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Baudelaire's Graves

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Despite my avowed rationalism, nothing could induce me to spend a night in a cemetery, but during the daylight hours, I am the one haunting the dead. I am, I have come to understand, a taphophile. To my mind, graves are a great way to get to know people, and when I teach Baudelaire, I often introduce students to his work through his graves. I say 'graves' in the plural because he has two, though one is strictly speaking only a cenotaph in the sense that it is an empty memorial with no body present.

I start my introduction with poor Charles' actual burial site: the Aupick family plot near the western wall of the Montparnasse cemetery in Paris. Here, he is reunited with his mother, at least, and this is where poetic pilgrims leave their tributes: selected quotations (the recommendation to be drunk seems to be a perennial favorite, and strikes a chord with students, too), personal testimonials, and assorted objects (flowers, candles, metro tickets). This photo from 2011 shows a sample of the appreciations that are left in many languages.



Fig. 1: Tributes to Baudelaire.

But next I talk about how Baudelaire was so unhappy with having to live with his military stepfather, the General Aupick, even posthumously (a burial plot is in perpetuity, after all), that many years after his death in 1867, his friends clubbed together to buy him a second residence as far away as possible, clear on the other side of the cemetery, tucked up against the eastern wall. Here, in 1892, a memorial was dedicated to the legacy of Baudelaire, whose work resonated so loudly at the fin de siècle. It consists of a sculpture by José de Charmoy representing 'l'ennui' in the form of the bust of a floppy-haired man hunched over, his chin resting despondently on his hands, looking down from atop a column, while a prehistoric-looking bat is spread out below him. The bat is dissolving into a skeleton, while a life-size sculpture of the body of Baudelaire in his winding sheet is laid out below. This macabre ensemble serves as an excellent introduction to the work of a poet who thought that ennui was the greatest evil, and who embraced the idea of death as eternal rest, a moment of release rehearsed every evening with the arrival of nightfall, a welcome respite from daily pain.



Fig. 2: Baudelaire and 'l'ennui'.