Seeing and Saying in Baudelaire's
"Les Aveugles"

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Les Aveugles
Contemple-les, mon âme; ils sont vraiment affreux!
Pareils aux mannequins; vaguement ridicules;
Terribles, singuliers comme les somnambules;
Dardant on ne sait où leurs globes ténébreux.
Leurs yeux, d'où la divine étoile est partie,
Comme s'ils regardaient au loin, restent levés
Au ciel; on ne les voit jamais vers les pavés
Penché rêveusement leur tête appesantie.
Ils traversent ainsi le noir illimité,
Ce frère du silence éternel. O cité!
Pendant qu'autour de nous tu chantes, ris et beugles,
Éprise du plaisir jusqu'à l'atrocité,
Vois! je me traîne aussi! mais, plus qu'eux hâché,
Je dis: Que cherchent-ils au Ciel, tous ces aveugles?

This text has attracted little interpretative commentary. Apart from speculation on the sources, pictorial and literary, the most notable contribution has been Peter Nurse's fine explication de texte, which contains some remarkable metric analysis and offers a reading that is the point of departure for the present study. Nurse concentrates on the relationship between "je" and "les aveugles" in the sonnet; I wish to draw attention more specifically to the presence of two other actors, "mon âme" and the "cité." These are of most immediate interest in that they are the subjects of an act of seeing, which is called for in the imperative mood by "je" ("Contemple-les, mon âme," "O cité! . . . Vois!") , the objects of the act being respectively "les aveugles" and "je." Since "les aveugles" are by definition unseeing, whereas "je" explicitly delegates the function of contemplation to his soul while no less explicitly conferring on himself that of speaking (speaking the poem, speaking the imperatives, and also speaking the embedded question in line 14), it may be worth examining not only the bond between "je" and "les aveugles" but also the relationship between "les aveugles" and the seeing instances, "mon âme" and the "cité."
This investigation is part of ongoing research into the structure and unity of the “Tableaux parisiens” sequence in Les Fleurs du mal, the hypothesis of which is that since Paris is not omnipresent in these poems and since the pictorial element is itself always presented in a subjective framework through the intervention of poetic functions like dreaming, remembering, and interpreting, the unity of the poems is more likely to reside in the problematics of the omnipresent subject, “je,” as he reveals himself not only through his seeing but in the content and mode of his saying.

THE BLIND

The blind, though they cannot see, have traditionally been regarded as seers, endowed with inner vision. As Victor Hugo puts it, in “A un poète aveugle,” “L’aveugle voit dans l’ombre un monde de clarté. / Quand l’œil du corps s’éteint, l’œil de l’esprit s’allume.” Mediating the sacred, they occupy a central position in the profane world, standing, according to a Rilke poem, as “ein Markstein namenloser Reiche,” “der Gestirne stiller Mittelpunkt” (“Pont du Carrousel”). Baudelaire’s blind men retain something of this numinous quality, being “terribles, singuliers comme des somnambules”; but they are deprived of the inner and spiritual virtù that provides mythical justification for the aura that surrounds the blind and the awe in which they are held. Like tailors’ models they have no inner reality; and their outer-directed eyes turn to a sky whose dubious noological status is indicated by the orthographical alternation between upper- and lowercase c in the word “ciel.” Objectless in this sense, their look becomes directionless as well, “dardant on ne sait où leurs globes ténèbres.” Hence, if the phrase “vraiment affreux,” which describes them, is an ambivalent one (since it may be taken as a colloquial expression of repugnance, or else held to direct attention to the etymological sense of affreux, derived from les affres), they are “vaguement”—but unequivocally—“ridicules.”

Furthermore, the term aveugles is plural; and the centrality of the single blind figure of the archetype has dissolved into a type of collective anonymity that has led commentators to think of Breughel and to invoke popular wisdom about the blind leading the blind. From being sacred figures, and hence unique, the blind have acquired representative status: “tous ces aveugles” are an allegorical figure of humanity in the mass, of the crowd—or they would be if the poem did not distinguish them from the noisy, pleasure-seeking “cité” all around them. The suggestion is that we are all in torment in this poem; the human collectivity at its most general, “éprise du plaisir jusqu’à l’atrocité.” is self-tormenting in its mindless unconcern for the transcendent dimension; more aware, the blind in their “affres” traverse the immensity of darkness while seeking a transcendence where they are unlikely to find it, in the external world.
of the sky; only "I" is in communication with a transcendent entity, but it is a purely inner and personal one, "mon âme," and he too drags himself like the blind through the world of the city, which "autour de nous" sings and laughs and bellows.

One might think of Hölderlin, "Aber weh! es wandelt in Nacht, es wohnt, wie im Orkus, / Ohne Göttliches unser Geschlecht" ("Der Archipelagus"), were it not that Baudelaire's underworld is less a place of explicit negation of the divine ("Ohne Göttliches") than it is one of anxiety and interrogation: "Que cherchent-ils au Ciel, tous ces aveugles?" This questioning is the characteristic response, in the "Tableaux parisiens," to the perception of the allegorical, which poses the problem of meaning in a world from which the divine—the meaning-giving dimension of existence—is to all intents and purposes absent. Thus, the emblematic "squelette laboureur," a more explicit figure of the living dead than the blind themselves, provokes equally anguished metaphysical questioning; whereas in the poem in which the key phrase "tout pour moi devient allégorie" occurs, the exiled swan—

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\begin{align*}
&\text{Vers le ciel quelquefois, comme l'homme d'Ovide} \\
&\text{Vers le Ciel ironique et cruellement bleu,} \\
&\text{Sur son cou convulsif tendant sa tête avide,} \\
&\text{Comme s'il adressait des reproches à Dieu!}
\end{align*}
\]

—adopts exactly the same heaven-scrutinizing posture as the blind.

"JE"

Unlike the blind, however, who seek the unknown in the heavens, the "I" of the poem seeks understanding of a spectacle in the here below; and to that end he has recourse to a seeing instance that is both internal and endowed with a specifically named faculty, that of contemplation. The nature of contemplation and its implications for "je" will be examined later; but it should be noted that "je" relates also to an external instance, the "cité," in a way that directly parallels the relationship of the blind to the sky. The blind look to a sky they cannot see, and "je" asks to be seen by a community that (it is clear) cannot hear him: each seeks a response that cannot be forthcoming. Hence the imperative "Vois!" has an illocutionary force very different from that of "Contemple-les, mon âme," the exclamation point (present in line 13, absent in line 1) distinguishing the urgency of an impassioned appeal, presupposing failure, from the calmer mode of address that assumes it will be heeded.

"Je" relates to the city because he is a speaking entity ("je dis") in a world of sound; for the city is distinguished from the blind as the hell of sound is distinguished from the hell of silence. The blind traverse the darkness, "frère du silence éternel," whereas the city's "atrocité" (etymologically blackness) derives from a pleasure-seeking that is directly equated with noise: "tu chantes, ris et beugles." Just so does the speech of "je" set him apart from the silent
contemplation of the soul. But speech also disjoins "je" from the "cité" as much as it conjoins him. The function dire contrasts with the functions of the city partly in terms of articulateness versus inarticulate expression (dire and chanter versus rire and beugler), partly in terms of pedestrian versus lyric modes of articulation (dire versus chanter), and entirely in terms of volume and control, the unemotional mildness of dire contrasting with the spontaneity and loudness of chanter, rire, and beugler. The implied inaudibility of "je"'s questioning speech in the sound-world of the city, and hence the similarity of his vain questioning with the vain seeking of the blind, is what makes him of a piece with the latter, silently looking in a city too noisily addicted to pleasure to pay them heed. And this community of "je" with the blind is recorded in the phrase "autour de nous."

This unity is quickly modified, however, by the assertion that "je" is "plus qu'eux hétérate." In this way the contextual meaning of hétéitude, as the common quality of "je" and the blind, becomes clear: it is that which distinguishes them from the uncaring city, the awareness implied by their joint questioning and seeking. But if "je" is "plus qu'eux hétérate," it seems that it is because to their seeking, obstinate and dogged as it is, he adds the questioning that inquires after the meaning of the seeking itself. This adds a further degree of consciousness that is a direct result of contemplating the blind; hence it is through his mastery of the function of contemplation, through his possession of a soul, that "je" stands out as an isolated individual, distinct even from those whose paradigmatic loneliness in the city he shares. Contemplation—which opposes him to the blind—is one of the keys to the specificity of "je"; speech—which distinguishes him from the contemplating soul—will prove to be the other.

CONTEMPLATION

Contemplation versus Seeking

One needs to distinguish not only the function of contemplation from the function of seeking but also the different relationships between "je" and the soul's contemplation, on the one hand, and between "je" and the blind men's seeking, on the other. A comparison between the opening and closing phrases of the poem enables us to do both. The calm initial imperative is perlocutionary and presupposes unproblematic relationships both between "je" and the soul and between the soul and the object of its contemplation, the blind. But the final question implies dubiousness and uncertainty—on the one hand in the relationship between the questioner, "je," and the object of his question, the blind (whom he does not understand), and on the other between the blind and the object of their search, which is and remains an enigma. The difference in relationship between "je" and the contemplating soul and "je" and the seeking blind is further reflected in the contrast between the possessive "mon âme" and the deictic "tous ces aveugles," with implications of control and intimacy in one
case, and of exteriority, bafflement, and lack of control on the other. (There is some resemblance between the unindividuated blind men and the menacing multiplication of identical figures that occurs in “Les Sept Vieillards.”) Contemplation mediates relationships between “je” and the soul, and between the soul and the blind, that are continuous (in the sense that no difficulty is assumed); whereas questioning and seeking produce relationships of discontinuity between “je” and “les aveugles” and between “les aveugles” and “le ciel,” respectively. It thus becomes clear that contemplation is to be distinguished not only from the seeking of the blind but also from the speech activity of “je.” Let us first examine in more detail how it differs from the activity of the blind.

It is evident that the major distinction between the soul’s contempler and the blind men’s chercher derives from the differing axes, horizontal versus vertical, that define the direction of the two functions. The locative “au Ciel” implies the type of answer expected by the question “que cherchent-ils?” by exploiting the traditional connotations of verticality (as well as of capitalization); but the question arises precisely because of the vertical direction of the search. The implication is one of incredulity that the blind can indeed be seeking what they appear to be seeking—the noological—where they are seeking it, “au Ciel.” The zero locative in “contemple-les” has the opposite implications: the locative is unexpressed because it is understood that the appropriate axis of contemplation is the horizontal; it takes place in the world of ici-bas. But a further significant difference between contemplation and seeking—and one not unrelated to the difference of axes—derives from the comparison of the metaphysical status of the respective subjects and objects of the two functions: chercher involves a cosmological subject (“ils”) in search of a noological (or transcendent) object; but, conversely, contempler involves a noological subject (“mon âme”) addressing itself to a cosmological object (“contemple-les”), the blind. The coincidence of the object of contemplation (the blind) with the subject of the search (the blind), and that of the object of the search (the noological) with the subject of contemplation (the soul), effectively define the basic donnée of the poem and relate it in historical terms to the sensibility of the “disappearance of God.” The blind are seeking the spirit of the universe where it is not, in the sky, and as the object of vision—whereas it is in fact the subject of vision, and situated within man.

Contemplation versus Dreaming

That spiritual power lies within man and controls his relationship, not with the heavens, but with the world, is a fundamental assertion of the second quatrain. In a hasty reading these lines appear to be saying the same thing twice: the blind look upward, they do not look downward. Closer analysis points up the difference in value attached to the two statements: the relationship of “leurs
yeux” and “au ciel” couples significantly with that of “vers les pavés” and “leur tête” so as to produce a contrast between two types of illusion—the false illusion (“comme s’ils regardaient au loin”) in which the blind obstinately persist (“restent levés”), and the compensatory mental faculty that would be available to them, were they to accept the implications of the departure of the “divine étincelle” from their eyes and allow their head to bend, heavily but “rêveusement,” toward the pavement. Dreaming thus appears as the function common to humanity that most resembles the individual privilege awarded to those who, being in possession of a soul, have at their command the function of contemplation: in each case the spiritual faculty is inner, and internal to man.

But a head is not a soul, and the two are significantly contrasted, not only by the difference between first person and third person possessives, “mon âme” and “leur tête,” but also through their respective positions in the initial and closing hemistichs of the quatrains. There is a clear hierarchization of the two functions—that of the soul and that of the head—that is implicit in the poem: “rêveusement,” as an adverb of manner, tells nothing about the outcome of the function of dreaming, but only how it may modify the action of bowing one’s head toward the city environment; and the further adverbial “vers les pavés” also emphasizes the intransitivity of the action described here. But in “contemple-les” the verb is transitive and its relationship with the object is direct; we have posited that the function of contemplation is to understand the sights of the world as meaningful—it is allegoresis. As such it has both direction and an object; whereas dreaming has direction (“vers les pavés”) but, as an intransitive activity, has no object. Both contrast with seeking, which is a transitive activity but—taking an erroneous object and a false direction—results in a sense both of directionlessness (“dardant on ne sait où leurs globes ténébreux”) and of objectlessness (“que cherchent-ils au Ciel, tous ces aveugles?”).

SPEECH

The poem opens with a voice eliciting from the soul the function of contemplation and closes by attributing to “je” a locutionary act: “je dis.” Speech thus characterizes “je” as contemplation characterizes the soul; and if the two are at first closely akin, so that the content of speech appears equivalent to the soul’s contemplation, the implication of serenity in the act of contemplation contrasts strongly with the questioning that, in the final self-quotation, is the form taken by “je”’s speech, a questioning that has already been seen to be akin to the seeking of the blind. The pronoun “je,” we know, is a shifter: its content changes with its context; and the “je” who addresses his own soul in line 1 is in a different illocutionary context from the “je” who draws explicit attention to himself as a self-conscious speaking subject in line 14. This shift in the content of the word “je,” as defined by the relationships in which the act of speech involves the entity “je,” not only defines the narrative movement of the
poem; it also delineates a profound division in the functioning of “je” as the subject of the act of speech.

Speech implies a referent, which for most of this poem is equivalent to the object of the soul’s contemplation, the blind. But, as Benveniste would put it, in addition to this je/il(s) relationship, speech also requires a complex set of agreements between an emitter and a receiver of speech, in short a je-tu relationship. Among these agreements is agreement about the contextual referent, so the complete model is therefore je-tu/il(s). It is by reference to this model that “je” may most conveniently be described as the locus of a shifting set of relationships in the poem.

Speech and the Soul

With “mon âme,” the je-tu relationship is truly an intimate one, and it is based on “je”’s assumption that the description he gives of the blind men is equivalent to their contemplation by the soul. As a corollary of this je-tu intimacy and agreement, the je/il(s) relationship in the quatrains is one of distance: the description focuses on the terribleness and ridiculousness of the blind men, on the emptiness and the disorientation that contrast with “je”’s possession of a soul and the steadiness of gaze implied by contemplation. Yet, as the speaking instance, or destinataire, “je” is not fully identified with the soul, as destinataire; and the assumed equivalence between his description and the inner understanding that is posited on the soul’s part has in fact no benefit of an absolute guarantee. It is “je” who assumes full responsibility for what is said, and the externality of situation and vision implied by speech is inscribed in the poem by means of the contrast between “Contemple-les, mon âme” of line 1 and “on ne les voit jamais” in line 7. Here the distance between “je” and “les aveugles” continues to be stressed in the semantic content (their failure to lower their eyes and to dream), but there has been a subtle shift in the alignment of “je” as a speaking agent: the point of view with which he identifies is no longer that of the individual soul but has become that of a community, with which the use of the pronoun “on” identifies the speaker. The adverbial phrase “on ne sait où” of line 4 mediates this important change of perspective.

Speech and the City

“Je”’s exteriority as a speaker with respect to the inner soul has two consequences in the tercets. We find him turning now to the “cité” and attempting to set up a new je-tu relationship with the community addressed in the vocative “O cité!” and the imperative “Vois!”: men, not the personal soul, are now taken to be the appropriate partners in the speech act. In other words, “je” is no longer a simple observer of humanity, relaying the soul’s contemplation; he is a member, or more accurately a would-be member, of the human community. For the externalization of “je” through speech has also been
accompanied by a transformation of his own role: he is no longer simply the emitter of speech, but also the object of reference. As such he has joined "les aveugles" as object of the city's vision and referent of his own speech. "Contemple-les, mon âme" translates a je-tu/ils relationship; whereas "Vois! je me traîne aussi!" , by grouping "je" and "ils" in a common "nous" of referentiality, now situates "je" on both sides of the slash, as speaker and spoken about: je-tu/nous.

This is a model of "je"'s double integration into the community, through identification with the blind and through communication with the city. However, the final model proposed by the poem disintegrates both the "nous" of identification, which becomes again a je-ils relationship, and the je-tu of communication with the city, since communication is not established; so that one is tempted to rewrite the situation in the tercets as tuije + ils. There is no je-tu communication relationship, be it with the soul or the city; and the referent of speech is itself divided, as between "je" and "les aveugles." Thus "je" speaks alone.

Consequently, the third-person verbs characteristic of the description of the blind in the quatrains spill over into the opening lines of the tercets, describing them, from a distanced point of view, in terms of their movement and their affinity with the "silence éternel." And if, in the penultimate line, "je"'s sense of affinity with them extends to his movement ("je me traîne aussi"), the connotations of this movement are very different. There is none of the solemn majesty of: "Ils traversent ainsi le noir illimité / Ce frère du silence éternel." For him there is only the dragging motion of the social outcast, and—explicitly distinctive of "je"—there is, instead of the eternal silence that makes the blind akin to the silent soul, speech. Thus, the third-person reference returns, significantly, in "plus qu'eux hébété" and in the final question, which restores the original distance between "je" and "les aveugles." But now it is the blind who appear as closer to the soul, as silent seekers of the transcendent; whereas "je," explicitly attributing to himself the locutionary act—"je dis"—aligns himself with the noisy world of the city.

Yet here, too, his position is one of solitude: we have seen that his speech is drowned in the singing, laughing, and bellowing of the multitude; but in illocutionary terms it can be seen also, unlike the imperative "Vois!", to be not even specifically addressed to a hearer. It is formally a question, but there are two reasons why it does not expect an answer: one is that it is posited (ironically, of course) by the speaker as unanswerable, but the other is that there is no illocutionary partner to answer it. It is not, then, an interrogation but a simple statement ("je dis") in question form.

It is only as speaker of the poem (and not as an actor in the poem) that "je" may expect his utterance to find a hearer, in the person of that hypothetical
construct, the implied reader. Within the poem, the power of speech appears as an isolating force, detaching “je” from his silent soul without bringing him into communication with his fellow men. And if it puts him in the category of other marginals, such as the blind, as the rejects of the social world, his solitude with respect to them also derives from speech, since his easy communication with the soul contrasts with their vain seeking of the transcendent; whereas on the other hand their single-minded commitment to the dark heavens contrasts in turn with his would-be involvement, as a speaker, in the life of the city.

So the ego of this poem is a very modern figure, in spite of the apparently transitional stance he takes as the possessor of a soul in a world from which the divine has otherwise disappeared. He is modern, first and foremost, because of his identification with language: he is not soul, but “je,” the producer of speech. And this language describes him in turn as the locus of a series of conflicts that we may identify with a historical problematic of the modern. The possessor of a soul and master of the power of contemplation, he comes into sharp contrast with the mindless pleasure-seeking of the city. It is meaningfulness and understanding he seeks, and this sets him apart, not only from the city but also from those more traditional seekers, the blind. Their residual numinousness makes them relatively prestigious figures, traversing the limitless darkness, in spite of their ludicrous appearance; whereas the poet—“Vois! je me traine aussi!”—is at best a pathetic figure, but the poet who seeks the meaning of their own search is by definition also a more troubled figure than they, “plus qu’eux hétére.” Thus poetic seeing, or contemplation, is a source of loneliness.

But so too does poetic speech set the poet apart, and this is so not simply in the failure of his attempted communication with the contemporary world of the city, but also in his relationship to the poetic tradition. For in this poem lyrical speech—singing—has become part of the mindless activity of the city. The poet speaks, and his speech is not the speech of beauty and certainty; he speaks to ask a question, and his utterance has the flatness and almost the vulgarity of a near-colloquial mode, with its familiar phraseology: “vraiment affreux,” “vaguement ridicules,” “que cherchent-ils au Ciel, tous ces aveugles?” The words “Je dis” here announce the arrival of a new poetic diction, something that might be called the speech of hétéitude.

“Je,” however, has no other existence than that conferred by such speech. This poem gives strong support to the hypothesis that the true subject of the “Tableaux parisiens” will prove to be not the city, not even the function of seeing, but the sujet de l’énonciation, a subject defining himself, then, as “je,” that grammatical entity which, as a shifter, has no content in itself but acquires meaning exclusively from the circumstances and content of its own discourse. The function of saying is no longer the act by which the poet makes manifest his
self, his soul, his inner existence; it is the act that constitutes him as the locus of a network of problematical relationships without which he would have no being.


2. The sources, notably in Breughel and Champfleury, are discussed in the major editions of Baudelaire’s works: Crépet-Blin (Corti), Adam (Garnier), Pichois (Pléiade). See also G. A. Brunelli, “I pittori-teologi dei secoli XV e XVI e Baudelaire,” *Studi Francesi* 20 (May–August 1963).


5. For an extended discussion of the illocutionary relationships implied in and by Baudelaire’s poetry, see Klaus Dirscherl, *Zur Typologie der poetischen Sprechweisen bei Baudelaire* (Munich: Wilhem Fink Verlag, 1975). A question not touched on in this paper is that of the tension between the voice in the poem, with its illocutionary aloneness and its flat discourse (“Que cherchent-ils au Ciel, tous ces aveugles?”), and the voice of the poem, which chooses the traditional sonnet as a medium of communication with a reader who is assumed not only to heed but also to understand the problem of loneliness.
L’œil était dans la tombe,
et regardait Caïn.

I am grateful to Professors Ross Chambers and Robert Greer Cohn for their incisive reactions to an earlier version of this study. Without the initial stimulus of Professor Cohn’s book, this essay could not have been written.