

The encounter between Verlaine and his translators has too often been a comic re-run of the first (deliciously foolish) exchange between the poet and William Andrews, the head of the school in Stickney, Lincolnshire, where Verlaine taught French in 1875:

Andrews: Soyez le bien-venu, Moussou.
Verlaine: Excuse me, I have got plenty of dust.
Andrews: Veux-tu laver?
Verlaine: Oui.

The translator, as a latter-day Andrews, garbles a welcome to his source, but, secretly patronizing, had rather the man would wash. The victims of the exchange are both Verlaine’s French and the Queen’s English.

Shapiro is no exception; here is his version of Verlaine’s playfully energetic rant against tight rhyming in ‘Art poétique’:

Prends l’éloquence et tords-lui son cou!
Tu feras bien, en train d’énergie,
De rendre un peu la Rime assagié.
Si l’on n’y veille, elle ira jusqu’où?

Take vain Eloquence and wring its neck!
Best you keep your Rhyme sober and sound,
Lest it wander, reiless and unbound –
How far? Who can say? – if not in check!

Shapiro’s decision to provide a rhyming translation makes a mess of the very point of Verlaine’s stanza. Verlaine, wittily and jauntily, blasts form-entranced Parnassian rhyming rules by teaching us what happens to a poem when the poet thinks rhyme words first. They will take over the poem, Verlaine warns us, and may even lead to blather and nonsense, as his neck-breaking rhyme of ‘cou’ with ‘jusqu’où’ shows. Shapiro lets his rhyme words rule the roost, ‘sound’ corrupted into its acoustic sense by the adjacent ‘Rhyme’, ‘reiless and unbound’ coming from nowhere in the French. Hypnotized by such rhyme words, Shapiro allows his stanza to drift into the very shoddy mock-eloquence that Verlaine is
warning poets against. Who outside historical romance says ‘Best you keep’? What is the justification for the creaky ‘Lest’?

The faults are made more grievous by his hapless decision to mimic Verlaine’s nine-syllable line. In English, this makes for syllabics, which, as Thom Gunn could have taught Shapiro, is only useful if you are trying to experiment with a non-iambic line of variable stress. The effect here is a bumbling four-beat line, reinless and unbound.

To reproduce both rhyme scheme and syllable count, you would need to be a poet yourself. Norman Shapiro is not up to the job, mainly because he wrings the neck of his own language to obey the Verlaine-given rules of the French. Even when Verlaine is deliberately, carefully, and on principle going for the simplest of lexical choices, Shapiro dances with vain Eloquence, as in this extract from ‘Voix de Gabriel . . .’:

Nature, animaux,
Eaux, plantes et pierres,
Vos simples travaux
Sont d’humbles prières.
Vous obéissez:
Pour Dieu, c’est assez.

God’s are the beasts, and His,
You plants, rocks, rivers too;
All your existence is
A humble prayer; you do
His every wish and whim:
And that’s enough for Him.

Shapiro’s God is bossy, tyrannical, snide, a slander on Verlaine’s God of simple, natural demands. The error is a real faux pas because Shapiro has forgotten that the idiom ‘every wish and whim’ implies a selfish and capricious master. He is similarly deaf to the treacherously strong tone of weariness and boredom in ‘that’s enough’. And why garble the syntax to such catastrophe in ‘and His, / You plants, rocks, rivers too’? Is this an attempt to insinuate a Wordsworthian invocation? If so, it fails, for it makes God into a bully who can’t speak English. ‘God’s are the beasts’ is awful too: God’s what? Are the gods beasts? The questions, brainless as they are, are raised by the manic inversion. How simple it could all have been without the rhyming and the six-syllable rules (why six for Verlaine’s five?):

Nature – animals,
Waters, plants and stones –
Your simple work
Is humble prayer.
You obey:
For God, that’s all he asks.

Verlaine’s lifelong search for naturalness, simplicity, sincerity, and humility was inflected by true faith in his Catholic phase. Shapiro translates such faith into hypocritical trumpery (he believes the whole of Bonheur is ‘dogmatic and preachy’).

It was a risk, for Verlaine, to appear before the world mis à nu. He succeeded, brilliantly and engagingly, in injecting a Villon strain into the straitjacket of post-Hugo verse. He wanted French poetry to have the freedom, fluidity, energy, and sprightliness of demotic street French, particularly the French he heard on the backroads and in the bars after his tramping marathon with Rimbaud. This desire to cross high poetic diction with slang rhymed gracefully with his Baudelairean dream of a poetry that could speak the whole self. Baudelaire had shown the way with his prose poems, and Verlaine bet his last sou on the gamble that he could manage the Baudelaire prose poem, with its urban slouch and city jargons, within the sacred house of poesy.

This project meant that he could be bawdy and nervy at the same time. His ‘A Mademoiselle ***’ is a case in point:

Tes mollets farauds,
Ton buste tentant,
– Gai, comme impudent,
Ton cul ferme et gros

There is real impudent gaiety in these lines, most clearly in the politically incorrect crossing of the coarse with the technically expert. In French verse, you need to pronounce the ‘e’ of ‘buste’ – this makes for an openly lascivious dwelling on the word, made comic by the slyly self-mocking ‘t’ alliteration. The line says ‘this is poetry too’ at the same time as being lightly and gaily mocking: ‘oh what a poet am I as I leer’. The whole point of poetry like this is not the mere shock value of bringing argot into the stanza, but is rather in the demonstration of how easy and liveable-with are words like ‘cul’, how natural and delightful and true to ordinary desire.

Shapiro would like Verlaine to wash. ‘Veux-tu laver ton “cul”, Moussou!’:

Bewitching bust; your calves,
Shameless; your impudent
Young rump, pert, corpulent,
And firmly plump (both halves)

Verlaine is translated into a pompous Edwardian lech with ‘bewitching’, a prurient voyeur (‘shameless’), a dirty old man (‘Young rump’ and ‘pert’), a meat-eating consumer (‘corpulent / And firmly plump’), and a ridiculous precisian (‘(both halves)’). Washed out of the poem is the energy of the street talk, and the broad comedy of the way Verlaine is listening to himself. Shapiro’s gentleman is talking down to his coquette. Verlaine’s desire to assimilate her register (‘bête et doux’) into his voice is pronounced unclean. Verlaine is clearly deliberately provoking a nineteenth-century version of an accusation of sexism here, but twists his poem around into an unencumbered statement of male desire. Shapiro uses his translation to berate Verlaine, unconsciously (I hope) puritanical about the impudence of the French.

Martin Sorrell’s version is a great improvement:

Clever glimpse of leg,
Mouth-watering bust –
Impudent happy
Large and firm arse.

This is still clumsy (‘clever glimpse’ doesn’t quite do what ‘mollets farauds’ does, and ‘arse’ is too anal), but makes the right move towards a simple statement of desire. At least Sorrell knows what Verlaine is doing.

It is as though Verlaine’s very openness, his frank sincerities and playfully childlike winningness, make him a prey to all the secret bullies out there. And, unfortunately, this was and is how many of the French still treat him. Just read Claude Cuenot’s extraordinarily patronizing introduction to the 1971 Livre de poche selection of Verlaine’s prose, *Mes Prisons*:

C’est un timide replié sur lui-même et qui, dépouvu de volonté, cherche la société, d’abord pour échapper à lui-même, ensuite pour se placer sous la domination d’une volonté plus forte que la sienne. La liaison avec Rimbaud est typique.

(He was a shy introvert, completely lacking in will-power, who would seek out company, firstly to escape from himself, then to place himself under the domination of a stronger will than his own. The liaison with Rimbaud is typical.)
This is the tone of the whole introduction, disgusted with Verlaine’s weakness, translating his restless hunger for experience as pitiful cowering, deeply embarrassed by the homosexuality. The ways in which Rimbaud transformed Verlaine’s sense of Baudelairean risk, of self, of what constitutes the childlike and revolutionary – all these are dismissed as mere symptoms of neurosis. It is Cüenot who acts the ‘volonté plus forte que la sienne’, the bully who scents a weakling in the open-faced poet.

Shapiro is not a bully, but some of his translating tactics seem to amount to the same thing, unconsciously. Verlaine writes about bullies in his wonderful defence of Rimbaud: ‘Tu mérites la prime place en ce rien livre, / Bien que tel soit grimaud t’as traité de ribaud / Imberbe et de monstre en herbe et de potache ivre.’ The lines angrily mimic the cruelacks of his day, but succeed in turning the accusation against the accuser: note the childishness of the repeated ‘et’, the deliberately clumsy ‘imberbe’-‘herbe’ internal rhyme, and the clenched fury in the miming of cheap journalistic malice with the ‘Rimbaud’-‘ribaud’ rhyme.

This is Shapiro: ‘Here are you placed / In honor, though twits fancied you a whore / Smooth-faced, a budding fiend; drunk pup, disgraced.’ A ‘grimaud’ is not a twit but a Grub-street scribbler. ‘Smooth-faced’ does not carry the sense of boyishness implied by ‘imberbe’. ‘Budding fiend’ is a practically meaningless collocation. Worst of all, the semi-colon after ‘fiend’ seems to imply that ‘drunk pup, disgraced’ is Verlaine’s own view of Rimbaud. The translation fails to convey Verlaine’s fury, watering it down to mere doodling surmise (‘fancied’). These infelicities are, I would suggest, cruel, in the end, to Verlaine’s attachment to Rimbaud.

Sorrell gets closer: ‘You deserve pride of place in my book / Even though some stupid hacks thought you a fresh-faced / Monster, drunken schoolboy, a disgrace.’ Even here, Verlaine’s discrete acknowledgement of the rumours of homosexual debauchery in ‘ribaud’ are smoothed out of sight. But at least we get some of the flavour of the French in the venom of ‘stupid hacks’, and the echo of Grub Street is there in ‘fresh-faced / Monster, drunken schoolboy’.

But enough Shapiro-bashing. In most of his headnotes to the selections from the individual collections, he is clearly sincerely attached to Verlaine, though more, it must be said, to the Parnassian than to the later free-wheeling Verlaine. The parallel texts allow readers to follow the poems adequately, and there are palpable hits, as in the following lines from ‘En sourdine’:

Laissons-nous persuader
Au souffle berceur et doux
Qui vient à tes peids rider
Les ondes de gazon roux.

Let us yield then, you and I,
To the waftings, calm and sweet,
As their breeze-blown lullaby
Sways the gold grass at your feet.

This has the lightly ironic gentle charm of the French, melding Browning and Eliot together. Early Verlaine is more pliant to Shapiro's dated vocabulary and faded poetic diction, and we do hear Verlaine's music.

We might get a clearer sense of the difficulties of translating Verlaine from a brief comparison of Sorrell and Tom Paulin. Both have translated 'Bournemouth', Verlaine's ultra-Catholic reading of Protestant middle England. Here, Verlaine dips back into dark, damned depression after the failure of the Protestant bells of a Bournemouth church to redeem the dying year:

Le soir se fonce. Il fait glacial. L'estacade
Frissonne et le ressac a géri dans son bois
Chanteur, puis est tombé lourdement en cascade
Sur un rhythmé brutal comme l'ennui maussade
Qui martelait mes jours coupables d'autrefois.

There is close identification between Protestant England's damnable schismatic heresy and Verlaine's own sense of damnation after the life he has led (Rimbaud, attempted murder, imprisonment, Léinois, his divorce, temptation to suicide – the list is too long). He goes back, in memory, to his years in England after the failure of his attempts at reconciliation with Rimbaud and Mathilde, and relives the terrible isolation he was forced to experience so soon after his conversion to Catholicism. There is a shouldering of guilt, then, but a soothing of it too, in the displacement of 'l'ennui maussade' onto England. Protestant England, the poem might be arguing, encouraged damnation in Verlaine, especially in its key role in staging the terrible rupture with Rimbaud in 1872–3.

This ambivalent identification is internalized into the heart of the poem's technique – at the heart of damnation, schism, heresy is a 'rhythmé brutal' (mimed in the assonantal string 'glacial – estacade – ressac – cascade – brutal – maussade – martelait – coupables') and a heavy, falling music (there in the heavy-handed enjambement and what Verlaine referred to as 'césures libertines' in his Rimbaud essay in Les Poètes maudits). There is a staged derangement of the alexandrine, which, as
always with Verlaine, pitches very personal confession of changeable mood against broken gestures towards the sublime.

Here is Martin Sorrell’s able, clear, and solid translation:

Evening gathers, cold as ice. The pier
Shines. A belly of water in its singing
Wood has come flopping down
To a rough rhythm – like peevish ennui
Beating at me in the old days of guilt.

Sorrell gets the identification of rough rhythm with broken verse right, with the enjambement ‘singing / Wood’, the insistent two-beat, and an attempt at assonance in ‘peevish ennui / Beating’. There are obvious glitches: ‘shines’ for ‘frissonne’; a flopping belly is ludicrous, whereas ‘le ressac ... tombe lourdement’ is merely descriptive, despite the personification in ‘a gémì’. Also, there is a significant difference between having the ennui hammering blows upon his guilty days and having ennui beating at him in the old days of guilt. Sorrell distances his poem from, and slightly trivializes, Verlaine’s unease that he may be slipping back into days hammered by ghastly alienating despair and abandonment, the French meaning of ‘ennui’. In a note Sorrell explains the untranslatability of ‘ennui’: ‘From Baudelaire onwards, ‘ennui’ means more spiritual desolation, alienation or sensibility, than passing irritation. I have chosen, therefore, to leave it as “ennui”, here and in other poems. The French word is well understood in English.’ This must be wrong, since Sorrell has to tell us what the French mean by the word. ‘Ennui’ in English means pretentious boredom. But having entered these caveats, this is an honourable translation, keen to do the poem justice.

Now Paulin’s version:

The evening digs in, icecold, the slatted jetty vibrates, and the wind in the wood lashes out and sings as it whips – a cascade of blows like the hammerbrash of all I’ve done wrong – my sins, my betrayals, the people I’ve hurt.

There is an enormous howler here, taking ‘ressac’ as wind in the wood, rather than the crash of wave against the wooden supports of Bournemouth pier. Though it is arguable that Verlaine was not talking about the pier, since ‘estacade’ could be a mere breakwater, it cannot possibly be true that it is a jetty. This is dangerously free, expanding outrageously on Verlaine’s mute ‘mes jours coupables’; mistakenly translating ‘se foncer’
as ‘foncer’; and in its use of dialect. But it is this last which explains the success of the translation: Paulin has taken Verlaine’s poem deep into his own sense of language, private experience, and culture. Who else but a Northern Irish poet could take the Catholic-Protestant clash of the poem so seriously today? Paulin leans on Verlaine to try and investigate his own difficult attitude to the sectarian divide in the six counties. This is confessed, as it were, with ‘hammerbrash’, since ‘brash’, meaning either ‘attack/assault’ or ‘burst of rain’, is a Scottish and Northern Irish idiom.

It signals, too, that this is an imitation, rather than a strict translation. And in this context, what seemed to be howlers and dangerously free translations become necessary acts of freedom and transformation. The ‘ressac’ howler becomes an imitative tightening up of Paulin’s own sense of what he wants to be going on in this stanza. Paulin concentrates the poem on the wind and the rain, appropriate for a Northern Irish poet in exile in England – such weather would remind him of his own country and his own tempestuous guilt at leaving it behind. Similarly, Verlaine’s hammering assonance is caught in Paulin’s ‘w’ repetition (‘wind-wood-whips’), but there is the supplementary cluster in ‘lashes-cascade-hammer-brash’, which brings the hammering home to Paulin, though he is away from home. Most successful is the stanza’s real sense of personal guilt, issuing from the sectarian double bind – whips and lashes and hammers have a sinister sense when they are imagined in violent Belfast contexts.

All this is to say that Verlaine, simply because he is so nakedly there as a moody, passionate, and emotional set of selves, is most powerfully translated when the translator finds the French text speaking for dark caches of personality within his or her own mind. Reading Verlaine can be joyous, liberating, affectionate, but it is always embarrassing, unless one is willing to speak with the Frenchman’s unashamed voice of display and unbridled confession.

It would be churlish, however, to say that only imitations can ever really work. Sorrell’s edition will be a valuable resource for readers with some French, and the sheer number of poems translated is a boon. Signs of haste are apparent in some poems. At random: it is silly to translate ‘Et pour cela préfère l’Impair’ from ‘Art poétique’ as ‘And that means no more one-two-one-twos’: we really need to know that Verlaine meant odd-numbered syllables, not iambic rhythm. It is peculiar to give ‘Or are they just dead?’ for the ‘Ou bien tout simplement des morts?’ of ‘Nuit du Walpurgis classique’: surely a straight translation (such as ‘Or else quite simply the dead?’) would have the spookiness the line wants. And there is a more technical fault which is very irritating: Sorrell will, for purely subjective reasons, decide to translate a long-lined poem with short lines. A great deal is lost in translation; this is especially true of the inadequate
version of that great hymn to sex, 'Ces passions ...'. Finally, and no
doubt understandably, Sorrell admits he cannot warm to Verlaine's
Catholic poems: the effect of the selection as a whole is therefore lop-
sided towards the profane.

But, in general, the English is strong, colloquial or rhetorical when
necessary, and sensitive to the double movement of Verlaine's poetry
towards a sensuality of memory and impression, and towards a quasi-
mystical or visionary language of confession. Verlaine is 'a great and
splendid poet', Sorrell writes in his introduction. And he proves it, and
for that deserves our thanks.

Adam Piette
University of Glasgow

Sigmund Freud: The Interpretation of Dreams. Translated by Joyce Crick.
Introduction and Notes by Ritchie Robertson. Pp. liv+458 (World's

Coinciding with the centenary of the best-known single work of an
author who has by common consent decisively shaped the contours of
'modernity', World's Classics has published a new translation by Joyce
Crick, with an introduction and textual notes provided by Ritchie
Robertson. (As Freud moves out of copyright, Penguin is also planning
a new translation of The Interpretation of Dreams as part of a fifteen-
volume selection of Freud's writings which will form part of the Penguin
Modern Classics list.) As in the case of his Three Essays on the Theory of
Sexuality, Freud updated the text of The Interpretation of Dreams over
much of his lifetime. Each new edition (1909, 1911, 1914, 1919) carried
a revised and enlarged text until, after slighter changes in 1921 and 1922,
an eighth and final version in 1930 constituted Volume 2 and part of
Volume 3 of the Gesammelte Schriften. In the joint Volume 2/3 of the
Gesammelte Werke published in London in 1942, the text of this eighth
edition of the Traumdeutung was reproduced.

The first translator of The Interpretation of Dreams was Abraham
Arden Brill (1874–1948), an Austro-Hungarian physician living in
America, who rivalled Ernest Jones in his enthusiasm for spreading the
good news of psychoanalysis among English-speaking gentiles, and in
1911 founded the New York Psychoanalytic Society. Having previously
translated Jung's 1907 text on schizophrenia, The Psychology of Dementia
Praecox, Brill originally wanted to translate the Studies on Hysteria by
Freud and Breuer, but Freud suggested instead (in a letter to Jung of 17
February 1908) the Three Essays or his Collected Short Papers. Freud