Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century

<Exposé of 1935>

The waters are blue, the plants pink; the evening is sweet to look on;
One goes for a walk; the grandes dames go for a walk; behind them stroll the petites dames.

—Nguyen Trong Hiep, Paris, capitale de la France: Recueil de vers (Hanoi, 1897), poem 25

I. Fourier, or the Arcades

The magic columns of these palaces
Show to the amateur on all sides,
In the objects their porticos display,
That industry is the rival of the arts.

—Nouveaux Tableaux de Paris (Paris, 1828), vol. 1, p. 27

Most of the Paris arcades come into being in the decade and a half after 1822. The first condition for their emergence is the boom in the textile trade. Magasins de nouveautés, the first establishments to keep large stocks of merchandise on the premises, make their appearance. They are the forerunners of department stores. This was the period of which Balzac wrote: “The great poem of display chants its stanzas of color from the Church of the Madeleine to the Porte Saint-Denis.” The arcades are a center of commerce in luxury items. In fitting them out, art enters the service of the merchant. Contemporaries never tire of admiring them, and for a long time they remain a drawing point for foreigners. An Illustrated Guide to Paris says: “These arcades, a recent invention of industrial luxury, are glass-roofed, marble-paneled corridors extending through whole blocks of buildings, whose owners have joined together for such enterprises. Lining both sides of these corridors, which get their light from above, are the most elegant shops, so that the passage is a city, a world in miniature.” The arcades are the scene of the first gas lighting.

The second condition for the emergence of the arcades is the beginning of iron construction. The Empire saw in this technology a contribution to the revival of
architecture in the classical Greek sense. The architectural theorist Boetticher expresses the general view of the matter when he says that, "with regard to the art forms of the new system, the formal principle of the Hellenic mode" must come to prevail.  

Empire is the style of revolutionary terrorism, for which the state is an end in itself. Just as Napoleon failed to understand the functional nature of the state as an instrument of domination by the bourgeois class, so the architects of his time failed to understand the functional nature of iron, with which the constructive principle begins its domination of architecture. These architects design supports resembling Pompeian columns, and factories that imitate residential houses, just as later the first railroad stations will be modeled on chalets. "Construction plays the role of the subconscious." Nevertheless, the concept of engineer, which dates from the revolutionary wars, starts to gain ground, and the rivalry begins between builder and decorator, Ecole Polytechnique and Ecole des Beaux-Arts.

For the first time in the history of architecture, an artificial building material appears: iron. It undergoes an evolution whose tempo will accelerate in the course of the century. This development enters a decisive new phase when it becomes clear that the locomotive—on which experiments had been conducted since the end of the 1820s—is compatible only with iron tracks. The rail becomes the first prefabricated iron component, the precursor of the girder. Iron is avoided in home construction but used in arcades, exhibition halls, train stations—buildings that serve transitory purposes. At the same time, the range of architectural applications for glass expands, although the social prerequisites for its widened application as building material will come to the fore only a hundred years later. In Scheerbart’s *Glasarchitektur* (1914), it still appears in the context of utopia.

Each epoch dreams the one to follow.

—Michelet, “Avenir! Avenir!”

Corresponding to the form of the new means of production, which in the beginning is still ruled by the form of the old (Marx), are images in the collective consciousness in which the new is permeated with the old. These images are wish images; in them the collective seeks both to overcome and to transfigure the immaturity of the social product and the inadequacies in the social organization of production. At the same time, what emerges in these wish images is the resolute effort to distance oneself from all that is antiquated—which includes, however, the recent past. These tendencies deflect the imagination (which is given impetus by the new) back upon the primal past. In the dream in which each epoch entertains images of its successor, the latter appears wedded to elements of primal history—*Urgeschichte*—that is, to elements of a classless society. And the experiences of such a society—as stored in the unconscious of the collective—engender, through interpenetration with what is new, the utopia that has left its
trace in a thousand configurations of life, from enduring edifices to passing fashions.

These relations are discernible in the utopia conceived by Fourier. Its secret cue is the advent of machines. But this fact is not directly expressed in the Fourierist literature, which takes as its point of departure the amorality of the business world and the false morality enlisted in its service. The phalanstery is designed to restore human beings to relationships in which morality becomes superfluous. The highly complicated organization of the phalanstery appears as machinery. The meshing of the passions, the intricate collaboration of passions mécanistes with the passion cabaliste, is a primitive contrivance formed—on analogy with the machine—from materials of psychology. This mechanism made of men produces the land of milk and honey, the primeval wish symbol that Fourier’s utopia has filled with new life.

Fourier saw, in the arcades, the architectural canon of the phalanstery. Their reactionary metamorphosis with him is characteristic: whereas they originally serve commercial ends, they become, for him, places of habitation. The phalanstery becomes a city of arcades. Fourier establishes, in the Empire’s austere world of forms, the colorful idyll of Biedermeier. Its brilliance persists, however faded, up through Zola, who takes up Fourier’s ideas in his book Travail, just as he bids farewell to the arcades in his Thérèse Raquin.—Marx came to the defense of Fourier in his critique of Carl Grün, emphasizing the former’s “colossal conception of man.” He also directed attention to Fourier’s humor. In fact, Jean Paul, in his Levana, is as closely allied to Fourier the pedagogue as Scheerbart, in his Glass Architecture, is to Fourier the utopian.

II. Daguerre, or the Panoramas

Sun, look out for yourself!
—A. J. Wiertz, Oeuvres littéraires (Paris, 1870), p. 374

Just as architecture, with the first appearance of iron construction, begins to outgrow art, so does painting, in its turn, with the first appearance of the panoramas. The high point in the diffusion of panoramas coincides with the introduction of arcades. One sought tirelessly, through technical devices, to make panoramas the scenes of a perfect imitation of nature. An attempt was made to reproduce the changing daylight in the landscape, the rising of the moon, the rush of waterfalls. Jacques-Louis David counsels his pupils to draw from nature as it is shown in panoramas. In their attempt to produce deceptively lifelike changes in represented nature, the panoramas prepare the way not only for photography but for <silent> film and sound film.

Contemporary with the panoramas is a panoramic literature. Le Livre des cent-et-un [The Book of a Hundred-and-One], Les Français peints par eux-mêmes [The French Painted by Themselves], Le Diable à Paris [The Devil in Paris], and La Grande ville [The Big City] belong to this. These books prepare the bellettistic
collaboration for which Girardin, in the 1830s, will create a home in the feuilleton. They consist of individual sketches, whose anecdotal form corresponds to the panoramas’ plastically arranged foreground, and whose informational base corresponds to their painted background. This literature is also socially panoramic. For the last time, the worker appears, isolated from his class, as part of the setting in an idyll.

Announcing an upheaval in the relation of art to technology, panoramas are at the same time an expression of a new attitude toward life. The city dweller, whose political supremacy over the provinces is attested many times in the course of the century, attempts to bring the countryside into town. In panoramas, the city opens out, becoming landscape—as it will do later, in subtler fashion, for the flâneurs. Daguerre is a student of the panorama painter Prévost, whose establishment is located in the Passage des Panoramas. Description of the panoramas of Prévost and Daguerre. In 1839 Daguerre’s panorama burns down. In the same year, he announces the invention of the daguerreotype.

François Arago presents photography in a speech to the National Assembly. He assigns it a place in the history of technology and prophesies its scientific applications. On the other side, artists begin to debate its artistic value. Photography leads to the extinction of the great profession of portrait miniaturist. This happens not just for economic reasons. The early photograph was artistically superior to the miniature portrait. The technical grounds for this advantage lie in the long exposure time, which requires of a subject the highest concentration; the social grounds for it lie in the fact that the first photographers belonged to the avant-garde, from which most of their clientele came. Nadar’s superiority to his colleagues is shown by his attempt to take photographs in the Paris sewer system: for the first time, the lens was deemed capable of making discoveries. Its importance becomes still greater as, in view of the new technological and social reality, the subjective strain in pictorial and graphic information is called into question.

The world exhibition of 1855 offers for the first time a special display called “Photography.” In the same year, Wiertz publishes his great article on photography, in which he defines its task as the philosophical enlightenment of painting. This “enlightenment” is understood, as his own paintings show, in a political sense. Wiertz can be characterized as the first to demand, if not actually foresee, the use of photographic montage for political agitation. With the increasing scope of communications and transport, the informational value of painting diminishes. In reaction to photography, painting begins to stress the elements of color in the picture. By the time Impressionism yields to Cubism, painting has created for itself a broader domain into which, for the time being, photography cannot follow. For its part, photography greatly extends the sphere of commodity exchange, from mid-century onward, by flooding the market with countless images of figures, landscapes, and events which had previously been available either not at all or only as pictures for individual customers. To increase turnover, it renewed its subject matter through modish variations in camera technique—innovations that will determine the subsequent history of photography.
III. Grandville, or the World Exhibitions

Yes, when all the world from Paris to China
Pays heed to your doctrine, O divine Saint-Simon,
The glorious Golden Age will be reborn.
Rivers will flow with chocolate and tea,
Sheep roasted whole will frisk on the plain,
And sautéed pike will swim in the Seine.
Fricasseeed spinach will grow on the ground,
Garnished with crushed fried croutons;
The trees will bring forth apple compotes,
And farmers will harvest boots and coats.
It will snow wine, it will rain chickens,
And ducks cooked with turnips will fall from the sky.

—Langlé and Vanderburch, *Louis-Bronze et le Saint-Simonien*
(Théâtre du Palais-Royal, February 27, 1832)  

World exhibitions are places of pilgrimage to the commodity fetish. “Europe is off to view the merchandise,” says Taine in 1855. The world exhibitions are preceded by national exhibitions of industry, the first of which takes place on the Champ de Mars in 1798. It arises from the wish “to entertain the working classes, and it becomes for them a festival of emancipation.” The worker occupies the foreground, as customer. The framework of the entertainment industry has not yet taken shape; the popular festival provides this. Chaptal’s speech on industry opens the 1798 exhibition.—The Saint-Simonians, who envision the industrialization of the earth, take up the idea of world exhibitions. Chevalier, the first authority in the new field, is a student of Enfantin and editor of the Saint-Simonian newspaper *Le Globe*. The Saint-Simonians anticipated the development of the global economy, but not the class struggle. Next to their active participation in industrial and commercial enterprises around the middle of the century stands their helplessness on all questions concerning the proletariat.

World exhibitions glorify the exchange value of the commodity. They create a framework in which its use value recedes into the background. They open a phantasmagoria which a person enters in order to be distracted. The entertainment industry makes this easier by elevating the person to the level of the commodity. He surrenders to its manipulations while enjoying his alienation from himself and others.—The enthronement of the commodity, with its luster of distraction, is the secret theme of Grandville’s art. This is consistent with the split between utopian and cynical elements in his work. Its ingenuity in representing inanimate objects corresponds to what Marx calls the “theological niceties” of the commodity. They are manifest clearly in the *spécialité*—a category of goods which appears at this time in the luxuries industry. Under Grandville’s pencil, the whole of nature is transformed into specialties. He presents them in the same spirit in which the advertisement (the term *réclame* also originates at this point) begins to present its articles. He ends in madness.
Fashion: “Madam Death! Madam Death!”
—Leopardi, “Dialogue between Fashion and Death”

World exhibitions propagate the universe of commodities. Grandville’s fantasies confer a commodity character on the universe. They modernize it. Saturn’s ring becomes a cast-iron balcony on which the inhabitants of Saturn take the evening air. The literary counterpart to this graphic utopia is found in the books of the Fourierist naturalist Toussenel.—Fashion prescribes the ritual according to which the commodity fetish demands to be worshipped. Grandville extends the authority of fashion to objects of everyday use, as well as to the cosmos. In taking it to an extreme, he reveals its nature. Fashion stands in opposition to the organic. It couples the living body to the inorganic world. To the living, it defends the rights of the corpse. The fetishism that succumbs to the sex appeal of the inorganic is its vital nerve. The cult of the commodity presses such fetishism into its service.

For the Paris world exhibition of 1867, Victor Hugo issues a manifesto: “To the Peoples of Europe.” Earlier, and more unequivocally, their interests had been championed by delegations of French workers, of which the first had been sent to the London world exhibition of 1851 and the second, numbering 750 delegates, to that of 1862. The latter delegation was of indirect importance for Marx’s founding of the International Workingmen’s Association.—The phantasmagoria of capitalist culture attains its most radiant unfolding in the world exhibition of 1867. The Second Empire is at the height of its power. Paris is acknowledged as the capital of luxury and fashion. Offenbach sets the rhythm of Parisian life. The operetta is the ironic utopia of an enduring reign of capital.

IV. Louis Philippe, or the Interior

The head . . .
On the night table, like a ranunculus,
Rests.
—Baudelaire, “Une Martyre”

Under Louis Philippe, the private individual makes his entrance on the stage of history. The expansion of the democratic apparatus through a new electoral law coincides with the parliamentary corruption organized by Guizot. Under cover of this corruption, the ruling class makes history; that is, it pursues its affairs. It furthers railway construction in order to improve its stock holdings. It promotes the reign of Louis Philippe as that of the private individual managing his affairs. With the July Revolution, the bourgeoisie realized the goals of 1789 (Marx).

For the private individual, the place of dwelling is for the first time opposed to the place of work. The former constitutes itself as the interior. Its complement is the office. The private individual, who in the office has to deal with reality, needs the domestic interior to sustain him in his illusions. This necessity is all the more pressing since he has no intention of allowing his commercial considerations to
impinge on social ones. In the formation of his private environment, both are kept out. From this arise the phantasmagorias of the interior—which, for the private man, represents the universe. In the interior, he brings together the far away and the long ago. His living room is a box in the theater of the world.

Excursus on Jugendstil. The shattering of the interior occurs via Jugendstil around the turn of the century. Of course, according to its own ideology, the Jugendstil movement seems to bring with it the consummation of the interior. The transfiguration of the solitary soul appears to be its goal. Individualism is its theory. With van de Velde, the house becomes an expression of the personality. Ornament is to this house what the signature is to a painting. But the real meaning of Jugendstil is not expressed in this ideology. It represents the last attempted sortie of an art besieged in its ivory tower by technology. This attempt mobilizes all the reserves of inwardness. They find their expression in the mediumistic language of the line, in the flower as symbol of a naked vegetal nature confronted by the technologically armed world. The new elements of iron construction—girder forms—preoccupy Jugendstil. In ornament, it endeavors to win back these forms for art. Concrete presents it with new possibilities for plastic creation in architecture. Around this time, the real gravitational center of living space shifts to the office. The irreal center makes its place in the home. The consequences of Jugendstil are depicted in Ibsen’s Master Builder: the attempt by the individual, on the strength of his inwardness, to vie with technology leads to his downfall.

I believe . . . in my soul: the Thing.


The interior is the asylum of art. The collector is the true resident of the interior. He makes his concern the transfiguration of things. To him falls the Sisyphean task of divesting things of their commodity character by taking possession of them. But he bestows on them only connoisseur value, rather than use value. The collector dreams his way not only into a distant or bygone world but also into a better one—one in which, to be sure, human beings are no better provided with what they need than in the everyday world, but in which things are freed from the drudgery of being useful.

The interior is not just the universe but also the etui of the private individual. To dwell means to leave traces. In the interior, these are accentuated. Coverlets and antimacassars, cases and containers are devised in abundance; in these, the traces of the most ordinary objects of use are imprinted. In just the same way, the traces of the inhabitant are imprinted in the interior. Enter the detective story, which pursues these traces. Poe, in his “Philosophy of Furniture” as well as in his detective fiction, shows himself to be the first physiognomist of the domestic interior. The criminals in early detective novels are neither gentlemen nor apaches, but private citizens of the middle class.
V. Baudelaire, or the Streets of Paris

Everything becomes an allegory for me.
—Baudelaire, "Le Cygne"16

Baudelaire's genius, which is nourished on melancholy, is an allegorical genius. For the first time, with Baudelaire, Paris becomes the subject of lyric poetry. This poetry is no hymn to the homeland; rather, the gaze of the allegorist, as it falls on the city, is the gaze of the alienated man. It is the gaze of the flâneur, whose way of life still conceals behind a mitigating nimbus the coming desolation of the big-city dweller. The flâneur still stands on the threshold—of the metropolis as of the middle class. Neither has him in its power yet. In neither is he at home. He seeks refuge in the crowd. Early contributions to a physiognomies of the crowd are found in Engels and Poe. The crowd is the veil through which the familiar city beckons to the flâneur as phantasmagoria—now a landscape, now a room. Both become elements of the department store, which makes use of flânerie itself to sell goods. The department store is the last promenade for the flâneur.

In the flâneur, the intelligentsia sets foot in the marketplace—ostensibly to look around, but in truth to find a buyer. In this intermediate stage, in which it still has patrons but is already beginning to familiarize itself with the market, it appears as the bohème. To the uncertainty of its economic position corresponds the uncertainty of its political function. The latter is manifest most clearly in the professional conspirators, who all belong to the bohème. Their initial field of activity is the army; later it becomes the petty bourgeoisie, occasionally the proletariat. Nevertheless, this group views the true leaders of the proletariat as its adversary. The Communist Manifesto brings their political existence to an end. Baudelaire's poetry draws its strength from the rebellious pathos of this group. He sides with the asocial. He realizes his only sexual communion with a whore.

Easy the way that leads into Avernus.
—Virgil, The Aeneid17

It is the unique provision of Baudelaire's poetry that the image of woman and the image of death intermingle in a third: that of Paris. The Paris of his poems is a sunken city, and more submarine than subterranean. The chthonic elements of the city—its topographic formations, the old abandoned bed of the Seine—have evidently found in him a mold. Decisive for Baudelaire in the "death-fraught idyll" of the city, however, is a social, a modern substrate. The modern is a principal accent of his poetry. As spleen, it fractures the ideal ("Spleen et idéal"). But precisely modernity is always citing primal history. Here, this occurs through the ambiguity peculiar to the social relations and products of this epoch. Ambiguity is the appearance of dialectic in images, the law of dialectics at a standstill. This standstill is utopia and the dialectical image, therefore, dream image. Such an image is afforded by the commodity per se: as fetish. Such an image is presented by the arcades, which are house no less than street. Such an image is the prostitute—seller and sold in one.
I travel in order to get to know my geography.

—Note of a madman, in Marcel Réja, L'Art chez les fous (Paris, 1907), p. 131

The last poem of Les Fleurs du mal: “Le Voyage.” “Death, old admiral, up anchor now.” The last journey of the flâneur: death. Its destination: the new. “Deep in the Unknown to find the new!”\(^9\) Newness is a quality independent of the use value of the commodity. It is the origin of the semblance that belongs inalienably to images produced by the collective unconscious. It is the quintessence of that false consciousness whose indefatigable agent is fashion. This semblance of the new is reflected, like one mirror in another, in the semblance of the ever recurrent. The product of this reflection is the phantasmagoria of “cultural history,” in which the bourgeoisie enjoys its false consciousness to the full. The art that begins to doubt its task and ceases to be “inseparable from . . . utility” (Baudelaire)\(^9\) must make novelty into its highest value. The *arbiter novarum rerum* for such an art becomes the snob. He is to art what the dandy is to fashion.—Just as in the seventeenth century it is allegory that becomes the canon of dialectical images, in the nineteenth century it is novelty. Newspapers flourish, along with *magasins de nouveautés*. The press organizes the market in spiritual values, in which at first there is a boom. Nonconformists rebel against consigning art to the marketplace. They rally round the banner of *l’art pour l’art*. From this watchword derives the conception of the “total work of art”—the *Gesamtkunstwerk*—which would seal art off from the developments of technology. The solemn rite with which it is celebrated is the pendant to the distraction that transfigures the commodity. Both abstract from the social existence of human beings. Baudelaire succumbs to the rage for Wagner.

**VI. Haussmann, or the Barricades**

I venerate the Beautiful, the Good, and all things great;
Beautiful nature, on which great art rests—
How it enchants the ear and charms the eye!
I love spring in blossom: women and roses.

—Baron Haussmann, *Confession d’un lion éteint vieux*\(^20\)

The flowery realm of decorations,
The charm of landscape, of architecture,
And all the effect of scenery rest
Solely on the law of perspective.

—Franz Boîle, *Theater-Catechismus* (Munich), p. 74

Haussmann’s ideal in city planning consisted of long perspectives down broad straight thoroughfares. Such an ideal corresponds to the tendency—common in the nineteenth century—to ennoble technological necessities through artistic ends. The institutions of the bourgeoisie’s worldly and spiritual dominance were to find their apotheosis within the framework of the boulevards. Before their completion, boulevards were draped across with canvas and unveiled like monu-
ments.—Haussmann’s activity is linked to Napoleonic imperialism. Louis Napoleon promotes investment capital, and Paris experiences a rash of speculation. Trading on the stock exchange displaces the forms of gambling handed down from feudal society. The phantasmagorias of space to which the flâneur devotes himself find a counterpart in the phantasmagorias of time to which the gambler is addicted. Gambling converts time into a narcotic. Paul Lafargue explains gambling as an imitation in miniature of the mysteries of economic fluctuation. The expropriations carried out under Haussmann call forth a wave of fraudulent speculation. The rulings of the Court of Cassation, which are inspired by the bourgeois and Orleanist opposition, increase the financial risks of Haussmannization.

Haussmann tries to shore up his dictatorship by placing Paris under an emergency regime. In 1864, in a speech before the National Assembly, he vents his hatred of the rootless urban population, which keeps increasing as a result of his projects. Rising rents drive the proletariat into the suburbs. The quartiers of Paris in this way lose their distinctive physiognomy. The “red belt” forms. Haussmann gave himself the title of “demolition artist,” artiste démolisseur. He viewed his work as a calling, and emphasizes this in his memoirs. Meanwhile he estranges the Parisians from their city. They no longer feel at home there, and start to become conscious of the inhuman character of the metropolis. Maxime Du Camp’s monumental work Paris owes its inception to this consciousness. The Jérémia des d’un Haussmannisé give it the form of a biblical lament.

The true goal of Haussmann’s projects was to secure the city against civil war. He wanted to make the erection of barricades in Paris impossible for all time. With the same end in mind, Louis Philippe had already introduced wooden paving. Nonetheless, barricades played a role in the February Revolution. Engels studies the tactics of barricade fighting. Haussmann seeks to neutralize these tactics on two fronts. Widening the streets is designed to make the erection of barricades impossible, and new streets are to furnish the shortest route between the barracks and the workers’ districts. Contemporaries christen the operation “strategic embellishment.”

Reveal to these depraved,
O Republic, by foiling their plots,
Your great Medusa face
Ringed by red lightning.
—Workers’ song from about 1850, in Adolf Stahr, Zwei Monate in Paris (Oldenburg, 1851), vol. 2, p. 199

The barricade is resurrected during the Commune. It is stronger and better secured than ever. It stretches across the great boulevards, often reaching a height of two stories, and shields the trenches behind it. Just as the Communist Manifesto ends the age of professional conspirators, so the Commune puts an end to the phantasmagoria holding sway over the early years of the proletariat. It dispels the illusion that the task of the proletarian revolution is to complete the work of 1789
hand in hand with the bourgeoisie. This illusion dominates the period 1831–
1871, from the Lyons uprising to the Commune. The bourgeoisie never shared in
this error. Its battle against the social rights of the proletariat dates back to the
great Revolution, and converges with the philanthropic movement that gives it
cover and that is in its heyday under Napoleon III. Under his reign, this move-
ment’s monumental work appears: Le Play’s Ouvriers européens [European Work-
ers].26 Side by side with the concealed position of philanthropy, the bourgeoisie
has always maintained openly the position of class warfare.27 As early as 1831, in
the Journal des débats, it acknowledges that “every manufacturer lives in his
factory like a plantation owner among his slaves” If it is the misfortune of the
workers’ rebellions of old that no theory of revolution directs their course, it is
also this absence of theory that, from another perspective, makes possible their
spontaneous energy and the enthusiasm with which they set about establishing a
new society. This enthusiasm, which reaches its peak in the Commune, wins over
to the working class at times the best elements of the bourgeoisie, but leads it in
the end to succumb to their worst elements. Rimbaud and Courbet declare their
support for the Commune. The burning of Paris is the worthy conclusion to
Haussmarm’s work of destruction.

My good father had been in Paris.
—Karl Gutzkow, Briefe aus Paris (Leipzig, 1842), vol. 1, p. 58

Balzac was the first to speak of the ruins of the bourgeoisie.28 But it was Surreal-
ism that first opened our eyes to them. The development of the forces of produc-
tion shattered the wish symbols of the previous century, even before the
monuments representing them had collapsed. In the nineteenth century this
development worked to emancipate the forms of construction from art, just as in
the sixteenth century the sciences freed themselves from philosophy. A start is
made with architecture as engineered construction. Then comes the reproduc-
tion of nature as photography. The creation of fantasy prepares to become prac-
tical as commercial art. Literature submits to montage in the feuilleton. All these
products are on the point of entering the market as commodities. But they linger
on the threshold. From this epoch derive the arcades and intérieurs, the exhibition
halls and panoramas. They are residues of a dream world. The realization of
dream elements, in the course of waking up, is the paradigm of dialectical think-
ing. Thus, dialectical thinking is the organ of historical awakening. Every epoch,
in fact, not only dreams the one to follow but, in dreaming, precipitates its
awakening. It bears its end within itself and unfolds it—as Hegel already no-
ticed—by cunning. With the destabilizing of the market economy, we begin to
recognize the monuments of the bourgeoisie as ruins even before they have crumbled.
Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century

Exposé (of 1939)

Introduction

History is like Janus; it has two faces. Whether it looks at the past or at the present, it sees the same things.
—Maxime Du Camp, Paris, vol. 6, p. 315

The subject of this book is an illusion expressed by Schopenhauer in the following formula: to seize the essence of history, it suffices to compare Herodotus and the morning newspaper. What is expressed here is a feeling of vertigo characteristic of the nineteenth century’s conception of history. It corresponds to a viewpoint according to which the course of the world is an endless series of facts congealed in the form of things. The characteristic residue of this conception is what has been called the “History of Civilization,” which makes an inventory, point by point, of humanity’s life forms and creations. The riches thus amassed in the aerarium of civilization henceforth appear as though identified for all time. This conception of history minimizes the fact that such riches owe not only their existence but also their transmission to a constant effort of society—an effort, moreover, by which these riches are strangely altered. Our investigation proposes to show how, as a consequence of this reifying representation of civilization, the new forms of behavior and the new economically and technologically based creations that we owe to the nineteenth century enter the universe of a phantasmagoria. These creations undergo this “illumination” not only in a theoretical manner, by an ideological transposition, but also in the immediacy of their perceptible presence. They are manifest as phantasmagorias. Thus appear the arcades—first entry in the field of iron construction; thus appear the world exhibitions, whose link to the entertainment industry is significant. Also included in this order of phenomena is the experience of the flâneur, who abandons himself to the phantasmagorias of the marketplace. Corresponding to these phantasmagorias of the market, where people appear only as types, are the phantasmagorias of the interior, which are constituted by man’s imperious need to leave the imprint of his private individual existence on the rooms he inhabits. As for the phantasmagoria of civilization itself, it found its champion in Hauss-
mann and its manifest expression in his transformations of Paris. — Nevertheless, the pomp and the splendor with which commodity-producing society surrounds itself, as well as its illusory sense of security, are not immune to dangers; the collapse of the Second Empire and the Commune of Paris remind it of that. In the same period, the most dreaded adversary of this society, Blanqui, revealed to it, in his last piece of writing, the terrifying features of this phantasmagoria. Humanity figures there as damned. Everything new it could hope for turns out to be a reality that has always been present; and this newness will be as little capable of furnishing it with a liberating solution as a new fashion is capable of rejuvenating society. Blanqui’s cosmic speculation conveys this lesson: that humanity will be prey to a mythic anguish so long as phantasmagoria occupies a place in it.

A. Fourier, or the Arcades

I

The magic columns of these palais
Show to enthusiasts from all parts,
With the objects their porticos display,
That industry is the rival of the arts.

—Nouveaux Tableaux de Paris (Paris, 1828), p. 27

Most of the Paris arcades are built in the fifteen years following 1822. The first condition for their development is the boom in the textile trade. Magasins de nouveautés, the first establishments to keep large stocks of merchandise on the premises, make their appearance. They are the forerunners of department stores. This is the period of which Balzac writes: “The great poem of display chants its stanzas of color from the Church of the Madeleine to the Porte Saint-Denis.” The arcades are centers of commerce in luxury items. In fitting them out, art enters the service of the merchant. Contemporaries never tire of admiring them. For a long time they remain an attraction for tourists. An Illustrated Guide to Paris says: “These arcades, a recent invention of industrial luxury, are glass-roofed, marble-paneled corridors extending through whole blocks of buildings, whose owners have joined together for such enterprises. Lining both sides of the arcade, which gets its light from above, are the most elegant shops, so that the passage is a city, a world in miniature.” The arcades are the scene of the first attempts at gas lighting.

The second condition for the emergence of the arcades is the beginning of iron construction. Under the Empire, this technology was seen as a contribution to the revival of architecture in the classical Greek sense. The architectural theorist Boetticher expresses the general view of the matter when he says that, “with regard to the art forms of the new system, the Hellenic mode” must come to prevail. The Empire style is the style of revolutionary terrorism, for which the state is an end in itself. Just as Napoleon failed to understand the functional
nature of the state as an instrument of domination by the bourgeoisie, so the architects of his time failed to understand the functional nature of iron, with which the constructive principle begins its domination of architecture. These architects design supports resembling Pompeian columns, and factories that imitate residential houses, just as later the first railroad stations will assume the look of chalets. Construction plays the role of the subconscious. Nevertheless, the concept of engineer, which dates from the revolutionary wars, starts to gain ground, and the rivalry begins between builder and decorator, Ecole Polytechnique and Ecole des Beaux-Arts.—For the first time since the Romans, a new artificial building material appears: iron. It will undergo an evolution whose pace will accelerate in the course of the century. This development enters a decisive new phase when it becomes clear that the locomotive—object of the most diverse experiments since the years 1828–1829—usefully functions only on iron rails. The rail becomes the first prefabricated iron component, the precursor of the girder. Iron is avoided in home construction but used in arcades, exhibition halls, train stations—buildings that serve transitory purposes.

II

It is easy to understand that every mass-type “interest” which asserts itself historically goes far beyond its real limits in the “idea” or “imagination,” when it first comes on the scene.

—Marx and Engels, *Die heilige Familie*

The secret cue for the Fourierist utopia is the advent of machines. The phalanstery is designed to restore human beings to a system of relationships in which morality becomes superfluous. Nero, in such a context, would become a more useful member of society than Fenelon. Fourier does not dream of relying on virtue for this; rather, he relies on an efficient functioning of society, whose motive forces are the passions. In the gearing of the passions, in the complex meshing of the *passions mécanistes* with the *passion cabaliste*, Fourier imagines the collective psychology as a clockwork mechanism. Fourierist harmony is the necessary product of this combinatorial play.

Fourier introduces into the Empire’s world of austere forms an idyll colored by the style of the 1830s. He devises a system in which the products of his colorful vision and of his idiosyncratic treatment of numbers blend together. Fourier’s “harmonies” are in no way akin to a mystique of numbers taken from any other tradition. They are in fact direct outcomes of his own pronouncements—lucubrations of his organizational imagination, which was very highly developed. Thus, he foresaw how significant meetings would become to the citizen. For the phalanstery’s inhabitants, the day is organized not around the home but in large halls similar to those of the Stock Exchange, where meetings are arranged by brokers.

In the arcades, Fourier recognized the architectural canon of the phalanstery. This is what distinguishes the “empire” character of his utopia, which Fourier himself naively acknowledges: “The societarian state will be all the more brilliant at its inception for having been so long deferred. Greece in the age of Solon and
Pericles could already have undertaken it.  The arcades, which originally were designed to serve commercial ends, become dwelling places in Fourier. The phalanstery is a city composed of arcades. In this *ville en passages*, the engineer’s construction takes on a phantasmagorical character. The “city of arcades” is a dream that will charm the fancy of Parisians well into the second half of the century. As late as 1869, Fourier’s “street-galleries” provide the blueprint for Moilin’s *Paris en l’an 2000*. Here the city assumes a structure that makes it—with its shops and apartments—the ideal backdrop for the flâneur.

Marx took a stand against Carl Grün in order to defend Fourier and to accentuate his “colossal conception of man.” He considered Fourier the only man besides Hegel to have revealed the essential mediocrity of the petty bourgeois. The systematic overcoming of this type in Hegel corresponds to its humorous annihilation in Fourier. One of the most remarkable features of the Fourierist utopia is that it never advocated the exploitation of nature by man, an idea that became widespread in the following period. Instead, in Fourier, technology appears as the spark that ignites the powder of nature. Perhaps this is the key to his strange representation of the phalanstery as propagating itself “by explosion.” The later conception of man’s exploitation of nature reflects the actual exploitation of man by the owners of the means of production. If the integration of the technological into social life failed, the fault lies in this exploitation.

**B. Grandville, or the World Exhibitions**

I

Yes, when all the world from Paris to China Pays heed to your doctrine, O divine Saint-Simon, The glorious Golden Age will be reborn. Rivers will flow with chocolate and tea, Sheep roasted whole will frisk on the plain, And sautéed pike will swim in the Seine. Fricasseed spinach will grow on the ground, Garnished with crushed fried croutons; The trees will bring forth apple compotes, And farmers will harvest boots and coats. It will snow wine, it will rain chickens, And ducks cooked with turnips will fall from the sky.

—Langlé and Vanderburch, *Louis-Bronze et le Saint-Simonien*  
(Theâtre du Palais-Royal, February 27, 1832)

World exhibitions are places of pilgrimage to the commodity fetish. “Europe is off to view the merchandise,” says Taine in 1855. The world exhibitions were preceded by national exhibitions of industry, the first of which took place on the Champ de Mars in 1798. It arose from the wish “to entertain the working classes, and it becomes for them a festival of emancipation.” The workers would constitute their first clientele. The framework of the entertainment industry has not yet taken shape; the popular festival provides this. Chaptal’s celebrated speech on
industry opens the 1798 exhibition.—The Saint-Simonians, who envision the industrialization of the earth, take up the idea of world exhibitions. Chevalier, the first authority in this new field, is a student of Enfantin and editor of the Saint-Simonian newspaper Le Globe. The Saint-Simonians anticipated the development of the global economy, but not the class struggle. Thus, we see that despite their participation in industrial and commercial enterprises around the middle of the century, they were helpless on all questions concerning the proletariat.

World exhibitions glorify the exchange value of the commodity. They create a framework in which its use value becomes secondary. They are a school in which the masses, forcibly excluded from consumption, are imbued with the exchange value of commodities to the point of identifying with it: "Do not touch the items on display." World exhibitions thus provide access to a phantasmagoria which a person enters in order to be distracted. Within these divertissements, to which the individual abandons himself in the framework of the entertainment industry, he remains always an element of a compact mass. This mass delights in amusement parks—with their roller coasters, their "twisters," their "caterpillars"—in an attitude that is pure reaction. It is thus led to that state of subjection which propaganda, industrial as well as political, relies on.—The enthronement of the commodity, with its glitter of distractions, is the secret theme of Grandville’s art. Whence the split between its utopian and cynical elements in his work. The subtle artifices with which it represents inanimate objects correspond to what Marx calls the "theological niceties" of the commodity. The concrete expression of this is clearly found in the spécialité—a category of goods which appears at this time in the luxuries industry. World exhibitions construct a universe of spécialités. The fantasies of Grandville achieve the same thing. They modernize the universe. In his work, the ring of Saturn becomes a cast-iron balcony on which the inhabitants of Saturn take the evening air. By the same token, at world exhibitions, a balcony of cast-iron would represent the ring of Saturn, and people who venture out on it would find themselves carried away in a phantasmagoria where they seem to have been transformed into inhabitants of Saturn. The literary counterpart to this graphic utopia is the work of the Fourierist savant Toussenel. Toussenel was the natural-sciences editor for a popular newspaper. His zoology classifies the animal world according to the rule of fashion. He considers woman the intermediary between man and the animals. She is in a sense the decorator of the animal world, which, in exchange, places at her feet its plumage and its furs. "The lion likes nothing better than having its nails trimmed, provided it is a pretty girl that wields the scissors."9

II

Fashion: “Madam Death! Madam Death!”

—Leopardi, “Dialogue between Fashion and Death”10

Fashion prescribes the ritual according to which the commodity fetish demands to be worshipped. Grandville extends the authority of fashion to objects of everyday use, as well as to the cosmos. In taking it to an extreme, he reveals its
nature. It couples the living body to the inorganic world. To the living, it defends the rights of the corpse. The fetishism which thus succumbs to the sex appeal of the inorganic is its vital nerve. The fantasies of Grandville correspond to the spirit of fashion that Apollinaire later described with this image: "Any material from nature's domain can now be introduced into the composition of women's clothes. I saw a charming dress made of corks. . . . Steel, wool, sandstone, and files have suddenly entered the vestmentary arts. . . . They're doing shoes in Venetian glass and hats in Baccarat crystal."\(^{11}\)

C. Louis Philippe, or the Interior

I

I believe . . . in my soul: the Thing.


Under the reign of Louis Philippe, the private individual makes his entry into history. For the private individual, places of dwelling are for the first time opposed to places of work. The former come to constitute the interior. Its complement is the office. (For its part, the office is distinguished clearly from the shop counter, which, with its globes, wall maps, and railings, looks like a relic of the baroque forms that preceded the rooms in today's residences.) The private individual, who in the office has to deal with realities, needs the domestic interior to sustain him in his illusions. This necessity is all the more pressing since he has no intention of grafting onto his business interests a clear perception of his social function. In the arrangement of his private surroundings, he suppresses both of these concerns. From this derive the phantasmagorias of the interior—which, for the private individual, represents the universe. In the interior, he brings together remote locales and memories of the past. His living room is a box in the theater of the world.

The interior is the asylum where art takes refuge. The collector proves to be the true resident of the interior. He makes his concern the idealization of objects. To him falls the Sisyphean task of divesting things of their commodity character by taking possession of them. But he can bestow on them only connoisseur value, rather than use value. The collector delights in evoking a world that is not just distant and long gone but also better—a world in which, to be sure, human beings are no better provided with what they need than in the real world, but in which things are freed from the drudgery of being useful.

II

The head . . .

On the night table, like a ranunculus,

Rests.

—Baudelaire, "Une Martyre"\(^{12}\)
The interior is not just the universe of the private individual; it is also his étui. Ever since the time of Louis Philippe, the bourgeois has shown a tendency to compensate for the absence of any trace of private life in the big city. He tries to do this within the four walls of his apartment. It is as if he had made it a point of honor not to allow the traces of his everyday objects and accessories to get lost. Indefatigably, he takes the impression of a host of objects; for his slippers and his watches, his blankets and his umbrellas, he devises coverlets and cases. He has a marked preference for velour and plush, which preserve the imprint of all contact. In the style characteristic of the Second Empire, the apartment becomes a sort of cockpit. The traces of its inhabitant are molded into the interior. Here is the origin of the detective story, which inquires into these traces and follows these tracks. Poe—with his "Philosophy of Furniture" and with his "new detectives"—becomes the first physiognomist of the domestic interior. The criminals in early detective fiction are neither gentlemen nor apaches, but simple private citizens of the middle class ("The Black Cat," "The Tell-Tale Heart," "William Wilson").

III

This seeking for my home... was my affliction... Where is—my home? I ask and seek and have sought for it; I have not found it.

—Nietzsche, 

Also sprach Zarathustra

The liquidation of the interior took place during the last years of the nineteenth century, in the work of Jugendstil, but it had been coming for a long time. The art of the interior was an art of genre. Jugendstil sounds the death knell of the genre. It rises up against the infatuation of genre in the name of a mal du siècle, of a perpetually open-armed aspiration. Jugendstil for the first time takes into consideration certain tectonic forms. It also strives to disengage them from their functional relations and to present them as natural constants; it strives, in short, to stylize them. The new elements of iron construction—especially the girder—command the attention of this "modern style." In the domain of ornamentation, it endeavors to integrate these forms into art. Concrete puts at its disposal new potentialities for architecture. With van de Velde, the house becomes the plastic expression of the personality. Ornament is to this house what the signature is to a painting. It exults in speaking a linear, mediumistic language in which the flower, symbol of vegetal life, insinuates itself into the very lines of construction. (The curved line of Jugendstil appears at the same time as the title Les Fleurs du mal. A sort of garland marks the passage from the "Flowers of Evil" to the "souls of flowers" in Odilon Redon and on to Swann's faire catleya.)

—Henceforth, as Fourier had foreseen, the true framework for the life of the private citizen must be sought increasingly in offices and commercial centers. The fictional framework for the individual's life is constituted in the private home. It is thus that The Master Builder takes the measure of Jugendstil. The attempt by the individual to vie with technology by relying on his inner flights leads to his downfall: the architect Solness kills himself by plunging from his tower.
D. Baudelaire, or the Streets of Paris

I

Everything for me becomes allegory.
—Baudelaire, "Le Cygne"16

Baudelaire’s genius, which feeds on melancholy, is an allegorical genius. With Baudelaire, Paris becomes for the first time the subject of lyric poetry. This poetry of place is the opposite of all poetry of the soil. The gaze which the allegorical genius turns on the city betrays, instead, a profound alienation. It is the gaze of the flâneur, whose way of life conceals behind a beneficent mirage the anxiety of the future inhabitants of our metropolises. The flâneur seeks refuge in the crowd. The crowd is the veil through which the familiar city is transformed for the flâneur into phantasmagoria. This phantasmagoria, in which the city appears now as a landscape, now as a room, seems later to have inspired the décor of department stores, which thus put flânerie to work for profit. In any case, department stores are the last precincts of flânerie.

In the person of the flâneur, the intelligentsia becomes acquainted with the marketplace. It surrenders itself to the market, thinking merely to look around; but in fact it is already seeking a buyer. In this intermediate stage, in which it still has patrons but is starting to bend to the demands of the market (in the guise of the feuilleton), it constitutes the bohème. The uncertainty of its economic position corresponds to the ambiguity of its political function. The latter is manifest especially clearly in the figures of the professional conspirators, who are recruited from the bohème. Blanqui is the most remarkable representative of this group. No one else in the nineteenth century had a revolutionary authority comparable to his. The image of Blanqui passes like a flash of lightning through Baudelaire’s "Litanies de Satan." Nevertheless, Baudelaire’s rebellion is always that of the asocial man: it is at an impasse. The only sexual communion of his life was with a prostitute.

II

They were the same, had risen from the same hell,
These centenarian twins.
—Baudelaire, "Les Sept Vieillards"17

The flâneur plays the role of scout in the marketplace. As such, he is also the explorer of the crowd. Within the man who abandons himself to it, the crowd inspires a sort of drunkenness, one accompanied by very specific illusions: the man flatters himself that, on seeing a passerby swept along by the crowd, he has accurately classified him, seen straight through to the innermost recesses of his soul—all on the basis of his external appearance. Physiologies of the time abound in evidence of this singular conception. Balzac’s work provides excellent examples. The typical characters seen in passersby make such an impression on
the senses that one cannot be surprised at the resultant curiosity to go beyond them and capture the special singularity of each person. But the nightmare that corresponds to the illusory perspicacity of the aforementioned physiognomist consists in seeing those distinctive traits—traits peculiar to the person—revealed to be nothing more than the elements of a new type; so that in the final analysis a person of the greatest individuality would turn out to be the exemplar of a type. This points to an agonizing phantasmagoria at the heart of flânerie. Baudelaire develops it with great vigor in "Les Sept Vieillards," a poem that deals with the seven-fold apparition of a repulsive-looking old man. This individual, presented as always the same in his multiplicity, testifies to the anguish of the city dweller who is unable to break the magic circle of the type even though he cultivates the most eccentric peculiarities. Baudelaire describes this procession as "infernal" in appearance. But the newness for which he was on the lookout all his life consists in nothing other than this phantasmagoria of what is "always the same." (The evidence one could cite to show that this poem transcribes the reveries of a hashish eater in no way weakens this interpretation.)

III

Deep in the Unknown to find the new!

—Baudelaire, "Le Voyage"

The key to the allegorical form in Baudelaire is bound up with the specific signification which the commodity acquires by virtue of its price. The singular debasement of things through their signification, something characteristic of seventeenth-century allegory, corresponds to the singular debasement of things through their price as commodities. This degradation, to which things are subject because they can be taxed as commodities, is counterbalanced in Baudelaire by the inestimable value of novelty. La nouveauté represents that absolute which is no longer accessible to any interpretation or comparison. It becomes the ultimate entrenchment of art. The final poem of Les Fleurs du mal: "Le Voyage." "Death, old admiral, up anchor now!" The final voyage of the flâneur: death. Its destination: the new. Newness is a quality independent of the use value of the commodity. It is the source of that illusion of which fashion is the tireless purveyor. The fact that art's last line of resistance should coincide with the commodity's most advanced line of attack—this had to remain hidden from Baudelaire.

"Spleen et idéal"—in the title of this first cycle of poems in Les Fleurs du mal, the oldest loanword in the French language was joined to the most recent one. For Baudelaire, there is no contradiction between the two concepts. He recognizes in spleen the latest transfiguration of the ideal; the ideal seems to him the first expression of spleen. With this title, in which the supremely new is presented to the reader as something "supremely old," Baudelaire has given the liveliest form to his concept of the modern. The linchpin of his entire theory of art is "modern beauty," and for him the proof of modernity seems to be this: it is marked with the fatality of being one day antiquity, and it reveals this to whoever
I venerate the Beautiful, the Good, and all things great; Beautiful nature, on which great art rests—
How it enchants the ear and charms the eye!
I love spring in blossom: women and roses.
—Baron Haussmann, Confession d’un lion devenu vieux

Haussmann’s activity is incorporated into Napoleonic imperialism, which favors investment capital. In Paris, speculation is at its height. Haussmann’s expropriations give rise to speculation that borders on fraud. The rulings of the Court of Cassation, which are inspired by the bourgeois and Orleanist opposition, increase the financial risks of Haussmannization. Haussmann tries to shore up his dictatorship by placing Paris under an emergency regime. In 1864, in a speech before the National Assembly, he vents his hatred of the rootless urban population. This population grows ever larger as a result of his projects. Rising rents drive the proletariat into the suburbs. The quartiers of Paris in this way lose their distinctive physiognomy. The “red belt” forms. Haussmann gave himself the title of “demolition artist.” He believed he had a vocation for his work, and emphasizes this in his memoirs. The central marketplace passes for Haussmann’s most successful construction—and this is an interesting symptom. It has been said of the Ile de la Cité, the cradle of the city, that in the wake of Haussmann only one church, one public building, and one barracks remained. Hugo and Mérimée suggest how much the transformations made by Haussmann appear to Parisians as a monument of Napoleonic despotism. The inhabitants of the city no longer feel at home there; they start to become conscious of the inhuman character of the metropolis. Maxime Du Camp’s monumental work Paris owes its existence to this dawning awareness. The etchings of Meryon (around 1850) constitute the death mask of old Paris.

The true goal of Haussmann’s projects was to secure the city against civil war. He wanted to make the erection of barricades in the streets of Paris impossible for all time. With the same end in mind, Louis Philippe had already introduced wooden paving. Nevertheless, barricades had played a considerable role in the February Revolution. Engels studied the tactics of barricade fighting. Haussmann seeks to forestall such combat in two ways. Widening the streets will make the erection of barricades impossible, and new streets will connect the barracks in straight lines with the workers’ districts. Contemporaries christened the operation “strategic embellishment.”
II

The flowery realm of decorations,
The charm of landscape, of architecture,
And all the effect of scenery rest
Solely on the law of perspective.
—Franz Böhle, Theater-Catechismus (Munich), p. 74

Haussmann’s ideal in city planning consisted of long straight streets opening onto broad perspectives. This ideal corresponds to the tendency—common in the nineteenth century—to ennoble technological necessities through spurious artistic ends. The temples of the bourgeoisie’s spiritual and secular power were to find their apotheosis within the framework of these long streets. The perspectives, prior to their inauguration, were screened with canvas draperies and unveiled like monuments; the view would then disclose a church, a train station, an equestrian statue, or some other symbol of civilization. With the Haussmannization of Paris, the phantasmagoria was rendered in stone. Though intended to endure in quasi-perpetuity, it also reveals its brittleness. The Avenue de l’Opéra—which, according to a malicious saying of the day, affords a perspective on the porter’s lodge at the Louvre—shows how unrestrained the prefect’s megalomania was.

III

Reveal to these depraved,
O Republic, by foiling their plots,
Your great Medusa face
Ringed by red lightning.
—Pierre Dupont, Chant des ouvriers

The barricade is resurrected during the Commune. It is stronger and better designed than ever. It stretches across the great boulevards, often reaching a height of two stories, and shields the trenches behind it. Just as the Communist Manifesto ends the age of professional conspirators, so the Commune puts an end to the phantasmagoria that dominates the earliest aspirations of the proletariat. It dispels the illusion that the task of the proletarian revolution is to complete the work of ’89 in close collaboration with the bourgeoisie. This illusion had marked the period 1831–1871, from the Lyons riots to the Commune. The bourgeoisie never shared in this error. Its battle against the social rights of the proletariat dates back to the great Revolution, and converges with the philanthropic movement that gives it cover and that was in its heyday under Napoleon III. Under his reign, this movement’s monumental work appeared: Le Play’s Ouvriers européens (European Workers).

Side by side with the overt position of philanthropy, the bourgeoisie has always maintained the covert position of class struggle. As early as 1831, in the Journal des débats, it acknowledged that “every manufacturer lives in his factory like a
plantation owner among his slaves.” If it was fatal for the workers’ rebellions of old that no theory of revolution had directed their course, it was this absence of theory that, from another perspective, made possible their spontaneous energy and the enthusiasm with which they set about establishing a new society. This enthusiasm, which reaches its peak in the Commune, at times won over to the workers’ cause the best elements of the bourgeoisie, but in the end led the workers to succumb to its worst elements. Rimbaud and Courbet took sides with the Commune. The burning of Paris is the worthy conclusion to Baron Haussmann’s work of destruction.

Conclusion

Men of the nineteenth century, the hour of our apparitions is fixed forever, and always brings us back the very same ones.

—Auguste Blanqui, L’Eternité par les astres (Paris, 1872), pp. 74-75

During the Commune, Blanqui was held prisoner in the fortress of Taureau. It was there that he wrote his L’Eternité par les astres [Eternity via the Stars]. This book completes the century’s constellation of phantasmagorias with one last, cosmic phantasmagoria which implicitly comprehends the severest critique of all the others. The ingenious reflections of an autodidact, which form the principal portion of this work, open the way to merciless speculations that give the lie to the author’s revolutionary élan. The conception of the universe which Blanqui develops in this book, taking his basic premises from the mechanistic natural sciences, proves to be a vision of hell. It is, moreover, the complement of that society which Blanqui, near the end of his life, was forced to admit had defeated him. The irony of this scheme—an irony which doubtless escaped the author himself—is that the terrible indictment he pronounces against society takes the form of an unqualified submission to its results. Blanqui’s book presents the idea of eternal return ten years before Zarathustra—in a manner scarcely less moving than that of Nietzsche, and with an extreme hallucinatory power.

This power is anything but triumphant; it leaves, on the contrary, a feeling of oppression. Blanqui here strives to trace an image of progress that (immemorial antiquity parading as up-to-date novelty) turns out to be the phantasmagoria of history itself. Here is the essential passage:

The entire universe is composed of astral systems. To create them, nature has only a hundred simple bodies at its disposal. Despite the great advantage it derives from these resources, and the innumerable combinations that these resources afford its fecundity, the result is necessarily a finite number, like that of the elements themselves; and in order to fill its expanse, nature must repeat to infinity each of its original combinations or types. So each heavenly body, whatever it might be, exists in infinite number in time and space, not only in one of its aspects but as it is at each second of its existence, from birth to death. . . . The earth is one of these heavenly bodies. Every human being is thus eternal at every second of his or her existence. What I write at this moment in a cell of the Fort du Taureau I have written and shall
write throughout all eternity—at a table, with a pen, clothed as I am now, in circum-
stances like these. And thus it is for everyone. . . . The number of our doubles is
infinite in time and space. One cannot in good conscience demand anything more.
These doubles exist in flesh and bone—indeed, in trousers and jacket, in crinoline
and chignon. They are by no means phantoms; they are the present eternalized.
Here, nonetheless, lies a great drawback: there is no progress. . . . What we call
"progress" is confined to each particular world, and vanishes with it. Always and
everywhere in the terrestrial arena, the same drama, the same setting, on the same
narrow stage—a noisy humanity infatuated with its own grandeur, believing itself to
be the universe and living in its prison as though in some immense realm, only to
founder at an early date along with its globe, which has borne with deepest disdain
the burden of human arrogance. The same monotony, the same immobility, on
other heavenly bodies. The universe repeats itself endlessly and paws the ground in
place. In infinity, eternity performs—imperturbably—the same routines. 23

This resignation without hope is the last word of the great revolutionary. The
century was incapable of responding to the new technological possibilities with a
new social order. That is why the last word was left to the errant negotiators
between old and new who are at the heart of these phantasmagorias. The world
dominated by its phantasmagorias—this, to make use of Baudelaire's term, is
"modernity." Blanqui's vision has the entire universe entering the modernity of
which Baudelaire's seven old men are the heralds. In the end, Blanqui views
novelty as an attribute of all that is under sentence of damnation. Likewise in Ciel
et enfer [Heaven and Hell], a vaudeville piece that slightly predates the book: in
this piece the torments of hell figure as the latest novelty of all time, as "pains
eternal and always new." The people of the nineteenth century, whom Blanqui
addresses as if they were apparitions, are natives of this region.