

# Charles Baudelaire's *The Swan* and the Vanishing Cityspace

Altti Kuusamo

School of History, Culture and Arts Studies, University of Turku, Turku, Finland

**Email address:**

[altti.kuusamo@utu.fi](mailto:altti.kuusamo@utu.fi)

**To cite this article:**

Altti Kuusamo. Charles Baudelaire's *The Swan* and the Vanishing Cityspace. *International Journal of Literature and Arts*. Vol. 10, No. 3, 2022, pp. 157-165. doi: 10.11648/j.ijla.20221003.12

**Received:** December 20, 2021; **Accepted:** April 21, 2022; **Published:** May 10, 2022

---

**Abstract:** Altti Kuusamo's article deals with the theme of loss and melancholy in Charles Baudelaire's famous poem *The Swan* (*Le Cygne*, 1859) taking seriously into account one of the central subject matters, the image of the La Place du Carrousel, which referred to the courtyard between the Louvre and the Tuileries Palace and which had turned out to be a wasteland during Baudelaire's mature work, in 1850s. In this way my article does not concentrate on the favourite subject of the *flâneur* in Charles Baudelaire's poems, not even in the manner which Walter Benjamin made so fashionable. Instead, I'll draw attention to the mental topography of the Carrousel site in Paris which seemed to be important to Baudelaire and also to his friends during 1840s. The feeling of the deserted quarters is in a way "humming" in the backyard of the Baudelaire's poem. The motivation for my article lies in pondering why so many literary analysts of the poem, for example Walter Benjamin, Jean Starobinski, Yves Bonnefoy, Jonathan Culler, Stephanie Bundy and Ross Chambers, just to name some central literary figures, have not taken into account those images and metaphors which surround the name Carrousel in the poem. In the poem metaphors which are connected to ancient myths sweep the deserted paving stones of Place du Carrousel and illustrate the situation in which the demolition of the houses and streets of the western side of Louvre had taken place. Also the themes of loss and exile are closely tied to the central imagery of Carrousel close to Louvre.

**Keywords:** Baudelaire, *The Swan*, Melancholy, Spleen, Allegory, *Place du Carrousel*, Paris, Exile

---

## 1. Introduction

Charles Baudelaire wrote his poem *The Swan* (*Le Cygne*) in the year 1859 and sent it to Victor Hugo whom he also dedicated the poem. In his letter to Hugo Baudelaire speaks of the swan as *mon petit symbole*: how the sight of a suffering animal makes us think a loss we can see around us and which we cannot bring back. [1]

In my article I'll draw attention to the image of the Carrousel in *The Swan* addressing how the image of the Place du Carrousel and the image of suffering swan both strongly refer to the sense of loss – and also to the lost city space. In this way my point of departure is that the deserted courtyard of Carrousel seems to be essential in understanding the fatal message of *The Swan*. Moreover, I have seriously taken into account the references to poem's urban topography, the theme of lost city space: the central image of Carrousel seems to crystallize the destruction of the old Paris: "The old

Paris is gone" and the place of the "new" Carrousel has taken its symbolic character.

It would seem as if Baudelaire wanted to mirror the mythical theme of exile via the demolished and lost part of the nuclear city, Place du Carrousel which at the time when Baudelaire wrote the poem was a deserted, dusty and plain area. Instead of ruins we curiously meet the plain and deserted wasteland in the heart of the city which is the imaginative playground of *The Swan*. In that way this article does not concentrate on the favourite subject of the *flâneur* in Baudelaire's poems.

As for *The Swan* quite many important literary critics speak of the old and lost Paris in general instead of taking into account the vital reference to the important Carrousel place inside the old Louvre district, its fate and its symbolical role. I will discuss the city's symbolic ruination as mirrored

in the theme the suffering swan. The atmosphere of suffer, exile and loss bring Carrousel and swan together. In the old days there was a zoo in the quarter of Carrousel. It is important to notice that the swan in the poem has “escaped from his cage”. Swan is free but suffering and lying on the dusty paving stones. The image brings together the swan and Carrousel.

## 2. Method

As for the method: My approach is in line with the close reading of *The Swan* -poem – also regarding its iconographic and allegorical dimensions and taking into account the mental imagery of the loss: how the empty and dusty area of the Place du Carrousel brings together the allegorical theme of the loss with its references to ancient myths. In that way the topography of the lost Paris and the theme of loss meet in the metaphorical level. The image of Carrousel at the beginning of the poem sets the basic tune for the stanzas to come. Here the question is not only of the mental map of the lost architecture but also of the lost way of life: La place du Carrousel was important for artists and writers in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Also, the melancholy atmosphere is almost tactile at the beginning of the second part of *The Swan*: “Paris may change, but in my melancholy mood / Nothing has budged!” This very stanza brings about the allegorical themes so important for the recalling of the old “faubourgs” which refer to the mood of spleen – intertwining with melancholy the way that they seem to be inseparable in the end.

### 2.1. Carrousel in a Whirlwind of Change

Jean Starobinski once wrote that “melancholy, allegorized in the past, animates not only anthropomorphic figures, but is also inscribed in things, in aspects of the world.” [2] Ofttimes, however, notably in poetry, it is difficult to pinpoint exactly where such anthropomorphizing occurs and how its meaning furtively shifts to a different level. The 1861 edition of Baudelaire's *The Flowers of Evil* (*Les Fleurs du Mal*) includes an added section of 19 poems entitled *Tableaux Parisiens*, which famously presents a 24-hour cycle of Parisian scenes. In these vignettes, the teeming crowds are conspicuous by their absence, a curious point that evidently perplexed the German translator, Walter Benjamin, who liked to imagine “the silence of the crowd” echoing in the background of every poem: “In *Tableaux Parisiens*, the secret presence of a crowd is demonstrable almost everywhere.” [3] But another latent presence also rings loudly on Baudelaire's barren streets: a pervasive sense of loneliness and desolation. If the masses are only shadows in the *Tableaux Parisiens*, they appear in full view in an essay published by Baudelaire two years later, *The Painter of Modern Life* (*Le peintre de la vie moderne*, 1863). The crowd also finds vivid portrayal in Edgar Allen Poe's short stories, which were translated into French by Baudelaire and insightfully analysed by Walter Benjamin. In the *Parisian Tableaux*,

however, the throng is depicted the same way as the fabric of the city: as an absent presence.

Baudelaire's *Tableaux Parisiens* (1861) bears a vague affinity to Louis-Sébastien Mercier's twelve-volume *Le Tableau de Paris* (1782–1789). Mercier professes that his descriptions of Paris are a long way off “satire”, [4] although satirical elements are unmistakably present. It is not only possible but highly probable that Baudelaire read Mercier's colourful portrayals of daily life in Paris. Victor Hugo's descriptions of the French capital similarly resonate in the background of Baudelaire's Parisian vignettes. May we recall that in Mercier's day, Paris was already a fully-fledged metropolis with a population of 800,000. [5] Describing the city from the top down, Mercier opens his narrative in dusky attics and slowly descends to street level.

I will not jump on the Benjaminian bandwagon by interpreting fragments of Baudelaire through the lens of the arcade trope, although I have gone to considerable trouble and derived much amusement from tracking down the surviving arcades of old Paris. [6] Nor indeed will I rehash the done-to-death Baudelairean theme of modernity or the figure of the *flâneur*. [7] Instead, my melancholy-themed discussion will address Baudelaire's poem *The Swan* (*Le Cygne*) and its meditations on Paris, specifically the poet's responses to a major urban modernization project undertaken by the prefect of Seine, Georges-Eugène Haussmann. Rather than scrutinize Paris through the default lens of the “silent masses” or the *Passagenwerk*, I will discuss the city's symbolic ruination as mirrored in the air of barrenness and melancholy that pervades *The Swan*.

“Paris change! mais rien dans ma mélancolie / N'a bougé!” The meaning of this line is semantically unequivocal: “Paris changes, but naught in my melancholy has stirred.” [8] It would be remiss to ignore, however, that *bouge* has a second meaning. As a noun, it means “hovel”. The association between melancholy and ruins in *The Swan* is enigmatic and challenging from the first line, the thematic implications opening gradually through the cited mythical figures, Andromache and Hector, and the forlorn figure of the swan. The poem is furthermore dedicated to Victor Hugo, who then lived in exile from France, which adds further thrust to the thematic subtext. Melancholy – opines Starobinski – is something that the poet should express without uttering the overused word itself too often. In *The Swan*, Baudelaire certainly avoids the expression by falling back on a variety of metaphors and equivalents, [9] which flash up like repressed memory traces subtly invoking the unutterable word they stand for. Baudelaire uses the term *triste miroir* in the second verse, which James McGowan unthinkingly pens as “melancholy mirror” in the 1993 English translation – and in that way he makes reading accidentally easier. [10]

The quarter of Paris that the ‘I’ of the poem laments as crumbling to ruin is cited by name in the second stanza:

*A fécondé soudain ma mémoire fertile,  
Comme je traversais le nouveau Carrousel.*

*Le vieux Paris n'est plus (la forme d'une ville,  
Change plus vite, hélas! que le coeur d'un mortel);*

"Has quickened suddenly my fertile memory, / As I was walking through the new Carrousel. / Old Paris is gone (the form a city takes / More quickly changes, alas! than does the mortal heart.)" [11] It is no coincidence that Baudelaire mentions "the new Carrousel" as the setting of the poem. The foundations of the Arc de Triomphe were laid in on the site between 1806 and 1808 to honour Emperor Napoleon's victories, but at the time of the poem's writing, the district was a shapeless, characterless wasteland between the Louvre and the Tuileries Palace. The drastic changes that gripped this pocket of Paris seem to convey a more universal, latent meaning in Baudelaire's poem. As the result of an ambitious renewal program undertaken by Baron Haussmann, the Place du Carrousel stood as empty already in the late 1850s as it does today – a far cry from the lively place it had been in the 1840s and early 1850s. [12] When literary analysts cite "the new Carrousel" in Baudelaire's poem, they refer vaguely to the quarter around the Louvre, without elucidating precisely what the first-person narrator is alluding to or where the exact location might lie. This accent can be seen in many writers, such as in Jonathan Culler, Jean Starobinski (1989 and 2012) Daniel Sjöblad and Stephanie Bundy, not to mention Walter Benjamin. [13] A few commentators such as Franca Quarantini (2012) constitute the rare exception. [14] The Carrousel is certainly more than 'just any old place' in the middle of Paris. It conveys deeper symbolic significance, having played a role in historical events such as the February 1848 revolution. It is therefore enlightening to look more closely at the thematic subtext of the setting and the sense of emptiness and transience it invokes.

Walter Benjamin argues that *The Swan* portrays Paris as a city with a fragile *Gestalt*, surrounded by symbols of brittleness. The poem is steeped in sorrow and hopelessness, and so too Paris itself is portrayed as fragile

and fragmentary. [15] It is curious that Benjamin – whose famed *Arcades Project* goes to great length analysing Paris during the Second French Empire – chooses not to address the poem's urban topography, opting instead to discuss Paris of *The Swan* on a very general level. This has become a habit.

Before Haussmann, the strip of land between the Louvre and Tuileries Palace was a dense pocket of settlement with an urban history dating back two centuries. The notorious Rue du Doyenné is described by Honoré de Balzac in *La Cousine Bette* (*Cousin Bette*, 1838), at which time the district was already condemned for demolition. Balzac also mentions a cluster of houses sandwiched between the Rue du Carrousel and the present-day Louvre Palace grounds. [16] This same quarter was once populated by artists and many of Baudelaire's close friends, including Théophile Gautier and Gerard de Nerval. [17] The below lithograph by Theodor Josef H. Hoffbauer (1839–1922), *Place du Carrousel en 1850*, offers a good picture of the Place du Carrousel in its pre-Haussmann guise (figure 1). On the left we see a fragment of the Louvre, and on the right, we see the wing of the Louvre known as the Galerie du bord de l'eau. The Arc de Triomphe, which lies to the west, is cropped out of the picture. Hoffbauer's lithograph offers an illustrative document of the residential district that was demolished soon after the drawing was completed (the original drawing was older than the lithograph, which was pulled in the 1880s by H. Toussaint, born 1849). Urban settlement spilled into the Carrousel also from the north, with buildings flanking both sides of the Rue du Chartres (figure 2), a diagonal street from the North leading to the Hôtel de Nantes. [18] The buildings north of the square are portrayed by J. Canella in his painting *La Rue du Carrousel* from the early 1800s. There is also Giuseppe De Nittis' shadowy painting "The Carrousel Courtyard and the Tuileries in Ruins" which depicts the empty and rough area of Carrousel from the South East (1882).

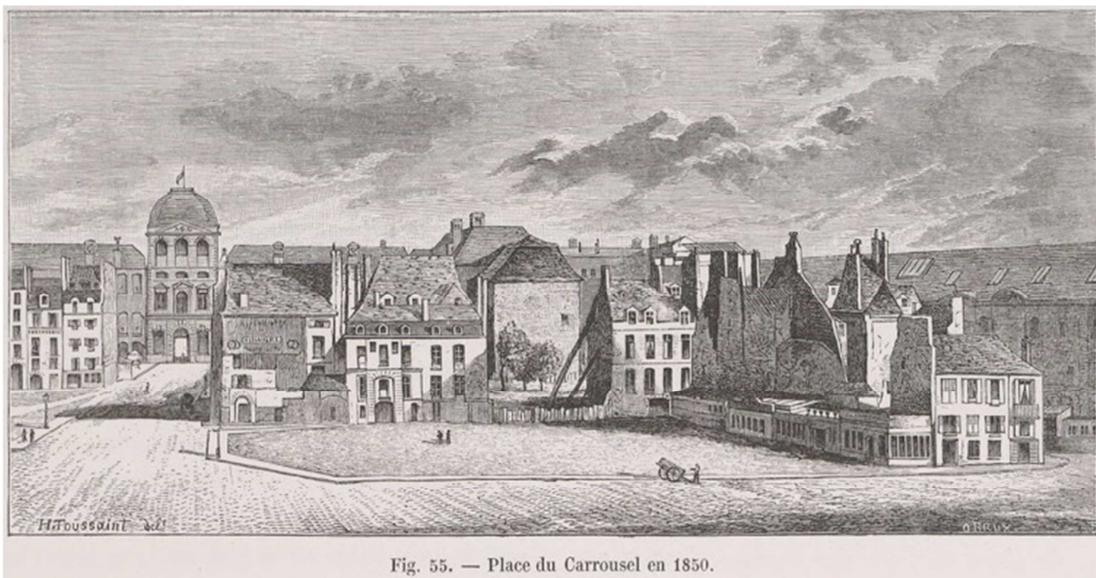


Fig. 55. — Place du Carrousel en 1850.

Figure 1. Theodor Josef H. Hoffbauer: *Place du Carrousel en 1850*. 1880s. Lithograph.



with the texts of the ancients, including Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which recounts how Cygnus, the impregnable-skinned son of Poseidon, is choked to death by Achilles as a victim of the Trojan War. [25] It seems significant that *kyknos* is the ancient Greek word for 'swan', although I have not found any previous academic sources linking the figure of Cygnus to Baudelaire's poem. In his *Metamorphoses*, Ovid describes Cygnus' death and transformation into a swan: "[...] the god of the sea has changed the body into that of a white bird, whose name is the one he bore, but a moment ago". [26]

In Baudelaire's poem, images and metaphors of exiledom become intertwined with expressions of melancholy amid the annihilation of old Paris, in which "Vieux faubourgs, tout pour moi devient allégorie" ("Old neighbourhoods, are allegorical for me" – as in McGowan's translation; however, the meaning of the sentence could also be: "...are changing into allegories"). [27] The last stanzas accentuate the gnawing longing of exiledom through the figure of the swan, Andromache, and "puny orphans", who "suckle pain as they would suck the good she-wolf." The exiledom theme which is accentuated here is again called forth in the poem's dedication to Victor Hugo, who was banished from France to the Channel Island of Guernsey.

Starobinski's interpretation of the poem plays on the verbs *penser* and *pencher*, 'to think' and 'to lean' Andromache leans in to inspect the majesty of her grieving in the "poor and sad" mirror of a stream. [28] Starobinski describes the gesture of leaning as an emblem of introspection. [29] Leaning also evokes the classical iconography of melancholy, which is often personified as a contemplative figure resting chin in hand (Dürer, Virgil Solis). Starobinski further cites Victor Hugo's line, "*L'acte de pensée et l'image de la figure penchée*" ("The act of thought and the image of the bent figure". [30] Baudelaire also draws from Virgil's *Aeneid* (III, 294–355), which illustrates the humiliations endured by Andromache through the gesture of her leaning or bending – chin resting upon hands being the natural posture of the melancholic. Finally, in Jean Racine's play *Andromaque*, the eponymous main protagonist literally 'bends' to Pyrrhus' unreasonable demands after Hector is slain. [31] These melancholic leaners associated with the fall of Troy are suggestively paired with Baudelaire's descriptions of the perishing 'old' Paris, the mythical protagonists now poetically transplanted in the dry gutters and desolate streets of the 'new' Paris.

The hushed lament of ruins – a trope born of modernity – is an apt vehicle for expressing the mythical melancholy afflicting those who endure bottomless loss and sorrow. True to his style, Baudelaire evokes melancholy through the poetic reconciliation of opposites, by uniting two seemingly contradictory impulses: grief and inspired irony, analogizing the past with the present. According to Starobinski, the poem is teeming with paradox and oxymoron, starting with the contradictory term "nouveau Carrousel". [32] This remark seems to be a bit peculiar, for Baudelaire obviously compares the 'new' with the 'old' Carrousel, its desolation symbolized

by the displaced titular swan.

But melancholy is indeed a condition of "paradoxical pathos", as convincingly argued by Sarah Kofman [33] – and Baudelaire if anyone infused his metaphors with this friction. Daniel Sandström has astutely pointed out the convoluted relationship that emerges between the poet's inner world and the external topography. [34] Baudelaire's many metaphoric juxtapositions (Paris = Troy), and his numerous paradoxes and inversions endow the poem with great density of imagery – but this also results in a certain amorphousness of *topos*. Rebecca Comay comments on the poem's curious fusion of *plénitude* and hollowness. [35] The poem's fragmentary surface finds its subtlety counterpart in the mythic exiledom of Andromache and the swan. The physical locus of the poem is urban, transient, desolate, and dry, flashing up before our eyes in a broken sequence of images that ultimately renders the scene abstract.

Ross Chambers shares interesting observations on the apostrophic structure of *The Swan*. The subject of the poem speaks to an absent addressee: "*Andromaque, je pense à vous*". [36] The apostrophe is sustained throughout the poem. The gaze has been turned to woeful images of the ancient past while the displaced swan wanders the dry, cobbled streets of modernity, searching for fresh water to quench its thirst. The subject of the poem first 'sees' Andromache (in the past) and then observes the Swan (in the present). It is not accidental that there is a chain of association linked to Louvre – Swan – Andromache: in front of the Louvre the subject of the poem thinks of the "great swan". Even in the very act of seeing, there is something fragmentary and averted about the way the subject of the poem breaks off and turns his attention from one thing to the next. The dryness (and cold) associated with the swan again evinces a melancholic disposition. [37] Everything observed by "he melancholic becomes fraught with diabolical meaning" (Starobinski), no matter how trivial or transient the thing might be. Baudelaire's correspondences are – to quote Starobinski – like oxymorons: the poem is steeped in "le goût de l'oxymore". [38]

Widowhood, exiledom, loneliness, emptiness, dryness, longing – here the key themes that Baudelaire grafts upon the deserted, vanishing streets of old Paris. In the seemingly flat, declarative statement "*Paris change*", Starobinski hears an indictment. [39] Melancholy verges upon *agonia*, as often is the tendency. Starobinski foregrounds the poem's urban loss theme in a way that few others have before, with the possible exception of Yves Bonnefoy, who does so in his typically vague, or even pathetic poetic manner. [40] *The Swan* laments the loss of a beloved place of the youth of the subject of the poem, the loss being multiplied through an arsenal of myths – while leaving curious cracks for the mythological meanings to keep shifting. Nebulous allusions lead allegory astray on strange detours, amplifying the mythical power of the narrative, and giving the mythical figures room to move. For Baudelaire, melancholy is more a question of style than allegory.

However, Baudelaire shows remarkably little genuine

concern for the vanishing old Paris on the pages of *The Flowers of Evil*. The demolition of old quarters began in the early 1850s, but Baudelaire does not wallow, ruminate, procrastinate, or entertain doubts about the ruination – meaning: the *zaudern* functions of melancholy are not highlighted, [41] other than to voice an agonizing indictment. In his poem *Little Old Women (Les Petit Vieilles)*, Baudelaire exclaims: “Ruins! my family! my fellow-minds!” (*Ruines! ma famille! ô cerveaux congénères!*). [42] The line is interesting if only for the fact that it contains three exclamation marks, building up a provocative prosodic impact. ‘Ruins’ undoubtedly have a double meaning in this context. A linked chain of signification is formed: alleys–mazes–old women–ruins.

### 2.3. *Melancholy and Spleen*

Jean Starobinski certainly has good reason for exclaiming: “*The Swan*, what a great poem of melancholy!” [43] He then goes on to describe it as a poem of “exile” and “escape”. [44] Commentators often emphasize the allegorical nature of *The Swan*, and the fact that allegory calls forth melancholy. According to Starobinski, the poem is “*allégory en allégory*”. [45] Ross Chambers, too, emphasizes the poem’s allegorical dimension, its “chiasmatic” stanza structure linking the past and present. In that way allegory activates melancholy, and vice versa. [46] Chambers fails to specify how the two feed upon each other, however. His argument is premised on the assumption that the stanzas depict the present. However, a poem always occurs in ‘presence’. In truth, Baudelaire’s allegories occasionally become muddled, inviting free play of unfixed association. As I see it, generalized talk of allegory (in which Chambers and Starobinski indulge) does not suffice to unlock the deeper meaning of the poem. When allegory stalks the low-lying terrain of hazy melancholic correspondences, it begins to resemble an opaque symbolization process fuelled by mythopoetic discontinuities. Allusions to Andromache and thereon to Ovid via the figure of the displaced swan are united by the theme of exile and connected by a nebulous bridge that spans a massive historical timespan. The only thing that lends the connection solidity, petrifying it, if you will, is Baudelaire’s description of the city’s stony ground. As I mentioned earlier, Walter Benjamin interprets *The Swan*’s Paris as a symbolically fragile *Gestalt*. [47] Elsewhere he observes that the city’s chthonic elements, such as the riverbed of the Seine, have an integral place in the poetic imagery of the *Fleur*. [48] This remark befits well to *The Swan*, which at regular intervals ‘returns to earth’. Rolf Tiedemann, too, draws attention to the chthonic elements in Baudelaire’s poetry, [49] which are most prominent in the *Spleen* poems (LXXV–LXXVIII), where poetic imagery and metaphors are all but slammed to the ground. If the horizon rises even an inch, it is soon brought crashing down to earth. But it is in the *Spleen* poems that the images of the cityscape finally vanish altogether.

In *Tableaux Parisiens*, Baudelaire’s verse combs the tenuous borderland between nostalgia and melancholy in a

very modern way. According to Starobinski, Baudelaire’s “poetic construction supplants naïve nostalgia”. [50] One might add that the most obvious border-blurring bridge between nostalgia and melancholy is the famous Baudelairean concept of ‘spleen’, for which there are astoundingly many definitions. The briefest is perhaps the most complex, being analogous to melancholy: ‘heavy-heartedness and ennui’. Max Horkheimer posits a more precise, watertight definition for the concept of ‘spleen’: “The French symbolists had a special term to express their love for things that had lost their objective significance, namely, ‘spleen.’” Horkheimer goes on: “The conscious, challenging arbitrariness in the choice of objects, its ‘absurdity’ and ‘perverseness,’ as if by a silent gesture discloses the irrationality of utilitarian logic, which it then slaps in the face in order to demonstrate its inadequacy with regard to human experience. And while making it conscious, by this shock, of the fact that it forgets the subject, the gesture simultaneously expresses the subject’s *sorrow* over its inability to achieve an objective order” (italics: AK). [51] Could this be expressed any more convolutedly? Horkheimer’s musings come close to Michael Ann Holly’s contemporary theory on the art historian’s sense of loss and attendant feelings of inadequacy and sorrow, which are born of an inability to fully grasp an object of the past – other than by foregrounding the impact of subjective interpretations. [52] An object of the past might also be void of meaning, a fact that the art historian might strive to embrace, shaken by the sudden realization that no theory or plethora of exegetic approaches will ever suffice to offer an exhaustive explanation of anything.

According to Antti Nylén, ‘spleen’ is Baudelaire’s term for a gnawing, agonizing sense of unfulfillment and inadequacy. [53] Here the emphasis is on the word ‘gnawing’. Nylén adds a further, perhaps even more salient observation on the character of spleen: “Helplessness and irrevocability are manifestations of spleen that are synonymous with the absence of mercy and forgiveness”. [54] Here, spleen reveals its modernity. The feelings of helplessness and irrevocability described by Nylén bring the concept of spleen unintentionally close to the psychological theme of *zaudern*, introduced by J. Vogl, often translated as ‘tarrying’, a condition of lingering, distracted procrastination, which I have elsewhere theorized, is an inherent feature of melancholy. [55] (Vogl himself does not consciously connect tarrying to melancholy). In a different context, Nylén expands the concept of spleen by pointing out how dandyism is an attempt to reconcile idealism and spleen. [56] Karin Johannisson in turn posits that Baudelaire’s brand of dandyism is the kind that marries beauty with melancholy – notion which is not so far from Sartre’s conviction. [57] For Baudelaire, beauty is often associated with crime, [58] or *beau désordre*. [59] Beauty for him has an altogether unique, all-encompassing darkness of timbre: In the *Spleen* poems of *The Flowers of Evil*, beauty gapes open like an empty tomb. The unusually expansive semantic field covered by the concept of ‘spleen’ assumes an oxymoronic form in

Baudelaire's poetry, the two extremes of the spectrum being linked by the sentiment of longing. Dark, metaphoric reflection both polarizes and unites. Daniel Sandström aptly refers to the "ambivalence of self-reflection". [60] Objects negate each other with oppressive doggedness; mercy is irrevocably absent – just as the act of tearing down buildings is irrevocable. Irrevocable, too, is the supplantation of myth with new myths – as is their cross-fertilization on the threshold of modernity. Lost city space exhumes old myths and push them into our consciousness with a grating new insistence. Still: mythic *agonia* is hushed in *The Swan*.

Sometimes it is difficult to discern spleen from melancholy. Vincent A. McCarthy (1977, 163) has defined melancholy in the following way:

*For melancholy is a reflexive emotion. Emotions are generally directed outwards, toward some object (as in love, hate, etc.). But melancholy has no object, in two senses. First, it has no object because the Absolute is an impossible object for human longing (understood in the external sense). Second, it has no object because the "object" which is ultimately the solution is the Self grounded in a relationship to the Absolute which is its Constituting Power (cf. Sickness Unto Death). Properly speaking, the Self is not an object for oneself. Melancholy is an emotion which is "about" the Self and which seeks the incorporation of the life of the Absolute into the personality which already participates nascently in it.*

The question is of the "inability to achieve an objective order" (Horkheimer). Because everything which is outside the Self is not the concern of Self which is always reflexive. Spleen and melancholy in Baudelaire form an allegorical and open union. Then there is no mercy, neither for nostalgia – not even for supernatural positivity. All is irrevocable, and hence the Absolute takes on a negative sign – whereas Michelangelo in the sixteenth century had assigned it one of cosmic positivity. Baudelaire even associates similar ideas (of negative signs) with Beethoven: "Beethoven began to stir up the worlds of melancholy and of incurable despair that had gathered like clouds in man's internal sky." [61] Again, the idea of irrevocability. Starobinski, too, describes spleen as an irrevocable state of inner malaise. [62] There is no escape, and thus we find the motif of exile in *The Swan* embodied in the stony ground of Paris and the hopeless despair stirred by the city's bleak transformation – Carrousel being its symbol. The tropes span a territory as immense as it is fragmentary. The ground upon which they rest is a vanishing urban terrain that is constantly crumbling and going to ruin. The span of the tropical significance is so vast that Starobinski indulges in play on the phonetic consonance between the words 'Cygne' and 'Signe'. [63]

Walter Benjamin challengingly posits a link between the idea of 'spleen' and Baudelaire's thoughts on time: "In spleen, time is reified (*verdinglich*): the minutes cover a man like snowflakes. This time is historyless, like that of the *mémoire involontaire*." [64] Clearly, then, for Baudelaire, spleen disrupts and posits itself as the opposite of time idealized, the *idéal*, blocking a smooth and direct

return to the past. Benjamin further adds: "*Der spleen bietet den Schwarm der Sekunden dagegen auf*" – "*Spleen rallies the multitude of the seconds against it.*" [65] For the melancholic, time is voided of future possibilities, and the past becomes a labyrinth of allegorical myths fed by isolation. Benjamin aptly speaks of "allegorical intuition", which was for him associated with things – commodities – that have lost their value: the allegorical impulse is awakened by a world that has been stripped of value. [66] According to Benjamin, experience of the aura (in Baudelaire) [67] arises from the fact that a response characteristic of human relationships is transposed to inanimate objects. [68] The true paradox of "allegorical intuition" is its propinquity to the German Romantic concept of the symbol, which assigns intuition an intransitive role. Ideas associated with words and images are not permitted to solidify as clear allusions: the Self is the limit. The same applies to the imagery in *The Swan*, precisely on account of its many discontinuities. Allegory engages in a game of hide-and-seek.

When grief strikes with an attendant intense longing to make the absent present again – by ushering it into the domain of melancholy, where such desire is extinguished [69] – the mechanisms of spleen go to work mercilessly: Experience of the 'now' is shot through with spleen – it becomes something perpetually lost and forever unattainable. The whole idea of 'presentness' is thus rendered inherently problematic. This alternating current of temporal experience adds its own richness to the many shades of irrevocability captured by *The Swan*.

### 3. Conclusion

For Baudelaire, spleen is associated with fragmentation, temporal discontinuity, and the contraries of time. In *The Swan*, this discontinuity expands the experience of place, infusing it with ancient associations. Each mythical entity that is anthropomorphized as a solid figure wanders the barren streets of Paris, the city's hollowness emblemized by the Carrousel, an empty pocket of Paris reduced to being a non-site during Baudelaire's era. It has often been observed that nature meant very little to Baudelaire. [70] In his poems, we instead often encounter the harsh, *chthonic* dimension, in this poem the empty courtyard, stripped bare of houses. Perhaps, in the end, it can be interpreted thus: Just as Benjamin envisages the "humming of the crowd" roaring in the background of every poem in *The Flowers of Evil*, so too the lost city itself can be imagined as hiding behind the stanzas of the poem, only occasionally summoned to the surface of the deserted city space by a pervasive sense of loss.

In this article I wanted to give some new light to *The Swan* (*Le Cygne*) and wanted to see the poem in the perspective of the urban topography of Paris in its dramatically changed situation after 1850s where the Place du Carrousel wins the central symbolic role in the fatal urban change with all its allegorical melancholy connotations.

---

## References

- [1] Baudelaire, C. *Correspondances I-II*; Texte établie, présenté et annoté par Claude Pichois avec collaboration de Jean Ziegler; Paris: Gallimard, 1973/1993, 623.
- [2] Starobinski, J. *La mélancolie au miroir*; Trois lectures de Baudelaire; Paris: Julliard, 1989, 20.
- [3] Benjamin, W. *Illuminationen*; *Ausgewählte Schriften 1*; Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977, 199.
- [4] Mercier, S. *Tableau de Paris I-II*; Amsterdam (unspecified publisher), 1782, ix.
- [5] Mercier, S. *Tableau de Paris I-II*; Amsterdam (unspecified publisher), 1782, V–VI.
- [6] See Kuusamo, A. *Allegoria, melankolia, raunio*; *Modernin melankolian dynamiikkaa*; *Synteesi* (35) 1–2, 2016, 103–118.
- [7] There has been a tendency to read Baudelaire's poems through the lenses of Walter Benjamin. An archetypal sample of the 'rubble and ruins' reading strategy is in Rosen, C. *Romantic Poets Critics and Other Madmen*; Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1998, 142–181.
- [8] Baudelaire, C. *The Flowers of Evil*; A new translation with the parallel French text. Translated by James McGowan; Oxford: Oxford University press, 1998, 174.
- [9] Starobinski, J. *La mélancolie au miroir*; Trois lectures de Baudelaire; Paris: Julliard, 1989, 16.
- [10] Baudelaire, C. *The Flowers of Evil*; A new translations with the parallel French text. Translated by James McGowan; Oxford University Press, 1998, 173.
- [11] Baudelaire, C. *The Flowers of Evil*. Translated by James McGowan; Oxford: Oxford University Press 1998, 174–175.
- [12] Gaillard, J. 1976. *Paris, la ville, 1852–1870: l'urbanisme parisien à l'heure d'Hausman* [n]: des provinciaux aux Parisiens: la vocation ou les vocations parisiennes; Lille: Université de Lille, 1976, 18. Horne, Alistair. *The Seven Ages of Paris*; London: MacMillan, 2002, 269.
- [13] Culler, J. Introduction. *Charles Baudelaire: The Flowers of Evil. A New Translation with parallel French Text*; Translated by James McGowan with an Introduction by J. Culler; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, xiii–liii; Starobinski, J. 1989. Starobinski, J. *L'encre de la mélancolie*; Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2012. Sjöbald, C. *Baudelairens landskap*; *Utan poesi aldrig!*. Baudelaire i nuet; Ed. C. Sjöbald; Stockholm: Carlssons, 2008, 194–226. Bundy, S. "Exile in modernity: The localized dislocation of Charles Baudelaire's *Le Cygne*." *English and Contemporary Literary Studies*, Spring 2009, 1–29.
- [14] Quarantini, F. Z. 'Andromaque' au Carrousel; *Une Lecture de la Cycne*; *Revue italienne d'études francaises*. (2) 2012, 1–24.
- [15] Benjamin, W. *Gesammelte Schriften I*; Ed. Rolf Tiedemann & Hermann Scwepenhäuser; Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974, 586.
- [16] Guichardet, J. *Balzac "archéologue" de Paris*; Paris: SEDES, 1986, 168.
- [17] Bombarde, O *Le mémoire et ses Chemins traverse*; Baudelaire et Nerval. *Poétiques compares*; Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 2015, 112–116. Sjöbald, C. 2008, 194–226.
- [18] Schaaf, L., J. *Doing the Django – and Finding Talbot's Calotype School in 1843 Paris*. <https://talbot.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/2018/05/18/doing-the-django-to-find-talbots-calotypeschool-in-1843-paris/>. (Accessed 18.11.2018, 2.12.2019).
- [19] Baudelaire, C. *Écrits sur l'art*; Paris: Libraire Générale Francaise, 1992, 305, 337.
- [20] Benjamin, W. *Gesammelte Schriften I*; Ed. Rolf Tiedemann & Hermann Scwepenhäuser; Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974, 591.
- [21] Focillon, H. *Maitres de l'estampe*; Paris: Flammarion. 1969, 173.
- [22] Starobinski, J. *L'encre de la mélancolie*; Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2012, 310.
- [23] Makarius, M. *Ruines. Représentations dans l'art de la Renaissance à nos jour*. Paris: Flammarion, 2011, 228–229, 310.
- [24] Starobinski, J. *La mélancolie au miroir*; Trois lectures de Baudelaire; Paris: Julliard, 1989, 68.
- [25] Graves, R. *The Greek Myths: 2*; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974, 296–297, 316.
- [26] Ovid. *Metamorphoses*; Translated by Mary Innes; New York: Penguin Books, XII, 72–145, XII, 145.
- [27] Baudelaire, C. *The Flowers of Evil*; A new translation. Translated by James McGowan; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, 174–175.
- [28] Starobinski, J. *La mélancolie au miroir*. Trois lectures de Baudelaire; Paris: Julliard, 1989, 48–49, 56.
- [29] Starobinski, J. *La mélancolie au miroir*; Trois lectures de Baudelaire; Paris: Julliard, 1989, 50.
- [30] Starobinski, J. *La mélancolie au miroir*; Trois lectures de Baudelaire; Paris: Julliard, 1989, 49.
- [31] Schück, H. *Yleinen kirjallisuuden historia 5*; *Ranskan klassismi*; Helsinki: WSOY, 1961, 312.
- [32] Starobinski, J. *La mélancolie au miroir*; Trois lectures de Baudelaire; Paris: Julliard, 1989, 70–71.
- [33] Kofman, S. *Melancolie de l'art*. Paris: Édition galilée, 1985, 17.
- [34] Sandström, D. *Andromaque, jag tanker på dig*; Baudelaire – det moderna livets betraktare; *Studier I ett författarskap*; Ed. C. Sjöbald & L. Leopold; Lund: Absalom, 1998, 114, 116–117.
- [35] Comay, R. *La Mélancolie et le fétichisme à l'ère de la mémoire de masse*. *Sur ma manière de travailler*; *Actes du colloque Art et Psychanalyse II*; Ed. Hervé Bouchereau & Chantal Pontbriand. Québec: Parachute, 2002, 25.
- [36] Chambers, R. *An Atmospherics of the City*; Baudelaire and the Poetics of Noise; New York: Fordham University Press, 2015, 78–79.
- [37] Cf. Starobinski J. *La mélancolie au miroir*; Trois lectures de Baudelaire; Paris: Julliard, 1989, 68–70.

- [38] Starobinski, J. *La mélancolie au miroir; Trois lectures de Baudelaire*; Paris: Julliard, 1989, 68.
- [39] Starobinski, J. *La mélancolie au miroir; Trois lectures de Baudelaire*; Paris: Julliard, 1989, 64. Starobinski: "Les destructions et reconstruction de l'urbanisme du milieu du siècle, avec leur mélange de monumentalité et de fonction répressive, sont-elles l'une des causes du spleen et du sentiment d'exil?"
- [40] Bonnefoy, Y. *Le siècle de Baudelaire*; Paris: Seuil, 2014, 45–46.
- [41] E. g. Kuusamo, A. *Modernin melankolian dynamiikka I: sivullisuus, päättämättömyys ja viipyily*; *Synteesi* (33) 3, 2014, 11–12.
- [42] Baudelaire, C. *The Flowers of Evil*; Translated by James McGowan, J.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, 186–187.
- [43] Starobinski, J. *La mélancolie au miroir; Trois lectures de Baudelaire*; Paris: Julliard, 1989, 56.
- [44] Starobinski, J. *La mélancolie au miroir; Toirs lectures de Baudelaire*; Paris: Julliard, 1989, 56-57.
- [45] Starobinski, J. *La mélancolie au miroir; Toirs lectures de Baudelaire*; Paris: Julliard, 1989, 75.
- [46] Chambers, R. *An Atmospherics of the City; Baudelaire and the Poetics of Noise*; New York: Fordham University Press, 78–82.
- [47] Benjamin, W. *Gesammelte Schriften I*; Ed. Rolf Tiedemann & Hermann Schweppenhäuser; Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974, 586-588.
- [48] Benjamin, W. *Illuminationen; Ausgewählte Schriften 1*; Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977, 180.
- [49] Tiedemann, R. *Studien zur Philosophie Walter Benjamins*; Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973, 122.
- [50] Starobinski, J. *L'encre de la mélancolie*; Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2012, 310–11.
- [51] Horkheimer, M. *Eclipse of Reason*; Oxford University Press, 1947, 38.
- [52] Holly, M. A. *The Melancholy Art*; New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013, 11–17.
- [53] Nylén, A. *Dandysmi, edistys ja kritiikin tila – jälkisanat; Charles Baudelaire: Modernin elämän maalari ja muita kirjoituksia*; Translation and commentary by A. Nylén; Helsinki: Desura, 2001, 348, footnote 6.
- [54] Nylén, A. *Dandysmi, edistys ja kritiikin tila; Baudelaire: Modernin elämän maalari ja muita kirjoituksia*; Translation and commentary by A. Nylén; Helsinki: Desura, 2001, 347.
- [55] Kuusamo, A. 2014, 10–12; cf. Vogl, J. *Über das Zaudern*; Zürich-Berlin: Diaphanes, 2007, 12–18.
- [56] Nylén, A. *Dandysmi, edistys ja kritiikin tila; Baudelaire: Modernin elämän maalari ja muita kirjoituksia*; Translation and commentary by A. Nylén; Helsinki: Desuram, 2001, 333.
- [57] Johannisson, K. *Melankoliska rum. Om ångest, leda och sårbarhet I förluten tid och nutid*. Stockholm: Bonnier pocket, 2010, 149–150. Cf. Starobinski 1989, 23–25; cf. Sartre, J-P. Baudelaire; Paris: Édition Gallimard, 1975, 143–144.
- [58] Praz, M. *The Romantic Agony*; Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1990, 29–30.
- [59] Starobinski 2012, 464. Starobinski derives his idea of melancholic disorder from Ludwig Binswanger's *Melancholie und Manie*, 1960 (see: Starobinski 2012, 462). Regarding beauty, Baudelaire himself has professed: 'La mélancolie, toujours inséparable du sentiment du beau' (Praz 1990, 30). Erich Auerbach points out that Baudelaire's *The Flowers of Evil* marked the end of 'ewige Seligkeit', being supplanted by *le Néant* and eclipsed by *Verderbnis des Sinnlichen* (Look: Auerbach, E. Baudelaire's 'Fleur du Mal' und das Erhabene. Baudelaire; Ed. Alfred Noyer-Weidler; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1976, 152–153.
- [60] Sandström, D. *Andromaque, jag tänker på dig; Baudelaire -det moderna livets betraktare. Studier I ett författarskap*. Ed. C. Sjöblad & L. Leopold; Lund: Absalom, 1998, 122.
- [61] Nylén, A. *Dandysmi, edistys ja kritiikin tila; Baudelaire: Modernin elämän maalari ja muita kirjoituksia*; Translation and commentary by A. Nylén; Helsinki: Deasura, 2001, 149.
- [62] Starobinski, J. *L'encre de la mélancolie*; Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2012, 315.
- [63] Starobinski, J. *La mélancolie au miroir; Trois de Baudelaire*; Paris: Julliard 1989, 73.
- [64] Benjamin, W. *Illuminationen; Ausgewählte Schriften 1*; Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977, 219.
- [65] Benjamin, W. *Illuminationen; Ausgewählte Schriften 1*; Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977, 218.
- [66] Benjamin, W. *Gesammelte Schriften I*; Ed. R. Tiedemann & H. Scwäppenhäuser; Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974, 1151.
- [67] Giorgio Agamben refers to Léon Daudet, who coined the concept of the aura in 1929, specifically in relation to Baudelaire (be it noted in a treatise called *La mélancolie*). Daudet described Baudelaire as a "poet of the aura" (Agamben G. *Stanze; La parola \*e il fantasma nella cultura occidentale*; Torino: Einaudi, 1993, 53). Benjamin sometimes, as if by accident, used the terms 'allegory' and 'melancholy' interchangeably. See Benjamin 1977, 249. In Benjamin's lexicon, allegory thus becomes an 'auratic' expression.
- [68] Benjamin, W. *Illuminationen; Ausgewählte Schriften 1*; Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977, 223.
- [69] Gustafsson, L. *Time, Pain and Loss; The Grey Hope; The persistence of melancholy*; Ed. Sandström, Sigrid & Atopia Projects. PROJECT 4.66, 2006, 58.
- [70] Leakey, F. W. *Baudelaire and Nature*; Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1969, 72, 79, 161–163; cf. Sartre, J-P. Baudelaire; Paris: Gallimard, 1975, 108–109.