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## Artistic Parrhesia and the Genealogy of Ethics in Foucault and Benjamin

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‘Our lives, whether we know it or not and whether we relish the news or bewail it, are works of art. To live our lives as the art of life demands, we must, just like the artists of any art, set ourselves challenges which are ... well beyond our reach, and standards of excellence that vexingly seem to stay stubbornly far above our ability ... We need to *attempt the impossible*’ (Bauman, 2008:20). In these words Zygmunt Bauman captures something of the anxiety and ambiguity of the experience of the contemporary self – the way in which the neoliberal subject has become trapped by her own dreams of freedom, self-invention, and rejection of fixed identities. Via neo-liberal techniques of government, the opportunity to stylize new arts of living, following the decline in transcendent authority and universal moral codes, has been seized for the production of entrepreneurial selves, forms of ‘human capital’ who are responsible for managing and reinventing themselves in order to compete more effectively in the market (Lazzarato, 2009). Disoriented by a creeping recognition that the source of her domination is her own freedoms, making her at once master and slave of herself, the neoliberal subject is left grasping at the impossible, still intoxicated by the possibility of stylizing her life as a work of art, but increasingly fearful of the consequences of failing to do so in line with the demands of the market.

As Michel Foucault made clear in his lectures on the genealogy of neoliberalism, he was acutely aware of this emerging experience of the self (Foucault, 2008). This can make it seem surprising, however, that Foucault was happy to speculate about the contemporary opportunities for stylizing life as a work of art – an aspiration that seems to lead uncomfortably close to the logic of neoliberal self-fashioning (Hamann, 2009; McNay, 2009). Yet Foucault’s turn to practices of the self should in fact be viewed as a direct *response* to the emerging forms of neoliberalism that he had so acutely diagnosed. ‘Foucault’s own insistence in thinking about the subject constituted as practices works *both with* and *against* neoliberal subjectivity and neoliberal conceptions of freedom, truth, and reality’ (Dilts, 2011:132). Foucault’s genealogies of ethics, that is, were intended as a form of ‘positive critique’, a way of grasping hold of the present in order to transform it, tracing the present limits of experience in order to locate their cracks (Blencowe, 2012). They aim to come to terms with the opportunities for developing arts of living that are *not* reducible to the entrepreneurial rationality of ‘homo economicus’.<sup>i</sup>

The work of uncovering and creating new genealogies of ethics, then, must be seen as an important means of testing the possibilities for testing the contemporary limits of the necessary. However, it should not be assumed that we can only turn to Foucault's own work to understand these genealogies. Foucault himself, for example, points to Burckhardt's (1878) study of Renaissance Italy and Stephen Greenblatt's (1980) work on Renaissance self-fashioning. Most intriguingly, he also marks out Walter Benjamin's writings on Baudelaire as an important example of a genealogy of arts of living (Foucault, 1992:11). Surprisingly, however, despite the surge of scholarly interest in Benjamin (Greenberg, 2008), Foucault's invitation to re-read Benjamin's work in terms of its contribution to such a genealogy has not yet been taken up. Commentators have drawn out connections between the two writers' theories of violence (Hanssen, 2000); language and bodies (Weigel, 1996); aesthetics and aestheticization (O'Leary, 2002); life politics (Agamben, 1998); Enlightenment (Smith, 2003); and methodological continuities between archaeological/genealogical analysis and the construction of constellations (Aronowitz, 1994; Lewandowski, 2001). However, the relations between their approaches to ethics, 'aesthetics of existence', and the role of art in contesting truth remain undeveloped.

One reason for this, perhaps, is the very different political and intellectual contexts to which Foucault and Benjamin were responding – Foucault to the rise of neoliberalism during the 1970s and 1980s, and Benjamin to the rise of Fascism during the 1930s. Yet Benjamin's primary focus was not Fascism as such, but the capitalist structure of experience that provided its condition of possibility. Both Benjamin and Foucault were horrified by the ways in which new forms of economic government were extending themselves into the very heart of modern subjectivity. As a route towards developing a fuller understanding of the genealogy of neoliberal arts of living, then, this article experiments with drawing out some affinities and resonances between Foucault's and Benjamin's histories of ethics and the art of living, as well as questioning whether the insights of a Benjaminian genealogy of ethics might in turn test the terms of Foucault's own ethical thought. The aim is neither to stage an anachronistic contest between Foucault and Benjamin, nor to reduce them to a spurious identity, but to isolate and amplify some moments where Benjamin's work helps to illuminate, add to, or trouble the genealogical project that Foucault saw to be vital for the critique of neoliberal subjectivity.

### **Ethics Beyond Subjectivity**

'What strikes me', Foucault remarks, 'is the fact that, in our society, art has become something that is related only to objects and not to individuals or to life. That art is something which is specialized or done by experts who are artists. But couldn't everyone's life become a work of art?' (Foucault, 2000c:261). Foucault's final books and lectures explored the potential for reactivating

such arts of living in modernity through an examination of Greek, Roman and early Christian aesthetics of existence (Foucault, 1990, 1992, 2001, 2005, 2010, 2011). The history of arts of living, Foucault comments, has been largely neglected since Jacob Burckhardt's (1878) classic account of Renaissance Italy. However, he goes on, it is possible to read Benjamin's writings on Baudelaire as an important contribution to such a genealogy of ethics (Foucault, 1992:11). If we are to follow Foucault's reading, then, Benjamin's problematic can usefully be read in terms of his own: the history of attempts to stylize life according to aesthetic, rather than epistemological or moral, criteria.

Given Benjamin's well-known critique of the aestheticization of politics (Benjamin, 2002), and his frequent allusion to the growing distance between art and life (e.g. Benjamin, 1999c, 2005a), Foucault's suggestion at first seems obscure. What I aim to demonstrate, however, is that it is in fact possible to draw from Benjamin's work a distinctive and compelling ethics, in the specifically Foucauldian sense of the word. Within Benjamin's feverish attempts to stop the world in its tracks and overcome the nightmare of Fascist capitalism through a revolutionary awakening of the dormant collective, it is possible to uncover a more intimate account of techniques of individual ascetic or self-modifying practices. The aim, however, is not to reconstruct a Benjaminian 'theory' of ethics or subjectivity, but to experiment with ways in which Benjamin's writings might enable us to extend, test, or challenge the Foucauldian project of writing a genealogy of ethics capable of creating a new, transformative, experience of the present.

Certainly there is little question that affinities do exist between the two writers' theoretical and political goals. Both Benjamin and Foucault (especially in his late work) were concerned with exploring the links between experience and critique, and developing a concept of experience where, as Thomas Lemke describes in relation to Foucault, 'experience is conceived of as dominant structure and transformative force, as existing background of practices and transcending event, as the object of theoretical inquiry and the objective of moving beyond historical limits' (Lemke, 2011:27). Graeme Gilloch notes the degree to which Benjamin anticipates Foucault's analyses of 'the architecture of visibility/invisibility, the fragmentation of the body, [and] the critique of narratives of "progress"' (Gilloch, 2002:236). Another important continuity between them is that both Benjamin and Foucault are concerned to develop an historicizing critique of the *a priori* structures of modern experience and reason (Caygill, 1998; Han, 2002). One clear point of divergence between the two thinkers' approach to experience and reason, however, needs to be addressed to make way for a Foucauldian reading of Benjamin. This relates to the ontological status of the subject.

Benjamin was unambiguously hostile to the concept of the subject; Theodor Adorno argues that Benjamin's target 'is not an allegedly overinflated subjectivism but rather the notion of a subjective dimension itself' (Adorno, 1981:235). Foucault, by contrast, has still not wholly succeeded in shrugging off accusations of a drearily conservative 'return to the subject' – a lapse, perhaps, into a geriatric existentialism (e.g. Dews, 1989; Eagleton, 1990; Wolin, 1986). Lois McNay has recently argued, for example, that his ethical theory does little to develop any understanding of how the neoliberal emergence of the self as enterprise, which he charted in *Naissance de la biopolitique* (Foucault, 2008), might be opposed (McNay, 2009). This difference between the two writers would seem to foreclose the possibility of a Foucauldian reading of Benjamin. Benjamin's political interest in 'innervating' new forms of collective body would appear to lead, less to a Foucauldian *critical* project (i.e. one that exposes the present limits of experience, reason and subjectivity) than to a post-Hegelian *speculative* project that moves beyond the subject altogether, in the creation of new forms of wholly non-subjective, singular experience (Benjamin, 2005b; Bernstein, 1999; Caygill, 1998; Jay, 2005). Indeed, Benjamin is keen to eliminate the subject, not just from the concept of experience, but also from knowledge and truth (Pensky, 1992:61). It is hard to see how such a radically post-subjective theory of experience, knowledge and truth could leave any room at all for a theory of ethics.

Yet according to Benjamin it is only through recognition of what has been *lost* that revolutionary potential can be actualized (Benjamin, 1999d). Revolutionary writing has to proceed via an analysis of loss – and, as Benjamin makes clear in his essay on storytelling, one crucial thing that has been lost in modernity is the ability for subjects to craft their lives, in unique and useful ways, as forms of artwork (Benjamin, 1999c:107). If the concept of the subject has eventually to be discarded, it is necessary first to come to grips with exactly what it is that is being thrown away. For Benjamin, subjectivity must destroy itself; and it can only do this through recognition of what it has become. Thus, despite Benjamin's hostility to the concept of the subject, his position still requires coming to terms with its ongoing destruction. In this respect, his position is clearly sympathetic to a Foucauldian insistence that '[r]efusing the philosophical recourse to a constituent subject does not amount to acting as if the subject did not exist, making an abstraction of it on behalf of a pure objectivity' (Foucault, 2000b:462). It remains to be seen, then, how successfully Benjamin's Baudelaire criticism can be read in terms of Foucault's ethical project.

## The Wish of Joshua

*'Then spake Joshua to the Lord ... and he said in the sight of Israel, Sun, stand thou still upon Gibeon; and thou, Moon, in the valley of Ajalon. And the Sun stood still, and the Moon stayed, until the people had avenged themselves on their enemies. So the Sun stood still in the midst of heaven, and hasted not to go down about a whole day. And there was no day like that before it or after it, that the Lord hearkened unto the voice of a man' (Joshua 10, 12-14).*

Benjamin's Baudelaire criticism is commonly read in terms of a dual historical and theoretical ambition: firstly, it identifies Baudelaire 'as the preeminent poet of the urban capitalist metropolis' and uses his texts to expose the contradictions of nineteenth century urban life; and secondly, it aims 'to present a large-scale theory of modern experience' (Jennings, 2003:91, 93). However, his writings on Baudelaire cannot simply be read as ideology critique. Beyond reading Baudelaire through Marx, Benjamin also reads Marx through Baudelaire, exploring some of the shared rhetorical figures that they employ: magic; intoxication; diabolism; petrification; the proletarian 'race' (Cohen, 1993:220). Benjamin invites a reactivation of Marxist politics that is mediated by Baudelairean ethics.

In Baudelaire's 'Le Vin des Chiffonniers' (The Ragpicker's Wine), the ragpicker dreams of a reversal of roles whereby the ragpicker 'dictates laws he's made / To vanquish evil, bring the victims aid'. Through this fantasy, he 'Grows drunk upon his own sublimity' (Baudelaire, 1993:217). Benjamin reads this as a socialist dream of 'future revenge and future glory' (2006:8), and taken in this way, the poem raises the question of whether, if religion is the opium of the people, Marxism, with its intoxicating optimism in the future, might not also be an anaesthetizing narcotic (Wohlfarth, 1986:149). Benjamin saw the Marxist political imagination of the 1930s to be flawed in at least two respects. Firstly, it did not question radically enough the nineteenth century infatuation with progress. Thus one aim of the *Passagenwerk* was 'to demonstrate a historical materialism which has annihilated within itself the idea of progress' (Benjamin, 1999a:N2,2). Secondly, it lapsed into a positivist concept of *truth* as something timeless and secure. Benjamin, by contrast, was interested in creating images where 'truth is charged to the bursting point with time' (1999a:N3,1). These two problems are intimately related because, according to Benjamin, the aspiration towards secure, timeless truth derives from a mechanistic model of experience as something finite, precisely measurable, and endlessly repeatable - and thereby universalizes the modern mechanization of experience (Benjamin, 1996). Benjamin finds in Baudelaire's rebellious individualism, despite its political immaturity, an ethos towards history and truth that can usefully be reactivated in correcting some of the problematic aspects of Marx's thought.

One reason why both Benjamin and Foucault were so interested in Baudelaire is that, by dwelling upon modernity as an attitude towards the present, he captured a crucial aspect of the modern experience of the self. However, whereas Benjamin used Baudelaire's poetry as a prism through which to express the contradictions of nineteenth century urban experience, Foucault only refers to Baudelaire's poetry in passing. He mentions Baudelaire as a writer whose poetry tests the limits of contemporary subjectivity through the lyricism of madness (Foucault, 2000a:339-340), death (Foucault, 2003:210) and crime (Foucault, 1977:68). Baudelaire's poetry exemplifies a desire to bring about transformative 'limit experiences'. In Foucault's most extended discussion of Baudelaire, however, in his essay 'Qu'est ce que les Lumières?', he concentrates on Baudelaire's famous theoretical essay 'Le Peintre de la Vie Moderne' (Baudelaire, 1964), in order to draw attention to the modern ethos that Baudelaire captures here, where 'extreme attention to what is real is confronted with the practice of a liberty that simultaneously respects this reality and violates it' (Foucault, 2000e:311). In this context, Foucault is less concerned with bringing out Baudelaire's specific literary techniques (in the way that he attempted with Manet's painting technique, for example (Foucault, 2009)), than with emphasizing the critical ethos that Baudelaire affirms, and which remains the task of critique in the present. Yet, as Benjamin demonstrates, the most distinctive aspects of Baudelaire's ethos of modernity only come through in the detail of his literary works. Baudelaire, Benjamin observes, was a bad philosopher and, although better as a theorist of art, was incomparable only as a 'brooder', someone to whom the world appears not as a legible whole but as an irresolvable puzzle (Gilloch, 2002:210). It is this attitude, which could only be explored in allegorical images rather than theoretical texts, which was Baudelaire's most important experiment in the art of living.

So to what extent can Benjamin's writings on Baudelaire's poetry be read through a Foucauldian conceptual architecture, and what does this contribute to our understanding of the role of history and truth in modern arts of living? In his genealogies of ethics, Foucault distinguishes four axes of an ethical framework: *ethical substance* (the part of the self that the individual constitutes as the prime material of their moral conduct); *ethical work* (the activities through which they transform themselves into the ethical subject of their behaviour); *mode of subjectivation* (the style in which individuals establish their relation to moral rules); and *telos* (the mode of being that the individual attempts to bring about) (Foucault, 1992:28-29). As we will see, an analysis of Benjamin's ethos of modernity along each of these axes can be drawn from Benjamin's reading of Baudelaire.

### *Ethical Substance*

The first axis of ethics that Foucault identifies is the ethical substance, the specific object which ethical activity aims to transform. According to Foucault, in modernity it is desire that has been the object of most ethical frameworks (Foucault, 1998, 2000c). Benjamin's reading, in accord with this, focuses on desire as the substance of Baudelaire's ethics, the aspect of himself that the poet continually battled against. Baudelaire, however, works upon desire, neither as an Hegelian vital energy, nor through a Foucauldian *ars erotica* (see Huffer & Wilson, 2010), but as an absence, something lost. By acting upon desire, he works on a part of his being that is already absent to him. Only by working upon subjective desire as a form of absence is it possible to discern the true, *collective* desire for a classless society that Susan Buck-Morss (1989) identifies as a central motif of the *Arcades Project*.

Commodity culture is based upon the manipulation of desire. In the modern city, everything provokes desire, but nothing satisfies it. This manipulation achieved its greatest expression in the arcades, for the arcade was a street that has been divested of every use except trade and consumption. 'The arcade is a street of lascivious commerce only; it is wholly adapted to arousing desires' (Benjamin, 1999a: A3a,7). It is a space that at once proliferates desire, and at the same time channels it towards lifeless objects in a manner that is quasi-erotic, 'lascivious'. In the arcades, commodities are literally fetishized in the sense that, as inanimate objects, they are invested with an inhuman life. The modern urban dweller is duped into experiencing lifeless, inert commodities as a source of life and vitality. The modern desiring subject is reduced to a series of reactive responses to momentary shocks and stimulations of desire, leading to a destructive oscillation between objectified subjectivity and fetishized objectivity.

In modernity, then, desire is not really a form of life, but is complicit with the process of commodification that sucks the true life out of things and replaces them with an illusory, fetishized life. Baudelaire, recognizing this, does not attempt to liberate his desire as a living and creative energy, but works upon desire as an absence, a form of life that is no longer available. Unlike the flâneur, whose delight in the city is a response to its intoxicating vitality and life, Baudelaire fights *against* his desire to partake in the (illusory) life of the city. His poetry links desire directly to death, rather than life. A lover's kiss, for example, becomes a deadly poison: 'your saliva, girl ... bites my soul, and dizzies it, and swirls it down remorselessly ... to the underworld!' (Baudelaire, 1993:101). Indeed, modern woman becomes desirable only when experienced as an object, something lifeless (Buci-Glucksmann, 1986; Buck-Morss, 1986). Baudelaire approaches desire, then, as something lifeless and empty. Baudelaire's ethics are focused upon desire as the element of the self that has been most completely commodified – the part of the subject that is most fully objectified, lost even to itself.

### *Ethical Practices*

Baudelaire's ethics, then, are not oriented towards liberating the ethical substance of desire as a form of *life*, but towards appropriating its lack of life, empathizing with the processes of commodification. For Benjamin, Baudelaire's ethical challenge is not just to empathize with the commodity (which the mere flâneur also does), but to empathize with its hidden destructiveness, its intimacy with death, instead of its false promise of life. He attempts this through a distinctive set of 'ethical practices', as Foucault describes the second axis of an ethical framework. Baudelaire, Benjamin writes, was a bohemian, a conspirator against his own class who angrily rejected its morals and values. As such, he was particularly sensitive to the forms of heroism that new forms of modern life demanded. According to Baudelaire, the hero of modern life is at once artist, dandy, flâneur, conspirator, and apache (Baudelaire, 1964). Much critical debate has gone into deciding which of these 'ethical practices' was most important. Jean-Paul Sartre insists that Baudelaire's most highly valued form of heroism was dandyism – a narcissistic retreat into the security of the isolated self, a celebration of 'the parasite of parasites – the dandy who was the parasite of a class of oppressors' (Sartre, 1967:146). Foucault, in a reading directly opposed to Sartre's, also places emphasis on Baudelaire's dandyism, but celebrates this as an ethical commitment to the recreation of subjectivity, rather than a disavowal of ethical duty (Foucault, 2000e).

Benjamin, however, insists that the ethical attitudes represented by the dandy, apache, raggicker and flâneur were mere *disguises*: they were roles that the poet adopted in the service of his final ethical practice: his poetic labour. 'Flâneur, apache, dandy, and raggicker were so many roles to him. For the modern hero is no hero; he is a portrayer of heroes' (Benjamin, 2006:60). The hero of modernity is an absent figure, an unfilled role on the stage of history. The dandy may be the 'last hero of modernity', resisting absorption into the undifferentiated urban mass, but his protest is comically inadequate. He cannot resist the overwhelming forces which subject him to the homogenizing egalitarianism of the commodity. The only form of heroism remaining open is the portrayal of heroism. The ethical calling of modernity is an *artistic* one.

However, to say that these roles are disguises is not to say that they are insignificant. In fact, they are crucial 'ethical practices', ways of working upon subjective desire so as to harness its empathy with the commodity. In order to achieve this, the hero of modernity has to *expose* himself to the fullest extremities of modern experience. The modern artist must live that modernity and let it imprint itself upon his being. Thus, 'the index of heroism in Baudelaire', Benjamin comments,

is 'to live at the heart of irreality (of appearance)' (Benjamin, 1985:43). Flâneur, dandy, apache and ragpicker are roles through which to expose himself to the shocks of modern life. As Baudelaire puts it, the hero of modernity encounters the crowd as 'an immense reservoir of electrical energy', both shocking and energizing (Baudelaire, 1964:10). He uses words as weapons to parry the blows of the city: 'When shafts of sunlight strike with doubled heat / On towns and fields, on rooftops, on the wheat, / I practice my quaint swordsmanship alone, / Stumbling on words as over paving stones' (Baudelaire, 1993:169). Exposing himself to the greatest extent possible to the destructive, alienating shocks of modernity, then, is an ascetic ethical practice that is the precondition for expressing the true physiognomy of modernity in poetic images. Only by exposing himself to modernity's shocks can the poet grasp the destructiveness of life's 'luminous *explosion in space*' (Baudelaire, 1964:18).

#### *Mode of Subjectivation*

Fulfilling this ethical demand requires cultivating a distinctive *attitude* towards modern life. Baudelaire is highly sensitive to the lure of the crowd, the pleasures of the street, seeing it as 'an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite' (Baudelaire, 1964:9). Yet he self-consciously foregoes this pleasure, cultivating a disposition of melancholy and anger towards it. 'Baudelaire found nothing to like about the age he lived in, and ... was unable to deceive himself about it' (Benjamin, 2006:60). Benjamin insists that Baudelaire's 'violence, his impatience, and his anger' lies behind everything he does – even his most lyrical poetry. In Foucauldian terms, this must be interpreted as a 'mode of subjection' that is characterized by an exemplary form of *askesis*, a working of the self upon the self, a deliberate *denial* of the pleasures afforded by the intoxicating anonymity of the mass. In rage, Baudelaire ascetically foregoes the pleasures of the city. It is through this mode of subjectivation that he can transfigure desire, as a form of absence, into poetic images of the truth of modernity's nature as loss and ruin. Experience can only be grasped as something lost. Rather than adopting a celebratory attitude towards desire, then, Baudelaire rages against it, determined to reveal every detail of modern life, every flow of commodified desire, as a symptom of modernity's devaluation of experience. Reading Baudelaire in Foucauldian terms, therefore, invites recognition that this anger was not just a subjective reaction to the demands of modern life, but a deliberate and carefully cultivated ethical disposition towards the world. It is in this saturnine disposition that Baudelaire's characteristic 'mode of subjectivation' can be discerned.

Benjamin's excavation of this ethos in 'Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire' is centred upon a critique of the Symbolist attempt to find the key to *Les Fleurs du mal* in Baudelaire's theory of sensuous natural 'correspondences', where: 'As the long echoes, shadowy, profound, / Heard from afar, blend in a unity ... So perfumes, colours, sounds may correspond ... Singing the senses' rapture, and the soul's (Baudelaire, 1993:19). These synaesthetic correspondences testify to the organic immanence of natural life. But *Les Fleurs du mal*, Benjamin insists, only evokes this natural immanence as something irretrievably lost. Baudelaire's attitude towards modernity is directed *against* natural life. Baudelaire's attitude towards desire is one of rage and violence: 'So would I wish ... To bruise your ever tender breast, / And carve in your astonished side / An injury both deep and wide, / To chastise your too-joyous flesh' (Baudelaire, 1993:89).

Thus the 'majesty' of Baudelaire's writing, Benjamin writes, lies in its 'destruction of the organic and living' (1985:41). 'In the opposition to nature announced by Baudelaire', he adds, 'there lies primarily a deep-seated protest against the "organic"' (1985:45). Baudelaire's ethics requires a refusal of any compensation for or refuge from modernity's destruction of subjectivity. He rages against life itself. And it is through this rage, this mode of subjectivation, that Baudelaire's ethical practices can be carried out in such a way as to achieve the final goal of his ethical practices.

### *Telos*

Benjamin is clear about the 'telos' of Baudelaire's ethics. He recalls the wish of Joshua, who called out to God to alter the course of nature and create a pause in the passage of the Sun: 'To interrupt the course of the world - that was Baudelaire's deepest intention. The wish of Joshua ... From this intention sprang his violence, his impatience, and his anger; from it, too, sprang the ever-renewed attempts to cut the world to the heart (or sing it to sleep). In this intention he provided death with an accompaniment: his encouragement of its work' (Benjamin, 1999a:J50,2). By encouraging the work of death, Baudelaire wants to destroy natural life itself, thereby recognizing the necessity of an impossible violation of the natural course of things. Just as Joshua stayed the course of the Sun, Baudelaire wants to bring the world to a standstill.

The means through which he does this - his final ethical calling - is poetry. It is through poetic images that he strives to make visible the lifelessness within the apparent dynamism of the modern city and create an interruption in the natural course of history. The way in which this space can be made visible is through allegory, a form of expression that sucks the life out of its object and reveals it in a spatial image of decay and loss. '[T]he only pleasure the melancholic permits himself', Benjamin observes, '... is allegory' (1998:185). Allegory drains the life from its

object, and thus mimics the power of the commodity. Commodification replaces the life (use value) of objects with a false life, a meaning that is entirely arbitrary (exchange value). Through allegory, Baudelaire finds a way of writing *as* commodity, as a subject who is entirely absent from himself. In allegory, the commodity can reveal itself in the space, piled high with corpses, between life and literature.

Allegorical images, then, stage an encounter with the *truth* of modern subjectivity. Rather than describing its presence, in the manner of a photograph, they expose its absence. They reveal, not *Erkenntnis*, factual knowledge, but *Wahreit*, truth (Benjamin, 1998; see Cowan, 1983). Whereas knowledge can be possessed and presented, truth is unrepresentable: it is a permanent exchange of extremes (van Reigen, 2001). Through allegory, the hyper-individualized modern subject is revealed as being simultaneously absent – an emptiness, an illusion, an empty signifier. Thus Baudelaire’s ethos of modernity aims to inhabit a new intersection between experience and truth. Baudelaire’s goal is not merely to present the truth, but to *imprint it upon his own life*. In doing so, he can lend truth the affective density of a lived experience of suffering. Baudelaire’s life is the authority by which his poetic images can gain access, not merely to representational knowledge, but to an unrepresentable truth that encompasses opposite extremities. The *telos* of his ethical practice, then, is to imprint the true nature of modernity’s contradictions upon himself, and thereby to become capable of making that truth palpable in poetic images. In this way, he hopes to make possible an interruption in the natural course of the world that is brought about by a collective encounter with the truth of modernity’s devaluation of experience.

Reading Benjamin’s Baudelaire criticism through a Foucauldian conceptual architecture, then, Baudelaire’s ethics of modernity emerges in terms of the distinctive relationship to truth that Baudelaire creates through his ethical practices. Baudelaire emerges, not just as someone determined to use art in speaking the truth to power, but as someone who works upon himself, through an ascetic renunciation of the (compensatory) pleasures of modernity, in order to imprint the truth of modernity upon his own self, and thereby to acquire the capacity and authority to expose the false life of the commodity as something destructive and alienating. For Benjamin, Baudelaire’s heroism is his commitment towards *living* the truth of modernity by exposing himself to its shock-effects to the extent that he can write as a subject that, totally objectified, is wholly absent to itself. It is in this emphasis on courageous truth-telling, in fact, that Benjamin’s Baudelaire criticism makes its most important contribution to a Foucauldian genealogy of ethics. In order to understand how, it is necessary to situate his work in the context of Foucault’s writings on ‘parrhesia’, Cynicism, and truthful life.

## Truth, Parrhesia, and Cynicism

Benjamin's genealogy of ethics, I have been arguing, opens up a novel space for truth, discernible in the relation between Baudelaire's art and life. Seen in this light, Benjamin's reading of Baudelaire can usefully be read in the context of Foucault's comments on the Cynics' experience of truth in his 1983–1984 lectures on *La Courage de Verité* (Foucault, 2011). In his work on the government of self and others, Foucault had become preoccupied with the idea of 'parrhesia', the practice of courageous truth-telling. 'Parrhesia', he writes, 'is a verbal activity in which a speaker expresses his personal relationship to truth, and risks his life because he recognizes truth-telling as a duty to improve or help other people (as well as himself)' (Foucault, 2001:20). Echoing Benjamin's distinction between knowledge and truth, Foucault suggests that in modernity the experience of truth has become dislocated from parrhesia, so that truth has become something secure, timeless, and passive – something indistinct from knowledge. In Antiquity, however, truth was distinct from knowledge, because an essential part of the experience of truth was the active transformation of the self. Parrhesia was a way 'for the subject to constitute himself ethically at the moment he tells the truth, and to transform himself to become capable of a truthful statement' (Macmillan, 2011:10). In the equivalence it draws between truth and knowledge, Foucault suggests, modernity has forgotten a *spiritual* experience of truth. '[W]e could call "spirituality" the search, practice, and experience through which the subject carries out the necessary transformations on himself in order to have access to the truth' (Foucault, 2005:15). Spirituality postulates that truth is not given to the subject by right, but that the subject must be changed, transformed, something other than itself, to gain right of access to truth (see Rabinow, 2009). Encountering truth requires transforming the self.

Foucault is particularly interested in the parrhesia of the Cynics, exemplified by Diogenes of Sinope, who sought to provoke through a 'life of scandal' (Foucault, 2011; compare Sloterdijk, 1988). The Cynics were committed, not just to truth-telling, but to living a truthful life. The Cynic's resolve was to 'expose his life', in all senses of the word. Through a series of public demonstrations, from verbal excoriation to extreme asceticism to public masturbation, Diogenes put his life on display and at risk; he sought to hide nothing of his life from view (Luxon, 2004). Finding contentment in himself, he had no need of external attachments and made no commitments that constrained freedom. Thus his life took the form of an active poverty, an exercise of the self upon the self, searching for new forms of renunciation in order to obtain the positive results of courage, resistance and endurance. Unlike later Christian asceticism, however,

his aim was not to deny himself pleasure, but to achieve it through the most economical means possible (Macmillan, 2011:12).

Although early in the lectures Foucault says that ‘the parrhesiastic modality [of truth-telling] has, I believe, precisely disappeared as such’ (Foucault, 2011:30), he later speculates that the Cynical tradition might not have been destroyed by Christianity. Instead, it travelled across Western culture in the idea that an ethical form of life can be a vehicle for disclosing truth. It did this in religious movements, but also in the model of life as a violent, scandalous manifestation of truth that was adopted by revolutionary movements over the nineteenth century. Thirdly, however, the ‘third great medium of Cynicism in European culture’ is found in *art* (Foucault, 2011:185-186; see Tanke, 2009). Citing artists such as Baudelaire, Manet Beckett and Bacon, Foucault observes how, in modernity, ‘art ... establishes a polemical relationship of reduction, refusal, and aggression to culture, social norms, values, and aesthetic canons’ (2011:188). In modern art one sees an ‘endless movement by which every rule laid down, deduced, induced, or inferred from preceding actions is rejected and refused by the following action. In every form of art there is a sort of permanent Cynicism towards all established art ... reduction, laying bare the basic of existence; permanent refusal and rejection of every form of established art’ (2011:188). Modern art, he goes on, ‘is Cynicism in culture; the Cynicism of culture turned against itself. And if this is not just in art, in the modern world, in our world, it is especially in art that the most intense forms of a truth-telling with the courage to take the risk of offending are concentrated’ (Foucault, 2011:189). . The kinds of modern art exemplified by Baudelaire and Manet, then, have a vital ethical role in modernity, an important contribution to make in the modern play of truth, experience and power. The modern artist’s interest in shock and scandal, in the refusal of norms, conventions and rules, and in the deliberate adoption of poverty as a style of existence, can be seen as an ethical commitment to a form of courageous truth-telling that is made possible by distinctive forms of work upon the self – by exposing their life, as truth, in art.

Seen in this context, Benjamin’s excavation of Baudelaire’s poetic truth telling can usefully be viewed in terms of the distinctive contribution it makes to a genealogy of artistic parrhesia. Foucault evokes a form of truth-telling that requires courage, a willingness to risk oneself, a preparedness to expose oneself to being ridiculed, ostracised, physically harmed, even killed (Franěk, 2006). His comments on the role of art in such practices in modernity, however, are very brief. Benjamin’s reading of Baudelaire, however, offers a much fuller understanding of an important moment in the development of the role of art in modern regimes of truth. Baudelaire’s art of living, as Benjamin describes it, involves an exemplary form of parrhesia. The poet deliberately exposes himself to the most harmful and shocking effects of modernity in order to

grasp what had been lost, to express this loss in poetry, and thereby make possible an encounter with truth that, being saturated with experience, has a destructive, transformative, and creative power. Through the lens of Foucauldian ethical theory, Benjamin's work emerges as an important contribution to an understanding of the role of art in the ethical practice of speaking truth to power.

### **Risk, Power and Potential**

Whilst Benjamin's history of nineteenth century Paris contributes in important ways to the Foucauldian problematic of courage truth-telling, however, it also takes this framework to its limits. The practice of parrhesia is a game that many players participate in. Parrhesia requires a willingness on behalf of authorities to be challenged by those outside legitimized authority structures. It requires the cultivation of affective relations of *trust* between those who are authorized to speak the truth and the parrhesiasts who challenge those truths (Luxon, 2004). If the truth-teller is afraid of being punished for the truths she speaks, there is a danger that she will fall back into flattery or silence. For Foucault, parrhesia is an improvisatory, agonistic encounter between the parrhesiast and the authority that she is challenging. Through courageous truth-telling, the present structures of governance of self and others can be creatively transformed. Foucault's ethics, that is, aim at confronting present limits rather than reaching beyond them; rather than summoning transformative new forms of potential energy or life, for example, he concentrates on the work of undoing present configurations of forces (Hallward, 2000; Revel, 2009). The starting point of his ethics is a polemical *refusal* of the self (O'Leary, 2002:15). He rejects any ethical or political project that aims to find outside a given system of power relations 'the bubbling source of life itself, life in an as yet uncaptured state' (Foucault, 2002:85). The 'outside' of present networks of power relations, then, is always folded into the inside, always immanent to those networks. The outside does not exist as such, or 'only as an absence that pulls as far away from itself as possible' (Foucault, 2000d:155).

Benjamin's account of modern power and authority, however, leads in a different direction. Firstly, it demands scepticism concerning whether such games of parrhesia could ever successfully be played under modern regimes of power. His account of modern experience leaves little room for the creation of any kind of positive affect; rather, it emphasizes far more dangerous affects including intoxication, desire, rage, anxiety and fear. In a capitalist world gripped by systematic mirage and deception, any possibility of reciprocal trust between institutional authority and those outside it, between governors and governed, is inconceivable. This difference cannot entirely be

put down to the different political contexts within which Foucault and Benjamin were writing (Benjamin during the rise of Fascism, Foucault during the consolidation of neo-liberalism). Rather, it is a question of a different approach to creative transformation – an emphasis on the harnessing of potential rather than the unravelling of power relations.

Although his work of art essay has led many writers to associate Benjamin's political theory with revolutionary optimism, in many respects Benjamin's pessimism far exceeds Foucault's. Benjamin's genealogy of ethics, in fact, tests the limits of Foucault's theoretical architecture to breaking point. In Benjamin, the notion of *risk* is very different to Foucault's. In Foucault, the parrhesiast risks herself, but it is through this element of risk that she creates the authority for her challenge to institutional authorities. Risk and trust are mutually necessary. In Benjamin, however, the risk inherent in Baudelaire's *self-exposure* is multiplied to the extent that it edges towards *self-annihilation*. Baudelaire deliberately martyrs himself to an indifferent community. For Baudelaire, suicide is very signature of modernity (Stark, 2007). Benjamin describes suicide, not just as a symptom of alienation, but as a heroic response to it: 'The resistance which modernity offers to the natural productive élan of a person is out of proportion to his strength. It is understandable if a person grows tired and takes refuge in death. Modernity must appear under the sign of suicide, the seal of which is affixed beneath a heroic will that makes no concessions to a mentality hostile to it. This suicide is not a resignation but a *heroic passion*' (Benjamin, 2006:45). Whereas for Foucault, 'passion' involves experimenting with corporeal pleasures through which the subject might escape itself (see Robinson, 2003), for Benjamin passion is an experience whose redemption seems to require the complete annihilation of the self. Whereas Foucault is concerned with risk and the creative dissociation of the subject, Benjamin is prepared to contemplate a complete destruction of the subject. Thus, in Benjamin's reading, Baudelaire's ethics takes on religious qualities, and he becomes a heroic martyr to the slumbering collective.

From a Foucauldian perspective, this kind of ethos is dangerously close to lapsing into the authenticity of self-destruction rather than the risk of self-creation – the certainty of an impossible opposition to authority rather than the uncertainty of confronting it. However, for Benjamin this certainty is a gambit in a wider project of provoking a collective, revolutionary 'awakening' from the phantasmagoria of modernity. The form of parrhesia that Benjamin brings out does not so much involve speaking truth against present forms of power and authority, but speaking truth to a form of *potential* power: the slumbering collective; the revolutionary mass. Whereas for Foucault truth-telling is a way of combating existing structures of subjectivity, Benjamin envisages a form of truth-telling through which the truth participates in an expression of potential – in

triggering the revolutionary shock-effect that awakens the dormant collective and actualizes its immanent authority, force, and creativity. 'Only when in technology body and image space so interpenetrate that all revolutionary tension becomes bodily collective innervation, and all the bodily innervations of the collective become revolutionary discharge, has reality transcended itself to the extent demanded by the *Communist Manifesto*' (Benjamin, 2005b:217-218).

Benjamin's ethos of modernity, then, unlike Foucault's, is oriented towards the actualization of a form of immanent potential, materialized in the new body of a technologically mediated collective (see Agamben, 1999) This framework calls into question the Foucauldian model of parrhesia where which creative transformation can be brought about by speaking the truth to existing forms of authority. For Benjamin, no trust can be placed in present structures of power. Instead, a wholly new political body must be created. The goal of truth-telling cannot be to engage in a form of combat with present authority, but only to create the possibility for harnessing new forms of material potential energy: the revolutionary energy of the proletariat. Thus at this point Benjamin's thought seems to lead closer to a Deleuzian stress on virtuality or difference-in-itself than to a Foucauldian emphasis on the despecification of the subject (though cf Blencowe, 2008).

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Of course, the truths that Baudelaire spoke failed to actualize this latent creative energy of the dormant collective. His poetic truths die stillborn, stars without atmosphere, and he is reduced to battling the crowd 'with the impotent rage of someone fighting the rain or the wind' (Benjamin, 1999b:190). Benjamin's aim is to fill those truths with new potential in their afterlife. However, in his attempt to activate a form of energy that will destroy the very opposition between subject and object, nature and history, Benjamin forecloses the possibility of the risky Foucauldian game of parrhesia, an active, creative game between a truth-teller and the authority with whom she speaks. Benjamin raises the stakes of the game to the extent that only two outcomes seem possible: the annihilation of the subject, or the moment of historical indeterminacy that will be enacted by the awakening of the proletariat.

## Conclusion

Despite Benjamin's determination to eliminate the individual subject from his theoretical vocabulary, the ethical relationship between an individual and their own life, I have argued, remains an important aspect of his historical and literary analysis. Reading Benjamin in terms of a Foucauldian genealogy of ethics, this aspect of Benjamin's thought comes into clear focus. Baudelaire's poetry becomes, not just an expression of the contradictions of his era, but the

expression of an courageous commitment to speaking the truth. Baudelaire's heroic postures are read as the ethical practices through which Baudelaire works upon his own self, as something absent to itself, in order to live the truth of modernity, and thereby lend his poetic images the authority of experience. Baudelaire's ethics, in Benjamin's reading, involves self-exposure to the most destructive and alienating aspects of modernity so as to imprint the truth of modernity upon one's own being.

Reading Benjamin's Baudelaire criticism as a contribution to a genealogy of ethics enables a much fuller understanding of the role of art in modern forms of parrhesia. Through his work, we can derive a much more detailed account of what Foucault describes as modern art's reactivation of Cynical parrhesia in modernity. At the same time, however, it is possible to use Benjamin's thought to provoke a challenge to Foucault's politics of truth. For Benjamin, the role of truth-telling is not to challenge to presently existing structures of authority, but to actualize the potential of a new collective agency. Whereas for Foucault truth is dissociative, undoing existing power relations, for Benjamin truth must play a role in liberating new forms of creative potential.

More important than this difference, however, is the shared problematic that both Foucault and Benjamin inhabit. Reading Benjamin's Baudelaire criticism as a history of arts of living, as Foucault suggests, provokes a differential repetition of what Foucault describes as the ethos of modernity itself – a commitment towards freeing reason from itself, abandoning the security of the sovereign self, and opening up new spaces of freedom beyond the present limits of experience (Foucault, 2000e). Both Benjamin and Foucault provoke a transformation of the field of ethics, away from any attempt to acquire the certainty of universal norms or codes of conduct, and towards a renewed questioning of the relation between the self, truth, and the authority of experience. Both explore the possibilities of a transformation of the self, not as a narcissistic retreat into the security of the subject, but as a risky confrontation with a truth with the capacity to cut, parry and wound.

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<sup>1</sup> Many thanks to an anonymous reviewer for helping me clarify these points concerning the links between Foucault's lectures on neoliberalism and his writings on ethics.

<sup>2</sup> Reading this debate through Deleuze, however, would problematize this conceptual distinction between refusing present forms, on the one hand, and actualizing outside potential, on the other, since potential is immanent to every material form. Deleuze's reading of Foucault makes a key distinction between 'exteriority' and 'outside':

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whereas 'exteriority' relates to actual form, the 'outside' concerns force (power), which operates in a 'different dimension' to form (Deleuze, 1999:72). Force, as creative potential, comes from an outside that is immanent to form, rather than external to it. Refusing the present, therefore, is identical to harnessing new forms of potential. To explore the implications of this line of thought in any more detail is beyond the scope of this article. However, it should be remembered that Deleuze's success in establishing a fully materialist theory of potential is highly questionable (see Badiou, 2000; Hallward, 2006).