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Eleanor Keane

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Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

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Eleanor Keane

Goldsmiths, University of London

My first experience of Charles Baudelaire's work resulted from reading Angela Carter's short story, 'Black Venus' (1985), which is interspersed with allusions to his poetry, including an excerpt from '*Sed non satiata*'.¹ The title refers to the so-called 'Black Venus' cycle of poems inspired by Jeanne Duval, Baudelaire's Haitian partner. In 'Black Venus', Carter reconfigures Duval and Baudelaire's relationship from Duval's perspective, and presents us with a woman who is in turn vivacious, jaded, provocative, shrewd, and who lights cigarettes with Baudelaire's discarded sonnets. Carter's daring depiction inspired me to seek out the source-material – Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857), translated by James McGowan for Oxford University Press (1998). On reading 'Exotic Perfume', 'A Phantom', and 'The Cat', I became fascinated by Baudelaire's extraordinary linguistic dexterity, and how tantalizing glimpses of Duval were scattered like jewels throughout each poem. Even two hundred years after Baudelaire's birth, his desire for Duval lingers on to trouble and entice the reader. As the title '*Sed non satiata*' suggests, satisfaction remains ever-thwarted, engulfing the subject of the poet's desire and the poetic self: 'Like a cook with ghoulish appetite | I boil and devour my own heart', the speaker mourns in 'A Phantom', while his incorporeal lover glows with incandescence, a 'splendid ghost'.²

Baudelaire's 'Black Venus' cycle of poems set out to both negotiate and perpetuate Duval's ghostly presence. For Baudelaire, language becomes as supple as the sinuous, undulating movements of the woman described in poems such as 'The Dancing Serpent'. Language continually turns back in on itself to refigure and reassess an elusive, shimmering, and phantasmic woman who dances just out of the poet's reach. Within the 'Black Venus' cycle, the subject's body is repeatedly compared to the awe- and fear-inducing sublimity of natural wonders. In 'The way her silky garments...' the speaker's body equals 'desert sands and skies' and 'the ocean's swells |

Unfolding with insensibility.³ This imagery abstracts the beloved's body which becomes a primordial force. In '*Sed non satiata*', the poem fractures into a *cri de coeur* which enunciates an impossible tension between defiance and control, domination and freedom:

[...] I can not
To break your nerve and bring you to your knees,
In your bed's hell become Persephone!⁴

In suggesting that the muse herself has become gender-neutral – both a 'wizard of the dusk' and an 'ebony sorceress' capable of moulding him into an impotent Persephone – Baudelaire presents a striking and unforgettable evolution of the poet/muse dynamic.⁵ By straddling both these identities, the speaker's idol becomes a version of Pygmalion, capable of sculpting an identity that extends beyond the poet's imagination to live on in the imagination of later writers such as Carter.

Poetic fragmentation becomes a means of escape. We see this in the final stanza of 'The Dancing Serpent'. After several attempts to catalogue and compare the addressee's dancing movements to an increasingly surreal series of creatures and objects – the titular snake, an elephant, a ship, a glacier – the speaker self-consciously surrenders to the indecipherability that the addressee brings him:

I know I drink a gypsy wine
Bitter, subduing, tart
A liquid sky that strews and spangles
Stars across my heart!⁶

The speaker allows the addressee to elevate him – and the reader – into the 'liquid sky', a celestial space of euphoric desire, freedom, and transcendence which renders all previous attempts at definition redundant. In a pseudo-divine transmutation, the addressee escapes all bodily confines and is transformed into innumerable glorious constellations that embed themselves in the poet's exposed, and therefore vulnerable, heart. In lifting the reader into the space of the imagination, he enables us to witness his 'singular goddess' shine beyond words.

¹ Angela Carter, 'Black Venus', in *Burning your Boats: Collected Short Stories* (London: Vintage, 1996), pp. 231-44.

- ² Charles Baudelaire, 'A Phantom', in *The Flowers of Evil*, trans. by James McGowan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 76-81 (p. 77).
- ³ Baudelaire, 'The way her silky garments...', in *The Flowers of Evil*, pp. 54-57 (p. 57).
- ⁴ Baudelaire, '*Sed non satiata*', in *The Flowers of Evil*, pp. 54-55 (p. 55).
- ⁵ Baudelaire, '*Sed non satiata*', p. 55.
- ⁶ Baudelaire, 'The Dancing Serpent', in *The Flowers of Evil*, pp. 56-59 (p. 59).