

**Celebrating 200 Years of Baudelaire:
New Translations with an Essay by Peter O’Neill**



In celebration of the 200th anniversary of his birth, we’re happy to share these **poems by Charles Baudelaire, translated by the accomplished poet and translator Peter O’Neil**. The poems are included in the original as well, and they are accompanied by an insightful and provocative essay on the state of contemporary poetry. What better way to celebrate Baudelaire and translations? It’s one of our favorite things to do in September.

There are thousands of ways to celebrate [#TranslationMonth](#). We’ve developed this list of [30 ways to celebrate NTM](#) to get you started, but we’re open to suggestions and encourage you to find your own way to celebrate. You don’t need our permission to celebrate, just as you don’t need anyone’s permission to celebrate National Ice Cream Month in July!

We’d love to hear from you. If you think of a way to celebrate National Translation Month in 2021, email us at nationaltranslationmonth@gmail.com. We’re always open to any collaboration ideas. Find us on Twitter [@TranslateMonth](#), tag us using [#TranslationMonth](#), join our mailing list, submit a translation month event, or like our [Facebook](#) page. And, most importantly, celebrate your favorite authors in translation this September and all year round.

—*Claudia Serea and Loren Kleinman*

Poems by Charles Baudelaire (1821 – 1867)
Translated from French by Peter O'Neil

XXIX.- 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,
Ouvrant d'une façon nonchalante et cynique
Son ventre plein d'exhalsaisons.

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 boudonnaient sur se ventre putride,
D'où sortaient de noirs bataillons
Des larves, qui coulaient comme un épais liquide
Le long de ce vivants haillons.

Tout cela descendait, montait comme un 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 forms 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.

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

- Et pourtant vous serez semblable à cette ordure,

A 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 graces,
Après les derniers scarements,
Quand vous irez, sous l'herbe et les floraisons grasses,
Moisir parmi les ossments.

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

XXXIX. – The Exquisite Cadaver

Remember the ideal object which you discovered
That beautiful summer morning, Dear soul:
By way of the path where you found that exquisite
Cadaver lying on a bed of pebbles,

Her legs in the air, like some old tart,
Burning and stewing in poisons,
Her belly slit, almost nonchantly,
Pouring forth all manner of noxious gasses.

The sun burns down on the decomposing
Body, as if searing a steak,
Rendering back a hundred- fold to Mother Nature,
What she herself had first conjoined.

And the sky looks upon the superb carcass
As it would upon a flower of Evil,
The rigor mortis encroaching to such a point
That the very earth around it has been scorched.

Great Blue Bottles swarm in convoys,
Buzzing out of the gaping cave, Cyclopean...
While a treacle of feasting larvae thickly drip,
Making of the stain a macabre Persian carpet.

The process of decomposition rose before me,
Falling in waves, and which I perceived in a kind of
Pointillism, so that, wave-borne,
The corpse seemed to come alive and multiply before me!

This alternate universe was announced in atonal chords,
And hit me with all the fever of a jungle humidity,
Or, like the sporadic grains, scattered by a winnower,
Whose rhythmic movements spun me in a dervish.

The effaced shapes and forms were as if but a dream
From a preliminary sketch, slow to arrive,
And which the artist, not being able to rely on memory,
Had then to resort to the magnetism of specific photographs.

Behind the rocks an unnerved dog
Looked at us both with a ravenous eye,
Trying to deduce the auspicious minute
When he could rip apart some rotting flesh from the bones.

- And yet, You now would appear to be not so dissimilar to this horror,
This putrid infection,
At one time *Star de mes yeux*,
You my one time, all consuming passion!

Yes! After the last rites have long ago been pronounced upon us,
O You, my once graceful Queen,
When will you now, in your own time,
Wallow with these bones upon the grass?

So, my great Beauty! Whisper then to the vermin
How you will cherish *their* kisses,
While I guard for eternity this sublime image,
Of all of our decomposing Love.

Translator's note

In my opinion, *Une Charogne* is one of the most important poems of the 19th century, as it contains all of its author's ground-breaking aesthetic, and one which our own poor aesthetically challenged century could learn a lot from, and that is the aesthetic of rupture; spleen; disaccord! It is Baudelaire's response, in a sense, to the early Romantics, such as Keats for example, and particularly concerning notions of beauty. Baudelaire, like Mary Shelley and Shakespeare before her, found more engagement in what could be described as the dark horror of existence which had always existed in literature, particularly in writers such as Dante, to whom Dame Francis Yates saw the keys, or genesis, of the Gothic novel—particularly in the last canto of the *Inferno* when Count Ugolino is forced, due to starvation, to eat his own sons locked away in a tower, as he is. However, Baudelaire's genius was to take such an aesthetic and take it into the everyday, and it is in this way that he became totally revolutionary.

Une Charogne is the perfect example of his aesthetic. In the poem, the poet starts off describing a carcass which he has seen rotting on his way home, and which he associates with the former love he had for his girlfriend. The reader, however, is only made aware of this in the very last verse of the poem. The remarkable contrast of topics is so unexpected that even after 160 years, the poem was written in 1859, the poem continues to shock.

The poem typically follows the genre of *memento mori*, however Baudelaire's originality was to apply what were typically rather banal death associated motifs, such as skulls placed alongside everyday fare such as fruit and flowers, and to insert affairs of the flesh, and, of course, the heart!

On a personal level, only readers who have experienced real heartbreak, what the ancient Greeks used to describe as the orphic mysteries, will have any real appreciation of the kind of fantastical act of catharsis that is taking place, how the poet wonderfully evokes his former passion for his beloved, and then inverts Love with its counterpart Hate, thus completely upturning the applecart of feelings for the beloved, which have now been so oppositely transformed into feelings of diabolical hatred and disgust, perhaps more for himself for ever having fallen dupe to such feelings in the first place.

As I said before, anyone who has been in Love and who has then lost out, inevitably by betrayal, will know and feel the very powerful emotions which are driving the poem forward. The poet's dedication and craft at the description of the whole process are what strike one, creating the most incredible impression.

To comment on my transversion. I was helped enormously by using the interviews held by David Sylvester with the twentieth century British painter Francis Bacon. Bacon was a keen reader of Baudelaire, and one who of course follows the French poet's dramatic overhaul of the romantic spirit. One only has to think about Bacon's entire corpus of imagery, the violent palette of colour, the decomposing matter of flesh... the 'smoky bacon' of decomposing Love!

This aesthetic, I find, is in direct contradiction to the flimsy narrative that one finds in the politically correct censor that exists in many so-called literary journals today. The narrative of all inclusivity and sensitivity to Others has reached, I would posit, simply idiotic proportions. What do I mean? Take for example the narrative of *Une Charogne* above. Anybody reading the poem with a half a brain will understand that there is a very definite mask wearing here, on the side of the poet. The diabolical humour is just that, a very nasty joke. But one which is very human. When one has been jilted, the immediate response is to seek revenge. Exact some hate! This is totally being human, and to deny it would be simply perverse. All's fair in love and war. This person betrayed you with another! This person who told you that they loved you forever are now to be found sleeping in the arms of another woman or man.

There is, I would say, no greater pain on this earth than the pain of being abandoned by another. It is, I would say, the hardest possible task for any human being, to accept graciously the loss, and then to move on. It is the instruction of Beckett – to fail, and to fail like no other! Everything now, from this point on, will be mere monochrome. In a sense a travesty. This is the exact sentiment that lies behind *Une Charogne* by Baudelaire. The poet is damned, damned by the Other. And so, he would exact his revenge. And the poet finds it in the poem alone, in its very composition. I would liken this art to extracting puss. It is an act of catharsis. Again, a very Greek notion. Bacon too was a great fan of the ancient Greeks, like Baudelaire.

I have made this point on so many other occasions before, if there is not a little poison in the well there is something rotten in the sweetness of the water. Do NOT be so hypocritical. I have met examples of these so-called high-minded moralists who are always pleading for the case of the Other. Whatever Other they may be invoking. But, at the same time I have seen their own deformed humanity seeping out in the most toxic manner. After all, these so-called saints are merely human too. When they let it all bottle up inside, it is not so pretty when it finally gets out.

Of course, on the philosophical plane the poet has completely sublimated Hegel's dialectic of the Master and Servant which to speak in the terms of his fellow countryman Lacan, albeit coming from an altogether different generation yet whose human fundamentals are

completely the same, he is killing symbolically the Other in the world of the Real, which for Lacan, as for the poet, is entirely symbolic. Baudrillard, perhaps the most Baudelairean of late 20th century French thinkers, was to make of this his unique discourse point, he believed that we had lost our capacity for creating metaphor so enamoured were we with the hyperreal, that is to say the literal living as we do in a completely mediated age where the news is constant, so ever-present. The Hegelian Now repeated ad infinitum! A poet's nightmare. Hence the reason why we are living in a period of atrocious poetry, pure confessional. The so called Spoken Word where the Now is Ever Present!

I AM

The spoken word speaks BEING poetry itself. Such is the utter fallacy.

This is the poetry of idiots.

If you do not kill your enemy symbolically, you will never kill them. Such is the Real. Not reality, but the symbolically Real which for a poet IS the only reality.

Did you never ask yourself where those populist monsters came from?

Take a leaf out of Baudelaire's black book, write your words in Hate, as much as Love. Be the totality that is You. And you will be a better artist, and Human for it.

LIX.- SISINA

Imaginez Diane en galant equipage,
Parcourant les forêts ou battant les halliers,
Cheveux et gorge au vent, s'enivrant de tapage,
Superbe et defiant les meilleurs cavaliers!

Avez-vous vu Théroinge, amante du carnage,
Excitant à l'assaut un peuple sans souliers,
La joue et l'oeil en feu, jouant son personnage,
Et montant, sabre au pong, les royaux escaliers?

Telle la Sisina! Mais la douce guerrière
A l'âme charitable autant que meurtrière;
Son courage, affolé de poudre et de tambours,

Devant les suppliants sait metre bas les armes,
Et son Coeur, ravage par la flame, a toujours,
Pour qui s'en montre digne, un reservoir des larmes.

Wonder Woman

Imagine Diana and her gallant retinue
Charging through the forests bursting through the thickets,
Mane and throat to the wind, drunk on uproar,
Superbly defiant the best riders!

Have you seen *Wonder Woman*, lover of carnage,
Happily defending the down-trodden,
Cheek and eye aflame, enfevered in her role,
Assaulting, sword and shield in hand, the staircase?

Just like Gal Jadot! But the gentle warrior
Is as much a charitable soul as she is a seasoned killer;
Her courage, panicking in the explosions and drums,

Is to know when to put aside weapons before suppliants,
And her heart, ravaged by both fire and pain, is always,
For those who have some dignity, also a reservoir of tears.

Tranversion As Opposed to Translation

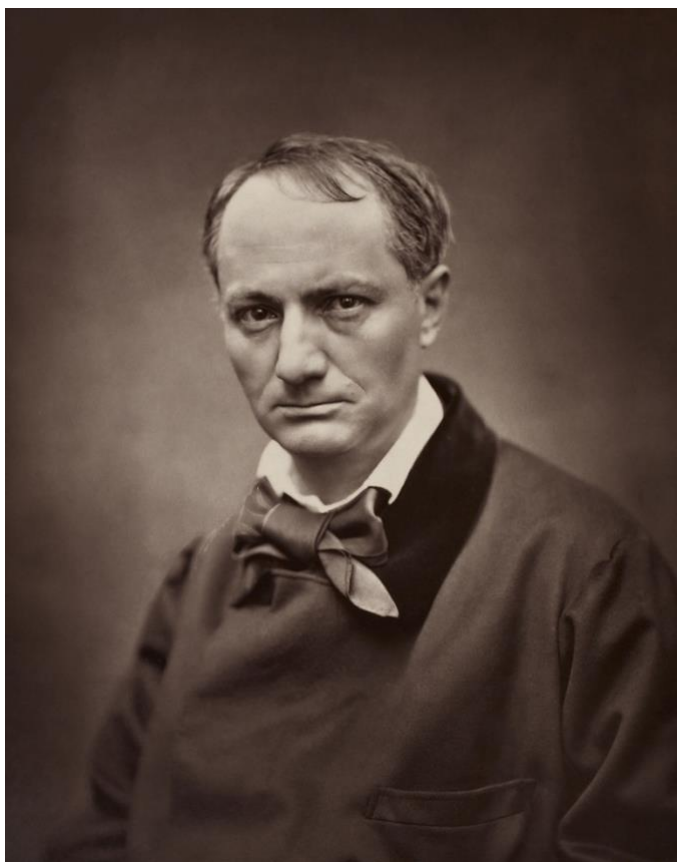
A Note on the Methodology

Take the tranversion of the poem *Sisina* in the cycle of poems published here, and which I have transversed as *Wonder Woman* In place of the name Théroigne which according to my Flammarion notes is a reference to Théroigne de Mericourt (1762 – 1817) who was involved in the French revolution in 1792. The original poem makes reference to a particular incident which happened upon a staircase. This same woman appears in the famous French historian Michelet's *Histoire de la Révolution française*, and she also appears in the poet Lamartine's *Histoire des Girondins*. Baudelaire was inspired apparently by a drawing by the artist Raffet depicting the incident and which was published by Pommier & Pichois. As *this* historical connection would appear to be completely lost on contemporary readers, I have supplanted it with the reference to the movie *Wonder Woman*. You have to choose your battles. I was particularly impressed by the character in the film while watching it with my ten- year old daughter, as I thought it was a very good role model for young girls today. This, I believe, is in direct accordance with the symbolism and underlining metaphor in the poem. Baudelaire's reference is to another actress, Elisa Neri, who played the role of Théroigne, from what I understand, in theatrical productions during Baudelaire's day. The poet came into contact with her through his attachment to Mme Sabatier who was to have such an impact on him. I

am of course referencing the climax of the Marvel movie when Wonder Woman, played by Gal Gadot, confronts Ares the God of War. This is an insight into my working methodology, and reasoning behind the historic changes, so as to show the reader that I am not just arbitrarily making the changes, but I am in fact very sensitively adjusting the historic personages, or characters, so that a contemporary reader may be able to have a greater appreciation of what Baudelaire was trying to achieve. Baudelaire, I firmly believe, would have been amazed to see the progress that women have made in society today, and whether he would choose to public admit it or not, I am sure that he would have been a great fan of the film by Marvel.

—Peter O’Neil, translator

About the author



Charles Baudelaire (1821 – 1867) is without any doubt the greatest poet in the French language and who has also had the most profound influence on not only the direction of world literature, but also with how we perceive the world around us. In but a single volume *Les Fleurs du Mal*, Baudelaire caused what can only be described as a Copernican tilt in how we see the world around us. The Anti-Rousseau par excellence, Baudelaire was profoundly influenced by Joseph de Maistre (1753 – 1821) who in the poet’s own words helped him to think. De Maistre’s profoundly Catholic take on good and evil, and in particular the role that evil has in the world, was to have a direct influence on Baudelaire who, as *Les Fleurs du Mal* was to show, would almost uniquely focus how the darker side of humanity typically won out. A highly moral writer, Baudelaire’s work was

condemned immediately upon publication (1857) and the poet was fined. For Baudelaire’s immediate circumstances, this proved to be a disaster as he became a pariah. A second version of *Les Fleurs du Mal* was printed in 1861 with the inclusion of the *Tableaux Parisiens* but nothing could salvage the poet’s reputation and he eventually died in almost obscurity in neighbouring Belgium where he spent the last remaining period of his life. Baudelaire was immensely prolific translating the works of Edgar Allan Poe into English, thus introducing the French reading public to the iconic American writer for the very first time, but he is also partly responsible for helping to create the prose poem, or poem in prose, having published a collection titled *Le Spleen de Paris – Petits Poèmes en Prose* (1869). Baudelaire was also a considerable critic of art and published articles on painters and painting throughout his writing life and which were all regrouped posthumously, he was also an avid smoker of hashish, as were so many writers and artists of his day publishing *Les Paradis Artificiels* in 1860.

About the translator



Peter O'Neill is the author of six collections of poetry, the latest being *Henry Street Arcade*, a bilingual volume translated into French by the poet Yan Kouton and published in France by *Éditions de Pont de l'Europe* earlier in the spring this year. O'Neill hosted a Zoom Fest for the *Alliance Francaise* in Dublin to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the birth of Charles Baudelaire on the 8th April with an international panel of translators poets and fellow lovers of the iconic 19th century French poet. O'Neill has published a volume of translations, *The Enemy - Transversions from Charles Baudelaire* (Lapwing, 2015) and he has also published a work of prose fiction *More Micks than Dicks – a hybrid Beckettian novella in 3 genres*. He is currently working on a bilingual edition of *Spleen et Idéal* with an introduction and notes. He has also edited two anthologies of poetry, *The Gladstone Readings* and *And Agamemnon Dead*, and co-edited an issue of *Live Encounters Poetry & Writing* (2020) and Issue 81 of *mgversion2>atura Transverser* - a mini anthology of contemporary French speaking poets coming from around the world. As well as Baudelaire and French poetry, O'Neill's other main interest is Samuel Beckett; he has presented a number of papers at international symposiums, most notably on the novel *Comment C'est (How It Is)*, upon which he has written extensively. O'Neill has an academic background in philosophy and comparative literature, BA and MA respectively (DCU).