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Baudelaire's 'Une Charogne'

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In the late 1980s I taught Baudelaire's 'Une Charogne' to a class of first-year students using the Richard Howard translation of *Les Fleurs du mal* (1982). Howard was a Distinguished Visiting Professor at the institution (one of them, anyway) where I was un-gainfully employed: The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, a progressive professional college for would-be artists, architects, and engineers located in the neighbourhood of New York City formerly known as the Lower East Side but now called, for reasons of real estate gentrification, the East Village. The year was likely 1987 or soon thereafter because 1987 was the year the Pet Shop Boys released their synth-pop hit 'I Want a Dog'. The dog the Pet Shop Boys wanted was a Chihuahua and Richard Howard had a little dog that he sometimes carried around with him, perhaps so that when he got back to his small flat, he could hear somebody bark (as the song goes). Naturally, whenever Howard would sit outside my office, I would play 'I Want a Dog' at very high volume on a boom box (it was the '80s, after all).

I mention this anecdote because it perhaps explains why I cannot help but think of the dead animal in Baudelaire's 'Une Charogne' as a dog, though probably not a Chihuahua; a mongrel, rather. Only recently has it come to my attention that not everyone understands the animal as a dog; other carrion candidates include the homely cow and the workaday horse, neither of which strikes me as remotely plausible. To those readers who advocate for either the bovine or equine identities, I say, 'What? You can't be serious! Have you never heard of the doctrine of correspondences? What about Richard Howard and his little dog? What about the Pet Shop Boys?'

A dog, then: but when teaching the poem, I always found it best not to suggest the canine identity of the carrion right away, not least because the poem itself defers that literal

possibility until the reference to what Howard calls 'an anxious bitch' (une chienne inquiète), another (?) dog that had been feeding on the dead animal (it's a dog-eat-dog world, after all) just before being interrupted by the lovers out for a romantic stroll 'on that lovely summer day' (Ce beau matin d'été si doux). I say 'lovers' because the diction in the first line of the poem evokes the convention of Romantic recollection: 'Remember, my love, the thing we saw' (Rappelez-vous l'objet que nous vîmes, mon âme). The romantic epithet that Howard renders 'my love' is actually 'my soul', which raises the possibility that the poet is out for a stroll alone, talking to himself, or rather, to his soul. That prospect is heightened in the tenth stanza:

> – Et pourtant vous serez semblable à cette ordure,
> À cette horrible infection,
> Étoile de mes yeux, soleil de ma nature,
> Vous, mon ange et ma passion!

The last two lines revert to the romantic 'soul' language of the opening: 'You, the light of my life, the sun | and moon and stars of my love!' as Howard has it. His translation of the first two lines of this quatrain is a bit too abstract: 'Yet you will come to this offence, | this horrible decay'; moreover, 'decay' in place of 'infection' – to my mind, at least – misses the sense of animation earlier in the poem, where death fairly seethes with life (*decay* seems a passive state, *infection* active). But Howard's omission of 'semblable' is really problematic. We know how important that word is because of 'Au Lecteur', where it signals the kinship of poet and reader on the basis of their shared sinfulness. The word here also signals correspondence between 'ordure' and 'âme': both are infected with something deadly, or rather deathly – the carrion suffers from decomposition, the soul from sin. The soul itself, it seems, is *une charogne*.

Like *âme*, the grammatical gender of *charogne* is feminine, but the gender correspondence goes beyond grammar, *charogne* being Parisian street slang for 'slut', as in the Aristide Bruant chanson 'Crâneuse' ['The Braggart'], where *charogne* appears alongside more familiar whorish epithets such as *salope* and *putain* (the song also includes the epithet *vache d'métier*, 'professional cow', which might force me to let go of my canine compulsion). The *charogne* meta-whore

Baudelaire has going is impressive, to say the least: the carrion creature is on a bed (of stones), legs in the air, very like a woman in a state of sexual arousal ('comme une femme lubrique'), or, possibly, like a woman giving birth – to decay. Howard translates 'larves' as maggots, which is fair enough, given that there are flies buzzing about the dead animal. Baudelaire's reference to 'a curious music' (une étrange musique) made by the maggots gnawing away always prompted a moment of Romantic recollection of my own in the classroom, because one of my most cherished childhood memories is hearing the faint whispering sound that maggots make at the bottom of a battered metal garbage bin when they are at their disgusting, unending repast. (The memory antedates the era of today's plastic garbage bags – I refer to a time when offal in a garbage bin was truly awful, so I sorrow for children today who will never know such memories, *hélas*!)

A fair definition of decadent poetry might be corruption recollected in tranquility. That, at least, seems to be the case with 'Une Charogne', which ends by reprising the tired trope of the poet making his belovèd immortal through his art, but with a sick, Baudelairean twist. How sick depends on whether 'mon âme' is 'my love' or 'my soul'. If addressed to a woman whose destiny is the same as any old *charogne*, the poet's assurance that his art will preserve 'the sacred essence' and 'the form' (la forme et l'essence divine) of his 'rotted loves' (mes amours décomposés), that pretty much buries the Romantic tradition once and for all. But if it is the soul itself that is left to rot while the poetry lives on, that undermines much more – the Christian faith, in fact.

Either way, such sicknesses are things that first-year students absolutely need to understand and appreciate. That particular Baudelairean dog, to vary a folksy American adage, will definitely hunt.