



## Catastrophic Utopia: The Feminine as Allegory of the Modern

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### Introduction

FROM THE YOUNG WALTER BENJAMIN'S first critiques in 1913 of the lack of culture in modern erotic civilization—the absence of an *experience* of a feminine culture—to his recognition of woman as *allegory of the modern* displayed in the great Baudelairean images (prostitute, barren woman, lesbian, androgyne), the motif of the woman imposes, by its constancy, its persistence and wealth of meanings, all its interpretive radicality. Certainly, this motif is never direct: it is subject to the oblique, the fragment, the interstice between concept and metaphor. More than any other theme, it links the fictive, materialist reformulation of a reconstructed history with our lack of presence. It remains, secret and concealed, as if in a labyrinth—a labyrinth we must find our way through once again.

In “A Berlin Chronicle,” Benjamin wrote that in the Proustian Berlin of childhood and recaptured memory—this city/forest, city/maze and labyrinth—he had found “that Ariadne in whose proximity I understood for the first time (and was never entirely to forget) something that was to make instantly comprehensible a word that . . . I cannot have known: love.”<sup>1</sup> And when, in “Central Park” and *Passagen-Werk*, the metaphor of the labyrinth becomes intrusive, this first engraved souvenir and the *arcana* of Paris of the Second Empire's modernity reappear together. “With the rise of the great cities prostitution came into possession of new secrets. One of these is the labyrinthine character of the city itself. The labyrinth, whose image had passed into flesh and blood in the *flaneur*, is at the same time colorfully framed by prostitution” (CP, 53).

Passing from the labyrinths of big cities to the labyrinths of commodities, without omitting the ultimate labyrinth, history (“the home of the hesitant” where “the way of the [sexual] drive in those episodes that precede its satisfaction” curiously meets “the way of mankind which does not wish to know where things are leading” [CP, 42]), the theme of the labyrinth, occupied by the “desire not to know,” defines a complete web of thoughts. It is here that the symbolic and imaginary divisions of the feminine are caught. Should we admit, in our turn,

that the feminine today might be one of Ariadne's threads for retracing these entangled routes?

The question of woman finds itself at the exact point of recovery of two scenes in Benjamin's historical work—the "sociological" determination of history (industrialization, the creation of large cities, the domination of commodity fetishism) and modernity as an ensemble of fantastic spectacles and as a progressive aesthetic. With the representations that emerge in Baudelaire, their origins in the utopian currents of nineteenth-century France (Saint-Simonianism, Claire Demar's feminism, the history of sects), and their descendents in Alban Berg's *Lulu* or the "female/flower/pubescence" of the *Jugendstil*, Benjamin reconstructs a system of feminine fictions that characterize modernity. We could name this system, recalling his expression, an unconscious of vision that parallels the Freudian unconscious of desire.

Of this we can be certain: the image engraved upon the *flâneur's* body, the Baudelairean passerby barely glimpsed in the intoxication of large cities, this multiplicity of emotions are only specific examples of what is characteristic of modernity: the cult of images, the secularization/sublimation of bodies, their ephemeral nature and reproducibility. Here, the feminine constitutes one of the nineteenth-century's "original historic forms" (*urgeschichtlichen Formen*), an origin (*Ursprung*) where a "prehistory" and a "posthistory" (*Vor- und Nachgeschichte*), the archaic and the modern, are dialectically articulated. The feminine becomes the inevitable sign of a new historic regime of seeing and "not-seeing," of representable and unrepresentable.

My purpose is to resurvey the scene of this "original historic form," to delineate it as a *tragedy* (*Trauerspiel*) of modernity's woman-body, to add in reflection certain implications of Benjamin's notion of "utopia" or a-topia, as affected by "that excess that accompanies the feminine" described by Maurice Blanchot in his writing on Marguerite Duras's *La Maladie de la mort*<sup>2</sup>—an excess seen as "the undefinable power of the feminine over all that wills or imagines itself as foreign to it."

The "feminine" could delineate certain scenes of modernity, certain of its negative or positive utopias, which appear close to the spaces of the baroque with their multiple entrances and doubled, ambiguous aspects:

1) "*Catastrophic utopia*, the destructive tendency toward appearance and false totality, where the feminine body is an allegory of modernity.

2) "*Anthropological utopia*, the exploration of the underground history of the nineteenth century: that of androgyny as traced through Saint-Simonianism, Claire Demar, Ganeau, the history of sects, and Baudelaire—the scene of a matrix bisexuality of "anthropological materialism" (*PW*, 971) that has broken with the bloodless humanism of the "man as totality," of universal man (*Allmensch*).

3) "*Transgressive utopia*, the sudden appearance in writing, as in historical praxis, of an absolute imaginary space (*hundertprozentigen Bildraums*) that dislocates estab-

lished frontiers and forces apparent “opposites” together in thought: catastrophe and progress, messianism and Marxism, feminine and masculine, novelty and repetition. [The discussion that follows takes up the first of these aspects.—Ed.]

### **Modernity and the Redistribution of Feminine/Masculine**

There emerges in all its dimensions in Baudelaire’s work a symbolic redistribution of relations between feminine and masculine that is characteristic both of modernity and of the archeological double scene (sociohistorical and aesthetic) of Benjamin’s work as historian of nineteenth-century France. In the realm of sociology, there is the new status of women in large cities, subjected by work and urbanization to a certain sexual uniformity. The violent insertion of women into commodity production collapses both material (division of labor) and symbolic differences of sex. Women become mass-produced, widely available commodities with the “massification” of industrial labor and society, simultaneously losing their “natural” qualities (a feminine essence, a nature determined by child-bearing) and their poetic aura (beauty as the sublimating idealization that surrounds Dante’s Beatrice).

This social dynamic urgently requires that the symbolic distinctions separating feminine and masculine be redefined, a task becoming all the more pressing in that the beginning of the nineteenth century is marked by the historical development of the first feminist movements. In the aesthetic realm, new representations of the feminine body already appear at work in the lyric experience of Baudelaire, the “feminized” poet victimized by his androgyny and offered at the marketplace like a prostitute.<sup>3</sup> Here, allegory’s destructive impulse with regard to “natural” appearances and the social order, its saturnine gaze over a history in which the alienation and *attenuation of experience* (spleen, melancholy, ennui, emptiness) characteristic of modernity unfold, shatter the integrity of the Baudelairean poetic Self, which hereafter finds itself, as in a drunken frenzy, in the grip of that same “dissolution of the I” (*Lockerung des Ich*).

In his own destructive rage, confronting this impotence in a Calvary of solitude, Baudelaire, captured in all his ambivalence (historical, psychic, poetic) in Benjamin’s analysis, discovers his own “androgyny” and identifies in turn with the prostitute, the image of modernity, and the lesbian, the heroic protest against that modernity.

The relation between the historic and aesthetic dimension is so close that Benjamin did not hesitate to write that “Baudelaire produces in his lyricism the sexually perverse figure who seeks its object in the streets” (*PW*, 343). Woman, like the poet, becomes one of the privileged sites for a mythological correspondence, in which “the modern world of technology and the archaic world of the symbol” (*PW*, 617) will be in play. This interweaving precisely characterizes a

kind of modernity which differs radically from that of “progress” and which almost always emerges out of the extremity of a crisis: in seventeenth-century baroque, Baudelaire, *Jugendstil*, Viennese and German culture during the twentieth century. . . . For this reason, the perspective of “catastrophe” in the face of progress allows us to clearly separate two forms of modernity.

The first form of the modern produces progress and is informed by it. It arises out of the great Hegelian synthesis and is characterized by linear, cumulative time; development “without barbarity” of culture and production; classic and romantic aesthetics of the Beautiful; and a historical vision stemming from a subject that, even if alienated, gives it meaning in Marxist evolutionary and historical interpretations. Benjamin dislodges the second modernity from the constellation of Baudelaire, Nietzsche, and Louis Blanqui, for whom the destruction of the appearance of totality, system, and historical specificity acts as the condition for the eternal return of a catastrophic utopia: the recognition of atrocity, fragmentation, and destruction as critical forces.

This second form of modernity, which I will call *untimely* in Nietzsche’s sense, establishes itself against “modernist” or “historicist” versions of modernity. It rests not on the fullness of a meaning, of a unified, perfectly intelligible history, but on a loss, an emptiness, a lack: the power of an absence, in relation to the “actual” immediate, that links signification and death. The ravaging power of spleen, the loss of the aura or the nihilistic emptying of values, this non-Hegelian negativity inscribes in writing the “blank space” evoked by Benjamin in describing Baudelaire as “envisioning blank spaces which he filled in with his poems” (*CB*, 116).

That this loss “of love,” leading to melancholy, can be expressed in the new status of the “feminine” and its *modern allegories*, that it is embodied with all its violence and ambivalence in the figure of the prostitute—from Georg Büchner to Berg without forgetting Baudelaire—says a great deal about the phantoms that haunt it.

Indeed, the prostitute is one of those monads that open the way for the archeological work of reconstructing history. Benjamin’s interest in the “nameless” (*Namelosen*) and the depths of history as well as literature, his constant desire to “fix the image of history in the humblest crystallizations,” will produce a constellation of thoughts and images, a chaos of metaphors around this figure of the feminine, the tragic form of modernity.

### **The Tragedy (*Trauerspiel*) of the “Prostitute-Body”**

The urban development of prostitution as a mass phenomenon leading to legislation, along with the visible “massification” of feminine bodies, expresses a historical change even more typical of the middle of the twentieth century—expressed in new relations between the visible and the invisible, the representable

and unrepresentable, and their consequent practices and discourses. The feminine body is the preeminent site of “that archeology of the look” Foucault describes and which is not unrelated to Benjamin’s concerns. Here indeed is a new staging of bodies, henceforth irreducible to their literal visibility, that is affected by an obscure, mysterious factor.

The increasingly “profound” visibility of the feminine body is at the center of Benjamin’s many analyses of the role of makeup, artifice, style and of the new “feminine fauna” of *Passagen-Werk* (PW, 617). In the most direct perspective, “woman becomes a commodity” in prostitution and is displayed in the street, then in bordellos, to be purchased and consumed. Such a “commodity” conveys a new correlation between sex and work—the prostitute claims “worth” as labor and has a price at the very moment “when work becomes prostitution” (PW, 439). There is much more than a superficial historical analogy between the prostitute, who obtains an increasingly well-accounted for, both profitable and exploitative, payment for her time and attentions, and a commercial economy where everything has its price. For if salaried labor and the general extension of commodities mark the “decline” of the qualitative, of use value, of distinctions for the benefit of a more generalized social submission to the universality of exchange—by the very abstraction of its universality—so prostitution expresses the end of the aura and the decline (*Verfall*) of love (PW, 617).

In this outline of a political economy of the prostituted body, Benjamin achieves a veritable permeation of appearances that carries his analysis far beyond a socio-economic examination of prostitution. “The revolutionary character of the technical” presents itself in prostitution: serial and serialized bodies, interchangeable like those put to work in a factory. But it is not just a question of regimentation; in the very mechanism of prostitution, there is “an unconscious knowledge of man”—the performance “through all the nuances of payment” of even “the nuances of love play [*Liebesspiel*], sometimes intimate, sometimes brutal” (PW, 615). In the strict sense, one does not so much buy pleasure as purchase that which commands it—“the expression of shame,” “the desire for fanatic pleasure” in its most cynical form. In mass prostitution—which does not end with prostitutes—new anthropological figures and new figures of the passions, characteristic of modernity, are defined. Eros links itself to Thanatos; the love of pleasure joins with perversion; and what appears to be the language of Christianity merges (even in the work of Baudelaire) with the language of commodities.

Here lies, then, one of the threads of Ariadne of our labyrinth: the masculine desire to immobilize, to *petrify* the feminine body. In Benjamin’s words, “In the inanimate body, which can however, give itself to pleasure, allegory unites with commodities.”

By this union, one must understand the entire series of imaginary and symbolic equivalents that Benjamin will establish around the “prostitute-body.” As one example, there is an equivalence between love for prostitutes, the form of

mythical communion common to big cities, and empathy (*Einführung*) for commodities. A more decisive equivalence occurs between new markings of feminine bodies, their *traces*, and the destructive violence of allegory, which creates a second-degree allegory from the prostitute—that of “the allegory of commodities.”

For this reason, the tragedy (*Trauerspiel*) of the prostituted body is organized by the double movement characteristic of allegoric violence—a *disfiguration* and devalorization of all reality, followed by its phantasmagoric *humanization*.

Disfiguration/devalorization—henceforth, the woman has lost her aura, her religious and cultic presence, her absolute unity, her feminine body as an announcement of the celestial beauty of love. Beauty herself no longer sees nor speaks. Her eyes, pure and inexpressive mirrors, are from this point on closed to every idealized and sublimated belief. *Beauty has become petrified* (PW, 411).

As Baudelaire writes in his poem “La Beauté”:

*Je suis belle, ô mortels! comme un rêve de pierre,  
Et mon sein, où chacun s'est meurtri tour à tour,  
Est fait pour inspirer au poète un amour  
Éternel et muet ainsi que la matière.*

[I am beautiful, O mortals, as a dream in stone, and my breast, on which every man has bruised himself in his turn, is formed to inspire in poets a love as eternal and as silent as matter itself; author's italics.]<sup>4</sup>

This dream of stone, this petrified, materialized love, mute as Benjamin's haunting images of allegory “as image of a *petrified* anxiety” (PW, 414) or as a “*petrified* primordial landscape” (OT, 166), returns to the double movement that affects the love object in modernity. If, since the civilization of the Middle Ages, there is no love object but the unreal as reflected by the phantasm in what Erich Auerbach calls the *figural* in relation to Dante, the loss of the aura can then only be a double loss, to be read and seen in the scenographies of the feminine.

In one sense, this loss leads to that sublimation of love which links Beauty to Truth and makes the figure of the female (such as Beatrice's image in the *Divine Comedy*) the mediatrix of another, more “celestial” love, that of Paradise. The Beauty of the “immortals” becomes the “dream of stone” of *mortals*. The poet deciphers contingency, mortality, his own “castration” in the feminine body; Baudelairean poetry is indeed, as Benjamin says in a striking formula, “a mimesis of death.” Thus the radical separation, always possible, between the erotic and love that is represented by the prostitute.

But in another sense, this “dream of stone” also expresses an alteration of desire: the inscription of a desire for its cessation in lyric experience. This perverse paralysis has, as an ultimate goal, precisely the love of prostitutes and masculine impotence. From this derives the new polarization of desire so characteristic of Baudelaire: either a perverse pleasure or a mystical consummation—if it is true that, as Benjamin observes, “masculine impotency feeds precisely on

the attachment to the seraphic image of the female." In this polarity of desire, Benjamin's analysis partially coincides with that of Lacan: "The body as final signified, this is the corpse of the *stone phallus*."<sup>5</sup>

Beauty petrified can only be a travesty of itself. Benjamin shows particular interest in artifice, disguise, and fashion, going so far as to see in the prostitute's rituals of makeup an anticipation of twentieth-century chorus lines. But these travesties do not succeed in dissembling the drawn-out labor of death that infests Eros. The Freudian *uncanny* finds a distant origin in the ontological aging of the body (e.g., the Baudelairean interest in the "petites vieilles") and the "erotology" of the skeleton where a "terrible and monstrous" beauty is found. As Baudelaire writes, "Ô charme d'un néant follement attifé" (O lure of nothingness so well tricked out!) and "Ô beauté, monstre énorme, effrayant, ingénu" (O beauty, huge, frightening, ingenuous monster).<sup>6</sup>

In this de-idealized beauty, stripped by the allegorist's destructive gaze at appearances, in this curious "ontology" of feminine absence "well tricked out," the woman's body, deprived of its maternal-body, becomes desirable only in its passage to the limit: as death-body, fragmented-body, petrified-body. It is as if the death of the organic body could only be represented as feminine in Baudelaire's interiorizing and subjectivizing of death, indeed to the point of being central to the perception of reality. John E. Jackson points out in his excellent book *La Mort-Baudelaire* that, since Büchner, the body's finitude, its characteristic ontological corruptibility and the aesthetic of fragmentation it induces, is crystallized in prostitution.<sup>7</sup> Witness Danton's love of prostitutes, as when he searches "for the Venus of Medici piece by piece among all the grisettes of the Palais Royal . . . making a mosaic, as he says. Heaven knows what limb he's at right now. It's a shame that nature has cut up beauty into pieces—like Medea her brother—and has put the fragments into our bodies."<sup>8</sup>

Prostituted, dispersed, and fragmented bodies themselves express the destructive impulse of allegory—with its loss of aura, veils, immortality. But this destructive utopia is also critical; though regressive, it admits of a positive aspect—"the dissipation [*Austreibung*] of appearances," the demystification of all reality that presents itself as an "order," a "whole," a "system" (*PW*, 411). From this point of view, modernity is a *mission*, a "conquest" (*CP*, 35).

Paradoxically, the prostituted body is not only a fragment, a ruin of nature, a disfigurement of the "sublime body." It is also staged by and in new fictions of style, play, image, all the "phantasmagoria" that provoke the myriad stimulations of modernity. It is thereby re-idealized and humanized: the prostitute represents the way "the commodity attempts to look itself in the face. It celebrates its becoming human in the [prostitute]" (*CP*, 42)—becoming human and something more: the plenitude of allegory itself. Thus, in Baudelaire's work "the prostitute could be the commodity that fulfills the allegoric vision of plenitude."

In this baroque approach to the feminine body, allegory presents itself in its

modern interpretation. We wish to emphasize all the implications of this in this statement: *only the status of the feminine as a simultaneously real and fictive body permits a differentiation between modern and baroque allegory.*

### **The Woman-Body as Interpretive Principle of Modern Allegory**

Like all allegory in Benjamin's sense, and contrary to the romantics, modern allegory shares certain features with baroque allegory, that origin (*Ursprung*) of modernity. To summarize:

—Allegory, as both rhetorical figure and as interpretation, simultaneously destroys and demystifies the real in its tidy, well-ordered totality. In its destructive intent, allegory *strips* the real by fragmenting it: reality appears as a ruin. In this process, history itself emerges in its most saturnine aspects and as representation.

—Such a development produces that *emotional writing* characteristic of allegory. This writing paralyzes itself in scenes; it represents itself. One of the key points in Benjamin's interpretation of allegory rests precisely on its visual character: allegory works with images, sight, scenes that link the visible and the invisible, life and dream. History presents itself to be *seen* with all its ambivalence fixed *in tableaux*. Like mysticism, history practices a language of bodies, and so "the observer is confronted with the 'facies hippocratica' of history as a petrified primordial landscape" (*als erstarrte Urlandschaft*; *OT*, 166).

—Because history emerges here in its catastrophic and fictive inclination (hence the theatrical models of Calderon, Shakespeare, and Gryphius), the alterity of tragedy, the perception of time as henceforth secularized, occurs in and through sentiment: mourning, affliction (*Trauer*), and play (*Spiel*). History refers back to a typology of passions and to a complete anthropology.

—In this distanced, passionate, and impassioning writing, the oxymoron is the dominant rhetorical figure, staging extremes and contradictions without ever exceeding them. "Nothingness" is "decked out," as in "icy fire" and "dark light."

One can say that allegory is an antidialectic, or to use Benjamin's expression *a dialectic at the state of arrest*, a frozen dialectic, fixed in images.

If these are the principal characteristics of allegory, its modernity, in contrast, is linked by Benjamin to a precise point: its relation to death. "Baroque allegory sees the corpse only from the outside. Baudelaire sees it also from the inside" (*CP*, 51). By leaving the exterior world for the interior, by creating an endopsychic (in Freud's terminology) image from death, *modern* allegory rids itself of certain of the limitations of the baroque, establishing itself henceforth on the foundation of a double disappearance. In the modern allegory, salvation, the present/absent redemption of the baroque, disappears. Modern time is radically secularized,

occurring without transcendence or future, and is periodized by the always new and always the same. Likewise, the opposition nature/cosmos vanishes as a totality, a metaphoric, “objective” reserve—a disappearance already evident in romantic irony, particularly in Jean-Paul’s works.

From now on, what “body” could give a “body” to the destructive impulse of an increasingly “feminized” poet, expelled from the great models of paternal filiation and mimicked by his own “depths”? The feminine body, which polarizes the sadistic and perverse impulse of the allegoric look: “For it [allegory] to touch things means to violate them, to know them means to unmask them.” Literally. As proof:

—The woman’s body presents itself, in Baudelaire’s work, as a “baroque enumeration of details” (*barocke Detaillierung*; referring to “Beau Navire,” *PW*, 415).

—The woman’s body, as well, in particular the prostituted body, stands as a metaphor for extremes: desire/death, animating/agitating, life/corruption, skeleton . . . and serves to materially convert that “petrified anxiety” (*erstarrter Unruhe*) that is the same formula as “the Baudelairean image of life” (*Lebensbild*), the image “that knows no development” (*PW*, 414).

—Finally, it is always the real/fictive body that provides modern allegory with the conditions of its existence, its visibility, and all that turns around the “image” (*Bild*). For this reason, as we have seen, the scenarios of the “feminine-body” serve as metaphors for those of the “commodity-body.”

One could multiply these practices, which doubtless all refer to the most secret and pregnant one, that of the *abyss*. This Baudelairean abyss—an inclination for chasm-like ruin and nothingness—accompanied by modern figures of mourning (spleen and melancholy) lives through a *continuous metaphor*, that of the feminine sex. An abyss without end exciting anguish and impotence, an abyss where the poet henceforth undergoes pregnancy as “a disloyal competition.” As Benjamin remarks in his most beautiful fragment, “The abyss-like meaning is to be defined as signification. It is always allegorical” (*PW*, 347). However, if in Blanqui “the abyss is a star,” defining itself in the space of the world and finding its historical index in the natural sciences, in Baudelaire’s works “it is without a star.” It is not even “the exoticism of theology; it is secularized: an abyss of knowledge and of signification” (*PW*, 347).

In this suggestive parallel, Benjamin questions himself on the historical index of the Baudelairean abyss, connecting it to fashion, its twin, and suggesting that this index could be “the arbitrariness of allegory itself” (*PW*, 348). In our turn, we suggest here that this historical index is not without a connection to the change in relations between feminine and masculine that emerged in mid-century in Baudelaire’s work.

—Translated by Katharine Streip

## Notes

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This article is comprised of the introduction and the first section of “L’Utopie féminine,” part 2 of the author’s *La Raison baroque: De Baudelaire à Benjamin* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1984)—Ed.

1. Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London, 1979), 294. Other works by Benjamin cited in the text: “Central Park” (CP), trans. Lloyd Spencer, *New German Critique* 34 (Winter 1985): 32–58; *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (CB), trans. Harry Zohn (London, 1973); *Das Passagen-Werk* (PW), ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt, 1983); *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (OT), trans. John Osborne (London, 1977).
2. Maurice Blanchot, *La Communauté inavouable* (Paris, 1983), 87 and 91.
3. On Baudelaire’s androgyny, see Michel Butor, *Histoire Extraordinaire*, trans. Richard Howard (London, 1969); and Leo Bersani, *Baudelaire and Freud* (Berkeley, 1977). Bersani links this androgyny to the loss of virility and the dislocation of the Baudelairean subject.
4. Francis Scarfe, ed. and trans., *Baudelaire* (Baltimore, 1961), 26.
5. Jacques Lacan, “La Relation d’objet,” unpublished seminar cited by Monique David-Ménard in *L’Hystérique entre Freud et Lacan* (Paris, 1983).
6. Richard Howard, trans., *The Flowers of Evil* (Boston, 1983), 102; Scarfe, *Baudelaire*, 223.
7. John E. Jackson, *La Mort-Baudelaire* (Neuchâtel, 1982). The book concentrates on this “interiorization” of death.
8. Georg Büchner, *The Complete Collected Works*, ed. and trans. Henry J. Schmidt (New York, 1977), 31.