

Rather Shame than Guilt

George Bartlett

In *Les Yeux des Pauvres*, Baudelaire's narrator feels shame when a homeless father and son see him enjoying the excess of a café outing: "I felt a little ashamed of our glasses and decanters, which were *greater than our thirst*."¹ Caught in his excess, he hopes to share this exposure with his lover. She instead responds with anxiety and demands the beggars be removed, choosing guilt over shame. Guilt, after all, "helps one to forget the register of shame."²

Miller differentiates shame from guilt by highlighting its primacy: "shame is related to an Other prior to the Other that judges ... a primordial Other."³ Shame, then, is a primary affect of the real⁴, an "index of ontological lack"⁵ that exposes the subject's impotence in relation to being. But what good is this in connection with truth?

What is at stake in truth, Miller says, is "separating the subject from the master signifier."⁶ The master signifier being that which veils the impotence called castration. This operation assumes the subject knows he has one⁷, thus *making ashamed* is "an effort to reinstate the agency" of the master signifier and its singularity.⁸ Shame, and speech about its experience, becomes then an important moment in this operation. Analysis must therefore continue to support shame where civilisation does not.⁹

Where guilt defends against knowledge of the lack at the heart of the speaking-being, shame is one of the conditions under which truth about it may be half-said. *Half-said*, because on one side of truth there is the sayable, and on the other the impossible; the silence of jouissance, where we encounter the sexual non-relation. "The end of truth, the real truth" Lacan says, is that "it doesn't work out between men and women."¹⁰ This is echoed in final line of Baudelaire's text: *How difficult it is to understand each other, my dear angel, and how incommunicable is thought, even between people who love each other!*

¹ Charles Baudelaire, "Les Yeux des Pauvres," *Un Jour Un Poème*, accessed March 2, 2026. Available at: <https://www.unjourunpoeme.fr/poeme/les-yeux-des-pauvres>.

² *Ibid.* p. 27.

³ Miller, J.-A., "On Shame," in *Jacques Lacan and the Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, eds. J. Clemens, R. Grigg, Durham: Duke University Press, 2006, p. 13.

⁴ Miller, "On Shame," p. 25.

⁵ Green, S., R. Vanheule, S., "Hontologie: A Lacanian Theory of Shame." *Theory & Psychology* 34, no. 1, 2024. p. 91. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09593543231199494>.

⁶ Miller, "On Shame," p. 21.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁹ Dominant discourse urges one not to be ashamed of jouissance, but of one's desire. The lover of Baudelaire's story skirts this injunction to *Enjoy!*

¹⁰ Lacan, J., "Yale University, Kanzer Seminar," *The Lacanian Review* 12, 2022: p. 47.