

Charles Baudelaire, “A Rotting Corpse”

A narrative about a man in a black leather jacket:

My friend Luther Martin and I had invited a famous French scholar to come to the University of Vermont to teach a seminar for faculty. Intrigued by our offer, he agreed to discuss it when he came to a conference in southern California, so Luther and I flew there to meet with him.

The conference on his work, which we thought would draw a few dozen participants, drew many hundreds of attendees. Our chosen scholar was, it turned out, an academic and cultural superstar. Everyone wanted to talk with him and spend time with him.

We later learned that he fended off a huge horde of scholars clamoring for his attention. It turned out, having arranged to get together for a light dinner in a bar in the hotel in which we were staying, that Luther and I were among the very few who would actually sit down with him.

We got to the hotel’s watering spot. A few minutes later, a man in a black leather jacket, his skull so closely shaved that it shone in the dim light of the bar, entered and surveyed the room. He appeared the antithesis (at least at the time – things have changed) of an academic and a philosopher. He looked like he had in earlier years ridden with the Hell’s Angels and still maintained his allegiances.

The man in the black leather jacket came over to our table and introduced himself. It was, as some of you may have guessed, Michel Foucault.

We talked about the details of his visit to Vermont, which took place several months later. That faculty seminar was one of the intellectual high points of my life. Even better was his visit to a seminar for advanced undergraduates, a seminar which I had been teaching, a seminar on his work. Foucault had such a good time, he liked the students so much, that when they invited him to come to one of their houses for dinner a few days later, he accepted.

Intellectually, Foucault could be a terror to those who challenged him in order to boost their own sense of self or their own reputation. With my students, he was exceptionally open and kind. The dinner quickly veered away from the intellectual and towards his warm desire to get to know the students.

Within six months of his visit to Vermont, Foucault would be dead. He was then, and is now, regarded as one of the most important thinkers of the second half of the twentieth century.

What has this to do with Charles Baudelaire, whose poem “Rotting Corpse” we are soon going to consider?

Foucault was many things: philosopher, sociologist, critic, theorist of post-modernity. But above all, he was a historian. It took me many years to understand that the specific practices he

examined were deeply rooted in his personal experience. His first great book, Madness and Civilization, grew out of his employment as a staff member in a psychiatric hospital. He eventually became an academic. Investigating, he set out to 'undermine' the notion that the realm of knowledge was an evolutionary process. Instead, he showed in The Order of Things that knowledge was shaped by changing modes of representation.

His next influential book, Discipline and Punish, examined prisons and their impact on the organization of society. It grew out of his decision to work on prisoners' rights in the wake of the student-led rebellion of 1968 in France.

His involvement with homosexual rights, and his own experience as a homosexual, led him to write an extended History of Sexuality.

The seminar he taught at the University of Vermont was called "Discipline of the Self." His central concern was with a concept that dated back to the Greeks, epimeleisthai sautou, 'taking care of oneself.' He was, unbeknownst to us, dying of AIDS as he investigated and taught this seminar....

Still, how do we get to Baudelaire?

As I understand him, Foucault often placed the invention of our modernity at the end of the Age of Reason (roughly, the close of the 18th century, when the Enlightenment foundered and was transformed). Clinics (the subject of his first book), insane asylums (which sequestered the mad from the sane), the birth of the prison: all date from the practices which arose in the late Enlightenment and then transformed not only how society functions, but how we think and act – how we constitute our world.

In my own more conventional way, I recognized the change in art and high culture that we call Romanticism. We have already seen, in Wordsworth's "The World Is Too Much With Us," that the new age of industrialism provoked a need for new relations to reality.

There is slightly later hinge that lies beneath much of what Foucault addresses, another turn toward modernity and post-modernity. I've been reading a contemporary of Foucault's, another French intellectual, Jean Baudrillard. (Stick with me: Baudelaire is coming!)

Baudrillard claims that a number of interrelated things – capitalism, the ubiquitous marketplace, advertising, mass media – have combined to displace 'reality' and 'truth' and in their place substitute endless 'simulacra'. In the world of simulacra, we have no access to anything other than other models. We live in a time of signs which point only to other signs. We no longer know¹ what will ease our hunger or our basic requirement for warmth: we only know and see the things we have been convinced we need.

¹ Norman Mailer in "The White Negro" (1957) saw in his culture an inability to feel one's own desires. He called for a modern existentialism in which by living on a Baudelairean edge to society (for him, the model was the hipster, imitating the life and values of the black subculture) one might be in touch with those desires "To be an

It is all, and this used to be the shorthand description of the philosophy of deconstruction of Jacques Derrida, it is all wall-to-wall discourse. What we have is language, and language is not tied to anything but other language. There is no recourse to reality, truth, or anything beyond language.

Today, with the presence everywhere of computers, we all too easily recognize this domination of the simulacrum as 'virtual reality.' In Baudrillard's view, then, virtual reality has taken over and we have no way to tell what is real and what is 'virtual.' Everything seems part of a computer-created alternate reality.....

Ah, now, finally, to Baudelaire. I think the 1850's were a hinge in which the tide of uncertainty about the 'real' threatened to completely overwhelm people.

In 1854, Henry David Thoreau published Walden, his account of how and why he went (in 1845) to live in the woods, build his own house and cut himself off from most of contemporary society.

Shams and delusions are esteemed for soundest truths, while reality is fabulous....
Let us settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance, that alluvion which covers the globe, through Paris and London, through New York and Boston and Concord, through Church and State, through poetry and philosophy and religion, till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call reality, and say, This is, and no mistake. [Chapter 2]

In search of 'reality' he went back to the woods².

In France, a very different country than the United States whose residents always had an awareness of an accessible wilderness at the edge of civilized society, Charles Baudelaire too was searching for a path 'beyond' the endless layers of society that obscured 'the real' In 1857 he published Les Fleurs du Mal (The Flowers of Evil). Its famous first poem, "To the Reader,"

existentialist, one must be able to feel oneself—one must know one's desires, one's rages, one's anguish, one must be aware of the character of one's frustration and know what would satisfy it."

² While Thoreau was writing and revising *Walden*, Herman Melville in 1851 published his greatest novel, *Moby-Dick*. His narrator, Ishmael, overwhelmed by the tedium of society (in a telling coincidence, Ishmael was a schoolteacher, as the historical Thoreau had also been), voyages out into the natural world: in his case, not the woods but the great oceans of the world. Ishmael too is searching for what is real.

In 1855, tired of being a journalist, Walt Whitman published a revolutionary book of poems, *Leaves of Grass*. He too was seeking 'reality,' which in his case would prove to be the natural world closest to hand, his own, actual, desire-driven body.

Through me forbidden voices,
Voices of sexes and lusts . . . voices veiled, and I remove the veil,
Voices indecent by me clarified and transfigured.

.....

I believe in the flesh and the appetites,
Seeing hearing and feeling are miracles, and each part and tag of me is a miracle.
(The lines are from Section 24, the central and most important part, of "Song of Myself.")

revealed the unreality, the lack of available satisfaction, of the world. In his own strange fashion, Baudelaire is not far from circumstances which drove Thoreau to the woods.

Yet there is one uglier, more amoral, more unclean!
Even though he never makes large gestures or loud cries
He would readily turn all we know into wreckage
And with a great yawn swallow the world.

It is Boredom! An involuntary tear running from his eye,
He dreams of gruesome hangings while smoking hash.
You know him, this refined monster,
You – hypocrite reader—my twin—my brother!

What we will find in the poem which follows is a desperate attempt to avoid ennui, boredom, to escape from a profoundly unsatisfying haze of less-than-reality³.

What, Thoreau had asked, can we stand on? He turns to the world that is revealed when the social is largely stripped away. Melville sailed away from civilization on the untamed seas. Whitman turned to the body and its desires. Not enough, Baudelaire responded: Everything finally bores us, leaves us unconnected. We must, we must, pursue the new.

Only something beyond our daily experience and expectation can connect us to reality. Only the shocking can jolt us into recognition, can shock us out of our enervating boredom. Baudelaire is, for me, a poet of shock. The first and greatest poet of shock.

And so we turn to a poem built on shock, on images and comparisons so shocking we still feel their power.

³ “The Voyage,” the last and longest poem of *Les Fleurs du Mal* is about a voyage to find . . . something. Section five is the shortest section in the poem, and one of the most powerful segments of a poem ever written. Here it is entire.

V
Et puis, et puis encore?

[“And then, and then what more?” Robert Lowell, inspired, freely translated it: ‘Yes, and what else?’] The fifth section sets up the poem’s ending. Here is the whole concluding seventh section of “The Voyage”:

O Death, old captain, it is time! Lift the anchor!
O Death, This country bores us! Let us set sail!
Even though sky and sea be as black as ink
These hearts you know so well are full of light.

Pour us your poison to refresh our hearts!
We want, while a fire burns in our brains,
To plunge into the deepest depths. Hell or Heaven, it matters not.
We’ll go to the depths of the Unknown to find *the new!*

[Though I must confess that in my view turning to shock is ultimately self-defeating: we continually need more and more shock, more and more novelty, to reconnect us to the world, and finally there is nothing to save us, and we drown.]

A Rotting Corpse

Charles Baudelaire

Do you remember that thing we saw, my love,
One beautiful sweet summer morning
Where the path turned: a rotting carcass
Lay on a bed of gravel.

Its legs in the air, like a whore ready for sex,
Burning, sweating out poisons,
It nonchalantly, cynically, exposed before us
A belly swollen by gas.

The sun blazed brightly over the decay
As if it to cook it, rare;
As if to give back to Nature, multiplied a hundred times,
All that Nature had earlier joined together.

And the sky, the sky watched that corpse
Bloom superbly, as if it were a flower.
But the stench was so great, there on the grass,
You thought you would faint dead away.

Flies buzzed over the putrid belly
From which black battalions
Of larvae oozed like a thick liquid
Making the tattered clothes seem alive.

All this rose and fell like a wave
Of iridescent sparkles.
One would have said the body, in what seemed a vague breathing,
Grew life through multiplying.

And this moving world gave forth a strange music,
Like running water, or the wind,
Or grain the winnower rhythmically shifts
As he turns his threshing fan.

Forms effaced themselves. They were nothing more than a dream,
A sketch slow to emerge,
A forgotten canvas on which the artist drafts
Just a token of memory.

Behind some rocks an anxious bitch
Watched us with her angry eyes,
Seeking the right moment to return to the body
And grab the morsel she had claimed as hers.

– And yet: You will be very like this awful filth,
This horrible rot,
Star of my eyes, sun of my being,
You, my angel and my love.

Yes! You will be like this, O my queen of gracefulness,
After the last sacraments,
When you go at last under the grass and the fragrant flowers,
To decay in the realm of bones.

Then, oh my beauty! Tell the larval grubs
Who devour you with kisses,
That I, your poet-lover, preserved the form, the very essence
Of our love, now so horribly decomposed.

I have struggled to come to terms with Charles Baudelaire, one of the greatest of nineteenth century poets, for most of my adult life. He's tough to like and sometimes very tough to understand. Yet he marks a watershed in modern consciousness. He is in important ways the first poet of modernity. He understands the centrality of city life, the poet as outsider, the continuing need to harness beauty to ugliness.

He is also a poet of shock, both of shocking originality but also of shocking subjects. As a sophomore in college, I read "A Rotting Corpse" and was as shocked as I have ever been in facing a literary work. The first line of the second stanza reads, in the French in which he wrote it, "Les jambes en l'air, comme une

femme lubrique.” Whew! Translated literally, it goes, “The legs in the air, like a lubricated woman.” Raw sexuality, not to mention that he is describing the position of a corpse.

Talk about shocking. But it would be a good number of years before I would recognize something even more shocking about the poem. But I will come to that, shortly.

No translation of the poem satisfies me, so I have embarked on my own translation. Translation itself is a difficult territory: does one convey the sense of the text, or its rhythms, or its rhymes? One can aim for all three, but as is the case in physics⁴, hitting all targets is not possible. Maybe the best that can be done is to strive for what the American poet Robert Lowell called “imitations,” in which many of the essential features of the poem are preserved, even if the fidelity to each detail of the poem is forgone.

So I have aimed at an imitation, stressing the imagery above all, since this poem is powered by its images. In Baudelaire’s original, the rhyme scheme for each four-line stanza is ABAB, and the lines (French is an unaccented language, so it counts syllables rather than stresses) tend to be 11/8/11/8 syllables long. In neither rhyme nor syllable count do I attempt to follow Baudelaire. Unlike him, I indent alternate lines to indicate that the first and third are weightier than the second and fourth.

But I am pretty sure you are not interested in the mechanics of translation, so we will leave them behind. On to the poem, which opens with a memory dominated by setting and the image central to the poem.

Do you remember that thing we saw, my love,
One beautiful sweet summer morning
Where the path turned: a rotting carcass
Lay on a bed of gravel.

We note from the first line that the poem is addressed to his lover (whom he calls “my soul” in the French). It is to be a poem of memory, of recollecting something he and his love saw, as they took a walk.

⁴ As I have pointed out earlier, the celebrated Heisenberg uncertainty principle asserts it is impossible to measure the location *and* speed of a subatomic particle, since to measure one is to affect the other. My close friend Jimmy Mann insisted to me that this is not the uncertainty principle, that what Heisenberg did was not describe physical process but offer a mathematical formula. Heisenberg did write of his principle in words, however: “The more precisely the position is determined, the less precisely the momentum is known in this instant, and vice versa.”

The subject, “a rotting carcass,” is typical of Baudelaire: he wrote more of gamblers and whores and decrepit old people and human vices than he did of ‘conventional’ poetic subjects. This is part of his modernity, a swerve away from the conventions of beauty to a recognition of the ‘real’ in modern life. It might help us if we understand that the painting, fiction, drama of his time (the beginning of the second half of the nineteenth century) was dominated by what we call, as a movement, ‘realism.’ The poem itself begins with a swerve, a turning of the path. There before the poet and his love is something astonishing: “a rotting carcass/ Lay on a bed of gravel.”

Its legs in the air, like a whore ready for sex,
 Burning, sweating out poisons,
It nonchalantly, cynically, exposed before us
 A belly swollen by gas.

The sun blazed brightly over the decay
 As if it to cook it, rare;
As if to give back to Nature, multiplied a hundred times,
 All that Nature had earlier joined together.

I have already said the fifth line is profoundly shocking. The position of the corpse is described as obscene, pornographic. This is Baudelaire ‘interpreting,’ since what we know is the legs are elevated: it his imaginative description, via simile, that takes the position and compares it to a woman ready for sex. I could never have written that line and imagine neither could you who are reading this, for it conjoins death and sex in an astonishing way, using a rotting corpse and an obscene scene. Baudelaire’s leap of imagination – awful, really, isn’t it? – takes him to a place that is not our own. Already stunned by a poem which yokes together a walk on a “beautiful sweet summer morning” in the park with a dead and decaying body, I – and probably you – realize I am in new territory here. Baudelaire’s world.

The corpse is described in the following seven lines, a description which will go on for the next eight stanzas. Here, in lines five through twelve, we have the imagery of heat. The corpse is “burning, sweating out poisons.” Two stanzas later he will return to this, but in the form of smell: the odor of the rotting remains is close to unbearable. Here, the internal heat of decomposition, “burning,” sweats out poisons. There, right before Baudelaire and his lover, is a body in decomposition, its belly distended by a putrefaction in the digestive system which is ongoing even as the life of the dead person has ended.

Even while there is rot within, the hot sun seems to roast it from without: exposed to the elements, the body seems to be ‘cooking.’ Again, that strange yoking, here of death and its aftermath, on the one hand, and domestic management on the other. And then that extraordinary couplet,

As if to give back to Nature, multiplied a hundred times,
All that Nature had earlier joined together.

which sets up the next three stanzas, where the dead body will seem to be a locus of life, where what should be still and unmoving gives an astonishing simulacrum of life. Although this couplet is abstract – there is no sense of the concrete reality of the process of decay here – what Baudelaire tells us (and his lover) is that death dis-integrates, that what was joined in life is here unjoined. Heart, ears, kidneys, brain, all working together in a harmony that is ‘life’ are in the rotting corpse disjoined, as the former unity of the living body decomposes into disparate elements.

And the sky, the sky watched that corpse
Bloom superbly, as if it were a flower.
But the stench was so great, there on the grass,
You thought you would faint dead away.

Baudelaire does not repeat ‘the sky,’ but I have in my imitation, because I wanted to emphasize the change of perspective, from the observer to a sudden large view. From this large view, it is as if the dead body were flowering “superbly,” blossoming into a new form of beauty. (I’ve already stressed that Baudelaire is shocking, and there is even greater shock to come. But pause momentarily, on this couplet: the poet by taking a long view from “the sky” sees natural process, even the process of bodily decomposition, as somehow beautiful.)

From the large perspective to the personal: while the body from a sky-oriented view seems to be blossoming, from a human perspective there is the horrible stench of death⁵, so overpowering as to lead his lover to think she might faint.

Flies buzzed over the putrid belly
From which black battalions
Of larvae oozed like a thick liquid

⁵ I read a lot of detective novels, including many police procedurals. When a cop visits a morgue to look at a corpse, he almost always smears Vicks VapoRub on his top lip to overcome the smell of death that is concomitant with a decomposing corpse.

Making the tattered clothes seem alive.

What can I say of this stanza? Awful, horrifying, the very opposite of what we expect poems to be. Flies attracted by the carrion buzz⁶ in the first line of this stanza, and their awful progeny – maggots – “ooze” from the body. So many larvae, the body seems even in death to be alive, as its surface moves as masses of larvae feed on the corpse.

The next stanza picks up on this movement:

All this rose and fell like a wave
Of iridescent sparkles.
One would have said the body, in what seemed a vague breathing,
Grew life through multiplying.

Each of these two stanzas regards the process of bodily disintegration as an imitation of life. The first describes the movement of the larvae on the body as “making the tattered clothes seem alive.” The second stanza touches on the last lines of stanza three (“As if to give back to Nature, multiplied a hundred times,/ All that Nature had once joined together”) as it reveals that the corpse multiplies into all sorts of new ‘life,’ here the terrible larvae of flies. There is so much movement that the corpse seems, almost, to be breathing.

Without our realizing it, most of our senses have to this point been engaged: sight, by the corpse “we saw” starting in the first stanza; taste, obliquely, through the simile of cooking; smell in the “stench” that led his lover to almost “faint dead away;” touch in the near-tactile imagery of maggots and the seemingly moving body. It is time for hearing:

And this moving world gave forth a strange music,
Like running water, or the wind,
Or grain the winnower rhythmically shifts
As he turns his threshing fan.

The hovering flies, with their “Blue - uncertain - stumbling Buzz⁷” sound like water flowing, like the wind, like grain being winnowed after the harvest. (For

⁶ Emily Dickinson, who had as tough a mind as Baudelaire, wrote a comic poem about flies attracted to death, “I heard a Fly buzz – when I died.” It is in its own way both as shocking and as great a poem as “A Rotting Corpse,” although she makes comedy out of the horror. The [text](#) is readily available.

⁷ Dickinson’s inspired term, in the poem “I heard a Fly buzz.”

certainly death is a kind of harvesting, as the third simile suggests.) Again, we have a strange and shocking yoking, here, of the sound of flies above the corpse through simile are connected to with the sustaining grain which remains after the harvesting, threshing and winnowing. The predatory flies attracted by the dead body are equated with the staff of life.

We return from the particular to a meditation on the body, on how as it disintegrates after death (which we first saw in stanza three, “give back to Nature...all that Nature had once joined together”). The body loses the clear outlines that distinguished the individual person.

Forms effaced themselves. They were nothing more than a dream,
A sketch slow to emerge,
A forgotten canvas on which the artist drafts
Just a token of memory.

As the body disintegrates, its identifying features seem an apparition, something imagined and ephemeral and not real and lasting. It is as if, the metaphor tells us, the body is not a ‘self’ any longer, but only a recollection of what it once was. The “sketch” is a remarkable stretch of poetic imagination, where the body turns into what prefigured it, for a sketch in normal temporal sequence precedes the work rather than succeeding it⁸.

Can we still be shocked in this poem? Baudelaire is more than willing to try. The next stanza, the conclusion of the ‘description’ of the corpse they encountered on their summer morning walk, is even more shocking:

Behind some rocks an anxious bitch
Watched us with her angry eyes,
Seeking the right moment to return to the body
And grab the morsel she had claimed as hers.

The dead body is meat, just meat. Here, a dog watches angrily – ‘you have not right to interfere with my meal,’ she seems to be saying – as she seeks to return to her meal. Our bodies are no different than the meat we buy at the butcher’s. Alive or dead, we are nothing more than meat. How far we have moved from two stanzas previous, where the dead body (feeding maggots though it is) sounds like

⁸ Baudelaire’s words, “les formes s’effaçaient” may have inspired one of the great lines in my favorite poem by Sylvia Plath, “Tulips.” There she writes about lying in a hospital bed after having attempted suicide. “I have no face, I have wanted to efface myself,” she writes, using that strange construction for both self-destruction and for the elimination of her – to herself – painful identity. Plath’s “[Tulips](#)” is also available on the web.

grain, the staff of life, to this point where the body is merely dead meat fit for a dog's meal.

The dash which precedes the first line of the next stanza indicates a turn in the poem as we shift from the imagery of a past walk to an imagined future time. Tenses signal this change, as varieties of the past tense are replaced by the future tense. The emphasis on Baudelaire's lover, clear in the first line of the poem, alluded to so that we don't forget it in the fourth stanza where she almost fainted from the smell, now moves front and center.

– And yet: You will be very like this awful filth,
 This horrible rot,
Star of my eyes, sun of my being,
 You, my angel and my love.

What is before us in the final three stanzas is the greatest shock of this poem. For the poem, its first nine stanzas an extended description of a rotting corpse, is now revealed as: A love poem!

The stanza is a revelation as well as a turning point. Having looked closely at the dead and rotting body, looked closely and long, Baudelaire is ready for a final simile, his last comparison. You will be like this, you will be a corpse, "this awful filth,/ This horrible rot," he tells his lover, following with terms of wonderful endearment. "Etoile de mes yeux, soleil de ma nature,/ Vous, mon ange et ma passion!" "Star of my eyes, sun of my being,/ You, my angel and my love."

Wow!

I am shocked – truly shocked – by the poem's resolute concentration on a dead body, on its swelling and smells, on the grubs which feed on it, on the dog which sees a choice part as a morsel to devour. But nothing has prepared me, despite that first line about how he and his love saw this scene one day as they walked in a park, for this to turn into a love poem, into a poem which celebrates his love and his art.

Yes! You will be like this, O my queen of gracefulness,
 After the last sacraments,
When you go at last under the grass and the fragrant flowers,
 To decay in the realm of bones.

In this penultimate stanza Baudelaire expands on the comparison. ‘In time, we will all, even you my queen, become a corpse.’ If this seems like a strange way to sing one’s love, we have only to recall Shakespeare’s sonnets, some of which end in the same way⁹ or hold up the artist as the possible conqueror of time¹⁰.

Baudelaire sounds the same themes as Shakespeare, but even more trenchantly. The poem proclaims, ‘You remember that corpse, how horrible it was? You will end up exactly the same, brought down by time, your body turned to rot. But never fear, my love, for your beauties, for your wonderful body, will be preserved in my poem.’

Then, oh my beauty! Tell the larval grubs
Who devour you with kisses,
That I, your poet-lover¹¹, preserved the form, the very essence
Of our love, now so horribly decomposed.

In this final stanza, Baudelaire celebrates both love and art. The tenderness he proclaimed – “Star of my eyes, sun of my being... my angel and my love” – is now manifested. It is one thing to speak tenderly. It is another to declare, as this entire poem does, that love and art will triumph over death and disintegration. For Baudelaire’s declaration is *more* than mere words: it is a speech act. What he declares, he does by declaring. He has made the poem (which his lover reads just as we read it too), a poem which will immure his love and his lover from the ravages of time, death, disintegration and dissolution.

The poem, with its final stanzas limning the grace of Baudelaire’s lover, her angelic quality, her beauty, is a poem in praise of beauty. It is also a reminder that, in our always changing world, art can triumph over time, and perhaps even over death.

⁹ Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st,
So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee. [Sonnet XVIII]

¹⁰ Time doth transfix the flourish set on youth,
And delves the parallels in beauty's brow,
Feeds on the rarities of nature's truth,
And nothing stands but for his scythe to mow.
And yet to times in hope my verse shall stand,
Praising thy worth, despite his cruel hand. [Sonnet LX]

¹¹ The term ‘poet-lover’ is nowhere in Baudelaire’s original French. I have added it to make clear his great claim in the face of disintegration. The last two lines, if translated literally, say ‘That I have kept the form and divine essence/ Of my decomposed loves.’

In reading this poem we have passed through a strange world, a world in which the ugly (a decomposing corpse) is made in some sense beautiful, in which the lifeless as it disintegrates takes on a new kind of life, in which death and decay serve to celebrate love and art. To my knowledge, no poet in the history of human culture has so powerfully connected the ugly and the beautiful. Certainly no poet has better held up to our view the contradictions which we take to be the defining conditions of our modernity.

