an angle with his legs that his stick, as if to add a finishing touch, gave him the carriage and the clumsy gait/of some lame animal...”.²² Often the violence of capitalism inflicted on the bodies of destitute laborers, vagabonds, beggars and sex workers is rendered more vivid and personal by displacing it to acts of aggression and self-

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21 For an illuminating discussion of Baudelaire’s “religion of violence,” see, Th  lot 1993, p. 127.

22 Baudelaire 1983, p. 92.

harming performed on and by a first-person narrator. This comes through in “A celle qui est trop gaie” [To One Who is Too Cheerful] where “the sunshine like an irony that lacerates my breast” and “the green of spring that humiliates my heart” give way to the murderous desire “to castigate your body’s joy,/to bruise your envied breasts,/and in your unsuspecting side/to gash a gaping wound.”²³ This scene of *Lustmord* recurs in “Je t’adore à l’égal...” [“I love you as I love...”]:

“Je m’avance à l’attaque, et je grimpe aux
assauts,
Comme après un cadavre un chœur de
vermisseaux,
Et je chéris, ô bête implacable et cruelle!
Jusqu’à cette froideur par où tu m’es plus belle! (OC I, 27)

I climb to the assault, attack the source,
A choir of wormlets pressing towards a corpse,
And cherish your unbending cruelty,
This iciness so beautiful to me... (JM 53)

For Jonathan Culler, “The self-reflective irony in such strange modes of address (comparing yourself in lovemaking to a choir of wormlets) places the utterance of poems such as this in a world of poetic action, where the workings of fantasy in the confection of a passionate self can be tested.”²⁴ While I agree entirely with Culler that Baudelairean irony generates “strange modes of address” that belong to a charged sphere of “poetic action,” what is most strange for me is Baudelaire’s staging of a performative violence immune to the aesthetic distancing effects of versification. What is awakened in the reader by this “poetic action” is an experience of the “real” of violence, the brutalism of violated flesh, unmediated by automated reactions of sympathy, empathy, and moral revulsion.

McClaughlin, Sanyal, and Bajorek each in different ways attributes negative capability to Baudelairean irony. It emerges as an emancipatory poesis aligned with a self-canceling reason of state (in the case of McClaughlin), a violent commerce particular to Napoleonic authoritarian democracy (in the case of Sanyal), and a force of “swindling” or “hocus-pocus whereby capital pretends to produce something out of nothing, like a rabbit from a hat, even as it drags all that was once valued, apart from value, into its disappearing act” (in the case of Bajorek). (CC 1). My own emphasis, harking back to T. J. Clark’s attention to Baudelaire’s ironic

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23 Baudelaire 2008, p. 49.

24 Culler 1993, p. 8. The

Proudhonianism and parodic mutualism, foregrounds the political economy of the ransom, where unequal distribution meets unjustified retribution.

Clark, who wants to preserve “The Ransom” as a testament to the decidedly revolutionary Baudelaire of 1848 despite the poet’s unreliable performance in any left political subject-position, situates the poem in apposition with an unrealized painting by Delacroix, referred to by contemporaries as *Equality on the Barricades of February*. Conceived as the 1848 counterpart to Delacroix’s celebrated painting of the 1830 July Revolution, *Liberty Guiding the People* (inspired, like Sand’s novel, by Holbein the Younger’s *Dance of Death*), *Equality on the Barricades* was never executed. Delacroix turned instead to the subjects of *Ugolino and his Children* and *Samson and Delilah*. Clark discovers the “lost children of 1848” subtending these mythic stories of familial dysfunction. While he worked on these paintings in 1850, Delacroix made entries in his journal that convey his fear of civil disorder, squared with a grudging admiration for the revolutionary principle of distributive justice. One entry describes a mock-heroic battle between a spider and a fly: “I saw the two of them coming, the fly on its back and giving him furious blows; after a short resistance the spider expired under these attacks; the fly, after having sucked it, undertook the labour of dragging it off somewhere, doing so with a vivacity and a fury that were incredible. ... It may be noted that there was distributive justice in the victory of the fly over the spider; it was the contrary of what has been observed for so long a time.” (AB 137) For Clark, “distributive justice” is a figure of equality that Delacroix seems at times to embrace but proves unable to represent. His failure to paint *Equality on the Barricade*, like the censored image of “commune liberté” in “The Ransom,” are diagnosed as symptoms of an aborted revolutionary idealism.

Baudelaire’s prose poem “Assommons les pauvres!,” at first blush a text typical of what Patrick Greaney calls “a minor tradition of writing about poverty within the larger traditions of modernism and the history of the representation of poverty in Europe” (but in terms of its critique of moral philosophy, a work that far exceeds any genre convention), mobilizes the calculus of unequal payments and wrongful damages to drive home – albeit in thoroughly ironized mode – the impact of distributive inequality.²⁵

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25 Greaney 2008, p. xi. Further references to this work will appear in the text abbreviated UB. Referencing Louis Chevalier’s landmark *Laboring Classes and Dangerous Classes in Paris during the First Half of the Nineteenth Century*, Greaney underscores semantic nuances of the French term *misère* that don’t really carry over in English. *Misère* is usually associated with a condition of existential suffering not restricted to material impoverishment but Chevalier underscores that it refers not to the condition of distinct “unfortunate classes but the far more complex relationship between those classes and other classes,” ... poverty is not a condition ‘but the passage from one [condition] to the other..., an intermediary and fluctuating situation rather than a status.’” (As cited by Greaney, UB xii-xiii). Greaney develops this idea in Chapter 2, extending Anne-Emmanuelle Berger’s suggestion that readers be mindful of “an experimental philosophy” in *Le Spleen de Paris* (“the narrator’s philosophy of the *promeneur-moralist-logician*”) to Baudelaire’s “experimental disposition” towards power relationality between the poor and the poet. UB 31.

The narrator, swayed by the voice of his inner Demon (which tells him that “To truly be someone else’s equal, you have to prove it; to truly be worthy of liberty, you have to conquer it”), proceeds to randomly assault a beggar, giving him one black eye and breaking two teeth. To top it off, he bashes the beggar’s head against a wall, kicks him between the shoulder blades and pounds him with a tree branch “with the energy of a cook trying to tenderize a piece of steak.” (LF 194) The beggar returns the violence, repaying him with two black eyes, four broken teeth and a furious beating with the same stick used on him. “*Sir, you are my equal!*” Says the narrator. Please do me the honor of sharing my purse with you; and should any of your colleagues ask you for a handout, don’t forget (if you are truly a philanthropist) to apply the theory that it has been my *pain* to test out on your back.” (LF 194) By rights the beggar should walk away with the whole purse – he’s won the fight after all - but instead, he agrees to forfeit part of his share. Here, the blatantly unfair math of the violent capitalist plays social equality off against economic equivalence, performing an exercise in “voodoo economics” and a parody of the fairness economy at one and the same time. “Let’s Beat up the Poor!” like “The Ransom,” conveys the violence of distributive injustice in the guise of a computational ruse: the figures don’t add up, and the house still takes all.

Baudelaire’s laughable “let’s call it quits” scene in “Let’s Beat up the Poor” can and has been read as an acid take on Proudhonian mutualism since the man, in offering to divide his purse with the beggar, would seem to be making a mutualist move until we realize it is a hollow, self-serving gesture that hoodwinks the beggar with counterfeit equity. Claude Pichois reminds us that “*Assommons les pauvres!*” originally ended with the passive-aggressive “*Qu’en dis-tu, Citoyen Proudhon?*” [“What do you have to say to this, Citizen Proudhon?”] a put-down line recently restored in Richard Sieburth’s translations of the late prose poems. (OC I, 1350, LF 195). Though Baudelaire suppressed this flippant tag in the final version, it confirms his contempt for anarchist mutualism, revealed to be little more than hypocritical scaffolding for a system of distributive justice that morally ratifies the gross inequality of capitalist pie-sharing.

Baudelaire is a master of distributive poetics, of social snapshots and forms of versification that drive home a point made in contemporary political philosophy (much of it stemming from a critique of Rawls) that “theoretical equality is the basis on which actual inequalities are routinely justified.”²⁶ Never a democratic leveler – he was too proto-Nietzschean in his acceptance of inequality between the weak and the strong as social fact – Baudelaire nonetheless sets us on a path of *making-equal* by exposing the flaws and inconsistencies in capital’s logic of equivalence-making. Having given us a world in which no General Equivalent exists that isn’t, in the end, just a foil for distributive injustice, he tips us into the philosophy

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26 Bull 2011.

of mathematics, where what it means to posit “this *equals* that” is by no means settled law,²⁷ and how “equality” is measured in differential currencies (“legal status, opportunity, resources, capability or welfare”) is never stable or clear.²⁸

Antoine Compagnon makes the complementary argument that Baudelaire was in quest of a different form of equivalency, one that could be mystically and metaphysically connected to infinity, the purity of number. Compagnon interprets Baudelaire’s constant evocations of the sea, the eternal, and the universal as symptomatic of the poet’s desire to mathematize existence. He cites a letter to Armand Fraisse of 1860 in which Baudelaire writes: “Tout est nombre. Le nombre est dans *tout*.”²⁹

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27The equals sign, (=) as Alison Mirin notes, is crucial to all “identity statements and assessments of sameness” in mathematics, but when it comes to unpacking expressions like “*is the same as* or *is identical to*” there is no simple sense, even in mathematics, of what “is” means or does. Frege, she reminds us, “struggled with the nature of the equality relation (the “is” of identity). At stake in the equals sign, for Mirin, is relational thinking, and the conceptual tensions between equivalence (that translates “equals” as “another name for”), and equality, translated as “same value” or “same quantity” to the left and the right of the parallel bars). Both are easy to conflate, as they share notions of identity distinguished by properties of symmetry, reflexivity and transitivity. See, Mirin 2019.

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What, I have long wondered, is the relation (if any) between = (the equality sign) and the word “equals” (derived from *æqualis*, meaning “uniform,” “identical,” or “equal”, and from *aequus* (meaning “level,” “even,” or “just,” and first recorded in 1557 by the Welsh mathematician Robert Recorde)? How does “equals” differ (if only indifferently) in meaning among arithmetic, logic, or other philosophical accounts of pure reason? Alain Badiou, will argue that Giuseppe Peano’s equals sign “is in point of fact a logical sign, not an arithmetical one” and should thus be treated as a special case of irreducible signs). (NN 49) And then there is Kant’s famous example of an a priori synthetic judgement, where $7 + 5 = 12$ uses “equals” to indicate a mental act of synthesis (and where the judgment in question is a priori because $7 + 5 = 12$ is a necessary truth). In Gottlob Frege’s 1879 *Begriffsschrift* (subtitled “a formula language, modeled upon that of arithmetic, for pure thought”), the act of mental “judgment” is symbolized separately from the equals sign, with a vertical stroke at the left end of a horizontal one. In the formula “ $I \text{—} A = B$,” the equals sign designates an identity of conceptual contents, or to be more precise, a relation between the *names* of conceptual contents (A and B), though later Frege would split conceptual contents between reference (*Bedeutung*) and sense (*Sinn*), roughly sign and meaning. In this way he further complicated the task of what = can express with the notion of “intensional contents” (meaning how we grasp the sense of a term, whether along the bias of description, action, nomination, etc). Frege, *Begriffsschrift*, 20-21. On the problem of names and reference in the epistemology of number, see Benaceraf 1965, pp. 47-73. The paper opens with an epigraph from Frege’s *The Foundations of Arithmetic* that is worth citing because it prepares his counter-argument that number cannot be a proper name:

“We can... by using...[our]...definitions say what is meant by
‘the number $1 + 1$ belongs to the concept F’
and then, using this, give the sense of the expression
‘the number $1 + 1 + 1$ belongs to the concept F’
and so on; but we can never ... decide by means of our definitions whether any concept has
the number Julius Caesar belonging to it, or whether that same familiar conqueror of Gaul is a
number or not.” (p. 47).

Benaceraf wants to “deny that all identities are meaningful.” His point is that “x and y are of some kind or category C, and that it is the conditions which individuate things as *the same C* which are operative and determine its truth value.” (p. 64, 65). This gets rid of the possibility that “Julius Caesar was (is?) or was not the number 43.” (p. 64). He thus limits the field of comparable identities to predicates of a common category, dismissing “entities” (like names) as “place fillers whose function is analogous to that of pronouns (and, in more formalized contexts, to variables of quantification”). (p. 66)

28 Ibid.

29 Compagnon 2003, p. 192. Baudelaire OC I, 649 as cited by Compagnon.

Compagnon does not discount the political significance of Baudelaire's reference to equality (reminding us that in "Le Miroir" a man claims to see in his reflection "the immortal principles of '89, according to which "all men are equal in their rights"), but in emphasizing the metaphysics of number his interpretation gives short shrift to the political thrust of Baudelaire's comic portrait of what Alain Badiou calls "the society of calculation." As in the worlds of Balzac's *Gobsek* and *César Birroteau* – the characters who control money in Baudelaire's financial fictions always steal and self-deal.

Given the extent to which Baudelairean poetics deconstructs equality as a political concept and exposes capitalism's "equal playing field" fairness economy as a sham, it is somewhat curious that a preeminent philosopher of equality like Jacques Rancière would select Mallarmé over Baudelaire as his paradigmatic poet of redistributive aesthetic praxis. Rancière emphasizes the relay in Mallarmé's writing between "a discourse that installs itself in the distributive separation of rhetorical place, and a discourse that enables the logic of distribution to evaporate, giving itself over to the indistinct equality of philosophical and linguistic invention."³⁰ For Rancière, Mallarmé's disarranged and reapportioned syntactic shares allow anyone in, or anything to count in preparation for what Kristin Ross calls "communal luxury" ("a beautiful commons available to all, a non-privatized experience of public culture, a time of communal enjoyment").³¹ Mallarmé, in this scheme, emerges as the radical theorist of political equality, while Baudelaire, by comparison, is merely the *iron* of equality's impossibility, who prefers to travesty the *juste milieu* philosophy of centrism, happy medium, middle-grounding, equalizing, and averaging-out (and its communication through a numerical unconscious) over and against experimenting with the re-ordering of discursive hierarchies as practiced by Mallarmé.

I want to insist, *pace* Rancière, on the relevance of Baudelaire's ironic poetics of distributive injustice to debates within contemporary social justice movements. It is hard not to be struck by this relevance in, for example, "Morale du joujou," the 1853 essay that furnished the basis for Baudelaire's prose poem "Le Joujou du pauvre" (in *Le Spleen de Paris*). A rich woman invites the young narrator to pick out a toy from a pile of treasure, and while he is attracted to an extravagant object, his mother admonishes him to choose a lowly gift. In an effort to appease everyone he makes a Whiggish choice, selecting something average and safe. It is clear, however, that the gift yields no excitement, only a sense of resignation to a world absent romantic absolutes and heroic ideals. When the opposing poles of luxury and common value become

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30 Rancière 2011, p. 228.

31 Ross 2015, p. 58.

mutually substitutable, and when the remainder of what has been evened out is entered into the bourgeois ledger of unexceptional rewards and just deserts, the legibility of inequality is lost and we are plunged into a value system of “same difference” where there really is no longer any difference between a rarity or a piece of trash. This is nothing short of heresy in capitalist doxa!

A scene from the *Sp/leen* prose poem “Le Joujou du pauvre,” investigates the “same difference” paradigm in a slightly different way. Where “Morale du joujou” democratizes commodities to the endpoint of value-indifference, “Le Joujou du pauvre” shows how this world of value-indifference reverts to inequality. It features a rich child playing listlessly near the gates of a castle, a splendid toy left to the side in total neglect. A thin, raggedy child approaches the gate and shows off his plaything, a live rat. The privileged youth stares avidly at this “rare and unknown” thing, catching the benefit of the imagination of the poor, capable of converting the most humble item into marvelous ludic material. An expression of complicity is exchanged between the two: “Et les deux enfants se riaient l’un à l’autre fraternellement, avec des dents d’une égale blancheur.” (OC I, 305) [And the two children smiled at each other fraternally, with teeth of equal whiteness] Here, references to fraternity and “equal whiteness” suggest revolutionary solidarity and distributive justice, but it is hard to take this apparent equality seriously. The rat may be “free stuff,” plucked from nature and released into a sharing economy, but such free gifts come at a price. If they even out class hierarchies through a universal transvaluation of values that raises up the socially excluded poor child by vesting him the premium value of a non-exclusive toy, however, they also contain a preview of how the gig economy works with independent contractors “freely” providing their labor (and discovering they are economically worse off than before). Moreover, such “free stuff” ultimately brings double profit to the rich boy: not only has he acquired an equal share in the poor child’s rat, he can add it to the interest-earning stock of his fancy plaything – unshared, and held in reserve for a rainy day.

Baudelaire excelled in parables that parody the ethical pretenses of those endowed with class privilege. Consider the *Sp/leen* prose poem “Les Yeux des pauvres” (1864), in which two lovers repair to a fancy café whose glistening walls refract bright white table-clothes and a decor teeming with casts of nymphs and goddesses sporting cornucopias on their heads. On the pavement outside a beggar appears with two tattered children in tow, fixing the couple with a baleful stare and making the man feel shame at the “sight of our glasses and carafes, bigger than our thirst.” (OC I, 318, 319). This image of the unjust portion - a surplus that will go to waste if not redistributed to the hungry - fails to arouse his companion’s Samaritanism. She prefers instead to demand that the poor be ejected from the premises. As Sanyal explains:

In this prose poem, the underlying violence of economic inequity is conveyed in the failure of amorous reciprocity. ... His beloved “dismisses the entire hermeneutic circuit that emerges from the assumption that the eyes of the poor are readable texts... 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, ... The principle of correspondences is deployed both in its poetic and social form to unveil a structural inequity before which poetic empathy and bourgeois humanism are woefully inadequate. (VM 81)

In “Les Yeux des pauvres” distributive injustice, shored up by the wealthy woman’s casual entitlement, leaves no place for the apologist of equity. The man in this couple must clearly choose – for the sake of love! - to adopt his beloved’s point of view. He (and by extension the poet and the reader) is coerced into adopting the post-political position of reveling in luxury, in *luxure*, vice, depravity, deadly sin, and *voluptuousness* (elevated in the famous refrain of “L’Invitation au voyage:” “Luxe, calme, et volupté”). For Jean-Paul Sartre, Baudelairean *volupté* was a particularly bad sin precisely because “it was a luxury.”³² He associated Baudelairean luxury with the horrific exuberance of nature, with pleasure spiritualized by Evil, with possession at a distance, with self-withholding, and with veneration for the sheer uselessness of poetic creation (which justifies aestheticizing the poor, indulging in the shocking act of luxuriating in others’ misery).

And yet, there are inklings of rebellious, “crazy” energies “spurting out of ennui and reverie” [une espèce d’énergie qui jaillit de l’ennui et de la reverie”] to be found in the lazy souls of voluptuaries. We discover them as gratuitous acts of violence in “Le Mauvais Vitrier;” in the figure of a man who starts a fire to see how it takes, in the actions of another, who lights a cigar near a powder keg just to tempt fate, and in the brutal shove that narrator gives the bad glazier, followed by the missile of a flower-pot that shatters the glass contents of his livelihood. These impulsive gestures can cost one dear, but who cares about the price of eternal damnation, the heretical narrator asks, if one can obtain, in one second, a feeling of infinite joy?³³ “Le Rebelle,” a poem from 1861 published in *Nouvelles Fleurs du Mal* (1868), the voluptuary’s indifference to the poor (and to morality, ethics, religion and justice) becomes what Benjamin, in reference to “Abel et Caïn,” identifies as the “radical theological form” given by Baudelaire “to his radical rejection of those in power.”³⁴

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32 Sartre 1949, p.75

33 Baudelaire 2008, p. 287.

34 Benjamin 2006, pp. 55-56.

Un Ange furieux fond du ciel comme un aigle,
Du mécréant saisit à plein poing les cheveux,
Et dit, le secouant: "Tu connaîtras la règle!
(Car je suis ton bon Ange, entends-tu?) Je le veux!

"Sache qu'il faut aimer, sans faire la grimace,
Le pauvre, le méchant, le tortu, l'hébété,
Pour que tu puisses faire à Jésus, quand il passe.
Un tapis triomphal avec ta charité.

"Tel est l'Amour! Avant que ton coeur ne se blase,
A la gloire du Dieu rallume ton extase;
C'est la Volupté vraie aux durables appas!"

Et l'Ange, châtiant autant, ma foi! qu'il aime,
De ses poings de géant torture l'anathème;
Mais le damné répond toujours: "Je ne veux pas!" (OC I, 139–140)

Scarfe Translation: A furious Angel swoops down from Heaven like an eagle and grips the wrongdoer's hair in his fist, saying as he shakes him, "Now you will learn the rule! For I am your good Angel, do you hear? Such is my will.

"Know that you must love, without wincing, the poor and the wicked, the twisted and the stupid, so that you will make for Jesus, when he comes a carpet of triumph with your charity.

"Such is Love! Before your heart becomes indifferent, rekindle your ecstasy for the glory of God; that is the true voluptuousness, whose charms endure."

And the Angel, chastising as much - heaven knows - as he loves, tortures the blasphemer with his gigantic fists. But the damned man keeps on answering. "No, I will not!" (BCV 257)

Faced with the duties imposed by Christian charity, and religion's guilt-enforced love for the poor, Baudelaire's rebel simply will not yield; he won't pay up, he insists on defying his "good angel" to follow the path of the "anathème," the excommunicant, and the "true Voluptuary." Here, "Je ne veux pas," - "I don't want to, I won't" - affirms an opting out of the economy of religious conscience that interestingly parallels Bartleby the Scrivener's formula of civil disobedience: "I would prefer not to."

Baudelaire's rebel belongs, on one side, to a lineage of Maistrian "antimoderns" whom, according to Richard Sieburth,

Baudelaire needed in the wake of his traumatic 'depolitization' after the failure of the 1848 Revolution and the subsequent coup d'état of 1851. From Maistre's politico-theological vantage point (far more

extreme than Edmund Burke's), the French Revolution had been nothing sort of a providential event, a divine punishment visited upon France (and, indeed, upon all of the modern world), ushering in the reign of unmitigated Evil attendant upon the extermination of all traditional principles of truth and order, themselves grounded in the absolute sovereignty of God. This is the Maistre whose analyses of the crisis of sacrality and sovereignty in postrevolutionary Europe presage not only those of Charles Maurras but also those of Carl Schmidt, Georges Bataille, the 1930s Parisian Collège de sociologie, René Girard and Robert Calasso. (LF 47–48)

On the other side, though, his rebel belongs to the company of poet-conspirators (Nerval, Rimbaud, Lautréamont, Artaud, Michaux, P.K. Dick, Pynchon, De Lillo, Bolaño), and philosopher-paranoiacs (Rousseau, Adorno, Guy de Bord, Deleuze with his “control society,” Guattari with his “integrated network of global capital”), qualified by the anonymous authors of the *Manifeste conspirationniste* as “penseurs de soupçon” (thinkers of suspicion). Thirsting for revenge on the society of calculation, they are possessed of a “conscience that will not be disarmed,” marrying *complotisme* with weaponized *bouffonnerie*.³⁵ A dual political character, between Schmidt and de Bord, Baudelaire’s rebel harbors residues of the unrepentant forty-eighter, still able, as Sieburth says, “to imagine the abolition of private property (as proposed by the French utopian socialists) as an alternate religious solution to the dehumanizations of modern capitalism.” The Rebel’s refusal “To make for Jesus/when he passes here/A regal carpet of your charity,” like the refusal of the Man in “The Ransom’s” suppressed strophe (who will not sow his crops to pay for slavery and holds out for “Common liberty,”) implies a wholesale rejection of the system of just deserts, poetic justice or proto-Rawlsian principle of fairness that shores up the foundational principles of capital logic and the theo-logic of religious moral claims. The Satanic “No” which doubles as a “No!” to the Angel’s demand for tribute, marks refusal to comply with a system of extorted property, crushing levies and infinite debt.

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³⁵ *Manifeste conspirationniste* 2022, pp. 47, 48, 33.

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