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Adorno and Baudelaire *Nouveau, inconnu, Natur*

Abstract

This article investigates Theodor W. Adorno's engagement with Charles Baudelaire by focusing on three key concepts that structure their dialogue: the nouveau, the inconnu, and the Natur. Drawing on Adorno's published works, archival materials, and aesthetic lectures, the paper argues that Baudelaire occupies a paradigmatic position within Adorno's philosophy of modernity. Adorno reads Baudelaire's rejection of immediacy and his embrace of the unknown as expressions of a negative mimesis that transforms historical alienation into aesthetic truth. The nouveau, inseparable from danger, death, and indeterminacy, emerges as a cryptogram of modernity itself, while the inconnu designates the blind spot through which art gestures toward what does not yet exist. Ultimately, the article shows how Baudelaire's uncompromising negativity covertly sustains a form of negative utopia, in which nature, though denied, is preserved as a promise articulated through aesthetic form.

Keywords

New, Unknown, Nature

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Au fond de l'Inconnu pour trouver du nouveau!
(Baudelaire 2020: 173)

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explore a part of Adorno's reflection, articulated in dialogue with Baudelaire and the poet's works. In particular, the concepts of the *nouveau*, the *inconnu* and the *Natur*¹ will be considered to examine Adorno's relationship with Baudelaire and to highlight the role of the latter in Adorno's philosophy. Nevertheless, it is helpful to provide a general overview of the state of art of this relationship. In fact, Baudelaire's name appears in Adorno's youthful writings of the early 1930s, for example, in the book about *Kierkegaard* (Adorno 2003d); the poet is therefore at the centre of his important correspondence with Benjamin, and he is also mentioned in Adorno's text on Wagner. There are also a few sporadic references to Baudelaire in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Adorno 1973), while more substantial or elaborate references, so to speak, are already present in *Minima moralia* (Adorno 2005). Baudelairean quotations also abound in the writings on Alban Berg (Adorno 1991) – and in the epistolary exchange between Adorno and Berg –, in other musicological writings (for example, in that devoted to Mahler), in the volumes of *Notes to literature* (Adorno 2019), in the *Frankfurter Adorno Blätter* (Adorno 1992) and, above all, in *Aesthetic theory* (Adorno 2013). Notably, Baudelaire's name appears in this last text, which was published posthumously, a considerable number of times (31).

Baudelaire is also referenced in certain parts of the Adornian material preserved in the Adorno archives (Frankfurt-Berlin). For instance, he is mentioned in Adorno's lectures on aesthetics in the late 1960s. Finally, it is possible to consult in the archives many letters and other documents that mention Baudelaire and that can summarily be called 'paratextual'. Some of these concern Adorno's own teaching activities, for example, the *Gutachten* (Adorno Archiv *Gu*) he wrote to assess his master's and doctoral students who had written their dissertations or some papers on Baudelaire. As regards Adorno's correspondence, Baudelairean quotations can again be found over a long period – from youth (when Baudelaire's

¹ The French terms *nouveau* (new) and *inconnu* (unknown) refer to Baudelaire's poetry, while the choice of the German term *Natur* (nature) alludes to Adorno's reflections on this important concept.

name is often associated with Benjamin's) to maturity – and intensified in the late 1960s, often still in connection with editorial issues concerning Benjamin's work, which Adorno edited and published together with his student Rolf Tiedemann.

I would like to add just a few more words about the Baudelaire texts taken into account by Adorno and the – very few – critical studies that have 'dealt' with the Adorno-Baudelaire nexus.

Adorno claims to have learned "The Whole of Baudelaire" (Adorno Archiv 2003: 15) at thirteen, a reading with which his aunt familiarised him. The philosopher refers to several poems in *Les fleurs du mal* (Baudelaire 2020), particularly the section *Les tableaux parisiens*. He also mentions *Les spleen de Paris* (Baudelaire 2017), *Les paradis artificiels* (Baudelaire 2021) and Baudelaire's criticism of art: from his writings on Delacroix to, in particular, *Le peintre de la vie moderne* (Baudelaire 2023), the writing dedicated to Constantin Guys (an exhibition on which Adorno had also attended in his youth during a stay in Paris).

On the other hand, as far as the 'secondary' sources from which Adorno studied Baudelaire, in addition to, of course, Walter Benjamin, who, as mentioned above, certainly played a pivotal role in establishing Baudelaire as a key figure of modernity, another source that certainly led Adorno to Baudelaire is the German translation of Stefan George's *The flowers of evil* (*Die Blumen des Bösen*; Baudelaire 2019).

Adorno also gives evidence of his familiarity with the Baudelaire studies of Pierre Jean Jouve (Jouve 2006), those of Hofmannsthal-Claudel (Hofmannsthal 1985), the psychiatrist René Laforgue (Laforgue 1931) – via Benjamin – and those of Jean Starobinski (Starobinski 1961, 1967) and Jean-Paul Sartre (Sartre 1947), intellectuals whom Adorno knew personally.

As far as the critical literature on Adorno and Baudelaire is concerned, there is no doubt that this literature, when taken individually, consists of an enormous amount of material. However, when it comes specifically to the connection between Adorno's philosophy and Baudelaire's work, the material is rather limited. If already a *sui generis* figure such as Roberto Calasso in his *La Folie Baudelaire* (Calasso 2008) has argued that Adorno, with *Minima moralia*, had taken over the Baudelairean *promesse de bonheur* (formerly Stendhal's), for the more markedly Baudelairean criticism it is possible to cite the name of Antoine Compagnon, who in his essay *Les cinq paradoxes de la modernité* (Compagnon 1990) at least points to this connection. Instead, among Adornian scholars I would evoke, at least, Robert Kaufman, who has suggested that the counter-tradition of moder-

nity, inaugurated by Baudelaire, significantly innervates Adorno's (and Benjamin's) philosophical aesthetics (Huhn 2004).

The two critics, Kaufman and Compagnon, were thus able to make the same observation, although each from a different perspective: it is Baudelaire who originates the "counter-field" of modernity because he was able to carry out with his person and his art the arduous "dialectical" enterprise of introducing to the modern world and at the same time opposing it. Baudelaire, like Celan later, according to Adorno, was indeed capable of producing poetry out of the ashes of poetry. In sum: while Kaufman and Compagnon argued that, for Adorno, Baudelaire was the modern poet *par excellence*, capable of modernizing poetry itself (and dare I say it, all art), neither critic then explored the wide and substantial range of points of contact between Adorno's philosophy with the work and figure of the poet of the *Fleurs du mal*. Consequently, these happy insights have yet to be developed.

Finally, to conclude this introductory section, it is important to mention the work on Adorno and Baudelaire by another American scholar, Joseph Acquisto, who published an article on Adorno, Baudelaire, and dissonance (Acquisto 2022), taking up and developing this same theme in his book *Reading Baudelaire with Adorno* (Acquisto 2023), recently published by Bloomsbury. But Acquisto did not set out to examine Baudelaire's presence within Adorno's work; instead, one could say that he moved in the opposite direction to the one I propose to take, since he tended to read Baudelaire's work using Adornian critical tools.

1. *Natur*

To enter into the merits of the discourse, centred on the concepts of the *nouveau*, the *inconnu* and the *Natur*, I would start with an observation by Adorno on Baudelaire found in the *Gutachten* (Adorno Archiv *Gu*)², mentioned above among the archival materials.

In one of them it is stated that the real (*das Wirkliche*) enters Baudelaire's art as something dialectically negated (*dialektisch Negiertes*) and, more precisely, as something desired and therefore "de-realized [*Entwirklichtes*]" (Adorno Archiv *Gu*: 009).

² *Gu* refers to the *Gutachten*, preserved in the Adorno Archiv in Frankfurt am Main and available in digital reproduction at the Walter Benjamin Archiv of the Akademie der Künste in Berlin.

Apart from the fact that the real is recorded by Baudelaire's work as something that is subtracted, absent, and precisely for that reason desired, another consideration is singularly striking, according to which Baudelaire's very truth should be sought in his persistent act of negation of all that is simply natural. Put differently, Baudelaire's truth would be found in his famous condemnation of nature, which is, according to the poet, morally degraded, low, and vile; and the poet does not fail to affirm that man is all the more virtuous the more he distances himself from nature (see Baudelaire 2023: 541-4). Rather, in the denial of the natural element lies, according to Adorno, "the disguised utopia of a world no longer deformed by commerce [*die verkappte Utopie einer nicht länger vom Kommerz deformierten Welt*]" (Adorno Archiv Gu: 009).

Several passages in *Aesthetic theory* could be juxtaposed with these remarks by Adorno, which would be very useful in explaining their meaning (Adorno 2013: 30, 44, 182-3). Nevertheless, it is enough to remember that an immediate reaction to nature such as the instinctive and aggressive reaction advocated theoretically by Baudelaire would be philosophically false in Adorno's eyes, precisely because it is "immediate". On the contrary, according to Adornian philosophy, Baudelaire's moment of truth would reside specifically in the fact that a critique of nature is equivalent to a critique of the immediate.

Adorno therefore certainly agreed with the critique of the immediate implicit in Baudelaire's attack on nature, but, unlike Baudelaire, according to his philosophy, nature is to be criticised through mediation and not immediately. In other words, it would be a mistake to oppose an immediate critique to the immediate. In such an interpretation, one would find an attitude typical of Adorno, who used to read in artists or authors the moments of a historical-dialectical process that went beyond them.

To adequately grasp Adorno's assertion about the kind of historical-philosophical truth present in Baudelaire's theoretical and poetic work, I would like to refer to some passages from the televised debate on Samuel Beckett in which Adorno participated in 1968. In addition to the significant statement that in Beckett "the whole of Baudelaire is still contained in him as a preserved one" (Adorno 1992: 95), during the discussion Adorno developed an interesting distinction about solipsism, distinguishing the truly "philosophical [*philosophische*]" one from the "lyrical [*dichterische*]" one (Adorno 1992: 109). The former referred to Max Stirner's philosophy and its presumption of positing the self as the "starting point [*Ausgangspunkt*]" (Adorno 1992: 108). This position, Adorno reminds us, had thus been harshly criticised by Marx, as well as already implicitly refuted by

Hegel's thesis that the "I is but an intermediary" and not an "ultimate principle" (*ibid.*).

Literary solipsism, on the other hand, "is something completely different from philosophical solipsism" (Adorno 1992: 109) and, with it, one must

accept the idea that [...] the point of view of radical alienation has been taken up by art here. Art does not believe that it can transcend alienation through identification with the world, thus jumping the ditch with both feet, but can only express it, and, if you will, deny it, by making it its own. This too – the appropriation of negativity – is also a position that can be traced back to Hegel's philosophy and corresponds literally and directly to Baudelaire. [...] This is exactly what Baudelaire expresses. [...] It is precisely because the poet does not allow himself to be involved in anything other than his experience and the experience to which he is necessarily thrown back, that he is able to become unknowingly the historiographer of his own time. For this reason he expresses mimetically, imitating it, a general condition which, in a certain way, transcends him. But he would never claim that it is only his self that exists, limiting himself on the contrary to saying, 'I am so alienated that I cannot speak otherwise than I do; and yet I am bound to do so'. The hope that underlies all this is basically [...] that this solitary voice, because it is in truth the unconscious voice of all, will somehow come to jump the ditch that separates it from other men. (Adorno 1992: 109)

To return to Baudelaire's persistent negation of nature, it can be said that it corresponds, in Adorno's view, to the paradoxical result of a historical process of alienation, so extreme that it objectifies itself in the subdued stance of the artist and more specifically of his poetic work. Elsewhere in his work, however, Adorno had not failed to recognise the "Baudelairean will to objectify irrational subliminal enervation in a work of art through the rational energy of the ego" (Adorno 1991: 114). Baudelaire's poetry thus seems capable of deliberately conveying the unintentional and, through form, an experiential immediacy that cannot otherwise be expressed. Here we have a paradoxical immediacy that is nevertheless usable through the infinite mediations of which it is the result. In other words, what is true in Baudelaire's work and to some extent transcends the mere "individual" Baudelaire is also what simultaneously inscribes his work in the objectivity of the spirit. This is the historical processuality of a commodified world for which art finds itself in the paradoxical position of having to resist it by surrendering to it through mimesis. As an example of this dynamic, Adorno cites Baudelaire as no less than his theoretical model: "According to Baudelaire's concept the artist must at once embrace that

world [the extra-aesthetic and social reality] and defend his autonomy" (*ibid.*).

With regard to this particular task, in *Aesthetic theory*, Adorno explicitly states that "direct protest that did not surrender to its opponent would in art be reactionary: this is why in Baudelaire the imago of nature is strictly taboo" (Adorno 2013: 30). This passage gains even more prominence if one compares it with another observation from the same text, according to which the fact "that one should make no image, which means no image of anything whatsoever, expresses at the same time that it is impossible to make such an image" (Adorno 2013: 93). In essence, the point is that in Baudelaire's age there is no more nature, just as there are no more images, and the poet's work only mercilessly records this fact. Although he is referring specifically to the *Old Testament* prohibition of images in the last sentence quoted, of which he discusses the aesthetic rather than theological aspect, this same prohibition also sheds light on Baudelaire's attitude to nature. According to Baudelaire, not only "nature does not exist in the eyes of most of his contemporaries, particularly businessmen" (Adorno 1991: 116), but, above all, the "Baudelaire's revolt of literature against nature as a social preserve does not spare thought" (Adorno 2019: 44). Adorno's reflections articulate the theoretical implications of Baudelaire's stance towards nature. In modernity, nature can no longer be depicted as something immediate or self-evident; the historical rupture has rendered such depictions obsolete. Instead, nature should be seen in the form in which it has already been subsumed – neutralized, domesticated – by bourgeois society. It is this pacified, instrumentalised version of nature that demands an aesthetic (and theoretical) assault. Indeed, according to Baudelaire, businesspeople, the agents of commodification, are blind to nature understood as otherness (or, as Adorno put it, "non-identity"). Consequently, one might argue that aggression itself becomes the means by which genuine mimesis of society is achieved: the aesthetic negation of nature simultaneously recalls its social negation. Hence, any claim to immediate access to nature is misguided, if not naïve. As Baudelaire suggests in the emblematic poem *Perte d'auréole* (1975: 11), only a foolish poet would have been able to pick his halo out of the street's mud to adorn his head with it.

The awareness of the destruction of nature in modernity is also what, in Adorno's view, elevates Baudelaire above Heine with regard to the impossibility of the image in the modern world, but with a fundamental difference that distinguishes Baudelaire's art and allows us to continue the present discussion. Compared to Heine, Baudelaire "heroically wrests

dream and image from modernity itself, from the experience of implacable destruction and dissolution, which by then was further advanced; indeed he transfigures the loss of all images, transforming that loss itself into an image” (Adorno 2019: 98). To claim that Baudelaire can transform the “loss of all images into an image” highlights the paradoxical and seemingly impossible task of art in an indifferent world, if not openly hostile to it. Baudelaire extracts poetry from the ashes of poetry, he finds an extreme possibility for art precisely in its impossibility: in this movement, he discovers the *Nouveau*.

2. *Nouveau*

Adorno elaborates the concept of the *nouveau*, constantly referencing Baudelaire. This concept is one of the most eminent categories of modernity. According to Adorno, the loss of nature corresponds to the becoming abstract of the world (Adorno 2005: 235), or modernity. The inevitability of modernity arguably constitutes a foundational premise of Adorno’s philosophy. In its most condensed form, the abstraction afflicting the modern condition is nothing other than the consequence of the unchecked development of the productive forces and the resulting dominance of the commodity form that results from this. Abstraction, closely bound up with indeterminacy, renders modernity in art legible from the outset as a system of negations rather than a “positive slogan” (Adorno 2013: 30). Adorno insists that what is absent in modernity is nothing less than “tradition itself” (Adorno 2013: 29). This event causes a real crisis of aesthetic normativity and, in such a vacuum, allowing the new to emerge as the ultimate authority on the artistic legitimacy.

More specifically, Adorno refers to the new in relation to Baudelaire throughout his work, demonstrating a consistent development of this theme. Noteworthy among these are the aphorism *Extrablatt* (*Late extra*) in *Minima moralia*, and several passages in *Notes to literature* (where such references are frequent, e.g. in one of the essays dedicated to Valéry, *Valéry’s deviations*), the writings on Alban Berg as well as the *Aesthetics lectures 1967-68* (Adorno 1973) and *Aesthetic theory*.

It is worth noting that Adorno almost always invokes the concept of the new through an allusion to the final two quatrains of Baudelaire’s poem *Le voyage*

Ô Mort, vieux capitaine, il est temps! levons l’ancre!

Ce pays nous ennuie, ô Mort! Appareillons
Si le ciel et la mer sont noirs comme de l'encre,
Nos cœurs que tu connais sont remplis de rayons!

Verse-nous ton poison pour qu'il nous réconforte!
Nous voulons, tant ce feu nous brûle le cerveau,
Plonger au fond du gouffre, Enfer ou Ciel, qu'importe?
Au fond de l'Inconnu pour trouver du nouveau! (Baudelaire 2020: 173)³

In his reflections Adorno often emphasises the fact that “the new is akin to death” (Adorno 2013: 30) and is a harbinger of misfortune. He even links his idea to Baudelaire’s Satanism⁴, interpreting it as an identification with the negativity of reality. Furthermore, in the aforementioned aphorism from *Minima moralia*, Adorno observes that through Baudelaire’s *nouveau*, the subject entrusts itself to an unknown threat which nonetheless “promises joy”⁵ (Adorno 2005: 235). In this sense, novelty becomes a “formula through which a stimulus is extracted from dread and despair” (*ibid.*), which – as Adorno elegantly references in Baudelaire’s work – “makes evil flower” (*ibid.*). The simple yet potent metaphor of the flower, captures both the satisfaction of the desire for novelty, as well as the ambivalence embedded within it. The fact that it is a *fleur du mal* signals not only the compromised nature of this satisfaction, which is bound to a condition of need, but also the deeper truth that novelty is rooted in evil and can only be drawn from it. Adorno characterises the new as the “exoteric” face of sensation (Adorno 2005: 236), and emphasises the progressive indifference attached to the stimulus value of novelty as such, regardless of its content. He writes that novelty turns into a “comet-like, remote, ultimate newness. It overwhelms a public writhing under shock [...]. Compared to its stimulus-value, the content of the shock becomes really irrelevant, as it was ideally in its invocation by poets; it is even possible that the horror savoured by Poe and Baudelaire, when realized by dictators, loses its quality as sensation, burns out” (Adorno 2005: 237). This

³ A comparison with *Aesthetic theory* is interesting, because Adorno, in a passage in which he also quotes Baudelaire but without explicitly referring to him, speaks of the importance of that “admixture of poison, virtually the negation of life” (Adorno 2013: 182), without which art’s protest “to civilizational repression would amount to nothing more than impotent comfort” (*ibid.*). Here, too, reference is made to this *poison* (the “poison” in the lines of Baudelaire’s poem), which is essential to modern art.

⁴ See Adorno 2005: 236: “The discovery of the new is satanic, an eternal recurrence of damnation”.

⁵ See Adorno’s comment on these same verses in his lecture of 4 January 1968 (Adorno 1973: 50-1).

indifference to the actual content, as long as it is something new, which in Baudelaire (and in Poe) remains confined to the realm of the idea, is starkly expressed in the oft-cited lines (“Enfer ou ciel, qu’importe? | Au fond de l’Inconnu pour trouver du nouveau!”; Baudelaire 2020: 173). Yet, according to Adorno, what remains an aesthetic gesture in their work would later have aggravating consequences on the level of reality. Adorno establishes a philosophical link (perhaps too boldly) between the mad euphoria he observes in Baudelaire’s poem on the “martyr of sex” (Adorno 2005: 237) and the “victims of Hitler’s régime”. In their lust for the new, they “buy, in paralysed greed, the newspapers in which stood the measures announcing their own doom” (*ibid.*). On the basis that “everything can, as the new, divested of itself, become pleasure” (*ibid.*) and to illustrate the slavery imposed by the new as sensation, Adorno even cites the example of “morphine addicts” who, “finally grab indiscriminately at any drug, including atropine” (*ibid.*). The demand for the new becomes “indifferent to his kind [*gleichgültig gegen seine Art*]” (Adorno 2003e: 272), and such a lack of quality in the demand for the new pushes art towards a reification that debases it and ultimately “disarticulates” it.

3. *Inconnu*

The new is not reducible to its dark tones, however present and undeniable (ultimately linked to mercification), because it has a fundamental “indeterminate character [*unbestimmte Charakter*]” (Adorno Archiv Vo: 11204, 7)⁶, indeed an “unknown” (Baudelaire’s *inconnu*), which constitutes its profound nature.

In his late 1960s lectures on aesthetics, as well as in the materials of *Aesthetic theory* (and in *Aesthetic theory* itself), Adorno acknowledges the extreme difficulty of describing this particular category of modernity⁷, the new. He explains that it is easier to acquire a negative knowledge of it, of which he therefore discusses in various ways.

⁶ Vo stands for *Vorlesungen* (lectures) kept in Adorno’s archive.

⁷ “This specific sense of modernity is extraordinarily difficult to *grasp*, because the term itself initially has something negative about it, one could say something abstract. It is extremely difficult to say *positively* what modernity is in a *specific*, qualitative sense; one can only say what it is not” (Adorno 1973: 59). The italics are the author’s, the word in question was added since listening to the recording of the 9 January 1968 lecture (Adorno Archive TA: 259, II; TA refers to *Tonaufnahmen*, “recordings”, preserved in Adorno’s archives).

Insofar as it is unknown, the new is opposed to the known, and therefore above all to tradition, which, as already mentioned, is rejected outright. At the same time, regarding its ephemeral and transitory nature, Adorno illustrates its impact on works of art. When he states that “the sudden appearance of a new quality, the dialectical reversal, is virtually a non-entity [*so gut wie ein Nichts ist*]” (Adorno 2013: 365; see Adorno 2003a: 402), he highlights an inherent tension in artistic production: the duration of the work of art itself is affected by the pursuit of novelty and is therefore reduced to the bare minimum. Furthermore, the constitutive indeterminacy of the new, which is described by the metaphor of the “blind spot [*blinder Fleck*]” (Adorno 2013: 29; Adorno 2003a: 38)⁸ and which, as Adorno points out, can already be found in Baudelaire, is not only explicitly named by the poet but is even “made thematic [*thematisch gemacht wird*]” (Adorno Archiv Vo: 11205, 8)⁹, to the point of setting the course for the concept of modernity.

The philosopher noted that for “exactly one hundred years, since the death of Baudelaire [*genau hundert Jahren, seit dem Tode von Baudelaire*]” (Vo 11206, 9) nothing changed with regard to the paradox of “art in a rational world” (*ibid.*)¹⁰. In the absence of any significant change that would affect reality profoundly, the condition of art in Adorno’s own time remained essentially the same as in Baudelaire’s time. The question remains whether, today, sixty years later, things are really different. Nevertheless, what must be emphasised is that in modernity, where all normativity is lost and tradition tends to be forbidden, the new asserts itself as such, regardless of any intrinsic quality of content. The imperative of the *nouveau* becomes normative, and Adorno never missed an opportunity to observe the disturbing “constancy [*Konstanz*]” (Adorno 1973: 61) of this tendency.

⁸ In *Late extra* Adorno speaks literally of a “blank place in consciousness [*Leerstelle des Bewusstseins*]” (Adorno 2005: 235; Adorno 2003e: 269). In the analogous passages of the *Vorlesungen* as well as in *Aesthetic theory* one finds instead “Blinder Fleck” (Adorno 1973: 60; Adorno 2003a: 38).

⁹ Adorno even talks about the fact that “what this concept of modernity rejects has become a musty provincialism, as if this slogan, this verdict pronounced by Baudelaire and Rimbaud, actually had some kind of objective binding force” (Adorno Archiv Vo: 11203-4, 11206-7).

¹⁰ For the italics, see Adorno 1973: 61. We have opted for “zweckrationalen Welt” found in the *Vorlesungen* instead of the “zweckhaft banalen (?) Welt” suggested by the archive transcription, because of listening to the recording of the lecture (Adorno Archive TA: 259, II).

In short, once it is established that “the authority of the new is that of the historically inevitable” (Adorno 2013: 30) – that it asserts itself directly and, one might even say, with a certain brutality – its association with the unknown in Baudelaire’s poetry becomes, for Adorno, a cryptogram of modernity itself (Adorno 2013: 31; Adorno 2005: 235). The philosopher explains that modernity finds itself in the aporetic situation of being on the one hand incapable of saying “what has yet to be” (Adorno 2013: 31), of affirming something new. At the same time, however, it is compelled to “seek it, protesting against the ignominy of the ever-same” (*ibid.*)¹¹ imposed by the commodification of the world. Therefore, for Adorno, it is impossible to suspend the inexorable advance of the new, despite its “pernicious social characteristics” (Adorno 2013: 366). Nevertheless, this advance is marked by an ephemeral duration that weakens its quality and ultimately undermines its very authority.

It is precisely on the basis of such considerations that the philosopher, in the preparatory materials to *Aesthetic theory*, explicitly rejects the thesis advanced by Baudelaire in *Le peintre de la vie moderne*, namely, that modern art is defined by a synthesis of the fleeting transience of the transient – that is, the new – and the eternal element inherent in beauty. In response to this assertion, Adorno asserts that works of art do not “weld together [...] the permanent [*Bleibendes*] and the modern” (Adorno Archiv Ts: 19189)¹² and he brands Baudelaire’s thesis as anachronism (also implicating Paul Valéry, “guilty” of maintaining this position).

This last consideration would seem to indicate that, for Adorno, modernity not only coincides in every respect with the ephemeral, but that he maintains a certain critical distance from Baudelaire, at least theoretically. However, it should also be recalled that in one of his writings on Alban Berg, the same Baudelairean assumption is defined with greater nuance: if, according to Baudelaire, modernity as *transitoire*, *fugitif* and *contingent* is indeed only one half of art, the other half – its *côté éternel* – is, for Adorno, “classically conceived objectification” (Adorno 1991: 120). In

¹¹ “The new, sought for its own sake, a kind of laboratory product, petrified into a conceptual scheme, becomes in its sudden apparition a compulsive return of the old, not unlike that in traumatic neuroses. To the dazzled vision the veil of temporal succession is rent to reveal the archetypes of perpetual sameness: this is why the discovery of the new is satanic, an eternal recurrence of damnation” (Adorno 2005: 236).

¹² Ts stands for *Typoskripte* in the Adorno Archiv.

other words, it would merely be a kind of transfiguration of the world of merchandise¹³.

Furthermore, Adorno's accusation of anachronism could be mitigated if we recall the concluding lines of aphorism 141 of *Minima moralia*, significantly entitled *La nuance, encor* (of Verlainian memory; Adorno 2005: 219). In this text, Adorno himself wrote:

But those in fear of falling in spite of everything behind the *Zeitgeist*, of being cast on the refuse-heap of discarded subjectivity, should be reminded that arriviste timeliness and progressive content are no longer the same. In an order which liquidates the modern as backward, this backwardness, once condemned, can be invested with the truth over which the historical process obviously rolls. Because no other truth can be expressed than that which is able to fill the subject, anachronism becomes the refuge of modernity. (Adorno 2005: 221)

Adorno's concept of modernity encapsulates all the paradoxes of an era that rejects tradition yet, paradoxically, asserts a historical dimension precisely through the emergence of the new. However, every passing moment in this era becomes anachronistic according to its own concept, and above all because of the relentless demand for novelty. The new reveals an intrinsically antinomian character, condemning it to the eternal repetition of the same at the very moment when it seems to offer an escape from the situation that has been configured under its dynamic. In this respect, the new is "the slogan to aspire to [*die Parole, der zuzustreben ist*]" (Adorno Archiv Vo: 11201, 11204), which is why, for Adorno, "the only art that can be seriously considered is that which contains the binding category of the new, or at least that which conveys the tension towards it" (Adorno Archiv Vo: 11202-3, 11205-6).

In her work *Theorie des Neuen*, Sylvia Zirden has also explored these aspects of Adorno's reflections. She observed that, with Baudelaire, the demand for the new in art becomes objective not because the poet seeks it positively, but because he allows himself to be guided by his *dégoût*, which "could become objective [...] through mimesis, precisely towards the negated [*das Negierte*]" (Zirden 2005: 162). According to Zirden, it is through "negative mimesis [*negative Mimesis*]" and "not with the intention of creating something new" that "art necessarily produces something new [*bringt Kunst notwendig Neues hervor*]" (*ibid.*). The scholar thus highlights a crucial point: "For Baudelaire, the new, even if it is theoretically

¹³ Adorno leaves no doubt on this: "For Baudelaire, modernity in its tangible sense is the world of commodities" (Adorno 1991: 114).

demanded in a positive way, arises less from this demand than from the rejection of the existing. Thus, according to Adorno, his search for the new is also an expression of his ‘disgust for stagnant’, of ‘*dégoût*’, of suffering from the same old thing [*des Leidens am Immergleichen*]” (*ibid.*)¹⁴.

According to Zirden (and, of course, Adorno himself), the issue is not about restricting oneself to the merely enunciative level (such as the poet’s explicit theoretical statements), but rather about identifying in Baudelaire the residual trace of an attitude, the hidden outcome of experience. The distinction is decisive: the *nouveau* is not the product of a deliberate intention, but rather the effect of a disposition. Even if Adorno’s Baudelaire navigates the paradoxical will to make that which is outside the will itself speak.

Zirden’s clever observations also highlight the significance of Baudelaire’s *dégoût* in an era devoid of norms, where novelty and the pursuit of it appear to play the phantom role of an emptied canon. Baudelaire’s *dégoût* itself becomes an unexpected slippery slope or a “negative canon”. Disgust, which belongs, so to speak, more to the corporeal and dense sphere of gesture than to the discreet sphere of theory, and this is that unites art and fashion, as well. As Adorno notes, both (art and fashion) share a “disgust for the musty and stagnant” (Adorno 2013: 261) and converge “in [their] instinct for the historical moment and in [their] aversion to provincialism and the subaltern” (Adorno 2013: 262). Finally, the fact that for Baudelaire the *nouveau* emerges not from a desire to be new, nor from any deliberate intention, but rather as a “consequence from his mimetic appropriation of reality [*Folge aus seiner mimetischen Aneignung der Realität*]” (Zirden 2005: 162), that is, from his experiential adherence to the epochal changes of his time, corresponds to what Adorno said about him in the televised debate on Beckett. In particular, one thinks of what was said about the poet who, even (especially?) in his immediate reactions – that is, when he is at his most spontaneous (or supposes he is) – can unconsciously become the “historiographer of his own time” (Adorno 1992: 109). This notion is implicitly reaffirmed in the posthumous *Aesthetic theory*, where Adorno observes that “in the new the knot is tied aesthetically between individual and society” (Adorno 2013: 30).

¹⁴ The passages quoted within Zirden’s extract refer to *Aesthetic theory* (Adorno 2003a: 286, 333; Adorno 2013: 262, 304).

Conclusions

In conclusion, I would like to bring this brief journey full circle, in order to respect the progression I initially proposed – from *nouveau*, to the *inconnu*, to *Natur*. Although according to Adorno all of Baudelaire's truth is contained in the negation of nature, it is nevertheless nature itself that is given voice through the poet's works through "dissonance" (Adorno 2009: 56-72)¹⁵. Indeed, Adorno himself explained that every dissonance – if the term is understood broadly – is a reminder of the suffering inflicted on nature by domination, and thus a means of giving nature a voice. At the same time, the very *nouveauté* that, in Adorno's view, links Baudelaire's "artistic experience with childhood" (Adorno 1991: 114) is itself bound to memory, acting as an "eminently aesthetic conjunction of involuntary remembrance and conscious command" (*ibid.*).

It is therefore worth quoting some further excerpts from the section of *Aesthetic theory* devoted to *Naturschöne*, as this resonates closely with the arguments developed thus far. The first reads: "Art does not imitate nature, not even individual instances of natural beauty, but natural beauty as such" (Adorno 2013: 99). This statement encapsulates aesthetics as a whole, particularly the negativity of its object. Adorno defines this negativity as "what is indeterminable in things" (*ibid.*) in a felicitous quotation from Paul Valéry. Another significant passage reinforces this point: "The being-in-itself to which artworks are devoted is not the imitation of something real but rather the anticipation of a being-in-itself that does not yet exist, of an unknown that, by way of the subject, is self-determining" (Adorno 2013: 106).

The association of these two extracts with what has been said in relation to the new, the unknown and nature should by now be clear. Once it has been established, in fact, that the new and, more precisely, its indeterminate character (the *inconnu*) are immanently conveyed through artistic imitation, the latter, by imitating "das Ansichsein", indeed imitates that which is yet "to come". In this way, art not only acquires an anticipatory dimension, but more crucially, it articulates the indeterminable as such: it lends voice to the negative.

¹⁵ The term "dissonance" cannot be duly developed here: its scope is indeed considerable, not only when referring to the two authors taken individually, but also for those wishing to deal specifically with Adorno's relationship with Baudelaire, for which we refer in particular to the works of J. Acquisto (2022, 2023).

In this respect, it is useful to refer to the interpretation of the sonnet *Correspondances* (Baudelaire 2020: 37), proposed by Dolf Oehler, an important Baudelaire scholar and student of Adorno, because he seems to refer to Adorno's theory of nature in his analysis:

The nature of the *Correspondances* is not a *fait accompli* to which one must adapt oneself, but an ideal, a harmony between the material and the spiritual that has yet to be established in a creative act. The sonnet of the *Correspondances*, fundamental to Baudelaire's poetics, cannot be understood otherwise than as an affirmation of this utopian nature, which can only be realised through the work of the poetic imagination, and thus at the same time as a negation of 'simple nature'. (Oehler 1979: 183)

Not only does Oehler appear to have used Adorno's philosophy to interpret Baudelaire in an unprecedented way, but he also associates the immanence of unrealised nature with (negative) utopia, understood as a negation of the idea of bourgeois nature. This is also the hidden meaning of much more recent interpretations of the sonnet in question. Following Wollheim (and Adorno), Giovanni Matteucci reads Baudelaire's poem as a "meta-aesthetic composition" (Matteucci 2019: 211), which aims to render the manifest character of experience without determining it "judicially or sentimentally" (*ibid.*):

The [Baudelairean] living pillars, to which the vegetal stems of nature are immediately assimilated in an aesthetic collapse of perception and feeling, have to evoke in themselves, according to Wollheim's formula, an allusive-collusive correspondence, so much so that they turn towards the participants in the game a face that makes the gesture of saying. But they say nothing, or at least what they say does not count: they are confused sounds and synaesthetic, expectant complexes, "In a deep and tenebrous unity", whose effectiveness is felt, if at all, as a dense emotional complex for the intransitively particular nuances of olfactory, chromatic and musical emergencies integrated with one another. (Matteucci 2019: 212)

Moreover, this is the sense in which Matteucci reads Baudelaire's *promesse du bonheur*: "If it were translated into an accomplished and ascertainable efficacy, its constituent energy would be dissipated" (Matteucci 2019: 202).

Finally, in yet another passage with a distinctly Baudelairean flavour from *Aesthetic theory*, we find the following observation: "A cryptogram of the new is the image of collapse [*des Untergangs*]; only by virtue of the

absolute negativity of collapse does art enunciate the unspeakable: utopia” (Adorno 2013: 45)¹⁶.

To grasp the full significance of Adorno’s remarks on Baudelaire and nature, it is important to emphasise that it is not so much Baudelaire’s work in general that matters, but rather his relentless negation. According to Adorno, this ultimately came to represent “the disguised utopia of a world no longer deformed by commerce” (Adorno Archiv *Gu*: 009). In another preparatory note for one of his lectures on aesthetics, the philosopher also linked Baudelaire’s *nouveau* to negative utopia: “He describes the new theoretically as *le nouveau qu’il soit enfer ou ciel*. [...] One could say that the new in Baudelaire is utopia in the guise of negativity” (Adorno Archiv *Vo*: 11275).

Ultimately, Baudelaire’s unreserved negation of nature instead secretly transports it into the knot that aesthetically binds it to the new and unknown, transforming negation into a mute utopia.

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¹⁶ See the comparison Baudelaire makes between the Dandy and the “soleil couchant” in *Le peintre de la vie moderne* (Baudelaire 2023: 536). That this passage is Baudelaire-inspired is also thought because in the essay *Valéry’s Abweichungen* Adorno defines the “sunset [*Sonnenuntergang*]” as “a Baudelairean allegory” (Adorno 2019: 165).

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