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Writing Desire on the Lesbian Body: Baudelaire's Fantasies and Vivien's Realities

by Emily Wieder

Depicting love, temptation, and ruin, *The Flowers of Evil* [Les Fleurs du Mal (1857)] established Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867) as the poet of modernity. His anthology refuses the binary between Good and Evil as well as the primacy of heterosexuality. Baudelaire had even considered the title *The Lesbians* [Les Lesbiennes]; however, openly discussing homosexuality breached French norms, as the censors affirmed. Pierre Brunel writes that two lesbian poems, “Lesbos” [Lesbos] and “Damned Women (Delphine and Hippolyte)” [Femmes damnées (Delphine et Hippolyte)],¹ were suppressed until 1949 (3). The remaining lesbian poem, “Damned Women” [Femmes damnées], compares female lovers to “thoughtful cattle” [un bétail pensif, line 1],² which, as a rare depiction of lesbianism in the 19th-century, problematically renders the women savage. This caricature remained standard well after Baudelaire's death, despite contrary poems by his “daughter” Renée Vivien (1877–1909). Herself a lesbian in Belle-Époque France, Vivien articulated sapphic pleasure in her biological and textual bodies.

Nearly every study of Vivien describes her baudelairean style, yet scholars of Baudelaire hardly mention his influence on the poetess, and no studies address their treatment of the lesbian body.³ The gap between Baudelaire's imagined sapphism and Vivien's actual encounters raises

¹ This poem will be referred to as “Delphine and Hippolyte.”

² All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

³ Studies addressing Baudelaire's lesbian poems and representations of lesbians include Jeanne E. Lindelof, *The Role of the Lesbian in Charles Baudelaire's Poetry*. 1997. San José State University, PhD dissertation. *ProQuest*.

several problematics, notably why do Baudelaire's lesbian poems — which lack authentic experience — dominate whereas Vivien's prolific writing remains secondary; and, how does "Baudelaire's daughter" valorize the lesbian body that "her father" imagines? In response, this paper views two of Baudelaire's poems and two of Vivien's poems through a feminist, psychoanalytical lens. Jacques Derrida's "phallogocentrism" and Judith Butler's reflections on the gendered body intertwine with Baudelaire's definition of Beauty, which brings into parallel Baudelaire's "Beauty" [La Beauté] and Vivien's "Feminin Sonnet" [Sonnet féminin]. While these sonnets convey admiration, violent passion drives his "Delphine and Hippolyte" and her "Fur." This four-poem sample demonstrates that Vivien appropriates Baudelaire's musings to inscribe subjectivity on the lesbian body.

As a theoretical cornerstone, Jacques Derrida's concept of phallogocentrism explains the omission of homosexual people from written and social spheres. Mas'ud Zavarzadeh clarifies that "phallogocentrism" derives from "phallus" or the male member, and "logocentrism," or a fixation on reason (292). In Western culture, Derrida concludes, men dictate knowledge. Valorizing phallic and the logos consequentially marginalizes the vaginal and the pathos. Such thinking likewise excludes ideas that are neither logical nor emotional, in other words those that are neither masculine nor feminine. Phallogocentrism thus erases lesbians. Baudelaire too subscribes to this discourse, which had been normative in 19th-century France. In his essay "The Painter of Modern Life" [Le Peintre de la vie moderne (1863)], Baudelaire describes a woman as

Chun-yen Chen "Vierges en Fleurs: Baudelaire's Lesbian Poems and the Ethics of Writing Sameness." *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies* 30.2 (July 2004): 173-200.

“a being with nothing to say” [“un être qui [...] n’a rien à communiquer” (89)]. By relegating women to silence, men protect their discursive superiority.

Without naming phallogocentrism, Leo Bersani analyses Baudelaire along Derridean lines. His monograph *Baudelaire and Freud* (1977) references two French psychoanalysts, Jean Laplanche and J.B. Pontalis, who consider the phallus as signification. Elaborating on this notion, Bersani reframes Freud’s castration complex “in terms of an anguished preoccupation with the mobility of meaning” (59). Baudelaire constantly sets meaning into motion, as his “Correspondences” epitomizes. In this sonnet, only the Poet — the capital letter signifies an ideal — can grasp ever-elusive meaning. Such linguistic command satiates the libido as well. Peter Brooks, in his monograph *Body Work* (1994), details this phenomenon in the narrator’s description of Emma Bovary in Gustave Flaubert’s 1856 novel. Flaubert, like Baudelaire, tends to describe women in parts rather than as a whole. Fragmenting the female body and language allows the poet to transcend from the terrestrial world to the divine realm of Poets.

Judith Butler, on the contrary, proposes corporeal and linguistic unity. In her monograph *Bodies that Matter* (1993), Butler contends that the body, if directed to, can interrogate the mimetic nature of language. More than a simple reflection of the sign, the body is productive; it constructs itself through each enunciation. As Butler summarizes, “materiality is that which is bound up with *signification* from the start” (30, italicized for emphasis). From this perspective, the textual and the feminine bodies complement each other instead of devoting themselves to male pleasure. Butler’s theory, however, has yet to alter the instruction of modern French poetry. When students read about the 19th century, they concentrate on Baudelaire and his descendants, such as Rimbaud, Mallarmé, and Proust. Discussions of “his daughter” remain marginal if ever initiated. Vivien was

nevertheless admired among her contemporaries. A lover to American novelist Natalie Barney and an acquaintance of French writer Colette, Vivien frequented literary circles. Proud of her homosexuality, she painted her verses with authenticity, as Butler encourages.

Vivien, like Baudelaire, write to achieve an aesthetic ideal. For both poets, the lesbian body offers one path to Beauty. As Baudelaire describes in “The Painter of Modern Life,” the Poet creates Beauty by fusing transitory and eternal elements. Beauty is observed in the fleeting present then, via the Poem, transcends to ever-lasting divinity. Chun-yen Chen remarks that perfect Beauty must also be artificial because Baudelaire despised nature (188). Particularly abominable because she is natural, a woman, according to Baudelaire, “represents savagery in civilization. She has her beauty that stems from Evil, always deprived of spirituality, but sometimes tinted by a fatigue that pretends to be melancholy” [représente bien la sauvagerie dans la civilisation. Elle a sa beauté qui lui vient du Mal, toujours dénuée de spiritualité, mais quelquefois teintée d’une fatigue qui joue la mélancholie (98)]. This appearance repulses Baudelaire, for, as he argues, female melancholy lacks originality. The dandy, by contrast, possesses an impeccably original melancholy, one that withstands eternity and thus achieves Beauty.

A female dandy, such as Vivien, would logically incarnate the baudelairean model. With her “unnatural” body, the lesbian belongs not among terrestrial poets but among divine Poets. Baudelaire evokes the transcendental potential of the lesbian body in “Delphine and Hippolyte.” In this poem, and in several others however, it is only through the male Poet’s enunciation that the lesbian enters the discourse. Vivien provides the counter voice that transforms the idealized object into an active subject.

To humanize the lesbian body, Vivien illustrates the coherence between sapphism and Baudelaire's aesthetics. Her "Feminine Sonnet" (*Cendres et poussières*, 1902), for example, illustrates a perfectly beautiful lover. A side-by-side reading of Baudelaire's "Beauty" and Vivien's "Feminine Sonnet" highlights her subversive mastery. Although both sonnets are written in alexandrines, or 12-syllable lines, the rhyme scheme varies. Traditional French versification requires masculine and feminine rhymes to alternate.⁴ Baudelaire adheres to this rule in "Beauty," but "Feminine Sonnet" contains exclusively feminine rhymes. As for the overall rhyme scheme, it is "Feminine Sonnet" that adheres to the traditional French structure ABBA ABBA CCD EDE. "Beauty" diverges by moving the couplet to the end and by adding two rhymes, which generate the scheme ABBA CDDC EFE FGG.

In Baudelaire's sonnet, the formal alteration accentuates the concluding lines, which Cyril Scott translates as:

Two mirrors, which Beauty in all things ignite:
Mine eyes, my large eyes, of eternal Light!

[De purs miroirs qui font toutes choses plus belles :
Mes yeux, mes larges yeux, aux clartés éternelles !] (lines 13-14)

Whereas Scott modifies the coupled rhyme to ignite/Light, the direct translation is beautiful/eternal [belles/éternelles]. The original French underscores that eternity follows true Beauty. This rhyme describes Beauty's eyes, which double as mirrors. Capturing the second element of baudelairean Beauty — the transitory — these mirror-eyes reflect only the fleeting present. More precisely, these eyes are peering down from the spiritual realm of Poets. Mortal poets thus see themselves in

⁴ In French, a feminine rhyme ends in a silent e [ə]. Everything else is a masculine rhyme.

Beauty's eyes and, driven by this narcissism, clamor for attention. Submissive like "docile lovers" [dociles amants (line 12)], poets fall under Beauty's spell. Her eyes alone "fascinate" and "make everything more beautiful" [fasciner (line 12); font toutes choses plus belles (line 13)]. Capable of both blinding and elucidating, Beauty recalls Freud's blindness-castration theory.

Though published after *Les Fleurs du Mal*, Freud's 1919 essay "The Uncanny" contends that man explores the world through an erotically invested gaze (Brooks 89). He seeks to conquer woman and Truth to achieve clarity. If blinded, however, man becomes sterile. The allegorical Beauty represents this double threat. Her appearance invites the male gaze, and she seduces through her potential to impart Truth. She ultimately manipulates the gaze to reflect the terrestrial world back onto itself and to trap poets there.

Accessing Truth via eroticism likewise underpins Vivien's "Feminine Sonnet." Instead of an allegorical figure, a human woman narrates. She muses over the marvelous voice, eyes, and hands of "you" [tu] her lover. There is no attempt to manipulate the poetic object, rather there is an invitation to achieve perfection together. Vivien does mimic Baudelaire's "Beauty" in the couplet, which also portrays the muse's eyes as a path to transcendence:

You seem to hear the echo of harmonies
Extinct; as blue as infinite blue clarities.

[Tu sembles écouter l'écho des harmonies
Mortes ; bleus de ce bleu de clartés infinies.] (lines9-10)

The rhyme harmonies/infinities references the baudelairean aesthetic. Much like the "eternal clarities" in Beauty's eyes, the female eyes reflect an ideal that will endure due to artistic

enlightenment. Whereas the allegorical Beauty tortures poets, the women in “Feminine Sonnet” inspire each other.

Their harmony emerges from music, an art that requires breaking silence. From the first line, “your voice has the languor of lesbian lyres” [ta voix a la langueur des lyres lesbiens], a new language emerges. Subsequent “Sapphic odes” [odes sapphiques (line 2)] and “erotic strophes” [strophes érotiques (line 6)] underscore that language’s formalization. In the two quatrains, the detached voices hover in the Poetic realm, then, after the couplet, their bodies manifest. First the eyes appear as reflections of the divine realm, followed by the lover’s hands, then her physique and breath. The lesbian voice speaks as erotically and with as much desire for Truth as the speaker does in “Beauty.” The women in “Feminine Sonnet,” through their vocal and corporeal explorations, attain ecstatic clarity. With her emphasis on music and sensuality, Vivien’s narrator embodies the acting woman who threatens the phallogocentric discourse.

Continuing to investigate speech, the lesbian couple in Baudelaire’s “Delphine and Hippolyte” use a language that no poet can decipher (Chen 185). In this “damned women” poem, Baudelaire stages a bedroom dialogue between two lovers. Delphine is more aggressive than the young Hippolyte, who questions their morality. Chen observes that the male narrator’s ultimate disapproval saved this poem from censorship whereas the other two lesbian poems were condemned in 1857.

In “Delphine and Hippolyte,” the narrator’s voyeur position feeds the scopophilic drive. A *mise-en-abîme* occurs as Delphine becomes the looking, lusting subject and Hippolyte, the looked-at object. Relating to Freud’s blindness-castration theory, those who see, enjoy more pleasure. Moreover, the looking subject remains a complete person while the desired object fragments.

Hippolyte, for example, is described in parts. Her characteristics include a “troubled eye” [un oeil troublé (line 5)], “tragic mane” [sa crinière tragique (line 57)], and “stigmatized breasts” [tes seins stigmatisés (line 101)]. This fragmentation allows Delphine to prey on Hippolyte. In the fourth stanza, she covers Hippolyte with her “ardent eyes” [ses yeux amortis (line 9)] then bites her. Accepting the attack and even burning for another offense, Hippolyte represents the masochism to Delphine’s sadism. Although the narrator paints the lesbian couple as evil, the portrait does bear resemblance to Vivien’s own experiences.

In Vivien’s “Fur” (*La Vénus des aveugles*, 1904), an “I” preys on her lover. The bedroom scene features analogies to hunting, which parallel the sadomasochism of “Delphine and Hippolyte.” More intensely than Delphine, the narrator of “Fur” animalizes herself: she sniffs, she breathes feverishly, and she craves wild cats (line 6). Reduced even further than Hippolyte, the desired body is no more than her “Fur.” This body part appears twice, each time with a capital letter (lines 8 and 19), which removes it from the terrestrial world. Belonging instead to the spiritual realm of Poets, the Fur unites the erotic and the epistemological.

To maintain the ideal, the object of desire remains faceless and anonymous. It is identified as “the Woman that I fear” [La Femme que je crains (line 6)] in the first sestet. Only in the final sestet does this mythicized woman gain physical traits. The narrator contemplates “your nudity” [ta nudité (line 19)] and “your flesh” [ta chair (line 21)], yet these object pronouns “your” [ta], both of which refer to bare skin, do not address the actual person. There are no “you” subject pronouns (neither *tu* nor *vous*) in the poem. Entirely objectified, therefore, this “other” exists solely to please the narrator. A more holistic representation would dismantle the fantasy by bringing the predator closer to the prey.

Through the first-person voice of “Fur,” the desired body endures more assaults than does Hippolyte in Baudelaire’s poem. Vivien had several relationships characterized by intense passion and disappointment.⁵ The lyric voice, therefore, conveys her lived exclusion on personal and societal levels. Writing in Belle-Époque France, Vivien enjoyed an experimental atmosphere, but social codes continued to govern the bourgeoisie class to which she belonged. That tension manifests in the range of tones and forms Vivien employs, as the distinction between “Feminine sonnet” and “Fur” indicates.

Baudelaire, by contrast, is fixed in his phallogocentric gaze. Blind to the nuances in female experiences, Baudelaire invents Delphine and Hippolyte. As characters, they each play a role. Delphine exercises a typically-masculine authority, to which Hippolyte submits. The latter, however, possesses a voice, which is more than the lesbian body in “Fur” has. A man nevertheless intervenes in “Delphine and Hippolyte,” and his third-person voice judges these “damned women.” In Vivien’s “Fur,” the first-person voice does not condemn its own actions. The question of morality surfaces in the first stanza but is dismissed in the same breath when the narrator compares her fervor to a mouth opened wide in “heat and in blasphemy.” In lines 4 and 6, the rhyme blasphemy/I like [blasphème/j’aime] provides a sadistic justification: if it pleases, there is no ethnical problem.

Given this freedom from morality, as well as the use of capitalization, “Fur” unfolds in the Poetic realm. Like the allegorical Beauty of Baudelaire, the desired body bears marks of fantasy.

⁵ Her first love was the French woman Violette Shillito. She had an ongoing relationship with Natalie Clifford Barney (1876-1972), an American who was the daughter of an Ohio industry leader. Barney and Vivien held a lesbian salon in Paris. Vivien also spent time with Mlle Gjertz, a Turkish woman Kérimé Turkhan-Pacha, and at the end of her life Hélène de Zuylen. For Vivien’s biography, see *Œuvre poétique complète de Renée Vivien, 1877-1909*, edited by Jean-Paul Goujon (Régine Deforges, 1986).

The narrator has a “septentrional dream” [rêve septentrional (line 10)] about her beloved, who the narrator perceives as otherworldly. Baudelaire’s Beauty similarly represents a cold “dream of stone” [un rêve de pierre (“Beauty” line 2)]. Vivien’s narrator “seeks the skies / whose frigidity attracts me” [...] cherche les cieux / dont la frigidité m’attire (lines 11-12)]. In other words, she looks towards the spiritual world where perhaps Beauty calls to her. Perfection itself, Vivien suggests, excludes no body.

To conclude, the intertextuality between these four poems highlights the interweaving of sexual and Poetic mastery. The poet aims to consolidate this tension by projecting it onto a desired female. That projection, as studied here, evokes the lesbian body as art, desire, and transcendence. She is more than a site of inspiration but matters as another human, which Vivien underscores. Whereas Baudelaire’s “Beauty” depicts a dangerously attractive ideal, Vivien’s “Feminine Sonnet” elevates the lesbian partner to the heterosexual model without objectifying her. Vivien’s sensuality nuances the intimate experience, presenting a range of sensuality from hesitant affection to violent passion. “Fur” notably illustrates a predatory relationship, which coincides with the “damned women” stereotype that Baudelaire elaborates in “Delphine and Hippolyte.” Although both poets depict the lesbian body as a fantastic other, Vivien appropriates Baudelaire’s musings to inscribe subjectivity on the lesbian body. Through the poem, the lesbian body offsets phallogocentrism.

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