

BENJAMIN AT THE BARRICADES: THE *ARCADES PROJECT* AS COMBAT AND INTRIGUE

Erik Butler

Die Mystifikation ist . . . ein apotropäischer Zauber
[Mystification . . . is an apotropaic magic]¹

The real pathos of Benjamin's life—and death—should not cast a shadow on the bright and variegated tapestry that is the *Arcades Project*. As Beatrice Hanssen has justly observed, “it is well known that National Socialism forced Benjamin into exile, into an enforced nomadic existence in Paris, where he would wander from one borrowed room and apartment to the next. Less a topic of consideration, however, is the fact that during the Weimar years, Benjamin practiced the fine art of travel, gravitating to Paris like his affluent intellectual friends.”² Benjamin's zigzag course through the Parisian arcades is in large part animated by what Edgar Allan Poe called the “imp of the perverse.”³ If Benjamin sought “secular illumination,”⁴ this ambition does not preclude his also undertaking operations intended to produce quasi-religious amazement without insight.

¹ References to the *Arcades Project* (from which this quotation is taken) follow the text found in Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1982), Volume V. English translations are from Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999). Hereafter, they will occur parenthetically. For the epigraph, see pages 422 and 335.

² Beatrice Hanssen, “Physiognomy of a Flâneur: Walter Benjamin's Peregrinations through Paris in Search of a New Imaginary,” *Walter Benjamin and The Arcades Project*, ed. Beatrice Hanssen (London: Continuum, 2006), 1.

³ Against the “pure arrogance of reason,” Poe proposed that one acknowledge “a radical, primitive, irreducible sentiment . . . overlooked by all the moralists,” which “we might . . . deem . . . a direct instigation of the Arch-Fiend, were it not occasionally known to operate in furtherance of good” (Edgar Allan Poe, *Poetry and Tales*, ed. Patrick F. Quinn [New York: The Library of America, 1984], 826, 829). This diabolical streak is also displayed by Benjamin, who approvingly quotes Valéry's remarks about Poe's invention of novel literary forms—a “phenomenon” (295/224) which, like the Devil's ruses, relies upon finding new ways to orchestrate perception, toy with expectations, and lure into complicity.

⁴ Norbert W. Bolz and Richard Faber, eds., *Walter Benjamin: Profane Erleuchtung und rettende Kritik* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1985) offers a number of approaches to the topic. For an excellent treatment of Benjamin's aims and the *Arcades Project* in particular, see James Rolleston, “The Politics of Quotation: Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*,” *PMLA* 104 (1989), 13-27.

It is difficult in the case of Benjamin to draw a sharp line dividing autobiography and the other forms of writing he practiced, notably the *essai*. From Montaigne on, this hybrid genre has permitted writers to conceal themselves in quotations and irony in order to play a game of hide-and-seek with readers, and experiment with form and intention to ends often unknown even to themselves.⁵ The problems of demarcation characteristic of this kind of literature present themselves especially acutely in the *Arcades Project*, which consists of bits and pieces taken from elsewhere and alternately commented or left to stand “as is.” Even in the latter case, the works of others bear the mark of the author’s style, if in muted form.⁶ Some parts of the *Arcades Project* are visibly more complete than others, having received, in the words of editor Rolf Tiedemann, the “mortar” of Benjamin’s own words.⁷ Had Benjamin lived to complete his undertaking, more such verbal cement would presumably hold together the rest of the text. But the *Arcades Project* was never finished.⁸

The discussion at hand leaves in place the rough edges of the *Arcades Project*, for in their unfinished state, they perform an obstructive function that demands attention and generates engagement.⁹ Oddly-proportioned spaces, detours, clandestine points of assembly, and dead ends shape the work. The commentary-on-commentary offered here eschews the hermeneutic task of unveiling meaning in an effort to connect with the spirit of intellectual combativeness that echoes in the glorious ruin that is the *Arcades Project*. These reflections, like Benjamin’s fighting words, affirm the joys of life in danger. While such an existence is hardly an ideal state of being, sometimes there is nothing better to expect. The “task of the commentator” is neither to describe the world, nor to change it, but to confound the illusions by which its contingencies assume the air of inevitability.

The open-ended text mirrors its subject matter. Benjamin writes of Paris:

Die Stadt ist nur scheinbar gleichförmig. Sogar ihr Name nimmt verschiedenen Klang in verschiedenen Teilen an. Nirgends, es sei denn in Träumen, ist noch ursprünglicher das Phänomen der Grenze zu erfahren als in Städten. Sie kennen heißt jene Linien, die längs der Eisenbahnüberführungen, quer durch Häuser, innerhalb

⁵ For a rewarding discussion of this topic of long standing, see Ann Hartle, *Montaigne: Accidental Philosopher* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2003), 62-90.

⁶ On citation-as-authorship (as exemplified by Montaigne), see Antoine Compagnon, *La seconde main, ou, Le travail de la citation* (Paris: Seuil, 1979), 13-45 and *passim*.

⁷ Rolf Tiedemann, “Einleitung des Herausgebers,” in Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1982), V, 13. When not otherwise credited, translations are my own.

⁸ Tiedemann presents the evidence concerning the work’s genesis in Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 11-41. Cf. the “Translators’ Forward” in the English edition, pp. ix-xiv and Margaret Cohen, “Benjamin’s Phantasmagoria: The *Arcades Project*,” *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, ed. David Ferris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 199-200. An indispensable guide for orientation in the *Arcades Project* is Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991).

⁹ In this regard, Benjamin reveals his affinity for contemporary movements in politics and the arts. See Michael Jennings, “Walter Benjamin and the European Avant-garde,” *The Cambridge Companion*, 18-34. On the reception of Benjamin’s writings and their power to occasion further commentary and discourse, see Detlev Schöttker, *Konstruktiver Fragmentarismus. Form und Rezeption der Schriften Walter Benjamins* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2002).

des Parks, am Ufer des Flusses entlang als Grenzscheiden verlaufen, wissen; heißt diese Grenzen wie auch die Enklaven der verschiedenen Gebiete kennen. Als Schwelle zieht die Grenze über Straßen; ein neuer Rayon fängt an wie ein Schritt ins Leere, als sei man auf eine tiefe Stufe getreten, die man nicht sah.

(The city is only apparently homogeneous. Even its name takes on a different sound from one district to the next. Nowhere, unless perhaps in dreams, can the phenomenon of the boundary be experienced in a more originary way than in cities. To know them means to understand those lines that, running alongside railroad crossings and across privately owned lots, within the park and along the riverbank, function as limits; it means to know these confines, together with the enclaves of the various districts. As threshold, the boundary stretches across streets; a new precinct begins like a step into the void—as though one had unexpectedly cleared a low step on a flight of stairs [141/88]).

These words about Paris apply equally well to the *Arcades Project* itself, which also “takes on a different sound from one district to the next.” Some parts are more peaceful than other, more turbulent areas. The text is divided by borders that run along the lines of theme, lexicon, and source (among other things). By following their uneven course, one constantly finds oneself making a “step into the void” and landing at another plane of elevation and in a new frame of reference. Indeed, though he has Paris in mind here, Benjamin presents a vision of urban space that holds true of cities in general, which always possess numerous strata to explore. Paris is the privileged site of Benjamin’s reflections not just because it is the “Capital of the Nineteenth Century,” as the introductory section of the *Arcades Project* declares, but also because of the accidents of biography and the contingencies of individual taste. A strong element of personal fantasy pervades Benjamin’s work.

There is no model for the *Arcades Project*, except, perhaps, that of “life” or “history” itself—unclear points of reference, at best. Therefore, the words mustered here in commentary follow the signs posted by Benjamin’s work in much the same way that one generally heeds the rules of traffic but occasionally breaks them. Infractions, after all, are something that city planners must anticipate, just as criminality is the necessary companion of law and order. Nothing in the text—or in Benjamin’s biography, for that matter—encourages readers to stick to a “straight and narrow” course of interpretation for long.

To employ a phrase of recent scholarship, Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* is comprised of “topographies of memory.”¹⁰ But the memory in question is both personal and cultural, intimate and distant. On the one hand, the text draws on Benjamin’s lived experience of Paris, and, on the other, the author’s vast readings about the city. How should one orient oneself? The *flâneur*—the figure providing the work with a theme and representing the author himself in his oblique writing trajectory—wanders through an expanse of images that belong to different, but contiguous and also overlapping worlds. The reader may follow “the man in the crowd,”¹¹ but only at constant peril of losing sight of him. Benjamin plunges his reader into an open page of history, which is still in the making. He writes: *Die Rede vom Buch der Natur weist darauf hin, daß man das Wirkliche wie einen Text lesen kann. So soll es hier mit der Wirklichkeit des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts gehalten werden. Wir schlagen das Buch des*

¹⁰ Bernd Witte, ed., *Topographien der Erinnerung: Zu Walter Benjamins Passagen* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2008).

¹¹ Benjamin refers this figure from Poe at numerous points, e.g. 151/96-7; 526/418.

Geschehenen auf (The expression “the book of nature” indicates that one can read the real like a text. And that is how the reality of the nineteenth century will be treated here. We open the book of what happened [580/464]). *Das Geschehene*, like the *Arcades Project*, belongs to the past, but it is also in large part still unwritten inasmuch as its contents flow into the present and the future.

Den Flanierenden leitet die StraÙe in eine entschwundene Zeit. (The street conducts the flâneur into a vanished time [524/417].) Almost every element of this sentence may be read allegorically as a kind of reflection on the composition of the *Arcades Project*. Baudelaire, about whom these words are written, becomes Benjamin’s stand-in; the nineteenth-century witness of, and participant in, history, is made to speak for his twentieth-century commentator. Baudelaire, the exemplary flâneur, is Benjamin. The “street” is a poem. The “vanished time” is not a historical event so much as a literary scene created by another author, whose vision is equal parts observation and literary embellishment. The statement is also the self-commentary of the *hypocrite lecteur* whom the author of *Fleurs du Mal* apostrophizes¹²—that is, of Benjamin himself, glossator of Baudelaire. Benjamin, the avid reader, is also a “hypocrite” in that, when writing, he does not state unequivocally what he means, but instead prefers allusions, juxtapositions, and circuitous paths toward meaning.

The reader must endeavor to share, as best s/he can, Baudelaire and Benjamin’s dissimulation. *Diese Arbeit muß die Kunst, ohne Anführungszeichen zu zitieren, zur höchsten Höhe entwickeln. Ihre Theorie hängt aufs engste mit der Montage zusammen* (This work has to develop to the highest degree the art of citing without quotation marks. Its theory is intimately related to that of montage [572/458])¹³. The *Arcades Project* mimics what it commentates and fans the sparks generated by the resulting interference; otherwise, history would be a dead letter.

Without wishing to discredit the author, we should note that Benjamin is not an unimpeachable source of information. Just as often than not, he can only lay claim to “memories” that have no index in his own experience. But what interests Benjamin is everything that has gone missing, anyway—what no one, even contemporaries of events, could possibly take into full possession and transmit as actual fact. Benjamin’s pursuit concerns the “aura,” “appearance,” and “surface” of things—what one might call “the objectivity of the subjective.” This is also why, throughout his writings, he takes up the pseudo-scientific language of Johann Kaspar Lavater’s physiognomy. Subtracting the latter’s essentializing, ontological claims, Benjamin recognizes a method of description that offers a rich phenomenological lexicon. Hence, he gives sections headings such as “Exhibitions,” “Advertising,” and “Modes of Lighting”—projections outward which quickly land in an inner space. Benjamin means to rally the illusions besetting him—and all others who wander the streets of modernity—for a counteroffensive against the forces that command these deceptive visions.

Sofern der Flaneur sich auf dem Markt ausstellt, bildet seine Flanerie die Fluktuationen der Ware nach (Insofar as the flâneur presents himself in the marketplace, his flânerie reflects the fluctuations of commodities [464/367]). In the universe that Benjamin evokes—with a polemical surplus-value for the twentieth century—people and things have become relay-points for transmigrating souls, which wander between the reified human beings, on the one hand, and uncannily animate objects, on the other. The metempsychosis of disembodied spirits under capitalism determines the life of the senses: *Die Liebe zur Prostituierten ist die Apotheose der Einfühlung in die Ware*

¹² Charles Baudelaire, “Au lecteur,” *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Y.-G. Le Dantec (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), 82.

¹³ The relationship between this principle and what Benjamin calls *gesteigerte Anschaulichkeit* (heightened perceptibility or vividness) is explored by Brigid Doherty, “The Colportage Phenomenon of Space’ and the Place of Montage in The *Arcades Project*,” in Hanssen (2006), 157-83.

(Love for the prostitute is the apotheosis of empathy with the commodity [475/375]). Such statements are, in equal measure, appreciations of occult aspects of modern life and warnings to the alienated subject.

As the simultaneously desired and feared reverse of a hallucinatory world, flatness, monotony, automation, mass production, and boredom form the backdrop of Benjamin's reflections.¹⁴ This is why transient appearances, precisely to the extent that they are illusory, command his attention. The task of the commentator, for Benjamin, is to be alert to the shocks and violent interruptions that occasionally disrupt the decorous dullness, however ephemeral and unfulfilling these diversions may be.¹⁵ And to this end, he employs whatever means are available. *Ich habe nichts zu sagen. Nur zu zeigen. . . . [D]ie Lumpen, den Abfall: die will ich . . . auf die einzig mögliche Weise zu ihrem Rechte komme lassen: sie verwenden* (I needn't say anything. Merely show. . . . [T]he rags, the refuse—these I will . . . allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them [574/460]). Much has been written about the mourning and melancholy that pervades Benjamin's work.¹⁶ Such observations are certainly not wrong, but the author of the *Arcades Project* also displays an appetite for the “cheap thrills” of casual sex, drugs, and shopping when he writes of prostitution, hashish, and the enticing display of consumer goods. Benjamin often seems undecided about how to judge affairs, but he clearly believes that boredom demands a strong antidote.¹⁷

This is why Benjamin also likes the heady wine of nineteenth-century extremists. He discusses the figure of Louis-Auguste Blanqui not just to reveal Baudelaire's poetic invention as having one of its sources in political radicalism, but also to enliven a vision of his own. *Die Verwertung der Traumelemente ist der Kanon der Dialektik* (The realization of dream elements is the canon of dialectics [580/464]). What else is the idea of revolution but a dream? Benjamin's prose alternates between somnambulistic citation and frenzied efforts to wake up from what, after all, may in fact be a nightmare.

When the historical night had apparently fallen forever on Blanqui, the first professional revolutionary, the latter's fantasy ignited a flame of unprecedented intensity. It burns in the pages of *[d]ie Schrift, die . . . [er] in seinem letzten Gefängnis als seine letzte geschrieben hat* ([his] last work, written during his last imprisonment [169/112]). Benjamin commentates this text, *L'éternité par les astres* (1872), as follows:

Es ist eine kosmologische Spekulation. . . . Die kosmische Weltansicht, die Blanqui darin entwirft, indem er der mechanistischen Naturwissenschaft der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft seine Daten entnimmt, ist eine infernalische—ist zugleich ein Komplement der Gesellschaft, die B<lanqui> an seinem Lebensabend als Sieger über sich zu erkennen gezwungen war. . . . Es ist eine vorbehaltlose Unterwerfung, zugleich aber die furchtbarste Anklage gegen eine Gesellschaft, die dieses Bild des Kosmos als ihre Projektion an den Himmel wirft.

¹⁴ Benjamin, 156-78; 101-19. For a discussion in context of nineteenth- and twentieth-century intellectual history, see Elizabeth S. Goodstein, *Experience without Qualities: Boredom and Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 108ff.

¹⁵ For Baudelaire, Benjamin's literary companion, they are often bloody: *l'Ennui . . . rêve d'échafauds en fumant son houka* (Boredom . . . dreams of the scaffolds, smoking his hookah) (“Au lecteur,” 82).

¹⁶ For a discussion focusing on Benjamin's early writings, see Max Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics: Walter Benjamin and the Play of Mourning* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001). A relevant work that deserves more attention from English-language critics is Karl Heinz Bohrer, *Der Abschied. Theorie der Trauer: Baudelaire, Goethe, Nietzsche, Benjamin* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1996).

¹⁷ Cf. Richard Wolin “A Metaphysical Materialist,” *The Nation* October 16, 2006, Vol. 283, Issue 12, 30-35.

(It is a cosmological speculation. . . . The cosmic vision of the world which Blanqui lays out, taking his data from the mechanistic natural science of bourgeois society, is an infernal vision. At the same time, it is a complement of the society to which Blanqui, in his old age, was forced to concede victory. . . . It is an unconditional surrender, but it is simultaneously the most terrible indictment of a society that projects this image of the cosmos—understood as an image of itself—across the heavens [169/112]).

Blanqui's work stages a *coup d'état* on bourgeois society down on earth through a siege on the City of God up in the heavens by laying hold of modern Laplacian theory in order to demonstrate the full import of a materialist understanding of the universe. Few are inclined to follow him in his cosmic flight of vengeance. Blanqui's *L'éternité par les astres*, Benjamin observes, *ist . . . bis heute gänzlich unbeachtet geblieben* (has remained entirely unnoticed up to now [169/112]). The statement basically holds true in the twenty-first century, too.¹⁸

Stated summarily, Blanqui's argument is as follows. According to modern science, the universe is infinite, but a finite number of elements constitute it. In the limitless expanse of the sky, countless other worlds exist. By necessity, then, not only are these planets like the earth—life on them has assumed forms identical to the world we know. Ergo, somewhere, among the host of celestial doubles, the revolution has been won and “Blanqui” and his cause have been vindicated. Benjamin qualifies this vision as “infernal,” whereby he has Blanqui's contemporary Baudelaire in mind. Like the verse of the *poète maudit*, the revolutionary's discourse appropriates and parodies the language and pacifying cant of his day. Baudelaire openly embraces Satanism, albeit with reservations that appear readily to the reader sufficiently familiar with dissimulation to have earned the confidential titles of *semblable* and *frère*. To similar ends, Benjamin argues, Blanqui embraces positive science. The truth that Blanqui declares, like the dark secrets that Baudelaire intimates to his readers, is audible only to the heightened senses of fellow conspirators and sympathizers; however, a noble end can justify a falsehood.¹⁹

Poetry and politics move, in Benjamin's Paris, in the shadows of a triumphant world of commerce, which conceals its cruelty in opulence. The wretched urban poor—the rag-pickers, petty criminals, and prostitutes whom Baudelaire hymned, like the proletariat of June 1848, in whose name Blanqui struggled—led an existence of virtual invisibility, either dying or already dead. But when recoded as “the specter haunting Europe” of which Marx and Engels wrote in the *Communist Manifesto*, these ghosts materialize and slake their thirst on the blood of their oppressors. Benjamin passes from Baudelaire to Blanqui and then to Nietzsche, the theorist of *ressentiment* and the Eternal Return; the latter harbored destructive fantasies whose attractions the author of the *Arcades Project* certainly appreciated.

Hence, it is perhaps less surprising than one might first think that Benjamin, the critic of violence,²⁰ quotes passages from Joseph de Maistre's somber *Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*. Maistre and Poe, Baudelaire wrote,

¹⁸ However, the work has been republished; see Auguste Blanqui, *L'éternité par les astres* (Paris: Les impressions nouvelles, 2002). Benjamin draws heavily of Gustave Geffroy's 1897 biography of Blanqui, (reprinted under the original title, *L'enfermé* [Lausanne: Éditions rencontre, n.d.], 211-23).

¹⁹ Cf. the *Arcades Project* 745-63/603-19.

²⁰ A discussion of Benjamin's critique, its implications, and afterlife can be found in Beatrice Hanssen, *Critique of Violence: Between Poststructuralism and Critical Theory* (London: Routledge, 2000).

m'ont appris à raisonner (taught me how to reason/argue).²¹ Benjamin chooses the most merciless words of Maistre, the apologist of counterrevolution and defender of the Church Eternal:

La terre entière, continuellement imbibée de sang, n'est qu'un autel immense où tout ce qui vit doit être immolé sans fin, sans mesure, sans relâche, jusqu'à la consommation des choses, jusqu'à l'extinction du mal, jusqu'à la mort de la mort.

(The whole earth, continually steeped in blood, is nothing but an immense altar on which every living thing must be sacrificed without end, without restraint, without respite, until the consummation of the world, the extinction of evil, the death of death [434/344]).

Maistre believes that blood, if only enough is spilled, can wash away blood. His position, though opposed to that of “the left,” shares with many of its soldiers a messianic vision and eagerness to accelerate the End of History. Hence, if only in ironic quotation, he is Benjamin’s tactical ally.

At many points, the author of the *Arcades Project* affirms that he wants only to state the facts, not to take sides.²² Such declarations are not to be credited. The disjointed, fragmentary nature of Benjamin’s work represents the fits and starts of a mind unsettled by its own dreams, uncertain which impressions to trust, but desirous of adventure. In the *Traumstadt Paris* (Paris the dream city [517/410]), *das Kollektivbewußtsein [versinkt] in immer tieferem Schläfe* (the collective consciousness sinks into ever deeper sleep [491/389]), and the figures that interest Benjamin, like the wandering spirits of murdered men, do not rest more soundly than he does.

In den Gebieten, mit denen wir es zu tun haben, gibt es Erkenntnis nur blitzhaft (In the fields with which we are concerned, knowledge comes only in lightning flashes [570/456]). Benjamin looks to the skies and see the City of Light as a refuge from the gathering clouds of National Socialism. His Paris consists of images, whether verbal or graphic, taken both from first-hand experience and extracted from readings. Paris is not Benjamin’s native Berlin, but rather a counterweight to the Prussian capital on the march toward its own destiny.²³ There was no place for Benjamin in the 1000-year empire that was supposed to emerge in Germany. Over cosmopolitan Paris hung a different firmament; even unlucky stars had the advantage of belonging to another world, where, a tourist of the imaginary, Benjamin could still feel secure.

Benjamin praises the gates of Paris:

Wichtig ist ihre Zweiheit: Grenzpforten und Triumphbögen, Geheimnis des ins Innere der Stadt einbezogenen Grenzsteins, der ehemals den Ort markierte, wo sie zu Ende war.—Auf der anderen Seite der Triumphbogen. . . Aus dem Erfahrungskreise der Schwelle hat das Tor sich entwickelt, das den verwandelt, der unter seine Wölbung hindurchschreitet.

²¹ Baudelaire, 1234 (“Mon coeur mis à nu”).

²² E.g., Benjamin’s marginal remark on methodology: *Vordringen mit der geschliffenen Axt der Vernunft und ohne rechts noch links zu sehen. . .* (Forge ahead with the whetted axe of reason, looking neither right nor left. . . [570/456]).

²³ Cf. Bernd Witte, “Paris–Berlin–Paris. Zum Zusammenhang von individueller, literarischer und gesellschaftlicher Erfahrung in Walter Benjamins Spätwerk,” *Passagen: Walter Benjamins Urgeschichte des XIX. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Norbert Bolz and Bernd Witte (Munich: Fink, 1984), 17-26.

(Important is their duality: border gates and triumphal arches. Mystery of the boundary stone which, although located in the heart of the city, once marked the point at which it ended.—On the other hand, the Arc de Triomphe. . . . Out of the field of experience proper to the threshold evolved the gateway that transforms whoever passes under its arch [139/86-7]).

The curvature of the Arc de Triomphe is like a second sky that covers and protects the wanderer and his shadow. The monument commemorates those who have fallen for France, especially on Napoleon's campaigns; its iconography contrasts the bloom of French youth with an armor-plated, medieval Germanic soldiery. It is as if the gate has been erected to express Benjamin's nostalgia for the revolutionary spirit of French yesteryear, which contrasts so sharply with the contemporary German longing for an even earlier time, the dream-world of a sleeping Barbarossa.²⁴

As Roland Barthes observed for another generation, "myth," in a modern context, does not refer to antiquity, but rather to the world of illusions that sustain life in bourgeois society.²⁵ This was already Benjamin's insight—and Marx's, too, in the preceding century. Benjamin taps into a vital current of his forebear's thought when he takes up the supernatural imagery that abounds in the polemical language of *Capital* and other works.²⁶ His concern is to illuminate the struggle that takes place not just in the arena of relations of production (the "material" realm), but also on the seemingly more immaterial terrain of culture.

To overstate the case somewhat, Benjamin, like the poetic and political radicals he commentates, loves trouble. His textual *praxis* engineers tension and conflict, for they are the wellspring of the revolutionary spirit. In its textual "barricades," the *Arcades Project* opens onto multiple layers of time that intersect and diverge—both on a "vertical," properly chronological axis and on the "horizontal" plane of the city street, which opens onto the recesses of history.

Paris steht über einem Höhlensystem, aus dem Geräusche der Métro und Eisenbahnen heraufdröhnen, in dem jeder Omnibus, jeder Lastwagen langausgehaltenen Widerhall erweckt. Und dieses große technische Straßen- und Röhrensystem durchkreuzt sich mit den altertümlichen Gewölben, den Kalksteinbrüchen, Grotten, Katakomben. . . . Noch heute kann man gegen zwei Franken Entgelt sich seine Eintrittskarte zum Besuche dieses nächtlichsten Paris lösen, das so viel billiger und ungefährlicher als das der Oberwelt ist.

(Paris is built over a system of caverns from which the din of the Métro and railroad mounts to the surface, and in which every passing omnibus or truck sets up a prolonged echo. And this great technological system of tunnels and thoroughfares interconnects with the ancient vaults, the limestone quarries, the grottoes and catacombs.

²⁴ For a comparative analysis of opposing systems of cultural memory, see Stefan Goebel, "Re-membered and Re-mobilized: the 'Sleeping Dead' in Interwar Germany and Britain," *Journal of Contemporary History*, Oct 2004, Vol. 39: 487 - 501.

²⁵ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill & Wang, 1972).

²⁶ Terrell Carver, *The Postmodern Marx* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998) discusses Marx's figural language in relation to political theories that do not share his assumptions about class struggle and modes of production.

Even today, for the price of two francs, one can buy a ticket of admission to this most nocturnal Paris, so much less expensive and less hazardous than the Paris of the upper world [137/85]).

The surface world echoes with the din of constructions belonging to what one might call, in grammatical terms, the “historical present perfect”—the network of trains constructed in the nineteenth century, whose modernity is such that they seem to date only “from yesterday.” On this level, phenomena crowd the senses, for the entrances and exits to the Métro spit out and swallow human traffic at a rate exceeding the powers of cognition.

The quarries, grottos, and catacombs around which this web is spun seem calmer, but they, too, have the power to overwhelm:

Das Mittelalter hat es anders gesehen. Aus Quellen wissen wir, das . . . sich kluge Leute sich erbötig machten, gegen hohe Bezahlung und Schweigegelübde ihren Mitbürgern dort unten den Teufel in seiner höllischen Macht zu zeigen. . . . Der Schmuggelverkehr im sechzehnten und achtzehnten Jahrhundert ging zum großen Teil unter der Erde vor sich. Wir wissen auch, das in Zeiten öffentlicher Erregung sehr schnell unheimliche Gerüchte über die Katakomben umliefen. . . . Am Tage nach der Flucht Ludwigs XVI verbreitete die Revolutionsregierung Plakate, in denen sie genaueste Durchsuchung dieser Gänge anordnete.

(The Middle Ages saw it differently. Sources tell us that there were clever persons who. . . , after exacting a considerable sum and a vow of silence, undertook to guide their fellow citizens underground and show them the Devil in his infernal majesty. . . . In the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries smuggling operations went on for the most part below ground. We also know that in times of public commotion mysterious rumors traveled very quickly via the catacombs. . . . On the day after Louis XVI fled Paris, the revolutionary government issued bills ordering a thorough search of these passages [137/85]).

Benjamin seems almost, in the manner of one of his sources, Michelet, to officiate at a summoning of ancestral voices from the past.²⁷ The scenes he evokes are alive with the occult forces that move history—black masses, crime, conspiracy, rumor, and political paranoia. The archeology of the Parisian underground reveals the tectonic instability of life in bygone ages. The passage concludes: . . . *ein paar Jahre später ging unversehens das Gerücht durch die Massen, einige Stadtviertel seien dem Einbruch nahe* (. . . a few years later a rumor suddenly spread through the population that certain areas of town were about to cave in [137/85]). These dormant tensions can reemerge and pull the city into the depths of terror once more.

The *Arcades Project* is less analytic than synthetic in ambition. Not just because of Benjamin’s death, but also because of his critical methodology, the text branches off into unwritten chapters that still belong within its scope. In the spirit of the logic underlying Benjamin’s project, we now turn to an alleyway that the author almost certainly knew about, but which he did not himself wander down in the pages he left behind.

²⁷ Roland Barthes, *Michelet*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1987), 81-87. On this topic, see also the brilliant essay by Philippe Muray, *Le XIXe siècle à travers les ages* (Paris: Denoël, 1984), 309-23, 451-73, 480-510.

The name *Champfleury*, the pseudonym of Jules François Félix Husson (1821-1889), recurs throughout the *Arcades Project*. Champfleury, the friend of Baudelaire²⁸ and Courbet, spent the last sixteen years of his life as the Chief of Collections at the Sèvres porcelain factory; today, he is best known as an art historian. He also composed sketches from the *vie de bohème* that he led in younger years. One such picture in prose is “L’homme aux figures de cire” (The Wax-Figure Man) (1849).

Champfleury presents his work as a slice of life²⁹ from mid-century Paris. The story begins with the narrator calling to mind a *spectacle . . . d’un extérieur morne et dégradé* (sight . . . with a gloomy and worn exterior) that one might have seen in walking from the Place de la Concorde to the Arc de Triomphe. On the other hand, it might have escaped notice, being *trop peu engageant pour le public des Champs-Élysées* (too uninteresting for the public of the Champs Élysées).³⁰ Significantly, the flâneur might have stumbled upon this attraction in the revolutionary year of 1848. There, one would have found two wax figures beckoning to passersby.

Une femme de cire vêtue en saltimbanque, que le [propriétaire] s’était imaginé pouvoir figurer une puissante princesse, tournait les yeux tantôt à droite, tantôt à gauche, par un mécanisme grossier. . . . L’autre figure de cire représentait un criminel sans titre, vêtu d’un modeste habit noir, les bras tendus en avant, comme pour engager le public à entrer. Ma longue étude de cet art populaire me donne aujourd’hui à penser que celui que j’appelle le criminel n’était autre chose que le témoin d’un crime. J’entends par là que l’homme en habit noir avait été sans aucun doute détaché d’un groupe représentant un assassinat.

(A woman in wax dressed as a circus performer, which the owner had thought might represent a powerful princess, turned her eyes alternately to the right and the left by means of a crude mechanism. . . . The other wax figure portrayed a criminal of an uncertain kind, dressed in humble clothing, extending his arms forward as if to encourage the public to enter. My lengthy study of this form of popular art makes me think, today, that the figure I am calling the *criminal* was nothing other than the witness of a crime. By that, I mean that the man in black dress had, without a doubt, been detached from a group of figures portraying a murder.)³¹

The female figure, clothed as a kind of clown, is supposed to have the commanding presence of a princess, although her eyes turn from right to left and back again, as if she were uncertain where to look for parties to support the royal cause. The male effigy, the narrator surmises, has been taken from another scene, in which “he” was the witness of a crime; now, he beckons to customers. *Les beaux bras qu’il faisait pour attirer le public furent anciennement un geste d’horreur; et cette bouche, qui jadis semblait crier: au meurtre! devint le pendant mécanique des oeillades de la princesse* (The striking gesture that he made to attract the public had formerly been an expression of horror; and that mouth, which once seemed to cry out “Murder!” became the mechanical counterpart to the princess’s

²⁸ Baudelaire devotes a section of *L’art romantique* (VII [pp. 955-57]) to “Les contes de Champfleury.”

²⁹ Cf. his 1857 study, *Le réalisme* (Geneva: Slatkine, 1967).

³⁰ Champfleury, *L’homme aux figures de cire* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), 7; the tale first appeared as part of the second volume *Les Excentriques* (1852), which is subtitled “Les grands hommes du ruisseau” (The Great Men of the Gutter).

³¹ Champfleury, 8.

winks.)³² A criminal quality still adheres to the dummy, as if by contagion—only at present, it taints the commercial spectacle as a whole.

On n'était pas encore sous la République (We were not yet living under the Republic),³³ the narrator observes. It is all the more remarkable, then, that the wax figures' human counterparts, who operate the sideshow, display inside their hutch unflattering representations of Bourbon kings and, moreover, indulge in diatribes against the contemporary Orléanist regime. They are also every bit as odd as the dummies that advertise for them: the man looks shifty and menacing, and the woman has no legs. The initial encounter prompts numerous subsequent visits, but, alas, *[l]a révolution de février arriva, qui coupa brusquement le carnaval en deux* (the Revolution of February came, which abruptly cut the carnival in two³⁴). The *cabinet de cire* closes. In the second year of the new government, the storyteller once again finds himself promenading in Paris in search of diversion—this time, at the *folles saturnales* of the idle rich disporting themselves at masked balls.

. . . je sortis d'un de ces terribles endroits, quasi hallucinés, ne me connaissant plus, ayant remarqué des confusions des sexes, des hommes et des femmes hybrides dont les sculptures et peintures licentieuses des antiquités ne peuvent donner aucune idée.

(. . . I exited from one of those terrible places, which seemed almost a hallucination, no longer knowing myself after observing the jumbles of the sexes, hybrid men and women of which the licentious sculptures and paintings of antiquity cannot give the slightest idea.)³⁵

The new society exceeds ancient Rome in its decadence. Suddenly, *un homme qui se disputait avec une vieille femme* (a man quarreling with an old woman) bids the narrator to enter a building in a curious fashion: *Entrez donc. . . vous n'avez pas peur qu'on vous assassine. . . . [V]ous . . . aimez le curieux* (Come on in, then . . . you're not afraid of being murdered? . . . [Y]ou . . . appreciate unusual things.)³⁶ Caught off-guard by this strange confidence, our hero agrees to follow. After five minutes in dark passageways, he realizes that he has again encountered the odd couple he met previously. *Je suis mon maître à présent* (I'm my own boss now),³⁷ explains the *homme bizarre*: on the condition that he marry the *femme cul-de-jatte*, his employer bequeathed the dummies to him, which now stand in greater disrepair than ever in the deepest recesses of their new home.

With the events of 1848, the world of business has changed as much as the political order. In this context, the strange old man who has come into possession of the wax cabinet is a figure of the bourgeoisie, which now controls government and finance alike. Like the class he represents, the new capitalist has a single, driving concern: *Il ne me manque plus qu'une chose* (Only one thing remains to be done), he excitedly tells his visitor, *c'est de nettoyer les figures, on ferait de l'or avec, bien exploitées* (that is to clean the figures—one could make a lot of money.)³⁸

³² Champfleury, 9.

³³ Champfleury, 10.

³⁴ Champfleury, 21.

³⁵ Champfleury, 22.

³⁶ Champfleury, 23-24.

³⁷ Champfleury, 26.

³⁸ Champfleury, 28.

Champfleury's narrative alter ego reacts with fascinated horror:

. . . je regardai cet homme plus curieux que tout son musée. Ses habits semblaient avoir servi à des pièces de la collection, mises au rebut. Sa figure était pâle et jaune. . . . L'oeil était vitreux, d'un bleu clair ressemblant à de certaines porcelaines. Si on avait pu retrancher la voix, cet homme eût pu passer pour une figure de cire; car ces gestes avaient le décousu et la raideur. Sa physiognomie générale n'offrait rien d'humain, il semblait sortir du moule où se coulent les criminels.

(. . . I looked at this man, who was stranger than his entire museum. His clothing seemed to have been part of the collection, cast-offs. His face was pale and yellow. . . . His gaze was vitreous, the bright blue of certain kinds of china. If it had been possible to remove his voice, this man could have passed for a wax dummy, for his gestures had a disjointed and stiff quality. His physiognomy, in general, presented nothing human; he seemed to come from the mold where criminals are made.)³⁹

Earlier, the dummy beckoning to visitors near the Champs-Élysées was transformed from the witness of a misdeed into a mannequin radiating criminality; now, the weird man who is his human equivalent has changed from a lowly role managing the cabinet of curiosities into its owner and orchestrator. In the process, it is as if he has shed his humanity for a waxen and mechanical body. Just as dummies can seemingly come alive, people can lose their soul and become inanimate.

[N]ous n'avons pas de temps à perdre ([W]e have no time to lose),⁴⁰ the hellish entrepreneur declares, once he learns that he is in the company of parties whose artistic abilities can help him revive his wax figures. [N]ous retournons aux Champs-Élysées où il y a du beau monde ([W]e're going back to the Champs-Élysées, where there's high society)⁴¹: already, he envisions a return that will consecrate his status in the new order.

The story's "punch line" is that the freakish entrepreneur, before he can remobilize his waxen army to march upon the Elysian Fields in a terrifying display of false immortality, absconds with the likeness of a particularly beautiful woman—a dummy he has named "Julie"⁴²—leaving his amputated wife behind with the rest of the broken bodies in his gallery. When the narrator and his friends return some two weeks later to treat themselves to another look at the spectacle, the *femme cul-de-jatte* indignantly tells them that it is no more: she caught her husband in bed with the *gueuse* (tramp),⁴³ and the pair stole away in the night.

Benjamin, who sought the archaic in the modern and the modern in the archaic, wrote the continuation of works begun a century earlier by others. The *Arcades Project* is his version of the Eternal Return: like his forebears Blanqui and Nietzsche, Benjamin envisions a world in which he is not the plaything of historical fatality, but instead the master of his destiny. This underlying fantasy defies whatever god(s) may exist.

³⁹ Champfleury, 31.

⁴⁰ Champfleury, 29.

⁴¹ Champfleury, 29.

⁴² This figure, *la reine des belles* (the queen of the beauties [33]) clearly implies a parody of Rousseau's *Nouvelle Héloïse* and its optimistic vision of humanity.

⁴³ Champfleury, 37.

An exhaustive tour of Benjamin's phantasmagorical Paris would be exhausting, and indeed, like the "talking cure" proposed by Freud, interminable. It is, however, necessary that we cease our wanderings at some point. In the spirit of the labyrinthine *Arcades Project*, and having passed the halfway point of our walk, we now turn to a diptych of the monsters that, like modern minotaurs, lurk in the pages of Benjamin's Paris and, like Champfleury's hellish entrepreneur of 1848, offer reflections of earlier and later revolutionary climates.

Benjamin makes passing reference to Pétrus Borel (1809-1859) and Isidore Ducasse, "Comte de Lautréamont" (1846-1870).⁴⁴ The latter, especially thanks to his "rediscovery" by the Surrealists, now enjoys a fixed—if eccentric—position in the French literary canon; the former remains largely unknown outside of a limited circle of specialists. These authors are significant not just because their period of artistic ferment coincides with times of revolutionary upheaval (1830 and 1870), but also because of the self-stylization they engineered in their works, whose mystifying results can be seen as analogues to Benjamin's cryptic mode of writing. Borel made himself known as "the Lycanthrope," and Lautréamont as "the Vampire."

Borel and his friends, who became known as the *Bousingots*, formed the Romantic avant-garde at the famous theater riots surrounding Victor Hugo's *Hernani* (1830).⁴⁵ Baudelaire wrote appreciatively of his predecessor, who represented for him the *expression la plus. . . paradoxale* (most paradoxical expression) of the new poetic *esprit* in his *haine aristocratique. . . contre les rois et contre la bourgeoisie* (aristocratic hatred. . . for kings and the bourgeoisie) under Louis Philippe's rule.⁴⁶ Nominally a republican—before the word came to signify the status quo of the ruling classes—Borel, like Baudelaire, was essentially a keen-eyed misanthrope (and, also like Baudelaire, he led a squalid, largely unrecognized life before dying prematurely and in penury).

Borel used his works to fashion an outrageous persona he intended to be mistaken for his true identity. *Champavert* (1833) was not only the title of a book—provocatively subtitled *Contes immoraux* (Immoral Tales)—but also the name of the work's "author." That is, Borel adopted a mask when he took the stage of publication. Or, to be more precise—and also more confusing—in another book that appeared the same year as *Champavert*, Borel assumed the appellation "Champavert" for himself. In the "Notice sur Champavert" appended to the second edition of *Rhapsodies*, a volume of poetry, "Champavert," the "same" party who had committed suicide in the eponymous story, revealed himself as the "true" author and "Pétrus Borel" as a pseudonym. In other words, "Pétrus Borel" was supposed to have killed himself, not "Champavert." Borel thereby declared the fictitious persona to be real and himself to be a fake (notwithstanding the impossibility that a man might record his own death).⁴⁷ Pétrus Borel, a.k.a. Champavert, a.k.a. *le Lycanthrope*, played a game of mystification by presenting a double work of fiction—made-up stories vouched for by a made-up person who enacted the "death of the author" over one hundred years before literary criticism caught on to the concept—as an authentic record of fact.⁴⁸ The spurious persona thereby fashioned, whose every word points back to his impossible

⁴⁴ Borel: 335/260, 353/276, 931/772. Lautréamont: 87/37, 120/71, 682/549.

⁴⁵ Enid Starkie, *Pétrus Borel: the Lycanthrope: His Life and Times* (New York: New Directions, 1954) contains a vivid account of the author's milieu and exploits.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Benjamin 931/772. Cf. Baudelaire, 1104-7 (*L'art romantique*, "Réflexions sur quelques-un de mes contemporains," V).

⁴⁷ Jean-Luc Steinmetz, "Le retour du lycanthrope," in Pétrus Borel, *Champavert: Contes immoraux* (Paris: Phébus, 2002), 9-26.

⁴⁸ Or, to put matters in somewhat different terms, Borel trumps literary theory by multiplying the sites of authorial identity and literalizing, in advance, what Roland Barthes would speak of metaphorically.

(auto)biography, does not vanish behind the tales he tells so much as appears, spectrally, among them. Champavert, the supposed suicide, outlived the man who invented him. . . .

The lycanthrope's literary kinsman, the vampire, is the product of similar trickery and artifice. Factually, the author of *Les chants de Maldoror* was Isidore Ducasse—a young transplant from Uruguay who sought his literary fortunes in Paris some forty years after Borel. However, in the sphere of illusion that Ducasse created on the pages of the *Chants*—and bequeathed to his readers and commentators—matters are considerably more convoluted. Ducasse's game of vampiric personation occurs through the equation of Lautréamont, the work's fictive “author,” on the one hand, and Maldoror, the “protagonist,” on the other. Writer and character merge, diverge, merge again, and so on, in the space opened by writing.

[Maldoror] s'aperçut. . . qu'il était né méchant. . . . Il n'était pas menteur, il avouait la vérité et disait qu'il était cruel. Humains, avez vous entendu? Il ose le redire avec cette plume qui tremble!

([Maldoror] perceived he was born wicked. . . . No liar, he confessed the truth, admitting he was cruel. Mankind, did you hear? He dares repeat it with this quivering quill!)⁴⁹

This passage initially discusses Maldoror in the third person and situates him in the past through a detached narrative voice. Then, as the (anti)hero's acknowledgement of his inherent evil is described, the voice aligns itself with him. Protagonist and author meet up in the moment of written confession.⁵⁰

Rumors—excited whispers breathlessly passed from one person to another like a disease—surround Maldoror.

Les uns disent qu'il est accablé d'une espèce de folie originelle, depuis son enfance. D'autres croient savoir qu'il est d'une cruauté extrême et instinctive, . . . et que ses parents en sont morts de douleur. Il y en a qui prétendent qu'on l'a flétri d'un surnom dans sa jeunesse. . . . Ce surnom était le vampire!

(Some say he has been stricken since childhood by a type of inherited madness. Others hold that he is of an extreme and instinctive cruelty. . . and that his parents died of grief because of it. There are those who maintain that he was branded with a nickname in his youth. . . . This nickname was *the vampire!*)⁵¹

The surname “vampire” is just one designation among others; it is a mark applied from without, rather than an emanation of inner essence. Yet Maldoror *has* no inner essence; he exists only in perpetual opposition to God and His World. The titles that the Adversary of the *Chants* receives present him as a remorseless, parasitic

⁴⁹ Isidore Ducasse/Comte de Lautréamont, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Hubert Juin (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), 19-20; *Maldoror and the Complete Works of the Comte de Lautréamont*, trans. Alexis Lykiard (Cambridge, MA: Exact Change, 1994), 29.

⁵⁰ That is, as Derrida would observe, an infinite deferral of the present—a “space” outside time, never given to experience.

⁵¹ Lautréamont, 42/46. Cf. Jean Michel Olivier, *Lautréamont: le texte du vampire* (Lausanne: L'âge d'homme, 1981).

creature with a toxic embrace, e.g., *celui qui ne sait pas pleurer* (he who does not know how to cry), *le frère de la sangsue* (the brother of the leech), and *l'homme aux lèvres de soufre* (the man with lips of sulfur). Contagion is his core, and it spreads from his mouth and hand.

Thus, of all the names Maldoror receives, *vampire* comes closest to capturing his formless, seething substance. Lautréamont appears where Maldoror takes up the pen, and vice-versa: *je jette un long regard de satisfaction sur la dualité qui me compose* (I cast a long look of satisfaction upon the duality that composes me.)⁵²

Ducasse's bizarre work culminates in the appropriately outrageous act of self-canonization among the patron saints of French letters by means of murder. The key to the intrigue is an epistolary exchange reproducing, in miniature, the dangers that the *Chants* hold for the reader in general.⁵³ Mervyn, a comely adolescent, catches Maldoror's attention, and the latter sends him a confidential missive. The missive concludes with *une tâche de sang* (a bloodstain) and *trois étoiles* (three stars).⁵⁴ Mervyn writes back a *lettre coupable* (guilty letter).⁵⁵ The boy expresses shameful lust, but even more importantly, he performs an action just like Maldoror's: *Je me dispense de signer et en cela je vous imite* (I excuse myself from signing, and in that I imitate you),⁵⁶ he writes. This move is fatal for it sets the boy adrift in the mysterious element of non-identity that his seducer amphibiously⁵⁷ inhabits.

When Mervyn finally meets his correspondent in person, the latter throws him unceremoniously—and in almost slapstick fashion—into a bag and beats him within an inch of his life. Maldoror then hangs the boy headfirst from the Vendôme Column and swings him through a series of mounting and expanding revolutions until his body is traveling on a plane perpendicular to the obelisk. The fiend releases the rope, and Mervyn goes flying across the river to the Left Bank.

⁵² Lautréamont, 246/203.

⁵³ Hence the words of warning with which the book begins: *Plût au ciel que le lecteur, enhardi et devenu momentanément féroce comme ce qu'il lit, trouve, sans se désorienter, son chemin abrupt et sauvage, à travers les marécages désolés de ces pages sombres et pleines de poison; car, à moins qu'il n'apporte dans sa lecture une logique rigoureuse et une tension d'esprit égale au moins à sa défiance, les émanations mortelles de ce livre imbiberont son âme comme l'eau le sucre. Il n'est pas bon que tout le monde lise les pages qui vont suivre: quelques-uns seuls savoureront ce fruit amer sans danger.* (May it please heaven that the reader, emboldened, and become momentarily as fierce as what he reads, find without loss of bearings a wild and abrupt way across the desolate swamps of these sombre, poison-filled pages. For unless he bring to his reading a rigorous logic and mental application at least tough enough to balance his distrust, the deadly issues of this book will lap up his soul as water does sugar. It would not be good for everyone to read the pages which follow; only the few may relish this bitter fruit without danger [17/27].)

⁵⁴ Lautréamont, 241/199.

⁵⁵ Lautréamont, 245/202.

⁵⁶ Lautréamont, 245/202.

⁵⁷ Gaston Bachelard, *Lautréamont*, trans. Robert S. Dupree (Dallas: The Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture, 1986), 13-32. Cf. Alain Paris, "Le bestiaire des *Chants de Maldoror*," in Philippe Fédy, Alain Paris, Jean-Marc Poiron, Lucienne Rochon, *Quatre lectures de Lautréamont* (Paris: A.-G. Nizet, 1972), 79-144; pp. 84-7 of this study provide a list of over 120 real and fantastic animals with which Maldoror overlaps at various points of the *Chants* (e.g., eagle, basilisk, crab, toad, snail, hornet, rat, and shark).

Mervyn... ressemble à une comète traînant après elle sa queue flamboyante. . . . Dans le parcours de sa parabole, le condamné à mort fend l'atmosphère. . . et son corps va frapper le dôme du Panthéon, tandis que la corde étreint, en partie, de ses replis, la paroi de l'immense coupole. C'est sur sa superficie sphérique et convexe . . . qu'on voit, à toute heure du jour, un squelette desséché, resté suspendu.

(Mervyn . . . resembles a comet trailing after it its flaming tail. . . In the course of his parabola, the doomed one cleaves the air. . . and his body hits the dome of the Panthéon while the rope's coils partly lasso the superstructure of the vast cupola. There upon its spherical and convex surface area . . . at any hour of the day a wasted skeleton may be seen, stuck hanging.)⁵⁸

This finale, which leaves words behind and writes itself immediately into the real, ratifies the power of vampiric writing. Not only does the exchange of letters, by delivering Mervyn into Maldoror's clutches, make the *tour de force* possible; this operation alters the landscape in which it inscribes itself: "at any hour of the day," supposedly, the boy's remains are still visible as the signature of the vampire's immortality.

Mervyn's correspondence with the fiend leads to his physical annihilation, but also to an afterlife. His fractured body eternally scars the summit of the Panthéon. This structure, which was originally built as a church, came to house the remains of the gods of French letters. In effect, Maldoror forcibly lodges the youth among the "Immortals." Because Mervyn has fatefully imitated Maldoror and become like him, his remains read as the apotheosis of the vampire, whose name in turn reveals itself as a coded description of the triumph of evil: the *Mal d'Aurore*.⁵⁹ And because Lautréamont is Maldoror's alter ego, the diabolical Count ascends to the heavens at the same moment.

What is the relationship between Benjamin and the werewolf Champavert, the conjuror of undead automata Champfleury, and the vampiric Comte de Lautréamont? The author of the *Arcades Project* also published under pseudonyms,⁶⁰ and, notwithstanding his readers' assumptions, he also, as I hope to have demonstrated, had an affinity for the perverse amply on display in the pages of his masterwork. Benjamin's fondness for occult subjects and his predilection to adopt a riddling style are also matters of fact. It would speak to his resourcefulness and genius if, at the time of National Socialism, he made his own the dissimulation and ruse of authors who, in the revolutionary years of 1830, 1848, and 1870, employed the pen as a sword to perform operations on a social reality like the ones they, too, found oppressive. At any rate, Benjamin never sought the dogmatic affirmation of any creed, religious or political, but instead appreciated the struggle of dialectical encounters with the deeply unjust world in which he found himself.

The *Arcades Project*, a sprawling mass of bricks and mortar, does not yield a choir singing the *Marseillaise*, the *Internationale*, or any other revolutionary hymn. The voices that echo in and between its fragments are closer to the whispers of conspirators seeking influence and power.⁶¹ Notwithstanding the status Benjamin's

⁵⁸ Lautréamont, 265-66/218; translation slightly modified.

⁵⁹ A pun first pointed out by René Crevel, "Lautréamont, ta bague d'aurore nous protège," *Le Disque vert*, 1925 (text reproduced in Marie-Louise Terray, ed., *Commentaire des Chants de Maldoror, Lettres, Poésies I et II* (Paris: Gallimard/Folio, 1997), 114.

⁶⁰ "Ardor," in his first articles, for the journal *Der Anfang*; toward the end of his life, as "O. E. Tal" and "Detlef Holz."

⁶¹ Cf. 745-63/603-19.

writings have achieved in the critical canon, his work—and especially the *Arcades Project*—offers more practice than theory. Even Benjamin’s critical essays engage with their subject matter and the reader in a way that, for the most part, avoids analysis in favor of gnomic statements, provocative formulations, and aphorisms. This mode of writing demands of readers that they face the text as a series of obstacles; Benjamin’s thought does not always unfold clearly, and it therefore becomes necessary to revisit a passage several times or to strike out on a course of nonlinear reading that uncovers points of contact and communication between isolated parts of his works.

The *Arcades Project* spins a web of intrigue inherited from earlier generations. The reader of Benjamin’s work, today, must disentangle many knots in order to move through the text. Some of these points of confusion cannot be resolved, for an exhaustive commentary would mean that the past, present, and future have all been disclosed to finite human understanding—an ahistorical and, notwithstanding Benjamin’s flirtations with dark powers, a blasphemous notion.

“Mystification . . . is an apotropaic magic,” this essay’s epigraph reads. As has been remarked on more than one occasion, Benjamin does not come out and say what he means, but rather skirts the issue, coyly gesturing toward a truth that has little reassuring about it, anyway. The *Arcades Project* presents as many obstacles to understanding as it offers insights, but these barriers are not simply impasses: instead, they represent points of resistance, where images are mobilized both to confound the enemy and to beckon to allies who still find themselves “on the other side.” The examples offered by Benjamin’s favorites, Baudelaire and Blanqui, as well as those of kindred authors (Borel, Champfleury, Lautréamont), reveal a creative perversity—or, if one prefers, a seditiousness—that forms the most substantive aspect of Benjamin’s work.

Erik Butler teaches German and comparative literature at Emory University. He has written two books: *Metamorphoses of the Vampire: Cultural Transformation and the Modern Monster, 1732-1933*, and *The Bellum Grammaticale and the Rise of European Literature*; both titles are scheduled to appear in 2010.

