

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Santa Barbara

“La ville aux cent mille romans”:
Flânerie and Modernity in Urban French Literature from Balzac to Breton

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Masters of
Arts in Comparative Literature

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June 2018

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis would not have come into being without the invaluable support of my committee chair, Professor Catherine Nesci. I am indebted as well to my other committee members, Professors Dominique Jullien and Maurizia Boscagli, for their generous help and numerous insights that continuously shaped the direction of my research. I also owe a special thank you to my parents, Professors Tim and Miriam Vivian, for their abundant love and support.

For Alex, for everything.

ABSTRACT

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This essay explores the aesthetic and theoretical implications of canonical urban writing in French literature from roughly 1830 to 1930. Beginning with Balzac and the popular works of his time such as the *tableau*, I trace the rise of the *flâneur* as the quintessential embodiment of new modes of reading and writing the city. I then turn to Baudelaire’s poetry and aesthetic theory, which reveals the conception of the city as materials awaiting metamorphosis through symbolism and allegory. In the fiction of Zola, I analyze the eponymous department store of *Au Bonheur des Dames* as a paradigmatic site of phantasmagoria that produces the counter-force of the *conte* within Zola’s realist representation. I then read two essential Surrealist novels as reflective of these issues of representation that continued to vex the twentieth century. The Surrealist appropriation of *flânerie*, their preoccupation with chance and *le merveilleux*, their insistence upon the visual and its power of enchantment—these concerns ground them firmly within the French literary tradition at the same time as they seek to break with it. In these works, are utopian spaces realized, or do such efforts end in disenchantment? does the flâneur reach new heights in literature or simply reenact *ad infinitum* Icarus’s ill-fated flight? With such questions in mind, I explore the ambivalence that prevailed in the urban literary aesthetics of nineteenth-century writers, and which continued well into the twentieth century through the works of the Surrealists and the criticism of Walter Benjamin.

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Introduction

Spleen...is more than *Trübsinn* [melancholy]. Or rather, it is *Trübsinn* only in the final analysis: first and foremost, it is that fatally foundering, doomed flight toward the ideal, which ultimately—with the despairing cry of Icarus—comes crashing down into the ocean of its own melancholy.

—Walter Benjamin, unpublished fragment (1921-22)

Faced with the “embarrassment of riches” (to borrow from Christopher Prendergast) presented by the topic of French urban literature from the early nineteenth to early twentieth century, I have drawn inspiration from Pierre Citron, who acknowledges, in the introduction to his study of Parisian poetry,

Ainsi délimité, le champ reste assez vaste et peut-être trop. Cette poésie « consciente » de Paris, où la borner? Il semble possible de considérer en gros comme poétique tout texte où l’auteur n’a pas prétendu reproduire la réalité de Paris—je veux dire la réalité matérielle, qui est un certain nombre d’hommes vivant d’une certaine manière dans un certain nombre d’édifices, tout cela étant descriptible et mesurable—mais où il a cherché à exprimer cette réalité à travers autre chose... (7)¹

This essay will examine precisely the ways in which authors have sought to express “[la réalité matérielle] à travers autre chose...,” as well as consider the aesthetic and theoretical implications of such symbolic representations. “La vie est autre que ce qu’on écrit” [“Life is other than what one writes”], admits the narrator of André Breton’s *Nadja* (1928).

Nonetheless, Breton begins his work by envisioning a novel form that radically lays bare the authorial subject, rather than engage with the pretenses of “realist” authors who write as if at a distant remove from the characters and events they seek to portray. This tension within

realist representation defines not only Breton's novel but also the work of much nineteenth-century urban literature, from Balzac and Baudelaire, to Flaubert and Zola.

Although focused primarily on canonical works of fiction and poetry, I will begin with the Paris of Balzac, for whom the capital was “*toujours cette monstrueuse merveille, étonnant assemblage de mouvements, de machines et de pensées, la ville aux cent mille romans, la tête du monde*” (*Ferragus*, 95).^{2,3} I will study Balzac's early urban fiction in the context of the literary ethnography and serialized city sketches of his time, in which I will trace the rise of the *flâneur* as the quintessential embodiment of new modes of reading and writing the city.⁴ I will then turn to Baudelaire to explore his transformation of this essential figure of urban literature. Indeed, Baudelaire's poetry and aesthetic theory will serve as the axis around which my thesis turns,⁵ for in Baudelaire I have located a “*dialectic of transcendence*” that reveals the conception of the “*raw materials*” of the city as subjects awaiting metamorphosis through symbolism and allegory.

This reflex to transform the everyday life of the city into the realm of the mythic or spiritual resonates deeply in French literature following Baudelaire. In the fiction of Zola, for example, symbiotic developments in technology and capitalism provoke religious and mythic metaphors in order to represent the “*rouages*” [cogs] of modernity's machinery. In particular, I will analyze the eponymous *grand magasin*, or department store, of *Au Bonheur des Dames* as a paradigmatic site of phantasmagoria that produces the counter-force of the *conte* within Zola's realist depiction.

Last, after turning briefly to the work of Apollinaire, I will examine how the Surrealists engaged with these issues of representation that continued to vex the twentieth century. The Surrealist appropriation of *flânerie*,⁶ fixation with chance and the *merveilleux*

[marvelous], and insistence upon the visual and its power of enchantment—the predominance of these various tropes grounds them firmly within the French literary tradition at the same time as they seek to break with it. The collective desire among the Surrealists to self-reflexively analyze and theorize the form of their writing, as well as their respective innovations in the literary representation of urban modernity, places them in a dialogue with the nineteenth century that I aim to profitably explore.

My approach will draw from historical, social, and literary analyses. Of particular importance are those of Walter Benjamin, whose preoccupation with Baudelaire and nineteenth-century Paris, as well as his attention to the Surrealists, make him an invaluable interlocutor for my work. Like Benjamin, I will endeavor to bear in mind the situatedness of these texts within the more global framework composed of the fraught and dense network of literary texts that maintained constant and mutually generative dialogue with the city of Paris.⁷ At the same time, I am deeply interested in how history takes shape *within* the text itself, rather than simply asserting that history lies *behind* the text.⁸ As I study how these works attempt to transform and transcend their “raw materials” and the constraints imposed by form,⁹ I will examine ways in which they succeed or fail: are utopian spaces realized, or do such efforts end in disenchantment? does the flâneur achieve new heights in literature or simply reenact *ad infinitum* Icarus’s ill-fated flight? With such questions in mind, I will explore the ample ambivalence that prevails within the dialectical conception of modernity that emerged in the urban literary aesthetics of nineteenth-century writers, and which found expression well into the twentieth century in the works of the Surrealists and Benjamin.¹⁰

I. The Balzacian Flâneur

...les héros de l'Iliade ne vont qu'à votre cheville, ô Vautrin, ô Rastignac, ô Birotteau...et vous, ô Honoré de Balzac, vous le plus héroïque, le plus singulier, le plus romantique et le plus poétique parmi tous les personnages que vous avez tirés de votre sein !¹¹

—Baudelaire, *Le Salon de 1846*

For Baudelaire, Balzac was the quintessential flâneur, a hero of the urban space for his ability, as Mary Gluck argues, “to render legible and transparent the bewildering heterogeneity of urban life and...create a viable model for an epic imagination in modernity” (65). Balzac capitalizes on the literary trends of his day—such as the *tableau* and physiology—and appropriates their most fundamental figure of the flâneur. Far from a simple observer, Balzac draws upon the conception of the flâneur that endowed him with acute perception and artistic talent. As Baudelaire writes in his strident *éloge* of Théophile Gautier, “J’ai maintes fois été étonné que la grande gloire de Balzac fût de passer pour un observateur ; il m’avait toujours semblé que son principal mérite était d’être visionnaire...”^{12,13} Balzac’s *flâneur-artiste* (an appellation coined in his *Physiologie du mariage*) saturates the pages of his fictions and embodies this visionary character. Through this figure, Balzac effectively captures the proliferation of perspectives in the postrevolutionary period and incorporates this heterogeneity into his work: not only his narrators but his characters, too, reveal the appeal of the flâneur’s mastery over the urban spaces of Paris.

Although the flâneur bears a complex and multiform history, writers from the early-mid nineteenth century consistently confer upon this figure certain traits: namely, an acute ability to *read* the city, enabling a degree of semiotic authority, as well as a unique skill for rendering the city comprehensible through observational and literary prowess. This ability clearly makes the flâneur an emblematic model for writers. In *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes* (1840-1842)—a work of “panoramic literature,” as Benjamin termed it¹⁴—the entry on “Le Flâneur” by Auguste de Lacroix explicitly connects flânerie to literature: “La flânerie est le caractère distinctif du véritable homme de lettres. Le talent n’existe, dans l’espèce, que comme conséquence ; l’instinct de la flânerie est la cause première” (69).¹⁵ To mark flânerie as the essential precondition of the writer, Lacroix offers the utterly unambiguous formulation, “littérateurs *parce que* flâneurs” [“writers *because* flâneurs”] (69). Defined thus, the writer-cum-flâneur employs these preternatural gifts of observation to cut through the semiotic haze that envelops postrevolutionary Paris. Balzac’s work, in particular his early urban fiction, adopts and diffuses the role of the flâneur artist in order to exert a sense of authority over the heterogeneity of the city. His narrators and characters similarly transcend typical capacities of observation, penetrating the semiotic enigmas that abound in the city-text.

Flânerie comes to serve as both a poetics and a praxis, a way for writers to apprehend, comprehend, and reproduce the city in their texts. Indeed, as Gluck writes, “The unique relationship between the *flâneur* and the urban environment was invariably characterized by the metaphor of the city as text and the *flâneur* as reader” (70). The intense literary activity and circulation of texts within Paris creates seemingly infinite discourses that endeavor to

define the city and its inhabitants. In a prophetic mode, Jules Janin, in his introduction to *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes*, claimed that a hundred years later

L'on dira que dans cette capitale, tout le temps de la vie se passait à parler, à écrire, à écouter, à lire : discours écrits le matin dans vos feuilles immenses, discours parlés dans le milieu du jour à la tribune, discours imprimés le soir ; que la seule préoccupation de la ville entière était de savoir si elle parlerait un peu mieux le lendemain que la veille ; qu'elle n'avait pas d'autre ambition, et que le reste du monde pouvait crouler, pourvu qu'elle eût chaque matin sa dose d'esprit tout fait et de café à la crème. (v)¹⁶

With an insatiable appetite to read and write the city, Parisians fueled this vast proliferation in the production of urban discourse in which they could identify themselves and learn to identify others. The writer-reader relationship operates dialogically within Paris as each new discourse contributes to the palimpsest of the city-text, with which Balzac fully engages and upon which he leaves his own indomitable imprint. Faced with the chaotic and protean capital wherein a strong collective sense of fragmentation reigned, Balzac affirms through his early urban novels his “intention to make the city whole” by wielding the authority granted to the flâneur artist (Ferguson: 1994, 66).

This sense of authority infuses the Balzacian oeuvre. Indeed, as Prendergast observes, Balzac exerts a certain “fantasy of omnipotence and control, assuming privileged access to what lies ‘behind’ tautology and stereotype, to what, in the ‘Avant-propos’...[he] calls the ‘sens caché’ of the modern world” (2). In a semiotic reading of the city, “toute matérialité visible renvoie à un invisible moral ou social, à une autre matérialité spatiale ou temporelle, à un ordre du sens plus ou moins caché,”¹⁷ and it is this hidden connection that Balzac exercises his authority to explicate (Nesci: 2007, 54). The important relationship between the flâneur and city cannot be underestimated in Balzac’s work. One of the most crucial passages for understanding Balzac’s conception of flânerie comes at the end of his novel *Ferragus*, in

which the narrator ponders the Parisian boulevards that serve as the site of so many spontaneous encounters:

Qui n'a pas rencontré sur les boulevards de Paris, au détour d'une rue ou sous les arcades du Palais-Royal, enfin en quelque lieu du monde où le hasard veuille le présenter, un être, un homme ou femme, à l'aspect duquel mille pensées confuses naissent en l'esprit ! A son aspect, nous sommes subitement intéressés ou par des traits dont la conformation bizarre annonce une vie agitée, ou par l'ensemble curieux que présentent les gestes, l'air, la démarche et les vêtements, ou par quelque regard profond, ou par d'autres *je ne sais quoi* qui saisissent fortement et tout à coup, sans que nous nous expliquions bien précisément. Puis, le lendemain, d'autres pensées, d'autres images parisiennes emportent ce rêve passager. (228)¹⁸

Balzac appeals to the collective urban sensibility of the Parisian public—"Qui n'a pas rencontré..." ["Who hasn't met..."]¹⁹—and offers a circular closure on the role of the urban, as the novel begins with Balzac's well-known "physionomie des rues" ["physiognomy of streets"].²⁰ Here, however, Balzac emphasizes the ephemerality of daily life in the capital, in which a constant influx of "ideas" and "images" is ready to displace those of the day before. The old "joueurs de boules" whom Ferragus observes provide a counter-image to the constant movement of Paris, this "galerie mouvante": "...s'il était permis d'assimiler les Parisiens aux différentes classes de la zoologie, [ils] appartiendraient au genre des mollusques" (230).²¹ The ending of *Ferragus* thus emphasizes two key points underlying the modernity of Balzac's Paris: the insistence on types, this form of "zoologie" that would underpin his forthcoming conception of *La Comédie humaine*, and the tension between the ephemeral and the immutable, which foreshadows the essential dichotomy at the heart of Baudelaire's aesthetics of modernity.

Balzac writes of the Parisian populace that "Aucun peuple du monde n'a eu des yeux plus voraces" ["No people in the world had more voracious eyes"] (*Fer.*, 213). It is abundantly clear that Parisians, like the Balzacian narrator, wish to see all, and, in seeing,

understand. Bridging *voir* and *savoir*—effectively binding signifier and signified—satisfies the anxious desire among the public to *feel* as if it comprehends the city and its activities, a yearning which itself becomes crucial to the literary representation of urban life in Balzacian realism. The city, however, in its ever-shifting heterogeneity, resists representation, and we find ourselves in the aporia that defines Balzac’s oeuvre: one step removed from the embodied experience of daily life in Paris, its representation can refer only to the sort of established, common knowledge of the type found in abundance in the panoramic literature of the time. To cite one example, the unmasking of the chameleon figure of Vautrin, in *Le Père Goriot*,²² yields no profound explication on the behalf of the policeman, as one might expect, but rather a tautological resignation: “Paris est Paris, voyez-vous” [“Paris is Paris, you see”] (251).²³ Such statements depend upon an audience already *in the know*, a listener or reader who possesses the same base knowledge as the speaker or narrator, who is similarly familiar with the various types that people the city.²⁴ Indeed, Balzac frequently observes that his stories are eminently *Parisian* in character and as such will be foreign to those outside the microcosm of the capital: “Ces observations, incompréhensibles au-delà de Paris...” (*Fer.*, 94); “Sera-t-elle [cette histoire] comprise au-delà de Paris ? le doute est permis” (*LPG*, 21-22).²⁵

Balzac’s Paris is thus at once knowable and unknowable, finite and infinite. Among the many metaphors Balzac employs, Paris as ocean perhaps best epitomizes the tension between authorial control and uncontainable complexity at the heart of his fiction:

Mais Paris est un véritable océan. Jetez-y la sonde, vous n’en connaîtrez jamais la profondeur. Parcourez-le, décrivez-le ! quelque soin que vous mettiez à le parcourir, à le décrire ; quelque nombreux et intéressés que soient les explorateurs de cette mer, il s’y rencontrera toujours un lieu vierge, un antre inconnu, des fleurs, des perles, des

monstres, quelque chose d'inouï, oublié par les plongeurs littéraires. La Maison Vauquer est une de ces monstruosités curieuses. (*LPG*, 34-35)²⁶

This metaphor, which clearly evinces the long gestation of the zoological inspiration for *La Comédie humaine*,²⁷ transforms Paris into an unfathomable ocean within which the would-be flâneur or writer turns deep-sea diver. As in the darkness of the ocean depths, mystery and limits that challenge human knowledge abound.²⁸ The question that Balzac's fiction implicitly poses belongs to the realist endeavor: how to represent the utter strangeness and inexplicable goings-on of Paris, metonymically characterized through the Vauquer pension as "une de ces monstruosités curieuses" of Paris (*LPG*, 34-35)?²⁹ As in the beginning of *Fille aux yeux d'or*, where the "peuple horrible à voir" ["people who are horrible to see"] of Paris offer a Dantesque spectacle that epitomizes the nature of the city,³⁰ the minute detail of the Vauquer pension shows the full force of Balzac's realist ethos and the intensive demands it places upon his narrators to explicate all, to bear the totalizing mastery of the flâneur artist. At times this rigorous principle fails, straining under the burden of its self-imposed quest for totalizing knowledge. This results in the self-reflexive tautology that signals an inability to comprehend the city but by the city alone.

Baudelaire's poetry similarly struggles with these central concerns at the heart of Balzac's fiction. Their shared subject of scrutiny—the labyrinthine and protean city whose very nature resists definition—undercuts the realist desire of authority. Baudelaire, as we will see also with Zola and the Surrealists, pursues a new aesthetic—in theory and praxis—that underpins the difficulties inherent to the representation of the modern city.

II. Baudelaire, or Modernity's "reservoir of dialectical images"

La possibilité de vivre commence dans le regard de l'autre.³¹

—Michel Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*

Against the orthodox conception of nineteenth-century Paris, which insists upon a *break* in literary representation following the Revolution of 1848, David Harvey argues that Balzac, by “drawing back the veil to reveal the myths of modernity as they were forming from the Restoration onward...helps us identify the deep continuities that underlay the seemingly radical break after 1848” (17). Baudelaire indeed shares Balzac’s penchant for mythic evocations of Paris, and for both writers there exists an undeniable tension in the city between the present and its fraught relationship to its past as well as its possible futures. A nightmare upon their brains? Dreaming the century to come? In any case, their work insists on fixing the present moment in all its modernity in order to immediately transcend it by way of the mythic or historical past, or the dreamed-up future (or both). “[...] tout pour moi devient allégorie” [“For me, all becomes allegory”], writes Baudelaire in one of his masterpieces, “Le Cygne” [“The Swan”]. His poetry remains always on the edge, always teetering in the balance. Heaven and Hell, God and Satan, beauty and horror, *Spleen et Idéal*, *Fleurs du Mal*—such oppositions fuel the blazing beauty and conceptual challenges of Baudelaire’s poetry. In his melancholy meditations, Baudelaire sometimes attempts to keep these dichotomies apart, as if held separately in each hand; more often, however, they are like interlaced fingers, the opposing forces woven together and held in tension. I wish to explore in Baudelaire precisely this dialectical approach that seeks to transcend dichotomies through

the marrying of contradictory forces.³² Therein lies the essence of Baudelaire's well-known conception of modern art, composed equally of "le fugitif, le contingent" and "l'éternel et l'immuable" (*Le Peintre de la vie moderne* [*The Painter of Modern Life*], 553).³³

For Baudelaire, art emerges from the struggle between the individual and the world: "Le dessin est une lutte entre la nature et l'artiste" ["The representation is a struggle between nature and the artist"] (*Le Salon de 1846*, 245).³⁴ The tension, however, between artists and the external materials that they mine for their art, reflects an inescapable duality found within human existence: "La dualité de l'art est une conséquence fatale de la dualité de l'homme" ["The duality of art is a fatal consequence of the duality of man"] (*PVM*, 550). More than perhaps any other writer of his time, Baudelaire searches without cease the glorious heights and bitter baseness of public and private life in the modern city. His choice of subjects draws upon the tradition Louis-Sebastien Mercier establishes with his *Tableau de Paris* (1781-1788).³⁵ Treading in and alongside the footsteps of writers such as Mercier, Balzac, and Hugo, Baudelaire dramatizes the heterogeneity of the city under the Second Empire and, more importantly, the shocks inflicted upon the collective psyche of Parisians who spend increasing amounts of time in the crowded public spaces opened up by Haussmannization.³⁶ Curiosity compels the onlooker to relate to the Other by overcoming the limits of the self—"Épouser la foule" ["Marry the crowd"] as Baudelaire puts it in *Le Peintre de la vie moderne* (552). In his consideration of Constantin Guys, who, for him, embodies the modern artist, Baudelaire writes that

Pour le parfait flâneur...c'est une immense jouissance...être hors de chez soi, et pourtant se sentir partout chez soi ; voir le monde, être au centre du monde et rester caché au monde, tels sont quelques-un des moindres plaisirs de ces esprits indépendants, passionnés, impartiaux, que la langue ne peut que maladroitement définir. (*PVM* 552)³⁷

To leave one's house only to feel *at home* in the city—this ideal acts as the engine that drives Baudelaire's aesthetics of modern art. Successful artists are those who can transcend their own selves in order to become one with the crowd, inside it yet incognito, soaking in the marvelousness of the multitude.³⁸ Similarly, the genius of the artist derives from the ability to shirk off the burden of adulthood to reclaim “une perception *enfantine*, c'est-à-dire d'une perception aiguë, magique à force d'ingénuité” [“a *childlike* perception, that is, an acute perception, magic by dint of ingenuity”] (*PVM*, 553).³⁹ This rediscovery of the innate curiosity of childhood—“...le génie n'est que l'*enfance retrouvée* à volonté” [“...genius is only childhood regained at will”] (552)—enables the discovery of the inherent beauty and wonder of Parisian life, which is for Baudelaire so “féconde en sujets poétiques et merveilleux” (*Salon de 1846*, 261).

The artist, then, must seize upon the *merveilleux* that lies hidden to the common observer: “Le merveilleux nous enveloppe et nous abreuve comme l'atmosphère; *mais nous ne le voyons pas*” [“The marvelous envelops and soaks us like the atmosphere; *but we do not see it*”] (my emphasis; *Salon de 1846*, 261).⁴⁰ The eminent difficulty of the task lies not only in the marvelous nature of the city's animate and inanimate objects, but also in the attempt to fix a city that, in the throes of Haussmannization, found itself in a constant state of destruction and reconstruction.⁴¹ Baudelaire describes the modern artist's “...peur de n'aller pas assez vite, de laisser échapper le fantôme avant que la synthèse n'en soit extraite et saisie...” (*PVM*, 555), and, in “Le Cygne,” offers this devastating parenthesis: “(la forme d'une ville / Change plus vite, hélas ! que le cœur d'un mortel)” (7-8; 97).^{42, 43} Indeed, the constantly changing tableau that the city street presents is a far cry from a *nature morte*. Nonetheless, Baudelaire's poetry, in addition to sometimes taking on the classic poetic form

of the sonnet, superimposes historical and mythical layers overtop the present. The interaction of these layers provides a formal parallel to the thematic content of Baudelaire's poetry, always preoccupied with the juxtaposition of contradictory forces, which, for him, are nowhere more apparent than within the self: "Il y a dans tout homme, à toute heure, deux postulations simultanées, l'une vers Dieu, l'autre vers Satan. L'invocation à Dieu, ou spiritualité, est un désir de monter en grade ; celle de Satan, ou animalité, est une joie de descendre" (*Mon cœur mis à nu*, 632).^{44, 45} In his poetry Baudelaire attempts to lay bare the divided self in search of a way to become whole, to integrate into a Paris in constant flux under the Second Empire.

Baudelaire perhaps most profoundly articulates this division *within* the self and *between* the self and society in "Tableaux parisiens,"⁴⁶ a set of poems added to the 1861 edition of *Les Fleurs du mal*, published four years after the initial publication led to the public trial of Baudelaire (Flaubert, too, was famously tried in the same year for *Madame Bovary*). Exile appropriately serves as one of the most prominent themes of this section. Three of these poems—"Le Cygne," "Les sept vieillards" ["The Seven Old Men"], and "Les petites vieilles" ["The Little Old Women"]⁴⁷—among the most remarkable in *Les Fleurs du Mal*, he dedicates to Victor Hugo, then living in self-imposed exile in Guernsey. While only an extremely narrow-minded view of Haussmannization could ignore the many benefits that it brought—namely, improved light and sanitation—it nonetheless engendered strong feelings of resentment and alienation among a large number of Parisians, in particular within the artistic milieu to which Baudelaire belonged. As we have seen in *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*, Baudelaire praises the ideal of *flânerie* in which people feel as at home in the public spaces of the city as they do within their own home.⁴⁸ The massive restructuring of the

city under the Second Empire gravely threatens this ideal and provides the *point de départ* for his ultimate poem of exile, “Le Cygne.”

Baudelaire’s poem seizes upon the essence of life under Haussmannization—at least, for those not so fortunate as to be reaping the material profits of speculation, as evoked so well in Zola’s *La Curée* (1872). For Benjamin, the changing cityscape provoked a change in the consciousness and perception of its inhabitants (Terdiman 37). The rapidly changing topography of the city spurs Baudelaire to fashion a moving elegy to the Paris of yesteryear by weaving together a series of mythical and allegorical symbols. Following the classical model of the epic invocation, the poem begins with the apostrophe, “Andromaque, je pense à vous!” [“Andromache, I think of you!”] (1; 97). Beginning with this emblematic figure of exile and grief,⁴⁹ Baudelaire invokes a timeless, mythic quality that he will interlace with the indeterminacy of the present. Baudelaire is awakening to what Benjamin theorizes as “the dialectical, Copernican turn of remembrance” (*Passagen-werk*, Konvolut K1, 3).⁵⁰ Benjamin emphatically criticizes his peers who engage with the historicizing bent of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, whose attempts to show things “as they really were” act as a potent narcotic (*PW*, N3, 4). Rather than a history of the spoils (à la Zola’s *La Curée*), Baudelaire enacts a universalizing gesture to all those for whom home is no longer home, to the *exilés* of past, present, and future.⁵¹ As Benjamin acknowledges, “Baudelaire’s genius, which is nourished on melancholy, is an allegorical genius” (“Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century,” 40).⁵²

Every figure Baudelaire evokes in “Le Cygne” represents the profound “drama and trauma” of Haussmannization (Berman 147). In this “drama” of Baudelaire’s, however, little narrative actually occurs. For Richard Terdiman, this demonstrates the “unpredictable and

erratic traces of a consciousness under stress, of a memory in crisis” (142). Unlike Balzac, who endeavors to fashion a coherent narrative totality out of the fragmentary pieces of society, Baudelaire reflects this fragmentary nature by strewing together different figures of exile that spring forth from his “*mémoire fertile*” (5; 97). These memories “of the banished and dispossessed,” as Terdiman phrases it, imbue the poem with a mythic and ahistorical quality that acts in tension with the topical allusions of, for example, “le nouveau Carrousel,”⁵³ “Le vieux Paris n’est plus,” “Paris change !” and “ce Louvre” (6, 7, 29, 31; 97). Against Haussmannization, the poem takes on a derisive and defiant tone, as when the poet writes “*ce Louvre*,” opting for the demonstrative adjective rather than the expected definite article, placing it contemptuously within the contingent and negatively associating it with its transformation under the Second Empire (my emphasis; 31, 97). Baudelaire valorizes “le vieux Paris” in contrast to the structuring and ordering forces of Haussmann, which effectively strip and reconfigure the topography of the city. The poem comprises two parts of seven and six stanzas respectively, which, for a poem nostalgic for “le bric-à-brac confus” of the past, might very well offer a subtle retort to the “alignment” sought by the regime of Napoléon III.⁵⁴

Against the discourse of the Second Empire, Baudelaire’s poem records for posterity his overwhelming sense of alienation from Paris, his lifelong home. He transcends the present through memory, mentally reconstructing—“*Je ne vois qu’en esprit*” [“I see only in my mind”]—the *quartier bohème* of the Carrousel that he frequented before its abrupt destruction in 1852 (9; 97). “Memory does not reproduce,” however, Terdiman reminds us—“it *represents*,” capturing the “inauthenticity of presentness, the traumatic persistence of an irreversible experience of loss” (108). The poem captures this sense of the city as inexorably

caught between what it was and what it will be; its recent reconstruction had not yet obscured the memory of the city as it had been (Terdiman 119).⁵⁵ Like the swan who struggles “vers le ciel” [“toward the sky”], the poet labors toward an idealized form of poetry that provides a respite from the uncanny sense of exile *within* one’s homeland (25-26; 97). The homophony of “cygne” and “signe” establishes a semiotic reading of the city as a text whose mutations have transformed it to the point of illegibility, and thus intelligibility. The displaced swan functions as just one of many signs that inevitably draws the reader away from the contemporary city and toward a mythic past. The final stanza reiterates the universalizing power of empathy as the poet evokes shipwrecked sailors and prisoners of war, and “bien d’autres encor !” [“many others still!”] (52; 97). As Catherine Nesci notes, “the final breath/sound of the endless echo of the ‘cor’ ...[is] emphasized by the final rhyme and non-closure of the poem on the adverb ‘encore’” (2014: 75). As Paris becomes a subject of lyric poetry with Baudelaire, the classical tradition nonetheless imposes its weight, à la Marx’s famed critique of Napoleon III’s coup: “The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living” (*The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoléon*, 595). “Le Cygne” concretizes this image when the poet writes that his “chers souvenirs sont plus lourds que des rocs” (32; 97). Memory thus operates ambivalently, at once preservation against the discourse of the Empire,⁵⁶ but also as a haunting burden upon one’s consciousness.⁵⁷

As Baudelaire shifts toward the prose poem, Paris gains some liberation from the weight of the past. The city, as in Balzac’s urban fiction, functions as a complete microcosm in which the author reigns supreme; in Baudelaire, however, the emphasis is as much on the aesthetic quality of the text as it is on the social aspect.⁵⁸ Although this isn’t to say that

Baudelaire ever loses sight of the social issues that plague Paris—au contraire. As Marshall Berman observes, “The physical and social transformations [of Haussmannization] that drove the poor out of sight now bring them back directly into everyone’s line of vision” (153). The most marginal figures draw Baudelaire’s attention and he places them into sharp relief in prose poems such as “Le joujou du pauvre” [“The Poor Child’s Toy”] and “Les yeux des pauvres” [“The Eyes of the Poor”]. These poems highlight the increase, since the start of the nineteenth century, in urban encounters between people of differing classes. In order to represent such heterogeneity, Baudelaire’s “Tableaux parisiens” demonstrate the poet’s desire to fully immerse himself in urban life, to register the beauty and horror of Parisian life in all its infinite variety. The role of the gaze, increasingly important since the rise of the flâneur, stands inseparable from Baudelaire’s urban aesthetic.

In poems such as “Les aveugles” [“The Blind Men”], “À une mendiante rousse” [“To a Redheaded Beggar-Girl”], and “À une passante” [“To a Woman Passing By”], the eye marks the subjectivity of the poet (the “I”) at the same time as it considers the reciprocal gaze of the passerby. The desire for an ecstatic dissolution of the self into the crowd depends upon the interpenetrating gaze. In “À une passante,” the all-too-fleeting eye contact with the eponymous *passante* allows for the poet’s instantaneous spiritual rebirth (10; 101).

Benjamin’s conception of the past, which depends upon a dialectical movement between the ephemeral and the eternal, resonates here: “The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again” (“Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 255). In Baudelaire’s poem, which itself fixes the fleeting moment into the memorializing space of the poetic text, the speaker asks, “Ne te verrai-je plus que dans l’éternité?” [“Will I see you again only in

eternity?"] (11; 101). The *passante* serves as a perfect symbol for Baudelaire's vision of modern art, in which the artist translates the subjective and eminently ephemeral experience of urban life into the work of art, which records the present for posterity by inscribing itself within the collective work of cultural memory. The *passante* crystallizes the fusion of ancient and modern, appearing as a classical work of art, with her "jambe de statue" ["statuesque leg"], somehow unmoored in—yet always ephemerally *passing through*—the crowd (5; 101).

The profound empathy expressed in "À une passante" forms a critical component of Baudelaire's urban aesthetics and emerges explicitly in the last sentence of the prose poem "Les Fenêtres": "Et je me couche, fier d'avoir vécu et souffert dans d'autres que moi-même" ["And I go to bed, proud of having lived and suffered in others than myself"] (174). As William Sharpe observes, there lies a tension within this expression of empathy: is it a mark of security and maturity, or rather a reflection of a loneliness that compels the need to escape the self? (53) The poem's opening meditation on the window as emblematic threshold between public and private, interior and exterior, reveals the overwhelming desire to overcome the liminal space through penetration into the interior space of the Other: "Il n'est pas d'objet plus profond, plus mystérieux, plus fécond, plus ténébreux, plus éblouissant qu'une fenêtre éclairée d'une chandelle" (174).⁵⁹ The old woman seen from afar, through the separation of both of their windows, provokes reflection on the constructed nature of consciousness, in which we impose mental structures of signification over the visual field that we encounter—in other words, binding signifier and signified, connecting *voir* ["to see"] and *savoir* ["to know"]. Based upon "son visage...son vêtement...son geste...presque rien" [her face...her clothes...her body language, almost nothing], the poet "refait l'histoire de cette femme, ou plutôt sa légende" ["remakes this woman's history, or rather her legend"]

(174). In this voyeuristic mode, as in “À une passante,” the poet reads the woman and reconstructs her, *or rather her legend*. The poet then addresses the reader who may be skeptical of his empathetic imagination:⁶⁰ “Peut-être me direz-vous : ‘Es-tu sûr que cette légende soit la vraie ?’ Qu’importe ce que peut être la réalité placée hors de moi, si elle m’a aidé à vivre, à sentir que je suis et ce que je suis ?” (174)⁶¹ The poet feels as if he finds himself in the Other, in the spectacle of the stranger’s private life. But to what extent can an individual live vicariously through the simulacrazed lives of others? The limits of the self’s ability to merge with the Other come to the fore in “Tableaux parisiens,” particularly in the sonnet “Les aveugles,” which follows two similarly uncanny poems, “Les sept vieillards” and “Les petites vieilles.”

Despite their lack of sight, the eponymous blind men of the poem wander the city with their heads upraised, seeming to search for answers from the heavens beyond. The poem opens with an imploring injunction from the poet to confront their frightening faces rather than turn away: “Contemple-les, mon âme ; ils sont vraiment affreux !” [“Contemplate them, my soul; they are truly frightening!”] (1; 100). The blind who roam the spectacle-laden city ironically become spectacles themselves, recipients of gazes that they cannot return. The poet then offers this apostrophe to Paris:

Ô cité !
 Pendant qu’ autour de nous tu chantes, ris et beugles,
 Éprise du plaisir jusqu’ à l’ atrocité,
 Vois ! je me traîne aussi ! mais, plus qu’ eux hébété,
 Je dis : Que cherchent-ils au Ciel, tous ces aveugles? (10-14; 100)⁶²

The city, overridden with vice, burdens the poet who—“plus qu’ eux hébété” [“more dazed than them”]—bears witness to its prostitution and material and spiritual poverty; *les*

aveugles, however, are paradoxically liberated from the weight of the world. Nonetheless, they seem, like the poet, to seek answers from the beyond, not from the city but in the eternity of the heavens.⁶³ The poet affects this same heavenward gaze in search of the *idéal*, attaining his own form of self-transcendence through self-identification with the Other.

This transcendental endeavor does not come without risks, however, and it is precisely the possibility of its failure—indeed, of falling from the sought-after heights—that aligns it so well with mythological figures such as Icarus and Phaëton.⁶⁴ Baudelaire explicitly repurposes the Daedalus-Icarus myth in his poem “Les Plaintes d’un Icare.”^{65, 66} In a characteristically perspicacious insight, Benjamin remarks how the title of “Spleen et idéal” itself resonates with the Daedalus-Icarus dichotomy, in which spleen consists of “that fatally foundering, doomed flight toward the ideal, which ultimately—with the despairing cry of Icarus—comes crashing down into the ocean of its own melancholy” (“Baudelaire [III],” 29). The myth had found a certain renaissance in the Romantic period, when Romantics viewed Daedalus as the quintessential classical artist, skilled and self-assured, with Icarus as the consummate Romantic artist, passionate, rebellious, and convention-flouting. Baudelaire embodies a merger of the two: in his adoption of classical lyric forms such as the sonnet, coupled with his then-radical choice of poetic subject matter and his innovation in the genre of prose poetry. In the highly personal work, *Mon cœur mis à nu* [*My Heart Laid Bare*], unpublished in his lifetime, Baudelaire confides that “Tout enfant, j’ai senti dans mon cœur deux sentiments contradictoires : l’horreur de la vie et l’extase de la vie” [“Only a child, I felt in my heart two contradictory feelings: the horror of life and the ecstasy of life”] (638). His poems weave these two feelings together, sometimes revealing in the same poem both the horror of ecstasy and the ecstasy of horror.⁶⁷

This dialectical employment finds itself likewise at work in his concepts of the *beau* and the *moderne*. In the prose poem “Le *Confiteor* de l’artiste” [“The Artist’s *Confiteor*”], for example, the poet ends emphatically with “L’étude du beau est un duel où l’artiste crie de frayeur avant d’être vaincu” [“The study of beauty is a duel where the artist cries out in fright before being vanquished”] (149).⁶⁸ The poem sets up a movement from Nature’s role as irresistible source of inspiration, in the vein of Romanticism, to its overwhelming force as “Nature, enchanteresse sans pitié, rivale toujours victorieuse” [“Nature, pitiless enchantress, always victorious rival”]. The contemplation of nature produces a state of reverie in which “le moi se perd vite” [“the *self* quickly fades”], permitting the poet to merge with the *beau*, in further pursuit of a transcendence of human limits. The artist strives toward the *beau* as the ultimate goal of the aesthetic ideal, but this ultimately begets alienation: “Ah ! faut-il éternellement souffrir, ou fuir éternellement le beau ?” [“Ah! Must one suffer eternally, or eternally flee from beauty?”]. As the Icarus myth cautions, going beyond human limits and failing to respect the forces of nature comes at a dire cost.⁶⁹ In taking on the figure of Icarus in “Les Plaintes d’un Icare” [“The Complaints of an Icarus”], the poet characterizes himself as guilty of the same aspirational tendencies and prophecies his own destiny:

Et brûlé par l’amour du beau,
 Je n’aurai pas l’honneur sublime
 De donner mon nom à l’abîme
 Qui me servira de tombeau.⁷⁰ (13-16; 85)⁷¹

We must also remember *why* Daedalus crafts his wings: in order to flee Crete, where he remains exiled from his native land by King Minos. Baudelaire wants to simultaneously flee himself and the city in which he feels exiled and alienated, as evoked so memorably in “Le Cygne.” Poetry permits him a paradoxical means of escape—paradoxical in that it is *through*

his urban experience that he develops his poetic consciousness. In mediating his perception of the city, Baudelaire's poetry reflects the shock of modern experience, to borrow Benjamin's well-known articulation.

A critical component of the shock, however, derives in particular from the chaos and heterogeneity of the modern city, in which people from all manner of classes and backgrounds merge in the crowd. It is easy to understand why Baudelaire's unflinching mixing of the high and the low, of God and Satan, Heaven and Hell, etc. moved the Second Empire to condemn *Les Fleurs du Mal* within two months of its initial publication. As Bakhtin remarks in *Rabelais and His World*, "official culture is founded on the principle of an immovable and unchanging hierarchy in which the higher and the lower never merge" (166). As we have seen, Baudelaire's poetry depends both thematically and structurally upon the dialectical movement between oppositions such as the sacred and profane, *spleen* and *idéal*. In this way, Baudelaire's work plays a fundamental role in the *Zeitgeist*, or "structure of feeling," of his epoch. Raymond Williams develops this term in *The Country and the City* (1973) to describe cultural marks of lived experience that fall outside the institutional forces of society—what Louis Althusser, for example, refers to as "Repressive and Ideological State Apparatuses" (1970). The Second Empire depended upon its hierarchy in order to justify its reified and farcical Napoleon.⁷² In spite of this oppressive atmosphere, Baudelaire cultivates an aesthetic theory that insists upon art's transformative role in turning the ephemeral materials of modern urban experience into the eternal form of the *beau*, which transcends time and space and flouts the institutional conventions of the Empire and the Catholic Church: "Nous voulons, tant ce feu nous brûle le cerveau, / Plonger au fond du gouffre, Enfer ou Ciel, qu'importe ? Au fond de l'Inconnu pour trouver du *nouveau* !" ("Le Voyage,"

124).⁷³ Whether from Heaven or Hell, the source of inspiration does not matter as much as what it permits, which Baudelaire describes as “l’aspiration...vers une beauté supérieure, et la manifestation de ce principe est dans un enthousiasme, une excitation de l’âme...” (*Notes nouvelles sur Edgar Poe*, 352).⁷⁴

This desire to transcend the self, to find fulfillment in the “excitation de l’âme,” will find expression in the mid-late nineteenth century not only in the *œuvre d’art*, but also in the commodity, which, in many ways, comes to replace it. Baudelaire despises the world of business, denigrating it as “satanique, parce qu’il est une des formes de l’égoïsme, et la plus basse et la plus vile” [“satanic, because it is one of the forms of egotism, and the most base and the most vile”] (*MC*, 639). Zola’s novel *Au Bonheur des Dames* reveals an ambivalence toward commerce, at once apologetic and critical, but not without detailing at length the manipulative and Machiavellian machinations that underlie the phenomenal rise of the *grand magasin* in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

III. Zola's *Au Bonheur des Dames*, or the Dream-World of the Commodity

...the novel was structured not in the distanced image of the absolute past but in the zone of direct contact with inconclusive present-day reality.

—Mikhail Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel"

Certain conditions precipitate the rapid development of the *grand magasin* under the Second Empire. Chiefly among them is the public's voracious appetite for spectacle, which Haussmann exploits at every opportunity.⁷⁵ The Haussmannized boulevards develop into the center of city life, their cafes and stores a visual feast for any would-be flâneur.⁷⁶ Under the Second Empire, as Vanessa Schwartz observes, flânerie becomes the normal "cultural activity for a generalized Parisian public" (16). The predecessors of the *grand magasin*—the *passages couverts* so fundamental to Benjamin's conception of urban modernity—compel the attention of passersby through innovations in architecture and lighting. As Brian Nelson writes, "l'avènement durant le Second Empire des grands magasins (avec leur structure de verre et d'acier identiques à celle des passages) représente une nette accélération dans l'évolution des modes de consommation" (20).⁷⁷ The developers of the *grand magasin* thus capitalize on these further advances in order to construct immense and spectacular structures that seek to effectively turn passersby into spectators.

Indeed, the very goal was to draw the public in, as these stores implemented a policy of *entrée libre*, an ingenious move since the interior served a similar purpose of whetting the purchasing appetite of the customer. This calculating nature of capitalism in the production and display of its phantasmagoric commodities should not be underestimated, as the *étalage*

[display] of products, in which Prendergast perceives a “staging as *objet d’art*,” places singular emphasis on attracting—and provoking the desire of—the customer (35). Engaged with the same spectacularity as the Universal Expositions that take place under the Second Empire (1855; 1867)—which Benjamin describes as “places of pilgrimage to the fetish Commodity,” and where “the phantasmagoria of capitalist culture attained its most radiant unfurling”⁷⁸—the *grand magasin* brings the Universal Exposition to the everyday, highlighting the utter saturation of daily life by spectacle.



Au Bon Marché, 1887 (Aristide Boucicault collection, engraver unknown)

The eponymous *grand magasin* of *Au Bonheur des Dames* demonstrates so vividly what Benjamin sees in the arcades, these “theatrical spaces for the *mise-en-scène* of the phantasmagoric commodity” (Buse 7). The famous connection Marx establishes between commodities and religion enacts a powerful critique of the way in which commodities suppress rationality through emotional appeal.⁷⁹ Georg Lukács perceives in the networks

established by fetishized commodities the emergence of an insidious “second nature,” in which the normalization of said commodities masks their false nature.⁸⁰ The consequence, as we shall see in Zola’s novel, is that the loyal customers of the *grand magasin* fail to recognize—or, in recognizing, fail to resist—its deliberately exploitative mode. Although they seek transcendence in the transitory and infinitely reproducible commodity, they ultimately fall victim to the cunning of Octave Mouret, whom Zola characterizes as a masterful architect of the modern city under the thrall of capital.

Mouret follows in the footsteps of one of the most significant early characters of *Les Rougon-Macquart* (1871-1893), Aristide Rougon (*dit Saccard*) of *La Curée* (1872), who, for Zola, embodies the corrupt workings of Haussmannization, with its rampant speculation fueled by the advent of new systems of credit.⁸¹ Saccard’s success depends upon his insider knowledge of the urbanizing plans of the *Hôtel de Ville* (thanks to his brother, Eugène, minister to Napoléon III); Mouret’s comes through a marriage that eventually makes him proprietor of the *Bonheur*.⁸² Both figures allow Zola to express an ambivalence that characterizes his fiction both thematically and formally, as I shall examine shortly.

Ambitious to the point of cutthroat and manipulative behavior, Saccard and Mouret underline the essential role that money and speculation play in the positivist march of “progress.” As Zola wants to show “le mécanisme intérieur”⁸³ that drives the actions of the Rougons and Macquarts, he similarly insists on exposing the inner workings of the machine-like *grand magasin*. Whereas Saccard’s fortune hinges particularly upon the venality of the Empire, Mouret’s attests more to the dint of hard work and ingenuity, a sort of *fin-de-siècle* Steve Jobs or Jeff Bezos. Just as these modern-day CEOs have capitalized on the rise of the Internet, Mouret makes full use of the technological advances of his time; as the Apples and

Amazons of today rely on a culture of consumerism, so did the *grand magasin*, which in fact develops the modern consumer who desires the convenience of “one-stop shopping” and the elaborate spectacle of the commodity in its manifold forms.

The increasing democratization of consumerism hinges equally upon the diminishing prices of commodities, especially clothing, driven by “increasing mechanization...falling costs of raw materials, improving efficiencies in both production and consumption, and a rising rate of exploitation of labor power” (Harvey 218). With greater purchasing power and the ever-increasing seduction of the window display, the public supplies more than enough demand for the explosive growth of the *grand magasin*. The Haussmannized boulevards, with their cafés and theaters, fuse public and private with a certain spectacularity. Mouret employs the spectacle in his theatrical displays, where the fetish of the commodity flourishes, persuasively demanding passersby to relinquish their attention—and then their pocketbooks. Mouret also masters the art of advertising: “...le *Bonheur des Dames* sautait aux yeux du monde entier, envahissait les murailles, les journaux, jusqu’aux rideaux des théâtres” (282).^{84, 85} The success of the commodity depends precisely upon this hegemony over the public. As Benjamin writes, “[The spectator] surrenders to [the commodity’s] manipulations while enjoying his alienation from himself and others (“Paris,” 36). The abstraction in the exchange value of a commodity such as an article of clothing depends inherently on the abstraction of fashion, on the collective whims of the bourgeois or aristocratic “tastemakers” of society. The rise of the *grand magasin* permits a similar rise in the bourgeois customer’s ability to participate in the phenomenon of fashion, which, as Benjamin notes, “prescribes the *ritual* according to which the commodity fetish demands to be *worshipped*” (my emphasis; “Paris,” 37).

Zola clearly understands this fetishistic nature and describes at great lengths the powerful effects it generates among the female clientele of the *Bonheur*. To cite one example, Mme Boves, a woman of wealthy means, becomes a kleptomaniac, helplessly succumbing to the irresistible nature of the commodity. At several points the narrator describes the store itself as a “cathédrale,” creating an explicit parallel between Catholic salvation and the illusion of transcendence through the commodity. The church also marks a uniquely porous site between personal and public as a communal space where people openly display their religious beliefs. Similarly, the *grand magasin* serves as a place where public and private come together for women freed from the domestic obligations of the home. (As the title of the store suggests, it is made expressly for female happiness.)⁸⁶ At the same time, however, the female clientele become entrapped in a store that depends upon their participation in a cycle of consumption, where the products artfully displayed before them reinforce their status as homemakers and tastemakers, confined to the domestic world where appearances reign supreme. The narrator, by way of *discours indirect libre*, provides us with Mouret’s persuasive pitch to Baron Hartmann (Zola took no chances with that allusive name), in which the former outlines his plan of exploitation:

Et si, chez eux, la femme était reine, adultée et flattée dans ses faiblesses, entourée de prévenances, elle y régnait en reine amoureuse, dont les sujets trafiquent, et qui paye d’une goutte de son sang chacun de ses caprices... [Mouret] lui élevait un temple, la faisait encenser par une légion de commis, créait le rite d’un culte nouveau... (111)⁸⁷

Women thus find themselves on the one hand liberated from, but on the other hand participant to, the reproduction of their domestic roles, which similarly defines the narrative arc of the novel’s principal heroine, Denise Baudu.

Denise is integral to what Dominique Jullien has observed as the novel's dual plot, which allows Zola to weave together "réalisme et conte" ["realism and tale"] (97). Zola himself, in his preparatory notes, acknowledges this "double mouvement" in which Mouret, whose wealth and prestige come from his conquering of women, finds himself in the end conquered *by* a woman. Denise's role in softening and civilizing Mouret, and in transforming the *Bonheur* into a utopic *phalanstère*, provides a counterpoint to the Mouret characterized as Machiavellian for the majority of the novel. Denise's presence as the object of Mouret's love lessens the realist force of the story and moves it into the dream-world of the fairy tale. What brings about this exception, that is, the rare volume in the twenty-novel cycle of *Les Rougon-Macquart* to end happily? Zola, who so often evokes the terrible force of the *réel* in novels such as *L'Assommoir* and *Germinal*, gives *Au Bonheur des Dames* the happy ending of the *conte*. But why? In *Le Roman expérimental*, Zola contends that "Cet inconnu immense qui nous entoure ne doit nous inspirer que le désir de le percer, de l'expliquer, grâce aux méthodes scientifiques" (85).⁸⁸ As much as the novel attests to his scrupulous desire to lay bare the inner mechanisms of the *Bonheur* and commodity fetishism, Zola nonetheless takes a decisive step away from the scientific doctrine of his experimental novel toward the more timeless narrative structures of myth and fairytale. Like Baudelaire, he draws upon the real for the "raw materials" (to borrow from the language of commerce) of his work, only to transform them through symbol and myth. This reflex reveals the power of the mythic and fantastic to impose—with the full weight of their symbolic power—upon the realist pretenses of the author.⁸⁹

The clients themselves contribute to the conception of the *Bonheur* as a fairytale world: during one particularly elaborate sale, two habitual customers describe the atmosphere

as “féerique” [“like a fairy-tale”] and “un monde” where “on ne sait plus où l’on est” [“a world” where “one no longer knows where one is”] (290). Unmoored in the labyrinth of the store, which metonymically reflects the labyrinth of Paris, the consumer becomes lost amid the commodities, drawn in all directions by their varied seductions. Although moments of clarity arise—one client tells another, for example, “Vous avez raison, il n’y a pas d’ordre, dans ce magasin. On se perd, on fait des bêtises” [“You’re right, there’s no order in this store. You get lost, you act foolishly”] (309)—they ultimately capitulate to the spectacle of the commodity and make impulsive purchases. At the *rayon des dentelles* [lace section], the narrator depicts a chaotic scene, palpable with the intoxicated fervor of the clientele:

Les clientes, qui s’y étouffaient, avaient des visages pâles aux yeux luisants. On eût dit que toutes les séductions des magasins aboutissaient à cette tentation suprême, que c’était là l’alcôve reculée de la chute, le coin de perdition où les plus fortes succombaient. Les mains s’enfonçaient parmi les pièces débordantes, et elles en gardaient un tremblement d’ivresse. (313)⁹⁰

The narrator makes explicit the nature of the temptation, in which the conspicuous consumption of these women, rather than exalting them, aligns them with the original sin brought on by the Fall. While churchgoers arrive at the cathedral in hopes of absolving their sin, here there is an inversion, wherein the seductive nature of the commodity, as Nelson remarks, leads consumers to “un fantasme d’identification au bien de consommation qui conduirait à des rituels d’achats, constamment renouvelés” (21).⁹¹ Although in theory the exponential growth of commodities would satisfy the most voracious consumer, the proliferation of these commodities in fact creates a multiplication of desires that produces an overwhelming sense of insatiability.

Mouret, as the master architect of the desire-producing space of the *grand magasin*, reigns over it like a patriarch. Depicted constantly as observing the store from above, his

privileged perspective indicates his power not only over the clientele but his workers as well.⁹² The workers share a collective sense of dread about the cutthroat firing sprees carried out by Mouret's second-in-command, Bourdoncle, with his merciless "Passez à la caisse !" Indeed, Mouret views the majority of the workers as dispensable, caring little about their poor treatment until Denise becomes engaged to him and manages to implement some reforms. The workers, *les petits commerçants* [small businesses] adjacent to the *Bonheur*, all remain subservient to the tide of industry, as Mouret tells Denise, "car l'idée soufflait des quatre points du ciel, le triomphe des cités ouvrières et industrielles était semé par le coup de vent du siècle ; qui emportait l'édifice croulant des vieux âges" (432).⁹³ Mouret embodies the same Haussmannian spirit, where renovation and expansion come at the expense of the less fortunate, but always ostensibly for the public good. Whereas he wants to build a cathedral of commerce, a majestic edifice testifying to progress *en marche*, he vilifies the small business owners who he claims have now become "la honte des rues ensoleillés du nouveau Paris" ["the disgrace of the new Paris's sunny streets"] (433). Michel Serres suggests that Mouret's success depends upon his understanding of the workings of imperialism, wherein the control of space is fundamental.⁹⁴ Unlike Haussmann, Mouret does not meet an unsuccessful end. He fulfills the narrative structure of the *conte* by marrying Denise and remains one of the most successful men in Paris. There remains, however, an ambivalence in the ending of the novel. Despite the marriage, and despite Denise's reforms to improve the condition of the workers, the *Bonheur* remains a fiercely hierarchical and insidiously exploitative machine. An attempt to read Denise's reforms as a successful humanization of the store struggles to hold up, as the bourgeois ideology and profoundly patriarchal structure persist in spite of her modest domestication of Mouret. The *grand magasin* will continue to exploit consumer and

employee alike so that the owner reaps the vast majority of the profits. This self-perpetuating Molochian capitalism obscures the relations between the classes within the microcosm of the store. Denise's effort to improve the quality-of-life of the employees ultimately helps Mouret, if it contents them with their meager pay and exhausting shifts, and sees them spending more of their time within the paternal control of the store, where the majority of the employees already live.

The novel ultimately offers an endorsement of the inextricable partnership of capitalism and modernity. Zola states in his preparatory notes that he is after the "poésie de l'activité moderne"⁹⁵ and, although it comes at certain costs, such as the ruin of the *petits commerçants*, the novel construes these as natural consequences to the march of progress, in which one can identify the unmistakable influence of social Darwinism. Despite all the negative characterizations of the *Bonheur*—this "ogre des contes," this "monstre"—it provides the epic backdrop of modernity, of the *réel* with which he will weave the romantic plot of the *conte* (450; 451). There is thus an unavoidable ambivalence at the heart of the novel, divided between admiration and repulsion, between the contemporary reality of the Second Empire and the mythic space of the *conte*, between a society advancing through technology yet consumed through its own compulsive consumption. In this way, Zola evinces a similar split between the real and the symbolic, drawing upon the concrete social conditions of his time only to locate them within a larger symbolic framework with far greater implications about the brutal mechanisms driving forth the machinery of modernity. Is Mouret not another Icarus, given wings by the Daedalus that is modern capitalism? A would-be Übermensch who flies ever nearer to the Sun? Indeed, he flies toward the Sun-God Apollo in search of the fully-fledged realization of the "poésie de l'activité moderne." Yet, he

remains in perpetual danger of falling from these heights, brought down by the fatal combination of hubris and the ever-insatiable appetite of Molochian capitalism.

IV. An Apollonian Interlude

Le tout est...de savoir concentrer son esprit sur un seul point, de savoir s'abstraire suffisamment pour amener l'hallucination et pouvoir substituer le rêve de la réalité à la réalité même.

—J.-K. Huysmans, *À rebours*⁹⁶

To compensate in some way for otherwise passing over roughly two generations, and authors such as Huysmans, in my transition from Zola to Surrealism I will briefly study Guillaume Apollinaire's *Alcools* (1913) as a proto-Surrealist work—it was Apollinaire, after all, who coined the term.⁹⁷ Apollinaire's name aptly recalls Apollo, classical God of (among many other things) poetry, music, and the sun, and a figure with whom Apollinaire identifies in “La Chanson du Mal-Aimé” in the line “Juin ton soleil ardente lyre” [“June your ardent lyre sun”] (45). Like the other authors under present study, Apollinaire sets out from descriptions of urban life but juxtaposes them with historical personages and mythic figures.

Characterizing Apollinaire's poetry is a play between modernity and tradition, sometimes subtle, sometimes more explicit, always expressed in a highly idiosyncratic and intertextual manner.

Apollinaire shares the same fascination as the Surrealists with the intoxicating power of language, as in his oft-cited couplet from “Zone”: “Et tu bois cet alcool brûlant comme ta vie / Ta vie que tu bois comme une eau-de-vie” [“And you drink this burning liqueur that's like your life / Your life that you drink like a brandy”] (28). Apollinaire's modernity seems to exude the intoxicating effects of alcohol, personifying Parisian nights as drunk and enveloping them in a lurid and surreal haze:

Soirs de Paris ivres du gin
Flambant de l'électricité
Les tramways feux verts sur l'échine
Musiquent au long des portées
De rails leur folie de machines ("La Chanson du Mal-Aimé," 45)⁹⁸

The inclusion of modern technologies such as electricity and the tramway marks the contemporary moment of Apollinaire, but the poet offsets this modernity by framing the poem within a timeless, mythological context—the tramway, for example, becomes a serpent that suggests the insidious side of a would-be Eden of the twentieth century. One of the few recurring stanzas in the poem crystallizes the position of the poet as suspended between the present and a tradition that long predates him:

Moi qui sais des lais pour les reines
Les plaintes de mes années
Des hymnes d'esclave aux murènes
La romance du mal aimé
Et des chansons pour les sirènes ("La Chanson du Mal-Aimé," 46)⁹⁹

Like Baudelaire and Breton, Apollinaire's poetic persona attempts to scrutinize the self *through* others, evinced by the constant vacillation between *tu* [informal "you"] and *je* ["I"] in "Zone." In this modernist masterpiece, as in the work of Baudelaire, the "random impressions of urban life...generate associations of ideas that lead the poet...to express the hope of recapturing [the] lost state [of childhood] in the present" (Porter 287). The bridge imagery of the poem's opening lines—"Bergère ô tour Eiffel le troupeau de ponts bêle ce matin" ["Shepherdess o Eiffel Tower the flock of bridges bleats this morning"] (21)—parallels the poet's desire to make connections of his own—between past and present, Paris and the pastoral, the mythological and the historical.

Indeed, for my present purposes Apollinaire serves as a powerful bridge himself, at once hearkening back to the aesthetics of Baudelaire's "Tableaux parisiens" and fearlessly innovating in his own right, crafting a liberated form of poetic expression that profoundly influences the Surrealists' own sensual and cerebral forays into the urban setting of Paris.

V. Surrealism: *l'errance, l'erreur, l'Éros*

Les erreurs ont presque toujours un caractère sacré.
N'essaie jamais de les corriger.¹⁰⁰

—Salvador Dalí, *Journal d'un génie adolescent*

In the early-twentieth century two closely related artistic movements—Dada and Surrealism—would carry on the fraught but always fruitful dialogue between artists and the spaces of urban modernity set forth so powerfully in the nineteenth century. Inspired by poets such as Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Lautréamont, and against the backdrop of continuing urbanization that long outlasted Haussmann's downfall, French Surrealists such as André Breton and Louis Aragon develop a literary doctrine that attempts to overcome the limitations set forth by the stifling homogeneity of bourgeois culture in the interwar period. It comes as no surprise that Benjamin, so absorbed by the phantasmagoric character of nineteenth-century Paris' *passages* and *grands magasins*, views the work of the Surrealists as a renewed approach to the dreamlike spaces and objects of the metropolis. If the *grand magasin* functioned for Zola as a dream- and desire-producing machine, the totality of the city provides the Surrealists with the “most dreamed-of of their objects,” as Benjamin writes in his 1929 essay “Surrealism, or the Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia” (51).¹⁰¹ In a clear development from the work on hypnosis led by Jean-Martin Charcot in Paris and Hippolyte Bernheim in Nancy, the psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud focused on the dream as the privileged point of access to the subconscious.¹⁰² For Surrealist writers, tapping into the subconscious level permitted a way of transcending the limitations of waking reality, with its fixed bourgeois forms and conceptions. Breton worked as a medical assistant to one of

Charcot's former assistants and was so taken with the pioneering work of Freud that he actually visits him in 1921, an encounter that leaves him very much disenchanted.¹⁰³ And although Benjamin does not explicitly refer to Freud very often, it is clear that he, too, grapples with his influence.¹⁰⁴ For the Surrealists, the time of childhood and the states of dreaming or madness allow the imagination to flourish, freed from the utilitarian considerations of a materialistic society. The streets of Paris similarly offer fantastical fodder for the would-be flâneur.

The appropriation of this crucial figure of nineteenth-century urban literature enables the Surrealists to engage with literary tradition—especially with Baudelaire—at the same time as they aim to create a new form of artistic expression freed from the constraints of modern rationality.¹⁰⁵ The Surrealists appropriate in particular the flâneur's openness to chance and willingness to explore the marginal sites of the city. I will study two novels that depend on this mode of flânerie in order to reimagine the urban spaces of the city and the form of the novel itself: Aragon's *Le Paysan de Paris* [*Paris Peasant*] (1926)¹⁰⁶ and Breton's *Nadja* (1928). As I explored in Baudelaire's poetry and Zola's *Au Bonheur des Dames*, these works show how the symbolic and mythical lie latent within the concrete reality of the city. As Aragon writes at the end of his novel, "La fantastique, l'au-delà, le rêve, la survie, le paradis, l'enfer, la poésie, autant de mots pour signifier le concret" (248).¹⁰⁷ The Surrealists take up the preoccupations of Baudelaire while adding a fascination with the latent possibilities found in dreams and the unconscious.

In the *Passagen-Werk*, Benjamin defines the rise of capitalism in the nineteenth century as "a natural phenomenon with which a new dream-filled sleep came over Europe, and, through it, a reactivation of mythic forces" (391; KJa, 9). We must awaken from this

sleep, Benjamin argues, to overcome the nefarious forces of capitalism. Benjamin's metaphoric deployment of sleep, in order to capture the sense of enchantment that emerged in the nineteenth century, seems to contradict the Surrealist's intense interest in dreams and the unconscious as spaces liberated from capitalism. In either case, however, Benjamin and the Surrealists endeavor to expose the phantasmagoria of urban modernity in order to unveil the contradictions of social life under capitalism. Indeed, Benjamin's initial working title for the *Passagen-werk* was "Parisian Arcades: A Dialectical *Féerie*."¹⁰⁸ His use of *féerie* [fairyland] marks the shared belief by Benjamin and the Surrealists of the supernatural and mythological underpinnings to modern capitalism. "Balzac," Benjamin writes, "was the first to speak of the ruins of the bourgeoisie. But it was Surrealism that first opened our eyes to them. The development of the forces of production shattered the wish symbols of the previous century, even before the monuments representing them had collapsed" ("Paris," 45). By studying "the ruins of the bourgeoisie," Benjamin and the Surrealists leverage the exposed inner workings of the past structures of capitalism to better analyze their influence on the present. The decaying decadence of Second Empire architecture affords a prime opportunity for "profane illumination," which Benjamin describes as "a materialistic, anthropological inspiration" ("Last Snapshot," 49). The Surrealists practice a Baudelairean *flânerie* that permits—or, rather, promotes—a poetic vision of modernity that leaves space for the superimposing of supernatural and symbolic imagery, of magical and mythological forces latent beneath the surface reality of social relations. Coaxing out these enchanting elements helps identify the utopian elements dreamed up by the past generations, and which thus become integrated into the collective unconscious. Consideration of such "wish

images,” following Benjamin, reveals “the utopia that has left its trace in a thousand configurations of life, from enduring edifices to passing fashions” (“Paris,” 32).

For Louis Aragon, these “enduring edifices” allow for the development of a “mythologie moderne” in light of the last stages of Haussmannization carried out in the early twentieth century.¹⁰⁹ In reference to Aragon, Benjamin once admitted in a letter that he “could never read more than two to three pages by him because my heart started to pound so hard that I had to put the book down” (qtd. in Huyssen 189). What exactly was it about Aragon’s early Surrealist writings that so viscerally affected Benjamin? Most likely, their shared view of the ecstatic potentialities of the modern metropolis, in particular through its marginal spaces such as the arcades, which Benjamin describes in the *Passagen-werk* as “caves containing the fossil remains of a vanished monster” (R2, 3). As Andreas Huyssen persuasively argues, Benjamin’s own creative writing efforts—as in *One-Way Street* and *Berlin Childhood*—demonstrate a “surrealism akin to Aragon’s ‘le merveilleux quotidien’” (183). Interestingly, Benjamin does not mention Aragon in his most drawn-out appraisal of surrealism, the “Last Snapshot” essay. This may very well be, however, simply a matter of chronology, as Breton’s *Nadja*, which receives explicit attention, had come out only the previous year.¹¹⁰ In any case, what is clear is that the doctrine and practice of the Surrealists in the mid-1920s fascinates Benjamin to the point that he dedicates his creative energies to appraising their cultural and artistic weight.

Aragon’s novel, and indeed the Surrealist movement more generally, emerges from what Georg Simmel describes as “the attempt of the individual to maintain the independence and individuality of his existence against the sovereign powers of society...” (11). This idiosyncratic drive leads Aragon to create a novel that would, in theory, baffle critics, for

whom Aragon was not short of contempt.¹¹¹ In his reflection on writing, *Je n'ai jamais appris à écrire ou les Incipit* (1969), Aragon describes his approach to *Paysan*:

[J]e cherchais... à faire naître à partir du roman reconnu tel, une nouvelle espèce de romans enfreignant toutes les lois traditionnelles de ce genre, qui ne soit ni un récit (une histoire) ni un personnage (un portrait), et que la critique devrait par suite envisager les mains nues... puisqu'il n'y avait plus de règle du genre... ce roman qui n'en serait pas un, je l'écrivais, je m'imaginai l'écrire, pour démoraliser mes amis, ceux qui se proclamaient les ennemis irréductibles de tout roman. (49-50)¹¹²

In clear allusion to the *anti-roman* stance of Breton, Aragon constructs a hybrid text that reflects both the Surrealist engagement with montage as well as the plasticity and creative potentialities of the novel form, which, as theorized by Mikhail Bakhtin, “sparks the renovation of all other genres... infects them with its spirit of process and inconclusiveness... draws them ineluctably into its orbit precisely because this orbit coincides with the basic direction of the development of literature as a whole” (7). Bakhtin’s observation dovetails nicely with the Surrealist desire to reform literature and wrest it from its more bourgeois conventions. Aragon innovates by incorporating into his novel poetry, publicity, and signage of all sorts, processed through the estranging perspective of the *paysan* newly arrived in Paris, eyes wide open to the wonders of the city. As outlined by Aragon himself in his boldly titled preface, “À une mythologie moderne,” this vision carries with it a desire to overturn the hegemony of “le sot rationalisme humain” [“stupid human rationality”], whose accompanying “peur de l’erreur” [“fear of the mistake”] and “manie de contrôle” [“mania of control”], Aragon tells us, “fait préférer à l’homme l’imagination de la raison à l’imagination des sens” (14) [“makes men prefer the imagination of reason to the imagination of the senses” (SWT 24)]. In response, Aragon seeks to restore the role of the senses, and his novel

weaves together a dense tableau of sense perceptions confronting the spaces and objects of urban modernity, prioritizing primarily vision but also preoccupied with hearing and touch.

“À toute erreur des sens correspondent d'étranges fleurs de la raison... Là prennent figure des dieux inconnus et changeants,”¹¹³ writes Aragon toward the end of the preface (15). This productive character generated by the fallibility of the senses enables “le sentiment du merveilleux quotidien” [“the sense of the everyday marvelous”], in which, as in the Paris of Baudelaire, “tout tourne aux enchantements” [“all turns to enchantment”] (“Les petites vieilles,” 2; 98). In Aragon’s *Paysan*, perception remains perpetually open to the marvelous metamorphoses of everyday life in the city, and these transformations occur through contemplation of the image:

Le vice appelé *Surréalisme* est l’emploi déréglé et passionnel du stupéfiant *image*, ou plutôt de la provocation sans contrôle de l’image pour elle-même et pour ce qu’elle entraîne dans le domaine de la représentation de perturbations imprévisibles et de métamorphoses : car chaque image à chaque coup vous force à réviser tout l’Univers. (82)¹¹⁴

In this self-ironizing definition that marks Surrealism as a practice, the image becomes crucial as the proliferation of meanings it demands from its various spectators necessitates a constantly renewed vision of the world. By refusing the fixed meanings assigned to daily life by the bourgeois status quo, the Surrealists attempt to step outside of capitalism, which insists upon assigning use-value to all objects. Along the same lines as Georges Bataille, who suggestively writes on the arbitrary nature of this economic signifier in *La Notion de dépense* (1933), and who engages polemically with Breton,¹¹⁵ Aragon claims that “...le principe d’utilité deviendra étranger à tous ceux qui pratiquent ce vice supérieur” (83) [“...the principle of usefulness will become foreign to all those who practise this superior vice” (SWT 79)]. This self-imposed estrangement from capitalism and its ever-flourishing

fetishization of the commodity permits the Surrealists to free themselves from the confining logic of capitalism.

The acceptance of error as the royal road to truth, as well as a liberating openness to chance,¹¹⁶ enables the Surrealists to move beyond the role of mere *observateurs* and take on the more far-reaching potentialities of *flânerie*, that is, to seize upon the emancipating energies of artistic creation that enable the overcoming of “certaines contraintes” to transcend the ordinary and perceive the world in its wild and natural state:

Je ne me serais pas cru observateur, vraiment. J’aime à me laisser traverser par les vents et la pluie : le hasard, voilà toute mon expérience. Que le monde m’est donné, ce n’est pas mon sentiment... je veux bien être pendu si ce passage est autre chose qu’une méthode pour m’affranchir de certaines contraintes, un moyen d’accéder au-delà de mes forces à un domaine encore interdit. (109)¹¹⁷

Although led by chance, Aragon attests to the magnetizing forces of the modern city—demonstrated so well by Zola in the *grand magasin* and its commodities—which stimulate the senses and seduce the eye, drawing in passersby through the production and solicitation of a previously unfelt or repressed desire:

Pour qu’était-ce, ce besoin qui m’animait, ce penchant que j’inclinai à suivre, ce détour de la distraction qui me procurait l’enthousiasme ? Certains lieux, plusieurs spectacles, j’éprouvais leur force contre moi bien grande, sans découvrir le principe de cet enchantement. (140)¹¹⁸

Like the religious character of commodity fetishism, the narrator is at pains to uncover the underlying source of the enchantment of the city.

The interplay of sense perception and spectacle follows a similar dance between the surface appearance and the truths underneath that they mask. For Aragon, breaking through to the other side becomes imperative as objects then take on meaning themselves rather than simply projecting meaning onto the viewer: “Un objet se transfigurait à mes yeux, il ne

prenait point l'allure allégorique, ni le caractère du symbole ; il manifestait moins une idée qu'il n'était cette idée même" (141).¹¹⁹ Aragon privileges the role of the body in such "profane illuminations," whereby in the process of integrating "l'infini sous les apparences finies de l'univers" ["the infinite in the finite guise of the universe"], he adopts "l'habitude d'en référer une sorte de frisson" (143) ["the habit of constantly referring the whole matter to the judgement of a kind of frisson" (SWT 130)]. The physical experience leads to a metaphysical one, allowing for transcendence of the self in a desirable dissolution into the external world.

As Baudelaire laments that "Le merveilleux nous enveloppe et nous abreuve comme l'atmosphère; mais nous ne le voyons pas," Aragon's narrator recounts that "Il m'apparut que l'homme est plein de dieux comme une éponge immergée en plein ciel" (143) ["It became apparent to me that man is full of gods as a sponge plunged into the open sky" (SWT 130)]. Crucial for Aragon's text is the *sentiment de la nature*, expressed, for example, by the evergreen desire of painters to portray the ocean, mountains, and rivers; humanity's taste for travel; and in gardens (141). Aragon realizes that the "mythes nouveaux" cannot be opposed to this *sentiment de la nature*, so inextricably bound to classical mythology. By consequence, these myths "puisent leur force, leur magie à la même source...et à ce titre ce qui m'émeut en eux c'est leur prolongement dans toute la nature" (152);¹²⁰ Aragon then argues that the "*sentiment de la nature* n'est qu'un autre nom du sens mythique" (155) ["*feeling for nature* is but another name for the sense of the mythic"]. This union of the natural and the mythic reveals how, following Aragon, all that is exterior to humans becomes transformed and located within a mythological structure. His task in the novel thus becomes precisely the

practice of a flânerie that acknowledges how certain symbolic structures belie the collective understanding of the modern metropolis.

The built environment of an epoch, as Benjamin frequently observes, expresses its underlying ideological structures.¹²¹ For Aragon, “Tout le bizarre de l’homme, et ce qu’il y a en lui de vagabond, et d’égaré, sans doute pourrait-il tenir dans ces deux syllabes : jardin” (147).¹²² In gardens, Aragon sees an artificiality that he connects to femininity by personifying them as women: “Jardins, par votre courbe, par votre abandon, par la chute de votre gorge, par la mollesse de vos boucles, vous êtes les femmes de l’esprit, souvent stupides et mauvaises, mais tout ivresse, tout illusion” (147).¹²³ The domesticity of nature in the garden permits a Surrealist connection to the domesticity of women in bourgeois society, in which the exterior acts as an intoxicating and illusory mask. (It is telling, indeed, that Aragon’s personification limits itself to the sensual and thus sexual parts of the female body.) This stereotype of the modern Parisienne does not fall far from the type evoked in Zola’s *Au Bonheur des Dames*, in which the clientele of the *Bonheur* fall victim to the passions produced by a certain uncontrollable *folie* in front of the artfully-displayed commodities. Women in Aragon’s novel, however, also possess the ability to inspire love in the narrator, a force portrayed as more transformative than any other. This ambivalence finds expression in the amorous narrator’s apostrophe to *la femme*: “Charmante substituée, tu es le résumé d’un monde merveilleux, du monde naturel, et c’est toi qui renais quand je ferme les yeux... Tu es l’horizon et la présence... L’éclipse totale. La lumière. Le miracle...” (207).¹²⁴ Embodying the *merveilleux*, women for Aragon similarly unveil the magical and mythological sense of life. At the same time, however, they tantalize and even imprison the narrator as desire-producing entities: “O désir...je me prends comme un prisonnier à la grille de la liberté, moi

le forçat de l'amour..." (207) ["O desire...like a prisoner I grip the bars of liberty, I, the slave of love..." (translation modified ; SWT 183)].

More importantly for Aragon, however, is that nothing represents lyric poetry better than the idealized Woman, who forms, after all, the genre's *raison d'être*. She embodies the creative force of the imagination and the polymorphous play of language and poetry: "La femme est dans le feu, dans le fort, dans le faible, la femme est dans le fond des flots, dans la fuite des feuilles, dans la feinte solaire où comme un voyageur sans guide et sans cheval j'égare ma fatigue en une féerie sans fin" (209).¹²⁵ The alliterative overload of "f," which naturally evokes words such as "fantaisie," "féerie," and "féminin," seizes upon the arbitrary connection between sign and signifier and how this arbitrary character appropriately reflects the *merveilleux*, which Aragon defines at the end of the novel as "la contradiction qui apparaît dans le réel" ["the contradiction that appears in the real"] (248).¹²⁶ Women, found "dans le fort" and "dans le faible," embody this contradiction. The narrator describes their power as a unique ability to overcome the boundaries between two subjects and dissolve the subject-object relationship: "Toute métaphysique est à la première personne du singulier. Toute poésie aussi. La seconde personne, c'est encore la première" (247).¹²⁷ Women, embodying the *merveilleux* as *poésie*, provoke the poet's love, as exemplified in Aragon's well-known tribute to his wife, *Les Yeux d'Elsa* (1942). To clearly demarcate Aragon's culminating argument, let's take it in the order given by the text:

La réalité est l'absence apparente de contradiction.

Le merveilleux, c'est la contradiction qui apparaît dans le réel.

L'amour est un état de confusion du réel et du merveilleux. Dans cet état, les contradictions de l'être apparaissent comme *réellement* essentielles à l'être. (248)¹²⁸

What emerges in Aragon's metaphysics is an insistence on the place of love, enabled by women, in the marvelous aspect of reality. The contradictions produced in the subject by the state of love "appear as truly essential to it," as the last part of the argument emphasizes. Love's unique ability to create a transcendent and poetic space aligns it with the Surrealist search for the *merveilleux*: "L'esprit métaphysique pour moi renaissait de l'amour. L'amour était sa source, et je ne veux plus sortir de cette forêt enchantée" (242).¹²⁹ As the "source" that engenders "l'esprit métaphysique," Aragon portrays love as the highest priority. But what about the characterizations of the women who permit such love in the first place?

By today's standards, these seem problematic at best, outright misogynistic at worst. Not seen as discrete entities but as iterations of one cohesive femininity, in which they act as muses, women remain nonetheless far from equivalent to men. If we briefly return to Baudelaire, we can see how the Surrealist treatment of women does not evolve much from his own. As Benjamin identified in nineteenth-century Paris, and as the work of Baudelaire attests (and Zola's, for that matter), subjects and objects become inextricably entangled, making subjects like objects and vice versa. In light of Baudelaire's conflicted stance toward the figure of the prostitute, Benjamin realizes that the prostitute crystallizes this conflation of subject and object, writing that "Love for the prostitute is the apotheosis of empathy with the commodity" (J85, 2; 011a, 4). Described by Benjamin as "seller and sold in one," the prostitute for Baudelaire is a reliable source of relief from the loneliness of modern life ("Paris," 41):

Les amants des prostituées
Sont heureux, dispos et repus;
Quant à moi, mes bras sont rompus
Pour avoir étreint des nuées. ("Les plaintes d'un Icare," 1-4; 85)¹³⁰

Despite these lines, the prostitute instills in Baudelaire a melancholy that Benjamin rightly views as symptomatic of “the price for which the sensation of the modern age may be had: the disintegration of the aura in the experience of shock” (“On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” 194).

A slight modification to this formula, “the disintegration of the aura in the experience of love,” provides a pithy summation of Breton’s own sort of hybrid “anti-novel,” *Nadja*, which came out two years after Aragon’s *Paysan*. Breton’s text focuses on a woman’s brief passing into and out of the narrator’s life. At the same time, the text is just as much about Breton and Surrealist ideology. Breton’s appropriation of Nadja’s mental health issues strikes the contemporary reader as in regrettably poor taste, if not utterly reprehensible, considering how Breton conceives of Nadja as simply a tool to access “profane illuminations,” rather than as a complex human being with a tremendously fragile psyche. Indeed, after a substantial introduction that outlines his literary approach, Breton fairly quickly recounts his brief connection with Nadja before dispensing with her once again to focus on his philosophical concerns. In this way, Nadja serves as simply a springboard for Breton to reflect on the movement that he set out to define just a few years previously in the first *Manifeste du surréalisme* (1924).

In his chancing upon Nadja in the street, Breton notes that “Elle va la tête haute, contrairement à tous les autres passants” [“She walks with her head high, unlike all the other passersby”] (72).¹³¹ Nadja literally sticks out, her head raised high above those around her, whom we imagine as beaten down by the *métro, boulot, dodo* rhythm of Parisian life. In fact, it is in part because Nadja seems unfettered by labor, and in part because her way of life seemingly adheres to surrealist tenets, that Breton believes to have found a kindred spirit in

her. At one point, for example, Nadja plays a game in which she improvises imagined scenarios—“je me raconte toutes sortes d’histoires” [“I tell myself all kinds of stories”]—telling Breton that “c’est même entièrement de cette façon que je vis” [“it’s even entirely in this way that I live”] (87).¹³² When they meet, she says she is on her way to a *coiffeur*, but Breton doubts her in this parenthetical: “(je dis : prétend-elle, parce que sur l’instant j’en doute et qu’elle devait reconnaître par la suite qu’elle allait sans but aucun)” [“(I say ‘she claims’ because at the moment I doubt it and she later had to admit that she was wandering without a destination)”] (73). In the way that Nadja, like Breton, *en flâneur*, wanders across Paris, freed from the yoke of capital and the visible marks left by the imposition of its labor, with an openness to the city and to chance encounters, it is not remiss to consider her a *flâneuse*.¹³³ As fellow flâneurs, then, Breton finds in Nadja a worthy subject for his Surrealist text, appreciating the enigmatic mystique that she exudes and a worldview seemingly Surrealist in its anti-rationalist outlook.¹³⁴ In a setting like that of “À une passante,” Breton finds himself compelled to note the appearances of those in the crowd: “J’observais sans le vouloir des visages, des accoutrements, des allures. Allons, ce n’étaient pas encore ceux-là qu’on trouverait prêts à faire la Révolution” (71-72).¹³⁵

Despite his general cynicism over the revolutionary potential of the masses, Breton finds in at least one of these passersby a subject of interest. His gaze drawn to the eyes of Nadja, he comments on her make-up in a characteristic digression that foreshadows his surface-level appropriation of Nadja for aesthetic and philosophical reflections that pertain more directly to him and the ideology of Surrealism:

(un tel éclat s’obtient et s’obtient seulement si l’on ne passe avec soin le crayon que sous la paupière. Il est intéressant de noter, à ce propos, que Blanche Derval, dans le rôle de Solange, même vue de très près, ne paraissait en rien maquillée. Est-ce à dire

que ce qui est très faiblement permis dans la rue mais est recommandé au théâtre ne vaut à mes yeux qu'autant qu'il est passé outre à ce qui est défendu dans un cas, ordonné dans l'autre? Peut-être.) (73)^{136, 137}



Photograph of Blanche Derval by Henri Manuel (1874-1947)

Breton refers here to *Les Détraquées*, a Grand Guignol-style play put on in 1921 that traces the forbidden desires of two women. Blanche Derval played one of them, and Breton was so struck by the play that he recounts the plot of it at length in *Nadja*. What becomes striking here, as Susan Rubin Suleiman has shown, is the extent to which Breton revels in the “spectacle of female ‘otherness’: madness, murderousness, lesbianism” in the safety of the theater, but eventually distances himself from it when it manifests in own life via *Nadja* (103).

Indeed, when *Nadja* begins to recount her past life to Breton, he grows bored and even irritated by this demystification, recalling Baudelaire, who, following his liaison with Mme Sabatier, writes to tell her that “... il y a quelques jours, tu étais une divinité, ce qui est si commode... si beau, si inviolable. Te voilà femme maintenant” (qtd. in Ruff 15).^{138, 139} Both Baudelaire and Breton prefer the enigma of the *passante*—which requires a certain emotional and physical distance—to the actual living and breathing woman beneath the

surface. This is especially true of Baudelaire, who argues that “Ce que les hommes nomment amour est bien petit, bien restreint et bien faible, comparé à cette ineffable orgie, à cette sainte prostitution de l’âme qui se donne tout entière, poésie et charité, à l’imprévu qui se montre, à l’inconnu qui passe” (“Les foules,” 155).¹⁴⁰ As in Baudelaire’s poetry, where “Paris becomes a phantasmal site... where in the sudden meeting with the unknown Other... sexuality and textuality combine in the [*passante*],” Breton views Nadja rather as a fetishized means to an aesthetic end (Sharpe 40).

Thus disenchanted, Breton senses an irreconcilable break, writing that Nadja’s stories “ont failli de m’écarter d’elle à jamais” [“nearly took me away from her forever”] (134). His attachment to her clearly dissipates as he moves from a more precise chronicling of their time together to an atemporalized “J’ai revu Nadja bien des fois” [“I saw Nadja again many times”], before no longer seeing her at all (136). The way in which Breton’s relationship with Nadja troubles the twenty-first-century reader stems largely from the way in which he objectifies, even fetishizes, her mental illness. This is an unfortunate irony for a text that sets out to overcome subjectivity and objectivity as well as the commodity fetishism instituted by capitalism. The ironies further abound when one realizes the extent to which Breton’s attempt to take the novel and “make it new,” to borrow Ezra Pound’s famous dictum, for the most part recalls a literary credo established a generation prior in “Le Roman,” Maupassant’s aesthetic manifesto that insists upon the illusory nature of realism.¹⁴¹ Despite the differences in their theorizations of the novel (and their novels themselves), there remains a striking similarity in the crux of their respective arguments. Maupassant claims that for realist writers, “C’est... toujours nous que nous montrons...” [“It is...always us whom we show...”] (55). Breton differentiates a writer whom he admires, Huysmans, from those who

vainly “prétendent mettre en scène des personnages distincts d’eux-mêmes” (18) [“give us characters separate from themselves” (RH 17)]. Critiquing precisely novels such as Maupassant’s *Pierre et Jean*, Breton believes in the need for a radical unveiling of the writing self through its self-representation as literary subject:

Fort heureusement les jours de la littérature psychologique à affabulation romanesque sont comptés... Pour moi, je continuerai à habiter ma maison de verre, où l’on peut voir à toute heure qui vient me rendre visite, où tout ce qui est suspendu aux plafonds et aux murs tient comme par enchantement, où je repose la nuit sur un lit de verre aux draps de verre, où *qui je suis* m’apparaîtra tôt ou tard gravé au diamant. (19)¹⁴²

Although skeptical, if not entirely dismissive of the revolutionary character and potential of the Surrealist work,¹⁴³ Benjamin writes approvingly of Breton’s decision to live in his glass house, describing it as “a revolutionary virtue par excellence...an intoxication, a moral exhibitionism, that we badly need” (“Last Snapshot,” 49). This is not to say, of course, that Breton does not truly innovate in important ways in an effort to stay true to his new form of (Sur)realism, in which photographs and drawings grant a significant reduction of description, which always filters through the subjectivity of the writing self. What I mean to suggest here is that Breton’s realist pretensions give way to an egotism not too distant from what Aragon dismissed as the *manie de contrôle* of rationalism.

In *Nadja*’s pursuit of transforming the novel genre, Breton manages to narrow—if not fully overcome—the gap between subjectivity and objectivity. With the hindsight afforded by some thirty-four years, he writes in his 1962 preface that “subjectivité et objectivité se livrent, au cours d’une vie humaine, une série d’assauts, desquels le plus souvent assez vite la première sort très mal en point” (8).¹⁴⁴ The older Breton effectively acknowledges the quixotic ideals of his youth, so ardently invested in defining in theory—and shaping through practice—the Surrealist movement. As the novel itself recognizes, “La vie est autre que ce

qu'on écrit" ["Life is other than what one writes"] (82). Literature is always a priori a mediation of reality, as are the photographs that aim to close the gap between subjectivity and objectivity. Despite his refusal of the classical mode found in Baudelaire, who nonetheless influences him profoundly,¹⁴⁵ Breton endeavors, with *Nadja*, to transcend his own quotidian experience of urban modernity by taking into account the enigmatic nature of life, which "demande à être déchiffrée comme un cryptogramme" (133) ["Perhaps life needs to be deciphered like a cryptogram" (RH 112)]. In one of the novel's lengthy meditations on *Nadja*, Breton wonders,

Qui étions-nous devant la réalité, cette réalité que je sais maintenant couchée aux pieds de *Nadja*, comme un chien fourbe? Sous quelle latitude pouvions-nous bien être, livrés ainsi à la fureur des symboles, en proie au démon de l'analogie, objet que nous nous voyions de démarches ultimes, d'attentions singulières, spéciales? (130)¹⁴⁶

Engaged with his new form of realism, symbols and analogies take on an infernal character, inextricably linked to femininity. Breton claims to respect *Nadja* as "un génie libre, quelque chose comme un de ces esprits de l'air que certaines pratiques de magie permettent momentanément de s'attacher, mais qu'il ne saurait être question de se soumettre" (111-12).¹⁴⁷ An untameable force, *Nadja*'s alluring presence infuses Breton's novel with an intoxicating energy that challenges his pretenses to objectivity and simultaneously reveals his dependence on the rupturing forces called forth by Surrealist doctrine. This finds perhaps its most explicit expression in Breton's use of *désenchaînement*, which, as Margaret Cohen notes, recalls Rimbaud's poetics of *dérèglement*: "Surrealism directed its unchaining at once against the chains of the assembly line (*la chaîne*) binding workers, and the rigid categories of logical sequence, the *enchaînement* of ideas" (2004: 204).

We might extend this more broadly—and more figuratively, away from concepts with direct connection to the chain—to Breton’s critique of novels whose writing subjects superficially mask themselves from the reader through sublimation into their characters. By laying bare his ideological situatedness to his text, Breton provides a privileged point of access to his readers as he embarks on a quest for self-knowledge that, as the title affirms, depends precisely upon his relationship to others. With the fitting double entendre of spectrality, Breton’s invocation of the French adage “Dis-moi qui tu hantes, je te dirai que tu es” [“Tell me the company you keep, I will tell you who you are”] emphasizes the essential role of the milieu in shaping identity. Benjamin sees in Freudian psychoanalysis a therapeutic potential for society at large to escape such specters, and Breton, as Cohen eloquently frames it, “envisioned Surrealism as a kind of rogue cultural therapy that could free modern society of its ghosts” (2004: 204). In this way, Surrealism seeks out liberation from the ails it inherits from past generations, endeavoring to reconcile with these ghosts by overcoming them through an avant-garde aesthetics that was, as we have seen, neither altogether revolutionary nor without its shortcomings, as in its problematic portrayal of women. Nonetheless, Breton shares Baudelaire’s artistic reflex to overcome contradictions: “Tout porte à croire qu’il existe un certain point de l’esprit où la vie et la mort, le réel et l’imaginaire, le passé et le futur, le communicable et l’incommunicable, le haut et le bas cessent d’être perçus contradictoirement” (*Second Manifeste du surréalisme*, 76-77).¹⁴⁸

Conclusion

Aragon and Breton's urban novels reveal much the same tension between the real and the symbolic that infuses the work of nineteenth-century writers, as we have seen in Balzac, Baudelaire, and Zola. The intoxicating and ecstatic potentialities offered by the city, by its women, by its commodities, by its *œuvres d'art* and *objets trouvés*, by its marginal spaces and monumental places, unite these writers in their commitment to represent *le merveilleux* of Paris. Whether through Balzac's flâneur-artiste, Baudelaire's Icarian struggle, Zola's phantasmagoric *grand magasin*, Aragon's *merveilleux quotidien*, or Breton's authorial subjectivity, these works collectively demonstrate a shared desire not only to *represent* the modern condition but also to *theorize* and *transform* its representation, to muse self-consciously on the ways in which literature is best-suited to portray the everyday reality of urban modernity.

Aragon's "mythologie moderne" reflects the prevailing concern among these authors to break new ground in literary representation, yet united in their infusion of the present with symbolic imagery drawn from the depths of a broad intertextual universe. This melding of myth and modernity requires a certain vision and, indeed, Breton conceived of the Surrealists as "seers"¹⁴⁹—and it is Nadja as a *voyante*, we must not forget, that attracts him to her.

Aragon develops this vision at the end of his preface, "À une mythologie moderne":

Chaque jour se modifie le sentiment moderne de l'existence. Une mythologie se noue et se dénoue. C'est une science de la vie qui n'appartient qu'à ceux qui n'en ont point l'expérience.... M'appartient-il encore, j'ai déjà vingt-six ans, de participer à ce miracle? Aurai-je longtemps le sentiment du merveilleux quotidien? Je le vois qui se perd dans chaque homme qui avance dans sa propre vie comme dans un chemin de

mieux en mieux pavé, qui avance dans l'habitude du monde avec une aisance croissante, qui se défait progressivement du goût et de la perception de l'insolite. (15-16)¹⁵⁰

By linking *le merveilleux quotidien* to youth, Aragon recalls the “perception enfantine” so valorized by Baudelaire. The further we age, the further we grow entrenched in social custom and routine, archenemies to a flânerie that seeks out “profane illuminations.”

Indeed, Benjamin engages with a similarly visionary quality in his writing, fueled by the totalizing desire to incorporate the polyphony of both material and textual universes, a compulsion that saw his fifty-page essay turn into the more than one-thousand-page *Passagen-werk*. In this highly idiosyncratic historical and poetical mode, why then did Benjamin attempt to keep his distance from the Surrealists?¹⁵¹ He perhaps sympathized with Bataille, who, as Martin Jay argues, characterizes “Surrealism as an Icarian movement that sought out heterogeneous, transgressive material only to transfigure it in an idealist direction” (236). This “Icarian movement” follows a similarly trajectory as Baudelaire’s aesthetics of modern art, dialectically caught between the contingent and the ephemeral, the enchantment of the *idéal* and the disenchantment of *spleen*. Perhaps the contemporaneity, the unfinished and open-ended nature of Surrealism underlay Benjamin’s unwillingness to openly align himself with them.

We might say of the Surrealists, following Maupassant’s definition of “les grands artistes,” in his theoretical treatise “Le Roman,” that they are “ceux qui imposent à l’humanité leur illusion particulière” [“those who impose on humanity their particular illusion”] (53). Regardless of their differing positioning within history, this definition applies synchronically to all of the authors under present study. The common desire to fix the city in constant flux, in all its modernity, hearkens back to Mercier, Balzac, and the panoramic

literature so in vogue in the 1830s and 1840s, but which continues to preoccupy writers such as Baudelaire, Zola, and the Surrealists. They all write with a clear consciousness of modernity, conceiving of a rupture with literary tradition that leads them to reappraise the writer's task of how to most accurately capture the modern city. Living through a time that sees rampant industrial and technoscientific advances fueled by speculative and exploitative capitalism, Zola serves as a highly ambivalent spokesperson of this modernity, at times seemingly in support, and at times seemingly against, this indomitable tide sweeping Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century. His novels, which, as we have seen, blend positivist realism with a penchant for the mythic and symbolic, reflect the ambivalence within Zola's outlook on his time.

These authors consistently argue for the side of beauty that depends, as Baudelaire theorizes, upon "sa qualité essentielle du présent" ["its essential quality of the present"] (*PVM*, 547). A great admirer of Monet's paintings of the Saint-Lazare station, Zola, leading up to his novel *La Bête humaine* (1890), writes that "Nos artistes doivent trouver la poésie des gares comme leur pères ont trouvé celle des forêts et des fleuves" ["Our artists must find the poetry of the train stations as their fathers found it in forest and rivers"].¹⁵² Zola's overall ambivalence crystallizes the dialectical conception of modernity that plays out in the theorization and representation of urban modernity in French literature. The textual palimpsest produced by literature on Paris demanded as much scrutiny from writers as the actual material reality of the Paris in which they lived. Representing this city thus required not only observation and explication of the present moment but a self-conscious *differentiation* from the past as well. Writers thus attempted at all times to account for the dense and fraught network of social relations and innovations that led Benjamin to crown

Paris as the “Capital of the Nineteenth Century,” and which inspired their respective “mythologies modernes.”

Epilogue: “Fluctuat nec mergitur”

In 2018, nearly two hundred years after Balzac, where might one find a form of Balzacian *flânerie*, one that exercises a certain mastery over the urban space and appeals to the collective knowledge and cultural memory of the city? One such expression lies in the contemporary rap of Jazzy Bazz, a lifelong Parisian whose lyrics frequently focus on the “ville lumière.” In the immediacy of the Paris terrorist attacks of 13 November 2015, Jazzy writes a powerful homage to the victims that simultaneously denounces ideological partisanship and systemic political issues.¹⁵³ Appealing to the unity of Parisians, the song draws its title, “Fluctuat nec mergitur,” from the capital’s official motto.¹⁵⁴ In the chorus, its people are thus once again on the ocean of Paris, holding out on the same ship:

À ceux qui voguèrent sur le navire
Battus par les flots, mais ne sombrent pas
À ceux qui voguèrent sur le navire
On chavire, mais jamais ne s’enfoncera
À ceux qui voguèrent sur le navire
Votre souvenir, jamais ne s’estompera¹⁵⁵

Written in the wake of this terrible tragedy, in a city that Jules Janin characterized as so incredibly verbose, the song reflects on the awful silence it engenders: “Un océan dans tes prunelles, dans tes ruelles c’est le néant / Tu es muette, j’espère voir revivre tes rues bientôt / Tu ne dis plus un mot...”¹⁵⁶ After this devastating silence, the rapper addresses the city: “...tu reflouriras, quand les bougies seront estompées / C’est pour les nôtres qui sont tombés” [“...you will flourish again when the candles have burned out / They’re for those of us who have fallen”]. As in Balzac, conceived of as a self-contained microcosm—“Paris, tu reflètes

le monde entier” [“Paris, you reflect the entire world”]—the city will surmount whatever may come, for its strength resides not in the individual and ephemeral, but in the collective and eternal.

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Notes

Introduction

¹ “Thus demarcated, the field remains quite vast and perhaps too much so. But how to mark the limits of his ‘conscious’ poetry? It seems possible to generally consider as poetic any text where the author has not sought to reproduce the reality of Paris—I mean material reality, which is a certain number of people living in a certain way in a certain number of structures, all this being describable and measurable—but where the author has endeavored to express this reality by way of something else...” (translations are my own unless otherwise stated).

² Henceforth abbreviated as *Fer*.

³ “always this monstrous marvel, stunning assemblage of movements, machines, and thoughts, the city of one hundred thousand novels, the head of the world.”

⁴ For innovative readings of the city sketches and physiologies, see the work of Marina Lauster and Valérie Stiénon.

⁵ I have sought, following Erich Auerbach, an *Anzantspunk* that possesses “concreteness and...precision” on the one hand, and the “potential for centrifugal radiation,” on the other (“Philology and *Weltliteratur*,” 72).

⁶ For the remainder of the essay, “flâneur” and “flânerie” will remain unitalicized, as both are found in American and British dictionaries (*Merriam-Webster* and the *OED*).

⁷ As in the palimpsestic view of urban literature, put forth, for example, by Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson: “As these urban texts become ever more various, meaning proliferates and turns the city into a palimpsest, that is, a textual expression of the labyrinth. Indeed, readings of the palimpsest weave the magic thread that enables the individual to find a way through the labyrinth” (1994: 38).

⁸ Here I am influenced by Prendergast, who writes in the introduction to his book *Paris and the Nineteenth Century* that this prepositional shift from “behind” to “in” helps move us “away from the positivist reduction of literary history to simple ‘source’ material” (22).

⁹ I have in mind Viktor Shklovsky’s observation that “The crises of a writer coincide with the crises of literary genres. A writer moves within the orbit of his art” (171). Also integral to my conception of the realist novel is Henri Mitterand’s excellent study, *L’illusion réaliste. De Balzac à Aragon*.

I. The Balzacian Flâneur

¹⁰ To cover nearly a century of French literature, and one which coincides with quite arguably the high point of the realist novel and urban poetry, I have had to leave out a great number of canonical authors, such as Victor Hugo, Gustave Flaubert, Jules Vallès, and Marcel Proust, to name only a select few of the numerous French writers from this period whose work treats the modern city and realist representation.

¹¹ “The heroes of the Iliad are nothing compared to you, o Vautrin, o Rastignac, o Birotteau... and you, o Honoré de Balzac, you the most heroic, the most singular, the most romantic and the most poetic of all the characters whom you have drawn from your heart!”

¹² “Théophile Gautier,” first published in *L’Artiste* in 1859 (*Œuvres complètes*, 459).

¹³ “I have often been amazed that the great glory of Balzac was supposedly as an observer; it has always seemed to me that his principal merit was as a visionary...”

¹⁴ Benjamin’s expression comes from the visual show of the “panorama” that was in vogue in the early nineteenth century in Paris.

¹⁵ “Flânerie is the distinctive characteristic of the true man of letters. Talent only exists in this type but as consequence—the instinct of flânerie being the cause.”

¹⁶ “One will say that in this capital, all the time was spent talking, writing, listening, reading: discourses written the morning in your immense papers, discourses spoken in the middle of the day at the newspaper office, discourses printed in the evening; that the sole preoccupation of the entire city was to know if it would speak a little better the next day than it had the day before; that it had no other ambition, all else be damned, provided that each morning it had its dose of wit ready-made and a *café crème*.”

¹⁷ “All visible materiality refers to a moral or social invisibility, to another spatial or temporal materiality, to another form of meaning more or less hidden.”

¹⁸ “Who has not met on the boulevards of Paris, at the turn of a street or under the arcades of the Palais-Royal, or in some place where chance would have it, a being, man or woman, the sight of which produces a thousand mixed-up thoughts in your mind! In front of whom we are suddenly interested either by certain characteristics whose bizarre conformation belies an agitated life, or by a curious ensemble shown by their gestures and general appearance, or by some profound look, or by some certain *je ne sais quoi* that suddenly and powerfully seizes us without explanation. Then, the next day, other thoughts and other Parisian images carry away this ephemeral dream.”

¹⁹ As Ferguson comments, nineteenth-century writers, despite their differences, “all write from... a presumption of knowability. For them, the city is readable, and they write within this conviction of legibility” (1994: 6-7).

²⁰ “...les rues de Paris ont des qualités humaines, et nous impriment par leur physionomie certaines idées contre lesquelles nous sommes sans défense” (93).

²¹ “...if it was permitted to assimilate Parisians to the various types of zoology, [they] would belong to the genus of mollusks.”

²² Henceforth abbreviated as *LPG*.

²³ Prendergast elaborates on this scene in his introduction to *Paris and the Nineteenth Century* (see p. 2).

²⁴ Balzac habitually uses phrases such as “Le père Goriot est un de ces gens-là,” invoking the shared knowledge of narrator and reader (76). This extends to virtually every character in *Le Père Goriot*, for example, in the description of the bureaucrat as “l’espèce particulière” to which Poiret belongs, as well as in the opening description of Vautrin as “un de ces gens dont le peuple dit : Voilà un fameux gaillard !” (221; 37).

²⁵ “These observations, incomprehensible outside of Paris...”; “Will [this story] be understood outside of Paris? The doubt is permitted.”

²⁶ “But Paris is a veritable ocean. Probe it; you will never know its depth. Roam it, describe it! whatever care you take in these endeavors; no matter how numerous and determined the explorers of this sea may be, there will always remain a virgin place, an unknown lair, flowers, pearls, monsters, something unheard of, forgotten by the literary divers. The Vauquer pension is one of these curious monstrosities.”

²⁷ Starting with *Le Père Goriot*, Balzac consecrates himself increasingly to defining social types. He dedicates the novel to his great inspiration, the “grand et illustre Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, comme un

témoignage d'admiration de ses travaux et de son génie." The naturalist Saint-Hilaire's taxonomical organization of animals inspires Balzac to carry out a similar task on Parisian society.

²⁸ This use of the unknown finds expression as well in Vautrin's metaphor of Paris as "une forêt du Nouveau-Monde, où s'agitent vingt espèces de peuplades sauvages..." (*LPG*, 156).

²⁹ Henri Mitterand emphasizes that "La métamorphose du matériau réel en évocation symbolique se fait en proportion même de l'intensité de la représentation et de son souci d'atteindre aux vérités les plus profondes" ["The metamorphosis of the real material through symbolic evocation is done in equal proportion to the intensity of the representation and its endeavor to attain the most profound truths"] (8).

³⁰ See Prendergast's tremendous overview and reading of the opening of *La Fille aux yeux d'or* ("The High View: Three Cityscapes," section II, 52-59).

II. Baudelaire: Modernity's "reservoir of dialectical images"

³¹ "The possibility of living begins in another's eyes."

³² In "Central Park," Benjamin argues that "for Baudelaire modern life is the reservoir of dialectical images" (134).

³³ Henceforth abbreviated as *PVM*.

³⁴ Henceforth abbreviated as *Salon de 1846*.

³⁵ Mercier's work was enormously influential, especially for the writers of the first half of the nineteenth century. For an excellent overview of *Le Tableau de Paris*, see Ferguson's article "Reading Revolutionary Paris," pp. 52-54.

³⁶ "Haussmannization" refers to the collective work done under the Second Empire under the direction of Georges-Eugène Haussmann (known as Baron Haussmann). A prefect of the Seine department, Napoléon III chose him to lead an immense restructuring of the city.

³⁷ "For the perfect flâneur...it's an immense joy...to be away from home and yet feel at home everywhere; to see the world, to be at the center of the world and remain hidden from it, such are the least of pleasures of these independent, impassioned, and impartial minds, that language can only poorly define."

³⁸ "Le plaisir d'être dans les foules est une expression mystérieuse de la jouissance de la multiplication du nombre" ["The pleasure of being in crowds is a mysterious expression of the enjoyment in the multiplication of the number"] (*Mon cœur mis à nu*, 623); "Le poète jouit de cet incomparable privilège, qu'il peut à sa guise être lui-même et autrui" ["The poet takes pleasure in this incomparable privilege, that he can be himself and others as he pleases"] ("Les foules," 155). The influence of Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Man of the Crowd" undoubtedly influences Baudelaire's conception of immersion with the crowd. He inscribes Poe's story into the French tradition by emphasizing its genre as "tableau" (*PVM*, 551).

³⁹ In his journals, Henry David Thoreau pens an entry with striking resonance to Baudelaire's reflection on "perception enfantine": "We seem to linger in manhood to tell the dreams of our childhood, and they vanish out of memory ere we learn the language" (19 February 1841, p. 23).

⁴⁰ Thoreau shares precisely this view in another journal entry: "All this is perfectly distinct to an observant eye, and yet could easily pass unnoticed by most" (3 November 1861, p. 219).

⁴¹ As Ferguson notes, “The modernity commonly ascribed to nineteenth-century Paris is rooted in this sense of movement, the perpetually unfinished, always provisional nature of the present and the imminence of change” (1994: 35). For a measured view of Haussmannization, see Prendergast, pp. 8-11.

⁴² Citations from poetry are given by line and then page number.

⁴³ “...fear of not going quickly enough, of letting the phantom escape before the synthesis is extracted and recorded”; “(the form of a city / Changes faster, alas! than the heart of a mortal).”

⁴⁴ Henceforth abbreviated as *MC*.

⁴⁵ “There is, in every man, at every hour, two simultaneous postulations, one toward God, the other toward Satan. The invocation to God, or spirituality, is a desire to ascend; Satan’s, or animality, the joy of descending.”

⁴⁶ For an excellent overview of Baudelaire’s appropriation of the “subliterary” genre of the tableau, see Karlheinz Stierle’s “Baudelaire and the Tradition of the Tableau.” In short, Stierle demonstrates how Baudelaire’s flâneur reflects the transformations of the city following Mercier and *Le Livre des Cent-et-un*, a work of panoramic literature published between 1831 and 1834.

⁴⁷ The latter two poems were originally published under the name of “Fantômes parisiens” in *La revue contemporaine* (1859).

⁴⁸ Benjamin realized this in his “Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century,” writing that “the arcades...are house no less than street” (41).

⁴⁹ The *Iliad* sees Andromache exiled from Troy after losing not only her father and brothers, but also her husband, Hector.

⁵⁰ Henceforth abbreviated as *PW*.

⁵¹ Richard Terdiman provides this useful sequence to trace the zigzagging movement between past and present, Paris and *ailleurs*, found in “Le Cygne”: Troy → Andromache’s ‘little Troy’ in Buthrotum → Rome (Aeneas’ destination and destiny; referent of Ovid’s exile) → vieux Paris → Second Empire Paris (145).

⁵² Henceforth abbreviated as “Paris.” This piece, unpublished in Benjamin’s lifetime, was written in May 1935. Citations from this work refer to *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire* (ed. Michael W. Jennings).

⁵³ “The Carrousel was where a group of artists who had made a strategic investment in representing themselves as figuratively homeless in Paris *felt at home*. For this segment of the nascent avant-garde, the razing of the *quartier* was a symbolic eviction—an exile” (Terdiman 116).

⁵⁴ “‘Alignment’ has split in half a number of memories that it would have been pleasing to hold on to” (Théophile Gautier [1854], qtd. in Terdiman 120).

⁵⁵ This corresponds well with Henri Bergson’s conception of reality as “un perpétuel devenir. Elle se fait ou elle se défait, mais elle n’est jamais quelque chose de fait” (*L’Évolution créatrice* [1907]).

⁵⁶ As Yuri Lotman writes, “The text is not only the generator of new meanings, but also a condenser of cultural memory. A text has the capacity to preserve the memory of its previous contexts” (18).

⁵⁷ Terdiman contends that in “Le Cygne” Baudelaire “materializes a haunting image of the sign” (137).

⁵⁸ Mary Gluck argues that there is a general transition, from Balzac to Baudelaire, between the city as a social text to an aesthetic text (77).

⁵⁹ “There is no object more profound, more mysterious, more fecund, more tenebrous, and more marvelous than a candle-lit window.”

⁶⁰ This follows Bakhtin's conception of authors' self-conscious relation to their prospective readers: "...every literary work *faces outward away from itself*, toward the listener-reader, and to a certain extent thus anticipates possible reactions to itself" ("Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes Toward a Historical Poetics," 257).

⁶¹ "Perhaps you will tell me: 'Are you sure that this legend is true?' What does it matter what reality may be placed outside of me, if it has helped me to live, to feel who I am and what I am?"

⁶²

O city !

While around us you sing, laugh and bellow,

Taken with pleasure to a shameful degree,

Look! I dawdle as well! But, more dazed than them,

I say: what are they looking for in the heavens, all these blind men?

⁶³ This recalls the prose poem that opens *Le Spleen de Paris*, "L'étranger": "J'aime les nuages... les nuages qui passent... là-bas... là-bas... les merveilleux nuages !" ["I like the clouds... the clouds that pass... over there... over there... the wonderful clouds!"] (148).

⁶⁴ As is common with mythological types, one can explore many global iterations of the Icarus figure: e.g. the Chinese Kua Fu (or Kuafu), the Anglo-Saxon Bladud, the Babylonian Etana, and the Hindu Sampati.

⁶⁵ An addition to the posthumously published third edition of *Fleurs du Mal* (1868), the poem was first published December 28, 1862 in *Le Boulevard*.

⁶⁶ My reading of the Daedalus and Icarus myth draws primarily from its rendering in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Book VIII). For a reading focused on Daedalus, see the study by French classicist Françoise Frontisi-Ducroux: *Dédale: Mythologie de l'artisan en Grèce Ancienne* (Paris: François Maspero, 1975).

⁶⁷ I owe this formulation to Judith Spencer's article "Le temps baudelairien et la fuyance de l'art romantique : entre *tempus* et *aeternitas*" (572). She explores the relationship between German transcendental aesthetics and Baudelaire's ambivalent attitude towards time.

⁶⁸ The following citations share the same page number.

⁶⁹ In *Les Paradis artificiels*, Baudelaire cautions against hedonistic means—including the use of mind-altering drugs—to attain transcendence. He writes that "...les vices de l'homme, si pleins d'horreur qu'on les suppose, contiennent la preuve...de son goût de l'infini ; seulement, c'est un goût qui se trompe souvent de route" ["...the vices of man, so horrible as one supposes them, contain the proof...of his taste for the infinite; only, it is a taste that often leads one astray"] (568).

⁷⁰ The sea in which Icarus fell, as well as the nearest island, were subsequently named the Icarian Sea and Icaria.

⁷¹ And burned by the love of beauty,

I will not have the sublime honor

Of giving my name to the abyss

That will serve me as tomb.

⁷² See the opening of Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire*.

⁷³ "We want, as long as this fire burns the brain, / To plunge into the depths of the abyss, Heaven or Hell, what does it matter? To the heart of the unknown to discover the *new!*"

⁷⁴ "The aspiration...toward a higher beauty, and the manifestation of this principle is an enthusiasm, an excitation of the soul..."

III. Zola's *Au Bonheur des Dames*, or the Dream-World of the Commodity

⁷⁵ For example, the opening of various major boulevards—such as Sebastopol (1858), Malesherbes (1861), and Prince Eugène (1862)—were ostentatious displays of the Empire's wealth and power (Harvey 209).

⁷⁶ Benjamin recognizes that the *grand magasin* “makes use of flânerie itself to sell goods” and referred to it as “the last promenade of the flâneur” (“Paris,” 40).

⁷⁷ “the advent during the Second Empire of department stores (with their structure of glass and steel identical to that of passages) represents a clear acceleration in the evolution of modes of consumption.”

⁷⁸ See “Grandville, or the World Exhibitions,” in “Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century,” pp. 36-37.

⁷⁹ See “Section 4. *The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof*,” pp. 319-329. Zola's novel follows Marxist theory somewhat in spite of itself, for Zola was highly critical of Marx in his reaction to the Paris Commune (1870-1871), calling him the “grand pontife de l'Internationale,” and one of these “étrangers expérimentaient leurs doctrines sur la France... comme sur un de ces maladies d'hôpital que les chirurgiens charcutent pour le grand amour de la science. Il leur importait fort peu, à eux, que notre patrie succombât pendant l'opération” [“foreigners testing their doctrines on France... like one of these hospital patients cut up by surgeons in the name of science. It mattered little to them if our country succumbed during the operation”] (“Paris, un centre où tout rayonne,” *Treize lettres sur 'la semaine sanglante' et la fin de la commune*, published in *Le Sémaphore de Marseille* from 22 May to 3 June, 1871).

⁸⁰ First introduced in his *Theory of the Novel* (1916) and expanded upon in *History and Class Consciousness* (1923).

⁸¹ Zola writes of Saccard, in a letter to Louis Ulbach (November, 1871): “Mon Aristide, c'est le spéculateur né des bouleversements de Paris” [“My Aristide is the sort of speculator created by the transformations of Paris”] (qtd. in Ferguson [1994: 125]).

⁸² In *Pot-Bouille* (1882), which immediately precedes *Au Bonheur des Dames* in *Les Rougon-Macquart*, Mouret arrives from the province (Plassans) and undergoes a series of unsuccessful romantic escapades before marrying the *patronne* of the *Bonheur*.

⁸³ *Différences entre Balzac et moi* (1869).

⁸⁴ Toward the end of the novel, the publicity grows to even greater heights and reads in the same language of “invasion”: “Maintenant, le *Bonheur* dépensait chaque année près de six-cent mille francs en affiches, en annonces, en appels de toutes sortes... C'était l'envahissement définitif des journaux, des murs, des oreilles du public, comme une monstrueuse trompette d'airain...” [“Now, the *Bonheur* spent nearly six hundred thousand francs per year on posters and advertisements of all kinds... It was the definitive invasion of the newspapers, walls, the ears of the public, like a monstrous brass trumpet”] (451). The rise of print allows the store to penetrate into the public imaginary far beyond its imposing physical presence on the boulevard.

⁸⁵ “...the *Bonheur des Dames* leapt out in front of the eyes of the whole world, invading the walls, the newspapers, even the curtains of the theaters.”

⁸⁶ Another store from Zola's epoch, and from which he clearly takes inspiration, was named *Le Paradis des Dames* (rue de Rivoli). English translations of Zola's novel often use the title of *The Lady's Paradise* (see Jeanne Gaillard's preface to the Gallimard edition [1990], p.13).

⁸⁷ "And if, among them, woman was queen, adulterated and flattered in her weaknesses, surrounded by thoughtfulness, she reigned as an amorous queen whose subjects traffic, and who pay with a drop of blood each of her whims... [Mouret] erected her a temple, had her praised by a legion of clerks, created the rite of a new cult..."

⁸⁸ "This immense unknown that surrounds us must inspire us only the desire to pierce it, to explain it, with the help of scientific methods."

⁸⁹ This same recourse to the mythic and/or monstrous occurs in *Germinal*—the mine as man-eating monster—and *La Bête humaine*—the train as unstoppable force, as machine, yet constantly animalized and personified. Henri Mitterand argues that *Germinal* shares this characteristic tendency of Zola's Naturalism in that, despite its scrupulous depictions of the working class condition, it expresses certain "dimensions archétypiques... éprouvés d'une culture à une autre, d'un mythe ou d'un conte à un autre" ["archetypal dimensions... experienced from one culture to another, from one myth or tale to another"] (6).

⁹⁰ "The clients, short of breath there, had pale faces and shining eyes. One would have said that all the seductions of the stores led to this supreme temptation, that this was the recessed alcove of the fall, the corner of perdition where the strongest succumbed. The hands would sink among the overflowing rooms, and they would keep a drunken trembling."

⁹¹ "A fantasy of identification with the consumer good that would lead to rituals of purchases, constantly renewed."

⁹² Indeed, Mouret wields the panoramic and dominating "regard surplombant" as theorized by Jean Starobinski in his essay collection *L'œil vivant* (see Jay 19-20).

⁹³ "Because the idea was sweeping the entire world, the triumph of the industrial workers' cities was sown by the gale of the century; which carried away the crumbling edifice of the old ages."

⁹⁴ In his Zola study, *Feux et signaux de brume* (qtd. in Nelson 25).

⁹⁵ Zola employs this expression on more than one occasion. In his drafts to *La Bête humaine*, for example, he characterizes the novel as the "grand poème du chemin de fer" (qtd. in Séginger 475).

IV. An Apollonian Interlude

⁹⁶ "The whole thing is...to know how to concentrate one's mind on a single point, to know how to sufficiently dissociate from oneself in order to bring about hallucination and be able to substitute the dream of reality for reality itself."

⁹⁷ His neologism dates to 1917: in his correspondence with Paul Dermée, in the program for the ballet *Parade*, and in the subtitle to his play *Les Mamelles de Tirésias: Drame surréaliste en deux actes et un prologue*.

⁹⁸ Paris evenings drunk with gin
Bursting with electricity
Green light trams on the spine
Make music along the span
Of the rails their madness of machines

⁹⁹ I who knows the lays of queens
The complaints of my years

Of slave hymns to the morays
The romance of the unloved one
And songs for the sirens

V. Surrealism: *l'errance, l'erreur, l'Éros*

¹⁰⁰ Errors almost always have a sacred character. Never try to correct them.

¹⁰¹ Henceforth abbreviated as “Last Snapshot.”

¹⁰² Freud in fact studied under Charcot from October 1885 to November 1886.

¹⁰³ See Cohen (1993: 57-60).

¹⁰⁴ The late essay “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” (1939), for example, draws upon Freud’s “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” in Benjamin’s discussion of memory, trauma, and Proust’s *mémoire involontaire*.

¹⁰⁵ On Aragon’s construction of a mythology, the role of *le merveilleux quotidien*, and the relationship between the concrete and the irrational, see Marie-Claire Bancquart’s excellent reading in *Paris des Surréalistes* (99-121).

¹⁰⁶ Henceforth abbreviated as *Paysan*.

¹⁰⁷ “The fantastic, the beyond, dream, survival, paradise, hell, poetry, so many words signifying the concrete” (trans. Simon Watson Taylor [henceforth cited as SWT] 217).

¹⁰⁸ Qtd. in Cohen (2004: 203).

¹⁰⁹ Aragon observes: “Il y a dans le monde un désordre impensable, et l’extraordinaire est qu’à leur ordinaire les hommes aient recherché, sous l’apparence du désordre, un ordre mystérieux... qu’ils n’ont pas plus tôt introduit dans les choses qu’on les voit s’émerveiller de cet ordre, et impliquer cet ordre à une idée, et expliquer cet ordre par une idée.” (231) [“The world exists in a state of unthinkable disorder: the extraordinary thing about this is that men should have habitually sought beneath the surface appearance of disorder for some mysterious order... and they have no sooner introduced this order into things than they start going into raptures about it, making this order the basis of an idea, or alternatively explaining this order by an idea” (SWT 203).]

¹¹⁰ Huyssen draws attention to Benjamin’s drafts for the essay, in which he had originally written “And no face is as surrealist as the true face of a city. *Aragon has demonstrated it*” (my emphasis; cited on 195). This remark, however, did not make the final edit.

¹¹¹ To the journalists who attacked Dada, for example, Aragon addresses them as parasites: “À mort vous tous, qui vivez de la vie des autres...” (93). This desire to stymie critics recalls John Lennon, who, frustrated by obsessive readings of his lyrics, and recipient of a letter from a schoolchild whose class analyzed Beatles’ lyrics, endeavored to absolutely bewilder listeners with the surreal non sequitur-filled verses of “I Am the Walrus” (1967).

¹¹² “I sought...to give birth, from the conventional novel, a new species of novels breaking all the traditional laws of this genre, which is neither a narrative (a story) nor a character (a portrait), and that the critic would then have to consider from scratch... since they were no longer rules of genre...this novel that would not be one, I wrote it, I imagined myself writing it, to demoralize my friends, those who proclaimed themselves the irreducible enemies of any novel.”

¹¹³ “There are strange flowers of reason to match each error of the senses... Unknown, ever-changing gods take shape there” (SWT 24).

¹¹⁴ “The vice named *Surrealism* is the immoderate and impassioned use of the stupefying *image*, or rather of the uncontrolled provocation of the image for its own sake and for the element of unpredictable perturbation and of metamorphosis which it introduces into the domain of representation: for each image on each occasion forces you to revise the entire Universe” (translation modified; SWT 79).

¹¹⁵ See Cohen (1993), in particular pp. 9, 111-12, and 121-22; Jay, pp. 232-36.

¹¹⁶ As an epigraph to the second chapter of his Surrealist novel, *Les dernières nuits de Paris* (1928), Philippe Soupault cites Lamarck: “Le hasard n’est que notre ignorance des causes” (27).

¹¹⁷ “But honestly, I would never have thought of myself as an observer. I like to let the winds and the rain blow through me: chance is my only experience, hazard my sole experiment. I do not subscribe to the idea that the world can be had for the asking... and may I be strung up by the neck if this passage is anything else but a method of freeing myself of certain inhibitions, a means of obtaining access to a hitherto forbidden realm that lies beyond my human energies” (SWT 101).

¹¹⁸ “Yet what was this need that moved me, this bent I felt like following, this detour that was more than a diversion and that so aroused my enthusiasm? I felt the great power that certain places, certain sights exercised over me, without discovering the principle of this enchantment” (SWT 128).

¹¹⁹ “The way I saw it, an object became transfigured: it took on neither the allegorical aspect nor the character of the symbol, it did not so much manifest an idea as constitute that very idea” (SWT 128).

¹²⁰ “...draw their strength, their magic from the same source, and so have an equal right to be considered myths” (SWT 137).

¹²¹ See also, for example, Henri Lefebvre’s *La Production de l’espace* (1974), in which “l’espace...est toujours déjà socialement construit, selon les codes et les valeurs économiques, idéologiques, religieux, politiques...” [“space is always already socially constructed, according to economic, ideological, religious, political...codes and values”] (Mitterand 58).

¹²² “Everything that is most eccentric in man, the gipsy in him, can surely be summoned up in these two syllables: garden” (SWT 133).

¹²³ “Gardens, your very contours, your artless abandon, the gentle curves of your rises and hollows, the soft murmur of your streams all make you the feminine element of the human spirit, often silly and wayward, but always pure intoxication, pure illusion” (SWT 133).

¹²⁴ “Charming substitute, you are the summary of a wonderful world, of the natural world, and it is you who are reborn when I close my eyes... You are the horizon and the presence... the total eclipse. The light. The miracle...” (translation modified; SWT 183).

¹²⁵ “Woman, the eternal female, is contained in fire, in the forceful and the feeble, the full-blooded and the faint-hearted, her femininity is in the flood tide’s flux and flow, in the fall and flight of foliage, in the false front of the sun where like a voyager lacking guide or horse I lead my fatigue astray into a far-flung fairyland” (SWT 184).

¹²⁶ In this way, Aragon recalls Saussure’s assertion of the arbitrariness of the sign through the arbitrary linkage of signifier and signified. In *Paysan* objects become unmoored semantically in the Surrealist city, losing their collectively circumscribed meaning but bearing a unique significance to the flâneur open to *le merveilleux*. The Belgian artist René Magritte frequently plays with this same idea, probably most famously expressed in *La trahison des images* (1928-29).

¹²⁷ “All metaphysics is in the first person singular. All poetry as well. The second person is still the first.”

¹²⁸ Reality is the apparent absence of contradiction.

The marvelous is in the eruption of contradiction within the real.

Love is a state of confusion between the real and the marvellous. In this state, the contradictions of being seem *really* essential to being. (SWT 217)

¹²⁹ “For me, the metaphysical spirit was reborn from love. Love was its source, and I hope never to leave this enchanted forest” (SWT 212).

¹³⁰ The lovers of prostitutes
Are happy, well-rested and full;
As for me, my arms are broken
From embracing the clouds.

¹³¹ In her chapter “Benjamin Reading the *Rencontre*” (1993), Margaret Cohen examines the connection to Baudelaire’s “À une passante” by way of Benjamin’s account of shock, in which the “subject’s self-sufficiency crumbles in the face of some irresistible external force” (213). Cohen views Benjamin’s theory of shock as more applicable to Breton than Baudelaire (214).

¹³² In the 1962 edition, Breton attaches one of only two footnotes to this sentence: “Ne touche-t-on pas là au terme extrême de l’aspiration surréaliste, à sa plus forte idée limite ?” [“Does one not touch here upon the extreme end of the surrealist aspiration, its most powerful limit idea?”] (87).

¹³³ In “The Invisible *Flâneuse*,” cultural sociologist Janet Wolff argues that, overwhelmingly, the “literature of modernity describes the experience of men” (qtd. in Nesci [2014: 77]).

¹³⁴ Speaking of coincidence and destiny, Breton writes at the end of the first part of the novel, “Je signale, pour finir, ces deux faits parce que pour moi, dans ces conditions, leur rapprochement était inévitable et parce qu’il me paraît tout particulièrement impossible d’établir de l’un à l’autre une corrélation rationnelle” (68) [“I offer, in closing, these two facts because for me, under such conditions, their connection cannot be avoided and because I find it quite impossible to establish a rational correlation between them” (trans. Richard Howard [henceforth cited as RH] 59).]

¹³⁵ “I observed in spite of myself the faces, the accessories, the looks. Well now, these were not the ones we would find ready for the Revolution.”

¹³⁶ “(this effect is achieved, and achieved exclusively, by applying the mascara under the lid alone. It is interesting to note, in this regard, that Blanche Derval, as Solange, even when seen at close range, never seemed at all made up. Does this mean that what is only slightly permissible in the street but advisable in the theater is important to me only insofar as it has defied what is forbidden in one case, decreed in the other? Perhaps)” (RH 64).

¹³⁷ This reflection recalls Baudelaire’s “Éloge du maquillage,” from *Peintre de la vie moderne*, in which he writes that “La femme est bien dans son droit, et même elle accomplit une espèce de devoir en s’appliquant à paraître magique et surnaturelle ; il faut qu’elle étonne, qu’elle charme ; idole, elle doit se dorner pour être adorée” [“Women are well within their rights, and they even fulfill a sort of duty in making an effort to appear magical and supernatural; they must stun and charm; idols, they must gild themselves to be adored”] (562).

¹³⁸ “...a few days ago, you were a deity, which is so accommodating, so beautiful, so inviolable. You are just a woman now.”

¹³⁹ Baudelaire courted Sabatier quasi-anonymously for three years before they ended up having amorous relations, the aftermath of which clearly belies Baudelaire’s vexed relationship to women.

¹⁴⁰ “What men call love is so small, so restricted and weak, compared to this ineffable orgy, this holy prostitution of the soul that gives itself entirely, poetry and charity, to the unexpected that reveals itself, to the unknown who passes by.”

¹⁴¹ “J’en conclus que les Réalistes de talent devraient s’appeler plutôt des Illusionistes” [“I conclude that Realists of talent should refer to themselves rather as Illusionists”] (52). Per Maupassant’s wishes, “Le Roman” was originally published as a sort of unorthodox preface to his third novel, *Pierre et Jean* (1888). Mitterand’s *L’illusion réaliste* takes as its *point de départ* the theory of the novel that Maupassant elucidates here.

¹⁴² “Happily the days of psychological literature, with all its fictitious plots, are numbered... I myself shall continue living in my glass house where you can always see who comes to call; where everything hanging from the ceiling and on the walls stays where it is as if by magic, where I sleep

nights in a glass bed, under glass sheets, where *who I am* will sooner or later appear etched by a diamond” (RH 18).

¹⁴³ While alleging that the Surrealists have Europe’s first “radical concept of freedom” since Bakunin, Benjamin asks, “...have they bound revolt to revolution?” (54). Benjamin disliked Breton’s seeming lack of empathy for Sacco and Vanzetti in *Nadja*, in which a fortune teller is named “Mme Sacco” for no apparent reason. Aragon, on the other hand, insisted on the importance of protesting the mistreatment of such contemporaries in his *Traité du style* (1928).

¹⁴⁴ “subjectivity and objectivity carry out, in the course of a human life, a series of attacks, from which the former usually quite quickly emerges in bad shape.”

¹⁴⁵ In a span of a few pages, for example, Breton cites “La Cygne” and alludes to “La beauté,” in which Baudelaire employs precisely this classical mode by defining beauty as a classical sculpture, this “rêve de pierre” [“dream of stone”] (155; 159). The allusions to Baudelaire are numerous in *Nadja*, as when Nadja describes herself as “l’âme errante,” a phrasing found in “Les fous”: “Comme ces âmes errantes qui cherchent un corps, [le poète] entre, quand il veut, dans le personnage de chacun” [“Like those wandering souls who seek a body, [the poet] enters, when he desires, into the character of anyone”] (155).

Conclusion

¹⁴⁶ “Who were we, confronting reality, that reality which I know now was lying at Nadja’s feet like a lapdog? By what latitude could we, abandoned thus to the fury of symbols, be occasionally prey to the demon of analogy, seeing ourselves the object of extreme overtures, of singular, special attentions?” (RH 110-11).

¹⁴⁷ “It would be hateful to refuse whatever she asks of me, one way or another, for she is so pure, so free of any earthly tie, and cares so little, but so marvelously, for life” (RH 90).

¹⁴⁸ “Everything suggests that there exists a certain point in the mind where life and death, reality and imagination, the past and the future, the communicable and the incommunicable, the high and the low cease to be perceived as contradictions.”

¹⁴⁹ See Jay 237.

¹⁵⁰ “Each day the modern sense of existence becomes subtly altered. A mythology ravel and unravels. It is a science of life open only to those who have no training in it... I am already twenty-six years old, am I still privileged to take part in this miracle? How long shall I retain this sense of the everyday marvelous? I see it fade away in every man who advances into his own life as though along an always smoother road, who advances into the world’s habits with an increasing ease, who rids himself progressively of the taste and texture of the unusual and unexpected” (translation modified; SWT 24).

¹⁵¹ Benjamin writes of “an all-too ostensible proximity to the Surrealist movement which could be fatal for me” (qtd. in Buck-Morss 5).

¹⁵² *Le Sémaphore de Marseille*, 19 April 1877, *Écrits sur l’art* 358 (qtd. in *La Bête humaine* 37).

A 21st-century Epilogue: “Fluctuat nec mergitur”

¹⁵³ He cites, for example, the following well-known lines from Boris Vian’s “Le Déserteur” : “Messieurs les dirigeants, s’il faut donner son sang / Allez donner le vôtre” [“To those who lead, if we must give away our blood / Go and give your own”].

¹⁵⁴ *Fluctuat nec mergitur* is typically rendered into French as “Il est battu par les flots, mais ne sombre pas” [“Tossed by the waves, but does not sink”]. This motto was made official in 1853 by the Baron Haussmann.

¹⁵⁵ To those who sail upon the ship

Shaken by the waves, but do not sink
To those who sail upon the ship
Who capsize, yet always resurface
To those who sail upon the ship
Never will your memory fade

¹⁵⁶ “An ocean in your pupils, in your streets it’s the void / You are silent, I hope to see your streets
come to life again soon / You no longer say a word...”