

*volupté*

INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF DECADENCE STUDIES

Volume 4, Issue 1

Summer 2021

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**ISSN:** 2515-0073

**Date of Acceptance:** 1 June 2021

**Date of Publication:** 21 June 2021

**Citation:** Maria Scott, 'The Toy and the Cemetery', *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 4.1 (2021), 195–97.

**DOI:** 10.25602/GOLD.v.v4i1.1537.g1650

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The Toy and the Cemetery

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Baudelaire is not to everybody's taste, but he does touch a lot of people. I remember visiting his grave in Montparnasse, many years ago. I realized at the last minute that I very much wanted to leave a gift but discovered that only the only flowers I could buy nearby were in the form of lavish funeral wreaths. I didn't have a lot of money, and after all Baudelaire had been dead for quite a long time; also, unlike him, I had never been of a naturally extravagant disposition. As a last resort, I went into a shop beside the graveyard and put a coin into a dispensing machine full of cheap toys in plastic capsules. This seemed an appropriate enough gift for a man who, in both his essay 'A Philosophy of Toys' and the prose poem 'The Toy of the Poor', recommends the supposedly innocent and amusing pastime of distributing cheap, mass-produced toys to street children for the sheer pleasure of seeing their eyes widen before they scamper off like cats with their prizes. I felt sure he would not feel slighted by my gift. I felt even more certain of this when, with some relief and not a little dark laughter, I found inside my plastic egg a set of tiny bat wings and fangs. This seemed a fitting gift for a poet who liked to imagine sexual relations with vampires. Over I went to lay my shabby but amusing tribute on his grave.

Baudelaire wrote often about corpses. They are regularly portrayed, in his verse poetry, as food for worms, vermin, birds, maggots. He wrote about the dead bodies of women he loved, of the corpses of men and women he did not know, of animated skeletons, and of his own dead body. Dead bodies, in his poetry, rarely seem entirely dead. In one of his prose poems, 'Laquelle est la vraie?', the narrator stands at the freshly filled grave of an idealized woman, when a very different version of the same woman materializes before him; the narrator stamps his foot so hard in refusal of this hysteric's claim to be his beloved, that his leg becomes buried in 'the grave of the ideal'. In another prose poem, 'Le Tir et le Cimetière', a man visits a graveyard abuzz with the sounds and sensations of life and hears a voice from below the ground: it tells him that death is

the only truth. Baudelaire's grave, as a result, seemed an impossible place: how could someone so conscious, in life, of death, and who so often wrote about the endurance of consciousness after death, now be devoid, in death, of all consciousness?

The first thing that struck me, on seeing Baudelaire's final resting place, was the relatively small space accorded to him on the gravestone: he was described in two lines, merely as the stepson of Jacques Aupick. Below these lines was the name of his mother, given as 'Caroline Archenbaut Defayes'. He loved his mother very much and would no doubt have been glad at the thought that his remains would spend eternity alongside hers. She had seven lines. Above both of their names, however, dominating both, was that of the General Jacques Aupick: ten lines. Aupick was a military man who became a well-known and respected statesman later in life: an ambassador and senator under Napoleon III's Second Empire. He disapproved of his stepson's choices in life, and Baudelaire, in turn, had little love for his stepfather; he is said to have called for his fellow insurgents, in February 1848, to shoot the General Aupick. The injustice of his posthumous tethering to the detested stepfather, and the insult of the gravestone's implied hierarchy, cut me to the quick.

But there is a twist to this story (as so often in Baudelaire's writing, though usually in the other direction), because piled high on this grave were fresh bouquets of flowers, often accompanied by cards. Someone had left a beautiful silver-on-blue handwritten version of 'À une passante', a poem that tells of a fleeting meeting of eyes on a crowded street, and which speculates about a connection that may or may not defy death. During his lifetime, Baudelaire only intermittently found the understanding that he craved, but he has certainly found it since his death, to the extent that such a finding is possible after death.

Baudelaire is not known for his sense of humour, but he was and remains very funny. There is one passage in his literary criticism that never fails to make me laugh. It is in his 1861 essay on Théodore de Banville, the Parnassian poet and generally luckier-in-life friend of Baudelaire. The relationship between the two men was warm, though no doubt somewhat strained

by the fact that one of Baudelaire's mistresses, Marie Daubrun, had recently left him for Banville. In a passage from the essay that discusses Banville's vision of his own afterlife, he notes that any hint of rot or decay would travesty the poet's grand ideas about himself. He goes on to quote Banville's lyrical evocation of his place at an eternal banquet, dressed in purple, drinking nectar, and seated beside the Renaissance poet Pierre Ronsard, being served by feminine forms more beautiful than any physical body could ever be. 'J'aime cela', observes Baudelaire, tongue firmly planted in cheek: 'I consider this love of luxury, reaching beyond the grave, to be a mark and proof of grandeur. I am touched by the marvels and majesties that the poet decrees in favour of whosoever touches the lyre' ('Sur mes contemporains: Théodore de Banville', my translation).

Banville, I suspect, would not have approved of the plastic bat wings. Baudelaire, I hope, might just have been tickled.