



The Evolution of Modern French Literature: From The Renaissance to the Present Day

Dear students,

During next week's taster session, we will be looking at three poems by Baudelaire from his only collection of poetry, *Les Fleurs du mal* (*The Flowers of Evil*). Please read these before the session, and while doing so, bear in mind the prompt questions listed below. The purpose of these questions is to provide a starting point for our discussion in class and to help you approach the poems more critically.

Collectively, these poems seem to me to typify the aesthetic advanced in *Les Fleurs du mal*. 'Correspondences' ('Correspondances') conveys, with quite startling vivacity, the poet's melancholy search for the Infinite, whereas 'The Giantess' ('La Géante') and 'A Carcass' ('Une Charogne') indicate two examples of his sexualised, and still quite scandalous, poetic imagination. The last of these can certainly turn the stomach.

A note on translation

Alongside the original French, I have included two English translations of 'Une Charogne'. Have a look at these and consider how different the poem can sound depending on its translation. I would also recommend looking at other translations for comparison - you can find various estimable translations here:

- [A Carcass \(Une Charogne\)](#)
- [The Giantess \(La Géante\)](#)
- [Correspondences \(Correspondances\)](#)

Questions for discussion:

1. Consider the form and metre of these poems - what verse form does Baudelaire use in each, and how does this impact our reading of the poems?
2. How did you react to 'A Carcass' ('Une Charogne') - were you disgusted by it, or amused?
3. What sense do we have when 'A Carcass' is taken in connection with 'Correspondences' and 'The Giantess', of the overall poetic vision that Baudelaire is forming?

Sincerely,
Adam



FRENCH
(ORIGINAL)

La Géante

Du temps que la Nature en sa verve puissante
Concevait chaque jour des enfants monstrueux,
J'eusse aimé vivre auprès d'une jeune géante,
Comme aux pieds d'une reine un chat voluptueux.

J'eusse aimé voir son corps fleurir avec son âme
Et grandir librement dans ses terribles jeux;
Deviner si son coeur couve une sombre flamme
Aux humides brouillards qui nagent dans ses yeux;

Parcourir à loisir ses magnifiques formes;
Ramper sur le versant de ses genoux énormes,
Et parfois en été, quand les soleils malsains,

Lasse, la font s'étendre à travers la campagne,
Dormir nonchalamment à l'ombre de ses seins,
Comme un hameau paisible au pied d'une montagne.

– *Les Fleurs du mal*, Charles Baudelaire



ENGLISH
(TRANSLATED BY
ROY CAMPBELL, 1952)

The Giantess

Of old when Nature, in her verve defiant,
Conceived each day some birth of monstrous mien,
I would have lived near some young female giant
Like a voluptuous cat beside a queen;

To see her body flowering with her soul
Freely develop in her mighty games,
And in the mists that through her gaze would roll
Guess that her heart was hatching sombre flames;

To roam her mighty contours as I please,
Ramp on the cliff of her tremendous knees,
And in the solstice, when the suns that kill

Make her stretch out across the land and rest,
To sleep beneath the shadow of her breast
Like a hushed village underneath a hill.

For more translations of 'La Géante,' visit <https://fleursdumal.org/poem/118>



FRENCH
(ORIGINAL)

Une Charogne

Rappelez-vous l'objet que nous vîmes, mon âme,
Ce beau matin d'été si doux:
Au détour d'un sentier une charogne infâme
Sur un lit semé de cailloux,

Les jambes en l'air, comme une femme lubrique,
Brûlante et suant les poisons,
Ouvrait d'une façon nonchalante et cynique
Son ventre plein d'exhalaisons.

Le soleil rayonnait sur cette pourriture,
Comme afin de la cuire à point,
Et de rendre au centuple à la grande Nature
Tout ce qu'ensemble elle avait joint;

Et le ciel regardait la carcasse superbe
Comme une fleur s'épanouir.
La puanteur était si forte, que sur l'herbe
Vous crûtes vous évanouir.

Les mouches bourdonnaient sur ce ventre putride,
D'où sortaient de noirs bataillons
De larves, qui coulaient comme un épais liquide
Le long de ces vivants haillons.

Tout cela descendait, montait comme une vague
Ou s'élançait en pétillant;
On eût dit que le corps, enflé d'un souffle vague,
Vivait en se multipliant.

Et ce monde rendait une étrange musique,
Comme l'eau courante et le vent,
Ou le grain qu'un vanneur d'un mouvement rythmique
Agite et tourne dans son van.

Les formes s'effaçaient et n'étaient plus qu'un rêve,
Une ébauche lente à venir
Sur la toile oubliée, et que l'artiste achève
Seulement par le souvenir.



FRENCH
(ORIGINAL)

Derrière les rochers une chienne inquiète
Nous regardait d'un oeil fâché,
Espionnant le moment de reprendre au squelette
Le morceau qu'elle avait lâché.

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

Oui! telle vous serez, ô la reine des grâces,
Après les derniers sacrements,
Quand vous irez, sous l'herbe et les floraisons grasses,
Moisir parmi les ossements.

Alors, ô ma beauté! dites à la vermine
Qui vous mangera de baisers,
Que j'ai gardé la forme et l'essence divine
De mes amours décomposés!

— *Les Fleurs du mal*, Charles Baudelaire



ENGLISH
(TRANSLATED BY
F.P. STURM, 1919)

The Corpse ('Une Charogne')

Remember, my Beloved, what thing we met
By the roadside on that sweet summer day;
There on a grassy couch with pebbles set,
A loathsome body lay.

The wanton limbs stiff-stretched into the air,
Steaming with exhalations vile and dank,
In ruthless cynic fashion had laid bare
The swollen side and flank.

On this decay the sun shone hot from heaven
As though with chemic heat to broil and bum,
And unto Nature all that she had given
A hundredfold return.

The sky smiled down upon the horror there
As on a flower that opens to the day;
So awful an infection smote the air,
Almost you swooned away.

The swarming flies hummed on the putrid side,
Whence poured the maggots in a darkling stream,
That ran along these tatters of life's pride
With a liquescent gleam.

And like a wave the maggots rose and fell,
The murmuring flies swirled round in busy strife:
It seemed as though a vague breath came to swell
And multiply with life

The hideous corpse. From all this living world
A music as of wind and water ran,
Or as of grain in rhythmic motion swirled
By the swift winnower's fan.

And then the vague forms like a dream died out,
Or like some distant scene that slowly falls
Upon the artist's canvas, that with doubt
He only half recalls.



ENGLISH
(TRANSLATED BY
F.P. STURM, 1919)

A homeless dog behind the boulders lay
And watched us both with angry eyes forlorn,
Waiting a chance to come and take away
The morsel she had torn.

And you, even you, will be like this drear thing,
A vile infection man may not endure;
Star that I yearn to! Sun that lights my spring!
O passionate and pure!

Yes, such will you be, Queen of every grace!
When the last sacramental words are said;
And beneath grass and flowers that lovely face
Moulders among the dead.

Then, O Belovèd, whisper to the worm
That crawls up to devour you with a kiss,
That I still guard in memory the dear form
Of love that comes to this!



ENGLISH
(TRANSLATED BY
JACQUES LECLERCQ, 1958)

Carrion ('Une Charogne')

Darling, do you recall that thing we found
("A lovely summer day!" you said)
That noisome carcass where the path swung round
A sprawling pebble-covered bed.

Its legs raised like a whore's in lubric play,
It burned, oozing rank fetors there,
Shameless and nonchalant, it offered day
Its belly. Poisons filled the air.

The sun beat down on this putrescent mold
As if to fry it to a turn,
To give great Nature back one hundredfold
All she had gathered in her urn.

The skies watched that proud carcass, lax or taut,
Bloom like a flowery mass.
So pungent was the stench, my love, you thought
To swoon away upon the grass.

Horseflies buzzed loud over this putrid belly,
Whence sallied column and battalion
Of sable maggots, flowing like a mucose jelly,
Over this live tatterdemalion.

Waves seemed to rise and fall over this mass,
Spurting with crepitation,
As though this corpse, filled with breaths of gas,
Lived by multiplication.

This world uttered a curious melody,
Like waters, wind, or grains of wheat
That winnowers keep stirring rhythmically
In the broad baskets at their feet.

The forms, fading into a dream, grew fainter;
Here was a sketch of misty tone
On a forgotten canvas which the painter
Completes from memory alone.



ENGLISH
(TRANSLATED BY
JACQUES LECLERCQ, 1958)

Hiding behind the rocks, an anxious bitch
Stood, watching us with angry eye,
Poised to regain the olid morsel which,
Hearing us come, she had laid by.

– Yet shall you be like this ordurous blight,
You, too, shall rot in just such fashion,
Star of my eyes, sun of my soul's delight,
Aye, you, my angel and my passion.

Such you, O queen of graces, in the hours,
When the last sacrament is said,
That bear you under rich sods and lush flower
To molder with the moldering dead.

Then, O my beauty! Tell such worms as will
Kiss you in ultimate coition
That I have kept the form and essence of
My love in its decomposition.



FRENCH
(ORIGINAL)

Correspondances

La Nature est un temple où de vivants piliers
Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles;
L'homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles
Qui l'observent avec des regards familiers.

Comme de longs échos qui de loin se confondent
Dans une ténébreuse et profonde unité,
Vaste comme la nuit et comme la clarté,
Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent.

Il est des parfums frais comme des chairs d'enfants,
Doux comme les hautbois, verts comme les prairies,
— Et d'autres, corrompus, riches et triomphants,

Ayant l'expansion des choses infinies,
Comme l'ambre, le musc, le benjoin et l'encens,
Qui chantent les transports de l'esprit et des sens.

– *Les Fleurs du mal*, Charles Baudelaire



ENGLISH
(TRANSLATED BY
ROY CAMPBELL, 1952)

Correspondences

Nature's a temple where each living column,
At times, gives forth vague words. There Man advances
Through forest-groves of symbols, strange and solemn,
Who follow him with their familiar glances.

As long-drawn echoes mingle and transfuse
Till in a deep, dark unison they swoon,
Vast as the night or as the vault of noon —
So are commingled perfumes, sounds, and hues.

There can be perfumes cool as children's flesh,
Like fiddles, sweet, like meadows greenly fresh.
Rich, complex, and triumphant, others roll

With the vast range of all non-finite things —
Amber, musk, incense, benjamin, each sings
The transports of the senses and the soul.

For more translations of 'Correspondances,' visit <https://fleursdumal.org/poem/103>

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