

The City and the Poetic Approach of Social Experience

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Abstract

In the name of experimental reasoning, the power of imagination and the heuristic merits of the artistic process are often anathema. Now, the discovery of a reality in which experience and existence are combined sums up the poetic adventure and developed a micro-sociology of everyday life of the city. This preoccupation is, in fact, two fold. On the one hand is the comprehensive description of the relationship between life and their stylizations in everyday practices and customs as well as in cultural works, and other are social sensitivities and representations that are relatively shared by individuals grouped in human communities. Benjamin offers us the first presentation of the player and the stroller as an urban personality, regulating their social existence on a temporal rhythmicity and an experience of space in dissonance with the ideals that mobilized nascent industrial Europe. To envisage sociologically this abrupt separation from everyday existence of which the player is the modern hero, we are brought to envisage the fact that there exist

effectual forms of experience based on a temporal rhythmicity rather distinct from that which the administrated organization of global society imprints on existence. Moreover, the study of these effectual forms, by composing crystallizations that signify sociality, sketch the subjective reliefs of a space combining habit and risk, a proximity with both elsewhere and with otherness.

Keywords: Everyday Life, Proximity, Rythmicity, Social Experience, Walter Benjamin

In the name of experimental reasoning, the power of imagination and the heuristic merits of the artistic process are often anathema. Yet, in far as knowledge is a symbolic system, a way of ordering reality in its complexity, it also appears to be an effect of representation, which aims at restoring to consciousness a less enigmatic universe. The scientific adventure has never departed from a position in conformity with the fundamental uncertainty which animates its development, because it has to understand and/or explain phenomena that lack of evidence the "truths" that science offers cannot pretend to perfection, they do not have the steadfastness and strength of beliefs. They remain conditional, imprisoned within the point of view from which they spring. The distinctions between science and a religion which longs for the immutable, or with an ideology that purports to offer a total interpretation of reality, thus derive from their mutual pretenses as well as from the existential experience which underlies them. From Karl Popper to Edgar Morin, scientific discovery depends upon an intangible principle of refutation, for the very reason

that a fact which is observed, is primarily an event; it remains empirical and leaves therefore no place for the absolute¹. The researcher's activity has something in common with voyeurism, his gaze at the object of his studies proceeds from a point of view a framework, an optical field, with all the implications hinted by those terms and that attitude, we will later return to that point.

If framing the phenomenon allows its selection within a space, if it localizes a fact, it also condenses space within the observed reality. The image which results from this operation is a visual angle; thus although the phenomenon considered can exist independently of us or a witness, its objective situation remains bound up with our relation to it.

The face of things and their features alter with the angle of view, as well as the importance of the latter, since it controls the lighting under which they will display themselves. If there is any objectivity at this stage of investigation of reality, it can only be evinced through the subjective synthesis that associates the framing and the light; the latter may be either natural or artificial; in that case, it is set up for the requirements of experimentation. Because they are framed within a certain setting, phenomena partake of a new signification, they acquire a meaning through (and for) the gaze. Besides, the framework represents a certain visual angle. It turns its content into an image, thus making it property of the picture and not of the operator who so to speak. hides behind his work. In so far as it has a spatial relation, set

1) Karl Popper, 1984. *La logique de la découverte scientifique*, Payot, Paris, p. 111.

within a particular duration, it is more valuable than the work which presided its apparition, and it displays a meaning that is appropriated in differentiated ways which refer to collective levels of sensibility and intelligibility. An image which carries a supra personal meaning is endowed with symbolic significations; more than the motif it expresses, it is the style, the shaping through the play of the frame and the lighting which gives it a kind of "superiority", a symbolic force through which its materiality is seized again as a model or a pattern, as a link between nature (the Heideggerian "*Bestand*.")) and the culture through which man recognizes himself in the form of things, exercises his ascendancy over them and imprints on them the mark of civilization.

What is common both to the practice of science and to the creative progression of the artist takes root in the imaging faculty (the capacity for building mental patterns the talent for designing a model) and in the dynamism of the image, its material density coupled with its psychic amplitude. To talk about an epistemological propinquity between social aesthetics and the imaginary, is to put in evidence the condensation of psychic energy on the material object, that assemblage of forces which display the universe as a spectacle in perpetual metamorphosis (F. Nietzsche). Thus we have the right to consider an aesthetical paradigm for the sciences and indeed to pave the way for aesthetical and comprehensive epistemology. Here we will limit ourselves to its adjustment to sociology.

Apart from the difficulties inherent in the edification of a

scientific knowledge, Human sciences are confronted with a complexity which defines them as “imprecise”, “imperfect”, very truly human. This complexity encompasses consciousness, action and desire, dream and unconsciousness, will and feelings. The exploration of this whole set of elements can hardly accommodate with the oblivion of the cultural contexts, of the world visions and their processions of images and myths, which day after day shape the horizon of knowledge.

Lastly, we come across a perspective, originated in the end of the XIXth century, of which Georg Simmel, “A Monet of philosophy” (G. Lukacs) was the pioneer; in a most audacious manner, this approach captures the two previous possibilities, even if it does not proceed to any specific development. Its purpose is to integrate the aesthetical categories within the description of social facts, to unveil the artistic and playful order in daily life, and to qualify the notions and “concepts” that may account for it. It also inaugurates an essayistic sociology.

This position oscillates between two extreme poles: explicative comprehension –*erklarendes verstehen* (Max Weber)– and the radical criticism of psychoanalytic and/or Marxist inspiration (G. Lukacs, Th. Adorno, and L. Goldmann). As a special field within sociology, it belongs from now on to the history of that discipline. The two other positions are directly linked to a debate, the interest of which goes far beyond the ambitions of sociology:

1: Epistemological: What are the conditions of validity of an

intuitive knowledge in a sociological demonstration. Is the subjective apprehension of social reality an obstacle to society's intelligibility?

2: Philosophical: the meaning of "being together", of collective experience, being the main goal of Human sciences, subjectivity should not be confused with subjectivism or with a withdrawal within the inner self, which is an individual sentiment. Sociology cannot escape being conceived as a social field of phenomenology and with it appears the idea that society is a world which is deeply rooted in the cultivation of the senses and the sensations. However, if we postulate that society is a phenomenal structure (the accords of minds, as described by August Comte, the intersubjective communication of Habermas); the problem of an ontological superiority that values one system of representations or ideas at the expense of a rival, leads towards the creation of a social hermeneutic based on the "eidetic reduction²", which is thought like a prolegomena to empirical consciousness.

3: Historical: the combination of the phenomenological and hermeneutic approaches now takes a decisive turn. There can be no answers suggested by it that are not the cause or consequence of unresolved issues. The historical signification of an event is indissociable from the shared experience and the temporal modalities of the actors of that given situation. This "truth" is only valuable as memory, testimony; nevertheless, the transmission

2) For E. Husserl eidetic concerns the essence of things and not their presence or their existence. Eidetic reduction substitutes the consideration of essence to that of experience, as the latter is commonly understood.

of meaning is hardly reducible to its amnesic sedimentation, because it becomes the object of a work of interpretation- in the analytical sense of the word (latent vs. overt content). Finally, the relation Tradition and History is based on the tension between hermeneutics (the language and symbols which carry the meaning) and phenomenology, which explores the feelings and representations of the historical actors. History, as phenomenological, is here defined as a “psychic process”³.

Now, one must capture the essence of the psychic to distinguish it from the physical and therefore come back to the eidetical science in order to free historical temporality from historicism and its univocal laws. The historicity of social phenomena is a state of temporality within consciousness. It enables a historical being to transcend his/her situation as a historical being to no longer exactly coincide with it, and therefore look at the historical reality like a text to be interpreted, like a territory with opened and branched out meanings. It is this inadequation of the historical being with him/herself that essentially targets him/her as being submitted to a psychical activity, the products of which are partly potential and partly actual. But the transition from the potential to the actual, and vice versa, covers the path from the subject to the object. Action is a potentiation; the object is a potentiality, the subject, an actualization, which consists in “making of what is in the object what ought to be in the subject”. This transcendence of historical

3) Georg Simmel, 1984. *Les problèmes de la philosophie de l'histoire*, Paris, PUF, p. 242.

being knows only of an ethical or aesthetical finality.

The discovery of a reality in which experience and existence are combined sums up the poetic adventure, from Baudelaire to Surrealism, and explains thereby the sociological interest given them by Walter Benjamin in his attempt to extract a theory of language reconciling the word and the thing, the image and the idea, and orienting itself even more generally toward a micro-sociology of everyday life and of the city. In this perspective every object is the fragment of the historic context surrounding it, each detail participates in a figuration of the universal which endows it with meaning.

In essays entitled *Charles Baudelaire, un poète lyrique à l'apogée du Capitalisme*⁴, Benjamin offers us the first presentation of the player and the stroller as urban personalities, regulating their social existence on a temporal rhythmicity and an experience of space in dissonance with the ideals that mobilized nascent industrial Europe. Borrowed from Baudelaire's "spleen", the theme of melancholy is somewhat the mental implanting of this mutilated sensitivity. In the 19th century, which witnessed the definitive establishment of the rational organization of labor with the salaried class, and its implicit rigor-the calculation of the temporal economy-the idle person and the player each refer to some sort of pre-Promethean nostalgia. W. Benjamin quotes Alain, who

4) Walter Benjamin, 1982. *Charles Baudelaire, un poète lyrique à l'apogée du capitalisme*, trans. by Jean Lacoste, Paris, Petite Bibliothèque Payot, coll. Critique de la politique, p. 399.

wrote in this regard: "... play energetically denies every acquired situation, every antecedent, every advantage recalling past services, and it is in this respect that it is distinguished from work. Play rejects ... that weighty past which is the characteristic of work."⁵ Benjamin then enlightens us on symbolic realism, of which Paris during the Second Empire furnishes an example with four ideal types: *la vie bohème*, the stroller, the player and modernity.

The positivist adage, "Progress through order", evokes quite well the spirit of the fully modern contours that Baudelaire's era impressed on the city. The city dweller cannot fail to inhale the moralizing breeze that triumphantly accompanied the industrial effort. The systematic lighting of streets, the strategically planned construction of the major boulevards, the Parisian tax on wine that pushed outside the limits of the capital an entire segment of the population whose poverty did not serve to inhibit drunkenness, the dissolution of the ragpickers' association are all examples signaling the coincidence between the new policed partition of urban space and the -hygienic exclusion of an entire underworld, that *Lumpenproletariat* so scorned by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels when they analyzed *Les Mystères de Paris* by Eugène Sue, the *mémoires* -of the "Professional Conspirator", A. Chenu, or of the "stool pigeon" Lucien de la Hodde⁶.

At the same time the "romantic" invention of photography and

5) Alain, 1927. *Les idées et les âges*, Paris, "Le jeu", p. 183.

6) Cf. A. Chenu, 1850. *Les Conspirateurs, les sociétés secrètes*, les corps-francs, Paris, L. de la Hodde, 1848. *La naissance de la république en février 1848*, Paris, On this, Alexandrian, 1979. *Le Socialisme romantique*, Paris, Seuil.

the development of the mass-circulation press began to snake up conventional relations between the image and time, the word and action. Testimony to this can be found in the polemics that opposed portrait painters and enthusiasts of the daguerreotype with regard to their relative artistic qualities: the aesthetic of the negative vs. the fetishism of a tale that can be recopied thousands of times brutally introduced the sensation of speed mediatized by technology. The invocation of Satan in *Les Fleurs du mal* is nothing other than the sullen perfume exuded by this historic confrontation. W. Benjamin reminds us that Baudelaire's Devil is both the guardian of Promethean scientific innovations and the "generous players" who has his "subterranean abode near the boulevard"; but he is also the author of perpetual intrigue designated in the poet's litanies as the "confessor of conspirators».

It is impossible here not to reflect on the obscure centrality of *la vie bohème*, refuge of the revolutionary clubs of Raspail and Blanqui, inflamed by a conception of politics that made of a *coup d'État* a game like "Monopoly", where rebellious barricades could become the magic winning formulas. Trysting places, *tapis-francs*, cabarets and wine shops are the fixed points in the hazardous existence of an international conspiracy, which the bohemian life in fact maintains at a distance from the modern proletariat. In reality as in the poem (cf. "*Le vin des Chiffonniers*"), informers and raggickers share this Kingdom of the Shades where the limits of human misery can only be vaguely glimpsed through the benevolent intentions of the social observer (cf. H.A. Fréguier, *Des*

classes dangereuses de la population dans les grandesvilles et des moyens de les rendre meilleures, Paris, 1840), Although technical control of urban geography seems to crown the conquest of power by the bourgeoisie, nevertheless W. Benjamin notes that for this class, "political events have easily taken the form of lucky breaks at a gaming table,

Benjamin's analysis describes perfectly this *vie bohème*, perceived as a residual art of living, derived from the encirclement by the law of commercial values of aspects until then neglected (art, poetry, etc) by its economic dictates. However, despite development of a truly original theory of the collective experience, the author discerns but vaguely the alternative current in which the bohemian lifestyle draws and expends the energy that makes it attractive at the heart of the social power it denies, *La vie bohème* is a case of spatial non-contemporaneusness in that it deliberately occupies a place (an area of precise movements, definable places, etc.) within a space organized around a weighty civilizational project, contradicting the cultural basis out of which it issues, A non-synchronicity in time is superimposed over this antagonistic co-existence (spatial proximity/social distance).

There where the satisfaction of needs through consumption of merchandise (cf. the "Parisian passageways" as networks for the socialization of urban crowds in W. Benjamin) legitimates the punitive compensation of salaried labor and sedentarism, the person living the bohemian life-fleeing ail social security-transforms his existence into a temporal errancy hardly in

conformity with the values and principles for management of time that govern his era. From this spatial and temporal imbalance to the social rhythm activating the world surrounding him flows modern melancholy i.e. the mental envelope of an individual consciousness taken in a collective sensitivity, which makes of the present a receptacle of burning memories, and of these the kaleidoscope in which the moment lived is appreciated and depreciated, "The spleen is the feeling that corresponds permanently to the catastrophe", W, Benjamin was to write⁷.

Re-evaluating this multiplicity of social times, and its poetic honing, leads to admitting a metanoiac dynamism,⁸ a convergence of emotions, a poignancy of intersubjectivity in communicational activity, which radically relativize rational imperatives and determinist logic in the adventure of groups and human communities.

In this way we can' understand that desire, childhood memory or shared sensations, which belong to the realm of the experience of time and space, sometimes stabilize an association of individuals that no explicit reason or coherent project could unite. The somber heroism of the player is also derived from this psychosocial framework; it is for this reason that W. Benjamin devotes several pages to it in his *Quelques thèmes baudelairiens* of 1939.

The emotional intensity of play snatches the individual away from his memory and from the heritage of experience, of which

7) Walter Benjamin, "Zentralpark", op. cit., p. 214.

8) Patrick Tacussel, 1984. *L'attraction sociale, le dynamisme de l'imaginaire dans la société monocéphale*, Paris, Librairie des Méridiens; coll. "Sociologies au quotidien"

he is the depository. The player is projected into an infernal time, that of the submission of pleasure to impatience. Of course; W. Benjamin is speaking here of the "professional" player-who would be the typical figure of the modern hero, who undertakes everything from zero, whose only partners are chance and the unflagging continuation of days and nights. This heroism is modern because it can no longer have any other setting for adventure than the large city, nor any higher ambition than that of making of chance a category of his destiny.

From this derives the confident resolution that guides the player toward the field of his hypothetical exploits: the lessons of the past barely count with regard to this perpetual round robin pursuit of the lucky break. W. Benjamin stresses, "play deprives of all orders of experience. Perhaps this is because they have that obscure feeling that players frequently recur to what is termed 'a plebeian appeal to experience'. The player says 'my number' like the pleasure-seeker says 'my type'"⁹. The valorization of objects, of numbers or events in terms of their power to harness chance along with the integration of these events into the player's legend is both one of the vectors of the heroizing of his social existence while at the same time being the means of access to the consecration through which this mythification of his destiny will be made possible. If the player expresses the refusal of the constraints of a salaried position, of bourgeois management of profit, like bad children of nascent capitalism, if he prefers to

9) Walter Benjamin, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

sacrifice all existential certainty to the dizzying nirvana of chance, the stroller of the nineteenth century is a gardener of the crowds to whom the immense city must open up its soul through the spectacle of its tumult and the enchanting charms of its omnipresent merchandise. The stroller plays in the city with the dimensions of space and time, whose frontiers he hopes to metamorphose-like some modern alchemist. As for the player, his consciousness lucidly grasps this irreparable flight of instants, W. Benjamin perceives in this cruel lucidity one of the reasons for the wild ecstasy of consciousness which, in expectation and pain, constructs the imaginary stage set for play. "The inebriating sensation which we mean here is specified temporally, just as is the suffering that it should lighten. Time is the stuff in which are hoisted up the phantasmagoria of play."¹⁰ Nevertheless, unlike the player, the consciousness of the stroller is an experiment on the memory of places and of men, a reappropriation of his own history -from childhood to adulthood- a longing open to the sensations nourished by melancholy.

W. Benjamin published an anthology of memories (*Enfance berlinoise vers mil neuf cent*) in a variety of journals between 1933 and 1935. In it he accorded to the urban setting a power to reveal authentic experiences, of which Childhood retains the privileged position. The city,-Berlin-permitted him to weave a link between the child he had been and the dialectical imagination of the adult author, who collected the images of a past ever

10) Walter Benjamin, *op. cit.*, p. 187.

present in the hopes and fears of the stroller. Just as memory remains a significant element of yesterday, a mental picture that memory has not evacuated, a miniature of the human trajectory, the street is also the microcosm, the monad that contains the exploding significances of the city and the world. The stroller is the one who patiently delivers himself to deciphering this latent social reality whose attributes are the interior architecture of the unconscious and the subjective relief of urban space.

Reading Aragon's *Paysan de Paris*, published in 1926, confirmed for Benjamin this quest for "corresponding agreements", for the elective affinity of phenomena; for the poet just as for the child, the meaning of things remains in suspense, the inflation of signs remains to be interpreted, "The Paris of the surrealists is also a *small world*", noted Benjamin. "That is, in the great, in the cosmos, everything is presented in the same manner. There too, through the flow of traffic, phantomatic signals light up the intersection. There too unimaginable analogies, and interlaced events are written into the daily agenda" (Myth and Violence¹¹). Just as the unconscious is the recording chamber for the traumas and fantasms that are strewn through the biography of a man or of a woman, giving the past a power over the present, the urban stroll can become a journey into the social ambience of an age, a journey where the present and the everyday conceal the premises for the future and make it readable in the anachronisms in which they are cast. The Surrealist technique of *montage*, which indeed bears a degree of

11) Walter Benjamin, *Mythe et violence*, trans. by Maurice de Gandillac, Paris.

resemblance to certain Expressionist works in Germany in the Twenties (cf, Ernst Bloch, *Héritage de ce temps!*¹²), perfectly demonstrates this requirement, for which literature is but a pretext.

W. Benjamin means to join the experience of the stroller to the totality of meanings for which he was constantly searching, his figurative writing so distant from all demonstrative rigor is part of this desire to introduce us to the mystery of "correspondence agreements" between individuals, places and things, On the cover of the first edition of *Sens unique*, published in January 1928 by Ernst Rowohlt in Berlin, an arrangement of titles in capital letters, like an advertising billboard, announced to the reader how this bouquet of thoughts and reflexes was to organize our mental panorama. There, in newspaper headline size type, can be read, "*Come back! Everything is forgiven!*" and, somewhat more soberly, "Mexican Embassy"; in an aggressive tone, "Luxurious apartments"; a note of wonder, "Products from China", The attention to detail, reading by an association of the words and images of urban fixtures (advertisements, billboards, graffiti, signs and panels) make the stroller penetrate into the material grammar of his knowledge of the city, but it is also the imperious sovereignty of sensations that here is raised to the rank of full-fledged knowledge.

In his preface to *Sens unique*, the translator Jean Lacoste described

12) Denoël Gonthier, 1971. "Le surréalisme" p. 304. 15 Cf. Ernst Bloch, 1978. *Héritage de ce temps*, trans. by J. Lacoste, Paris, Payot, coll. "Critique de la politique"

the scope of this poetic and cognitive project. "The oneway street will then become like a diagram in the Kantian sense, a guarantee of objectivity, a manner of shifting from the subjectivity of impressions to the construction of an object in space. The productive imagination that is at work in the construction of this street, full of letters and objects, makes possible the affinity of phenomena", according to the expression from the *Critique of Pure Reason*, "The word affinity here finds its full value, "It is a property of things, outside of us, but a magic property, obscure, which is beyond comprehension."¹³ With the theory of the stroller, Benjamin introduces a cognitive aesthetic aiming at linking the image and the thing seen to the emotion that they create in order to bring together in the space where experience takes place a duration made up of an eternal succession of instants, The past would cease to be irreparable if it could preserve from the attacks of forgetfulness and death all this plethora of feelings that attach us each day pail-mail to our intimate measure of time.

In his fugitive "illuminations", the stroller senses the violence of the modern tragedy: the planned-wear merchandise and the by now explicit artificiality of labor are the daily manifestations of the exile of nature, the loss of a cultural exchange with what is original in our relationship to the world. Nevertheless, at the center of this decline, in this geometrical place where alienation is everywhere at home, W. Benjamin discerns a passage, a difficult

13) Walter Benjamin, 1972. *Sens unique*, preceded by *Enfance berlinoise*, translated and with preface by J. Lacoste, Paris, Les Lettres Nouvelles, p. 16.

one certainly, through which the sacred, which leads beings and their products toward a respect for time, can recall its presence at the very heart of its historical negation (the reification of space combined with objectivizing manipulations of duration).

Man's profane sacrifice through commercial universalization and the laws of generalized equivalency, the increasing integration of dead time into his creations, all those aspects generating boredom and the social and economic channeling of his desires collapse at the threshold of leisurely strolling. Such strolling begins, in fact, with the slow apprenticeship of deregulating applicable traffic laws and conventions and the programmed speed which defines it spatially. As Benjamin notes, "Boredom appears in the production process when this process is accelerated (by machines), The stroller, with his ostentatious nonchalance, protests against the production process."¹⁴ It can be seen that this concept of urban strolling leads to a theory of modernity, the two parts of which are constituted by the description of the historic form of the tragic and of the sacred in industrial capitalism and by the philosophy of experience underlying these forms.

The poignancy of cult is irrevocable when our use of things and places liberates them from their utilitarian role. In these moments our familiarity with the life of objects, our urban paths are enveloped in a mysterious complicity. The example of a collector or of a flea market (W. Benjamin, the son of a rich Berlin

14) Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire*, p. 238.

antique dealer, was himself a collector of rare books and autographs; he often refers to this) indicates this abandon to singularity when individual memory assumes the diversity which the standard consumer circuit can no longer recycle. That difficult natural proximity to human creations, the aura, could not be perceptible to the person left indifferent by the accumulation of suffering and dreams inscribed in every human construction. There where atrophied experience seizes only the exaltation of the merchandise and magnifies the cannibal need to satisfy oneself with it, cultural experience metamorphoses the subject into an initiate, or rather into a "medium" listening to all the threads connecting his present experience to other dimensions of time: the unfinished still awaiting, the utopian negation, the signs announcing the future.

Personal experience in contemporary mass societies becomes hypothetical if the individual evacuates the intuition of unicity upon which rests the communicational relationship between men, mediatized by the objects they have created and the structures in which they live, at last given over to their memory. The stroller is the one who remains open to this possibility, which is in no way the refuge of nostalgia. "It was a prophetic corner. For like those plants said to have the power to make the future visible, there are places that have this gift of prophecy ... In such places, it seems that everything that in reality still awaits

you is already a thing of the past¹⁵.

The history of individuals and of groups, when raised to a paroxysmal and irremediable degree, is embedded in the memory of the stones, and its indelible stain remains accessible to the "seer", that is to the person capable of picking up the psychic energy deposited in the area of these developments. In this case the near and the far lose all idea of distance and become categories of the "conscious dream", of anticipating consciousness, for which the linearity of time, the flow of duration, no longer corresponds to an immutable order. This consciousness is thus dissimultaneous in its present experience in that it apprehends the scattered elements of a still active yesterday, or that it possesses the presentiment of what will come.

By examining these cultural phenomena, Benjamin hoped to show that aesthetic figuration (a work of art, a poem, and photography) imitates the poetic stylization whose clandestine presence is detected in daily life by the stroller or the collector. This sensitivity finds its image-embellished expression in allegory, whose function is to "recollect" the complicity of man with creation, to metamorphose merchandise into a collector's object, to transfigure the stroller's street or neighborhood. The "recollection" comes from melancholy and turns against it, paradoxically it opens consciousness to the perception of the aura of things and places and invites considering these not as relics issued from a defunct experience but rather as "fragments or components of

15) Walter Benjamin, *Enfance berlinoise*, p. 64.

actual experience. Says Benjamin, "If fantasy offers memory corresponding agreements, thought dedicates allegories to it. Memory causes the two to meet."¹⁶ Likewise, the modern imaginary world is a collection of symbols and images in which the archaic can be renewed in a unique practice, while the "new" often takes on the aspect of the still-the-same, of "déjà-vu", and the eternal return to the same thing. Allegory is that essential experience of the coexistence of archetypal and original significations that prohibit the technical encircling of nature from seizing control of time. In it feeling is deposited like a precipitate in social modes of communication. Thus some traces of an individual's past can enter into resonance with the semantic and cultural contents of a collective past *and vice versa*.

That modernity is the framework of a lyric aesthetization of its negative here explains how the poet, the stroller or the collector¹⁷ perceives in these works of human labor this potential antiquity inevitably present in their everyday presence. The aesthetic experience remains the opening to a figurative knowledge which exceeds the truth of the facts, describing the contours of words, of things and of gestures in their virtual spatial and temporal extension.

16) Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire*, p. 225.

17) Cf. Walter Benjamin, "Je déballe ma bibliothèque" (a lecture on the activity of a collector), 1 and 2, translated by M. Raspati, *Le promeneur II*, Paris, Nov.

