

ROBERT DUNCAN ON CHARLES BAUDELAIRE: TOWARDS A POETICS OF INFECTION¹

Leticia Pérez Alonso, State University of New York at Buffalo
Email: lpalonso@buffalo.edu

Abstract: This paper argues for a poetics of infection in *Groundwork: In the Dark*, where Robert Duncan seems to be contaminated by the language, titles, quotations and tone of malaise of Charles Baudelaire's *Flowers of Evil*. Of especial importance is the function of intertextuality in Duncan's "To Master Baudelaire" and "In Blood's Domaine," given that it acts as a metaphor for the organism's exposure to contagion. Thus, this poetry of infection can help reflect on the possibility of a polysemous discourse between these authors that assimilates the turmoil of the body on the level of the text.

Keywords: Baudelaire, body, contagion, Duncan, ennui, infection, intertextuality, malaise, poetry.

Título en español: Robert Duncan en Charles Baudelaire: Hacia una poética de la infección.

Resumen: Este ensayo aboga por una poética de la infección en *Groundwork: In the Dark*, donde Robert Duncan parece contaminarse de la lengua, los títulos, las citas y el tono de malestar de las *Flores del mal*, de Charles Baudelaire. Especialmente importante es la función de la intertextualidad en "To Master Baudelaire" y "In Blood's Domaine" de Duncan, puesto que actúa como metáfora de la exposición del organismo al contagio. De este modo, esta poesía de la infección puede ayudar a reflexionar acerca de la posibilidad de un discurso polisémico entre ambos autores que asimile la inestabilidad del cuerpo a niveles textuales.

Palabras clave: Baudelaire, cuerpo, contagio, Duncan, ennui, infección, intertextualidad, malestar, poesía.

Oh, my reader, you know this fiend
–Hypocrite reader, my image, my twin!
(Baudelaire, "To the Reader," *Flowers of Evil* 37-40).

These emblematic lines with which Baudelaire closes his poem "To the Reader," included in *The Flowers of Evil* (1985), appeal to humans' possibility of simultaneously being the executors and the victims of vices and sins. The reader, as an extension of humankind, is the "image" and "twin" of the poet, as he recognizes and partakes in the same evil actions. Therefore, he has the ability to indulge and sympathize with his counterpart. Likewise, in *Groundwork: In the Dark* (1987), Duncan identifies with this attitude by insisting on his

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“sickness of living,” and by evoking Baudelaire’s sense of infection, malaise, and ennui. My purpose for this essay, then, is to confront the effects of the Baudelairean aesthetics of malaise in conjunction with Duncan’s own readings and appropriations interspersed in *Groundwork: In the Dark*. Resting on the existing biographical data shared by these poets (both of them suffered from fatal diseases), I will argue for the notion of contagion in terms of intertextual relationships, given that Duncan, in “To Master Baudelaire,” seems to be contaminated by the tone and style noticeable in Baudelaire’s “Spleen.” I will also point to the thematic of disease in Duncan’s “In Blood’s Domaine” from *Groundwork: In the Dark*, and in Baudelaire’s “The Sick Muse” from *The Flowers of Evil*, as both poets insist on the progressive decay of the body, once it is affected by a degenerative or infectious disease. Thus, I hope to unravel the convergence of those texts, and to explore to what extent Baudelaire’s poetics of infection has a bearing on Robert Duncan.

Duncan’s life, his homosexuality and his disease are intimately connected to Baudelaire’s sense of ennui and malaise. Adopted by an orthodox family of theosophists, Duncan was drawn to the world of the fabulous and the occult. These circumstances partly brought about his position of detachment in the world, which was aggravated shortly after he attended the University of California at Berkeley. There, his homosexuality, antagonistic to Protestant morals, came to light. This may have been one of the reasons why he departed with his lover to New York, where he lived for a few years, attending the circle of Anaïs Nin, which included figures such as Henry Miller, Lawrence Durrell, and George Barker, among others. His homosexual condition led him to publish a series of articles as a vehicle to support homoeroticism, and at the same time criticize the rigid protestant morality. Later on, he joined the poets of the San Francisco Renaissance (Kenneth Rexroth, Phillip Whalen, Jack Spicer, Robin Blaser, and Philip Lamantia), and initiated a relationship with Jess Collins, an artist who had an impact on Duncan’s theory of a “grand collage.”² In addition to the difficulties arisen from his sexual orientation, Duncan developed a cancerous disease which gradually deteriorated his kidneys and resulted in his death. These critical moments of his life connect with Baudelaire, as the French poet suffered from syphilis, which was the cause of his mortality. Although their illnesses vary in category (cancer is not infectious, whereas syphilis is), they coincide in that they provoke the gradual decay of the body, and both poets, who were victims of those effects, translated their despair in their works. Even if it is questionable, and there is no evidence about it, the American poet may be engaging in a homoerotic act which enacts the love of Baudelaire, his language and poetics. By studying French and the aesthetics of *The Flowers of Evil*, Duncan seems to manifest not only a desire for the sensuous aspects of that language, but also sympathy for Baudelaire’s fatal illness, which bears resemblance with his own personal situation. Baudelaire, then, returning to the last words of the opening poem of *The Flowers of Evil*, can be considered

² Duncan’s theory of a “grand collage” is defined as the assemblage of different plastic and literary materials which, by being relocated in a new context, acquire a new signification, and rather intricate values. Of special importance are Jess Collins’ visual practices, which helped Duncan exploit the full potentials of language and typography. One of Collins’ creations that most influence Duncan were his paste-ups, which stand for the combination of diverse-natured fragments (from magazines, articles, graphics, and photos). They are not only characterized by its open arrangement on the page, but also distinguished from collages by its childlike tone. See the introduction of Bertholf’s revised edition on *Robert Duncan Selected Poems* xii. For a contrasting view on Jess’ visual strategies, see Johnson 5.

to be Duncan's "image" and "twin." He is the mirror on which Robert Duncan's poetics of sickness is reflected. This is even more evident if we attend to the resonances of "the sickly flowers," the original title that the French poet destined for his book. With that backdrop in mind, Robert Duncan forges a theory of illness that is extended to the domains of his poetic language. Baudelairean French language and tone act as a contagious disease, infecting and disseminating in the American poet's texts, as we will observe in "Towards his Malaise," "Among his Words" and "The Face."

In his letter of response to Baudelaire concerning the copies of *The Flowers of Evil*, Sainte-Beuve wrote:

you, who have come so late, and arrived the last, have said to yourself—I imagine: *Well, I shall still find some poetry, and I shall find it where no one has considered gathering and expressing it.* And you have chosen Hell, you have made yourself a devil. You have tried to tear their secrets from the demons of the night. In doing that with subtlety, with refinement, with a rare talent and an almost *precious* abandon in expression, by *perfecting* detail, by making yourself the Petrarch of the horrible, you appear to have amused yourself; and yet you have suffered, you have grieved as you paraded your vexations, your nightmares, your spiritual tortures; you have suffered dearly, my dear child. That particular sadness which rises from your pages and in which I recognize the last symptom of a sick generation, whose elders are well known to us, is also what will be esteemed in you.³

In those lines, Sainte-Beuve addresses Baudelaire as the evil poet par excellence who, in savoring the depravation of human nature, manifests a syndrome of sickness and decay. Baudelaire, then, breaks with the aesthetic notions of beauty, and originates a new turn towards the condition of malaise and evil. He delights in exhibiting and naming what is socially unacceptable and generates revulsion and nausea, that is, the improper and unclean, filth and waste. By doing so, he transgresses the forbidden laws, and ultimately endangers his own identity. He can be considered to be a poet of abjection,⁴ in Kristeva's terminology, in that his poetry responds to those liminal spaces which divide life from death, and thus, become the site for desire and repulsion. In "To the Reader," from *The Flowers of Evil*, this poetry of abjection can be observed in the following lines:

The Devil it is who is pulling the strings
Which move us to lust after what we should hate;
Step after step we move closer to Hell
And accustom ourselves to the stink of the pit (13-16).

Truly, he must "have suffered dearly," as Sainte-Beuve wrote, as he deploys his physical and spiritual agony throughout the text so as to strive for a cathartic effect that purges his soul of vices and sins. In the same poem, he continues as follows:

³ For an extensive view, see Richardson 223-224.

⁴ On the concept of abjection, Kristeva remarks in *Powers of Horror*, "it is thus not a lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection, but what disturbs identity, system or order. What does not respect borders positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4).

Only one is most wicked and ugly and foul!
 Even though he makes scarcely a stir or a cry,
 He would willingly devastate all of earth,
 And in one giant yawning would swallow the world;
 He is Ennui—whose eye drips a casual tear
 As he dreams about gallows and slips on his gin; (33-36).

In this passage, Baudelaire touches on the presence of evil in the world, and further argues that the poet's vices and sins are a projection of those of the reader. In other words, both the artist and the reader are partaking in the same caustic experience and grief. It is precisely ennui that Baudelaire detests most from all of human vices. With that term, he does not refer to romantic melancholia or nostalgia, but to guilt and dejection (Richardson 224-225). According to Poulet, "the ennui described by Baudelaire is thus a complex form of experience. It is a maximum of consciousness in a minimum of action; or, more precisely, it is a maximum of consciousness which has as both its cause and its effect a minimum of action" (11). For Baudelaire, ennui is the sickness of modern condition, as the paralysis of consciousness eludes commitment, action, and stakes.

Similarly, in "To Master Baudelaire," Robert Duncan retrieves the memory of the poet of *The Flowers of Evil* by emphasizing the tone of malaise and hopelessness which affected both the poetry of Baudelaire, and by extension, his own. The title in itself is enigmatic owing to the ambivalence of the word "master," meaning a form of address or the achievement of mastery over someone. This polysemy of the title and the poem as a whole attests to the multiplicity of signification, which can be the equivalent of a disease spreading within the limits of the body. Poetry and language for Duncan seem to act as "a locus of the selfsame in the strange and the strange in the selfsame" (Wray 54). Thus, Duncan rescues Baudelaire's memory, his words, language, titles, quotations and furthermore, the tone of "malaise and infection" that Michael Palmer rightfully observes in his introductory study to *Ground Work: In the Dark* (13). All this can be noticed in "Towards his Malaise:" "When I come to death's customs,/to the surrender of my nativities [...]." Likewise, his symbiosis with the French poet's project of life and poetry is accounted for in the following lines: "

[...] Hatreds
 as well as loves flowd thru as the
 sap of me. And we too,
 my life companion and I,
 entertaind our projects and fancies [...]
 that we would never have come to, yet
 in the depths of Poetry (45-56).

This intertextuality acts as a contagious disease which threatens to destabilize identity and the univocal conception of meaning. By inhabiting the Baudelairean universe, he goes beyond his own poetic tradition or language, and ends up entering into a dialogue with what he called "the voice of the other," which is nothing but the reenactment of the violent force of desire. Monolingualism, then, is nothing but an illusory condition of the human being, as linguistic and stylistic borders are subject to being pervaded and contaminated. In

that sense, Duncan reactivates Baudelaire's work by evoking *The Flowers of Evil*. Divided into "Toward his Malaise," "Among his Words" and "The Face," this series of poems from *Groundwork: In the Dark* strive to recreate the ennui and malady of both Baudelaire and Duncan.

"Towards his Malaise" conveys the Baudelairean sense of anguish by pointing to a landscape of the River Styx, which in Greek mythology stands for the demarcation between Earth and the Underworld. There, Duncan is supposed to give his personal documents to the customs official who defends the area, before stepping into the Underworld. Duncan touches upon the passage from life to death, by envisaging the cycle of seasons. The "vernal leaves and autumnal leavings" emphasize this transition which ends up in the return to "animal debris and decay of intensities." Likewise, Baudelaire in "A Voyage to Cythera" depicts the disintegration of a corpse so as to insist on the transitoriness of human life and the return to its origins. It is precisely by way of death that the human being is restored to its primeval harmony. As Bataille claims, "we are discontinuous beings, individuals who perish in isolation in the midst of an incomprehensible adventure, but we yearn for our lost continuity" (15). Like the French philosopher, Duncan seems to suggest that our solipsistic human nature yields to definitions and determinations. We live and die alone, but in our heart, we desire to transgress the limitations of our existence. That is, we manifest a desire to live as if we were not going to die. Notwithstanding, our consciousness of death makes us vulnerable creatures, and brings about states of melancholy and anxiety. In Duncan's poem this tone of malaise is conveyed by his awareness of that irrevocable return to nature. This is what motivates the communication and identification with Baudelaire. Duncan seems to be drawn to the same existential vacuum predicated in the French poet's work, a vacuum that accounts for the "sickness of living," for ennui, to put it simply:

upon the edge of what we never knew then
 you made clear was there
 in the human condition – your *Ennui*
 plus laid, plus méchant, plus immonde,
 that we would never have come to, yet
 in the depths of Poetry
 I have so long ever gone to and ever
 returned myself from, beyond (51-58).

This ennui for Duncan is realized in an ailing existence which manifests that which is "*plus laid, plus méchant, plus immonde*" (more ugly, nasty, and foul). These allusions embody that Baudelairean state of lethargy Duncan identifies with, a state both poets inhabit and stand by, as they consider it to be part of the human condition. The nearness of death, as a last resort, is what brings about that numbness and suffocation of the mind before its imminent collapse. Within the text, this idea of instability and disintegration is conveyed by the use of French as a foreign language. As Walter Benjamin states, "languages are not strangers to one another, but are, a priori and apart from all historical relationships, inter-related in what they want to express" (72). On the one hand, the use of French words helps build bridges and forge an emotional bond between Baudelaire and the American poet. On the other hand, Duncan draws on that tongue to capitalize on the quest for an "open

form,”⁵ and thus to celebrate the impossibility of communicating the essence of things in the world. In “Spleen,” a poem that can be taken as the counterpart of Duncan’s “Towards his Malaise,” Baudelaire also expresses this paralysis of consciousness before the void, which is an expression of ennui and tedium.

Nothing is longer than the limping days
 When, under heavy lakes of years of snow
 Ennui, the fruit of dulling lassitude,
 Takes on the size of immortality.
 –henceforth you are no longer living flesh!
 You are of granite, wrapped in a vague dread,
 Slumbering in some Sahara’s hazy sands,
 And ancient Sphinx lost to a careless world,
 Forgotten on the map, whose haughty mood
 Sings only in the glow of setting (15-24).

Here, ennui, a ubiquitous presence, anesthetizes consciousness and threatens to transform human creatures into living dead who do not put themselves at risk. As Michael Davidson states, “just as Baudelaire’s life is identified with decay and disease, so is his poetry obsessed with spiritual malaise or ennui” (296). This emotional state renders humans oblivious, and deprives them of any capability for commitment or action. Furthermore, it is the counterpart of Dante’s modern vestibule, which includes the indecisive, such as the angels who sided neither with God nor with Lucifer during their revolt. These creatures, whose status is considered to be even more dreadful than that of the sinners of the lower Hell, are the embodiment of the Baudelairean ennui, as they are in a state of paroxysm due to the absence of stakes. In this poem, Baudelaire, rather than directly confronting death, adopted a position of detachment and affirmation.

Similarly, Duncan, in evoking lines from *The Flowers of Evil*, seems to reenact this passive attitude. At this point, let us remember that both Baudelaire and Duncan were affected by fatal diseases. Whereas Baudelaire’s health considerably deteriorated as a result of his syphilitic condition, Duncan developed a cancer that led to a kidney failure. These illnesses may partly explain the tone of these poems. In “Towards his Malaise,” Duncan yearns for the ground of his own writing, a ground that eventually threatens to disappear in an abyss of images, sounds and references which place emphasis on the overlappings with Baudelaire’s text. This can be perceived towards the end of the poem, where Duncan points to the “Muse of Man’s Stupidities” and “the endlessness/of a relentless distaste.” According to Palmer, these lines can be read in terms of the atmosphere encountered in Baudelaire’s “Spleen” (13). As Blanchot maintains in “Baudelaire’s Failure,” “if analogy and

⁵ The long-lasting notion of “open form” is pushed to its extremes by Duncan, who claimed the poem to be a site full of possibilities. Poetry is a force field of influences similar to the Wagnerian conception of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or a total work striving for a synthesis of the arts. Likewise, a Duncan poem, enlarges its boundaries, and assimilates the visual effects of the collage or of the montage, as it allows for the inclusion of a diversity of materials such as quotations, magazines, recipes, monologues, and myths, to name a few. Of special interest for Duncan are those sources belonging to Christian mystical tradition and occultism, as they appeal to imagination and the freedom of poetic activity.

metaphors are the essential resources of the being who imagines, it is because in metaphors and images he finds at once this movement of surpassing that carries him toward something else... and also the true meaning of each object as it sends back to him the experience of everything" (139). Hence, Duncan retrieves Baudelaire's textual references and language not only to mimic in his work the rhetoric of *The Flowers of Evil*, but also to indicate that he is a victim of the same vital condition, that is, of ennui.

If that state is indicative of the numbness and the passivity of consciousness, a contagious or degenerative disease distinguishes itself by its ability to vigorously expand and pervade the membranes of the body. In such incursion and colonization, the organism is endangered, and confronted face to face with death. This sense of malaise and sickness prevails all throughout "To Master Baudelaire," but it is self-evident "In Blood's Domaine," where AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases proliferate, especially since Duncan's friends were diagnosed with these illnesses. "In Blood's Domaine" carries in itself the sense of infection manifested in Baudelaire's "The Muse Sickened" and "A Voyage to Cythera." The first poem depicts a sickly muse who, rather than inspiring in the poet "the scent of health" and "great thoughts," is seized by "dream visions," "madness and horror." The muse's disturbing condition, then, is marked out in her vital organs (eyes and skin), which contain and reflect her despair. This muse, deprived of the vitality symbolized by blood, has also lost her ability to "think great thoughts the whole day." She seems to be suffering through a melancholy state which is even affecting her health. Baudelaire refers to mythology to cure that physical and spiritual sickness, and thus he suggests a return to the myth, rather than to Christian religiosity. Hence, gods such as Apollo and Pan are called on as an antidote to the disease of the muse. Apollo is known as the god of light and the sun, truth and prophecy, medicine and healing, music, poetry and the arts, among others. He is the patron of the Delphi Oracle and as such, he can predict the future. Interestingly enough, he is also endowed with medical faculties, and thus has the ability to cure. Baudelaire, then, is asking for Apollo's help so that the muse's deteriorated health can be revitalized. The other god appealed to in the poem is Pan, whose goat-like appearance allies him with the forces of nature. He is also believed to have musical skills, as he is depicted playing the flute. By naming him, Baudelaire seems to point to the healing properties of music, properties that could combat the muse's decline. Hence, the muse, also a synonym for inspiration, is endangered, and potentially recovered by way of Apollo and Pan.

Maybe more explicitly, "A Voyage to Cythera," based on Nerval's *Voyage en Orient*, can be read as a warning against the devastating effects of sexual pleasure. The poem acts out a supreme state of joy that takes control of the imagination of the poet, who hopes to arrive at a land of pleasure and reverie:

My heart was like a bird which fluttered joyously
And glided free among the tackle and the lines!
The vessel rolled along under a cloudless sky—
An angle, tipsy, gay, full of the radiant sun (1-4).

Here, the glittering and radiant day is expressive of the rapture the poet is experiencing in his voyage towards the unknown island, and which runs parallel to the excess of inebriation.

However, towards the end of the poem, the speaker is disheartened by the discovery of a land of death, rather than a land of love and pleasure. This loss of life is accentuated by the presence of a corpse in a state of decomposition. The violence inflicted upon the dead body, on which the birds and panthers are feasting, is exhibited as such a grotesque spectacle that the voice of the poem claims to “have suffered all the stabs of all the killer crows.” Here, the corpse bears resemblance to the figure of the victim in ritualistic practices that Bataille points to in his essay “From the Stone Age to Jacques Prévert.” In the sacrifice, the victim is cut off from any functional practice, and the distance between the self and the other is effaced. That is, to the extent that the object is threatened to be annihilated, thrown into the abyss of nothingness, personal sensibility is touched. The distance between subject and object is obliterated only to be dissolved in the same spirit. What is at issue is the awakening of sensibility. Only by experiencing the painful loss of the other, will humans be able to recapture their original emotions. Likewise, in Baudelaire’s lines, there is a moment of suspension that allows the poet and the corpse to partake in the same experience. That is, the poet empathizes with and merges into the lifeless body devoured by crows and panthers. Hence, despite the initial promise of physical enjoyment and love, the body, invaded by the contagious disease of desire, suffers an irrevocable collapse:

Venus, in your black isle nothing is found erect
 But the symbolic tree whereon my image hung.
 Ah, Lord! I beg of you the courage and the strength
 To love without disgust my carcass at its core! (57-60).

The sensuous pleasures of the body, here, threaten to turn against the self, and thus degradation, decay, and an eventual death are at stake. In *Cythera*, there is nothing “erect,” which accounts for the absence of sexual desire that the rotten corpse has generated.

Bearing those poems in mind, Duncan, “In Blood’s Domaine,” seems to correlate the increasing spread of the infection with the syphilitic condition of Baudelaire. In addition to the omnipresent allusion to the French writer, Duncan refers to Nietzsche, Rilke and Swift perhaps to universalize the aloofness caused by degenerative diseases, and thus to empathize with all those historical figures that shared his same process of decline. As Duncan suggests, an illness radiates life to the full, given that it enacts the dynamic energy and violence of a military attack:

there are
 spirochete invasions that eat at the sublime envelope, not alien, but familiars
 Life in the dis-ease radiates invisibilities devour my star (7-9).

This “dis-ease” is symptomatic of unease, of lack of repose, but also of poor health. In that sense, the disease invades and ends up devouring the body, even the “sap” and the “marrow” of the bones. Duncan’s poetry can be seen as reenacting the therapeutic effects that Artaud wished for his theater. For the French playwright, the idea of acting lies in the dramatization of existential dilemmas. His performances strive to push the actor and the onlooker to states of agitation, so that the sickness of living and the suffering of humankind

can be exhibited on the stage. Theatrical representation, which echoes those rituals of primitive societies, provides a collective cure or catharsis which banishes evil from society. For Artaud, theater must prove human conflicts, and the body, posited as the focal point, has the mission to project those antagonistic emotions to the outside. Similarly, for Duncan nothing can be compared to the body when it comes to the exhibition of torment, and the disease is the utmost expression of that violence. Its force and eruption endangers the consistency of the organism, just as the diffusion of French sentences destabilize the coherence of the text: “*Meurs, vieux lâche! Il est trop tard!*” The poem, then, is infected by way of the use of the French language, and allusions to Rilke’s “*Jeder Engel ist schrecklich*” (“Every angel is horrible”) and Baudelaire’s *Ennui* (Davidson 297):

What Angel, what Gift of the Poem, has brought into my body
this sickness of living? Into the very Gloria of Life’s theme and variations
my own counterpart of Baudelaire’s terrible *Ennuie*? (53-55).

Baudelaire as the “Angel Syphilis” and Duncan as the “Angel Cancer” illustrate the destructive force of the illness in the body, which reaches a state of paralysis, once it wastes away. By virtue of this medical terminology, the text disintegrates, and thus a poetics of infection emerges out of an organism in ruins. As Palmer states, “we have arrived at the heart of darkness, where Form has been infected by “scarlet eruptions,” and where another language prevails” (13). Likewise, Duncan’s *ennui*, according to Oudart, stands for a feminized version—*Ennuie*—as a voiceless “e” is added at the end of the word in all his manuscripts so as to graphically emphasize the transformation undergone by the Baudelairean word. In so doing, he may be questioning both its morphological and sexual condition. The visual arrangement of the page, an overt influence of Jess Collins, also challenges the traditional organization of the poem. Spacing, typography, and lineation point to the complexity of human and aesthetic experience, and frustrate the ability of the eye to follow a coherent order. These devices point to the ravaging effects of the disease, which are inscribed within the text, and are an extension of the body’s gradual process of decline:

Lovely then
that Death come to carry you from the moment of this splendor
that bursts the cells of your body like a million larvae triumphant
comes to life in the fruit All the spreading seeds, the viral array
taking over flesh as the earth it is

scarlet eruptions (56-61).

The page is the site for the contestation of multiple vectors, writings and voices, in that both line breaks and polyvocality interrogate the stability of margins and the notions of “the totalized authority of other texts” (Davidson 299). They may as well be considered to enact those “scarlet eruptions” of the disease within the body, a body that is ultimately torn apart and desolate.

“To Master Baudelaire” and “In Blood’s Domaine” are infected by the sickly aesthetics of *The Flowers of Evil*, and as such radiate the aura of Baudelaire’s poetics of malaise. In the quest for the ground in these poems, we run the risk of plummeting into the void of

nothingness, of an endless intertextuality made out of continuous references to Baudelaire. Ennui, then, is the abyss, an existential loss, the boredom and “sickness of living” which evokes the idea of “Vastness. Voluptuous. Desolation. The Baudelairean words” perceived in Duncan’s poem entitled “Among his Words.” Here, the ennui, abyss or the “Ab-grund,” in Heidegger’s terminology, “is the nihilating of all ground (of all prop, all protections all measures, all goals) and it *is thus* en-ownment unto the open of the refusal and, therefore, is *of the sway* of be-ing, but it is never the same as be-ing because it is never the foundational fullness. Nothing is, above all, not the fullness because it is thus no *ground*” (83). That is, the “Ab-grund,” entails the saying of a truth which shifts away from the emphasis on grounding. Duncan’s dialogue with Baudelaire seems to throw the reader into the abyss, unveiling the true meaning of Being as such. As Duncan remarks, “This immensity, these shadowy profundities. Giddy extensions into Green. Vertigo” are nothing but the “Ab-grund” which opens up, and glimmers in the *poiētic*,⁶ not poetic, act of recalling *The Flowers of Evil*.

This remembrance is even more evident in “The Face,” where Baudelaire’s memory is realized by way of mirrorings and reflections with which Duncan seemingly identifies:

Be still, whatever deep onward current flowing, steady
your face entirely receptive, my soul, to mirror this presence
needs, as if the eternal hold of a breath to sound your depth
needs hear this dark glassy clear surface waiting upon
reflections... (1-5).

Even if Duncan thinks that Baudelaire’s image is unattainable, his soul is receptive to the mirroring in an instant of exchange and conversation about life and creative imagination. Attentive listening is needed so as to perceive the flowing presence in a state of repose, allowing him to capture the face of the other in a static moment of reflection. The image, like the synaesthesia, modulates the perceptual processes of the psyche, and reproduces the simultaneous acts of seeing, listening, and speaking. In this manner, the text is reworked by the omnipresence of Baudelaire. The mutable face of the other returns in its radiance and reveals the “mystery of person.” Duncan, then, searches his soul in his reflecting on the other’s countenance. Rather than as an object, “this shadow of an other face” is there as an actual giving which turns towards our eye, allowing us to see the world as it is from the other’s perspective.

In “To Master Baudelaire” and “In Blood’s Domaine,” then, Duncan turns his eyes toward the life and work of the poet of *The Flowers of Evil*, with whom he builds bridges so as to convey the tone of dejection and also his “sickness of living.” Of special importance is the function of intertextuality, as it helps Duncan construct a poetic discourse rooted in the notions of contagion. Hence, Duncan transfers poem titles, quotations, French words and biographical data onto his own work so as to recreate the effects of malaise appreciated

⁶ Etymologically, *poiēsis* comes from the Greek and means “to make,” which gave place to the word poetry as we know it today. In the *Symposium*, by Plato, Diotima describes it as the bringing forth in the quest for beauty. Martin Heidegger in his lectures on “The Origin of the Work of Art” (1935) and “The Question Concerning Technology” (1953) also approaches this notion in terms of the bringing-forth of concealment into unconcealment, also known as truth in the Greek sense of *alētheia*.

in *The Flowers of Evil*. The polysemy generated from these appropriations, translations, and adaptations may pave the way for rethinking the possibility of a homoerotic discourse which insists on the idea of poetic infection. To be sure, just as the desire for the other may expose the organism to the threat of contagion, the question of a polysemous poetic language could possibly help reflect on the transmission of the turmoil and instability of the infected body onto the levels of the text. For that reason, Duncan's *Groundwork: In the Dark* can be a significant case study not only because of the prevalence of both poets' fatal illnesses, but also because of Duncan's modality of poetic infection, based on the allusions to the French poet's mood, language and work.

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