

Samuel N. Rosenberg

Indiana University, Bloomington

### **Remarks on translating the poetry of Paul Verlaine into English**

*The following remarks stem from a lengthy seminar presentation made at Indiana University's Lilly Library in February of this year. They were occasioned by my decision to prepare Verlaine texts for a book-length anthology. Of interest here is an array of particular challenges that the corpus poses for the English translator; I discuss the ways in which I have attempted to meet such challenges.*

Paul Verlaine (1844-1896) was, with Charles Baudelaire and Stéphane Mallarmé, one of the most important French lyric poets of the 19th century—and surely the most prolific, with well over 500 poems published during his lifetime and posthumously. He never took time off from writing, whatever the circumstances of his rather chaotic life. He was born and raised in Metz (NE France, Lorraine), lived in Paris, Belgium, England, experienced time in prison more than once, was both heterosexual and married, and homosexual, remembered for a particularly tempestuous affair with his fellow poet Arthur Rimbaud; he was in and out of devotion to his Catholic faith; he wrote in a broad variety of styles and forms, covering a considerable range of interests and themes.

Several book-length English translations of Verlaine appeared in print in the latter part of the 20th century, notably the bilingual versions published by C. F. MacIntyre, Norman Shapiro, and Martin Sorrell.

In light of those already in print, what might justify another collection of poems of Verlaine translated into English?

It is the extraordinary musicality of his poetry, which presents an irresistible challenge to many a translator.

It is a musicality that has drawn the creative attention of a number of French composers—I think of Chausson, Reynaldo Hahn, for example, but especially Debussy and Fauré, who have all set poems by Verlaine for the singing voice.

And it is the same lyric mastery that has elicited a response, again and again, from translators into English (and other languages as well).

In fact, some editions of the composers' vocal settings are accompanied by singable English versions.

It is not surprising, then, if yet another translator feels impelled to try his hand at doing Verlaine.

The first question I faced was that of selecting the pieces to be translated.

The corpus is unusually extensive, so it was obviously necessary to make drastic cuts in the number of pieces I could hope to include in an anthology. At the same time, I wanted, from the outset, to represent Verlaine's entire career—that is, to present works chosen from the two-dozen collections of his poetry published during his lifetime and afterward.

My criteria of selection were first of all exclusionary.

The corpus contains a small amount of dramatic material. I decided not to translate it.

Likewise, I decided to exclude lengthy narrative, contemplative, or expository compositions that fall outside the realm of what we normally call lyric poetry. The focus of my work, I decided, would be poetry composed in traditional forms, such as sonnets, ballades, sets of quatrains and the like. Such pieces do, after all, constitute the bulk of Verlaine's output and best exemplify his lyricism.

I also opted for relatively few religious compositions and relatively few heavily marked by allusions to particular persons and events that struck me as of questionable interest or significance for modern American readers.

Besides, this anthology was to be a reflection of what appealed to me personally—what I the translator wished to translate, what I wished to create as a credible poetic equivalent to Verlaine's composition.

*De la musique avant toute chose* (*Music above all*).

That statement is probably the best-known single line in Verlaine.

It opens the poem, aptly titled "Art poétique", which occurs in *Jadis et Naguère*, the seventh collection of Verlaine's poetry, published in 1884. And it sums up Verlaine's intention: to place music—or rather, musicality—at the heart of his work. But the line is also a prescription for poets in general—and it must certainly be taken as an injunction to anyone translating Verlaine's poetry.

When you think of translating rhymed verse—and all of Verlaine is rhymed—your first consideration may well be the use or non-use of rhyme in the English translation. To rhyme or not to rhyme is a basic, unavoidable question.

Here is one way of answering the question. Consider the poem "Marine" (*Poèmes saturniens*, "Eaux-fortes III"):

*L'océan sonore*

*Palpite sous l'oeil  
De la lune en deuil  
Et palpite encore,*

*Tandis qu'un éclair  
Brutal et sinistre  
Fend le ciel de bistre  
D'un long zigzag clair,*

*Et que chaque lame,  
En ronds convulsifs,  
Le long des récifs  
Va, vient, luit et clame,*

*Et qu'au firmament,  
Où l'ouragan erre,  
Rugit le tonnerre  
Formidablement.*

Note that, in French, all four lines of each stanza are rhymed, in the pattern *abba*. In English, I have preserved the rhyming of lines 1 and 4, but have made the intervening lines unrhymed, thus: *axya*.

The sonorous ocean  
Throbs under the eye  
Of the mourning moon

In unending motion,  
  
While lightning bolts slash  
Their menacing way  
Through dark-colored skies  
In a zigzag flash,

*Etc.* (The full poem will appear in  
the Fall 2017 issue of  
*Metamorphoses*)

In this poem, then, I found it possible to answer the question *to rhyme or not to rhyme* by doing both. In most instances, however, that hybrid approach does not yield a satisfactory result.

While I readily accepted Verlaine's injunction to give fundamental importance to musicality—and while that feature is often taken to mean rhyme first of all—I realized that, generally speaking, the search for rhyme in English would too easily denature and distort the text. An insistence on rhyme could produce lexical choices and syntactic configurations that would be regrettably divergent from the original text.

Such difference for the sake of rhyme could be excessive, marking an essential infidelity to the poet's work—and no translator wants to be guilty of disregarding the all-important principle of fidelity to the original text!

An important aspect of that fidelity, for me, was the need to respect the autonomy of the individual lines—that is, the need to follow the sequence of Verlaine's ideas and images, instead of recasting the stanzas globally and thereby disrupting the movement of his thought.

In accordance with that respect, I had to accept the notion that, more often than not, I would have to forgo rhyme in my English versions (note that "rhyme" means end-rhyme, i.e., rhyme that occurs at the end of a given line of verse. For rhyme occurring elsewhere, terms such as "internal rhyme", "initial rhyme" are necessary.)

English, as is commonly acknowledged, is less hospitable to rhyme than are Romance languages, and readers consequently tend

not to be disturbed by the absence of rhyme in either original English verse or translated compositions.

Consider now the poem "Green" (*Romances sans Paroles*, "Aquarelles"):

*Voici des fruits, des fleurs, des feuilles et des branches  
Et puis voici mon coeur qui ne bat que pour vous.  
Ne le déchirez pas avec vos deux mains blanches,  
Et qu'à vos yeux si beaux l'humble présent soit doux.*

*J'arrive tout couvert encore de rosée  
Que le vent du matin vient glacer à mon front.  
Souffrez que ma fatigue, à vos pieds reposée,  
Rêve des chers instants qui la délasseront.*

*Sur votre jeune sein laissez rouler ma tête  
Toute sonore encore de vos derniers baisers;  
Laissez-la s'apaiser de la bonne tempête,  
Et que je dorme un peu puisque vous reposez.*

I translated this poem with rhyme or assonance in lines 1 and 4, but not in the intervening lines:

Consider these fruits, these flowers and branches and leaves  
And now consider my heart, beating only for you.  
Don't tear it apart with your beautiful hands,  
But treat it with the kindness it modestly seeks.

I arrive still covered with a new morning's dew  
Which an early wind has let freeze on my brow.  
Allow my fatigue, now at rest at your feet,  
To dream of dear moments refreshingly new.

*Etc.* (The full poem will appear in the  
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There are some instances, as in the first and second cases above, where rhyme springs almost naturally from the French text without any forcing or disfigurement in translation. In general, however, rhyme does not work smoothly or naturally.

Musicality, however (to return to that centrally important term), may be expressed through prosodic features other than rhyme.

I decided to attend to the much broader category of *homophony*, of which rhyme is only one manifestation, followed closely by line-end assonance.

There is also internal rhyme, along with internal assonance—and either of those features may occur not only within a given line of verse but may also move from one line to the next.

There is also alliteration, which is to consonants what rhyme and assonance are to vowels.

Moreover, all of these techniques are subject to clustering and gradation.

[m], for example, is closer to [n], which is another nasal, than it is to [z] or its unvoiced partner, [s].

All such phonetic considerations enter into the phenomenon we call *homophony* and work to create poetic *musicality*.

Consider, in the following instances, how such various prosodic features work—along with rhythm—to produce musicality.

Here is "L'Angoisse" (*Poèmes saturniens*, "Melancholia VIII"), first in French, then in English:

*Nature, rien de toi ne m'émeut, ni les champs  
Nourriciers, ni l'écho vermeil des pastorales  
Siciliennes, ni les pompes aurorales,  
Ni la solennité dolente des couchants.*

*Je ris de l'Art, je ris de l'Homme aussi, des chants,  
Des vers, des temples grecs et des tours en spirales  
Qu'étirent dans le ciel vide les cathédrales,  
Et je vois du même oeil les bons et les méchants.*

*Je ne crois pas en Dieu, j'abjure et je renie  
Toute pensée, et quant à la vieille ironie,  
L'Amour, je voudrais bien qu'on ne m'en parlât plus.*

*Lasse de vivre, ayant peur de mourir, pareille  
Au brick perdu jouet du flux et du reflux,  
Mon âme pour d'affreux naufrages appareille.*

In preparing to translate, I took stock of the poem's structure and musical elements:

Syllable count—12

Quatrain rhyme scheme—*abba*

Stanza 1, line 1—alliteration with nasal consonants; line 2—recurrence of the same alliteration; enjambment to line 3; line 3—three alliterations: [s], [p], [r]; line 4—recurrence of nasal alliteration; alliteration with [d]; assonance with nasal vowels.

Stanza 2— same rhymes as stanza 1; line 1—recurrence of initial phrase; line 2—alliteration with [t]; line 3—recurrence of alliteration with [t]; line 4—alliteration with [m].

Tercet rhyme scheme—*aab, aba*

Stanza 3, line 1—alliteration with [j]; line 2—internal nasal assonance; line 3—echo of line 1 [j]; nasal consonants and vowels.

Stanza 4, line 1—alliteration with [p]; enjambment to line 2—line 2—echo of line 1 [p]; alliteration with [fl]; internal and line-end rhyme; line 3—alliterations with [p], [fr].

Nature, nothing in you is moving to me,  
Neither fruit-laden fields nor silvery echoes of  
Sicilian pastoral scenes nor the splendors of dawn  
Nor the somber reserve of the sun as it sets.

I laugh at Art, at Humanity too, at music no less,  
At verse and Greek temples and the spiraling towers  
That cathedrals stretch up to an empty heaven,  
And my eye sees no gap between good men and bad.

I believe not in God; I renounce and reject  
All reflection; and as for that ironical staple  
Called Love, I'd prefer it be mentioned no more.

Tired of living but fearful of dying, much like  
A lost boat tossed here and there on the waves,  
My soul is on course for a frightening wreck.

Here are structural and musical elements used in putting Verlaine's sonnet into English:

Rhymes: none

Meter: irregular, 4 or 5 stresses per line

Stanza 1, line 1—alliteration of nasal consonants; line 2—recurrence of nasal alliteration; alliteration with [f]; internal assonance with long [e]; enjambment to line 3; line 3—alliteration with [s]; line 4—recurrence of nasal consonants; recurrence of sibilants.

Stanza 2, line 1—internal assonance with [ü]; line 2—alliteration with [t]; line 3—internal assonance with open [e]; assonance with [a].

Stanza 3, line 1—initial alliteration with [re]; line 2—alliteration with [r]; enjambment to line 3; line 3—alliteration with nasal consonants; also, "mentioned" echoes line 2 "reflection".

Stanza 4, line 1—assonance with [i], with [ing]; enjambment to l. 2; line 2—internal rhyme; echo of long [i] in line 1; final consonant [k] echoes line 1 final consonant.

I cited "Marine" above in connection only with the question of rhyme. I return to that poem here for a brief look at other prosodic features that converge there to produce homophony. I leave it to my readers to identify the relevant features—alliteration, assonance, recurrence, enjambment, etc.—in the French text. In the English, I point out here only a few notable features in my attempt to capture the musicality of Verlaine's lyricism:

There is rhyme or assonance in every stanza, according to the scheme *axyā*.

Light enjambment turns all stanzas into a single statement.

The numerous nasal consonants of stanza 1 are echoed in st. 2, which is principally characterized by the presence of sibilants. Sibilants, in fact, are notable in stanzas 2, 3, and 4. There is an important presence of [r] in stanzas 3 and 4, where, in addition, "maddening" echoes st. 2 "menacing" and where final "fearsome" echoes "far".

With the same purpose of examining the constituents of Verlaine's musicality, I return for moment to the poem "Green" to consider its first two quatrains.

The most immediately striking feature of Verlaine's French composition is its string of alliterations with [f] in the first line. That



string is introduced by "Voici", whose [v], of course, is the voiced partner of [f].

Alliteration with [v] is then developed in line 2 and further echoed in lines 3 and 4 *and* in the following quatrain.

The musicality created by these labio-dental consonants (in concert with other features of the lines) is stunning.

Also notable is how consistently the poem's 12-syllable lines break into 6-syllable segments, producing their own rhythmic contribution to the musicality of the passage.

*Voici des fruits, des fleurs, des feuilles et des branches  
Et puis voici mon coeur qui ne bat que pour vous.  
Ne le déchirez pas avec vos deux mains blanches,  
Et qu'à vos yeux si beaux l'humble présent soit doux.*

*J'arrive tout couvert encore de rosée  
Que le vent du matin vient glacer à mon front.  
Souffrez que ma fatigue, à vos pieds reposée,  
Rêve des chers instants qui la délasseront.*

Here again is my English version of the same passage. I invite readers to identify the various means by which I sought to produce an acceptable re-statement of Verlaine's lyric text. Think of rhyme and assonance (both internal and at line's end), alliteration, rhythm, echoes that straddle the two quatrains...

Look at these fruits, these flowers and branches and leaves  
And look now at my heart, beating only for you.  
Don't tear it apart with your beautiful hands,  
But treat it with the kindness it modestly seeks.

I arrive still covered with a new morning's dew  
Which an early wind has let freeze on my brow.  
Allow my fatigue, now at rest at your feet,  
To dream of dear moments refreshingly new.

My final example comes from the last period of Verlaine's career. It is "L'Arrivée du catalogue", no. IV in the collection *Biblio-Sonnets*:

*L'amateur reçoit son courrier! fiévreusement,  
Même avant de toucher aux plis qu'il sait intimes,  
Il court aux Catalogues et, rapidement,  
Non encore rabidement, sans trop de crimes*

*Projetés ou conçus pour l'amour de sublimes  
Emplettes, et voici qu'il tombe, justement!  
Sur celui du libraire aux malices ultimes  
Qui ne vend pas trop cher pour vendre sûrement,*

*Et d'une main fiévreuse, mais honnête, dame,  
On est honnête! et comme il a vu tel bouquin,  
Qu'il convoite depuis ... tant d'ans! un vrai béguin!*

*Il envoie au Négociant un télégramme:  
"Gardez-Le-moi." — "C'est fait", répond avant la nuit  
Un petit bleu.*

*Le bon Client s'évanouit.*

It is striking to see how the sheer musicality, the glowing lyricism, of the earlier works is now considerably reduced and, in particular, how the poet's earlier taste for occasional enjambment has now developed into a veritable fragmentation of the discourse—but still within the confines of traditional meter and rhyming.

Notably, along with enjambment—which makes a line flow into the following line—this sonnet introduces the opposite technique: breaking the line of verse, thereby ending the statement before the end of the line. Considering only the quatrains, note how they are linked to each other by enjambment across the stanzas and how at the same time they break into abnormal segments.

Here now is my way with the entire poem:

*The lover of books receives the day's mail. In a rush,  
Before even touching his personal letters,  
He attends to the Catalogues' call and rapidly,  
Though not rabidly, with no crime on his mind,*

*Whether planned or imagined, for love of sublime  
Acquisitions—suddenly spots a long-wanted title*

'Mid the wares of the most clever bookseller,  
Whose prices are good and good for his sales.

With feverish hand, going at it the right way—  
The right way, of course!—now he's seen  
This work he's desired forever—a real crush!

He sends the Purveyor a quick telegram:  
"Hold it for me." "It's yours!" comes the answer  
By the end of the day.  
The good Client swoons and staggers away.

As that final example of Verlaine's verse makes clear, one important aspect of its musicality is his treatment of *rhythm*.

The challenge for the translator is to find an equivalent in accordance the normal English principle of accentual rhythm—that is, patterns of alternation between stressed and unstressed units—as opposed to the French principle of meter defined by the number of syllables in the line of verse and by their subgrouping(s).

Where French counts syllables within a syllabically fixed form, English measures stresses, or beats.

After some number of syllables, French, too, shows stress variation within a given line of verse, but such variation is not a defining feature of French prosody.

There are basically two ways in which French can escape the constraint of a syllable-based line: by *enjambment* and by its apparent opposite, which may be called *fragmentation*.

*Enjambment* involves bringing a grammatically cohesive phrase to its conclusion only in the line following its opening. The phrase is said to contain a run-on line.

Our examples show many instances of this procedure. Verlaine used it frequently in his poetry, and it contributes greatly to the impression of a smooth musical flow from one line to the next.

*Fragmentation* is much less frequent in Verlaine. It involves bringing a grammatically cohesive statement to a full stop *before* the end of a syllabically complete line. Our fourth example, the sonnet about the arrival of a book catalogue, shows a number of instances of this breaking up of the verse line.

My approach to rhythm in translation—as obvious in the examples cited—is very fluid, with the accentual patterns varying liberally from poem to poem and even line to line, without regard to metrical regularity.

I simply do what, to my ear, the sense of a given line requires in order to achieve a pleasing acoustical flow. Uppermost in my mind is always Verlaine's injunction to give musicality a place of privilege.

As evident in the examples, I respect as much as possible the poet's approach to enjambment (and fragmentation). That is part of being faithful to his overriding sense of the musical imperative.

There is much that could be said about **lexical** challenges—that is, finding the right translation for a given word or phrase.

Only a few examples, however, can be accommodated within the parameters of the present article.

1) *The problem of rendering a technical term.*

The noun "petit bleu" refers to messages on special blue paper used for a number of years by the postal service in Paris. These messages were sent through a city-wide underground system of pneumatic tubes. The closest comprehensible term in English has to be the more general term "telegram".

2) *The challenge of a common French term often used in English, but with a different sense.*

A word such as "bourgeois" works well in ordinary conversation but seems out of place in a poem translated from French. It calls for a truly English equivalent.

3) *A play on words.*

The phrase "maire et père de famille" is a pun used in *Poèmes saturniens* ("Il est grave...") to characterize an apparently upstanding citizen. The problem is obvious, a solution not at all!

The issue of lexical choices, like that of syntactic challenges, calls for exploration at a later time.

Samuel N. Rosenberg

(Indiana University, Bloomington)

POUR CITER CET ARTICLE

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