“A Hole in a Paper Sky”: Pirandello, Baudelaire and the Crisis of Representation in Modernism

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Abstract

In this paper I investigate the ways in which Luigi Pirandello and Charles Baudelaire, as modernist authors, articulate and respond to the crisis of representation in modernism. Modernism is an aesthetic period governed by a series of crises, including the crisis of the general or metanarrative, the crisis of experience, and the crisis of history. These crises are tied to a Christian theological breakdown in which transcendence no longer gives purpose to immanence. In this paper I investigate the ways in which the crises that define modernism effect representation. I examine the way that allegory changes in modernism, and the way that Pirandello and Baudelaire both record and respond to the crisis of representation.

Without a Christian theological metanarrative or general, allegory in modernism ceases to function as it did in previous eras. This aesthetic crisis also has a psycho-social dimension in the realm of subjectivity. The modernist subject becomes more uncertain, more reflective, and more “pensive.” This “pensive” subject is an individual anxiously coping with the crises of modernity. The pensive subject sees life and experience as fragmented, and schemes or metanarratives that would organize the world as tentative at best. Walter Benjamin, in The Origin of German Tragic Drama, distinguishes allegory from symbol by describing it as a relationship between a general concept and the particularity of lived experience. Benjamin refers to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, whose concept of the symbol provides the fullness of immediate experience, whereas the notion of allegory requires mediation and process to derive meaning. The symbolic understanding of the world is what is lost in modernism; instead, a fractured form of allegory is what remains, leading to the creation of a new subjectivity. The transition to an allegorical style of writing marks the onset of modernism in literature. Pirandello sees allegory as a mode that is broken, and no longer functions for the
modern world. Baudelaire observes this problem and tries to rehabilitate the mode. In this way, Baudelaire in a sense responds to the crisis outlined by Pirandello.
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Introduction

In this paper I will investigate the ways in which Luigi Pirandello and Charles Baudelaire, as modernist authors, articulate and respond to the crisis of representation in modernism. Modernism is an aesthetic period governed by a series of crises, including the crisis of the general or metanarrative, the crisis of experience, and the crisis of history. These crises are tied to a Christian theological breakdown in which transcendence no longer gives purpose to immanence. This theological breakdown is part of what I will refer to as the crisis of the “universal.” A “universal” or “general” concept represents a scheme that would hold the world together, giving organization and purpose to all “ particulars” or details of everyday experience. Jean-Francois Lyotard, in “The Postmodern Condition,” defines “postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives” (356). This incredulity, or suspicion, of metanarratives has its origin in modernism. While postmodernism has become incredulous toward the metanarrative, as Lyotard argues, modernism is concerned with the decline of the metanarrative. Lyotard argues that “The grand narrative has lost its credibility” (359), and that this is “what the postmodern world is all about. Most people have lost the nostalgia for the lost narrative” (360). While postmodernism is marked by this lack of nostalgia and incredulity, modernism is a period which still keenly feels the decline of the metanarrative. This is what I will refer to as the “crisis of the universal,” or the crisis of the decline of an organizing structure that would give meaning and direction to everyday life. Lyotard describes metanarrative as “making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth” (355). The metanarrative in decline central to the crises of modernism is the falling away of a metaphysical background.
J. Hillis Miller, in his introduction to *The Disappearance of God*, argues that since the medieval period, literature is marked by the “Disappearance of God” from the world (1). Miller asserts that “The history of modern literature is in part the history of the splitting apart of this communion” between humanity and God (3). This theological rupture is recorded in literature, and modernist literature is largely an articulation of or response to this crisis. Miller argues that “modern literature betrays in its very form the absence of God. God has become a *Deus absconditus*, hidden somewhere behind the silence of infinite spaces, and our literary symbols can only make the most distant allusions to him” (6). While Miller himself seems caught up in just such the nostalgia for God that he describes, I will suggest that Pirandello and Baudelaire are not simply nostalgic; they pursue aesthetic projects that push beyond the realm of nostalgia into irony and experimentation with form. The ongoing Christian theological breakdown, the crisis of the metanarrative, significantly effects representation in modernism. The aesthetic crisis, the crisis of representation, is particularly relevant to the problem of form in the mode of allegory. Without a Christian theological metanarrative or “universal,” allegory in modernism ceases to function as it did in previous eras. This aesthetic crisis also has a psycho-social dimension in the realm of subjectivity. The modernist subject becomes more uncertain, more reflective, and more “pensive.” This “pensive” subject is an individual anxiously coping with the crises of modernity. The pensive subject sees life and experience as fragmented, and schemes or “metanarratives” that would organize the world as tentative at best.

I will first consider Luigi Pirandello’s focus on crisis, and then turn to Baudelaire, who responds to this crisis by challenging form. I will be studying Baudelaire as an aesthetic modernist, and I will be discussing modernism as an aesthetic principle, rather than a strictly temporal period. Jürgen Habermas, in “Modernity—an Incomplete Project,” asserts that
“The spirit and discipline of aesthetic modernity assumed clear contours in the work of Baudelaire.” (5). Baudelaire clearly understood himself to be a poet of “modernity.” In “Le peintre de la vie moderne” (“The Painter of Modern Life”), Baudelaire defines ‘modernity’ as “le transitoire, le fugitif, le contingent, la moitié de l’art, dont l’autre moitié est l’éternel et l’immovable” (“the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable”) (12). This definition reveals a preoccupation with instability and change, and sets modernity up for comparison with classical aesthetics of previous eras that strive to express permanence. Habermas observes that “the term ‘modern’ again and again expresses the consciousness of an epoch that relates itself to the past of antiquity, in order to view itself as the result of a transition from the old to the new” (3). Although Baudelaire presents a veneration of the “now,” he is also concerned with the decline of old forms, specifically allegory, and the rehabilitation of this form. It is in this way that Baudelaire seems to respond to the crisis of representation that Pirandello articulates in Il fu Mattia Pascal (The Late Mattia Pascal).

Walter Benjamin, in The Origin of German Tragic Drama, distinguishes allegory from symbol by describing it as a relationship between a general concept and the particularity of lived experience. Benjamin returns to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who writes of allegory that: “There is a great difference between a poet’s seeking the particular from the general and his seeing the general in the particular” (quoted in Benjamin161). Goethe asserts that “The former gives rise to allegory, where the particular serves only as an instance or example of the general; the latter, however, is the true nature of poetry: the expression of the particular without any thought of, or reference to, the general” (161). Goethe’s symbol provides the fullness of immediate experience, whereas allegory requires mediation and process to derive meaning. The symbolic understanding of the world is what is lost in
modernism; instead, a fractured form of allegory is what remains, leading to the creation of a new subjectivity. The transition to an allegorical style of writing marks the onset of modernism in literature. The loss of the universal and the shift towards allegory causes a change in subjectivity, which gives rise to the modernist pensive subject. Pirandello sees allegory as a mode that is broken, and no longer functions for the modern world. Baudelaire observes this problem and tries to rehabilitate the mode. In this way, Baudelaire in a sense responds to the crisis outlined by Pirandello. There has been little research into the overlap of Pirandello and Leopardi in the context of the cosmological rupture that both authors articulate. Similarly, there seems to be no criticism that connects Baudelaire and Pirandello in terms of responding to a crisis of representation, or more generally the crisis of the universal. In this paper I investigate the ways in which the crises that define modernism affect representation in the work of Pirandello, Leopardi, and Baudelaire. I will examine the way that allegory changes in modernism, and the way that Pirandello and Baudelaire record and respond to the crisis of representation.
Chapter 1: “A Hole in a Paper Sky”

Luigi Pirandello, in *The Late Mattia Pascal*, writes that the difference between ancient and modern tragedy is “a hole torn in a paper sky” (139). Pirandello imagines a marionette theatre production of *Orestes*, and suggests that if a hole were torn in the sky while Orestes was trying to avenge his father, Orestes would become distracted: “Orestes would still feel his desire for vengeance, he would still want passionately to achieve it, but his eyes, at that point, would go straight to that hole…Orestes would become Hamlet” (139). Pirandello in this way marks a transition between an ancient and a modern cosmology. The world of Orestes is one in which every particular is organized according to a universal scheme. Once this organized cosmology is punctured by the tiniest of holes, “from which every kind of evil influence would then crowd the stage” (139), Orestes would become overwhelmed by particulars, and paralyzed. Hamlet, who is overwhelmed by unbridled particulars, represents a precursor to the modernist subject. Pirandello uses the figure of Orestes as a symbol of the unified cosmology of the ancients. His life is governed by fate and necessity, and does not admit of contingency in the way that Hamlet’s life does. Orestes would see the heavens as complete; however, this is a tentative structure, much like the fabricated backdrop to the marionette play described by Pirandello. If a hole is torn in this paper sky, Orestes would become distracted, and unable to complete the task of avenging his father. He would instead become mired in reflection, much like Hamlet. For Pirandello, the constellations of the ancient world are an image of wholeness torn apart by the modern subject.

Pirandello suggests, “that’s the whole difference between ancient tragedy and modern…a hole torn in a paper sky” (139). Orestes, as a figure of antiquity, represents a subject who exists in a world where universals are intact. Orestes would see the heavens as
complete; his world is one in which every particular is linked to a general principle. In this way, Orestes lives in a world in which allegory is intact, as the particulars or details of narrative are tied to a universal principle, or metanarrative. For Pirandello, the general concept would be a cosmological principle that would lend organization to the particulars of everyday life. Orestes represents the unified cosmology of the ancients. He is capable of taking action, as he successfully avenges his father’s murder without excessive reflection. According to Pirandello, “Orestes would become Hamlet” if he were to tear a hole in the sky while trying to avenge his father, thus becoming distracted. In this way, Pirandello suggests that the organization of the constellations or the universe resembles an aesthetic construct, similar to the backdrop of a play. The constellations are an image of wholeness projected onto the sky; we complete the heavens by way of an image that does not really exist. The whole is thus only tentative, a projection. It is this realization, that the cosmos is indeed an aesthetic construct, which tears a hole in the “paper sky.” Modernism appears with a ruptured cosmology due to the tearing apart of previous structures of unity. For Pirandello, the unified structure is the cosmology of the ancients, represented in the figure of Orestes.

“Orestes would become Hamlet” because Hamlet serves as a precursor to the modernist, pensive subject due to his constant reflection. Distraction plays a key role in the creation of the modernist subject. Unlike Orestes, Hamlet becomes distracted in his efforts to avenge his father. Like Hamlet, the pensive subject becomes overwhelmed by unbridled particulars and paralyzed. Pirandello essentially creates a timeline with this incident. Orestes, a figure of antiquity, represents a unified world. Hamlet is more akin to the modernist subject, as he is unable to act. His distraction results from the crises of modernity, specifically the kind of hole in the sky articulated by Pirandello. In Pirandello’s novel, Mattia Pascal becomes the distracted Orestes. Mattia envies the “Lucky marionettes… over whose
wooden heads the false sky has no holes! No anguish or perplexity, no hesitations, obstacles, shadows, pity—nothing!” (140). Mattia has a lazy eye so he exists in perpetual distraction, mired in the contemplation of empty particulars. When the universal which organizes these particulars crumbles, the possibility of allegorical wholeness is torn apart, and the modernist individual becomes reflective and pensive, mired in his own subjectivity. Though “Orestes would become Hamlet,” Pirandello highlights a moment of rupture. *The Late Mattia Pascal* is an explicitly philosophical novel, and is largely concerned with crisis representation in modernist literature, and the crisis of allegory.

The text begins with two forewords, rather than the narrative itself. The first addresses the identity of the protagonist whereas the “Second Foreword (Philosophical) By Way of Being an Apology” frames the text as a vehicle for philosophical inquiry on behalf of Pirandello. The frame narrative introduced in the forewords explains that Mattia Pascal is writing his own life story from a position outside of his previous lives, stating that he has “died already twice” (xiv). He is now working as a librarian, sorting through piles of disorganized books in a deconsecrated church. From this unusual and allegorically significant location, he tells the story of how he almost unwittingly fakes his own death, wins a small fortune at a casino in Monte Carlo, and manages to escape his mundane life in a small town. After the death his infant twin daughters and the death of his mother town newspaper mistakenly identifies another man’s body as his. Freed from the burden of his nagging wife and mother-in-law, he travels around Europe, finally settling in Rome under a new identity. He attempts to establish a new life for himself as Adriano Meis, but finds that he is unable to participate meaningfully in life as he does not legally exist. He fakes a second death, and

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1 I have chosen to use the masculine form when referring to the modernist subject because for Pirandello, as well as Leopardi and Baudelaire, the subject is consistently male. Problematic as this may be, it is not the focus of my paper.
attempts to re-enter his previous life, only to find that his friends and family have moved on. Mattia explains in the “Second Foreword” that “I can consider myself already outside of life and therefore without obligations or scruples of any kind” (4). It is from this tertiary and removed position that he reflects on the disorganization of particulars, and problems of literary representation. Pirandello also uses the “Second Foreword” as a venue to consider the notion of rupture through the figure of Copernicus. He observes that modernity is the result of a Copernican revolution and identifies Copernicus as the cause of the problems of modernity. This portrayal of Copernicus is an allusion to Giacomo Leopardi’s dialogue “The Copernicus,” from his Operette Morali. Although Leopardi functions as a precursor of Pirandello, as acknowledged by Pirandello himself in his work Umorismo, his interpretation of the revolution is more humorous and less pessimistic. In contrast to Leopardi’s nostalgia, Pirandello’s attitude is ironic. The deconsecrated church which has become a library represents a crucial allegorical moment for Pirandello. The disorganization of books presents an ironic literalization of the cosmological question at the heart of Pirandello’s text.

**Contemporary Critical Perspectives**

Critical interpretations of the “Orestes” passage in *Il fu Mattia Pascal* have ranged from existentialist to Freudian to feminist, however, none has focused on the allegorical significance of the passage. Several approaches focus on the implications of the passage on consciousness and self-consciousness. Anthony Caputi, in *Pirandello and the Crisis of Modern Consciousness* calls the “Orestes would become Hamlet” scene “the most celebrated passage dealing with this dimension of consciousness” (49). For Caputi, this remarkable passage speaks to an emergence of self-awareness in the modern subject. Caputi asserts that “the image [of Orestes] catches beautifully the meaning of watching oneself live (vedersi
vivere)” (49), and that the hole torn in the backdrop causes Orestes to be “distracted by a
detail that reminds him that he is only a marionette in a flimsy little theatre” (49). It is this
realization which renders Orestes’ actions meaningless: “he is Orestes become Hamlet
because he understands himself to be an actor on a stage where he knows any one of a
million other dramas could be playing” (Caputi 49). Similarly, Fiora A Bassanese, in “The
Late Mattia Pascal and the Goddess Luck” interprets the “Orestes would become Hamlet”
conceit as a shift in modern consciousness. Bassanese argues that for Orestes, “Caught in the
act of living, action suddenly becomes contemplation,” and as a result “Orestes gives way to
Hamlet, the self-conscious embodiment of existential incongruity and psychological
impotence” (37). Bassanese asserts that “Paleari’s conceit functions as a metaphor for the
state of the modern individual, an absurdly self-aware puppet of life” (37). She observes that
Mattia immediately identifies with the puppet-Orestes, as “Adriano-Mattia also sees himself
in the act of living, effectively blocking him from action, as the arbitrariness of his own
construction takes hold” (37). Bassanese asserts that Mattia’s fate “is the fate of
contemporary man, left with no absolutes in a mysterious and contingent universe, to be the
observer of himself” (37). Self-reflection is a theme which runs throughout Pirandello’s
works, finding its best expression in Mattia Pascal and Umorismo (On Humor).

Ann Hallamore Caesar, in “Pirandello’s Philosophers,” observes that “Some critics
have taken Mattia’s commentary as a point of departure for their own reading of the novel”
(176). She provides as an example Leone de Castris’ reading of Il fu Mattia Pascal as
“Pirandello’s ‘Copernican revolution in the novel’ where nineteenth-century narrative
practices are jettisoned in favour of a new decentered consciousness of crisis” (176). Caesar
argues, however, that “one of the interests this novel holds for the reader is that, rather than
representing a break with tradition, it is constantly negotiating between past practices and
present needs” (176). She situates *Il fu Mattia Pascal* among intertexts such as Pirandello’s own *Umorismo* and Giacomo Leopardi’s *Operette Morali*, although she does not fully explore the extent to which Leopardi’s *Operette* inform Pirandello’s *Mattia Pascal*. Caesar states that the figure of Copernicus illustrates “how central the disproportionate gap between our insignificance in the face of the cosmos and the importance we attribute to ourselves is to Pirandello’s concept of *umorismo*” (179). She ironically points out that “being a humorist is no joke; in the absence of God, in the absence of any certainties, of any significance, his *umoristi* have seen through all those concepts we hold dear” (179). The “hole in a paper sky” is a good example of Pirandello’s concept of humorism. Caesar likens the paper backdrop to the organization of life: “We structure life, we order it, we impose time, coherence, and meaning—and they are all delusions. The humorist’s materials are those structures that we hold in place to protect ourselves from the abyss that we spend our lives tiptoeing around and pretending not to see” (179). It is the role of the humorist to point out just how tentative such organizing structures are. Caesar reminds her reader that, “After all it was Mattia’s namesake, Pascal, who by both theorizing our insignificance in an infinite universe…like the most uncompromising of humorists, laid bare those self-delusions that help keep the abyss from our sight” (180). Although Caesar identifies the function of the backdrop as the organization of life, she does not fully consider the allegorical significance of this passage. I intend to show how Pirandello is concerned with the breakdown of allegory and the modernist crisis of representation.

Caesar mentions another critic, Daniela Bini, who, in “Enacting the Dissolution of the Self: Woman as One, No One, and One Hundred Thousand,” engages in a feminist reading of Pirandello’s male philosopher protagonists. Bini counts Mattia Pascal as one of “the best known of Pirandello’s *raisonneurs*, the humorist protagonists of his works,” and the novel *Il
fu Mattia Pascal is described as one in which “page after pages is devoted to [his] endless philosophical monologues that replace actions” (163). She correctly observes that Mattia Pascal is one of Pirandello’s characters who “reflect and do not act” (163). Bini asks, “What do these raisonneurs accomplish? What do they finally understand through the use and abuse of reason? That life is a ‘flusso incandescente’; that it is chaos; that there is neither order nor logic in it” (166). This analysis is certainly appropriate to the “Orestes would become Hamlet” conceit of Il fu Mattia Pascal. However, the main thrust of Bini’s argument misses the mark. Bini argues for “Pirandello’s awareness of woman’s higher ability not only to live life, but paradoxically to understand it, if we give to the word understanding a spectrum of connotations that go beyond the strictly logical ones” (167-8). This assertion implies that it is a fact that women possess a “higher ability” to live life, and that Pirandello was simply aware of this. As problematic as this overall argument is, Bini’s focus on the raisonneurs of Pirandello’s works is valuable, but does not consider the raisonneur as modern man, mired in an allegorical crisis. Bini ignores what is the fundamental concern of Pirandello’s Mattia Pascal: the attempt to give order to the “chaos” that is modern life.

Madeline Strong Cincotta, in Luigi Pirandello: The Humorous Existentialist, performs an existentialist analysis of Il fu Mattia Pascal and proposes that what is at stake in the Orestes passage is the issue of human freedom. She asserts that, “although the question of the possibility of individual human freedom appears numerous times in Pirandello’s works, it is nowhere treated as deeply as it is in Il fu Mattia Pascal” (15). Cincotta’s reading of the text focuses on the significance of Mattia’s liberation from the social fetters of his former existence and the unlimited possibility represented by his new life as Adriano Meis. She also notes Mattia’s initial inability to self-fashion, noting how “Pirandello paints the picture of a person who seems to lack any will of his own, prey to the events of the life which surrounds
him but in which he doesn’t really participate” (15). Cincotta here articulates Mattia’s exclusion from meaningfully participating in the events of life, and identifies the major themes of the novel as “bad faith, the illusion of complete materialistic liberty which little by little is changed into the realization of the nature of true freedom, and the acceptance of this latter” (16). For Cincotta, these major themes would suggest that Il fu Mattia Pascal contains “an existentialist philosophy of freedom with its related notions of responsibility and bad faith, the necessary loneliness of each man’s search for liberty the necessity of choice” (24). Cincotta does not, however, entirely address the cosmological rupture articulated by Pirandello. She also, surprisingly, does not acknowledge Pirandello’s debt to Leopardi with respect to existentialist philosophy, as Leopardi is often read as an existentialist. Pirandello, however, offers a more cheerful existentialism, one that is informed by irony and humor.

Like Cincotta, Thomas Harrison, in his essay “Regicide, Parricide, and Tyrannicide in Il fu Mattia Pascal: Stealing from the Father to Give to the Son,” appropriates Pirandello for a specific critical project. Harrison performs a Freudian analysis of the father-son dynamic in Il fu Mattia Pascal, emphasizing the importance of the similarities of Orestes and Hamlet to Oedipus. Harrison asserts that in the Orestes passage, “what is at stake is a vision of modernity, where Orestes becomes Hamlet, and Hamlet turns into the self-knowing Oedipus” (191). Harrison observes that, for Orestes, “The anxiety accompanying this hole in the sky would be infinitely more unsettling than the political wrongs requiring his attention” (189), and this overwhelming anxiety is the reason he would become a proto-Hamlet. Harrison acknowledges the tradition of critical interest in this passage, stating that “Paleari’s words sum up the moral of the tale as it has interested so many of Pirandello’s critics: the tear in the metaphysics of life inaugurates modern art, the epoch of the antihero, of the perplexed, self-conscious Pirandellian character, too concerned with the ontological fissure to perform his
everyday duties” (189). I propose that this metaphysical rift and the resultant creation of the pensive subject is the most significant aspect of the novel. Harrison, on the other hand, proposes a Freudian interpretation of the cosmological rupture that is implied by the tear in the sky: “the higher authority which once enabled humans to live as mechanical, unconscious marionettes is no longer intact; the ethical logos dictated by the heavens or the throne has been torn apart” (191). Harrison’s interest lies in the patriarchal structure implied by this logos, which is upset by the hole in the sky. Harrison points out that “meaning had a linear itinerary in pre-Copernican days, from the logos of the father to the logoi of the sons, in a network of supported identities” (206) In this way, Harrison argues that the Copernican rupture upsets the previous patriarchal structure of meaning. He argues that, in fact, “the real causality of this Copernican revolution, Mattia implies, is the very structure of patriarchy, it cosmic, philosophical support” (202). Harrison here identifies the cosmological rupture, but in support of an argument about patriarchy. Although some support for such an argument may exist in the text, the more central issue of allegorical crisis goes unmentioned. Harrison notes the importance of the philosopher Blaise Pascal to the narrative, stating that “the world of chance, repetition, substitution, duplicity, and instability that so worried both the historical Copernicus and Blaise Pascal furnishes the narrative and metaphorical basis for Pirandello’s novel” (206). Harrison thus acknowledges the philosophical tradition into which Pirandello inserts his novel, but does not consider the implications of chance on a pre-Copernican world of cosmological wholeness.

In a similar vein, considering Mattia Pascal in the context of literary and philosophical traditions, Wladimir Krysinski examines the centrality of Modernity to Pirandello’s work in his essay “Pirandello and the Discursive Economies of Modernity and Postmodernism.” In a section entitled “Pirandello and the Slogans of Modernity,” Krysinski
examines the way in which Pirandello’s thought fits into a larger panorama of distinctly modernist perspectives. Pirandello’s keen awareness of the “Copernican rupture” and its fallout in the realm of subjectivity certainly qualifies him as an aesthetic modernist. As I will examine more closely in this paper, Krysinski briefly outlines the relationship between Pirandello and Charles Baudelaire, considering Baudelaire’s definition of Modernity as “the ephemeral, fugitive, contingent half of art, whose other half is the eternal and immutable.” He argues that, “in Pirandello, the transitory corresponds to a projection into the theamtics and form of acute consciousness of a rupture of the harmony between the characters and their creator himself” (220). Krysinski thus understands the cosmological rupture at stake in Pirandello, and likens Pirandello’s articulation of rupture to that of Baudelaire. Krysinski asserts that reading Pirandello alongside Baudelaire makes sense, as “Pirandello’s art is based upon a strategy of ‘dialectic images’ that, according to Walter Benjamin, define the modern writing of Baudelaire” (220). Krysinski thus connects Pirandello and Baudelaire through the modernist quality of their writing. This is an issue to which I will return in the second chapter of this project, which will focus on Baudelaire, Benjamin, and allegory. Krysinski notes that “Pirandello’s generation witnessed the growth of the trenchant philosophical systems that have marked this century: Nietzsche, Bergson, phenomenology, existentialism,” and that, “there were also two literary revolutions during Pirandello’s lifetime: the ‘Copernican’ revolution of Dostoevsky that revealed the subterranean psychology, and the ‘Einsteinian’ revolution of Joyce that definitively broke the narrative linearity of time” (221). Pirandello’s work fits into this tradition of these writers, with Mattia Pascal as a particularly relevant text. Mattia Pascal explicitly addresses the Copernican revolution, and demonstrates that the result is the creation of the radical subjectivity of Adriano Meis. Pirandello also participates in the Joycean tradition of temporal non-linearity by presenting the chronology of the out-of-
sequence text, framed within the forewords which announce two of the protagonist’s three deaths.

**Pirandello and Allegory**

Pirandello’s work has been appropriated by diverse critical projects, but the extent to which the text engages with a notion of modern allegory has not been explored. The text announces itself at the outset as a work of philosophical literature, and engages with the problem of representation and the cosmological rupture of the Copernican revolution. This thread continues throughout the text, most memorably in the discussion of Orestes. I contend that the Orestes passage from *The Late Mattia Pascal* is essentially a parable of modernity, and highlights the breakdown of the notion of a transcendental scheme of the universe. This ruptured cosmology is also indicative of the breakdown of allegory within modernism. The particulars of the world and of narrative are no longer linked to a unifying structure, and become overwhelming. Pirandello’s Mattia Pascal identifies Copernicus as the cause of the destruction of transcendental structures. Copernicus’ theory of a heliocentric universe represents the point of cosmological crisis for Mattia Pascal, who states that “Copernicus has ruined humanity forever” (3). Copernicus provided the first modern formulation of a heliocentric cosmology in his work *On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres*, upsetting the previous notion of a geocentric universe. According to Mattia Pascal, Copernicus is the reason people are aware of their “infinite smallness” (3). The geocentric world appeared ordered and purposeful, with all details or particulars connected to a universal. This type of organization does not allow for distraction, as it is governed by necessity. A world governed by necessity would not cause the kind of anxiety and excessive reflection that leads to the creation of the pensive subject in modernism. Mattia Pascal suggests that “even today we
believe that the moon is in the sky only to give us light at night, like the sun in the daytime” (4). Pirandello here channels Leopardi and the *Operette Morali*, in which Leopardi criticizes anthropocentrism in several dialogues. For Mattia Pascal, even though a geocentric understanding of the universe has been replaced with a heliocentric cosmology, it is still thought that the sun and moon exist for the sake of lighting the earth. The Copernican revolution represents knowledge that came at the cost of previous understandings of the world. The Copernican world is one of intimate details, a world of particulars divorced from their universal. The Copernican rupture represents the difference between eternity and transience. I propose that this Copernican rupture is the crisis of the universal that defines modern allegory. The “Copernicus” passage of *Mattia Pascal* represents a crisis which occurs in the sixteenth century and resonates through to modernism. This crisis of the universal, or the theological metanarrative which breaks down as the result of Copernicus, is also felt as a formal crisis. Allegory relies on an intact universal structure according to which to organize narrative. When this structure is disassembled, traditional allegory falls apart. It is investigation of this breakdown that fascinates both Pirandello and Baudelaire.

Mattia Pascal’s namesake, Blaise Pascal, was a baroque figure, a seventeenth-century French theologian, physicist, and mathematician who became famous for his notion of the Wager as it relates to faith. Pascal suggested one should wager his temporal life for the possibility of eternity, in essence mortgaging a part of the now for a promise in the future. Pascal’s famous wager is representative of Pirandello’s understanding of the post-Copernican world. This is part of Mattia’s Pascalian nature, as his life changes drastically due to betting at a Monte Carlo casino. Mattia wins enough money to begin life anew, on his own, under an assumed name, leaving his family and former life behind. The casino is a place of ultimate variability, and roulette becomes emblematic of the contingency that marks the Copernican
world. Mattia Pascal, like his namesake, lives in a world in which one can make a wager on transcendence and ontology. A Spaniard in the casino asks Mattia what his infallible rule is, as if it might be possible to account for chance. Mattia simply relies on luck and chance, having no secret to winning. Similarly, in Umorismo, Pirandello suggests that absolute concepts are fictions, as they attempt to capture the flux of life in a fixed form, accounting for variables, and harnessing contingency (140). For Pirandello, absolutes do not exist, as life is inherently fragmented. Mattia’s experience in the Monte Carlo casino demonstrates how his life is marked by contingency. The pre-Copernican world, by contrast, was a closed system, which relied on absolutes, and did not admit of contingency because everything was organized according to God’s plan. The selection of the name “Pascal” for a character whose life changes as the result of a wager is an ironic choice for Pirandello. While Blaise Pascal considers a wager in terms of choosing between God and sin, he writes about wager in a world of absolutes, where God controls all eventualities. The possibility of chance upsets the organization of fate. Pirandello imports this notion of betting into a world of disorganization, to demonstrate and highlight the contingency of the post-Copernican world.

At the outset of the text, Mattia Pascal explains that he is now a librarian in a deconsecrated church, Santa Maria Liberale. The books have been stored in a place that which is no longer sacred, implying that the books have themselves been deconsecrated. The light which illuminates this library is lamplight, rather than divine light. The church represents a secular version of an ordered cosmos; when the church is deconsecrated, the order becomes secularized. The books, the constituents of a once-organized universe, are now scattered. Mattia confesses having “a low opinion of books” (xiv), and complains about the amount of detail contained in contemporary novels (3). His follow librarian, Don Eligio, agrees with him, stating that “books have become more and more detailed, filled with the
most intimate particulars” (3). The deconsecrated status of these novels would imply a lack of a cosmological order by which their details might be organized. Mattia’s complaint contains a vein of irony, as it is made as he is about to narrate a story fraught with disordered particulars and details. Pirandello in this way critiques contemporary literature, while cementing its importance as a necessary form representation. Literature is indeed full of disorderly particulars, but so is life, as evidenced by the humorous breakdown of Mattia Pascal’s marriage and home life.

The setting of the Church-become-library for the Forewords to the novel sets the tone for the rest of the novel. It also captures an important point about the text in that it suggests that this too is what happens to allegory in modernism: it becomes deconsecrated. Mattia, as narrator of his own story, speaks to the reader from outside the text, essentially providing a gloss on the text. In expressing his frustrations about Copernicus and contemporary narrative form, he provides the reader with instructions on how to read the novel that is to follow. Pirandello here indicates to his reader that his novel will be largely concerned with itself as a mode of representation in modernism. Mattia acknowledges that, “when the earth didn’t turn, and man was dressed in Greek or Roman clothes and looked so elegant in them and was so aware of his own dignity, I can imagine that a detailed narration, full of tiny incidents, was agreeable” (3). But now that “the earth has taken to turning” (3), as a result of Copernicus, these types of narratives are no longer appropriate. The particular details of these narratives are no longer organized by a geocentric cosmology. It is in the wake of Copernicus that narrative representation, specifically allegory, has begun to fall apart. A four-fold method of allegorical interpretation no longer functions in a de-centered world. This is the mode of allegory particular to the exploded universe in Pirandello’s puppet play: an allegory of contemplation of free-floating particulars. However, Pirandello does not articulate this in a
nostalgic way. His interest in this breakdown has an ironic or humorous dimension which is present in Leopardi and Baudelaire.

**Pirandello, Umorismo, and Leopardi**

Although Mattia provides a gloss on the text by way of the two Forewords, *The Late Mattia Pascal* can also be read in conjunction with Pirandello’s work *Umorismo*, which is dedicated to Mattia Pascal. In the chapter “The Essence, Characteristics, and Substance of Humor,” Pirandello writes that “One of the greatest humorists, though himself unaware of it, was Copernicus who, properly speaking, disassembled not the machine of the universe but the haughty image we had formed of it for ourselves” (141-2). This is analogous to Mattia Pascal’s “curse on Copernicus!” at the outset of the novel. Copernicus has simply called attention to the fact that the geocentric conception of the universe was a tentative scheme for understanding the world. This echoes Mattia’s exchange with Don Eligio in the Second Foreword:

“Before, when the earth didn’t turn…”
“Come now! The earth has always turned!”
“No, that’s not true. Man didn’t know it, and therefore it was as if it didn’t turn. For many people it doesn’t turn even today. I told this scientific fact the other day to an old peasant, and you know what he answered? He said it was only a good excuse for drunkards.” (2-3)

Pirandello makes this same point in *Umorismo*, explaining that what was upset by Copernicus was not the universe, but an image or representation of the universe. For this reason, the Copernican rupture is of particular significance in the realm of representation and form. The previous representation of the universe has been dismantled, and such a breakdown will influence other aspects of representation, specifically allegory.

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2 I have chosen to quote from an English translation for the Italian literature and theory included in this paper. I will, however, include in the original language the French poetry that will be quoted in the second chapter, as the language of poetry is more specific and deliberate.
Pirandello’s *Umorismo* looks to the disassembling of the universe as the cause of man’s understanding of his own infinite smallness. Pirandello likens the Copernican rupture to looking through a telescope:

While our eye looks from below through the smaller lens, and sees as big all that nature had providentially wanted for us to see small, what does our soul do? It jumps up to look from above through the larger lens, and as a consequence the telescope becomes a terrible instrument, which sinks the earth and man and all our glories and greatness. (*On Humor* 142)

In a post-Copernican world, argues Pirandello, science displaces theology, reversing a previous understanding of the world. The soul looks backwards through the telescope, and sees man as very small; man is no longer of central importance. Science, however, does not function for narrative, and is not able to ground aesthetic representation. Pirandello proposes response through Humorism, because “fortunately, it is in the nature of humorist reflection to provoke the feeling of the opposite” (142). If man is aware of his infinite smallness, the humorist will focus on the opposite, being infinite greatness. The humorist thinks, “If he can understand and conceive of his infinite smallness, it means that he understands and conceives of the infinite greatness of the universe. How then, can one say that man is so small?” (142). Humorism would seem an attempt at repairing the Copernican rupture and the destruction of transcendental schemes by meditating on the infinitely small as a means to meditation on the infinitely large. This is an ironic articulation of a previous way of understanding the world; Pirandello engages in this logic as an ironic gesture. Meditation on the vastness of the universe does not reduce the “infinite smallness” of the subject.

Pirandello, in *Umorismo*, advises his reader to “Read that dialogue of Leopardi’s which bears as a title precisely the name of the Polish canon” (142). Pirandello thus explicitly points to Giacomo Leopardi’s dialogue, “The Copernicus,” articulates the crisis of the Copernican rupture in much the same way that Pirandello does in *The Late Mattia Pascal*. 
Leopardi’s *Operette Morali* was written between the years 1824 and 1827, and published in 1827. Leopardi, in his dialogue “The Copernicus” (1827) articulates the rupture between an ancient and a modern cosmology. Although frequently considered a Romantic writer, Leopardi demonstrates a distinctly modern sensibility in the *Operette*. His works present a transitional phase of late Romanticism, and a moment of cosmological rupture. While his early works and poetry convey a deep nostalgia and pessimism, the works of the *Operette* reveal an ironic sensibility. This irony in Leopardi’s work is often overlooked, and he is instead labeled simply a pessimist. Leopardi suggests that the Copernican revolution of 1543, which caused a break between the ancient Ptolemaic worldview and the modern heliocentric worldview, is a cosmological rupture that resonates in modernity as an aesthetic rupture. Leopardi draws on antiquity, critiquing an anthropocentric worldview that no longer obtains. His choice of form is an ironic gesture, as he mainly relies on dialogues in the *Operette* as a vehicle to critique many worldviews typically conveyed through this form. By writing dialogues, Leopardi also reveals his text as philosophical endeavor. This philosophical meditation through literature is another feature which connects Leopardi to Pirandello.

Leopardi writes a dialogue between the sun and Copernicus, in which the sun decides to stop turning. Copernicus is asked by the sun to convince the earth that it is useful to circle around the sun, in a reversal of the geocentric process that has been in place for millennia. Copernicus’ role is also to convince the population of the world that this situation is in fact preferable. Leopardi depicts a world in which science and historicism are in ascendance, replacing theology. This represents a reversal, where the world of eternity becomes the world of immanence. Copernicus tells the sun that the effects of the change will not be restricted to physics, “for it will upset all steps on the ladder of the dignity of things and the order of beings; it will switch the purposes of creatures; and therefore it will cause an extremely great
revolution in metaphysics as well” (Leopardi 435). The effects of the Copernican rupture are felt in all aspects of life, particularly literature. The particulars of the world are no longer organized by that system which previously gave them order and meaning. In allegory, the literal level particulars are no longer linked to an anagogic level of meaning, governed by a universal. Allegorical representation is thus left without a model to follow, and literary form is dismantled as a result of the Copernican rupture. Leopardi does not, however, seem nostalgic for the pre-Copernican world. While he does convey pessimism in much of his work, he eventually looks to contentment with the here and now of everyday life as a response to the Copernican rupture.

Although Leopardi largely influences Pirandello in his depiction of the Copernican revolution, Pirandello differs substantially from Leopardi in his views on humor. Whereas for Pirandello humor is a process of consciousness, Leopardi sees humor or laughter as a product of madness. Leopardi’s understanding of laughter is thus ironically pessimistic. In the Operetta, “In Praise of Birds,” Leopardi outlines his view on humor and, more specifically, laughter, thorough the voice of Amelius, “the solitary philosopher.” He wonders at the irony that “man, who is the most afflicted and the most miserable of all creatures, should possess the faculty of laughter, which is alien to every other animal” (359). He considers this, and concludes that “laugher is a form of temporary madness, raving, and delirium. For men, never being satisfied and never finding real pleasure in anything, cannot have a reasonable and just cause for laughter” (359). For Leopardi, laughter provides only a temporary escape from the torture of modern consciousness. As a result, Leopardi’s writing takes on a largely pessimistic tone. Whereas for Pirandello humor can form the basis of a literary theory, for Leopardi it provides only a short distraction from the reality of life. As I will explore shortly,
Leopardi instead turns to the comfort of friendship to alleviate the suffering of an intelligent man existing in a world without answers.

Although Leopardi’s “The Copernicus” certainly informs Pirandello’s discussion of Copernicus as well as his work on humor, this connection has been largely left out of commentary on Pirandello and on Leopardi. Daniela Bini, who writes on Leopardi as well as Pirandello, in *A Fragrance from the Desert: Poetry and Philosophy in Giacomo Leopardi*, connects the figure of ‘modern man’ in Leopardi and Pirandello, but only in passing. I suggest, however, that the condition of the modern subject is central for both authors. Bini’s text, on the relationship of poetry and philosophy in Leopardi, makes little reference to Pirandello’s interest in Leopardi, although Leopardi’s figure of Copernicus figures prominently in Pirandello’s *Il Fu Mattia Pascal* as well as his work on humor. Bini observes that “Leopardi’s praise of activity and intense living is recurrent throughout his *Zibaldone* and the *Operette Morali*, where it reaches its fullest expression in “L’elogio degli uccelli” and in the “Dialogo di Cristoforo Colombo e di Pietro Gutierrez” (43). She points out that for Leopardi, leading an active life “can give men pseudo-happiness, insofar as it prevents them from thinking, from reflecting. It therefore stands in open opposition to reason, which discovers truths” (43). Bini outlines Leopardi’s preoccupation with the hyper-reflective individual, as well as his suggestion that activity can prevent the individual from excessive reflection. Leopardi in this way anticipates the figure of the modernist pensive subject, and Bini might well be describing Pirandello’s Mattia Pascal when she explains that, for Leopardi, “Only he who lives fully, and does not think thus ignoring truth, can be happy. He who thinks, on the other hand, discovers truth, which is of a negative order, thus he does not act, for he knows the senselessness of any action” (43). Bini does connect Leopardi to modernism, stating that “Leopardi was here anticipating the anguish of the alienated modern
man, that Pirandello, Svevo, and Motale with make the central issue of their lives and works” (45). Bini observes the connection between Leopardi and Pirandello, but this is not the focus of her argument. She suggests that Leopardi’s “Copernicus” shows that “Man’s most dangerous error has been his anthropocentric fallacy. Considering the whole universe as a function of himself he has made himself nature’s most precious creature. Copernicus’ irony is the best representation of this absurd and yet universal belief” (75). This is a theme Pirandello picks up in the first pages of The Late Mattia Pascal. In the “Second Forward (Philosophical) By Way of Being an Apology,” Mattia tells Don Eligio, “Our stories are like the biographies of worms,” and he describes the deaths as the result of a volcanic eruption as “several thousand worms roasted to death” (4). In this way Pirandello humorously conveys the “infinite smallness” of and futility of human life, and suggests that humanity is merely another species in a planet full of unremarkable species. Pirandello also channels Leopardi’s frustration with anthropocentrism when Mattia remarks, “even today we believe that the moon is in the sky only to give us light at night, like the sun in the daytime, and the stars are there to afford us a magnificent display” (4). Pirandello’s frustration with the delusions of grandeur of the human race finds its literary origin in Leopardi’s Operette. The “Dialogue between a Sprite and a Gnome,” for example, seeks to dismantle anthropocentrism, as Leopardi represents humanity as having exhausted itself. All of humanity has died, yet the world continues to exist. In a parody of the anthropocentric fallacy, the sprite and the gnome both argue that the world was created solely for their own particular race. The Sprite comments, “I firmly believe that even lizards and gnats think that the whole world was especially made for their species” (92-3). Leopardi uses this absurd comparison to highlight the ridiculousness of anthropocentrism, making a sharp and comical dig at the tendency of the human race to self-aggrandizement. This is an ironic reversal of Leopardi’s earlier
nostalgic poetry. Leopardi’s supposed “cosmic pessimism” seems more ironic than genuine when considered this way.

Bini observes a kind of blame placed on Copernicus by both authors. Leopardi, in his identification of Copernicus as the cause of a crisis, functions as a proto-modernist author. She observes that, “as the Operette develop [Leopardi’s] critical tone becomes milder, less punitive, as he arrives at the cause of human ignorance” (150). It would seem that, for Leopardi, “Man’s natural desire for happiness justifies the Ptolemaic fallacy (which required the whole world to work for man)” (Bini 150-151). Bini suggests that Copernicus is guilty of dismantling the Ptolemaic system, and as a result the possibility of humanity’s happiness existing within such a construct. Similarly, Mattia Pascal identifies Copernicus as having cost humanity the possibility of happiness at the outset of Pirandello’s novel. Mattia tells Don Eligio that “Copernicus has ruined humanity forever. We have all gradually become used to the new idea of our infinite smallness, and we even consider ourselves less than nothing in the universe, despite all our fine discoveries and inventions” (3). Although Bini observes the crisis of the anthropocentric fallacy, she does not discuss the cosmological rupture that is really at stake for Leopardi and Pirandello. What Pirandello and Leopardi both do is identify a moment of rupture that disrupts representation well into modernity.

Nicholas Rennie, in “Copernicus, or the Problem of Revolution,” from Speculating on the Moment: The Poetics of Time and Recurrence in Goethe, Leopardi, and Nietzsche, considers the idea of a “progressive Leopardi,” an epithet which “indicates the very difficulty of classifying Leopardi” (133). Rennie points out that “Such difficulties have given rise to a variety of sometimes contradictory labels: Leopardi is a “rebel classicist” (Fubini); he is “the most modern and revolutionary of the Romantics (Biral); he is a “Romantic-illuminist” or “classical-Romantic” (Binni) (135). Leopardi is notoriously difficult to classify as an author,
as evidence for each label can be found in his work. By the time he was writing the *Operette*, however, he had largely departed from Romanticism and demonstrates a proto-modern sensibility. Nature becomes a “cruel stepmother,” and man is aware of the meaninglessness of life. Rennie indicates “the problem of situating Leopardi historically in order to highlight a related narrative difficulty in his own writing” (137). Rennie outlines a modern aspect of Leopardi’s writing, and observes how this dialogue seems out of step with its time. He points out that “The Copernicus,” “has an undertone of unease that is at odds both with the aphoristic concision of its eighteenth-century style of repartee, and with the teleological drive of nineteenth-century historical narrative” (139). Rennie asserts that, for Leopardi, “the Copernican revolution signals a recognition of the implausibility of progressive history” (140), as Leopardi realizes the non-teleological nature of human life. Leopardi does not accept the metanarrative of progress or improvement to explain human history.

Rennie argues that “What the Dialogue “Copernicus” presents as a democratization of planets represents also the individual’s recognition of his unimportance in a universe within which the earth is a “grain of sand” (“The Broom,” l. 191) (143). Rennie here observes, as many commentators have, another instance of borrowing from Leopardi for Pirandello. Mattia Pascal asks Don Eligio, at the outset of the novel, “Are we or are we not on a kind of invisible top, spun by a ray of sunshine, on a little maddened grain of sand, which spins and spins and spins, without knowing why, never reaching an end…” (3). This “granello di sabbia” is famously borrowed from Leopardi’s “La Ginestra” or “The Broom.” Rennie observes that Leopardi was consciously parodying Pascal, and that “Writing to Luigi De Sinner that his ‘Copernicus’ illustrates ‘the nullity of the human race,’ Leopardi calls attention to the Pascalian theme at work in the Dialogue” (143). Rennie quotes Pascal, who asserts that “The whole visible world is only an imperceptible atom in the ample bosom of
nature. No idea approaches it. [...] It is an infinite sphere, the centre of which is everywhere, the circumference nowhere” (Rennie 143). Rennie also observes that for Pascal, “the insignificance of humankind within an infinite universe demonstrates the necessity that the individual abandon himself to God’s grace” (143). However, this reliance on faith is rejected both by Leopardi and by Pirandello, via Mattia Pascal. Rennie asserts that, “At stake, in Leopardi’s metaphor, is not simply a shift from earth to sun as center of the universe; what this Copernicus predicts, rather, is the progressive abandonment of the very idea of an ontological or epistemological center” (153). This de-centered location is precisely where Mattia Pascal begins his narrative. He is writing in a deconsecrated church, existing in an exploded worldview. He attempts to reorganize the discarded books in the library, at the same time as he tries to organize the details of his own life into a narrative. He is at a loss for a framework, however, as his own life varies so drastically from that of a protagonist in a traditional novel. Mattia Pascal’s life functions as an example of what happens to the modern subject with the metanarrative that would organize representation is dismantled.

The Pensive Subject

The modernist, pensive subject is created as a result of the Copernican rupture. The pensive subject is disconnected from transcendental structures that would give existence meaning and unity. He is aware of all the immanent particulars of the world, and cannot relate these particulars to a transcendental scheme. Pirandello’s The Late Mattia Pascal articulates a uniquely modernist subjectivity. Through Mattia Pascal, Pirandello introduces a character who can be understood as the modernist “pensive” subject: an individual tentatively coping with the crises of modernity. Among these crises are the crisis of experience, and what could be called the crisis of the universal. A “universal” or “general” represents a
scheme that would hold the world together, causing all particulars to be embedded in the universal. The modern pensive subject recognizes particulars as free-floating, and those schemes which tie them together are tentative at best.

Pirandello also considers modernist subjectivity in *Umorismo* (1908), in which he writes that “Consciousness, in short, is not a creative power, but an inner mirror in which thought contemplates itself... consciousness is thought which sees itself watching over what it does spontaneously” (112). For Pirandello, modern consciousness is a process of hyper-reflection, brought on by the Copernican rupture. It is this kind of consciousness, or hyperconsciousness, that is responsible for the preoccupation of the pensive subject. When the transcendental is dismantled, the possibility of allegorical wholeness is torn apart, and the modernist individual becomes mired in his own subjectivity. The crisis of allegory in modernity is unique in that it represents a departure from previous eras. The pensive subject exists in this state of hyper-reflection, and, as a result, is prevented from actually acting. The consciousness of the pensive subject prevents the spontaneous action that thought would see itself watching. Pirandello writes that reflection “comes to disturb and to interrupt the spontaneous movement that organizes ideas and images into a harmonious form” (119). The pensive subject is mired in a world of hyper-reflection, and becomes unable to act. Accordingly, he exists in what Georg Lukács refers to as an “abstract potentiality” in his essay “The Ideology of Modernism.” Lukács writes that “Abstract potentiality belongs wholly to the realm of subjectivity; whereas concrete potentiality is concerned with the dialectic between the individual’s subjectivity and objective reality” (24). Since the pensive subject is aware of only the most immanent aspects of life, and does not have an objective view of reality, abstract potentiality consumes him. He is unable to act because the world of particulars and possibilities has been exploded. Hamlet, unlike Orestes, is mired in reflection,
which prevents him from promptly avenging his father. Hamlet becomes a tragic prefiguration of the modernist, pensive subject.

Pirandello’s *Mattia Pascal* engages with the notions of identity and subjectivity through a problem of pronouns. When Mattia Pascal develops his new identity of Adriano Meis, he seems to occupy a third position that is neither of his identities. This is a parenthesis or moment when Mattia Pascal is no more, and Adriano Meis does not yet exist. Mattia Pascal seems to be narrating: “I set myself thinking about Adriano Meis. Imagining a past for him, asking myself who was my father, where I had been born, etcetera. I did this calmly” (89). The narrator uses “I,” but speaks about Mattia Pascal in the third person—although he is not yet Adriano Meis. In the chapter, “My Shadow and I,” the narrator again takes a third position outside of his two identities, stating that he “took them both for a walk” (94). This third person finds himself again in a parenthesis between Adriano Meis and Mattia Pascal. The “I” who is speaking is the missing omniscient narrator in a sense. This question of identity and individuality becomes a central feature of Mattia’s brand of pensive subjectivity. It would seem that, for Pirandello, consciousness is really a multiplicity of positions. Reflection becomes a problematic process, as Pirandello asserts that, “Reflection, engaging in its special activity, comes to disturb and interrupt the spontaneous movement that organizes ideas and images into a harmonious form” (119). Reflection does not organize, but rather seems to disturb the “spontaneous” organizational movement, causing disorder. Mattia Pascal represents a hyper-reflective character, certainly disorganized. Pirandello also addresses the dual or perhaps tripartite nature of the soul. He writes that “the various tendencies which mark the personality lead us seriously to think that the individual soul is not *one*” (136) and that this so-called “individual” soul “appears as if he really has within himself several different and even opposed souls” (136). Pirandello here quotes Blaise Pascal, stating
that “Pascal observed that there is no man who differs from another man more than he differs, with the passing of time, from himself” (136). Pirandello’s comment provides some explanation for the third position Mattia manages to take between his two identities. For Pirandello, the subject is not really an individual, but rather multiple competing perspectives. This contributes to the excessive reflection and pensive nature of the modern subject.

According to Lukács’ description of concrete and abstract potentiality, it would seem that the modernist pensive subject is mired in a world of possibilities, without actualizing these possibilities. It is important to note that Lukács privileges concrete potentiality, a feature of realism, and criticizes abstract potentiality as a bourgeois feature of modernist literature. Although presented from a negative standpoint, this distinction remains useful in understanding the isolation of the modernist pensive subject, and his inability to engage in life. Since the pensive subject is aware of only the most immanent aspects of life, and does not have an objective view of reality, he becomes open to distraction by an infinite number of particulars. Lukács also criticizes the “thrownness-into-being” (20) of the modernist subject, who is presented with a lack of social context. Lukács argues that characters in literature “cannot be separated from the context in which they were created,” and that modernist writers depict the exact opposite of this (19-20). The characters in modernist literature display a “thrownness-into-being,” which dissolves the ties to other people, historical context, or meaning (21). This “thrownness-into-being” causes a dissolution between abstract and concrete potentiality for the modernist subject, rendering every potentiality abstract, since meaningful actions and relationships are not possible (24). Lukács also asserts that this is the result of “the assumption that the objective world is inherently inexplicable” (25). In modernist literature, the fragmentation of experience and the lack of inherent meaning suggest that people are ontologically solitary (30). It would seem that for Lukács, in
modernism, eccentricity becomes the norm in character, and the meaning behind human activity is rendered ultimately ambiguous.

Pirandello’s Adriano Meis provides a comically archetypal example of Lukács’ “thrownness-into-being.” He is a fictional character invented by a fictional character; he has no past, no place of origin. He is simply thrust into life. When Mattia Pascal becomes Adriano Meis, he becomes a bystander to life, an outsider. He does not exist for the external world, so he is barred from participating in the world. He is excluded from life, and thus must live in a world of possibilities, of abstract potentiality. Lukács derisively refers to this exclusion from life as the “ontological solitariness of the individual” (20), where one’s being is divorced from a collective being. Mattia Pascal’s removal from life becomes ultimately apparent when he tries to buy a puppy. In one of the most artful tragic-comic scenes of the novel, Mattia, as Adriano Meis, considers buying a cold, shivering puppy from a peddler on the street. As soon as he has decided to purchase the dog, he realizes he will have to pay a dog tax. “I, who no longer paid any taxes!” he realizes (93). Mattia does not exist, as Kafka might write, “before the law” so he is unable to legally participate in life. Mattia comments that he is “Alive for Death and yet dead for Life” (189). He is excluded from life forever, and can only live in a world of possibilities as Adriano Meis. This incident is indicative of Pirandello’s ability to mediate between tragedy and humor. The puppy is described in the most pitiable terms, and the reader sympathizes with Adriano Meis’ desire to adopt the creature. The scene becomes humorous when Adriano selfishly abandons his charitable inclination based on the fact that he would then be required to pay taxes, like everyone else. Adriano/Mattia enjoys his radical subjectivity only when it serves him financially to be disconnected from all other people.
Mattia Pascal seems to overcome this radical subjectivity, however, in that he is able to return to his former life of concrete potentiality. His return to his hometown, and his initial interaction with his mother-in-law, albeit unpleasant, functions as a genuine interaction with the world, and is ultimately welcome. However, Mattia Pascal remains marked by Adriano Meis. Mattia Pascal’s wandering eye has been corrected by Adriano Meis through surgery. This now-fixed eye is the trace of Adriano Meis on Mattia Pascal’s face, and the correction is a sign of a former defect. It indicates that Mattia will never be able to return to the life that he once had. His old life has become focused; his project is organizing the scattered books in the deconsecrated church, along with the particulars of his life into a coherent narrative for his novel. Mattia Pascal changes his name, his face, his lazy eye, and his address, but finds himself drawn back into his former life of disorganized particularity. Although he still seems overwhelmed by free-floating particulars, he is no longer mired in abstract potentiality, and is attempting to organize his life, as well as with the moldy books in the church-become-library.

In “The Ideology of Modernism,” Lukács is greatly concerned with the question of subjectivity, as well as a lack of historical context in modernist literature, and sees ahistoricism as problematic for the depiction of reality. The radical subjectivity of the modernist subject results in part from the disconnection from historical context. Lukács argues that “the modernist writer identifies what is necessarily a subjective experience with reality as such, thus giving a distorted picture of reality as a whole” (51). Lukács identifies the ahistorical quality of modernist literature as deeply problematic. He would suggest that the veneration of the “now” comes at the cost of attention to history. Although Lukács asserts that modernism is not preoccupied with history, I suggest that the past is a requisite backdrop for privileging the “now.” Modernity cannot be conceived of without history. Lukács writes as if modernity is not at all concerned with history, however, modernism is centrally
concerned with history. As a genre, it is ultimately historical, as it conceives of itself against
the backdrop of the aesthetic beliefs and values of previous eras. For Lukács, historical
context in a literary work is necessary, for “[w]hile traditional critical realism transforms the
positive and negative elements of bourgeois life into ‘typical’ situations and reveals them for
what they are, modernism exalts bourgeois life’s very baseness and emptiness with its
aesthetic devices” (68). According to Lukács, without historical context, no moral message
may be gleaned from a text, and modernist literature becomes simply indulgent.

Marshall Berman, in Adventures in Marxism, accuses Lukács of being “colossally,
wilfully ignorant” with respect to historical context (194). Berman asserts that “Lukács
speaks as if it were writers who autonomously create reality: as if Freud had created the
twentieth century’s pathologies and Kafka its police states” (194). Berman comments that,
“Lukács says that he is fighting in the name of ‘realism,’ whose basic idea is that ‘reality can
be known.’ What he really means, we see as we read on, is that reality is known, and he
knows it, and he doesn’t want to read any writing that doesn’t tell him what he already
knows” (194). Lukács’ text is primarily a stand in the debate over the merits of realist versus
modernist literature, and he is primarily interested in texts which specifically depict their
narratives as part of the fabric of history. Chronology and history are both dismantled in
modernist literature; history becomes a zone of contingency, and the events of history seem
to occur retrospectively. This crisis of the concept of history is one of the many crises which
define aesthetic modernism, and represents one of the many effects of the Copernican
rupture.

What Pirandello does in The Late Mattia Pascal is highlight a certain phase of
modernity. Pirandello articulates a moment of crisis, and traces the subject’s response to the
Copernican rupture. He functions as a critic of modernity, demonstrating the destructive
effects of crisis of the universal on the individual. Because Pirandello articulates so well the
moment of rupture, *The Late Mattia Pascal* is an appropriate place to start for an
investigation into the effects of the crisis of allegory on the modern subject. He is not the first
modern author to consider such a problem, but he demonstrates the source of this crisis in a
meditation, however humorous, on the Copernican rupture. Pirandello thus creates a
distinctive understanding of this crisis, a particularly modern interpretation of the Copernican
upheaval. If we examine how other modern authors respond to this crisis through the lens of
Pirandello, we gain a fuller understanding of the significance of this event. Both Baudelaire
and Pirandello provided lasting and peculiar insight into modernity and the significance of
the loss of the universal. Although Baudelaire wrote before Pirandello, it is useful to access
Baudelaire’s view of modernity by way of Pirandello’s meditation on the Copernican rupture.
In this way we see that the problem of the universal informs the problem of allegory, and has
significant consequence for the subject. If we examine Baudelaire through the lens of
Pirandello, a new Baudelaire emerges. Pirandello highlights a moment of rupture, and
Baudelaire responds to this rupture. Baudelaire writes in the wake of the Copernican hole in
the sky, which Pirandello articulates. Pirandello presents a cosmological and aesthetic crisis
which leads to a psychological problem, in that the breakdown of allegory causes the creation
of the pensive subject. He casts light on allegory as a genre because this formal problem in
Pirandello causes a psychological problem.

Although Pirandello articulates this crisis, he does not really provide a solution. The
radical subjectivity of Adriano Meis is ultimately untenable. Mattia Pascal must return to his
former life, but as a result of his new subjectivity he finds himself forever at a remove from
his previous existence. What Pirandello does provide is a response to the crisis. What we find
at the end of the novel is Mattia Pascal futilely attempting to piece together the particulars of
a life. He remains in the deconsecrated church-become-library until his “third and final
death.” In the face of the crisis of the universal, the subject is left organizing his scattered
particulars. Mattia is not miserable, and although he enjoys complaining about his vocation
he passes his time with a friend in a charitable role. This is oddly similar to the sentiment the
reader is left with towards the end of Leopardi’s *Operette Morali*. In Leopardi’s “Dialogue
Between Plotinus and Porphyry,” Plotinus finds Porphyry contemplating suicide, and
successfully convinces him to continue living. This dialogue is the third last in the collection,
and signals a kind of moral from Leopardi. The collection is entitled *Operette Morali*, which
translates to “little moral works.” This title implies a pedagogic impulse to the collection.
However, this is again indicative if Leopardi’s irony, as he veils satire in a pedagogic form.
This highlights the irony in his formal choice, as he draws on Socratic tradition to satirize
traditional anthropocentric views.

The earlier dialogues and works in the *Operette* explain the condition of the late
Romantic subject, living a seemingly aimless existence, abandoned both by God and Mother
Nature. J. Hillis Miller, in the introduction to *The Disappearance of God*, argues that from
the fourteenth century on, God’s presence in the world diminishes. By the time of the
Romantics, “God exists, but he is out of reach” (1). Leopardi’s *Operette Morali* record how,
in the nineteenth century progression from late Romanticism to early modernism, the divine
is not only out of reach, but seems entirely absent. Miller argues that modern man is caught
in a time of “disconnection: disconnection between man and nature, between man and man,
even between man and himself” (2). For Leopardi as a Romantic, nature represented
something which might function as a form of communion, albeit mediated, with the divine.
Miller observes that, for the Romantics, “Nature and human history were full of symbols and
types of divine truth. Each page of the book of nature was written by God and was another
revelation of God by God” (Miller 2). Leopardi demonstrates through the Operette the dissolution of this possibility, and human frustration and despair at this seeming abandonment.

At the end of the “Dialogue Between Plotinus and Porphyry,” Leopardi provides what is essentially an argument for existence in the face of despair. Leopardi’s conclusion as to the purpose of life, or the best way to carry it out, is mediated through Plotinus, who states: “Let us live, my dear Porphyry, and let us comfort each other… Let us keep each other company; let us encourage each other, and let us help and support each other so that we may complete as well as we can this labor of life, which will undoubtedly be brief” (477). For Leopardi, it would seem companionship is what would provide the impetus in life. Man has been abandoned by his creator and nature, so he must take solace in friendship with his fellow human. Leopardi makes a conscious choice in providing this advice through the voice of a Neo-Platonic philosopher. Plotinus continues in his advice to Porphyry: “And when death comes, we will have no regrets; and also in those last hours our friends and companions will comfort us; and we will rejoice at the thought that when we are no more, they will often remember us and will not cease loving us” (477). Leopardi, like Plotinus, seems resigned to the fate of the modern subject as being removed from understanding of a greater purpose. This is similar to Pirandello’s ultimate message in Mattia Pascal, which comes not at the end of the novel, but rather at the beginning. Pirandello in a way demonstrates a continuation of Leopardi’s view of life. Leopardi would rely on comfort from friends, and Pirandello would add to this the importance of artistic endeavor. What results is a kind of pragmatism; Pirandello’s protagonist lives out his days with a friend, while arranging the disorganized particulars of his life into a coherent narrative.
Chapter 2: “Tout pour moi devient allégorie”

Luigi Pirandello, in *The Late Mattia Pascal*, identifies a moment of rupture in Modernity. Charles Baudelaire, although writing nearly fifty years prior to Pirandello, articulates a response to this crisis in *Les Fleurs du mal* and in the essay “The Painter of Modern Life.” Wladimir Krysinski, in “Pirandello and the Discursive Economies of Modernity and Postmodernism” identifies a connection between the ideas of Pirandello and of Baudelaire. As I have previously noted, Krysinski observes that the “transitory” element of Baudelaire’s definition of modernity corresponds to the rupture articulated by Pirandello (220). Krysinski demonstrates that reading Pirandello in conjunction with Baudelaire makes sense, as a continuity of thought exists between these authors. Pirandello highlights the Copernican rupture to which Baudelaire responds. This rupture appears as a crisis of representation in modernism. Rainer Nägele, in *Theatre, Theory, Speculation*, posits that allegory is the product of a crisis, and states that the history of modern allegory begins in 1857 with the publication of Charles Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du mal* (82), which Baudelaire writes in the wake of the “hole in the sky” articulated by Pirandello. The transition to a fractured allegorical style of writing marks the onset of modernism in literature. The loss of the universal and the shift towards allegory causes a change in subjectivity, which gives rise to a modernist, pensive subject. Baudelaire, in “The Painter of Modern Life,” articulates the destruction of organizing structures by turning to art. “The ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent” half of art realizes that the unifying structures of previous eras are mere constructs. *Les Fleurs du mal* articulates what is lost when allegory is dismantled, as well as an attempt to rehabilitate allegory through an examination of the low or profane, in order to confirm the existence of the high or transcendent. *Les Fleurs du mal* thus traces a movement
through, and a departure from, a Romantic sensibility. T.S. Eliot, in his essay “Baudelaire,”
calls Baudelaire “Inevitably the offspring of romanticism, and by his nature the first counter-
romantic in poetry” (376). I will investigate the way Baudelaire calls into question the
privileging of symbol, and instead experiments with a distinctly modern, fractured form of
allegory.

The poem “Correspondances,” although typically read as a manifesto of Symbolism,
functions as a measure of what is lost in modernity. What Baudelaire evokes in
“Correspondances” is that which is no longer available to modernity, because the possibility
of a world governed by the universal has been dismantled. Through the poem “Une
charogne” (“A Carcass”) Baudelaire examines the profane world to access the transcendent
through what T.S. Eliot refers to as the “back door” (Selected Essays 373). Baudelaire
discovers an image of the organization of the cosmos in a rotting corpse, which is being
devoured by insects. The purposiveness of these insects suggests a kind of orderliness
inherent in the natural world, which would imply a transcendental scheme according to
which these particulars are organized. Walter Benjamin, in The Origin of German Tragic
Drama, writes that “all of the things which are used to signify derive, from the very fact of
their pointing to something else, a power which makes them appear no longer
commensurable with profane things, which raises them onto a higher plane, and which can,
indeed, sanctify them” (175). As a result, in allegory, “the profane world is both elevated and
devalued” (Benjamin 175). In this chapter, I will argue that Baudelaire’s “Une charogne” is a
study of the profane world of particulars to investigate the possibility of a transcendental
scheme which could lend organization to those particulars.

Baudelaire’s poetry provides a tentative solution to the crisis of allegory in
modernism. In “The Ideology of Modernism,” Georg Lukács writes that allegory is “a
problematic genre because it rejects that assumption of an immanent meaning to human existence which – however unconscious, however combined with religious concepts of transcendence – is the basis of a traditional art” (40). By transcendence, Lukács refers to “the negation of any meaning immanent in the world or the life of man” (40). Allegory requires a transcendental scheme to connect the particulars of its narrative. In poems like “Une charogne,” Baudelaire would revive the universal by recourse to the smallest particular, much like Pirandello’s humorist. While the humorist attempts to provoke meditation on the opposite of a notion such as infinite smallness, Baudelaire focuses on particularity and the profane world to discover organization. Both The Late Mattia Pascal and Les Fleurs du mal represent an investigation of allegory in modernism. Baudelaire insightfully treats the theme of the decline of allegory in several poems from Les Fleurs du mal. My analysis will focus on the poems “Correspondances” (“Correspondences”), “A une passante” (“To a Woman Passing By”), “Une charogne” (“A Carcass”), and “Le Vin des chiffonniers” (“The Ragman’s Wine”).

I have taken as my title for this section a line from Baudelaire’s “Le Cygne” (“The Swan”), as it reveals his poetic preoccupation with allegory:

Paris change! mais rien dans ma mélancolie
N'a bougé! palais neufs, échafaudages, blocs,
Vieux faubourgs, tout pour moi devient allégorie, (29-31)

Paris may change, but in my melancholy mood
Nothing has budged! New palaces, blocks, scaffoldings,
Old neighbourhoods, are allegorical for me,

For Baudelaire, the city becomes fundamentally allegorical. “Le Cygne” appears in the “Tableaux parisiens” section of Les Fleurs du Mal, which conveys a distinct aesthetic. While the “Spleen e idéal” section articulates two types of experience of the modern world, the subsequent sections are often read as tentative responses to spleen, in an attempt to attain the
ideal. The section “Le Vin” articulates a turn to alcohol as a means of escape from spleen, whereas the section “Fleurs du Mal” represents an escape through physical pleasure. The “Tableaux parisiens” section demonstrates a kind of aesthetic escape, and a search for beauty in the in features that constitute the experience of Paris of the Second Empire. Gérard Gasarian, in “‘Le Cygne’ of Baudelaire” observes that while the poem is “unanimously perceived as the poem of melancholy, it is seen also—often by the same critics—as the poem of modernity” (124). Gasarian notes that “In order to account for this paradoxical view of the poem, most critics have sought to reconcile Baudelaire’s melancholic sense of loss (mediated in the first part by the opening figure of Andromache) with his modern curiosity for the present (triggered in the second part by the transformation of Paris)” (124). Gasarian suggests that Baudelaire here conveys a degree of nostalgia for the past which is irretrievably lost, like the nostalgia of Leopardi. However, while this poem records a loss that modernity has suffered, much in the way I suggest “Correspondances” does, it also provides a way out of melancholy through hope. “Correspondances” is an ironic articulation and critical rejection of melancholy. “Correspondances” serves as a foil to the collection, setting up a worldview that no longer obtains, and that Baudelaire well knows is obsolete. Gasarian observes that critics have read into the “Le Cygne” an element of hope or possibility springing from loss. According to Victor Brombert, “‘Le Cygne’ is a successful attempt to turn a painful memory into a modern artifact,” and for Ross Chambers, “the poem manages to turn mourning into writing, bile into ink” (Gasarian 124). For Baudelaire, seeing allegorical possibility in the city provides an answer to what I will call the “loss of the universal” suffered in modernity. Gasarian argues that, “Instead of wasting his mental energy in such acts as regretting or rebelling, the poet uses it to create works in which his opposition to the reactionary politics of his time is expressed in allegorical disguise” (124). In this way, loss becomes productive for
Baudelaire, as allegory becomes a way to mediate the loss of a past sense of wholeness. Gasarian asserts that “Baudelaire’s fascination with the allegorical process stems from a desire to escape his depression by emulating, in his style, a city that is constantly changing” (130). The dynamic city becomes the source of new poetic inspiration. Changing Paris marks what has been lost, but might also signify allegorical possibility. Although the changing city is felt as a loss, it is not simply negative, as it becomes an impetus to reflect on poetry itself, and to create out of loss. The city gives rise to allegorical possibility, and challenges the creative impulse of the poet. The city, for Baudelaire, connotes the possibility of giving rise to modern allegory which can lift the poet out of melancholy. Baudelaire responds to the crises of modernism, which Leopardi and Pirandello both articulate by drawing on the dynamism of these crises.

“Correspondances” and “A une passante”

The fourth poem from the “Spleen and Ideal” section of Les Fleurs du mal

“Correspondances,” represents the ideal, and indicates what is lost to spleen. Jonathan Culler, in his introduction to James McGowan’s translation of Les Fleurs du Mal, provides a brief outline of the distinction between spleen and the ideal. In a note on the text, Culler observes that “The term spleen was in vogue in Baudelaire’s day: a number of the minor French Romantic poets had used the term for a state of depression or youthful world-weariness, marked by a sense of the oppressiveness of life” (xvii). He also explains that “The ideal is more difficult to define: most generally it is whatever provokes effort and aspiration, including the world of ideal forms and beauty itself. It is thus both opposed to spleen and, in its inaccessibility, a cause of spleen” (xvii). As Culler observes, the inaccessibility of the ideal is a central cause of spleen, and this is precisely what Baudelaire outlines in
“Correspondances.” I will read “Correspondances” as a remnant from a previous worldview. “Correspondances” is not indicative of the collection, but rather exists as part of it to establish that which has been lost in modernity. The placement of “Correspondances” early in the collection indicates that it is part of a previous cosmology, one which will be challenged in the poems to follow. “Correspondances” represents a symbolic world of wholeness, and a unified sensorium. It is against the backdrop of Romanticism that one can begin to understand what is at stake in “Correspondances.” The poem offers a symbolic view of nature held by the Romantic poets, and in this sense, “Correspondances” can be understood as a critical articulation of a Romantic view of nature. Paul de Man, in “Allegory and Irony in Baudelaire,” states that “The world of correspondences and analogies functions, in Baudelaire’s poetic world, as a myth, as a conception that can only be admitted or rejected in terms of belief” (107), and that “The ‘belief’ in the unity of a world of correspondences is as vulnerable as all others to this awakening shock” (109). The unity of the world of “Correspondances” no longer functions in the modern world of urban shock experience. De Man also asserts the importance of irony in Baudelaire’s work, and “Correspondances” can be read as an ironic reformulation of a Romantic view of nature as the site of communion with God. De Man asserts that “Irony becomes the structural principle by means of which [Baudelaire’s] work develops…many of Baudelaire’s poems are later, ironic versions of the same poems, interpretations that bring out an ironic potential that was always there but had been hidden from the reader’s and perhaps even from the author’s consciousness” (112). “Correspondances” is already imbued with irony, and exists at the outset of the collection as a foil to the experience of the modern subject.

In “Correspondances,” Baudelaire writes that “La Nature est un temple” (“Nature is a temple”; 1), and that “L’homme y passe à travers des forêts de symbols” (“Man walks within
these groves of symbols”; 3) evoking a Romantic understanding of nature as symbolic of the
divine. The poem is often interpreted as a symbolist work, and this represents an
aestheticized reading, in which art stands for religion. Though the poem may be an
articulation of symbolism, it also describes the loss of the symbol in modernity and the shift
to an allegorical world. Culler notes in his introduction that “‘Correspondances’ is often read
as Baudelaire’s affirmation of a traditional notion: that the poet’s task is to convey
Correspondances between things terrestrial and celestial, revealing the spiritual significance
of earthly matters” (xxxi). He argues that, “In fact, the poem gives us a much stranger, more
uncertain vision” (xxxi). This strange vision to which Culler refers is the experience of
synaesthesia, which is the dominant trope in the poem:

Comme de longs échos qui de loin se confondent
Dans une ténèbreuse et profonde unité,
Vaste comme la nuit et comme la clarté,
Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent. (5-8)

As the long echoes, shadowy, profound,
Heard from afar blend in a unity,
Vast as the night, as sunlight’s clarity,
So perfumes, colours, sounds may correspond.

As Baudelaire describes here, synaesthesia causes a blending of the senses, when stimulating
one sense evokes sensation in a different sense. Synaesthesia suggests a unity that is no
longer available in modernity, as it requires a unified sensorium, one that is governed by a
universal. A moment of correspondence with divinity through nature is not possible for
Baudelaire, as the “universal” or transcendental has been dismantled by the Copernican
rupture. De Man, in “Allegory and Irony in Baudelaire,” explains the allegorical possibility
in synaesthesia in “Correspondances.” De Man writes that, “To see the material and the
spiritual world connected by a system of correspondences can reduce nature to a set of signs
that refer, allegorically, to a unity of greater order, the senses being, as it were, the key to this
allegorical deciphering” (106). What Baudelaire evokes in “Correspondances” is that which no longer obtains in modernity, and this poem instead seems nostalgic for the symbol, as elaborated by Goethe and Benjamin. “Correspondances” evokes a kind of wholeness that is precluded by the shock experience of modernity. These sensations “Qui chantent les transports de l’esprit et des sens” (“Singing the senses’ rapture, and the soul’s”; 14) are not consistent with modern experience as Baudelaire conveys it in many of his other works, including most of the other poems in Les Fleurs du Mal. The placement of “Correspondances” early in the collection seems a deliberate move to set up the poems that are to follow. Although “A une passante,” like “Le Cygne,” figures in Tableaux Parisiens, a section which Baudelaire added in the 1861 edition of Les Fleurs du mal, I propose that poems such as “A une passante” convey the true mode of experience in modernity for Baudelaire. “Correspondances” lends itself to the way Goethe describes symbol, as Benjamin saw in The Origin of German Tragic Drama. Read in this way, “Correspondances” reveals a new dimension of meaning. Goethe defines symbol as the whole or universal seen in the particular, and allegory as the whole or universal seen by way of the particular (Benjamin 161). For Goethe, symbol is a mode of seeing, whereas allegory is a process of seeking. Symbol requires no contemplation; if one understands symbol, one understands the whole that ties everything together. “Correspondances” is a world of symbol, one which is out of reach for modernity.

Benjamin considers “Correspondances” extensively in his essay “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire.” He understands “Correspondances” as “a concept of experience that includes ritual elements” (333). According to Benjamin, “Only by appropriating these elements was Baudelaire able to fathom the full meaning of the breakdown which he, as a modern man,
was witnessing” (333). “Correspondances” is set up as a foil to what the modern subject experiences, and the poem demonstrates a lack felt in Modernity. Benjamin argues:

What Baudelaire meant by Correspondances can be described as an experience which seeks to establish itself in a crisis-proof form. This is possible only within the realm of the ritual. If it transcends this realm, it presents itself as the beautiful in the beautiful, ritual value appears as the value of art. Correspondances are the data of recollection—not historical data, but data of prehistory. (333-334)

The ritual is something that is irretrievably lost, according to Benjamin. It has a content that cannot be rendered in the present. The notion of a “crisis-proof experience” is only possible within the realm of ritual. The ritual does not admit of an unfulfilling experience, as ritual has a link to something immutable, a notion of transcendence. “Correspondances” nostalgically conveys the realm of the ritual from which the moderns are excluded.

Benjamin borrows the terms Erlebnis and Erfahrung from Wilhelm Dilthey in order to explore the concept of experience. Martin Jay, in his essay “Experience Without a Subject: Walter Benjamin and the Novel,” summarizes the distinction between Wilhelm Dilthey’s and Walter Benjamin’s understanding of experience in terms of Erlebnis and Erfahrung. According to Jay:

Wilhelm Dilthey had contrasted Erlebnis (or sometimes das Erleben), which he identified with “inner lived experience,” to äussere Erfahrung, by which he meant “outer sensory experience.” Whereas the latter was grounded in the discrete stimuli of mere sensation, the former involved the internal integration of sensations into a meaningful whole available to hermeneutic interpretation. (48)

Erlebnis is prioritized as true experience, whereas Erfahrung is seen as a rational process. Erlebnis is understood as “immediate, passive, fragmented, isolated, and unintegrated inner experience,” whereas Erfahrung is the “cumulative, totalizing accretion of transmittable wisdom, of epic truth” (Jay 48). Jay writes that “Erlebnis was an honorific term for subjective, concrete, intuitive responses to the world that were prior to the constructed
abstractions of science or of the intellect” (48). Erlebnis means experience locked in itself, a unique experience in which the experience and its meaning are intertwined. “A une passante” presents neither Erlebnis nor Erfahrung, but rather a type of experience which is hollow.

In “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” Benjamin presents his reformulation of the concepts of Erlebnis and Erfahrung. For Benjamin, Erlebnis becomes a kind of urban shock, a rapid shifting of the nerves. It is part of the reality of the urban environment. The shock of Erlebnis becomes the process through which the urban dweller lives on an everyday basis. Benjamin argues that what lies behind this mode of experience is a series of attempts to attain true experience, which makes the city a place of inauthenticity. Erlebnis is that type of experience which is had immediately, whereas Erfahrung is long experience, or mediated experience. The lived experience of Erlebnis is impossible in a city. Erfahrung indicates a collective type of experience, one that can be passed down through generations. Erfahrung is thus a historical mode of experience which makes collective existence possible. Just as the notion of ritual has been emptied out, so has experience, as modern man has been “cheated out of experience” (332). For Benjamin, genuine experience is no longer possible, as shock experience has taken its place.

Baudelaire’s poem “A une passante” conveys the modernist crisis of experience. Benjamin looks to Baudelaire’s “A une passante” as evidence of the hollowing out of experience in modernity. The subject of this poem is “love—not at first sight, but at last sight. It is an eternal farewell, which coincides in the poem with the moment of enchantment” (Benjamin 324). The poem records the fragmented experience of modern urbanity: the experience of not having an experience. Baudelaire describes the confusion of the urban scene in the first line: “La rue assourdissante autour de moi hurlait” (“Around me roared the nearly deafening street”;1). Gone are the “longs échos qui de loin se confondent / Dans une
ténèbreuse et profonde unité” (“long echoes, shadowy, profound, / Heard from afar blend in a unity”; 5-6). “Correspondances” presents the type of experience which is unified, and complete, and no longer possible in the world of “A une passante.” “Correspondances” also functions as a yardstick by which Baudelaire measures modernity’s loss in “A une passante.” This hollowing out of experience demonstrates how a symbolic world no longer functions in modernity. In a modern urban context, a fullness or authenticity of experience is no longer possible. The woman represents an experience that the poet might have had, but is not able to because of the jostle of the crowd:

Un éclair... puis la nuit! — Fugitive beauté
Dont le regard m’a fait soudainement renaître,
Ne te verrai-je plus que dans l’éternité?

Ailleurs, bien loin d’ici! trop tard! jamais peut-être!
Car j’ignore où tu fuis, tu ne sais où je vais,
Ô toi que jeusse aimée, ô toi qui le savais! (12-14)

One lightening flash...then night! Sweet fugitive
Whose glance has made me suddenly reborn,
Will we not meet again this side of death?

Far from this place! too late! never perhaps!
Neither one knowing where the other goes,
O you I might have loved, as well you know!

The poet is unable to have a meaningful connection with this woman, and in this way she signifies a lack for Baudelaire. She represents that mode of experience which no longer obtains in modernity. The possibility of meaningful experience is emptied out, and “A une passante” highlights this crisis of experience. This recalls the life of Pirandello’s Mattia Pascal when he becomes Adriano Meis. He is prevented from meaningfully participating in life, much in the way the poet is unable to meaningfully interact with the woman in the poem. Whereas Adriano Meis is unable to own a dog, the poet in “A une passante” is unable to express himself to the woman in the crowd. “Correspondances” indicates the fullness of
experience that is lost in modernity. It is set up as a foil to the other poems in the collection, specifically “A une passante,” to demonstrate the hollowing out of experience in modern life. Read alongside “A une passante,” the poem acts as a benchmark of what has been lost in modern urbanity. “A une passante” conveys the mode of experience particular to the urban locus, an experience of lack. This experience of lack is why symbol is no longer appropriate to modernity, and allegory becomes a more fruitful mode. As I intend to show, Baudelaire articulates this problem of representation in “Correspondances,” “A une passante” and “Au lecteur,” and responds to it in poems like “Une charogne” and “Le Vin des chiffonniers.”

“Au lecteur” and “Une charogne”

Baudelaire announces his project in Les Fleurs du mal in the poem “To the Reader,” which acts as a preface or foreword to the collection. He here outlines the main thrust of his poetic endeavor:

    Si le viol, le poison, le poignard, l'incendie,
    N'ont pas encor brodé de leurs plaisants dessins
    Le canevas banal de nos piteux destins,
    C'est que notre âme, hélas! n'est pas assez hardie. (25-28)

    If slaughter, or if arson, poison, rape
    Have not yet adorned our fine designs,
    The banal canvas of our woeful fates,
    It’s only that our spirit lacks the nerve.

Baudelaire here challenges a Romantic understanding of nature as a whole, suggesting that this view ignores filth, or the low, as a fundamental part of existence. Death and decay do not feature prominently in the often-idealized Romantic conception of nature. Baudelaire, in Les Fleurs du Mal, seeks to fill this void, and to demonstrate the place of these themes within poetry. Baudelaire conveys his interest in the investigation of filth as follows:
Nos pêchés sont têtus, nos repentirs sont lâches;
Nous nous faisons payer grassement nos aveux,
Et nous rentrons gaiement dans le chemin bourbeux,
Croyant par de vils pleurs laver toutes nos taches. (5-8)

Our sins are stubborn, our contrition lax;
We offer lavishly our vows of faith
And turn back gladly to the path of filth,
thinking mean tears will wash away our stains.

Les Fleurs du mal investigates precisely this “path of filth,” opening the door to a contemplation of a type of an allegorical model via the notion of filth and decay. It would seem that this is the way to modern allegory, to begin with the profane world. It is through the allegorical significance of the profane that the transcendental can be accessed. To reiterate, as Benjamin argues, “Considered in allegorical terms, then, the profane world is both elevated and devalued” (175). The profane world will provide for Baudelaire a foundation upon which an allegorical framework can exist. Baudelaire’s “Une charogne” exemplifies Benjamin’s notion of elevating the profane world. The poem can be read allegorically, as an examination of the low or profane world to investigate the possibility of transcendence. As Benjamin suggests, by virtue of pointing to an organized cosmology, the profane world represented in “Une charogne” is made high. Because the divine must be accessed in this manner, however, God remains an absent presence. He is not seen symbolically in every particular, but an examination of filth can reveal the existence of a “universal” or transcendent structure which would provide meaning for the profane or the “low.”

In “Une charogne,” Baudelaire examines the world of filth to discover a potential cosmology. He discovers a “whole teeming world” (l. 25) of insects come to life in a woman’s corpse. Baudelaire observes that:
Les mouches bourdonnaient sur ce ventre putride,
D'où sortaient de noirs bataillons
De larves, qui coulaient comme un épaiss liquide
Le long de ces vivants haillons. (16-20)

The flies buzzed and droned on these bowels of filth
Where an army of maggots arose,
which flowed with a liquid and thickening stream
On the animate rags of her clothes.

The corpse, typically signifying death and decay, comes to represent the possibility of new life for Baudelaire. The poet watches as,

Tout cela descendait, montait comme une vague
Ou s'élançait en pétillant
On eût dit que le corps, enflé d'un souffle vague,
Vivait en se multipliant. (21-24)

It rose and it fell, and pulsed like a wave,
Rushing and bubbling with health.
One could say that this carcass, blown with vague breath,
Lived in increasing itself.

In a sense, Baudelaire finds some value in that which is abject – a corpse, forgotten by the side of the road. The dead body becomes the site of new life for innumerable insects, as well as a source of nourishment for a dog that makes a meal of the decomposing body. Julia Kristeva, in the chapter “Semiotics of Biblical Abomination” from Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection considers the notion of the abject as it relates to corpses. In the section “Waste-Body, Corpse-Body,” Kristeva writes:

But it is the corpse…that takes on the abjection of waste in the biblical text. A decaying body, lifeless, completely turned into dejection, blurred between the inanimate and the inorganic, a transitional swarming, inseparable lining of a human nature whose life is undistinguishable from the symbolic—the corpse represents fundamental pollution. (109)

Baudelaire recognizes this “pollution” as something potentially allegorically significant. The corpse, a dead thing, is also the site of new life for insects, and gives rise to poetry. Kristeva observes that “if the corpse is waste, transitional matter, mixture, it is above all the opposite
of the spiritual, of the symbolic, and of divine law” (109). Baudelaire makes an ironic choice in investigating a carcass to discover the possibility of transcendence. Baudelaire’s “Une charogne,” read allegorically, suggests a kind of cosmology. For Baudelaire, God becomes immanent in decay, death, loss, change, and dispersal. Things normally viewed as negative become productive in this poem. Baudelaire is here not simply engaging in Satanism—he is not reversing the theological binary; instead, he is stepping outside of it, and seeing God in the mundane. This indicates Baudelaire’s interest in the productive potential of filth and waste, and this interest opens the door to the consideration of a cosmological model of some kind. God is not displaced onto nature, as for the romantics; but God is also not entirely absent, as suggested by Miller in *The Disappearance of God*. By observing the mundane, Baudelaire accesses the general by way of the particular. Culler observes that “The opening lines of this poem, addressing the beloved as his ‘soul’ in the past tense of the greatest formality … install us in the universe of Petrarchan love poetry and exalted sentiments, but the object the lovers saw proves not to be a flower but a rotting corpse” (xix). This poem is certainly far from the realm of the Romantic symbol, and Baudelaire calls attention to this through form.

T.S. Eliot, in his essay “Baudelaire,” considers Baudelaire’s interest in the profane world, or what he calls “Baudelaire’s Satanism.” Eliot asserts that:

When Baudelaire’s Satanism is dissociated from its less creditable paraphernalia, it amounts to a dim intuition of a part, but a very important part, of Christianity. Satanism itself, so far as not merely an affectation, was an attempt to get into Christianity by the back door. Genuine blasphemy, genuine in spirit and not purely verbal, is the product of partial belief, and is as impossible to the complete atheist as to the perfect Christian. It is a way of affirming belief. (373)

The satanic “back door” that Eliot describes here is Baudelaire’s examination of the profane world. Confirming that profanity and filth exists is like blasphemy, in the sense that it
blaspheming would confirm that there is a God against which to blaspheme. Baudelaire’s
Satanism and blasphemy indicates a “partial belief,” according to Eliot. Eliot suggests that
“Baudelaire is essentially Christian,” but that this view “needs considerable reservation”
(373). Eliot, as a believer, saw the possibility of redemption in Baudelaire: “His business was
not to practice Christianity, but—what was much more important for his time—to assert its
necessity” (374). Although Eliot’s Anglicanism influences his reading of Baudelaire’s work,
he observes several key features of Baudelaire’s interest in the profane world. Eliot observes
that Baudelaire’s poetry presents an investigation into the possibility of transcendental model
of the world, rather than certainty of its existence. Baudelaire is in this sense a “discoverer,”
according to Eliot; “He is beginning, in a way, at the beginning; and being a discoverer, is
not altogether certain what he is exploring and to what it leads” (373). Baudelaire’s poetry
represents an inquiry rather than a conclusion.

Miller writes of Baudelaire as “one of those writers for whom the absence of God has
been experienced as a positive thing” (13). He asserts that, “for such writers the
transcendence of God has reversed its polarity and has turned into a devouring darkness, the
frightening reality of a positive rather than empty nothingness” (13). This positive can be
understood as a way of investigating theology from the bottom-up, or by way of the
particular. For Baudelaire, filth and decay become a possible means of regaining an
allegorical model of the world. According to Benjamin, Baudelaire articulates the pain of the
loss of God. Baudelaire provides an investigation into the possibility of a transcendental
scheme through an investigation of the profane, filth, and decay – moral or corporeal.
Baudelaire shows how a rotting corpse can perhaps shed light on the “disconnect” from God
that Miller suggests is experienced by the moderns. Baudelaire’s conception of decay
suggests a type of reusability which can be understood as a model of cosmology. Baudelaire
presents the creative potential of destruction and loss. Filth and decay, for Baudelaire, are not empty, but abundant, productive. Baudelaire’s interest in decay and decomposition becomes a productive or creative negativity.

At the outset of his book An Ontology of Trash, Greg Kennedy asks, “How does waste, the essence of which contains loss and negation, take on positive value?” (10). To answer this question, he draws on Baudrillard, who implies that waste “need not suggest death and privation. It can equally symbolize the life process, the abundance and exuberance of nature” (Kennedy 10). Similarly, J. M. Baker, Jr. in his essay “Vacant Holidays: The Theological Remainder in Leopardi, Baudelaire, and Benjamin” asserts that “The trick to reading ‘pessimistic’ writers like Leopardi, Baudelaire, or Benjamin is to lay one’s finger on the place where their negativity pulses with the thing—the energy or desire—that is convertible into something positive” (1207). In this sense, Baudelaire’s investigation of filth and decay as waste in fact provides something productive, as the profane world provides a possible “back door” to cosmological order. Jonathan Culler, in his introduction to Les Fleurs du Mal, asserts that Baudelaire’s “lyrics can be read as asking how one can experience or come to terms with the modern world and as offering poetic consciousness as a solution—albeit a desperate one, requiring a passage through negativity” (xxxi). This is similar to the kind of negativity that Pirandello and Leopardi both consider in their work. Leopardi proposes friendship as a means of enduring the negativity, whereas Pirandello also subscribes to the kind of “poetic consciousness” that Culler describes.

“Le Vin des chiffonniers”

In much of his writing, Baudelaire seemed particularly fascinated with the figure of the “chiffonier” or the raggpicker. In “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire,”
Benjamin notes this interest, and highlights the similarities between the poet and the ragpicker. Benjamin writes that “The poets find the refuse of society on their streets and derive their heroic subject from this very refuse” (108). As a result, argues Benjamin, “a common type is, as it were, superimposed upon their illustrious type. This new type is permeated by the features of the ragpicker, who made frequent appearances in Baudelaire’s work” (108). Benjamin also notes that Baudelaire wrote about the figure of the ragpicker one year before he wrote “Le Vin des chiffronniers.” In “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire,” Benjamin quotes Baudelaire’s prose description of the figure:

Here we have a man whose job it is to gather the day’s refuse in the capital. Everything that the big city has thrown away, everything it has lost, everything it has scorned, everything it has crushed underfoot he catalogues and collects. He collates the annals of intemperance, the capharnaum of waste. He sorts things out and selects judiciously; he collects, like a miser guarding a treasure, refuse which will assume the shape of useful or gratifying objects between the jaws of the goddess of Industry. (qtd. in “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire” 108)

The role of the poet, and by extension the allegorician, is clearly similar to that of the ragpicker. Baudelaire as poet wanders the city and collects particulars to reassemble into something meaningful. Benjamin observes this connection, asserting that “This description is one extended metaphor for the poetic method, as Baudelaire practiced it. Ragpicker and poet: both are concerned with refuse” (108). Baudelaire observed that the ragpicker was analogous to the poet in terms of their respective functions as modern city dwellers. Like the ragpicker, the poet hunts out moments or scenes in the debris of modern urbanity. The poet, at least in the case of Baudelaire, is fascinated by humanity’s leftovers, or that which is abject. While Baudelaire’s prose writing suggests a comparison between the poet and the ragpicker, “Le Vin des chiffronniers” makes this comparison explicit:

Souvent à la clarté rouge d'un réverbère
Dont le vent bat la flamme et tourmente le verre,
Au coeur d’un vieux faubourg, labyrinthe fangeux
Où l’humanité grouille en ferments orageux,
On voit un chiffonnier qui vient, hochant la tête,
Butant, et se cognant aux murs comme un poète,
Et, sans prendre souci des mouchards, ses sujets,
Epanche tout son coeur en glorieux projets. (1-8)

Often, beneath a street lamp’s reddish light,
Where wind torments the glass and flame by night,
Where mankind swarms in stormy turbulence
Within a suburb’s muddy labrynth,

One comes upon a shaking ragman, who
Staggers against the walls, as poets do,
And disregardful of policemen’s spies,
Pours from his heart some glorious enterprise.

The poet and the ragpicker inhabit the same space, and are further connected by their love of
wine. They are also connected in that they suffer abuse from society:

Oui, ces gens harcelés de chagrins de ménage
Moulus par le travail et tourmentés par l’âge
Ereintés et pliant sous un tas de débris,
Vomissement confus de l’énorme Paris, (13-16)

Yes, and these men harassed by household strife,
Tortured by age, bruised by the blows of life,
Under their heaps of rubbish burdened down,
The dregs, the vomit of this teeming town,

Baudelaire articulates a weight associated with bearing the burden of society’s abject. The
ragpicker, like the poet, becomes a kind of cultural historian and observer. Debarati Sanyal,
in The Violence of Modernity asserts that Baudelaire’s “portrait of the poet-chiffonier
interweaves the production of poetry and the collection of refuse” and that, “Like the
ragpicker, the poet is the keeper of an urban junkyard, an alternative historian who composes
the archives of urban waste” (62). The ragpicker takes on a role similar to the artist
Constantin Guys in “The Painter of Modern Life.” Both become experts in observing and
distilling modernity. Sanyal also notes the centrality of the ragpicker figure to Benjamin’s
reading of Baudelaire: “Walter Benjamin fully grasped the importance of the chiffonier as an analogue for the poet, and envisioned the ragpicker’s activity as a metaphor for Baudelaire’s poetic composition” (63). Benjamin addresses the social phenomenon of the ragpicker and its rise in the nineteenth century in “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire.” He explains that, “When the new industrial processes gave refuse a certain value, ragpickers appeared in the cities in large numbers. They worked for middlemen and constituted a sort of cottage industry in the streets” (54). The task of the ragpicker as Benjamin outlines is to lend value to that which would otherwise be considered waste. This is similar to what Baudelaire does in poems such as “Une charogne.” Benjamin also observes that “The ragpicker fascinated his epoch. The eyes of the fist investigators of pauperism were fixed on him with the mute question: Where does the limit of human misery lie?” (54). Baudelaire seems equally fascinated with this figure, seeing in it a double of himself. Benjamin acknowledges that “A ragpicker cannot, of course, be considered a member of the bohème. But from the littérateur to the professional conspirator, everyone who belonged to the bohème could recognize a bit of himself in the ragpicker” (54). The poet, like the ragpicker, looks into the dark corners of the city to find waste which can be made into something useful or something of value.

Ross Chambers, in “Recycling the Ragpicker: “Le Vin des chiffoniers” extensively considers this connection between the ragpicker and the poet. Chambers notes the connection between the purpose of the ragpicker and the allegorical project of the poet, and suggests that “the words “tout pour moi devient allégorie” in “Le Cygne” might stand for Baudelaire’s whole effort as a poet of the city” (178). Chambers is one of many critics to identify the shared vocation of the ragpicker and the poet as collectors of fragments. He also asserts that Baudelaire was concerned with his social role as a poet:
Baudelaire was to be increasingly concerned with the social situation and aesthetic power of the “modern” poet in an era of inauthenticity...as well as troubled about the very possibility of a genuinely “poetic” discourse in a world in which what Walter Benjamin called the “loss of aura” and Baudelaire “perte d’auréole” [“loss of halo”] reduced the poetic function itself to gleaning what it could from the life of a city... (180)

Chambers here notes that the modern poetic function has been reduced to a collector of waste and the abject. As Baudelaire articulates in “L’albatros,” the modern poet is a fallen figure, no longer the Romantic genius (“Lui, naguère si beau, qu'il est comique et laid!” [“This voyager, how comical and weak!”; 9]). Like the albatross (“Le Poète est semblable au prince des nuées” [“The poet is a kinsman in the clouds”; 13]), the poet has become a detestable figure, reduced to collecting what urbanity has chosen to discard or forget.

Chambers notes the function of the poet or flâneur as collector, asserting that “The flâneur of the 1840s was to come to think of himself, more specifically, by the late 1850s and early 1860s, as a “glaneur,” a “collector” of a particularly humble kind and comparable, therefore, to the ragpicker...” (180). Chambers examines the poem’s “implications as an enactment of a certain poetics of modernity and as an allegorization, not of French political history, but of the figure of the poet (see Gasarian), as that history had led Baudelaire to understand it” (181). He points out the essay on “Le Cygne” by Gasarian, and notes the connection between “Le Cygne” and “Le Vin des chiffoniers” based on the figure of the poet as allegorician. Chambers details the similarities between the figure of the ragpicker and that of the poet, observing that “the ragpicker’s trade made him a strikingly apt metaphor for those rather marginalized writers and journalists who themselves eked out precarious livings as parasites on the life of the city” (181). He notes that, “Like ragpickers, they collected in random fashion the sights and sounds of the streets and recycled them but into literary descriptions” of “the new, modern way of life [which] had made urban reality so complex
and various” (181-2). In their functions as collectors of urban debris, the ragpicker and the poet are strikingly similar. Sanyal, in *The Violence of Modernity*, observes that “the analogy between poet and ragpicker is readily discernable: just as the former sifts through the dirt of the city dreaming of ‘poétiques chenilles, that is to say, rubbish that can be turned into gold, the poet too will go in search of opportunities for the alchemical transformation of mud into gold” (62-63). Sanyal also observes that in the prose poems of *Le Spleen de Paris* “The poet’s incarnations as werewolf, vagrant, and solitary urban wanderer, powerfully conjure up the *chiffonier*’s abjection, his nocturnal peregrinations in search of salvageable waste…both ragpicker and prose poet harvest debris from the field of urban modernity itself” (63). This is similar to abjection as Kristeva describes it. Both the modern poet and the ragpicker deal with that which is abject. Sanyal sates of *Les Fleurs du mal* and *Le Spleen de Paris* that, “The abject figures haunting the imperial splendor of Haussman’s Paris…are uneasily hosted, if not held hostage, by these texts. The human debris of the industrial empire echo the poet’s own condition as an anachronistic figure in exile” (64). Sanyal identifies the modern poet as someone who feels obsolete and rejected by society. These features would cause the poet to see in the ragpicker a likeness of himself. The ragpicker is in this way an important figure for modern allegory. The ragpicker becomes a type of the modern allegorician, and his status results from the Copernican rupture. With the figure of the ragpicker, allegory becomes self-referential, and becomes an allegory of the allegorician. This is the kind of fractured form of allegory that results in modernism.

Ross Chambers, in his essay on the figure of the ragpicker in Baudelaire, highlights the shock that Baudelaire would have induced in his mid-nineteenth century reader by including a description of a ragpicker in a poetic work. While the ragpicker was a familiar figure in mid-nineteenth century prose, it would have been unusual to encounter such a figure
in poetry (Chambers 182). Chambers asserts that “Baudelaire was interested in finding a way
to make poetry modern my making it capable of treating the themes of city life, itself the
most modern of phenomena (182). His poetic treatment of the ragpicker marks Baudelaire’s
work as modern, by recording the experience of the city. Chambers proposes that “Le Vin
des chiffoniers” is remarkable “not for the originality of its treatment of the ragpicker topos,
but because it puts into verse a content that, as prose, was already entirely banal by the
1840s” (182). This treatment of the unexpected, of the decidedly modern, is part of what
marks Baudelaire as a poet of modernism. As he does in other works of Les Fleurs du Mal,
Baudelaire poeticizes the decidedly unpoetic; he answers his own call in “Au Lecteur” to
represent those characteristics of the city which have been left out of art because they are
base or low.

Chambers suggests that Baudelaire would have written of such things precisely
because he wished to shock his audience with form, and that Baudelaire was in fact counting
on his reader’s shock “upon encountering and recognizing in a startlingly unexpected genre
(poetry) a figure totally familiar from the prosy flâneur journalism that had already coded the
meanings that could be attached…to the “chiffonier” as a social phenomenon” (182). The
purpose of including such a figure in his poetry was to create for his reader a sense of what
Benjamin, in “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” calls shock experience, which becomes
integral to urban experience. For Baudelaire, writes Chambers, “the shock of coming upon a
ragpicker in a poem, like finding a swan in a gutter, qualified in this way and in this sense as
the quintessential urban experience” (182). Baudelaire was attempting to cause his reader the
shock experience that was the reality of urban life. Chambers notes that, “as Walter Benjamin
perceived, shock, for Baudelaire, is at the heart of the new aesthetics of the city” (182). For
Baudelaire, this was the reality of urban experience which had not yet been expressed in poetry.

Chambers also points out that in other works, such as “Le peintre de la vie moderne,” in describing the life of Constantin Guys, “Baudelaire comes closer to associating a picture of the poet or artist as a collector of chance sights or insights, or even simply of rhymes, thrown up by city life, with the theme of exhilarating inspiration, or “ivresse” (187). It is by reading “Le Vin des chiffoniers” alongside other works of Baudelaire’s, such as “Le peintre de la vie moderne,” that it becomes clear the extent to which these figures are similar. Chambers notes that both figures are not “the producers of history, but its ragpickers, those who stagger along, buffeted by events and picking up the débris that history “throws up” like a “vomissement” but attempting also to recycle the bits and pieces into a form that might make sense of their experience” (190). Baudelaire, as author, tries to weave together the fragments of experience into an allegorical narrative that makes sense. The modern poet, like the ragpicker, lives in a world of disordered particulars, and must collect them so they can be rearranged to form something meaningful.

T.S. Eliot, in his essay on Baudelaire, asserts that by including the profane details of urban life in poetry, Baudelaire elevates these things. Eliot writes that “It is not merely in the use of imagery of the sordid life of a great metropolis, but in the elevation of such imagery to the first intensity—presenting it as it is, and yet making it represent something much more than itself—that Baudelaire has created a mode of release and expression for other men” (377). This assertion is similar to Benjamin’s assertion that profane things, when deployed allegorically, by virtue of being used to signify, become elevated. Because Baudelaire represents the particulars of everyday urban life in poetry, they become more than
themselves. This is what is meant by “Tout pour moi devient allégorie.” Baudelaire sees allegorical possibility in the profane and lowly aspects of the city.

Baudelaire’s poetry is an investigation of the formal crisis of allegory through the profane world. Baudelaire examines modern urban experience to discover whether it still functions symbolically. What he finds is that experience has been hollowed out. Goethe’s symbol, as described by Benjamin, provides the fullness of immediate experience, whereas allegory requires mediation and process to derive meaning. The symbolic understanding of the world is what is lost in modernism; instead, a fractured form of allegory is what remains, leading to the creation of a new subjectivity. The pensive subject results from this crisis, and is a character living in an exploded or shattered cosmology. Pirandello, while not as obviously invested in writing modern allegory, is nonetheless interested in its breakdown as a result of the decline of the “metanarrative” or cosmological rupture. Pirandello articulates the crisis of the metanarrative, “universal,” or transcendental scheme that would give meaning and direction to everyday life. The metanarrative in decline central to the crises of modernity is the falling away of a metaphysical background. Pirandello observes this crisis in Leopardi, who, considered in this way, functions as a proto-modernist in his later work. Leopardi articulates the rupture between an ancient and a modern cosmology. Although frequently considered a Romantic writer, Leopardi demonstrates a distinctly modern sensibility in the Operette. Leopardi suggests that the Copernican revolution of 1543, which caused a break between the ancient Ptolemaic worldview and the modern heliocentric worldview, is a rupture that resonates in modernity. Leopardi draws on antiquity, critiquing an anthropocentric worldview that no longer obtains. The crisis articulated by Leopardi, Pirandello, and Baudelaire resonates throughout modern thought and literature, and postmodernity is still largely influenced by the Copernican rupture. This rupture significantly
effects subjectivity in postmodern artistic, literary, and social trends, resulting in a current phase of anxiety. Many other modernist authors perceive and react to this rupture, and experiment with form as a way of rehabilitating experience in modernity. Authors such as Woolf, Joyce, and Pound experiment with form in order to more accurately represent the experience of modernity. These writers of modern life respond to the crisis of representation as it is outlined by Leopardi, Baudelaire, and Pirandello.
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