Old Father, Old Artificer: Female Sexuality and Male Authorship in *Les Fleurs du mal* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

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**Abstract.** This paper examines the troubling relationship between the identity of the male artist and female sexuality during the rise of early modernism by comparing two literary works: Charles Baudelaire’s poetry collection *Les Fleurs du mal* and James Joyce’s novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Portraying prominent female characters as a means to define the authors’ own modern aesthetics, both Baudelaire and Joyce perceive underlying tensions between biological reproduction and artistic creativity, prompting them to explore in detail the relationships between gender, sexuality, and the production of literature. For Baudelaire, the male poet as flaneur derives voyeuristic pleasure from his imaginary lesbian narratives, and his aesthetic awareness of the self that emerges is contrasted with the “sterile” nature of female homosexuality. Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus in Portrait, on the other hand, adopts a more ambivalent relationship towards women: like Baudelaire’s speaker, Stephen usurps the generativity of women by replacing meaningful relations with imaginary ones, subsequently deriving literary inspiration; at the same time, however, these attempts bespeak deeper anxieties towards his inability to attain artistic autonomy, ultimately reflecting increasing vulnerabilities in the modern male artist’s perceptions of self-contained subjectivity. Published half a century apart, these two works marked critical junctures in the emergence of modernism, and a comparative approach thus allows us to trace shifting ideologies of modern personhood and gendered identity.

By the turn of the 19th century, the figure of the woman had become increasingly vital to modernism’s long-standing concern with the identity of the male artist. Whether it is Charles Baudelaire’s poetry collection *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857), initially titled “the Lesbians,” or James Joyce’s Künstlerroman novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), female characters are heavily featured in order to define the authors’ own modern aesthetics. In particular, both Baudelaire and Joyce perceive underlying tensions between biological reproduction and artistic creativity, prompting them to explore in detail the relationships between gender, sexuality, and the production of literature. Published half a century apart, these two works marked critical junctures in the emergence of modernism, and a comparative approach thus allows us to trace shifting ideologies of modern personhood and gendered identity. For Baudelaire, the male poet as flaneur derives voyeuristic pleasure from his imaginary lesbian narratives, and his aesthetic awareness of the self that emerges is contrasted with the “sterile” nature of female homosexuality. Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus in Portrait, on the other hand, adopts a more ambivalent relationship towards women: like Baudelaire’s
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In *Les Fleurs du mal*, Baudelaire characterizes female homosexuality as inherently sterile, highlighting both the impossibility of biological reproduction as well as the insatiability of lesbian desire that gives rise to perpetual torment. In Baudelaire’s reconstruction of Lesbos, the mythological Greek island associated with Sappho and lesbian love, the speaker describes it as the “land of the warm and languid nights/ that draw in mirrors sterile fantasies,” where “girls with hollow eyes make love alone, fondling their avid bodies’ mellow fruit” (Baudelaire, 1857/1993, p. 235). The intensity of desire is matched only by its barrenness, since the lesbians’ lovemaking is driven by “mirroring,” or endlessly multiplying, desire but is ultimately unproductive. The speaker again characterizes his lesbians this way in “Condemned Women: Delphine and Hippolyta,” in which “the harsh sterility of all [their] acts of lust” results in a “descen[t] along the path to the eternal Hell” (Baudelaire, 1857/1993, p. 245). The repeated associations of female homosexuality with sterility not only emphasize the lesbians’ rejection of biological conception and motherhood, but also spiritual emptiness marked by endless transgressive desire. Baudelaire thus establishes a parallel between the physical act of childbirth and spiritual fulfillment, both of which are denied to his lesbians, as their “slakeless thirsts” create only “a fierce and moaning monster nothing can assuage” (Baudelaire, 1857/1993, p. 247, p. 243). In this sense, the overflowing eroticism and chaotic sensuality of Lesbos is portrayed as obstructing the generativity of female sexuality by rendering its inhabitants perpetually governed by fruitless desire.

Contrary to the sterility of Baudelaire’s lesbians, however, the poet’s own voyeuristic desires are fulfilled through imaginary narratives, thereby suggesting that the male artist’s aesthetics are comparatively fertile. “The poet enjoys the incomparable privilege of being able to be himself or someone else, as he chooses,” he claims, and “the solitary and thoughtful stroller finds a singular intoxication in this universal communion” (Baudelaire, 1869/1970, p. 20). Being this flaneur, this idle observer of crowds, is not a detached or neutral activity for Baudelaire—it is ultimately self-serving in allowing him to construct an awareness of the self through the imagined narratives of others. This imagining of the stranger’s story and its subsequent projection onto the poet’s own consciousness, furthermore, is an “ineffable orgy” of “feverish delights,” “the divine prostitution of the soul” (Baudelaire, 1869/1970, p. 20). There is an explicit sense of sensual pleasure derived from the poet’s imaginary creation, also manifest in the inherent voyeuristic nature of Baudelaire’s lesbian poems, where the women are depicted to be engaged in various sexual acts. The voyeuristic male intrusion into the intimate female sphere becomes explicit in “Condemned Women: Delphine and Hippolyta,” where the poem is framed entirely as an exchange between two lovers who presumably have just had sex. “Sunk in the softest cushions soaked with heady scent,” Hippolyta “lay dreaming of the thrilling touch/ that spread apart the veil of her young innocence” while Delphine “stretched calmly at her feet, joyfully satisfied” (Baudelaire, 1857/1993, p. 239). The speaker’s voyeuristic pleasure here is thus twofold: he is the male onlooker of the lesbians’ act of lovemaking in the poem as well as the observing flaneur satisfied by the assertion of his sense of self through fantasized narratives of female homosexuality. Unlike the “sterile” lesbians who can never “flee the infinite [they] carry in [them]selves,” the perverse gratification of the male poet’s conflated aesthetic and sexual desires is fertile because it produces his subjectivity as artist (Baudelaire, 1857/1993, p. 245).

In James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the relationship between Stephen Dedalus, the aspiring young artist, and the various women in his life contains an equally complex dynamic. As Baudelaire’s male speaker readily utilizes women as aesthetic devices for his poetry, Stephen is found to do the same, considering that the only occasions in the novel where he produces
poetry follow his sexual encounters with women. However, this process of artistic creation is more problematic than it appears to be. Let us first examine Stephen’s own definition of art, and subsequently the irreconcilability he perceives between its organic production and female inspiration. Drawing his name from the Greek myth of Daedalus the artificer, Stephen idealizes the male artist as being self-contained, constructing his own labyrinth and thus replacing the father-creator Daedalus. This desire for artistic autonomy is clearly reflected in Stephen’s theory of aesthetics, where he describes the moment of artistic beauty as “the clear radiance of the [a]esthetic image,” “apprehended luminously by the mind which has been arrested by its wholeness and fascinated by its harmony” (Joyce, 1916/2003, p. 231). In this “luminous silent stasis of [a]esthetic pleasure,” the artist realizes the image as “the thing which it is and no other thing” (Joyce, 1916/2003, p. 231). The qualities of “wholeness,” “thingness,” and “stasis” essential to Stephen’s ideal image of beauty characterize art as eternal, transcendent, and most importantly free of external influence in its creation, existing solely in the imagination of the artist as it is.

Despite Stephen’s clear articulation of his desire for artistic autonomy, however, his literature and the circumstances in which he produces them are anything but self-contained. As Maud Ellmann notes, despite Stephen’s “mission to be father to himself, self-made and self-begotten,” the novel is particularly concerned with the fragility of identity and constantly blurs the lines between creator and creation (Ellmann, 2010, p. 147). Central to her argument is the idea of Stephen as “porous,” in the sense that his artistic process involves the constant processing of a variety of sounds, odors, and fluids, often described metaphorically in a way that “dissolv[es] the boundary between body and language” (Ellmann, 2010, pp.158-159). Stephen hence embodies a system of economic exchange, where sensory input and language flow in and out of him in constant aesthetic recycling. This notion of literature as always composed of recycled language fundamentally undermines Stephen’s aesthetic ideals of self-production. As I shall discuss specifically now, female sexuality further compromises Stephen’s desire for artistic creation free of external influence as it epitomizes this conflation of body and language, subsequently causing him to fail to adhere to his own definitions of art.

Within the system of economic flow that dissipates the boundaries between word and flesh, female sexuality poses a particularly persistent threat to Stephen’s aesthetic ideologies of autonomy. As observed by Ellmann, Stephen perceives his artistic self to be inseparable from forces of physical passion, resulting in his inability to differentiate between bodily and spiritual ecstasy. This is especially salient during his many sexual encounters with women: visiting a prostitute for the first time, Stephen feels “the dark pressure of her softly parting lips” “pressed upon his brain as upon his lips as though they were the vehicle of a vague speech” (Joyce, 1916/2003, p. 108). The dualistic quality of female sexuality as inspiring both physical and spiritual passion is again highlighted in Stephen’s encounter with the bird-like girl at the beach, where “her image had passed into his soul for ever and no word had broken the holy silence of his ecstasy” (Joyce, 1916/2003, p. 186). Simultaneously sensual and holy, the image incites in Stephen a “profane joy” (Joyce, 1916/2003, p. 186). Thus, despite Stephen’s attempts to define himself as the artist who “forg[es] anew in his workshop out of the sluggish matter of the earth a new soaring impalpable imperishable being,” the diffusions of female sexuality into him both through the body and spirit disrupt his aesthetic vision of the male artist’s autonomy (Joyce, 1916/2003, p. 183). Stephen’s resulting frustration is epitomized in his poem to Emma, a romantic interest from his youth whom he regards as “the temptress of his villanelle” (Joyce, 1916/2003, p. 242). After the “glow of desire kindled again his soul,” Emma’s nakedness “enfolded him like water with a liquid life,” in which “the liquid letters of speech…flowed forth over his brain” (Joyce, 1916/2003, p. 242). As Ellmann notes in another scene, language literally liquifies and fuses with Emma’s sexual body, producing “liquid life” that consists of both verse and semen (Ellmann, 2010, p. 160). Having his artistic autonomy subsequently threatened in this process, Stephen urges Emma in his poem to cease her “ardent ways” and “tell no more of enchanted
days,” referring to her flirtation with Father Moran but also her consistent sexual presence that intrudes into his artistic productions (Joyce, 1916/2003, p. 242). Indeed, Stephen demonstrates subtle awareness of his artistic self’s vulnerability even as a child, when he imagines sexual awakening as a form of spiritual transformation that would cause him to be “transfigured” in “supreme tenderness,” “fad[ing] into something impalpable under [his partner’s] eyes” (Joyce, 1916/2003, p. 67). Thus, unlike Baudelaire who is able to emerge as artist through aesthetically distancing his speaker from the objects of his voyeuristic gaze, Stephen struggles to establish his subjectivity as artist because he perceives female sexuality as always suffused with male authorship, ultimately challenging his artistic autonomy.

Not only do Stephen’s anxieties arise from the inability to filter physicality from his literary work, they also reflect an acknowledgement, perhaps an unconscious one, of women’s superiority in the self-production of art. Like Baudelaire, Stephen observes the metaphor of women’s physical capability for childbirth as parallel to their spiritual potential. Throughout the novel, one of the most significant female characters to Stephen’s transition into the artist is Mary, whose virgin conception of Jesus epitomizes female generativity that is both physical and spiritual in and of itself, unlike Stephen who must rely on external passions to transform his language. A highly revered spiritual figure within the Catholic tradition, the Virgin is also perceived to be uncontaminated, resistant to the confusions of bodily lust and spiritual ecstasy that Stephen himself is constantly subject to. Mary’s holiness “did not humiliate the sinner who approached her,” and “if ever his soul, reentering her dwelling shyly after the frenzy of his body’s lust had spent itself…it was when her names were murmured softly by lips whereon there still lingered foul and shameful words, the savour itself of a lewd kiss” (Joyce, 1916/2003, p. 112). Here Stephen again suffers from the porous coalescence of body and spirit, for he cannot reconcile the lips of fleshly desire with the same lips that invoke Mary’s holy protection (Ellmann, 2020, p. 154). His willingness to yield his sinful soul to her, however, furthermore reveals his underlying acknowledgement of Mary’s spiritual superiority, since she is able to embrace the meaning of these lips without needing to differentiate between word and flesh. The perfection of Mary’s creativity is also what inspires Stephen’s villanelle to Emma, where he expresses his own aspirations to have “in the virgin womb of the imagination the word [] made flesh” (Joyce, 2003, p. 236). This is also one of the many instances of “gender inversions” within Portrait that Laurie Teal suggests are indicative of Stephen’s identification with the maternal in attempt to construct a virgin womb of his own (Teal, 1995, p. 68), in which he hopes to engender through art the “uncreated conscience of [his] race” (Joyce, 1916/2003, p. 276). By emulating Mary’s “virgin womb,” not only is Stephen expressing his desires for complete artistic autonomy that precedes any separation of body and spirit, his metaphor of imagination as womb ultimately recognizes the superiority of women’s embodied spiritual potential.

In addition to Stephen’s physical interactions with various women in his life, his approach to self-pleasure also contrasts sharply with the autoerotic workings of female sexuality, through which the female body is again elevated in terms of its productivity. As Annette Shandler Levitt has done elsewhere for Joyce’s Ulysses, applying feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray’s concept of female autoeroticism to this text is particularly illuminating as well (Levitt, 1989). Irigaray suggests that the woman’s vulva in constant contact with itself resists the dominant phallic economy of pleasure by introducing a feminine language of plurality (Irigaray, 1996, p. 25). Unlike a man who needs the “instrument” of his hand, images, or language in order to masturbate, the woman “touches herself in and of herself without any need for mediation, and before there is any need to distinguish activity from passivity” (Irigaray, 1996, p. 24). This autoerotic nature of female sexuality reinforces its potential for organic self-production, in direct contrast to Stephen’s deliberate, almost obsessive, attempts at inducing self-pleasure in order to derive autonomous inspiration. During his decade-long infatuation with Emma, for instance, Stephen resorts to frequent masturbation instead of forming any meaningful connections with her, and his efforts to relegate Emma into an imaginary sexual relationship, where
“his brutelike lust had torn and trampled upon her innocence,” again reveals Stephen’s deep-seated desires for self-authorship that completely excludes the possibility of female narrative (Joyce, 1916/2003, p. 124). Unlike the autoerotic woman who is unbound by external stimulation, however, Stephen’s “monstrous reveries” come “thronging into his memory…suddenly and furiously, out of mere words” (Joyce, 1916/2003, p. 95). Stephen’s attempts to contain his imaginary sexual relationship with Emma thus ultimately fails, since his imagination, being porous, is a fusion of sensory images and language that are never entirely his own. Indeed, “wondering always where they came from,” Stephen is quite agitated by the unknown origins of these “monstrous images” that “sweep across and abase his intellect” (Joyce, 1916/2003, p. 96). Compared to Baudelaire’s speaker who successfully conflates sexual and aesthetic desire through his voyeuristic gaze, Stephen’s construction of artistic subjectivity is therefore less effective due to the additional tensions he perceives between self-authorship and pleasure. On the other hand, Irigaray’s concept of female autoeroticism perhaps challenges Baudelaire’s interpretations of sexuality within the sterile-fertile binary as well, since the absence of the phallus in lesbian sexual dynamics actually further highlights the self-sustained nature of female sexuality. For both Joyce and Baudelaire, then, the presence of the woman and her sexuality subverts the validity of the male artist’s seemingly superior, closed model of the self and its aesthetic productions.

By examining the relationship between female sexuality and male authorship in Baudelaire’s Le Fleurs du mal and Joyce’s Portrait, one traces the emergence of the modern artist through a more nuanced lens that questions the effectiveness of the male artist’s securing of his subjectivity through portrayals of women. Although Baudelaire’s speaker derives his awareness of self as an artist in juxtaposition to the “sterility” of his imagined lesbians, Stephen Dedalus shares a much more ambivalent relationship with female sexuality, repudiating it as a source of aesthetic disruption while simultaneously recognizing its dualistic potential for creation. In both cases, however, it is ultimately the male artist who bears the power of authorial representation for female sexuality, and the question remains of how to authentically discover and articulate the experience of the modern woman.

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References