

The (New) Decadent Woman: Delmira Agustini's *Tête-à-Tête* with Charles Baudelaire

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Si el genio es una montaña de dolor sobre el hombre, el don genial tiene que ser en la mujer una túnica ardiente.

Rubén Darío, in a letter to Delmira Agustini¹

Delmira Agustini (1886-1914) of Uruguay and Charles Baudelaire (1821-67) of France wrote poetry that shares the liberating exaltation of sensuality, emotionality, misanthropy, and sexual and political anarchy characteristic of the decadent literary movement of the late nineteenth century.² Nevertheless, their works diverge at one crucial point: Baudelaire's simultaneous desire and disdain of women³ (who often act as decadent women or overly dangerous, passive, or silent *femmes fatales*) contrast with Agustini's attempt to uplift these same women to participatory and empowering roles.⁴ Agustini's representation of the affirmative woman is remarkable considering that Agustini wrote during her teens and twenties⁵ and was the product of turn-of-the-century Uruguay in

¹ Qtd. in Agustini, *Correspondencia* 46.

² I would like to acknowledge the anonymous reviewers of *L'Érudit franco-espagnol* whose very valuable feedback greatly improved this article.

³ Bram Dijkstra cites Baudelaire's "rabidly misogynist point of view" (233); Liz Constable, Dennis Denisoff, and Matthew Potolsky state that "Baudelaire's critique of artifice . . . is problematically allied with a seemingly misogynistic valorization of women's inherent artificiality" (Introduction 29, note 14); and Linda Dowling refers to "Baudelairean misogyny" (446).

⁴ An evaluator of an earlier draft of this article stated that this argument assumes Agustini's superiority to Baudelaire as a poet by imposing feminist aesthetic criteria onto both a male and a female poet. Contrary to this reading, I do not seek to rank Baudelaire and Agustini as poets. Rather, I intend to show how Agustini utilized and subverted specific decadent poetic techniques and themes exemplified by Baudelaire in order to overcome Baudelaire's misogyny and access female empowerment.

⁵ Agustini's dialogue with Baudelaire through her poetry is particularly compelling, since at first glance, Agustini epitomized the stereotypical chaste and obedient daughter of bourgeois society in turn-of-the-century Montevideo, Uruguay. Her adolescence occurred during a time of social upheaval led by anarchists and socialists who succeeded in making Uruguay the first site of female suffrage in Latin America. Agustini embraced the changing roles of women outside her bourgeois background as evidenced by her poetry (begun when she was only ten and first published when she was twenty-one) and her tumultuous love relationships (she was married and soon divorced only to maintain a clandestine relationship with her ex-husband who shot her and himself when she was 28 years old).

which there was a co-existence of traditional and progressive values for women with the burgeoning feminist movement in addition to the appearance of the New Woman.

The New Woman entered Western discourse when British feminist Sarah Grand coined the term in 1894 to describe the new generation of women who were influenced by John Stuart Mill and other campaigners for women's rights (Parente-Čapková 9). Under the leadership of progressive José Batlle y Ordóñez⁶ and his Colorado Party, feminism entered the discourse of early twentieth-century Uruguay⁷ and provided Agustini a venue in which to write in a subversive and challenging manner. Beginning in 1902 and throughout the mid-1910s, influential Uruguayan feminists such as María Abella de Ramírez and Celestina Margain de León founded feminist organizations and magazines that advocated social and liberal feminism (Lavrin 133, 323-24). Despite this influx of feminism in Uruguay and other countries of the Southern Cone, women were still regarded as exuding immaturity, lagging behind men, and needing education to become better companions (Lavrin 25). In her book *Las máscaras de Delmira Agustini*, Varas describes the oppressive effects of the modern city of Montevideo on its female residents:

Para algunos la ciudad era un lugar democrático, seguro y moderno donde vivir y hacer negocios, mientras para otros, especialmente las mujeres, fue una promesa sin cumplir. Montevideo, 'la aldea', se convirtió en un infierno donde las mujeres empezaron a sofocarse. Mujeres, como Agustini, que en su deseo de sobrevivir tuvieron que crear estrategias de adopción y rechazo del nuevo sistema. (36)

Agustini adopted many characteristics of the decadent style and rejected the objectified and vilified decadent woman exemplified by Baudelaire.⁸

On the other hand, Baudelaire represented the literary male establishment *par excellence*, and as such, he greatly influenced writers in Europe and in Latin America. Théophile Gautier, in his introduction to a posthumous volume of *Les fleurs du mal* of 1868, characterized Baudelaire's poetry as exhibiting decadent style (17-18, 56-57). This style responded to what intellectuals perceived as the decline of culture in the increasingly more scientific and industrialized world in its creation of an often macabre and ethereal literature. As a post-romantic writer, Baudelaire initiated the decadents' critique of modernity's positivism and inspired many writers such as Huysmans, Verlaine, and Darío to build upon the decadent style.⁹

According to literary scholar John R. Reed, most decadent writers sought something more noble and unique than they observed in the present (73). Despite male and female

⁶ José Batlle y Ordóñez was the President of Uruguay from 1903 until 1907 and from 1911 to 1915.

⁷ Patricia Varas notes that, in Montevideo in 1908, 12.63% of women between 40 and 49 years of age were single: an increase of 19% in only 19 years (*Las máscaras* 31).

⁸ I will use the terms *New Woman* and *decadent woman* interchangeably, but the latter specifically refers to the representation of the woman in poetry exemplifying the decadent style, while the former refers to the liberated woman of the burgeoning women's movements of the nineteenth century. I could also use *femme fatale* instead of *decadent woman*, but I prefer to emphasize the fact that the decadent woman is a product of the decadent literary style.

⁹ Agustini also was highly influenced by the French poet, and David Zambrano even goes as far as to say that "se puede afirmar que el influjo de Baudelaire ha sido en ella más profundo que en ningún otro poeta hispanoamericano" (227). Zambrano attributes this to the fact that, in contrast to Darío, Agustini read Baudelaire from a very early age (227-28).

decadent writers' shared affinity for writing a response to modernity's banishment of art and literature to an inferior status, male decadents engaged in a profound misogyny that reflected their reticence to accept the liberated New Woman who was also a product of modernity. Baudelaire, as well as various *fin-de-siècle* male practitioners of the decadent style throughout France, Spain, and Latin America (to whom Agustini would have been exposed), exemplify this point in their pithy quotes about women as woefully natural creatures, the encapsulation of evil, sexual beings not to be trusted, and examples of monstrosity.¹⁰ Rita Felski explains the reasons for the misogyny of the male decadent:

In [h]is pessimistic vision, women stand for the most despised aspects of both culture and nature, exemplifying the crass vulgarity and emptiness of modern bourgeois society (woman as archetypal consumer) as well as natural sentimentality coded as specific to women, an inclination to outpourings of uncontrolled feelings that threaten the disengaged stance of the male aesthete.

Thus the dandy, in pursuit of uniqueness through the narcissistic cult of self, sees women as exemplifying the uniformity and standardization of modern life that he most abhors. (1100)

In her study of Finnish decadent female poet L. Onerva, Viola Parente-Čapková asserts that “[o]ne of the key characteristics of the New Woman was activity and independence, but in Decadent writing, woman could never be an active agent” (10). She concludes that “Onerva subverted the Decadent imagery of woman, but Decadent imagery and thinking, for its part, subverted her attempts to create the New Woman” (17). By contrast, Agustini dispels this notion of a lack of agency of the female subject of decadent poetry by creating a dynamic female voice within the discourse of decadence.

Notwithstanding the overwhelming sentiment against the New Woman and the presence of powerful women in decadent writing, Agustini engages in a dialogue with Baudelaire's poetry by composing poems that represent vibrant decadent women counteracting his one-dimensionally submissive ones.¹¹ This study will identify and analyze specific poems by Agustini that respond to Baudelaire's inattention to the portrayal of the emerging New Woman in his poetry and trace the challenges of a *fin-de-siècle* Latin American poetess trying to dismantle the passive and malevolent woman of the decadent movement and of the Western tradition in general. The analysis will be mostly close textual readings and will make frequent allusions to the decadent literary style that grew out of the

¹⁰ “La femme est *naturelle*, c'est-à-dire abominable”; “J'ai toujours été étonné qu'on laissât les femmes entrer dans les églises. Quelle conversation peuvent-elles tenir avec Dieu [?]” (Baudelaire, “Mon cœur mis à nu” 630, 635; emphasis in original); “Je considère comme monstres les femmes littéraires, avocates et politiques, Georges Sand, Madame Adam et autres raseuses, qui ne sont que des veaux à cinq pattes” (Auguste Renoir, qtd. in Nord 14); “Trato de una mujer extraña y escabrosa, de un espíritu único esfíngicamente solitario...; de un ‘caso’ curiosísimo y turbador...; satánica flor de decadencia picantemente perfumada, misteriosa y hechicera y mala como un pecado” (Darío about Rachilde, a French decadent woman poet, 111).

¹¹ Varas uses this exact language of Agustini engaging in “a dialogue with Baudelaire” (“Modernismo or *Modernismo?*” 157). She shows this dialogue through only one of the same of the four sets of poems I use, and her analysis focuses on the victimized lover and the beloved as vampire, while mine emphasizes Agustini's subversive enactment of Baudelaire's destruction of the decadent woman. I use the term *tête-à-tête* in my title to call attention to what I interpret as Agustini's deliberate response to Baudelaire, as if they were in a private poetic discussion with one another.

stark changes of modernity and its attendant New Woman in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. An exploration of the representation of the decadent woman in poems of Baudelaire's *Les fleurs du mal* (1857) and Agustini's *El libro blanco* (1907), *Los cantos de la mañana* (1910), and *El rosario de Eros* (1924) illuminates the role that misogyny plays in the male decadent mindset.

Through her poetry, Agustini frees the decadent woman and thus creates the oxymoronic pairing of the liberated decadent woman and the feminist decadent artist. In this respect, Agustini both re-creates herself and the female subjects of her poetry by giving them a voice and subjectivity that male decadents deny them. Agustini's powers of subversion create a stark contrast to Baudelaire's creation of the threats and weaknesses of the decadent woman. In the end, Agustini succeeds in "dismantling the master's house with the master's tools"¹² in her use of the decadent style to overthrow the notion of the objectified and powerless decadent woman. Jorge Luis Castillo notes an analogous phenomenon in Agustini's subversion of the male episteme in *modernismo*: "... [El] propósito [de la obra de Agustini] [es] destejer la textura dualista del discurso dominante, masculino, patriarcal, y volverlo a tejer de una manera tal que la voz femenina pueda encontrar o fundar dentro del mismo su propio espacio" (73). Similarly, Cathy L. Jade describes the source of Agustini's strong poetic voice: "Agustini answers the language of male authority and male creativity. In doing so, she speaks for a new type of female poet, one that is personally and artistically self-affirming, inspired by factors that crisscross the entire hemisphere" (94). One of these factors is the decadent style epitomized by Baudelaire.

David Weir's *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* declares Baudelaire's "Une charogne" of his *Les fleurs du mal* as the first example of a poem that reflects the decadent style through its representation of decay accompanied by delight (xii). Baudelaire wrote *Les fleurs du mal* two years before Darwin's publication of the theory of evolution in *Origin of Species*. Therefore, he remained unchallenged at that time in insisting that art is superior to nature. The superiority of art over nature is a characteristic of the decadent movement as an alternative to romanticism's idealization of nature and realism's depiction of nature as dead matter in its goal of a faithful imitation of nature (Weir 8). As *The Decadent Reader: Fiction, Fantasy, and Perversion from the Fin-de-Siècle France's* editor Asti Hustvedt explains, "[l]ike symbolism, decadence puts forth the idea that the function of literature is to evoke impressions and 'correspondences' rather than to realistically depict the world" (14). In this respect, decadent literature does not pretend to depict the everyday woman, but rather the extremes of the behavior of a stereotypical woman. Baudelaire chooses to elucidate her passive and dangerous side, while Agustini prefers to delineate her dynamic and empowered side.

The conventional decadent woman's primary purpose is to stimulate her male observer. Nichola Anne Haxell describes her role: "... the woman [is] performing a sinuous dance for a lone spectator, the Herod-like figure of the poet whose lethargy and jaded

¹² Ana Peluffo refers to this famous quote in feminist Audre Lorde's essay "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." Peluffo examines the representation of the *femme fatale* in Agustini's poetry and questions whether Agustini could represent the female body outside the confines of the male modernist imaginary of the erotic (142).

senses only she can arouse" (117). Weir describes this male decadent hero as the "ideal man of passivity and inactivity" (84). Nil Santiáñez characterizes him as constituting "la culminación de la subjetividad moderna" with his "marcado cerebralismo, una imaginación fecunda" and his identity as "un heredero secularizado del monje cristiano" (180). In her study *La imaginación en la obra de Delmira Agustini*, Nydia Ileana Renfrew explains Agustini's heightened attention to subjectivity in Latin American *modernismo*: "... Delmira intensifica y/o ahonda en el modernismo al ir más allá [sic] del análisis de la percepción, preocupación central en ese movimiento, para llegar al de la estructura de la subjetividad" (60-61). At the same time, Gwen Kirkpatrick notes Agustini's evasion of the norms of *modernismo* and her attention to decadent style, explaining that her poetry "marca una desviación radical de muchas de las constantes modernistas" (298) and that her poetry displays "el tipo de abstracción de la imagen física que brota de la [sic] incrustaciones verbales tan típicas del decadentismo" (304). Agustini appropriates the decadent style not only as a technique on the margins of *modernismo* but also as a mode in need of eradication of the misogyny demonstrated by Baudelaire as its first practitioner. According to Andrea Gogrof-Voorhees, true civilization for Baudelaire means spiritual refinement, artistic productivity, and inventiveness (71). Agustini and Baudelaire express the same attention to spirituality and creativity in their poetry, but the difference lies in Agustini's refusal to strip the decadent woman of her subjectivity. Instead of embarking on a "[s]exualisation, diabolisation et aggravation pathologique" of Baudelairean elements (Coquio 95), Agustini presents a regenerative female voice while maintaining aspects of the decadent style.

Even though Baudelaire's poetic voice is emotionally overwhelmed and impotently solipsistic at the site of his creation, this same voice does not relinquish its power of defining the feminine subject throughout the poem "Le serpent qui danse." The female object continues to represent only a metaphor and an almost supernatural phenomenon that is responsible for the male spectator's demise:

.....
Quand l'eau de ta bouche remonte
 Au bord de tes dents,
Je crois boire un vin de Bohême,
 Amer et vainqueur,
Un ciel liquide qui parsème
 D'étoiles mon cœur ! (vv. 31-36).

Baudelaire's woman resides uniquely in the symbolic order. In order for the woman to exist, a masculine observer must be present as evidence of her source of creation. In "Le serpent qui danse," Baudelaire introduces the reader to an idealized woman and her observing male creator. Baudelaire emphasizes the male spectator/creator's omnipotence through his description of the woman through metaphors. His woman has all of the paradoxical decadent characteristics of refinement and degeneration as defined by the French decadent scholar Sylvie L. F. Richards: "... dual nature of beauty capable of combining the melancholy and the classically beautiful, desire and despair, satiety and privation" (41).

In Agustini's poem "Serpentina," the idealized aspects of Baudelaire's woman appear, but her woman appropriates her own voice and does not have to depend on her male

observer to speak for her.¹³ Although Agustini's poem does not contain a male onlooker, her poem is reminiscent of Baudelaire's decadent themes and images. Even with her title "Serpentina," Agustini imitates Baudelaire's "Le serpent qui danse" in its indication of sinuous movement. From the beginning of "Serpentina," the reader notes its decadent characteristics. Both portray the dual nature of attraction/repulsion and veiling/unveiling that the decadent woman represents by describing her mysterious eyes, head, body, and sinewy movements:

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>..... Dos plldoras de insomnio y de hipnotismo Son mis ojos. . . . ("Serpentina," vv. 3-4)</p> | <p>Tes yeux, où rien ne se révèle De doux ni d'amer. . . . ("Le serpent," vv. 13-14)</p> |
| <p>..... Mi testa es la luzbética diadema. . . . ("Serpentina," v. 11)</p> | <p>Sous le fardeau de ta paresse Ta tête d'enfant ("Le serpent," vv. 21-22)</p> |
| <p>Gliso y ondulo como una corriente. . . . ("Serpentina," v. 2)</p> | <p>..... Et ton corps se penche et s'allonge Comme un fin vaisseau Qui roule bord sur bord et plonge Ses vergues dans l'eau. ("Le serpent," vv. 25-28)</p> |
| <p>Mi cuerpo es una cinta de delicia Glisa y ondula como una caricia... ("Serpentina," vv. 7-8)</p> | <p>Que j'aime voir, chère indolente, De ton corps si beau, Comme une étoffe vacillante, Miroiter la peau ! ("Le serpent," vv. 1-4)</p> |

Agustini liberates the immobilized decadent woman of Baudelaire's poetry by elevating her using the same decadent poetic technique with which Baudelaire degrades her. Agustini enables her decadent woman to enact an agency that Baudelaire as voyeur/creator/muse never allows her. By empowering her female poetic subject, Agustini is able to emphasize the contrasting subjugation of Baudelaire's decadent woman.

When Baudelaire and Agustini describe the body of the decadent woman, they both utilize the emotional, sensual, and mystical characteristics of decadence. The elements that do not correspond in the two poems are the varying images of the woman's tongue/voice and her dreams/unconscious. In Baudelaire's poem, the reader does not see the woman's tongue until the end when the snake reaches the height of its power. In contrast, Agustini does not hesitate to represent the snake's tongue in "Serpentina." Her serpentine has a power from the beginning that Baudelaire's serpent barely grasps even at the end of "Le serpent qui danse." Agustini clearly defines the omnipotence of her "serpentina" from the

¹³ For a description of how Agustini's early twentieth-century male critics received her work from an asexual or aberrant viewpoint and of how she represented men in her poetry, see Estela Valverde.

Both poets idealize the woman through metaphorical descriptions of her that relate to divinity and royalty. In contrast to Agustini, however, Baudelaire suspends the woman's movement (and thus her freedom) more than Agustini because he associates her body with man-made, frozen, and inaccessible objects:

... tes deux pieds violets ?

Ranimeras-tu donc tes épaules marbrées
.....

Ou, saltimbanque à jeun, étaler tes appas
..... (vv. 4-5, 12)

The feet of Baudelaire's muse must be colored in order to detract from their natural vulgarity. Her shoulders are made of marble, which links her with the decadent poetic voice's desired woman of stone.

Baudelaire uses the word "appas" to convey its double meaning of the charms of her breasts and her magic that contribute to the decadents' conception of the woman as natural and needing to be transformed into something supernatural. However, the vulgarity of Baudelaire's muse prevails at the end of "La muse vénale" because the poetic voice laments her final aspiration to "faire épanouir la rate du vulgaire" (v. 14). The male observer surrenders to her vulgarity, but not without his attempts to change her. The fact that she likes to "étaler [s]es appas" (v. 12) suggests that she is exhibiting a certain magical and ethereal quality. However, the other definition of "étaler" signifies that she is ostentatiously showing her breasts, and consequently, represents her detestable natural characteristics. Baudelaire first evokes the image of her as a controllable, harmless object, but finally he must submit to her triumphant vulgarity. In either case, the decadent woman and her decadent artist creator never exhibit the same level of authority.

Agustini does not yearn for the perfectly idealized, sterile woman that Baudelaire desires. She wants to create a woman whose natural and idealized qualities merge to create a vibrant and ever-changing woman. Agustini does not define her muse using only motionless physical descriptions as Baudelaire does. Her muse is "cambiante [y] misteriosa" (v. 1) from the first verse of "La musa." First, the reader sees her eyes—"ojos de abismo que se vuelvan fanales" (v. 2)—, then her mouth's interior—"[e]n su boca, una fruta perfumada y bermeja" (v. 3)—, and finally her hands—"sus manos asombran caricias y puñales" (v. 8). These three images impart the senses of hearing, smelling, and touching, and they infuse Agustini's muse with a warmth that Baudelaire's frozen muse never obtains.

Agustini's muse also conveys a sense of warmth through her voice and her majestic appearance: "... / Tenga una voz que hiele, que suspenda, que inflame, / Y una frente que erguida su corona reclame / ..." (vv. 12-13). In contrast, Baudelaire reduces his muse to an infant who also resembles the woman in "Le serpent qui danse" when he sees "[s]ous le fardeau de [s]a paresse / [s]a tête d'enfant" (vv. 21-22). In "La muse vénale," he declares: "Il te faut, pour gagner ton pain de chaque soir, / Comme un enfant de chœur, jouer de l'encensoir, / Chanter des *Te Deum* auxquels tu ne crois guère ..." (vv. 9-11). Baudelaire's

metaphorical women cannot elude the impotence that derives from their vulgarity, while Agustini's women harness their natural power as female human beings.

In keeping with Agustini's attention to the empowerment of women, Agustini's muse celebrates her fusion of idealized and natural characteristics. She is so refined and brutal at the same time that Agustini allows her to supersede even the most powerful animals: "... nos asalta un aguijón de abeja; / ... / Y sea águila, tigre, paloma en un instante ..." (vv. 5, 10). Idealizing her muse to the point where she possesses the entire animal kingdom, Agustini does not limit her muse as Baudelaire does. Her muse is capable of retaining her sublime characteristics unlike Baudelaire's muse, who plummets to her vulgar fate. Baudelaire only sees the woman's ghastly carnal ostentation at the end of "La muse vénale," for he regrets that she cannot sustain herself in his idealizations. Baudelaire's idealizations are restraining and denigrating, while Agustini's idealizations are limitless and empowering.

Agustini further exalts the positive aspects of the decadent woman using exclamation points to affirm the power of the decadent woman who has managed to evade becoming merely a dream of stone:

.....
Que el universo quepa en sus ansias divinas;
.....
Y una frente que erguida su corona reclame
De rosas, de diamantes, de estrellas o de espinas! (vv. 11, 13-14)

Images of nature, jewelry, the supernatural, and danger aid Agustini in her endeavor to empower her decadent muse. Her muse prevails when she triumphantly takes on the characteristics of animals, while Baudelaire's muse displays only hypocrisy: "... / Chanter des *Te Deum* auxquels tu ne crois guère ..." (v. 11). Agustini sanctifies her muse through declarations of her various abilities: "Y que vibre, y desmaye, y llore, y ruja, y cante ..." (v. 9). Belonging to many realms and capable of governing them all, she becomes the epitome of the decadent woman whom Baudelaire tries to evoke but only dooms to failure in a vulgar abyss.

The superficial differences between the two women of Baudelaire and Agustini in "Serpentina," "Le serpent qui danse," "La musa," and "La muse vénale" offer only a glimpse at the descent of Baudelaire's Woman and her dramatic escape through Agustini's reinvention of Her. Agustini's later poems, "El surtidor de oro" and "El vampiro" reveal a second and more rigorous stage of her deconstruction of Baudelaire's increasingly subjugated decadent woman. These poems also reiterate the misogynous forces that create Baudelaire's evil Woman, the consequences of the creation of such a one-dimensional Woman, and Agustini's response of feminine agency and dynamism.

In Baudelaire's poem "Le jet d'eau," the poetic voice relegates the woman to a position of absolute powerlessness. The literary critic Mira Levy-Bloch confirms the secondary role that the woman plays in Baudelaire's poetry: "Pour Baudelaire, la femme n'a aucune valeur en elle-même; seul compte son rôle médiateur entre le poète et l'extase" and "Si la femme a une importance secondaire, c'est parce que Baudelaire la considère comme un objet d'art à contempler et à aimer" (47). Baudelaire himself declares: "Il en est des vers comme de quelques belles femmes en qui se sont fondues l'originalité et la correction; on ne les

définit pas, on les *aime*” (“Théophile Gautier” 467 ; emphasis in original). Baudelaire does not thoroughly describe the women of his poetry as much as he presents them in an aesthetic light. Women do not merit individualized descriptions because only collectively can women play the role of the beautiful but voiceless Woman. This Woman has no other identity outside of her function as an “objet d’art,” except when she dares to appropriate the life of the New or Modern Woman of the nineteenth century.

In his “Le jet d’eau,” Baudelaire disdains the Woman so much that he can only think of Her in relation to a jet of water in order to experience the ecstasy that he craves. The jet of water and the Woman complement and resemble each other in their assistance to Baudelaire to reach an aesthetic climax. Two images from the first stanza of “Le jet d’eau” reflect the similar stasis and predictability of the Woman and the jet of water: “Tes beaux yeux son las. . . / Reste longtemps . . . / Dans cette pose nonchalante / . . .” (vv. 1-3) and “Dans la cour le jet d’eau qui jase / Et ne se tait ni nuit ni jour, / Entretient doucement l’extase / . . .” (vv. 5-7). The two corresponding images reflect each other as if they were looking at each other in a mirror or a body of water. The Woman cooperates with the natural jet of water so that the third entity of the poem, the poet, can stimulate himself. The Woman sheds her artificial qualities to exist in the same space as the natural jet of water in order that the poetic voice may satisfy his aesthetic desires.

The physical aspects of Baudelaire’s Woman disappear in the third stanza when She develops spiritually and thus becomes more endowed with the ethereal qualities that the decadent seeks:

Ainsi ton âme qu’incendie
L’éclair brûlant des voluptés
S’élançe, rapide et hardie,
Vers les vastes cieux enchantés. (vv. 15-18)

Despite this ascension into spirituality, the next stanza brings only the disenchanting material world:

Puis, elle s’épanche, mourante,
En un flot de triste langueur,
Qui par une invisible pente
Descend jusqu’au fond de mon cœur. (vv. 19-22)

Here the Woman’s suspension of movement represents the repressed desire with which Baudelaire wrestles. Baudelaire experiences a sort of ontological floating and feels imprisoned by what he perceives as the deteriorating society around him. Subsequently, he exists in a state of absolute impotence that breeds the overwhelming supremacy of his female subject described by Baudelaire scholar Fabrice Bruno Poussin:

Elle semble [devenir] force magique, et puissance surnaturelle, cela évidemment et exclusivement dans l’imaginaire poétique baudelairien, qu’elle soit vivante, morte, jeune, vierge, vieille ou prostituée. . . La femme devient peu à peu un symbole de la création sous toutes ses formes, de la Vie, de la Mort, qui mènent le cosmos et l’homme dans le gouffre d’une fémininité à la fois odieuse et fascinante. (36)

These diverse forms of the woman converge into one paradoxical Woman Baudelaire regards as the incarnation of modernity's decline. Camille Paglia attributes Baudelaire's production of the evil Woman to his desire to restrict and confine her chthonian liquidity as a personification of nature. For Paglia, the Baudelairean Woman is "the dandy's opposite because she lacks spiritual contour and inhabits the procreative realm of fluids where objects dissolve" (430).

In "Le jet d'eau," Baudelaire's Woman becomes a source of fascination when nature surrounds her:

Ô toi, que la nuit rend si belle,
Qu'il m'est doux, penché vers tes seins,
D'écouter la plainte éternelle
Qui sanglote dans les basins !
Lune, eau sonore, nuit bénie,
Arbres qui frissonnez autour,
Votre pure mélancolie
Est le miroir de mon amour. (vv. 29-36)

Without idealized nature surrounding her, the Woman resumes her lowly state. She is not the object of Baudelaire's melancholy love, but the metaphor for his ontological instability. Baudelaire cannot exist between the two extremes of ascension and descent that he has created in his oxymoronic world:

La gerbe épanouie
En mille fleurs,
Où Phœbé réjouie
Met ses couleurs,
Tombe comme une pluie
De larges pleurs. (vv. 9-14)

In the act of writing poetry, Baudelaire is closest to the ecstasy he seeks, but upon realizing the empty materialism outside his poetic creation, he must return to lamenting his lack of stability.

Baudelaire contemplates his precarious state of being through nature and through the Woman. Both serve him at the expense of their dynamic identities. This results in a quality of indecision and imprecision that does not characterize Agustini's poetry. Another consequence of Baudelaire's one-dimensional and generic *femme fatale* is what Ignacio Ruiz Pérez describes as the marked absence of a female episteme produced by an aesthetic that is logocentric and patriarchal (195). Agustini responds to this limitation in her poem "El surtidor de oro" by challenging the notion of the abstract Woman that "Le jet d'eau" portrays. In "Le jet d'eau," the woman and the jet of water equally inhabit the verses; in "El surtidor de oro," the jet takes on a secondary role, while the muse is its motor. The poetic voice is minimal and not reminiscent of the controlling voice in "Le jet d'eau." Agustini's poetic voice encourages the muse to energize the jet of gold: "Vibre, mi musa, el surtidor de oro / ..." (v. 1). Agustini does not emphasize merely the physical aspects of her muse as Baudelaire does at the beginning of his poem before he acknowledges only the fleeting spirituality of his muse. Instead, Agustini merges the physical and the spiritual aspects: "... amante ideal, el esculpido / En prodigios de almas y de cuerpos ..." (vv. 5-6). While

Agustini uses refrains in “El surtidor de oro” just as Baudelaire does in “Le jet d’eau,” her repeated verses express the confidence her muse has and not the fatal destiny that Baudelaire’s muse must ultimately face.

The muse of “El surtidor de oro” maintains a central position throughout the poem as the controller of the jet of gold and the lover that surges from it. The muse’s power does not diminish at the end as the power of Baudelaire’s muse does, nor does it manifest the poetic voice’s volatility in “Le jet d’eau.” Agustini’s muse wants to access the supernatural world that Baudelaire seeks as a decadent, but she will not sacrifice her muse’s soul in the process:

.....
De las espumas armoniosas surja
Vivo, supremo, misterioso, eterno,
.....
Ha de nacer a deslumbrar la Vida,
Y ha de ser un dios nuevo! (vv. 3-4, 9-10)

Agustini’s female muse creates a male lover who retains his natural attributes but is able to take the reader to the mysterious realm at the same time. His role in Life is creative, not destructive.

In Agustini’s poem, the lover’s life originates from the muse’s use of the jet of gold: “Las culebras azules de sus venas / Se nutren de milagro en [su] cerebro...” (vv. 11-12). In Baudelaire’s “Le jet d’eau,” the poetic voice relays the muse’s existence through the memory of a recent event:

... le jet d’eau qui jase
.....
Entretient doucement l’extase
Où ce soir m’a plongé l’amour. (vv. 5, 7-8)

Agustini’s poetic voice does not rely on memory as much as on spontaneity to create the lover with expressions such as “ha de ser” (v. 10), “[d]ebe ser,” (v. 7) and all of the commands given to the muse. This lover takes on a dimension of his own and does not serve merely as a reflection of nature.

Agustini’s muse controls the jet of gold unlike Baudelaire’s lover who imitates “le jet d’eau” in her “pose nonchalante” (v. 3) before the poet. Further, in “El surtidor de oro,” the muse distinguishes herself from the jet of gold and becomes the fourth entity of the poem after the poetic voice, the jet of gold, and the lover that it creates. In “Le jet d’eau,” only the poetic voice, the lover, and the jet of water exist. The water represents the fluidity with which Baudelaire contemplates ecstasy and then misery through thoughts divided between his lover and the jet of water. In “El surtidor de oro,” Agustini idealizes the lover to the point that the poetic voice demands that the muse “[s]elle” (v. 23) the lover with a “taza rosa de [su] boca en besos” (v. 24). Agustini’s muse has the power of sustaining her lover’s ideal state.

The lover in “El surtidor de oro” retains the same qualities at the end of the poem that Agustini gives him at the beginning. She describes both the corporal and ethereal aspects of her lover that do not exist in the lover of “Le jet d’eau”:

.....
Arraigando las uñas extrahumanas
En mi carne, solloza en mis ensueños;
—Yo no quiero más Vida que tu vida,
Son en ti los supremos elementos;
Déjame bajo el cielo de tu alma,
En la cálida tierra de tu cuerpo!— (vv. 17-22)

Agustini does not want to create a helpless and frustrated lover like Baudelaire's. Agustini's muse creates an exalted and individual lover who thrives and evades the purely aesthetic and temporary existence of Baudelaire's lover. The power of Agustini's lover complements that of his beloved muse, and her poetic voice gives informal commands to the lover while it gives formal commands to the muse who controls the powerful jet of gold. Baudelaire's muse does not possess this same kind of power because she is the culprit of the ills of a decaying society. His muse cannot represent the decadent style without falling into the depths from which Baudelaire can never retrieve her. Eliane F. Dalmolin characterizes this process as Baudelaire's fear of the "impossibility of keeping both models of represented females in separate aesthetic categories [of] the classical statue and the modern representation of woman" (79).

Baudelaire's Woman becomes so menacing that she becomes the protagonist in his poem "Le vampire," plaguing Baudelaire to such a degree that he depicts her invading his entire soul:

Toi qui, comme un coup de couteau,
Dans mon cœur plaintif es entrée ;
.....
De mon esprit humilié
Faire ton lit et ton domaine. . . (vv. 1-2, 5-6)

Baudelaire blames the Woman for every evil and describes Her as another one of life's vices:

.....
Comme au jeu le joueur têtue,
Comme à la bouteille l'ivrogne,
Comme aux vermines la charogne,
— Maudite, maudite, sois-tu ! (vv. 9-12)

Literary critic George Ross Ridge compares the decadent woman to a woman who "drains her lovers like a vampire" (161).¹⁴ Baudelaire becomes so powerless before this vampiric decadent woman that his masculine defenses cannot help him:

¹⁴ According to Sian Macfie, in late nineteenth-century culture, vampirism was linked to women's involvement in black magic as well as to their expression of sexuality. R. von Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia sexualis* (1892) makes reference to a nymphomaniac female patient suffering blood-fetishism, and Caesar Lombroso and William Ferrero's *The Female Offender* (1895) describes the female nymphomaniac's desire to bite and suck blood. The vampiric woman was also associated with sexually transmitted diseases, the

J'ai prié le glaive rapide
De conquérir ma liberté,
Et j'ai dit au poison perfide
De secourir ma lâcheté. (vv. 13-16)

In Baudelaire's world, the decadent woman becomes the central and dominating figure that no sword or poison can stop as long as they are in the hands of the powerless poet:

Hélas ! le poison et le glaive
M'ont pris en dédain et m'ont dit :
« Tu n'es pas digne qu'on t'enlève
À ton esclavage maudit,

Imbécile ! — de son empire
Si nos efforts te délivraient,
Tes baisers ressusciteraient
Le cadavre de ton vampire ! » (vv. 17-24)

Baudelaire depends upon the Woman for his writings of the decadent world, and he will continue to create her poetically while he ignores the individual woman.

Agustini responds to Baudelaire's "Le vampire" with her poem "El vampiro." Here she shows Baudelaire's destruction of the natural and individual woman from the decadent poet's perspective. Turning the tables, the decadent poet himself becomes a vampire in his intent to destroy any traces of the culpable Woman:

.....
Yo invoqué tu dolor... Sentirlo era
Sentirte el corazón! Palideciste
Hasta la voz, tus párpados de cera,

Bajaron... y callaste... (vv. 2-5)

The natural woman literally loses her vision, and more importantly, her voice. As the decadent poet becomes her odious vampire, her death represents the Death of the natural Woman in order to enter into the Life of the decadent Woman:

... Pareciste
Oír pasar la Muerte... Yo que abriera
Tu herida mordí en ella —¿me sentiste?—
Como en el oro de un panal mordiera! (vv. 5-8)

The reader remembers this characteristic in Agustini's "La musa": "... / En su boca, una fruta perfumada y bermeja / Que destile más miel que los rubios panales ..." (vv. 3-4). In "La musa," Agustini's muse approximates an animal in her state of glorified naturalness. In

menstrual cycle's effect of "moral madness" (Macfie 60) and women's need to replenish blood, lesbianism, the woman as the psychic sponge of resources of her companions, and the mixed-race woman seeking *good* (white) blood (Macfie 59-62).

“El vampiro,” Agustini describes the decadent vampire poet who destroys this same attribute.

The vampire thinks that he has magical powers that his victim does not:

Y exprimí más, traidora, dulcemente
Tu corazón herido mortalmente,
Por la cruel daga rara y exquisita
De un mal sin nombre, hasta sangrarlo en llanto!
Y las mil bocas de mi sed maldita
Tendí a esa fuente abierta en tu quebranto. (vv. 9-14)

The decadent poetic voice’s power resides in his “mal sin nombre” and in his “sed maldita,” which attack his victim whose heart is “herido mortalmente.” The decadent lover as poetic voice transforms the disdainful natural Woman into another vampire who is responsible for original sin and society’s downfall.

Agustini subverts Baudelaire’s vampire Woman when she attributes the creation of the decadent Woman to the vampire poet who searches frantically for the force responsible for society’s decay. Agustini’s poetic voice tries to identify the motives for the decadent woman’s conversion into a vampire by the conventional decadent poetic voice: “¿Por qué fui tu vampiro de amargura? / ¿Soy flor o estirpe de una especie oscura / Que come llagas y que bebe el llanto?” (vv. 15-17). Making a direct reference to Baudelaire’s *Les fleurs du mal* in the poetic voice’s question: “¿Soy flor o estirpe de una especie oscura / . . . ?” Agustini demands to know if the decadent poet must destroy the natural woman to preserve the “fleurs poétiques [qui naissent] du Mal de la Modernité contemporaine” (Poussin 41) or if he is evil’s accomplice. Baudelaire’s poetic voice creates the decadent Woman at the expense of the dynamic woman through his misogynistic and pessimism-generating female objects “com[iendo] llagas y beb[iendo] el llanto” (v. 17). Baudelaire’s despotic and phallic decadent Woman acts as a representative of the anxiety of male European intelligentsia in the face of increasing feminist demands (Felski 1104).

Questions such as “What forces create Baudelaire’s evil Woman?” “What are the consequences of the construction of such a Woman?” and “How does Agustini respond to the evil Baudelaire evokes upon creating Her?” can now be answered. Baudelaire’s misogyny, fed by fears of the anti-traditional, overly natural, and consuming New Woman, creates his diabolical Woman. Such a Woman evades the agency and equity advocated by the New Woman of turn-of-the-century feminism. Agustini responds to this evil and passive Woman by uplifting the very same natural and artificial elements that Baudelaire degrades. Furthermore, Agustini’s poetry exudes a steady vitality that escapes Baudelaire’s “conversion of aesthetic pleasure into poetic pain” and the transformation of his “blissful admiration . . . to a horrified state of poetic paralysis” (Dalmolin 90).

The natural/vulgar and decadent/artificial women are feminine prototypes of the traditional decadent movement that Agustini deconstructs through her poetry. Agustini’s decadent woman reflects only the positive traits and power that “Serpentina,” “La musa,” and “El surtidor de oro” manifest. These affirmative characteristics culminate in her demonstration of the destruction of the woman’s power in “El vampiro” by Baudelaire’s poetic voice in search of the monstrous Woman responsible for society’s evils. Agustini’s natural woman transcends the artificial woman’s realm and their fusion creates a woman

who contains neither the horrifying debility of the natural woman nor the consuming wickedness of the evil decadent woman. The Uruguayan poetess succeeds in demonstrating the harmonious co-existence¹⁵ of nature and artifice in her representation of the powerful and stable dynamic woman of a more fluid decadent style. Agustini successfully represents the liberating potential of the New Woman in the context of decadent style, while Baudelaire represents only the decadent woman or *femme fatale*. Agustini's feminist application of the decadent style raises the modern female poetic subject to new heights and provides a compelling alternative to the chronically diabolical woman of traditional decadent poetry, enabling Agustini to write subversively and uniquely despite the flaming tunic that her contemporary Darío insisted she donned as a female writer of the early twentieth century.

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¹⁵ The idea of Agustini's use of the co-existence of nature and artifice resembles the conclusion of Castillo in his article "Delmira Agustini o el modernismo subversivo": "El proyecto de la poeta [Agustini] consiste . . . en enunciar [l]as dicotomías para luego atenuarlas; pero no disolviendo los dualismos en una síntesis, que sería la solución moderna, dialéctica, sino haciéndolos *coexistir* . . ." (73; emphasis added).

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