

## Introduction

In the late summer of 2006, I began to translate a few favorite early Verlaine poems. This innocent amusement somehow became an obsession—and a kind of love affair. What has by now become a complete translation of Verlaine’s first book, the *Poèmes saturniens* (*Poems Under Saturn*) of 1866—so far as I know the only complete translation of the book in English—began with two motivations common to most, if not all, translations: admiration for the original work, and a certain impatience with the existing translations. Of the former I shall say more in a moment.

The Verlaine translations I knew first were those by C. F. MacIntyre (dating from 1948), which have long been standard in English. Yet I came to feel that these somehow condescend, both to Verlaine and to the contemporary reader, in a way that simply would not do. They also ride on now-unaccountable complacencies of culture and gender, even after we make allowances for those present in the original. “How fresh and adolescent the whole poem is!” MacIntyre exclaims at one point; elsewhere, he speaks of “Those lovely girls of one’s first fine flush of rapture!” Often, in his attempt to preserve Verlaine’s rhymes, MacIntyre sacrifices syntax or diction or both, and includes padding, as do later translations of Verlaine by Doris-Jeanne Gourévitch (1970).

Joanna Richardson’s translations (1974) alternate between free verse and metrical verse, though meter shapes some of her best lines. Her commitment to rhyme is similarly variable. Among contemporary translations, Norman Shapiro’s (1999) are probably the most successful, but like the other translators mentioned so far, he is trying to represent the whole span of Verlaine’s work in a single volume.

Martin Sorrell's translations in the Oxford World's Classics series also date from 1999. These are, however, unrhymed, and indeed, the translator declares that "the worst tyranny for any translator of Verlaine was rhyme" (p. xxx). By taking it for granted that rhyme "does not anyway have such a strong place in modern English prosody," Sorrell clears the way for his own free verse translations. But in fact rhyme is alive and well in both contemporary English and American poetry, and ignoring it in the hopes of sounding more "contemporary" seems too easy. Furthermore, in a "critique" of the *Poèmes saturniens* he wrote in 1890 at the time of the reissue of his first book, Verlaine speaks of those who would accuse him of "timidity" with regard to *vers libre*, and retorts, "My God, I thought I had smashed verse enough, I thought I had freed it enough, if you like, in displacing the caesura as much as possible, and with regard to rhyme, making use of it with discretion, though, without constraining myself much to employ either pure assonances or inconsiderately excessive types of echo." ("Mon Dieu, j'ai cru avoir assez brisé le vers, l'avoir assez affranchi, si vous préférez, en déplaçant la césure le plus possible, et quant à la rime, m'en être servi avec quelque judiciaire pourtant, en ne m'astreignant pas trop, soit à de pures assonances, soit à des formes de l'écho indiscrètement excessives." Le Dantec/Borel, 1074.) From this point of view, the use of rhyme is an actual imperative if the translator is to remain faithful to Verlaine's original and to its innovation.

I felt, therefore, that there was room for a fresh attempt, and one that would restore some of these often-anthologized poems to their original context in Verlaine's first book. Robert Bly has remarked that "the best translation resembles a Persian rug seen

from the back—the pattern is apparent, but not much more” (Bly, 48). In thinking about what part of Verlaine’s “pattern” to concentrate on first, I was guided by my own practice of thirty years in writing and publishing poems in English, and decided that I would preserve, poem by poem, Verlaine’s diverse schemes of end-rhyme. Bly further opines that “I believe in working as much as possible with internal rhymes, but I think it’s best not to insist on reproducing end rhymes . . . the translator has to add images that destroy the poem’s integrity” (Bly, 44). However, I resolved that I would seek to avoid both such padding of images and the earlier translators’ compromises of syntax, while trying to preserve an English language diction infused with as much as possible of the range of the French original, which as I understand it mines high and low, academic and colloquial. As Paul Valéry remarks of Verlaine, “His verse, free and moving between the extremes of language, dares stoop from the most delicately musical tone to prose, sometimes to the basest of prose, which he borrows and adopts deliberately” (“Son vers, libre et mobile entre les extrêmes du langage, ose descendre du ton le plus délicatement musical jusqu’à la prose, parfois à la pire des proses, qu’il emprunte et qu’il épouse délibérément”; Valéry, 183). There is a striking lexical energy in this book, and, without being seduced by false cognates, the translator must rejoice at the opportunity to carry into English words like “bister” (“bistre”), “amaranth” (“amarante”), or “wyvern” (“guivre”). In any case, the translator who obeys Bly’s judgment about end-rhyme, in the case of Verlaine (or of Rilke, who was Bly’s subject) is depriving the reader of one of the chief auditory beauties of the original poetry.

In order to maintain as close a fidelity to Verlaine's original as possible, I have defined "rhyme" in English with a latitude that is conscious of work by American poets such as Robert Pinsky in his 1994 translation *The Inferno of Dante*. Pinsky proved the viability of rhyme over the long haul with the notoriously restrictive form of terza rima. In his "Translator's Note" to that volume, Pinsky describes pitfalls of the kind that presumably made Bly give up on end-rhyme: "squeezing unlikely synonyms to the ends of lines, and bending idiom ruthlessly to get them there" (Pinsky, xix). In order to avoid these, seeking what he calls an "audible scaffold," Pinsky widens the spectrum of rhyme so that it includes "the same consonant-sounds—however much vowels may differ—at the ends of words" (Pinsky, xix). My translation has relied upon a system of rhyme that ranges from perfect (masculine rhymes like "yell" and "swell," "leaps" and "weeps"; feminine rhymes such as "plastic" and "fantastic") through a spectrum of imperfect rhyme, from consonant rhyme ("citrus" and "boleros," "coast" and "rest") through more approximate rhymes, such as "waves" and "wreathes," "flesh" and "Electra," "zigzags" and "masks," "ingénues" and "known," and "ecstatic" and "Viaticum." Throughout, the change from singular to plural is forgiven, as part of the rhyme: "reeds" and "onward," "swans" and "green," "fast" and "artists," etcetera.

To be sure, there are sound effects in Verlaine's first book that cannot be rendered in English, such as the complex crossed internal rhymes of lines like "Des bouts de fumée en forme de cinq / Sortaient drus et noirs des hauts toits pointus" ("Shaped like a five, the wisps of smoke / Poured thick and black from the high gables"). An acoustic pun is also lost in translation, such as that in play in the two lines "Comme l'aile d'une orfraie / Qu'un

subit orage effraie” (“Like the wing of an osprey / Frightened by the storm’s sudden fury”), in which one bird, the osprey or white-tailed eagle (“orfraie”), mingles with another, the barn owl (“effraie”), whose name in French corresponds to a form of the verb “to frighten.” Then there is the opening line in “Monsieur Prudhomme,” in which the subject is mayor of his town and both mother and father of his family, in French, but only mayor and father, in English (“il est maire et père de famille”).

What have been sacrificed, in my version, are Verlaine’s syllabic meters, which, as Sorrell points out (Sorrell, xix), both engage with traditional prosody and challenge it. But if it is possible to distinguish between meter and rhythm, I have certainly tried to be sensitive to those exquisite rhythms, in certain of Verlaine’s early poems, in which his unique combination of verbal music and psychological state announces itself. This is what Jacques Borel describes, in his Introduction to the *Pléiade* edition, as “the musical quality of this art . . . the magic of a song inseparable from tactile or visual sensations, auditory or olfactory, finally confounded, integrated into the melody through which they are made known to us” (“la qualité musicale de cet art . . . la magie d’un chant indissociable des sensations tactiles ou visuelles, auditives ou olfactives finalement fondues, intégrées à la mélodie à laquelle elles se communiquent à nous”; *Le Dantec/Borel*, 55).

Robert Pinsky has also remarked that “Translation is the highest form of reading.” Implicit in what he says, it seems to me, is a notion of translation as a kind of homage to an original, and as an act of absolute attention and comprehension. It might well be asked: why translate Verlaine’s first book? Being his first (absent a Rimbaudian precocity), it could hardly be expected to be his best, revealing

instead a number of apprentice debts. And the critical consensus is that Verlaine wrote *too much* poetry: that it is always necessary to pick and choose among his poems. As a contemporary American poet, rather than a trained scholar of French, I am less able to offer scholarly or critical justifications for this translation than I am able to reexamine my own initial enthusiasm and admiration.

In the Introduction to his 2000 translation of *Beowulf*, Seamus Heaney speaks of the attraction of translating, of falling in love with the source text: “The erotics of composition are essential to the process, some pre-reflective excitation and orientation, some sense that your own little verse-craft can dock safe and sound at the big quay of the language. And this is as true for translators as it is for poets attempting original work” (Heaney, xxvi). This is what translator Christopher Middleton has described as the translator’s feeling that “he might be reweaving the original spell” (Warren, 24). I would take this further and suggest that the profound excitement one experiences in deciding to translate the work of a poet writing in a different language is something like that of discovering a world with which, though it was hitherto unknown, one feels instantly familiar: or of encountering a mind, a sensibility, with which one feels an immediate affinity. In an essay entitled “The Added Artificer,” scholar Renato Poggioli describes it this way: “Through the shock of a recognition primarily psychic in quality, the translator suddenly finds that a poem newly discovered, or discovered anew, offers him an exemplary solution for his own formal problems, as well as an expressive outlet for his subjective *Erlebnis* . . . translation is, both formally and psychologically, a process of inscape, rather than of escape” (Brower, 141–42). And Bly speaks of a stage of

translation at which “the translator should ask himself whether the feelings as well as the concepts are within his world. If they are not, he should stop” (Bly, 21).

There is no doubt a risk that such a sense of familiarity will invite the translator to take too much for granted. When a writer finds a kindred spirit in literature, he may assume, like a lover, that he perfectly understands that spirit, whereas true understanding comes with long cohabitation. And there is a different risk of familiarity, too, which is that the translator will simply use the original as a kind of palimpsest upon which to inscribe his own obsessions. Thus Heaney, in describing the process of his translation of the Irish poem he calls *Sweeney Astray* (1983), writes, “[Robert] Lowell’s example was operative here. His trick of heightening the sense by adding voltage to the diction and planting new metaphors into the circuit was not lost on me. Nor was his unabashed readiness to subdue the otherness of the original to his own autobiographical neediness. . . . I cuffed the original with a brusqueness and familiarity that was not earned but that gave me immense satisfaction. I was using *Buile Suibhne* as a trampoline . . .” (Warren, 17–18). As Rosanna Warren points out in the Introduction to the anthology in which Heaney’s “Notes on Translating *Buile Suibhne*” appear, “We grow by welcoming difference, not by assimilating it entirely to ourselves” (Warren, 5).

The risks of such subjectivity make it seem imperative to find other reasons after all, more external or objective reasons, for translating. So, to speak once again of my admiration for this book of Verlaine’s, the first thing that struck me about the *Poèmes saturniens*, along with its range of experience (whether

real or imagined), was its erudition. The fact that the young Verlaine is participating in Leconte de Lisle's Parnassian retrospect to the Greeks and the Hindus does not diminish my pleasure in his learning; it is dazzling even if new-minted. As one whose own sense of poetic possibility had been shaped by the Late Modernist intellectual achievements of learned and ambitious poets such as Berryman, Lowell, and Jarrell, I could hardly have responded otherwise.

I also found in Verlaine's first book a confirmation of a notion of poetic originality that is unfashionable at the moment. T. S. Eliot suggested long ago (in his 1917 essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent") that true originality lies in the way the poet responds to what has come before him. And in this first book, Verlaine is deliberately engaging (sometimes down to the phrase and image) with his contemporaries, his predecessors, with the giants of French poetry up to his time. The influence of Baudelaire—all that languor and baleful carnality—is particularly clear. Jacques Borel emphasizes Verlaine's indebtedness to Baudelaire when he says that in this first book, "The break with all earlier poetry, the turning point from which all modern poetry takes its origin, and first of all that of Verlaine himself, could not be more strongly affirmed" ("La cassure avec toute la poésie antérieure, ce tournant majeure à partir duquel toute la poésie moderne prend naissance, et d'abord celle de Verlaine lui-même, ne sauraient être plus résolument affirmés"; *Le Dantec/Borel*, 50). Furthermore, in an age (our own) in which the aftermath of Confessional poetry has given rise to incomparably tedious vistas of autobiographical verse, there is something invigorating about the Parnassian doctrine of *l'impassible* (the "impassive" or "un-

moved”), about the challenge of creating emotion in poetry by means that have little or nothing to do with (traumatic) personal testimonial, with the details of the poet’s own experience. And this is true even if the fascination of Verlaine’s early poems lies, in part, in the inconsistency of their attitude toward *l’impassible*.

Verlaine’s engagement is not just with authors, but with genres of poetry, too. Such is the case with ekphrasis, or poems that speak to works of visual art—fashionable in Verlaine’s time as it has become so again in our own. In the same essay, “The School of Giorgione,” in which he offers his famous dictum (quite relevant to Verlaine’s practice also) that “*All art constantly aspires toward the condition of music*,” Walter Pater remarks upon the analogy “of French poetry generally and the art of engraving.” In the section of Verlaine’s book called “Eaux-fortes” (“Etchings”), and in particular in a poem like “Effet de nuit” (“Night Effect”), we find lines of poetry that seem to have been carved by some fierce burin with a visual clarity quite equal to the cross-hatched savagery of the image they describe; and the extent to which visual effects contribute to the atmosphere of terror in the later parts of “La mort de Philippe II” (“The Death of Philip II”) is uncanny.

I was attracted to these poems not only for their intellect, but for their sensuousness as well, what Norman Shapiro refers to as the “synthesis of the cerebral and the visceral” in Verlaine’s work (Shapiro, 3). The intoxications of the flesh, the “smell of bodies young and dear,” mingled with self-disgust: the mixture is still a potent one, even after a century and a half. And just as one begins to feel that the worldly irony audible in some of these poems is a kind of late-adolescent posture, a startling and convincing erotic

longing erupts in others. This longing has partly to do with Verlaine's rejection of bourgeois values and social pretense. The title of the poem "Jésuitisme" ("Jesuitism"), for example, connotes not just intrigue or equivocation but hypocrisy. And "La chanson des ingénues" ("The Song of the Ingenues") seems to be propelled partly by longing and partly by rage. A recurrent phrase in this book is "sans trêves," that is, "unceasingly, relentlessly," and the drive here (on the part of the twenty-two-year-old author) is to beat down the suffocating confines of mid-nineteenth-century French society.

For Verlaine, not only the intellect and the emotions, but also the spirit, always speak through the body. English author George Moore remarked of Verlaine that "he abandoned himself to the Church as a child to a fairy-tale" (Richardson, *Verlaine*, 133). He is certainly trying on attitudes in these early and secular poems, but there is an energy of feeling that relates them to both the devotional poems of the 1881 volume *Sagesse (Wisdom)* and to the more leering or louche poems of *Chansons pour elle (Songs for Her)*, published in 1891. What one hears in *Poèmes saturniens* is a kind of labile passion that never settles on either the sacred or the profane, the spirit or the body, but instead whipsaws between them, and indeed requires both of them. With good reason, Valéry speaks of "the dark and powerful mixture of mystical emotion and sensual ardor that develop in Verlaine" ("le mélange puissant et trouble de l'émotion mystique et de l'ardeur sensuelle qui se développent dans Verlaine"; Valéry, 173).

In short, much of Verlaine's later work is prefigured by these first poems. In his *Confessions*, written near the end of his life, Verlaine spoke of "these *Poèmes saturniens* in which the self I was

then breaks out, strange and a little fierce” (“ces *Poèmes saturniens* où éclate bien le moi fantasque et quelque peu farouche que j’étais”; Verlaine, 103). Actually, the adjectives Verlaine uses to describe himself, “fantasque” and “farouche,” are hard to translate; the first can also mean “fantastical” or “whimsical,” and the second can mean “sullen,” “unsociable,” or “shy.” The young Verlaine is all of these things, and in *Poèmes saturniens* he both acknowledges his debts to his elders and explores the extraordinary range of his own voice.

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An ellipsis [ . . . ] has been used to indicate a stanza break when poem continues onto a new page.