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Letter to the Editors That Doggone Baudelaire

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In the special Baudelaire ‘Appreciations’ section of the summer 2021 issue of *Volupté* I recounted my experience teaching ‘Une Charogne’, first published in 1857.¹ The fact that the poem escaped the attention of the censors who banned six poems from the first edition of *Les Fleurs du mal* perhaps argues in favour of certain obscurities (the censors could not ban things they could not understand), such as the one that I focused on in my appreciation, namely, the animal identity of the carrion creature whose lively decay Baudelaire describes. I am convinced that ‘une charogne’ must be ‘un chien’ or another ‘chienne’ (a female dog feeds on the carcass), but strictly speaking, I cannot offer hard evidence in support of the interpretation. As near as I can figure, only five dogs wander through *Les Fleurs du mal*. In ‘Hymne à la Beauté’, Destiny is figured as ‘un chien’ that Beauty takes for a walk. In the third ‘Spleen’ poem, ‘ses chiens’ [dogs] divert the young, decrepit spleen-king from ennui as he rules his rainy country. In ‘Le Vin de l’assassin’, the wife-murderer sleeps ‘comme un chien’ [like a dog], a simile meant to suggest that the assassin is free to do as he pleases. In the first section of ‘Abel et Caïn’, Cain is cursed to suffer hunger ‘comme un vieux chien’ [like an old dog]. And then there is ‘une chienne inquiète’ [a worrisome, anxious bitch] gnawing on the carcass in ‘Une Charogne’. Possibly, the dog comparison in ‘Abel et Caïn’ might be used to advance the case that in ‘Une Charogne’ the dead animal is ‘une chienne’ because of the way the tables are turned in the second section of ‘Abel et Caïn’: Abel is now the brother who is cursed, his ‘carrion’ condemned to ‘fatten’ the earth: ‘Ah! race d’Abel, ta charogne | Engraissera le sol fumant!’ [Ah! race of Abel, your carcass | Will fatten the smoking earth]. That dog-carrion, Cain-Abel reversal is a strained connection, to say the least, so the canine identity of the carcass in ‘Une Charogne’ must remain a matter of conjecture, at least for now; however, since my appreciation was published, I have come across a piece of evidence that, at the very least, shows

that I am not the only person to have imagined that ‘une charogne’ might very well be ‘une chienne’.

Everyone knows that the celebrated photographer Nadar (pseudonym of Gaspard-Félix Tournachon) made several compelling, formal studio portraits of Baudelaire and that the two men were on friendly terms. Less well known is Nadar’s work as a skilled caricaturist who used his talents to capture the likenesses of many of those he photographed in drawings as well. One of these caricatures shows Baudelaire walking – or at least standing – in the woods, the words ‘Fleurs du’ at the top left of the drawing (near the right shoulder of the poet) and ‘Mal’ at the bottom right (near the left hand of the figure). The scruffy vegetation suggests that the poet is indeed out of doors, his hands raised as if in alarm over something he has encountered. In the bottom left of the drawing is a dead dog, its legs in the air, as in ‘Une Charogne’ (‘Les jambes en l’air’). There also appear to be a mass of flies swarming over the canine carcass, another detail that chimes with the poem (‘Les mouches bourdonnaient sur ce ventre putride’). The drawing is in the archives of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, bearing this title: ‘Ch. Baudelaire: (caricature, en pied, marchant à côté d’une charogne)’ [Ch. Baudelaire: (caricature, full-length, walking next to a carcass)], the brackets suggesting the title was not given to the work by Nadar himself but is, nevertheless, a fair description of the action the caricature depicts. Indeed, the image could have been used as an illustration for ‘Une Charogne’. Moreover, the fact that Nadar incorporates the title of the collection as a whole into the image suggests that the photographer – or rather, the caricaturist – understood ‘Une Charogne’ as perhaps the one poem that best captures the larger meaning of *Les Fleurs du mal*, dogs and all.

¹ For a translation and the French text of the poem, see Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil*, trans. by James McGowan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 58–63. Further references to Baudelaire poems cited in this letter are to the McGowan edition.



Nadar, 'Ch. Baudelaire: (caricature, en pied, marchant à côté d'une charogne)', date unknown.
Bibliothèque nationale de France, <http://ark.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb42559105t>.