

## ***Vierges en Fleurs: Baudelaire's Lesbian Poems and the Ethics of Writing Sameness***

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### **Abstract**

Over a decade before the publication of his first collection of poetry, Baudelaire announced on several occasions that this collection would be entitled *Les Lesbiennes* (*Lesbians*). Although the collection eventually came out with the title *Les Fleurs du mal* instead of *Les Lesbiennes*, and although there are only three poems in the collection that explicitly address the lesbian subject, the arch-modernist's one-time intention to invoke the lesbian figure for his representation of modernity is more than suggestive. Arguing that both Walter Benjamin's and gender studies' readings of Baudelaire's lesbian figure are inadequate, this essay considers the ethico-political implications of Baudelaire's writing of female homoeroticism. While in other poems Baudelaire's poetic persona is easily recognized as being manipulative and violent towards the female, in the Lesbian poems, I will argue, this persona approaches the radical other in a non-desiring and non-narcissistic manner—hence assuming a subject-object dynamic quite different from that which has been said to ground the ideology of modernity. The governing claim of this essay is that, at a time when the conceptualization of “difference” is assuming formative importance in modernity's political philosophy, cultural imaginary, and epistemology, Baudelaire's evocation of sameness not only collapses the subject-object dichotomy at the forefront of high modernity, but also figures as an ethical possibility wherein the self attends to the radical other for the sake of the other.

### **Keywords**

Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du mal*, lesbian, ethics,  
modernity, prostitute, mistress

The uncommon difficulty in approaching the core of Baudelaire's poetry is, to speak in a formula, this: there is about this poetry still nothing out of date.

—Walter Benjamin, "Central Park"

During the period 1845-1847, a decade before the publication of his first collection of poetry, Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) on various occasions announced that this collection would be entitled *Les Lesbiennes*.<sup>1</sup> When the first edition of the collection finally came out in 1857, with the title of *Les Fleurs du mal* instead of *Les Lesbiennes*, only three poems explicitly dealt with the lesbian subject, all placed in the section bearing the same title as the collection. For a poet whose poetic persona easily comes across as misogynous, sado-masochistic, and manipulative towards heterosexual female objects,<sup>2</sup> what is the role played by his one-time fascination with the lesbian figure in his "modern" writings? For a poet whose view of modernity finds its best articulation in the heterosexual female, what are the ethico-political implications of writing female homosexuality into a historical mode that has yet to find the right medium to address homoeroticism? Baudelaire was among the pioneers who first approached the lesbian theme in nineteenth-century Europe.<sup>3</sup> Do the Lesbian Poems say anything about the arch-modernist's poetic vision—and, perhaps, the failure of his vision as well?<sup>4</sup> Or, are the three poems merely an accidental detour that Baudelaire later would forego?

Walter Benjamin was among the first to suggest examining the ethico-political dimensions of modernity *via* Baudelaire's transgressive female figures: "The motif of the androgyne, the lesbian or the barren woman is to be dealt with in relation to the destructive violence of the allegorical intention" ("Central Park" 35). Benjamin would

<sup>1</sup> See editor/annotator Claude Pichois's notes in Baudelaire's *Œuvres complètes* 1: 792-94. All page references to Baudelaire and Pichois are to this two-volume edition, hereafter abbreviated as *OC*.

<sup>2</sup> Some famous readings conducted along these lines include those by Leo Bersani, Richard Burton, Barbara Johnson, and Peggy Kamuf. Bersani suggests that Baudelaire's misogyny is nothing but the poet's attempt to repress his feminine side and to keep his identity from being reduced to fragments. Johnson argues that Baudelaire manipulates the male privilege of "playing feminine" and replaces sexual difference with a male self-difference. Burton and Kamuf also argue in a similar vein. Burton contends that there is a repressed femininity inside the male poet, and that the Baudelairean woman often represents poetic creativity, a force that man has to tame in order to take advantage of it. Kamuf suggests that the invoking and silencing of the female voice are integral parts of the poet's artistic creation. Also see Lowe.

<sup>3</sup> See Pichois (*OC* 1: 1127-28); DeJean; Faderman; and Morgan.

<sup>4</sup> I will refer to those poems in *Les Fleurs du mal* that address the poetic persona's (heterosexual) mistress as the Mistress Poems, and those poems that can be read as addressing the prostitute figure as the Prostitute Poems.

historicize these transgressive women and place them within the emergent capitalist world of commodification and mass production:

The nineteenth century began openly and without reserve to include the woman in the process of commodity production. The theoreticians were united in their opinion that her specific femininity was thereby endangered; masculine traits must necessarily manifest themselves in women after a while. Baudelaire affirms these traits. At the same time, however, he seeks to free them from the domination of the economy. Hence the purely sexual accent which he comes to give this developmental tendency in woman. The paradigm of the lesbian woman bespeaks the ambivalent position of “modernity” vis-à-vis technological development. (*Arcades* 318; “Central Park” 39)

Prostitution opens up the possibility of a mythical communion with the masses. The rise of the masses is, however, simultaneous with that of mass-production. Prostitution at the same time appears to contain the possibility of surviving in a world (*Lebensraum*) in which the objects of our most intimate use have increasingly become mass-produced. (“Central Park” 40)

This twofold approach—on the one hand, an eschatological reading of transgressive women as signifying the violence of history that would denaturalize the organic; on the other hand, a sociological anatomy of modernity’s maneuvering of sexuality and gender ramifications—renders Benjamin’s analytic framework insightful and complex, if not also confusing.<sup>5</sup> It seems that, at the sociological level, Benjamin means to

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<sup>5</sup> One possible cause for confusion is the inclusive scope of Benjamin’s notion of allegory. Critics have attempted to distinguish Benjamin’s allegory from his other philosophemes. Susan Buck-Morss, for instance, differentiates allegory (historical nature: ruin) from symbol (mythic nature: wish image), phantasmagoria (mythic history: fetish), and trace (natural history: fossil) (210-12), yet Benjamin’s allegory very often is interchangeable with his other philosophemes and, once in a while, even emerges as the central signifier for modernity. It is debatable as to whether Benjamin’s theoretical paradigm is indeed fixed, as Buck-Morss puts it, “within an unreconciled and transitory field of oppositions” (210). For example, while he presents allegory as an “antidote to myth” (“Central Park” 46), Benjamin elsewhere also mentions the “refunctioning of allegory in the commodity economy”—by which he means the re-creation of aura for the commodity, the “deceptive transfiguration of the world of the commodity” (42). Thus, allegory here appears to resemble the fetishization of the commodity or “phantasmagoria” in Buck-Morss’s categorization. Or, Benjamin would present the dialectical image as “an image flashing up in the *now* of recognisability, that the past, in this case that of Baudelaire, can be captured” (“Central Park” 49)—an image not so different from the allegorical, which Benjamin renders

distinguish the relationships of the prostitute and the lesbian vis-à-vis modernity: prostitution bespeaks the reification of women while the lesbian figure assumes a heroic positioning against the “naturalizing” agenda of modernity. At the eschatological level, however, this distinction is not meticulously pursued, and the prostitute and the lesbian tend to be considered within the same idiom.

Following Benjamin’s model, major critic Christine Buci-Glucksmann situates Baudelaire within the “feminization of culture” that transpired in the second half of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth century. She argues that in a crisis period such as modernity, the “woman question” emerges as a sign for the “question of civilization” that has to be tackled *via* “a whole series of oppositions and myths.” Gender identity, then, represents one of these “oppositions and myths.” More importantly, the feminine would become “an element in the break with a certain discredited rationality based upon the idea of a historical and symbolic continuum”; the feminine would come to signify a new heterogeneity, a new otherness in modernity (49).

Buci-Glucksmann’s critique usefully elaborates Benjamin’s gendered reading of modernity. Yet, both she and Benjamin focus primarily on the ethico-political significance of Baudelaire’s lesbian figure at the expense of the real texture/textuality of the three Lesbian Poems. Moreover, they both see the Baudelairean prostitute and lesbian figures through the same optics. The problem with this approach rests in their allegorical reading of Baudelaire’s lesbian figure. For, as a matter of fact, the lesbian in Baudelaire’s Lesbian Poems—a mythological figure, perhaps—is barely an allegorical figure in the conventional sense, that is, a personification. Nor does she fit into the Benjaminian notion of “modern allegory.”<sup>6</sup> It is rather the mistress and the prostitute in *Les Fleurs du mal* who have occasionally emerged as allegorical personifications. It is also the mistress and the prostitute who best illustrate Benjamin’s modern allegory.

Outside the Benjaminian tradition, other Baudelairean critics who have dealt with the lesbian subject either dismiss this thematic as the poet’s intent to shock society,<sup>7</sup> or contend from the perspective of gender studies that femininity (including homosexual femininity) in and for Baudelaire represents a creativity and otherness that the poet

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as “the opposition between antiquity and the modern to be transposed out of the pragmatic context” (35). Yet, at some point, Benjamin also stipulates that the “correspondence between antiquity and the modern” to be found in Baudelaire—that is, “the allegorical way of seeing”—excludes dialectics rather than contains it (“Central Park” 47).

<sup>6</sup> What needs to be emphasized is that Benjamin’s notion of modern allegory, which is largely born of his reading of Baudelaire, is to be distinguished from his notion of baroque allegory, which he elaborates in the monograph *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Faderman 254-71.

figure eventually must subsume to maintain his creative male subjectivity.<sup>8</sup> While the latter approach in general has produced sophisticated readings of Baudelaire's *Mistress Poems*,<sup>9</sup> I will argue that it is insufficient to read the *Lesbian Poems* solely in the light of gender issues. Nor is it enough to view the *Lesbian Poems* through the same lens that we view other poem clusters, or to deal with the lesbian figure merely in relation to the biographical Baudelaire in the context of an emerging modernity.<sup>10</sup> I will claim that the *Lesbian Poems* in effect occupy a very distinctive position in Baudelaire's poetic mission. In terms of semantics, stylistics, and thematics, the *Lesbian Poems* stand out on their own; the use of metaphors and the imagery/imaginary of the female figure in these poems signify a different sense of temporality and a different subject-object relationship than what we find, for instance, in the *Mistress* and *Prostitute* clusters.

In what follows, I will launch a close textual analysis of the *Lesbian Poems* and address not only the poetics but also, based on the understanding of these poetics, the ontological and epistemological dimensions of these poems. The ultimate goal is to achieve a better grip on the ethico-political exigency of a (heterosexual) male writer's writing of female homosexuality, the exigency of writing sameness in (sexual) difference. The governing claim is that, at a time when the conceptualization of "difference" is assuming functional importance in modernity's epistemological, cultural, and political formations, Baudelaire's poems, at the forefront of high modernity, are already undermining a firm self-other, subject-object demarcation. In his poems on heterosexual love, the collapse of the subject-object distinction is tinged with the male poetic persona's desire-charged ambivalence and manipulation. In the *Lesbian Poems*, however, the male poetic persona announces boldly his identification with the female homosexual other. Instead of aligning with the typical gender studies' presupposition of the male persona's lesbianism, I see this persona's identification with the lesbian figure as a moment in which he wrestles with an "ethical"—which I define here as "non-desiring" and "non-narcissistic"—approach to the other.

In my analysis, I will use the capitalized "Poet" to denote the male poetic persona in Baudelaire's poetry—a persona that straddles the floating space interconnecting the real-life poet Baudelaire, the ideal writing subject that Baudelaire aims to project into his verses, and the actual/textual subject whose presence constantly reveals his discrep-

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<sup>8</sup> For the "male lesbianism" in Baudelaire, see Butor (chapter 6) and Morgan. For Baudelaire as a disturbed homosexual playing out masochistic neuroses in his poetry, see Kostis. I will return to these critics later.

<sup>9</sup> See note 2.

<sup>10</sup> For the latter, see Benjamin ("Central Park"); Buci-Glucksmann; and Fisher.

ancies from the ideal and eventually disturbs the entire poetic enterprise that Baudelaire seems to have in mind.

## I.

Baudelaire's artistic ideal is marked by an obsession with the orders of time. As one of his art critiques, "Le Peintre de la vie moderne," suggests: "toute notre originalité vient de l'estampille que le *temps* imprime à nos sensations" (2: 696; emphasis in the original).<sup>11</sup> His conception of beauty repeatedly stresses the coexistence of eternity with transitoriness:

Toutes les beautés contiennent, comme tous les phénomènes possibles, quelque chose d'éternel et quelque chose de transitoire, —d'absolu et de particulier. La beauté absolue et éternelle n'existe pas, ou plutôt elle n'est qu'une abstraction écrémée à la surface générale des beautés diverses. L'élément particulier de chaque beauté vient des passions, et comme nous avons nos passions particulières, nous avons notre beauté. ("Salon de 1846"; 2: 493)<sup>12</sup>

Most Mistress Poems indicate that the Poet is constantly wrestling with mortal time—which is tantamount not so much to human mortality as to the "immortal" life of *ennui*. In "Le Masque," for example, the woman who symbolizes divine beauty is condemned in that she shares the same fate with ordinary creatures: "Elle pleure, insensé, parce qu'elle a vécu! / Et parce qu'elle vit! Mais ce qu'elle déplore / Surtout, ce qui la fait frémir jusqu'aux genoux, / C'est que demain, hélas! il faudra vivre encore!

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<sup>11</sup> "All our originality comes from the stamp that *time* imprints on our sensations." All translations are mine unless otherwise noted and will mostly be placed in the footnotes.

<sup>12</sup> "All kinds of beauty, just like all possible things, contain some eternal aspect and some transitory aspect—some absolute element and some particular element. Absolute and eternal beauty does not exist; or, rather, it is nothing but an abstraction skimmed off the general surface of diverse beautiful things. The particular element of each kind of beauty comes from passion. And just as each of us has our particular passion, each of us has our own sense of beauty."

/ Demain, après-demain et toujours! —comme nous!” (1: 24).<sup>13</sup> Here, daily existence turns into the curse of eternal return. This sentiment also predominates in all four poems entitled “Spleen,” where immortality is received with mixed feelings because it is (mis)recognized as *ennui*: “L’ennui, fruit de la morne incuriosité, / Prend les proportions de l’immortalité” (1: 73).<sup>14</sup> Yet various Mistress Poems suggest that the Poet shuns mortality as well. In “Une Charogne,” for instance, the sight of a dead animal conjures up the loathsome thought that his mistress, too, will soon fall prey to mortality (1: 31-32).

The Poet does long for eternity. Yet, instead of the pseudo-immortality or eternal curse of *ennui*, he seeks the kind of eternity that will not only facilitate but also commemorate the creation of his poetry. In his bitter moments (moments of “spleen,” so to speak), the Poet’s agony is mostly generated by the mistress’s oblivious nature: “L’oubli puissant habite sur ta bouche, / Et le Léthé coule dans tes baisers” (“Le Léthé”; 1: 156);<sup>15</sup> “Désormais tu n’es plus, ô matière vivant! / Qu’un granit entouré d’une vague épouvante, / [...] / Un vieux sphinx ignoré du monde insoucieux, / Oublié sur la carte [...]” (“Spleen”; 1: 73).<sup>16</sup> In his moments of *Idéal*, on the other hand, the Poet finds inspiration in his mistress’s eternalizing memory: “Ton souvenir en moi luit comme un ostensor!” (“Harmonie du Soir”; 1: 47);<sup>17</sup> “chère Déesse, Être lucide et pur, / Sur les débris fumeux des stupides orgies / Ton souvenir plus clair, plus rose, plus charmant, / À mes yeux agrandis voltige incessamment. / [...] / Ainsi [...] ton fantôme est pareil, / Âme resplendissante, à l’immortel soleil!” (“L’Aube spirituelle”; 1: 46).<sup>18</sup> At times, however, it is the Poet’s art rather than the mistress’s memory that can surpass mortal time: “Alors, ô ma beauté! dites à la vermine / Qui vous mangera de baisers, / Que j’ai gardé la forme et l’essence divine / De mes amours decomposes” (“Une Charogne”; 1: 32).<sup>19</sup>

<sup>13</sup> “She cries, madly, because she has lived, and because she lives! Yet what she deplores most and what makes her tremble all the way to her knees is the fact that tomorrow, alas, she has to live again—tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, and forever—just like us!”

<sup>14</sup> “*Ennui*, result of gloomy indifference, takes on the proportion of immortality.”

<sup>15</sup> “Powerful oblivion lives on your lips, and the Lethe flows in your kisses.”

<sup>16</sup> “O living matter, from now on you are nothing but a rock encompassed by a vague fear, [...] an old Sphinx unknown to the insouciant world, left off the map [...]”

<sup>17</sup> “Your memory shines on me like a monstrosity.”

<sup>18</sup> “Dear Goddess, so bright and pure: on the smoked debris of stupid orgies, your memory—clearer, rosier, and more charming—hovers incessantly before my wide eyes. [...] Glorious spirit, your shade is equal to the immortal sun!”

<sup>19</sup> “O my Beauty! Tell the vermin that will devour you by its kisses that I have kept intact the divine form and essence of my rotten loves.”

It seems that infinity or immortality is desirable only when poetic creation is involved. Yet, the Poet seems constantly anxious over the genuine source of his creativity. On the one hand, infinity is something he has yet to be introduced to, as he confesses in “Hymne à la Beauté”: “Si ton œil, ton souris, ton pied, m’ouvrent la porte / D’un Infini que j’aime et n’ai jamais connu?” (1: 25).<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, infinity seems already inherent in his poetry (“j’ai gardé la forme et l’essence divine”). Such an uncertainty can explain why he is often misled by the kind of beauty his mistress represents and why he is often left devastated afterwards. For behind the mistress’s superficial beauty is nothing but a void that cannot promise any difference—that is, a void that cannot make today different from yesterday, tomorrow different from today. It is noteworthy that, even though Baudelaire constantly reiterates his dichotomous aesthetics in his prose pieces (that is, as shown in the quotes above, beauty and art are both constituted by the eternal and the transitory), the poetic rendition of the “transitory” part of beauty/art very often emerges as a distressing, sometimes destructive, experience for the Poet.

This motif of the misplaced ideal of beauty is tellingly unfolded in the allegorical mode. Two poems in the Mistress cluster explicitly address Beauty as a personification of fatal attraction:

Viens-tu du ciel profond ou sors-tu de l’abîme,  
Ô Beauté? ton regard, infernal et divin,  
Verse confusément le bienfait et le crime,  
Et l’on peut pour cela te comparer au vin. (“Hymne à la Beauté”; 1: 24)<sup>21</sup>

Les poètes, devant mes grandes attitudes,  
Que j’ai l’air d’emprunter aux plus fiers monuments,  
Consumeront leurs jours en d’austères études;

Car j’ai, pour fasciner ces dociles amants,  
De purs miroirs qui font toutes choses plus belles:  
Mes yeux, mes larges yeux aux clartés éternelles! (“Beauté”; 1: 21)<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> “What if your eyes, your smiles, and your feet open for me the door of Infinity, which I love and yet have never known?”

<sup>21</sup> “O Beauty! Do you come from the deep sky or are you from the abyss? Your regard, both infernal and divine, pours out a mixture of beneficence and crime, and that is why we can compare you to wine.”



I will come back to this image of mirrors and compare it with the mirror image in the Lesbian Poems in light of the Poet's (mis-)identification with his female objects.

Allegory in the Mistress Poems, illustrated in these two poems above, translates the Poet's desperation for poetic inspiration, which is wrongly identified with his heterosexual lover. This sentiment is pointedly replayed, with an even more diabolical twist, in the Prostitute Poems. "Les Deux Bonnes Sœurs" presents Debauchery and Death as twin sisters who scoff at the modern mystification of marriage and fertility; "Allégorie" portrays a transgressive woman's defiance of Debauchery and Death while at the same time it also betrays her affinity with them. "La Béatrice" and "Les Métamorphoses du Vampire," both addressing the Poet's disillusionment with his false muse, do not feature any allegorical figure at first sight. Yet, as another poem in the same cluster, "Un Voyage à Cythère," well puts it, the Poet's perception of life has already been shaped by the allegorical lens: "Le ciel était charmant, la mer était unie; / Pour moi tout était noir et sanglant désormais, / Hélas! et j'avais, comme en un suaire épais, / *Le cœur enseveli dans cette allégorie*" (1: 119; emphasis mine).<sup>23</sup>

It seems that Benjamin's various senses of modern allegory developed out of Baudelaire's poetry may converge here. First, there is the "allegorical intention" as the "destruction of the organic and living—the extinguishing of appearance" ("Central Park" 41). Secondly, there is the deadly image of allegory in the female: "Women in Baudelaire: the most precious spoils in the 'Triumph of Allegory'—Life, which means Death. This quality is most unqualifiedly characterised by the whore" (39). Then, there is the association of allegory with the sentiment of melancholy when the latter indicates a dwelling on nothing other than fragments (36, 41, 51). Finally, there is the optical aspect of allegory—that is, allegory as a way of seeing (52). A look at a much discussed poem, "Le Cygne" from the "Tableaux Parisiens" section, further drives home the point that the allegorical nature (in the Benjaminian sense) of *Les Fleurs du mal* is centered on the incongruous sense of temporality *qua* modernity: "Paris change! mais rien dans ma mélancolie / N'a bougé! palais neufs, échafaudages, blocs, / Vieux faubourgs, *tout pour moi devient allégorie*, / Et mes chers souvenirs sont plus lourds

<sup>22</sup> "Poets, when facing my grand postures that I seem to borrow from the proudest monuments, spend their days in austere studies. For I, in order to fascinate these docile lovers, have these pure mirrors that can make everything prettier—my eyes, my big eyes with eternal clarity!"

<sup>23</sup> "The sky was charming, and the sea was peaceful. Yet for me everything was dark and bloody since then. Alas! *I had*, as if in a thick shroud, *buried my heart in this allegory.*"

que des rocs” (1: 86; emphasis mine).<sup>24</sup> This sentiment would find its film-noir version in the vampirical prostitute figure: “Tremblaient confusément des débris de squelette, / Qui d’eux-mêmes rendaient le cri d’une girouette / Ou d’une enseigne, au bout d’une tringle de fer, / Que balance le vent pendant les nuits d’hiver” (“Les Métamorphoses du Vampire”; 1: 159).<sup>25</sup> The creaky metallic sounds issuing from the remains of the vampirical woman allegorize the anachronism of modern life.

Baudelaire once commented that modernity constitutes one half of art, whose other half is eternity: “La modernité, c’est le transitoire, le fugitif, le contingent, la moitié de l’art, dont l’autre moitié est l’éternel et l’immuable” (“Peintre”; 2: 695).<sup>26</sup> If his allegorical figures in the Mistress and Prostitute clusters illustrate the ephemeral and fugitive half of art *qua* modernity, where, then, does he locate the eternalizing aspect of art if it does exist in his poetic vision? Even though the multi-layered allegory in the Benjaminian model is meant to apply to both the prostitute and the lesbian, I would argue that, in effect, the use of allegory in *Les Fleurs du mal* marks the very difference between the lesbian and other female figures in Baudelaire. Both conventional allegory and Benjaminian modern allegory are nowhere to be found in the three Lesbian Poems. As a matter of fact, even though I have tried to separate the two types of allegories for the sake of clarity, it should be noted that, in Baudelaire, Benjaminian modern allegory, with its use of terms like Debauchery and Death, is decodable insofar as it happens to inhabit a conventional personification.

## II.

Of the three immediately identifiable Lesbian Poems in *Les Fleurs du mal*, two were banned from publication after the appearance of the 1857 edition: “Lesbos” and “Femmes damnées: Delphine et Hippolyte” (the latter will be cited as “Delphine et Hippolyte” hereafter). Only the third poem, also entitled “Femmes damnées,” survived

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<sup>24</sup> “Paris changes, but nothing in my melancholy has moved. New palaces, scaffoldings, blocks, and the old suburbs—all of them become allegories to me, while my dear memories are heavier than rocks.”

<sup>25</sup> “The ruins of a skeleton were trembling by themselves like a creaking weather vane, or like a [commercial] sign hung at the end of an iron pole swinging in the wind on winter nights.”

<sup>26</sup> “Modernity is the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent—one half of art, whose other half is the eternal and the immutable.”

juridical scrutiny. These poems are generally dated to the earlier stages of the poet's career.<sup>27</sup>

The condemned women in these poems do not appear in the conventional allegorical mode of personification. "Lesbos" portrays the mythical figure Sappho as the mother of the isle of lesbians, Lesbos. Yet Sappho only exists as an absence that both Lesbos and the narrative about Lesbos (namely, this poem) seek to invoke in order to generate their respective possibilities. Nor do Delphine, Hippolyte, or those nameless lesbian women in "Femmes damnées" come across as allegorical figures. If anything, these poems project an intricate temporality: a seeming timelessness interrupted by the present—the Poet's present.

"Lesbos" is narrated mostly in the present tense. As each stanza begins and ends with the same verse, refrains lend an air of always-the-same-ness—a feeling that is reinforced by the fact that the real addressee of the narrative is the immobile isle Lesbos instead of any specific figure that comes and goes. Yet this timelessness is disturbed at least twice: the first time is when the Poet recalls how he has started a liaison with Lesbos, and the second time when Sappho's death is mentioned. At first sight, it is Sappho's death that marks the history of the isle, that divides the time of Lesbos into a before and an after: "Et c'est depuis ce temps que Lesbos se lamente!" (1: 152).<sup>28</sup> Yet, as I will argue, it is in effect the Poet's intrusion into the middle of the narration that makes history for Sappho and Lesbos possible—and this is so all because of the Poet's act of writing. Stanzas nine and ten of "Lesbos" read:

Car Lesbos entre tous m'a choisi sur la terre  
 Pour chanter le secret de ses vierges en fleurs,  
 Et je fus dès l'enfance admis au noir mystère  
 Des rires effrénés mêlés aux sombres pleurs;  
 Car Lesbos entre tous m'a choisi sur la terre.

Et depuis lors je veille au sommet de Leucate,  
 Comme une sentinelle à l'œil perçant et sûr,  
 Qui guette nuit et jour brick, tartane ou frégate,  
 Dont les formes au loin frissonnent dans l'azur;

<sup>27</sup> An earlier version of "Lesbos" was published in an anthology of poetry published by Garnier entitled *Les Poètes de l'amour* in 1850. See Pichois (*OC* 1: 1060-61, 1123-24, 1126-27); Leakey 30-31.

<sup>28</sup> "And it's since then [Sappho's death] that Lesbos started to moan."

Et depuis lors je veille au sommet de Leucate. (1: 151)<sup>29</sup>

The conjunction “car” (“for”) in stanza nine demands attention. Right before this stanza, the Poet was celebrating the “religion” of these “vierges au cœur sublime” (“virgins of the sublime heart”) and, more importantly, was addressing the fate of these lesbians in judiciary and moral terms:

Que nous veulent les lois du juste et de l’injuste?  
Vierges au cœur sublime, honneur de l’archipel,  
Votre religion comme une autre est auguste,  
Et l’amour se rira de l’Enfer et du Ciel!  
Que nous veulent les lois du juste et de l’injuste? (1: 151)<sup>30</sup>

Then, with no conspicuous causal connection, the Poet throws in this “car” in the ninth stanza to arbitrarily establish not only his connection with Lesbos but also the relevance of his poetry to religion, law, and justice. The intrusiveness of this “car” generates two possibilities: either the Poet’s poetic vocation begins as an outcome of his sympathizing with these condemned women, or his enunciative moment marks the starting point of Lesbian history. Either way, the Poet intends to address the limits and limitations of the discourse of law and justice (“Que nous veulent les lois du juste et de l’injuste?”). Moreover, the writing here promises an ethics in that this writing, in its act of enunciation, enables a history of the condemned to take place beyond the confines of human laws and cults.

“Femmes damnées” also undergoes a change of narrative perspectives. The first half of the poem appears to be an impersonal depiction of lesbian women as “bétail pensif” (“pensive cattle”), but the second half turns into a second-person address to Bacchus, whom the Poet calls “endormeur des remords anciens” (“the deceiver of ancient remorse”; 1: 113, 114). The Poet’s monologue to the god of drunken revelry focuses on sensory images of the lesbian women: how their eyes turn towards the

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<sup>29</sup> “For Lesbos chose me out of all poets on earth to sing the secret of her flowering virgins, and since childhood I have been admitted to the dark mystery of excessive laughter mixed with somber tears. For Lesbos chose me out of all poets on earth. And since then I have stayed on guard on the top of Leucate, like a sentinel with a piercing and certain eye, who watches day and night for brigs and frigates—whose shapes from afar shiver in the blue sky. And since then I have stayed on guard on the top of Leucate.”

<sup>30</sup> “What do laws of justice and injustice want from us? Virgins of the sublime heart, honor of the archipelago. Your religion, like another religion, is august, and love will ignore the Hell and the Heaven! What do laws of justice and injustice want from us?”

horizon, how their feet reach for each other's bodies, and how they indulge themselves in secretive conversations. All of this representation, too, is facilitated by the always-ness of the present tense. Towards the end, however, the Poet turns to these women and cries out to them in a most urgent tone. His apostrophes, once again, reveal that the determining mode of temporality for poetic and historical cognition in this *other* world is the Poet's "writing present":

Ô vierges, ô démons, ô monstres, ô martyres,  
De la réalité grands esprits contempteurs,  
Chercheuses d'infini, dévotes et satyres,  
Tantôt pleines de cris, tantôt pleines de pleurs,

Vous que dans votre enfer mon âme a poursuivies,  
Pauvres sœurs, je vous aime autant que je vous plains,  
Pour vos mornes douleurs, vos soifs inassouvies,  
Et les urnes d'amour dont vos grands cœurs sont pleins! (1: 114)<sup>31</sup>

"Delphine et Hippolyte" consists of the Poet's third-person depiction of Delphine and Hippolyte, a dialogue between the two heroines, and the Poet's final comment. The first part is carried out in *l'imparfait*, a past or past progressive tense. The past mode lends a feeling of historical reality (something already happened) while the progressive mode produces a sensory reality (as if the reader was there watching). All of this "realness" seems to be furthered by the direct quotations in the dialogue. Yet, in effect, it does not take long before the artificiality of the dialogical setting reveals itself. Delphine and Hippolyte speak almost exactly in the same way as the narrating Poet outside the dramatic dialogue: with the same diction, the same metaphors, and the same sentiment. It seems that the Poet cannot "decode" the two heroines properly without the translation of similes and metaphors: "le rideau de sa jeune candeur" ("the curtain of her young innocence"); "Ainsi qu'un voyageur qui retourne la tête / Vers les horizons bleus dépassés le matin" ("like a traveler who turns his head towards the blue horizons passed in the morning"); "ses bras vaincus, jetés comme de vaines armes"

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<sup>31</sup> "O virgins, demons, monsters, martyrs! You in your proud spirit contempt reality. You are seekers of infinity, devotees and satyrs—one moment full of cries, and the next moment full of tears. You whom, in your hell, my soul has followed—poor sisters, I love you as much as I pity you, for your gloomy pain, for your insatiable thirst, and for the urns of love that fill your noble hearts."

(“her arms conquered, dropped like useless weapons”); “Delphine [...] / Comme un animal fort qui surveille une proie” (“Delphine [...] like a strong animal watching her prey”); “s’allongeait vers elle, / Comme pour recueillir un doux remerciement” (“lying down near [Hippolyte] as if she wanted to receive sweet gratitude”); “Delphine secouant sa crinière tragique, / Et comme trépigant sur le trépied de fer, / L’œil fatal, répondit d’une voix despotique” (“Delphine shook her tragic hair, and, as if trampling on the iron tripod, with fatal eyes, she responded with a despotic voice”).

Figures of speech inundate the first part of the poem, and they continue into the dialogue between the two heroines: “l’holocauste sacré de tes premières roses” (“the sacred holocaust of your first flowers”); “mes baisers sont légers comme ces éphémères” (“my kisses are as light as ephemeral mayflies”); “ceux de ton amant creuseront leurs ornières / Comme des chariots ou des socs déchirants” (“your lover’s kisses leave ruts just like carts or ploughs do”); “ils passeront sur toi comme un lourd attelage” (“your lover’s kisses trample over you like a heavy harness”); “je souffre et je suis inquiète, / Comme après un nocturne et terrible repas” (“I suffer and I feel disquieted like coming back from an evening prayer and a terrible dinner”); “Je sens s’élargir dans mon être / Un abîme béant; cet abîme est mon cœur” (“I feel that a wide abyss is enlarging in my being, and this abyss is my heart”); “brûlant comme un volcan, profond comme le vide” (“scorching hot as a volcano, deep as the void”) (1: 152-54). Based on the predominance of these tropes, critics have argued for multiple gender identifications on the part of the Poet, or at least for his manipulation of gender roles. I would argue, however, that the amplexity of similes here indicates the artificiality of the Poet’s rapport with these female figures. I will return to this point later.

Critics have suggested that the last five stanzas of this poem were added only later, possibly a few days before the publication of the 1857 edition of *Les Fleurs du mal* to avoid censorship (Pichois, *OC* 1: 1126-27). These stanzas are separated from the preceding ones with a dash, and, here, the Poet addresses the heroines directly:

—Descendez, descendez, lamentables victimes,  
 Descendez le chemin de l’enfer éternel!  
 Plongez au plus profond du gouffre, où tous les crimes,  
 Flagellés par un vent qui ne vient pas du ciel,  
  
 Bouillonnent pêle-mêle avec un bruit d’orage.  
 [. . . . .]

Loin des peuples vivants, errantes, condamnées,  
 À travers les déserts courez comme les loups;  
 Faites votre destin, âmes désordonnées,  
 Et fuyez l'infini que vous portez en vous! (1: 155)<sup>32</sup>

At first, this addition indeed seems to convey a severe, even clichéd, condemnation of these women. The first and the last verses, nevertheless, would disrupt the superficial moral pedagogy. In the first verse, the Poet shows his sympathy by calling these women “lamentables victimes.” The last verse also manages to dilute the putative moralist doctrine by lending itself to ambiguity. In the other “Femmes damnées” poem, in which the Poet’s compassion for these women is unmistakable, lesbian women are also portrayed as “chercheuses d’infini” (“seekers of infinity”). Why, then, would the Poet here urge them to flee infinity? If the destiny of these women lies in an *other* world, why does he suggest that they abandon infinity since infinity appears to be the time marker of that *other* world (be it infinite curse or infinite felicity)? Wouldn’t the abandoning of infinity turn the heroines into historical beings bound by historical time (“peuples vivants”), whom the Poet also advises the heroines to shun? If it is true that these last verses were a last-minute addition, it does not seem unfair to argue that the Poet in effect is disguising his sympathy, hiding it beneath this ambiguity. After all, he is urging the heroines to flee and to create their own fate. Their fate, to be sure, is possible only in a world other than the human one.

All three Lesbian Poems are placed in a mythical milieu: Lesbos is the mother of “des jeux latins et des voluptés grecques” (“Latin pleasures and Greek sensuality”; 1: 150); Sappho is “plus belle que Vénus” (“more beautiful than Venus”; 1: 151); and other mythical figures such as Hippolyte, Bacchus, St. Antoine, and the satyrs are also important actors here.<sup>33</sup> If, as argued earlier, the mistress and the prostitute articulate the confusing experience of modernity—that is, the concurrent encounter with eternity and transitoriness, creation and destruction, infinity and oblivion—the lesbian figure bespeaks a different sense of time. As shown above, the temporality in the three Lesbi-

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<sup>32</sup> “Go down, go down, lamentable victims. Go down to the road of eternal hell. Plunge into the deepest gulf, where all the crimes, flagellated by a wind that is not from heaven, roar chaotically with a stormy noise. [...] Far away from living people, wandering and condemned, run across deserts like wolves. Create your own destiny, disordered souls, and flee the infinity that you carry within you!”

<sup>33</sup> See Pichois’s notes (*OC* 1: 1128) for possible sources for figures of Delphine and Hippolyte—especially the connection of the latter with the Amazons.

an Poems is a timelessness virtually punctuated by the Poet's present. It is the Poet's present, rather than the lesbian women's existence, that serves as the vantage point for poetic imagination, historical cognition, and, above all, ethical engagement. This, however, is not to say that the Poet in the Lesbian Poems means to show the same kind of anachronism as in, for instance, the Prostitute Poems. Rather, registered in the Lesbian Poems is an artificially fabricated chronotope that is devised to escape the false eternity of *this* historical world; it is a new eternity rendered possible by the Poet's writing of the hitherto unwritten, that is, lesbian eros. As the arbitrary conjunction-word "car" in "Lesbos" suggests, artificiality is the keyword here. Baudelaire has famously pronounced his detestation of naturalness (either in women or in art) while stressing the primacy of artificiality in his poetics:

La femme est *naturelle*, c'est-à-dire abominable. ("*Mon cœur mis à nu*"; 1: 677; emphasis in the original)<sup>34</sup>

Tout ce qui est beau et noble est le résultat de la raison et du calcul. Le crime, dont l'animal humain a puisé le goût dans le ventre de sa mère, est originellement naturel. La vertu, au contraire, est *artificielle*, surnaturelle, puisqu'il a fallu, dans tous les temps et chez toutes les nations, des dieux et des prophètes pour l'enseigner à l'humanité animalisée, et que l'homme, *seul*, eût été impuissant à la découvrir. Le mal se fait sans effort, *naturellement*, par fatalité; le bien est toujours le produit d'un art. ("*Peintre*"; 2: 715; emphasis in the original)<sup>35</sup>

In this context, it would be easier to explain why the mistress figure very often signals an uncontainable alterity, one that the Poet feels impelled to manipulate for the sake of his creative power (see note 2). It is also in this context that the centrality of the lesbian figure in relation to the Poet's poetic enterprise can be better appreciated. In the next section, I will relate the primacy of artificiality in the Baudelairean system to other poetic practices of his Poet persona—such as poetic identification and the sub-

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<sup>34</sup> "The female is *natural*, that is to say abominable."

<sup>35</sup> "All that is fine and noble is the outcome of reason and calculation. Crime, for which the human animal started developing a taste since he was in his mother's womb, is originally natural. Virtue, on the contrary, is *artificial* and supernatural, since at all times and in all countries, we needed gods and prophets to teach animalized humankind what virtue is, and man *alone* had been incapable of discovering it. Evil is committed effortlessly, *naturally*, by fate; good is always the product of an art."



ject-object dynamic—and address the problem of why the Poet has sought to form an artificial community with lesbian women.

### III.

As mentioned above, many critics approach Baudelaire's lesbian subject in light of gender ambiguity. Thaïs Morgan, following Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's classic model, contends that there are multiple identifications operating in the Lesbian Poems, and that by misrepresenting male-male desire through lesbian bodies, Baudelaire manages to retain a normative masculinity and a heterosexual model of gender identification:

[...] Baudelaire's ambiguation of genders in this lesbian couple [Delphine and Hippolyte]—each woman is both masculine and feminine—enables the male poet-reader to move rapidly back and forth between opposable subject-positions on the axes of both gender and sexual orientation. When he wishes to desire the Other as a heterosexual male, the writer-reader can identify with Delphine, the masculinized woman whose gaze and hand have clearly mastered the feminized object of desire, Hippolyta [sic]. Or, when he wishes to be desired as the Other himself—that is, as Woman—the writer-reader can identify with Hippolyta. Alternatively, when the writer-reader desires the Same as a homosexual male, he occupies both the feminized lesbian and the masculinized lesbian positions simultaneously, without risking his gender identity—that is, his masculinity—because whenever he feels threatened or excessively feminized (the Hippolyta position), he can flip back to identifying with the masculine member of the couple (the Delphine position). It is at this moment of double identification with both gender positions within the same-sex couple that the male writer-reader becomes what I call a male lesbian. (46)

Morgan wants to critique the male writer's appropriation of the lesbian figure in order to maintain or reproduce masculinity. Morgan's problem, however, lies in her own reproduction of the stereotypical gender roles of masculinity and femininity in both heterosexual and homosexual identifications. It is also debatable whether Morgan's

reading would not paralyze all male writers' attempts to portray lesbian eros, since all these attempts could be easily relegated to nothing but a sinister masculinizing scheme.

Another critic, Nicholas Kostis, links the aggressive image of Delphine to Baudelaire's masochistic psyche, claiming that the play with female homosexuality disguises Baudelaire's androgynous desire. According to Kostis, to solve inner conflicts occasioned by his sexual "abnormality," Baudelaire (the author) draws on the "magic" of poetic images to assimilate different roles into his own subjectivity. Thus, sexual transpositions and the interchangeability of subject and object are essential to his creation of poetry. This is manifest in his fascination with images of aggressive women, androgynous eroticism, and masochistic pleasures.

Kostis's association of Baudelaire's gender ambiguity with the latter's propensity for conflated subject-object relationships insightfully points to the predominant object-images in *Les Fleurs du mal*, such as cats, bottles, hair, and ships. Kostis explains the ontological grounding of this poetic device:

This foundation of Baudelaire's technical innovation in poetry is the belief that there exists in nature an object which corresponds to every subjective or psychological state: "Qu'est-ce que l'art pur suivant la conception moderne? C'est créer une magie suggestive contenant à la fois l'objet et le sujet, le monde extérieur à l'artiste et l'artiste lui-même."<sup>36</sup> This linguistic and ontological confounding of subject with object is a poetic operation indispensable to the poet in expressing his deepest psychological structure. Only through a superimposition or interchangeability of subject-object can he hope to make the sexual and emotional transpositions necessary to assuage and defend his inner state. (52)

Kostis's argument pivots on the series of masochistic transferences that assist Baudelaire in ultimately achieving a harmonious poetic ideal. For example, in the two "Le Chat" poems, Kostis claims, it is through the action of an object, the cat, that the Poet finds a psychic bridge between his own subjectivity and that of the mistress. What is involved here includes the Poet's absorption of the female being, transposition of the penis and the aggressive role to the woman, the Poet's masochistic subjectification of

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<sup>36</sup> "What is pure art, according to the modern idea? It is to create a magic that contains the object and the subject at the same time, the external world outside of the artist and the artist himself" ("L'Art Philosophique"; 2: 598).

his own being, as well as his “making place for the female psyche to enter and displace and unite with his own psyche” (54-55). Kostis further identifies two groups of poems in terms of their poetic achievement: in the “Spleen et Idéal” section the Poet’s masochistic suffering leads to the creation of beauty while in the “Fleurs du mal” section (where the Lesbian Poems and the Prostitute Poems are located) masochism and sexual perversion eventually amount to the ruin of the poetic process. In the “Fleurs du mal” section, according to Kostis, “poetry is an agent of bondage, synonymous with the poet’s process of self-humiliation. The sexual bondage now becomes the poetic bondage as poetry ceases to offer an escape from masochistic love” (67).

Kostis is right about the epistemological centrality of object-images in *Les Fleurs du mal*.<sup>37</sup> He is also right in pointing out the ontological underpinnings of the Poet’s artistic manifestations. Yet Kostis’s reading of the Lesbian Poems, which proceeds in the same fashion as his reading of other poems, falls short of explaining certain isolated characteristics of the Lesbian Poems—this hermeneutic flaw will be clearer in the discussion that follows.

One central poetic idea/ideal of Baudelaire’s is “les transports de l’esprit et des sens” (“transpositions of spirit and senses”; “Correspondances”; 1: 11).<sup>38</sup> Perfumes would emit a fragrance as sweet as the baby’s flesh or as the sound of the oboe—all scents, all colors, and all sounds would correspond to one another. It is noteworthy that such a state of “correspondance” rarely takes place in the Poet’s direct encounter with women; correspondence only transpires when there are other objects involved—objects other than the female figure. Furthermore, after a series of sensuous transpositions, this correspondence very often leads to nothing other than the Poet’s self-reflexivity:

Quand mes yeux, vers ce chat que j’aime  
Tirés comme par un aimant,  
Se retournent docilement  
Et que je regarde en moi-même,

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<sup>37</sup> It is, however, debatable as to whether the subject-object transpositions in famous poems like “Parfum exotique,” “Le Chevelure,” and “Le Beau Navire” work precisely in the same way as the two “Chat” poems. For, in the former three poems, women function as the initiative point of the Poet’s sexual and poetic fantasizing and eventually lead the Poet to the world of objects—this is also the main argument of critic Leo Bersani. In “Le Chat” poems, on the other hand, it is the external object, the cat, which enables the poet to relate with his lover.

<sup>38</sup> See Paul de Man’s famous reading of the poem “Correspondances.”

Je vois avec étonnement  
Le feu de ses prunelles pâles,  
Clairs fanaux, vivantes opales,  
Qui me contemplent fixement. (“Le Chat”; *OC* 1: 51)<sup>39</sup>

Critic Michel Deguy describes this unique poetics of Baudelaire’s as a “*theology of the thing*” (190). By this Deguy means the extension of possibilities rendered palpable by the use of metaphors:

The poetic transaction offered through a comparison—or rapprochement—in the general form of A or B holds in reserve a possibility offered (and refusable) to future *recognition* (in other *circumstances* wherein the *relation* in question recurs). Thus the poem itself is an “expansion of infinite things”; a place where things not finite may be extended, expanded [...] or *an extension of possibility upon the world*. (189; emphasis in the original)

For Deguy, the ultimate poetic experience is to provide possibilities by way of sensory, emotional, psychological, and cognitive transpositions.

To be certain, Deguy’s critical paradigm works for the majority of the “female” poems in *Les Fleurs du mal*. The predominant form of figurative language in the Mistress cluster is indeed the metaphor, especially an extended metaphor that runs through the entire poem as the central image: for instance, the famous oceanic imagery in “Le Beau Navire,” “L’Invitation au Voyage,” “Parfum exotique,” and “Le Chevelure”; the closed-box imagery (coffin, flask, boudoir) in “Le Falcon,” “Correspondances,” and “Spleen”; the animal imagery in “Le Serpent qui danse” and “Le Chat”; and, above all, the satanic imagery of women throughout the cluster. One may even venture to say that the originality of these extended metaphors well attests to the popularity of these poems in Baudelaire scholarship.

Metaphors in the Mistress and Prostitute clusters, all in all, demonstrate “les transports de l’esprit et des sens”—be it heavenly fantasizing or nightmarish encounters with the wrong muse—and henceforth also a subject-object confluence. That is, the extended process of imagining or image-making oftentimes would mobilize the

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<sup>39</sup> “When my eyes, as if drawn by a magnet, are drawn to the cat that I love and that I see in myself, and then return docilely, I see with amazement the fire of the pale pupils, bright torches, and living opals which gaze at me firmly.”

interpenetration of the subject and the object. Thus, the Poet's enjoyment of the state of "correspondance" has to be facilitated by his mistress (who can function both as object and as subject), and his fantasized adventures happen only after his subjectivity is taken over by the mistress—in other words, he objectifies himself in order to enjoy the sensory pleasures as a subject. Or, the Poet sees himself in the cat, which, as Kostis has pointed out, serves as a medium for the fulfillment of the Poet's fantasizing.

In the Lesbian Poems, however, it is similes (in the mechanical formula of "A is like B") that abound. Unlike the metaphor, which suggests an organic correspondence between the sign and the image-product, the simile generally comes across as an artificial construct in which the relationship between the two terms depends heavily on the preposition "like." Moreover, as shown in the previous section, the similes in the Lesbian Poems—which only exist on a local scale and rarely go beyond the length of a stanza—are so numerous that the Poet seems unable to read the lesbian heroines without constantly changing the lens through which he observes these women. What strikes home here is the absolute otherness of these lesbian figures to the Poet—so radically *other* that the Poet cannot even manipulate the femaleness of the lesbians as he does that of the mistress figure and the prostitute figure. Moreover, if "les transports de l'esprit et des sens" stands as the central aesthetics or epistemology in the Mistress Poems, the Lesbian Poems specifically name not only the impossibility but also the immorality of conflating different sensuous and cognitive experiences:

Celui qui veut unir dans un accord mystique  
L'ombre avec la chaleur, la nuit avec le jour,  
Ne chauffera jamais son corps paralytique  
À ce rouge soleil que l'on nomme l'amour! ("Delphine et Hippolyte"; *OC*  
1: 154)<sup>40</sup>

Once again, the Lesbian Poems reveal a distinctive poetics to the extent that they appear to contradict Baudelaire's central idea of "correspondance." Yet, given the distressing nature of the Poet's poetic/epistemological experience with heterosexual women, the Lesbian Poems may very well be the only chance for him to avoid the misrecognition or misrepresentation of his poetic inspiration in the mistress and the prostitute.

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<sup>40</sup> "He who wants to unite shadow and heat, night and day, in a mystical accord, shall never warm his paralyzed body under that sun which we call love."

#### IV.

How different, then, is the subject-object dynamic in the Lesbian Poems from that in other clusters?

Tackling the lesbian subject in Baudelaire, one cannot ignore a poem that the young poet wrote addressing the-then established poet Sainte-Beuve. This poem, not included in *Les Fleurs du mal*, suggestively invites a reading in terms of double homoeroticism. First of all, the young Poet in the poem unmistakably articulates a homoerotic-sounding identification with the veteran poet:

Poète, est-ce une injure ou bien un compliment?  
 Car je suit vis-à-vis de vous comme un amant  
 En face du fantôme, au geste plein d’amorces,  
 Dont la main et dont l’œil ont pour pomper les forces  
 Des charmes inconnus. —Tous les êtres aimés  
 Sont des vases de fiel qu’on boit les yeux fermés (1: 208)<sup>41</sup>

This is the closing stanza of the poem. While homoeroticism is ostensibly present, many details in effect emerge to unsettle the homoerotic elements. For example, the young Poet’s love object is likened to a phantom image, and the young Poet’s amorous journey is taken in an unknown realm (“charmes inconnus”). Furthermore, the Poet suggests that all the loved ones are bitter “vases of gall” that he drinks *with his eyes closed*. All these clues point to an intricate play between sameness and difference, between identification and non-identification—or, more precisely, between the possibility and impossibility of identification. The final image of “eyes closed” will further disturb the predominant mirror image in the earlier stanzas of the poem, where the Poet compares his fate as an aspiring writer to the fate of lesbian girls:

—Et puis venaient les soirs malsains, les nuits fiévreuses,  
 Qui rendent de leur corps les filles amoureuses,  
 Et les font aux *miroirs*—stérile *volupté*—

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<sup>41</sup> “Poet—is it an insult or rather a compliment? For, with regard to you, I am like a lover facing a ghost, with a gesture full of baits, and whose hands and eyes are to pump forces out of unknown spells. —All the loved ones are vases of gall that we drink with eyes closed.”

Contempler les fruits mûrs de leur nubilité—  
 [. . . . .]  
 —J’ai partout feuilleté le mystère profond  
 De ce livre si cher aux âmes engourdis  
 Que leur destin marqua des mêmes maladies,  
 Et devant *le miroir* j’ai perfectionné  
 L’art cruel qu’un Démon en naissant m’a donné,  
 —De la Douleur pour faire une *volupté* vraie, —  
 D’ensanglanter son mal et de gratter sa plaie. (1:207-08; emphasis mine)<sup>42</sup>

The young Poet in his throes of writing dwells on homosexual girls in their affliction of love. The Poet calls the book that is so dear to numbed souls a “livre voluptueux” (“voluptuous book”). His ambition to write, thus, is marked by a sensuous and sensual desire—also something shared by lesbians, just as diseases are. The repetition of the word “volupté” emphatically suggests his identification with these women. So does the recurrence of the mirror image—his mirror in comparison with their mirrors.

The mirror image in this poem reveals a complex matrix of identifications. The singular mirror in the Poet’s chamber may well suggest a narcissistic self-love, yet this very mirror’s status as an echo of the lesbian mirrors also points to an outward identification, thus to something other than narcissism. As critic Dominique D. Fisher suggests, “[r]epetition and difference undo the narcissistic paradigm in a theater of writing where sameness, by means of a series of mirror images, is constantly asserted and diverted” (51). It is noteworthy that the Poet usually refers to lesbians in the plural form—while the mirror in his poetic world is singular, the lesbians’ mirrors always come in the plural form. Based on this nuance, one may have to think twice before concluding that there is an element of male lesbianism in the Poet. My argument is that, if there is any identification here, the Baudelairean Poet desires not so much to become a disguised lesbian figure as to watch what lesbians experience while he remains an *other* himself. What the Poet identifies with in the lesbians is the same otherness—an otherness that can be *shared* insofar as they both occupy a marginalized position

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<sup>42</sup> “—And then came those sickening evenings and feverish nights, which make girls fall in love with their bodies and make them contemplate, in *mirrors*—sterile *voluptuousness*—the mature fruits of their nobility. [...] I browsed through the profound mystery of this book so dear to numbed souls that their destiny marked the same diseases. And in front of *the mirror* I improved the cruel art that a Demon gave me upon my birth—the art of pain, so as to make a true *voluptuousness*, and the art of staining his illness with blood and of scratching his wound.”

punctuated by sickening nights, voluptuousness, disease, and pain. Thus, the stereotypical images of lesbian women in “Delphine et Hippolyte” should not be read as the Poet’s sinister maneuver of gender identifications, as many critics have suggested, but as the Poet’s precocious attempt to represent an unknown realm of knowledge, that is, lesbian eros. His true identity remains that of the Poet at the end of the poem, calling out to these heroines and hiding his compassion underneath moral fuzziness. In comparison, the mirror image in the allegorized “Beauté,” where the eyes of Beauty are described as the purest mirrors that young poets look up to in vain for poetic inspiration, is but a hollow void that neither reflects nor generates anything.

Nevertheless, if one only looks at the poem to Sainte-Beuve, one may easily jump to the conclusion that the Poet, after all, is manipulating the lesbian eros in order to shape his own writing subjectivity. For, despite his identification with these homosexual women, he claims that their voluptuousness is “stérile” while his is “vraie” (“true”). A gender-studies approach, then, seems to suffice here. Yet, if one compares this poem with the Lesbian Poems in *Les Fleurs du mal*, a more nuanced reading is in order.

The passage on identification with lesbians in the poem to Sainte-Beuve will find a variation, a repetition with difference, in “Lesbos”:

Lesbos, terre des nuits chaudes et langoureuses,  
 Qui font qu’à leurs miroirs, stérile volupté!  
 Les filles aux yeux creux, de leurs corps amoureuses,  
 Caressent les fruits mûrs de leur nubilité;  
 Lesbos, terre des nuits chaudes et langoureuses (1: 150)<sup>43</sup>

Although its diction is similar, “Lesbos” differs from the poem to Sainte-Beuve in many ways. First of all, in the poem to Sainte-Beuve, “stérile volupté” is closely associated with the fruits of lesbian nubility:

—Et puis venaient les soirs malsains, les nuits fiévreuses,  
 Qui rendent de leur corps les filles amoureuses,  
 Et les font aux miroirs—stérile volupté—  
 Contempler les fruits mûrs de leur nubilité—

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<sup>43</sup> “Lesbos, land of hot and languid nights, which make, in their mirrors, sterile voluptuousness! Girls with empty eyes, in love with their bodies, caress the mature fruits of their nubility.”



In “Lesbos,” however, the reference of “stérile volupté” is less definite. For the reference of “leurs miroirs” is uncertain since “leurs” can refer to either the lesbian girls or the “nuits chaudes et langoureuses” (“hot and languid nights”). If the latter, “stérile volupté” can be merely the result of the languid land and henceforth is not to be so directly associated to the lesbian women. The Poet in “Lesbos” is not forcefully dismissing lesbian eros as sterile or wishing to fulfill his own literary desire through representations of lesbianism, as he seems to be doing in the poem to Sainte-Beuve. Furthermore, in the poem to Sainte-Beuve, girls *are made to love* their bodies and *to contemplate* the “fruits of their nobility” in mirrors. In “Lesbos,” however, they *are in love with* their own bodies and *caress* the fruits of their nobility. Girls in the latter poem come across as more active agents of their action while in the poem to Sainte-Beuve they are more like objects in the Poet’s desire for a poetic vocation.

The Lesbian Poems in *Les Fleurs du mal*, to be sure, are closely related to the Poet’s poetic vision, but this vision does not work through a manipulation of lesbian eros as the poem to Sainte-Beuve so voluptuously suggests. The Poet in the Lesbian Poems claims that he has been chosen by the lesbian isle to “chanter le secret de ses vierges en fleurs” (“sing the secret of these flowering virgins”), and that his soul has been following these girls through their infernal world since childhood. In the narrative setting of these poems, however, no verbal exchange, eye contact, or other physical communion is to be found between the spokesman for the lesbian land and the condemned women; the only form of connection between them is established by the Poet’s own enunciation. One can even argue that the Poet’s poetic vocation takes off at that very moment of self-enunciation—a moment of self-introduction translated into identification with an absolute Other *qua* the homosexual woman. There may well be a palpable act of silencing women in the Mistress Poems, as many critics have acutely pointed out; yet in the Lesbian Poems, the impossibility of communion/communication predominates. The Poet’s recognition of his poetic vision is revealed and materialized in a recognition of his otherness in the otherness of lesbian women. What philosopher Maurice Blanchot terms “communauté inavouable” (“unavowable community”) can serve as a literal rendition of the rapport between Baudelaire’s Poet persona and the lesbian figure:

[The community] includes the exteriority of being that excludes it—an exteriority that thought does not master, even by giving it various names: death, the relation to the other, or speech when the latter is not folded up

in ways of speaking and hence does not permit any relation (of identity or alterity) with itself. Inasmuch as the community on behalf of everyone rules (for me and for itself) over a beside-oneself (its absence) that is its fate, it gives rise to an unshared though necessarily multiple speech in a way that does not let it develop itself in words: always already lost, it has to use, creates no work and does not glorify itself in that loss. Thus the gift of speech, a gift of “pure” loss that cannot make sure of ever being received by the other, even though the other is the only one to make possible, if not speech, then at least the supplication to speak which carries with it the risk of being rejected or lost or not received. Hence the foreboding that the community, in its very failure, is linked to a certain kind of writing, a writing that has nothing else to search for than the last words: “Come, come, you for whom the injunction, the prayer, the expectation is not appropriate.” (12)

Whereas the lesbian’s existence does not fit into “the injunction, the prayer, and the expectation” of society, ordinary speech—a carrier of identity and difference, hence also a medium of moral pedagogy—can turn violently on her. Consequently, speechlessness (or, in Blanchot’s words, “multiple speech” that does not reveal itself in words) may emerge both as a trace of past trauma and as the potentiality for a different community—a community that can “accommodate” the experience with the impossible, a community whose possibility is mediated by way of writing.

Blanchot’s configuration of “community “echoes what may be termed the “relational ontology” put forth by Jean-Luc Nancy (or what Simon Critchley calls “social ontology” [240]), who seeks to reinterpret Heidegger’s “Mitsein” in light of a Being taken as already a “being-with,” that is, a relationship with fellow beings: “Being cannot *be* anything but being-with-one-another, circulating in the *with* and as the *with* of this singularly plural coexistence” (3; emphasis in the original). While the traditional conception of the subject prescribes a relation of representation, Nancy’s community is inscribed in an understanding of finitude *qua* the mutual exposure of fellow beings to each other’s alterity (or “exteriority” as stipulated in Blanchot above). My claim is that what the Baudelairean Poet persona attempts in the Lesbian Poems is an attentiveness to the impossible experience figured in the unattainability of communion and communication with the lesbian figure. This is what I have read as ethics.

Put otherwise, while Blanchot’s and Nancy’s models fall short of a historical dimension, the fact that Baudelaire articulates lesbian eros at a time when both writing

and the epistemologization of modernity have become mutually generative ideological praxes suggests the ethical potential of writing. As modernity is registered by a power play on the part of the subject vis-à-vis the object, the imperative of writing for/towards the other evinced in Baudelaire's Lesbian Poems points to a distinctive subject-object scenario. The mature Baudelaire may be remembered mostly for his manipulation of female objects and the gendered staging of his poetic settings. The younger poet, nevertheless, does attempt to establish his poetic enterprise upon an ethical call prompted by the other-ed lesbian.

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