

## 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY BAUDELAIRE?

### Affectivity and Ecology in *Le Crépuscule du soir*

In the heated debates that followed the publication of *Sur Racine* (1960), Roland Barthes was accused of many sins, not least that of dehistoricising Racine. One of Barthes' responses was to dedramatise: 'We should not be surprised that a country should periodically review in this way the things which come down from its past and describe them anew in order to find out *what it can do with them*: such activities are and ought to be normal assessment procedures'.<sup>1</sup> This article takes its cue from Barthes' sentence and considers what we can do with Baudelaire today: how does Baudelaire's poetry speak to the present?

Formulated in this manner, the question is likely to set off alarm bells. It seems reductive to look for something like the contemporary use value of Baudelaire, because it invites an instrumental approach to literature whose limitations have been pointed out by many – Baudelaire and Barthes included. Furthermore, this guiding question is politically suspect: the singular form of 'present' necessarily simplifies a much more complex set of circumstances, violently excluding many other relevant aspects of the contemporary situation(s). It is therefore appropriate to begin by setting out which particular version of the 'present' this article will be referring to.

During the last fifteen to twenty years, a plethora of new theoretical approaches has emerged in literary studies as well as in the humanities and social sciences more widely. Labels such as 'affect theory', 'new materialism', 'object-oriented ontology', 'animal studies', 'ecocriticism', 'post-humanism', 'cyborg theory' and 'speculative realism' have been coined. Even if this proliferation of labels also testifies to well-known logics of fashion and the marketable, it is difficult to deny that

collectively these many new approaches speak to important mutations in current scholarship. In 2015, Richard Grusin attempted to bring together this diverse set of theoretical formations under the umbrella term ‘the nonhuman turn’.<sup>2</sup> For reasons that will become clear later in this text, I prefer the (no doubt less elegant) term ‘non-anthropocentric’, but Grusin’s effort to bring out what these writings all share is still very helpful. He sees them as responses to some of the major societal challenges facing us today – above all, global warming and rapid developments in the (bio)technological sciences. In other words, these theoretical texts aim to reconsider the place of the human in a world where ecological and technological developments prompt us to push the questioning of the human in directions other than those pursued during the years of post-structuralism.

Literature and other forms of art offer a wealth of material to scholars who are critical of anthropocentrism. Science fiction, object-oriented poetry, avant-gardist experiments with chance and many other forms of literature invite us to engage with a world that escapes us, and at the same time emphasize our bodily entanglement in nature and other environments. Literature therefore also plays a key role in a number of these newer writings.<sup>3</sup> The present article argues that some of Baudelaire’s writings can contribute to these current debates. It therefore stages an encounter between the non-anthropocentric dimensions of Baudelaire’s texts and selected developments in this contemporary critical landscape.

Needless to say, the very broad picture outlined above cannot be fully addressed in the present text. This article will focus on the prose version of *Le Crépuscule du soir* in *Le Spleen de Paris* – and a limited number of recent texts associated with ‘affect theory’ and (less explicitly) ‘new materialism’. It will closely read selected passages from Baudelaire’s poem, thereby attempting to demonstrate

what can be gained from reading Baudelaire non-anthropocentrically. The first part of the article brings Brian Massumi's writings on affectivity into dialogue with Baudelaire's poem; the second and third parts step back and seek to clarify how a non-anthropocentric reading of Baudelaire's text differs from two other (and to some extent related) readings of Baudelaire: Georges Poulet's Baudelaire chapter from *Les Métamorphoses du cercle* (1961), and the recent volume by Ross Chambers, *An Atmospherics of the City: Baudelaire and the Poetics of Noise* (2015). By the end of the article, I will have given one possible answer to the question of how Baudelaire's poetry speaks to 'the present', arguing, in particular, that *Le Crépuscule du soir* invites us to think human beings as dynamic mediations of their environments.

### **The Affective Ecology of *Le Crépuscule du soir*: Baudelaire and Massumi**

*Le Crépuscule du soir* exists in a verse version published in 1852 and in the very different prose version that will be the subject of this article. The latter is the earliest of Baudelaire's prose poems and it is among those he revised most substantially. The first version is from 1855; the final text, discussed here, is from 1864.

As its title indicates, *Le Crépuscule du soir* expresses what happens when darkness falls. Responses to the fading of the light vary throughout the poem: it makes the poor happy, relieved that the day is over. It excites the mad people. The narrator writes about two mad friends who explode in apparently random acts of violence – much like the narrator in *Le Mauvais vitrier* (or the characters that the Tiquun collective analyzed in their *Théorie du Bloom* (2004)).<sup>4</sup> Eventually, one of these madmen dies, whereas the other, still alive, is walking around harbouring a desire for recognition that no one will be able to satisfy. The darkness has a third effect on the city more generally: here it is associated with happiness and family time.

The narrator is standing on his balcony, overlooking the city, the windows he contemplates reveal such instances of happiness. Finally, twilight takes yet another form in the poet himself – or rather, it takes several forms. First, he notes that it produces light in his spirit. This, however, makes him ‘intrigued’ and ‘alarmed’ about the range of reactions the twilight can produce.<sup>5</sup> He then goes straight from this state of alarm back to a celebration of the night: we have a sequence of five sentences all ending with an exclamation mark, including a description of the twilight as ‘fireworks celebrating the Goddess Liberty!’ (*The Prose Poems*, 63) [‘le feu d’artifice de la déesse Liberté !’] (thereby bringing back the light).<sup>6</sup> Towards the end of the poem, a series of elaborate erotic metaphors describe the mix of light and darkness on the horizon. In the penultimate paragraph, the narrator evokes candelabras and dark draperies from the Orient that imitate the emotions in the human heart. And in the final paragraph (one long sinuous sentence), he introduces the semi-transparent tutu of a dancer. It is tempting to link these last two chains of metaphors and see the contours of a dancer in a semi-transparent dress, behind heavily draped curtains... However, the poem does not offer a personification of darkness – there is no embodiment. Readers looking for a summative statement are therefore better off going back to the penultimate paragraph and the idea that the spectacle of the sunset ‘reflect[s] all the complex feelings that struggle in the heart of man at the solemn moments of life’ (*The Prose Poems*, 63).

As mentioned this is a poem that traces what happens when ‘evening falls’ [‘le jour tombe’]. It belongs to a category of Baudelaire poems that lend themselves to a non-anthropocentric reading (other such prose poems include *Le Confiteur de l’artiste*, *Les Bienfaits de la lune*, *Le Tir et le cimetière*, and many verse poems). Obviously, there is a narratorial voice and we encounter a number of characters.

Nevertheless, I would like to suggest that the poem is less concerned with human characters and the ways in which they act and interact, than it is with an elusive, affective state that modulates the characters: the titular ‘crépuscule’. From the beginning, the poem presents a kind of hydraulic system; evening falls and sounds begin to rise from a mysterious ‘black asylum [‘noir hospice’] perched on the mountain’; next they flood the city. Readers will feel inclined to tidy up and systematize the effects of this flooding by distinguishing between the emotions of the poor, the mad, the city more generally and the narrator. This is exactly what I just did, for this is precisely what the narratorial voice tries to do. But in the end, the poem’s attempts at ordering the effects of darkness largely collapse, and we end up with ‘everything’: ‘all the complex feelings...’.

To analyze the poem, it is helpful to draw on Brian Massumi’s early writings on affects. We can then say that *Le Crépuscule du soir* is a poem about ‘affects’ rather than ‘emotions’. For Massumi, affect is (to borrow from Steven Shaviro’s concise summary):

...primary, nonconscious, asubjective or presubjective, asignifying, unqualified, and intensive; while emotion is derivative, conscious, qualified, and meaningful, a “content” that can be attributed to an already-constituted subject. Emotion is affect captured by a subject [...]. Subjects are overwhelmed and traversed by affect, but they *have* or *possess* their own emotions.<sup>7</sup>

Affects in-fluence human beings, but due to their fluidity they largely escape us; emotions and feelings, on the other hand, are affects recollected by a consciousness.<sup>8</sup>

*Le Crépuscule du soir* – like many other late 19<sup>th</sup> century French poems – largely lies within the realm of affectivity: it is a poem about elusive sensations, about mysterious sounds, about changes in the play between light and shadows. The poem

and the narrator register the effects of darkness, but the effects are wildly dissimilar, and it is impossible for readers to fully explain the poem by working their way back to a single unifying cause. This is why readers are in the same position as the narrator: what both worries and excites us is that darkness can produce seemingly any response. As the narrator observes: ‘although it is not unusual for one cause to engender two contrasting results, I am always somewhat intrigued and alarmed when it happens’ (*The Prose Poems*, 63).

But how far can one reasonably push such a non-anthropocentric reading of *Le Crépuscule du soir*? To what extent does this poem move away from human figures that manifest themselves through choices and actions, and towards modes of happening, modes of doing that escape both the narratorial voice and the characters we encounter in the poem? Most of Baudelaire’s readers have tended to focus on the human subjects in the poem, addressing complex issues relating to the voice of the narrator, the actions of his friends, intersubjectivity, and the problem of irony, for instance. This reading, however, will leave such issues aside and instead deliver a non-anthropocentric reading.

So let me propose a slight hyperbole: there is almost nothing about subjectivities and identities in this poem. At least, not in the existential sense of human subjects becoming (or betraying) themselves through various kinds of agency. In *Le Crépuscule du soir*, no one is more than a momentary crystallisation of a mood that seems to roll in from the mountains. This mood is filtered through clouds before it eventually takes the immaterial ‘form’ of an ‘ululation’ (‘lamentation’, my translation) – a word that very appropriately seems to unravel syllable by syllable, ending up as little more than the modulation of a sound. Furthermore, darkness itself is constantly modulating. The poem moves swiftly from one metaphor to the next,

thereby first of all demonstrating its own inability to capture the darkness. Already, after the first two paragraphs, the twilight has been associated with colours, different sounds, a tide, and a tempest brewing in the distance. Using a contemporary vocabulary to characterize *Le Crépuscule du soir*, it can thus be said that the poem maps an affective ecology that floods the various elements and characters presented. True, it would be too much to suggest that there are no human characters in the text – that the poem is ‘nonhuman’ – but it is reasonable to argue that human characters aren’t privileged, that the poem is thoroughly non-anthropocentric.

To understand this non-anthropocentric form of being, and its implications for how we think our relations to the world, we can turn to Gilbert Simondon’s idea of the ‘*individu-milieu*’. With this notion, Simondon is aiming to conceptualize what can now be called the co-evolution of beings and environment. Simondon underlines two things: first, that the *individu-milieu* never exhausts the environment that it mediates; and next, that the environment is never only ‘one’. He introduces these ideas in a dense but crucial passage from his major work *L’individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et d’information* (1964):

Thus, the individual is to be understood as having a relative reality, occupying only a certain phase of the whole being in question – a phase that therefore carries the implication of a preceding preindividual state, and that, even after individuation, does not exist in isolation, since individuation does not exhaust in the single act of its appearance all the potentials embedded in the preindividual state. Individuation, moreover, not only brings the individual to light but also the individual-milieu dyad. In this way, the individual possesses only a relative existence in two senses: because it does not represent the totality of the being, and because it is merely the result of a phase in the being’s development during which it existed neither in the form of an individual nor as the principle of individuation.<sup>9</sup>

With Simondon, we thus distance ourselves from an idea of individuals interacting. Instead, he focuses on what he calls pre-individual processes of becoming that

temporarily produce individuals as environments. In this manner he moves from a logic of inter- (as in ‘intersubjectivity’, ‘interaction’ and ‘interrelated’, for instance) towards a logic of trans- (as in ‘transindividuation’, ‘transduction’ and ‘transitional’). The characters in *Le Crépuscule du soir* seem to be precisely such *individus-milieus*, transitory figures modulated by the hydraulics of the dying light. They do not exhaust the affective environment presented in the poem; rather the mood runs through them, and through the text. More precisely: this mood manifests itself *as* text. The poem thereby registers how the mood (in-)forms the various poor and rich citizens – almost like a virus or an electronic pulse. And this virus (like most viruses) transmutes as it moves along: coming in from the mountains, affecting the characters it encounters, and (we must imagine) receding as the light reappears.

Brian Massumi writes that in our time will and affectivity are very often in a state of indistinction (*The Power at the End of Economy*, 47). Something similar can be said about the world of Baudelaire’s poem. Agency cannot be located at any precise point – instead the poem offers a radical challenge to conventional ideas of choice, action, causality and subjectivity. Nowhere is this communicated more clearly than in the anecdote about the two mad friends. Their actions seem to happen independently of their will and independently of any form of conscious decision. A deed is done through them, ‘choice happens’, ‘decision happens’ as if a particular kind of intensity is seeking an outlet (*The Power at the End of Economy*, 19-20). In Baudelaire’s poem, this challenge to more classical ideas about subjectivity (and its relation to choice and agency) also results from complex and precise linguistic crafting (which largely amounts to a destabilisation of linguistic conventions). In the present context, a brief analysis of this work will have to suffice.



If we consider the verbal and syntactical structures in the poem, it becomes clear how often these prevent us from determining ‘whom’, if anyone, is the cause of ‘what’. This is communicated from the laconic beginning of the text: ‘Le jour tombe’. The three-word sentence presents a noun and a verb in the present tense; the grammatical subject is performing an act, the verb is active – it could hardly be more straightforward. But we might begin by asking to what extent ‘falling’ can accurately be described as an act. Grammatically, the verb is active, but semantically the idea of falling is more commonly associated with passivity; it is often something that happens to you, against your will. Staying with the grammatical subject (‘le jour’) it is remarkable not only that a nonhuman element ‘acts’ (our language is full of such expressions, but that does not make them any less noteworthy), but also that this subject could be replaced by its antonym (‘la nuit’) without causing the denotative meaning of the sentence to change (‘le jour tombe’ = ‘la nuit tombe’, hence the English translation ‘evening falls’). The three-word opening thereby immediately begins to build a zone of indistinction where identities disappear (‘jour’ equals ‘nuit’) and things happen without actions being initiated. Although the poem cannot yet be called outright disturbing, these forms of indistinction already begin to build a worrying universe, enhanced by the signification of ‘tombe’ as noun (a grave), and the subversive take on the biblical links between order, light and creation: *let there be darkness*.

The remaining part of the opening paragraph continues to eat away at identities and agency. First, the text uses a passive voice (‘Un grand apaisement *se fait* dans les pauvres esprits fatigués’ [‘A great sense of peace pervades poor spirits...’]) to undermine any clear idea of agency (who acts here?). Then it repeats the trick from the opening sentence, introducing another grammatically active verb

that confuses our attempts to determine who acts: ‘et leur pensées prennent maintenant les couleurs tendres et indécises du crépuscule’ (‘and their thoughts now assume the tender and indeterminate colours of dusk’). Here the verb ‘prennent’ might suggest that the subject (‘leurs pensées’) acts, but it actually seems to describe something like a reflection (as in the ‘reflection of light’: ‘les pensées’ reflect what is happening around them), thereby turning the grammatical subject into the object. In this manner, the sentence brings together two different views of cognition. The more active reading of ‘prendre’ suggests a form of cognition that we might, simplistically, call Cartesian, Hegelian or Sartrean: thinking as a form-giving activity through which the subject gradually builds itself. On the other hand, the reactive meaning of ‘prendre’ points to an environmental conception of thinking: thinking as a responsive act in which we are affected by impulses in the environment. In Baudelaire’s grammatical construction, these two views of cognition – these two meanings of the word reflective – are scrambled.<sup>10</sup>

At a more macro-narrative level, the poem creates a flat ontology, often doing away with the distinction between living and non-living entities. Not only is ‘the day/night falling’, but windows speak and the poet addresses twilight apostrophically (‘Dusk, how gentle and tender you are!’). At the crucial point towards the end of the text where readers might expect the narrative to come to an end, and a moral (however ambiguous) to emerge, some very complex syntactical structures (introducing elaborate metaphors) guarantee that the ambiguity reaches a new climax. The metaphors in the final two paragraphs create a semantic overload that it is virtually impossible to bring back to a linear narrative logic. The logic of the last paragraph can be summed up like this: the twilight resembles a dress decorated with

stars that represent the sparks of a fantasy that only the Night lights up. Again, it is very difficult to pinpoint *whom* does *what*.

If we add these observations to the mysterious sounds that well forth from the mountains, it is clear that the poem pulls away from causal logics, away from subject-object relations, and instead creates a climate of indistinction. This climate points to a new conception of subjectivity – the ‘individu-milieu’ – that resonates (and can be read) with contemporary affect theory. The poem can be summed up: as night falls, Paris and its inhabitants become an environment in which modulations play out. But how does such a reading compare to earlier readings?

### **Phenomenology and Spiritual Materialism: Poulet and Poe**

In some respects, this non-anthropocentric reading sounds familiar. Baudelaire himself writes about intensities, and (as we shall soon see) several of his readers have picked up on the links between intensity and affectivity. More generally, mid- to late 19<sup>th</sup> century French poetry has long been known as an art of suggestion, music, and everything that exceeds the representational (‘peindre non la chose, mais l’effet qu’elle produit’ [‘Paint not the thing but the effect it produces’], as Mallarmé famously put it).<sup>11</sup> We might therefore ask why (or indeed ‘if’) it is helpful to bring in Brian Massumi, Gilbert Simondon, Steven Shaviro and others who do not write about Baudelaire, when these topics have already been approached by Baudelaire scholars. We might ask where the difference between a non-anthropocentric reading and these previous readings lies.

In particular, many of the points made in the section above seem close to readings delivered by Geneva school critics such as Jean-Pierre Richard and Georges Poulet in the mid-1950s and early 60s. Poulet and Richard tend to focus on the

sensuous aspect of Baudelaire's writings, the spatial and temporal characteristics of his poetic universe, and the various movements we find in his texts. With this interest in space, sensation and movement, they largely pull away from psychology, sociology and politics to concentrate instead on delivering sophisticated analyses of something that resembles the moods described above.

Consider the very first page of Poulet's Baudelaire chapter in *Les Métamorphoses du cercle*. Poulet opens with a short passage from Baudelaire's early essay on Poe, then weaves this citation together with other brief excerpts from texts by Baudelaire and observations of his own. In this manner, there emerges a description of what I have called 'Baudelaire's affective ecology'. But Poulet and Richard are not only describing – their particular style of writing *performs* the ecological ethos of Baudelaire's poetry. Destabilising distinctions between critic and object of study, Poulet lets the poetry speak through a voice that no longer has a single point of origin:

"Nature... quivers with a supernatural and galvanic quivering." It is by this quivering that everything in Baudelaire begins. At certain hours, "admirable hours, veritable festivals of the brain," objects suddenly find themselves decked with more vivid colors, endowed with a strange setting off, with a keen resonance: "sounds ring musically, colors speak." An exceptional energy makes everything tremulous. They sparkle, resound, trepidate. To be is no longer enough with them, they come alive. To this intensity bursting everywhere outside, there corresponds a similar intensity within. It is the time when "the more vigilant senses perceive more reverberating sensations," in which "all sublime thought is accompanied by a nervous shaking." Things vibrate, thought vibrates. A vibration which is in every contour, noise, or color without, in every idea within. Or rather, there is neither within nor without, simply the sudden and multiple apparition, somewhere, in the perceptive field, of the same vibrating insensibility.<sup>12</sup>

According to Poulet, Baudelaire's imagination begins with *vibration*, with intensity, with 'une extrême énergie', or, as Baudelaire also evokes in his texts on Guys and

Wagner, for instance, with *electricity*. This, I argued above, is exactly what *Le Crépiscule du soir* proposes: intense affective vibration. But Poulet's opening paragraph can be said to give the optimistic counterpoint to the more ambiguous and at times outrightly disturbing nocturnal vibration (the 'ululation') that resonates through – or rather *as* – *Le Crépiscule du soir*. Poulet's opening page also suggests a flat, vitalist ontology in which there are no strong distinctions between things and thought. Like contemporary new materialist philosophy, he seems to emphasise that all is 'vibrant matter' (to borrow the title of Jane Bennett's influential study).<sup>13</sup> As Poulet writes in the next paragraph, we are in a world where 'there is no relation' (267): everything is so inextricably linked up that even the idea of relation is misguided. In the terms used above: we have moved from the logic captured by the prefix 'inter-' to that captured by 'trans-'.

But Poulet's (and Richard's) text(s) do not stay this close to Massumi (or Jane Bennett) throughout. Instead, Poulet moves back towards questions of consciousness and subjectivity, back into the zone of relations, back into a dualist, phenomenological framework. After a long opening, Poulet begins to describe the various stages that Baudelaire's consciousness goes through in an attempt to mediate its relation to the world. In a very narrative-driven, tripartite account we then follow Baudelaire's search for a figure that is open and directed, mobile and concentrated, a figure capable of mediating between the eternal and the transitory. Poulet ends up with the thyrsus being Baudelaire's answer to the problem of mediating between consciousness and world.

The difference between the Geneva school critics and the non-anthropocentric reading offered above can therefore be associated with the complex issue of how a phenomenological understanding of subjectivity compares with an affective,

Simondon-inspired conception of subjectivation. If we schematize, Simondon's point is that whereas most philosophers (including the phenomenologists) have begun their thinking of subjectivity by presupposing an 'individual' that then has to negotiate its relations to the world, we should begin with the 'process of individuation'. This is why the Simondon passage I cited above is preceded by the announcement of something like a Copernican revolution:

It is my intention to demonstrate *the need for a complete change* in the general approach to the principle governing individuation. The process of individuation must be considered primordial, for it is this process that at once brings the individual into being and determines all the distinguishing characteristics of its development, organisation and modalities. Thus, the individual is to be understood as having a relative reality... ('The Genesis of the Individual', 300)

For Simondon, process, or movement, precedes individual consciousness. To understand his conception of individuation, Anne Sauvagnargues explains, it is therefore necessary to 'pass from an ontology of being to an ontology of becoming'.<sup>14</sup> Or as Miguel de Bestegui writes: "[t]he shift, then, is from beings as things to being as event".<sup>15</sup> On his very first page, it seems that Poulet is making exactly this shift, but eventually he moves to a more classical (dualist) phenomenology in which the individual consciousness is mediating its relation to an external world.<sup>16</sup>

Going back to Baudelaire, my point is that this difference between a phenomenological reading and an affective, non-anthropocentric reading is worth considering when looking at the poetic texts. We can imagine a reading of *Le Crépuscule du soir* that is concerned with how a certain number of characters behave in Paris at night. This reading might, for instance, be interested in modern psychology, that of the characters, that of the narrator; it might be interested in irony, that of the narrator in particular. This reading might view Paris as a setting for poetry

about human interactions. But we can also – less anthropocentrically – approach *Le Crépuscule du soir* as a poem about how a specific affective ecology (in-)forms and modulates subjectivities. This reading (my reading) would want to stress that Baudelaire’s poem works against our desire to think agency in individual and individualizing terms. It would emphasize that the characters (who are obviously there) are ‘des individus-milieus’. Similarly, some readers may consider ‘le spleen de Paris’ as the name of what is essentially a psychological condition shared by the narrator(s) and the inhabitants of Paris. Other readers may argue that spleen is a mood that pervades Paris, that it is indistinguishable from Paris, and that the very heterogeneous and complex gallery of people and narratorial voices that we encounter on our way through the collection are little more than different temporary crystallisations of this elusive, affective state. In my opinion, the widespread focus on characters (and at times, but not always, their psychology) does not fully capture what is going on in Baudelaire’s poetry.<sup>17</sup> As Poulet’s opening page suggested, there is also what we might call a vibrant or vitalist materialism that troubles the existential, psychological and phenomenological frameworks.<sup>18</sup> To further explain the importance of this vitalist materialism for Baudelaire’s work, let me sketch a line of argument that goes through Poe and *Le Salon de 1846*.

Poulet’s chapter began with a citation from an early Baudelaire text about Poe. Poulet erased (and paraphrased) a part of the passage: ‘la nature *dite inanimée participe de la nature des êtres vivants, et, comme eux, frissonne d’un frisson surnaturel et galvanique*’ [‘So-called inanimate nature participates in the nature of living beings, and, like them, trembles with a supernatural and galvanic trembling’].<sup>19</sup> The restored part (here in italics) highlights what we already know from our reading of *Le Crépuscule du soir*: Baudelaire seeks to undo distinctions between living and

‘so-called’ (i.e. ‘wrongly called’) non-living organisms. He is making the point that agency is more evenly distributed than we often care to think. He is making a point about the inextricability of human beings and their environments, about ‘des individus-milieus’ and ‘des milieux-individualisés’ – about pervasive electricity, vibrant matter, and various forms of quivering (‘frissonnement’).

That Baudelaire should make this point in a text on Poe is far from accidental. His very first Poe translation was of a short fictional dialogue called *The Mesmeric Revelation*. This text presents Poe’s idiosyncratic negotiations with Epicurean or Lucretian ontology. A man is first hypnotized and then interviewed about life and death. At some point during the interview he dies, but the hypnosis allows the talking to continue. As in some of Poe’s more famous tales, *The Oval Portrait* (1842) and *The Facts in the Case of Mr. Valdemar* (1845), we do not know exactly when death occurs, and we therefore do not know if the voice presenting its worldview is that of a subject or an object. This is most appropriate because the voice, dead or alive, outlines an ontology in which distinctions between mind and matter (and God) disappear.

A particularly striking passage from Poe’s text opens with the sentence that Baudelaire seems to be referring to in the syntagm that Poulet omitted from his article. Poe’s mesmerized protagonist explains:

The atmosphere, for example, impels the electric principle, while the electric principle permeates the atmosphere. These gradations of matter increase in rarity or fineness, until we arrive at a matter *unparticled* – without particles – indivisible – *one*; and here the law of impulsion and permeation is modified. The ultimate, or unparticled matter, not only permeates all things but impels all things – and thus *is* all things within itself. This matter is God. What men attempt to embody in the word ‘thought,’ is this matter in motion.<sup>20</sup>



The passage contains its fair share of speculative metaphysics, but it clearly describes an ultimate level where matter can no longer be particled, where atmosphere and electricity cannot be separated. This matter is first called God – and when it infuses (or impels) the particles, we call it ‘thought’. Poe’s hypnotized and possibly dead narrator thus presents a radical idea of God as unparticled matter (or perfected matter), God in motion as thought, and thought impelling all things, setting the world in motion.

It is striking how these speculations resonate with Baudelaire’s writings about colour in the 1846 *Salon*.<sup>21</sup> Significantly, Baudelaire’s text contains no references to God or a God-in-motion called thought, but he shares with Poe the vibrant ontology, the idea of mattering as a movement that animates the universe. He thus delivers a very vitalist account of how shades and colour produce a universe in motion:

Let us imagine a beautiful expanse of nature where the prevailing tones are greens and reds, melting into each other, shimmering in the chaotic freedom [Supposons un bel espace de nature où tout verdoie, rougeie, poudroie et chatoie en pleine liberté], where all things, diversely coloured as their molecular structure dictates, changing every second through the interplay of light and shade, and stimulated inwardly by latent heat, vibrate perpetually, imparting movement to all the lines and confirming the law of perpetual and universal motion.<sup>22</sup>

In this theory of vibrant matter, qualities – such as colours (vert, rouge) – become activities; adjectives become verbs (verdoie, rougeie). None of this is tied up with human agency and/or subjectivity. Rather, as in Massumi’s account of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s theory of expression, we find that ‘expression is abroad in the world’.<sup>23</sup> This expression is an energetic, material and ecological process that depends on a mixture of ‘the interplay of light and shade’ (as when ‘le jour tombe’) and movements ‘stimulated inwardly by latent heat’ (‘le travail intérieur du calorique’).<sup>24</sup>

What such passages point to is nothing new: a 19<sup>th</sup> century version of ‘materialism’ that seems to disregard distinctions between what many 20<sup>th</sup> century thinkers would see as the radically different fields of poetic and scientific discourses.<sup>25</sup> What deserves to be emphasized here, however, are the ways in which such passages on matter resonate with contemporary critical theory. Like many contemporary writers, Baudelaire – his ontology, his theory of colour – invites us to think about happenings and doings that challenge anthropocentric frameworks. The texts cited above promote an idea of human beings caught up in more general vital processes. In other words, Baudelaire’s spiritual materialism resonates with a number of contemporary theorisations of what it means to be human in the age of the anthropocene. Obviously, this does not mean that we should now simply embrace what we previously considered as the reactive and mystical dimension in Baudelaire’s work. However, with our increased awareness of the inextricability of humans and environments, it may be possible to consider this non-anthropocentric ontology in a different light. At this point, it is appropriate to turn to Ross Chambers’ recent monograph, *An Atmospherics of the City – Baudelaire and the Poetics of Noise*.<sup>26</sup>

### **The Politics of (reading) *Le Crépuscule*: Chambers and Williams**

In some respects, the affective, ecological reading of Baudelaire resembles Ross Chambers’ analysis. This does not mean that *An Atmospherics of the City* references any of the literature associated with the nonhuman turn (nor does it mean that Chambers is rehabilitating a mystical dimension in Baudelaire’s work). When Chambers writes about affect, he does not use Massumi’s distinction between affects and emotion; when he discusses the theme of entropy, he is not referring to recent new materialist interest in the work of Robert Smithson; and when he analyzes the

function of noise he does not have Ray Brassier or other speculative realists in mind. Nevertheless, the extent to which Chambers' text resonates with this recent literature is striking.

*An Atmospherics of the City* deserves a more detailed discussion than can be offered here. It contains an argument about the overall arc of Baudelaire's writing, from the early poetry's fetishisation of beauty and the eternal, to the later writings' surrender to noise, dirt and time. It presents interesting reflections on allegory and irony as strategies that Baudelaire uses (in my terms) to gradually, but never fully, step out of an anthropocentric perspective. And it advances a series of reflections on literary genres that will have to be left aside here. I am introducing Chambers' book because it allows us to focus on politics.

What are the politics of *Le Crépuscule du soir*? And what are the politics of a reading emphasising the non-anthropocentric dimensions of the text? This article has highlighted how the poem works to challenge conventional understandings of agency (for instance, by disturbing our desire to think agency in individual and individualizing terms), disturb cause-effect logics, and pull us towards the idea of an 'individu-milieu'. What remains of politics in this affective ecology? Chambers does not consider *Le Crépuscule du soir*, but he nevertheless provides us with one way of answering such a question. Let us therefore begin with the question of agency in *An Atmospherics of the City*.

On the one hand, Chambers clearly operates with an idea of Baudelairean agency. From the opening pages, he explains that Baudelaire sees 'the practice of modern art as an atmospherics of urban life [...] *making sensible* the dimension of strangeness inherent, most notably, in the "moving chaos"<sup>27</sup> of the familiar urban street' (*Atmospherics*, 3). This helps to 'awak[en] the poet's readers to the

unconscious state of alienation in which they lived' (3). Chambers describes this 'making sensible' as Baudelaire's poetic *act*, and in many passages it is therefore logical to conclude that Chambers sees Baudelaire as a poet who is aiming to demystify and disalienate readers, thereby making them sense and understand the modern world. This account of Baudelaire's 'long struggle to invent an alternative poetics [capable] of drawing attention to [...] the dangerous reality of atmospheric noise' (147) remains a key aspect of Chambers' analysis and entails a strong sense of the poet as an acting subject.

On the other hand, there are also moments when Chambers nuances this idea about Baudelairean agency and the 'long struggle' against alienation. When analyzing the poetry, Chambers often writes about what this article has called – borrowing a term from Simondon – a process of crystallisation. Discussing *Les Sept vieillards*, he explains that the first *vieillard* materializes 'as a kind of condensation of the ambient atmosphere or an emanation from out of its damp foggiess' (95), and later he suggests that the poem as a whole can be seen as 'a phenomenon comparable with the way a storm evolves out of the build-up of atmospheric pressure that precedes and produces it, as if it were a precipitate of that heavy and foreboding atmosphere' (101). In other sections, he insists that 'what is active both in Baudelaire's late verse and in his prose poems, therefore, is an atmosphere' (59). In such passages, Chambers draws near to the non-anthropocentric reading offered here; agency is difficult to place – or it is, as in this last citation, placed with the 'atmosphere'.

If changes and events are also meteorological and acoustic phenomena, what then happens to the idea of the poet as an acting man? Analyzing *Perte d'auréole* (where the poet-narrator slips in the street and loses his halo), Chambers explains that 'Baudelaire [...] has stumbled, literally, into an understanding of poetic practice that

implies effacement, discretion, restraint: an abandonment of all forms of poetic resistance – that is of “heroism” – in the face of the conditions of modern life’; and the poet will now attempt to pull the reader into this ‘disalienating encounter’ (136). In this passage, Chambers (successfully, in my opinion) brings the subjective and the non-anthropocentric together: we have an ‘act’ of stumbling (which, as we saw in the analysis of ‘Le jour tombe’, is hardly an act) that is followed by an act of pulling. More generally, *Le Spleen de Paris* is presented as ‘nearly anonymous writing’ (156) in which a poet, by intentionally giving himself over to a particular situation, offers the reader ‘a sort of poetic chantier’ (159) where we, the readers, must then go to work.

In these ways, Chambers’ argument approaches a non-anthropocentric view of Baudelaire’s prose poetry, but nevertheless retains a sense of agency. Baudelaire’s ‘agency’ has to do with impersonality and effacement, with actively giving himself over (what Chambers calls ‘a kind of denial of self by means of an actively *assumed* anonymity’ (132)). Similarly to what we saw above when analysing of verbal structures in *Le Crépuscule*, Chambers can therefore argue that Baudelaire’s late work challenges the distinction between activity and passivity. The poet has the courage and sensitivity to allow his poetry to become a symptom of atmospheric changes, and he is therefore (these are my terms and not Chambers’) best understood as a seismograph for a particular quake in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century France, registering the entropic *Zeitgeist*.

Chambers’ book can now be placed in proximity to Raymond Williams’ famous idea about ‘structures of feeling’, even if this notion, which has become so important in recent affect theory, does not appear in *An Atmospherics of the City*.<sup>28</sup> Williams introduced the idea in the hope of paving the way for a subtler form of

Marxism than the one he found to be dominant in the late 1950s to mid-1960s. According to Williams, Marxist cultural criticism was generally operating with a very rigid distinction between superstructure and base: ideology was viewed as a set of fixed doctrines produced by the base. Marxists were therefore stuck with a mechanistic view of the social. To counter this view, Williams introduced what he called the 'cultural hypothesis' of 'a structure of feeling': 'Meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt'.<sup>29</sup> He associated it with 'elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships' (ibid.). He furthermore insisted that the natural environment (for instance the Welsh landscapes) informed such structures of feeling.<sup>30</sup> And he gave art and literature a particular role in relation to these structures of feeling: because art is a living form ('structured formation'), it is capable of registering structures of feeling while avoiding their reification.

This comparison with Chambers and Williams allows us to specify the political nature of Baudelaire's *Le Crépuscule du soir* (and, by extension, the question of reading non-anthropocentrically). In order to do so, let me propose the following starting point: *Baudelaire's poem gives form to a mid-nineteenth-century structure of feeling*. This is only a starting point. The rest of this article will work towards a rephrasing by considering three aspects of the sentence: the first and longest point will focus on 'feelings', while the last two will address the phrases 'gives form' and 'mid-nineteenth-century'.

*Le Crépuscule du soir* differs from the poems that Chambers has chosen to prioritise. With Chambers' key examples we are largely within the well-known horizon of modern, Haussmannian Paris. If we seek to locate agency, doing so is therefore more straightforward than it is with *Le Crépuscule du soir*. When Chambers

notes that the atmosphere ‘acts’, this atmosphere – the noise, the horse manure on the streets, the gas lamps, etc. – can be understood as the result of human activity and enterprise. Haussmann (and many other men) changed Paris, and those changes (were) gathered in Baudelaire’s noisy (and smelly?) city poems. Chambers’ text therefore remains anchored in a socio-political tradition for which the key term is ‘modernity’; in this tradition the human being is never far from the centre.

*Le Crépuscule du soir* is also a city poem, but it is a half-hearted one. It is less concerned with modernity than the later prose poems. The narrator is not yet in the street but on his balcony; when darkness rolls in from the hills, his attention is directed towards a world that lies beyond the perimeter of Haussmannian modernity. *Le Crépuscule* is not exactly a loud poem either. True, there are several sounds in the poem: a ‘great howling’ and ‘discordant cries’ modulate into the more discreet ‘ululation’. But as we move along, these sounds tend to disappear, and the uncanny atmosphere of the poem has as much to do with silence as it has with the noises of the modern city: Baudelaire is also a great poet of those mysterious moments when the universe seems to hold its breath (as in *Les Chats* for instance). With *Le Crépuscule du soir*, a less anthropocentric world is drawn up, and the twilight (in so far as it initiates the ‘action’) can hardly be brought within the horizon of modernity.

Because agency is more difficult to place in this poem than it is in the modern atmospheres that Chambers prioritises, *Le Crépuscule du soir* is also harder to retrieve for a traditional understanding of progressive politics.<sup>31</sup> This might explain why Chambers’ preference goes towards the later poems, and why it is easy to conclude that *Le Crépuscule du soir* is an example of the more mystical dimension in Baudelaire’s work. But in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as we grow accustomed to questioning our inability to look beyond the human, we may no longer feel confident about

marginalising what disturbs our ideas of Baudelaire's modernity. We may even suggest that the contemporaneity of a poem such as *Le Crépuscule du soir* also has to do with the fact that it offers a more profound destabilisation of the anthropocentric perspective than the kind we find in purer examples of city poetry: whereas *Le Crépuscule du soir* disturbs our inclination towards anthropocentrism, the city poems often feed this inclination through their very act of critiquing human behaviour.

I would therefore like to rephrase the formulation given above that Baudelaire's poem gives form to a mid-nineteenth-century structure of feeling by suggesting that *Le Crépuscule du soir* expresses a structure of *affectivity*. The renaming (replacing 'feelings' with 'affectivity') is important in so far as it identifies this challenge to our anthropocentric habits. This crepuscular structure of affectivity is a heterogeneous assemblage in which even Poe's obscure speculations deserve reconsideration. Many readers will feel uncomfortable with this reconsideration – they will be suspicious of a mystical dimension. But we have to remember that the poem does not encourage the *embrace* of a mystic dimension; in fact, readers are meant to be troubled by *Le Crépuscule du soir*. And precisely because the poem writes forth an unsettling ecology in which no reader feels at home, I believe that this dimension has the perhaps unintended, but potentially progressive, side-effect of inviting us to imagine a notion of life that doesn't begin and end with the human figure.<sup>32</sup>

My second remark concerns the verbal structure in our reformulated sentence (Baudelaire's poem *gives form* to a mid-nineteenth-century structure of affectivity). It is important to hold on to the idea of Baudelaire's prose poetry as a seismograph. But is also important to realize that by offering itself as a seismograph to readers, the poetry contributes to – and affects – the structures it expresses. Poetry is not a passive



medium for the expression of a *Zeitgeist*; rather, it generates affectivity and subjectivity, and as such it is part of the social production and circulation of its time. Therefore, the idea of *giving form* must go hand in hand with an idea of Baudelaire's poetry as interference in the affective ecology of his time. Again, there is no clear distinction between passivity and activity; the poem expresses, and this expressive event stimulates new processes of becoming. Some readers may be keen to explain these changes using the well-known grammar of subjects, objects and actions, but my argument is that Baudelaire's poem precisely encourages us to think critically about this grammar and our fidelity to it.

Finally, it is important to add that the poem's interference in the structure of affectivity has ongoing implications. This article has attempted to tackle the complex question of how *Le Crépiscule du soir* speaks to the present. It has emphasised that *Le Crépiscule du soir* is a poem that allows us to examine a mid-nineteenth-century structure of affectivity. With this comes an invitation to think subjectivities as (Simondonian) 'individus-milieus'; and therefore the poem also urges us to familiarise ourselves with what can be described as a non-anthropocentric ontology. My argument has *not* been that Baudelaire's poetry maps a modernity that is comparable to the world in which we live today. Many critics have argued this point, but I am not only suspicious of the homogenisation of 'the present' that such a reading implies, but also, more simply, unconvinced that this argument remains true today (the shocks and surprises associated with crowded streets, unexpected gazes and the sudden confrontations of rich and poor, etc. are certainly more of his time than of ours). Rather than aiming to minimise the distance between 'the present' and the world *represented* in Baudelaire's poetry, I have argued that Baudelaire's affectively charged poetry generates subjectivity in a manner that anticipates

contemporary theorisations of what it means to be human. In contradistinction to a rich tradition of sociologically inflected Baudelaire readings (many of which rank among the most interesting and stimulating we have), I have therefore suggested that maybe the so-called ‘mystical’ aspect of Baudelaire’s poetry needs to be reconsidered, as it plays a part in the production of affectivity and subjectivity. This dimension of Baudelaire’s poetry disturbs the anthropocentrism of the more sociological readings, and thereby produces a hesitation that allows a careful consideration of our entanglement in the world.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes, *Criticism and Truth*, trans. Katrine Keuneman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 1. Unless otherwise noted, emphases are (as here) in the original.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Grusin, *The Nonhuman Turn* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> For instance, in many texts by Timothy Morton (English romantic poetry, in particular) and Steven Shavero (science fiction). Rosi Braidotti explicitly refers to Barthes’ critique of the ideal of ‘faithfulness to the text’ when she (with the help of George Eliot and Virginia Woolf) presents her critical ideal: ‘the creative capacity that consists in being able to remember and to endure the affective charges of texts as events’ (Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman*. (London: Polity Press, 2013), 166).

<sup>4</sup> Tiqqun, *Théorie du Bloom*. (Paris: Éditions La fabrique, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *The Prose Poems and La Fanfarlo*, trans. and intro. by Rosemary Lloyd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 63.

<sup>6</sup> French original from Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres Complètes vol. 1. Texte établi, présenté et annoté par C. Pichois* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), 315.

<sup>7</sup> Steven Shavero, *Post-Cinematic Affect* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2010), 8.

<sup>8</sup> Massumi’s early work received a lot of criticism for establishing too rigid a distinction between affects and emotions. In the recent *The Power at the End of the Economy*, it is perhaps clearer that instead of a dichotomy between emotion and

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affect, we should think of a dynamic relation in which emotion can be seen as the always incomplete capture of affect: ‘affect is autonomous to the degree to which it escapes confinement in the particular body whose vitality, or potential for interaction, it is. Formed, qualified, situated perceptions and cognitions fulfilling functions of actual connection or blockage are the capture and closure of affect. Emotion is the intensest (most contracted) expression of that capture – and of the fact that something has always and again escaped’ (Brian Massumi, *The Power at the End of Economy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 106).

<sup>9</sup> Gilbert Simondon: ‘The Genesis of the Individual’, in *Incorporations*, eds. Jonathan Crary and Sanford Kwinter (New York, Zone Books, 1992), 300.

<sup>10</sup> Massumi writes that ‘a jellyfish is its brain’ (Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 36-37). By this he means that although the jellyfish does not think in the way that humans do, it still adjusts and responds to the environments in which it finds itself. It is a reflective animal. The point here is not that Baudelaire’s text’s (or Massumi, for that matter) suggests that human beings are reflective *only* in this sense of the word, the argument is that his poem draws attention to the fact that we are *also* reflective in this sense of the word.

<sup>11</sup> Stéphane Mallarmé, *Œuvres Complètes vol. 1*, éd. par Bertrand Marchal (Paris: Gallimard), 663. Translation from Roger Pearson, *Stéphane Mallarmé* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010), 48.

<sup>12</sup> Georges Poulet, *The Metamorphoses of the Circle*, trans. by Carley Dawson and Elliott Coleman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966), 266.

<sup>13</sup> Readers familiar with the so-called new materialist philosophy of writers such as Jane Bennett will appreciate just how contemporary Poulet’s description seems. It sounds as if has been pulled from Jane Bennett’s article on Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura*, or from her later book on *Vibrant Matter*. Reading Poulet’s opening page anachronistically we may say that he is trying to convince us that Baudelaire’s writings are a mix of new materialism and affect theory. (see Jane Bennett, ‘De Rerum Natura, *Strategies vol. 13-1* (2000): 9-22; and Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009)).

<sup>14</sup> Anne Sauvagnargues, ‘Crystals and Membranes: Individuation and Temporality’, in *Gilbert Simondon: Being and Technology*, eds. Arne de Boever, Alex Murray, Jon Roffe and Ashley Woodward (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 58.

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<sup>15</sup> Miguel de Bestegui, "Science and Ontology: From Merleau-Ponty's "Reduction" to Simondon's "Transduction"," in *Gilbert Simondon: Being and Technology*, ed. Arne de Boever, Alex Murray, Jon Roffe and Ashley Woodward (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 168.

<sup>16</sup> The relationship between a non-anthropocentric, Simondon-inspired reading of Baudelaire on the one hand, and a phenomenologically inclined reading on the other is more complex than these remarks suggest. The differences can be less pronounced; for instance, the late writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty – in particular his 1956-60 lectures on nature – come close to bridging the gap between phenomenology and Simondon, and more recently the critic Mark B. N. Hansen has attempted to construct a radically non-anthropocentric phenomenology. On the relations between Merleau-Ponty and Simondon see *Merleau-Ponty, Vie et individuation avec des inédits de Merleau-Ponty et Simondon*, eds. Renaud Barbaras, Mauro Carbone, Helen A. Fielding and Leonard Lawlor (Paris: Vrin, 2005); on Mark B. N. Hansen's 'phenomenology of implication' see his *Feed-Forward. On the Future of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Media* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015).

<sup>17</sup> After the *dédicace* emphasising how the *project* of allowing his poetry to be the symptom of an encounter with the modern city has escaped him, Baudelaire moves straight to *L'étranger*. This poem can be read as a subversive take on what would later be known as the filmic convention of the establishing shot (a convention that comes straight out of realist writing à la Balzac). Rather than grounding the titular character (and the collection more generally), the dialogue in *L'étranger* ungrounds, rather than panning over a cityscape, zooming in on Paris, Baudelaire tilts his camera to sky, weaving the title character into the movement of the clouds in the sky: from the outset we are in a universe of pure kinesis, movements without direction, 'a kind of ambient, free-floating sensibility' (as Steven Shaviro writes about the contemporary structure of feeling (*Post-Cinematic Affect*, 2)).

<sup>18</sup> Obviously, not all texts are equally non-anthropocentric. For instance, there are good reasons to continue to read *A une passante* as a poem about an encounter between a man and woman, a poem about inter-subjectivity. That said there are also good reasons to note that the man and the woman are always already superseded by environmental factors such as the 'rue assourdissante'; we may even want to speculate that the 'coup de foudre' only happens because she is particular kind of

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*individu-milieu*: the site of a meteorological phenomenon ('son œil, ciel livide où germe l'ouragan').

<sup>19</sup> French original from Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres Complètes vol. 2*, Texte établi, présenté et annoté par Claude Pichois (Paris: Gallimard), 318. English translation in Charles Baudelaire, *Flowers of Evil and Other Works, A Dual-Language Book*, ed. and trans. by Wallace Fowlie (New York: Dover Publications, 1992), 253.

<sup>20</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, *Tales, Poems, Essays*, intro. by Laurence Meynell (London: Collins, 1952), 552.

<sup>21</sup> Edgar Allan Poe's short story was written and first published in 1844. Exactly when Baudelaire read the story we do not know, but it is very possible that the *Salon* predates his discovery of Poe (most scholars give 1846 or 1847 as the year that Baudelaire first read Poe). Baudelaire's translation of *The Mesmeric Revelation* appeared in 1848 as *La Révélation magnétique*.

<sup>22</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, trans. and intro. by P.E. Charvet (London: Penguin, 1972), 54.

<sup>23</sup> 'The subject, its embodiment, the meaning and objects it might own, the institutions that come to govern them, these are all conduits through which a movement of expression streams. [...] Expression is always on the move, always engrossed in its own course, over-spilling individual experience'. (Brian Massumi: 'Introduction', in *A Shock to Thought: Expression after Deleuze and Guattari*, ed. Brian Massumi (London: Routledge, 2002), xxi).

<sup>24</sup> This last notion ('le calorique') refers to late 18<sup>th</sup> to mid-19<sup>th</sup> century theories about heat (by scientists such as Lavoisier, Joseph Black, Count Rumford and Laplace) according to which heat is a liquid or a gas running from warm bodies to cold.

<sup>25</sup> One aspect of this materialism was the interest in whether bodies produce electricity – what today is called bioelectromagnetics. The pioneer in this field was Luigi Galvani (1737-98) and his famous experiment with frogs and electricity. When 'la nature frissonne... d'un frisson surnaturel et galvanique', when bodies produce electricity like in *A une passante*, when Poe writes about mesmerised (and eventually dead) speaking bodies, when Baudelaire believes that colours must be linked to molecular energy consumption and production (the calorie being a unit for measuring energy), we are clearly in a world of 'spiritual materialism' (to borrow an expression from Artaud (see Antonin Artaud, *Œuvres*. (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), 701).

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<sup>26</sup> Ross Chambers, *An Atmospherics of the City: Baudelaire and the Poetics of Noise* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015).

<sup>27</sup> Chambers' quotation marks indicate that he is borrowing from Gérard de Nerval's *Sylvie*.

<sup>28</sup> See for instance: Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); and Steven Shaviro, *Post-Cinematic Affect* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2010).

<sup>29</sup> Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 132.

<sup>30</sup> See Raymond Williams, *Culture and Materialism* (London: Verso Books, 2005), 213-29.

<sup>31</sup> It is potentially misleading to present Chambers as someone who associates Baudelaire with a progressive politics. Rather, Chambers explains how Baudelaire gives up on the ideology of progress in the wake of his disappointment with the events of 1848-51. But precisely because he gives up on progress, he manages to liberate himself from idealisation and fetishisation, instead assuming the role of a seismograph for the contemporary structures of feeling. This allows readers to respond to his writing, to judge the alienation, progressively. In short, Chambers argues that Baudelaire becomes progressive when he ceases to believe in progress.

<sup>32</sup> Such forms of imagining do not guarantee a new progressive politics, but this is no reason to pull back: contemporary social and scientific developments are making it increasingly urgent to engage in a critical questioning that addresses – at the same time, without one undermining the other – classical social issues (such as the politics of redistribution and recognition) and the problematic belief in human exceptionalism.

<sup>33</sup> I would like to thank my colleagues Emily McLaughlin and Alastair Wright, as well as the two anonymous readers for *Modernism/Modernity*, for their critical suggestions.