

## Teaching Baudelaire through Translation

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It is a pleasure to celebrate the work of Clive Scott. I have vastly benefited over the years from his work on French verse and its formal qualities, but I propose to focus instead on his remarkable and controversial work on the translation of poetry.

In Nicholson Baker's novel *The Anthologist*, the poet and anthology-maker Paul Chowder describes encountering poems in *The New Yorker* or another magazine:

You locate the poem, because you're naturally curious to see what this week's or this month's trawl is... There it is. You take in the title – "Way Too Much." Way too much: Okay! And then you check the name of the writer – hmm, Squeef Corntoasty, never heard of him. Or: I sure have seen Squeef Corntoasty's name popping up in a lot of places lately. Or if it says "translated from the Czech by Bigelow Jones," forget it, you instantly move on, because translations are never any good.

Well, wait—that's not fair. That's ridiculously unfair. I've read some wonderful translations.... But my heart does droop when I see that it's a translation.<sup>1</sup>

We say poetry is what gets lost in translation—an adage that suggests the hapless lot of the translator. Translating poetry is a mug's game. Most enterprises offer at least some hope of success, but the translator of poetry operates in a context where failure is defined as inevitable. We may evaluate translations of novels for the experience of reading they afford—this one is more ornate and orotund, that

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholson Baker, *The Anthologist* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2009), pp. 68-69.

one sparer and swifter; this one particularly vivid, that one more laconic—but with poetry there is more reverence for an Adamic original, where form and meaning should miraculously coincide, and any translation is necessarily a fall, or at least a falling away. As Clive Scott puts it, ‘It is back towards the pre-Babel text that the post-Babel translated text must struggle, marked as it is by the curse of fallenness: translation is a state of punishment, in which we are compelled to reiterate our sense of loss’.<sup>2</sup>

Doomed to struggle with the differences between languages and with the material of languages themselves, translators of poetry have little hope of producing something that will be praised. The most they can hope for is that people will take enough notice of their translation to point out the aspects of the original that it fails to capture.

Clive Scott is one of the few thinkers who has offered alternatives to this dismal vision. His wondrous and difficult *Translating Baudelaire* explores a range of translating options and processes while comparing translations and, undertaking experimental transformational translations of his own, argues that we should assess the process, not the product of translation; we should not act as critical police spotting errors, but treat translations as compositions where we are privileged to have access to a text to which the writer is responding, and where we can also use these new compositions to shed light on, to help us see, meaning in the text translated.<sup>3</sup> One context in which this problem can be turned to advantage - not to the advantage of translators, I’m afraid, but at least to someone’s advantage - is the pedagogical one. When I teach a course on Baudelaire I generally get quite a few students who want to take a course with me, but whose French is weak and who need the help of translations. My policy has been that the state of their French is their problem not mine –I’m not going to stop to translate. But I have found that the presence of linguistically-challenged students and the introduction of translations into the discursive space of the classroom can be pedagogically beneficial. If we look at a translation or translations alongside a poem by

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<sup>2</sup> Clive Scott, ‘The Criticism of Translation’, in *Translating Baudelaire* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000), p. 176.

<sup>3</sup> ‘The Criticism of Translation’, pp. 181-82.

Baudelaire, questions about the effectiveness and accuracy of a translation are a heuristic spur to discussion. The students with a better knowledge of French are happy to display this for the benefit of their less fortunate peers. And, particularly important for me, the route through translation, as Clive Scott has pointed out, provides an easy way to raise questions about formal features of the poems, which in ordinary discussions either get neglected or else require an insistence by the teacher that seems fussy and pedantic. When discussing a poem, asking questions about the meter or rhyme-scheme can seem an academic distraction from the interpretive questions—what does the poem really mean?—but since formal patterning—metre, rhyme, and other sorts of phonological repetition—is one dimension on which poem and translation will differ markedly, the subject comes up naturally when translation is in play: questions about the choices affecting rhythm, meter, rhyme, and phonological patterning are immediately relevant. Not that they are easy to answer, but they are scarcely avoidable. Clive Scott suggests that translation's principal task may be to translate the materiality of language and thus bring the textual unconscious to the surface.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, for students, commenting on something that a translation might have missed seems less high-stakes than making an interpretive claim in a large seminar, so translations can actually generate disagreements more easily than discussions about the poem itself. If, these days, students are less inclined to disagree with each other in class than they used to be, arguing about a translation seems to involve less of a challenge to the other person.

Above all, comparing translations helps to highlight features of the originals. What happens when we are discussing Baudelaire's 'Correspondances', whose famous first stanza runs

La Nature est un temple où de vivants piliers  
Laisser parfois sortir de confuses paroles;  
L'homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles  
Qui l'observent avec des regards familiers.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Scott, 'Translating Baudelaire', in *Cambridge Companion to Baudelaire*, ed. Rosemary Lloyd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 203.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), p. 11.

We might compare a couple of translations. Keith Waldrop, winner of the National Book Award, translates the first stanza: ‘Nature is a temple whose columns are alive and often issue disjointed messages. We thread our way through a forest of symbols that peer out, as if recognizing us’.<sup>6</sup> Clive Scott offers a version that, as he says, ‘tries to push prose as close to a verse translation as it can’: ‘Nature is a temple: from time to time, its living pillars sibylline, let slip bewildering words. We pass along these aisles, through symbols forest-thick, followed by eyes that know our minds’.<sup>7</sup> Scott’s version is more engaging, doubtless because of the half-rhymes or assonances that give the passage some structure (time/ sibylline/ minds; aisles/ eyes) and because of the more clearly articulated rhythm (Scott says he is trying to create a text with ‘a firm bearing rhythm’), and he boldly marks the *confuses paroles* as ‘sybilline’, unclear yet enigmatic and potentially prophetic, rather than simply disjointed (Baudelaire’s rhyming of *paroles* and *symboles* is relevant here). Scott also makes a choice about ‘regards familiers’, which is ambiguous in the French—‘familiar to us’, or ‘overly knowing’—rendering in a different way (‘know our minds’) some of the uncanniness that in the French may stem from this ambiguity. Waldrop’s ‘thread our way’ is a skillful rendition of ‘passe à travers’, which most translations do not try to capture, but his ‘as if recognizing us’ not only is clunky but strangely introduces an ‘as if’ focused on action rather than on the uncanny quality of these symbols. His ‘peer out’, however, while somewhat awkward, does hint at the paranoia that may lurk behind this verse of Baudelaire’s (think of Nerval’s ‘Crains, dans le mur aveugle, un regard qui t’épie’ [Fear in the blind wall a look that spies on you]).<sup>8</sup>

But both these translations, perhaps because of the normalizing pull of prose, shift the third person to the first person plural, from ‘l’homme’ to ‘we’, which is out of keeping with the deliberate impersonality of the poem. Though the translators might argue that today ‘man’ is tied to presumptions of male privilege that are irrelevant to the poem (if not to Baudelaire in general!), still the insertion

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<sup>6</sup> Keith Waldrop, trans., *The Flowers of Evil* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2006), p. 14.

<sup>7</sup> Scott, *Translating Baudelaire*, pp. 159-60.

<sup>8</sup> Gérard de Nerval, ‘Vers Dorés’, in *Les Chimères* (Geneva: Droz, 1966), p. 79.

of a first-person pronoun in a poem distinctive for its lack of them transforms the poem in a significant way.

Roy Campbell, Francis Cornford, James McGowan, Allen Tate, and Richard Wilbur all use ‘man’, the appropriate term to oppose to ‘Nature’ in the parallel structure Baudelaire sets up, and a term which may be less ideological in verse, perhaps, than in normalizing prose.<sup>9</sup> William Crosby offers ‘mankind’, which could in principle be a good solution, despite its breaking of the parallelism, though his future tense—‘Here mankind *will* cross by’—either projects a singular future event, which is something quite different, or imagines a destiny, which the unclear ‘cross by’ scarcely illuminates.

Nature is a temple where the living pillars  
Permit from time to time confused words to escape;  
Here mankind will cross by, where symbols take the shape  
Of forests gazing on his progress like familiars.<sup>10</sup>

His choice, by deviating from the original, brings out the fact that Baudelaire’s sonnet seems to imagine not a singular passage but a normal general condition of passage through a world rendered enigmatically meaningful. Translation, as Clive Scott puts it, ‘confers meaning on the source text by using another language’.<sup>11</sup>

Scott goes further in his experiments of conferring meaning by changing one fixed form into another—translating ‘Le Balcon’, a poem written in five-line stanzas where the fifth line repeats the first, into a rondeau, or refashioning the sonnet ‘A une passante’, for example, into a villanelle. ‘The process of translation itself’, Scott writes, ‘provides the opportunity to put these forms under much greater expressive pressure, to oblige them to carry more emotional freight, and ultimately to test their capabilities [...]. How well will a villanelle withstand the stresses and strains of a Baudelairean sonnet? And what counter-claims will the villanelle wish to make on that sonnet, and will they be justified, and could they be

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<sup>9</sup> For Cornford, Tate, Campbell, and Wilbur, see *Baudelaire in English*, ed. Carol Clark and Robert Sykes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1997), pp. 16-19.

<sup>10</sup> William H. Crosby, trans., *The Flowers of Evil and Paris Spleen* (Brockport, NY: BOA Editions, 1991), pp. 29-31.

<sup>11</sup> Scott, *Translating Baudelaire*, p. 177.

enhancing?—this last a particularly provocative question.<sup>12</sup> Here is Baudelaire's sonnet:

La rue assourdissante autour de moi hurlait.  
Longue, mince, en grand deuil, douleur majestueuse,  
Une femme passa, d'une main fastueuse  
Soulevant, balançant le feston et l'ourlet;

Agile et noble, avec sa jambe de statue.  
Moi, je buvais, crispé comme un extravagant,  
Dans son oeil, ciel livide où germe l'ouragan,  
La douceur qui fascine et le plaisir qui tue.

Un éclair... puis la nuit ! - Fugitive beauté  
Dont le regard m'a fait soudainement renaître,  
Ne te verrai-je plus que dans l'éternité ?

Ailleurs, bien loin d'ici ! trop tard ! jamais peut-être !  
Car j'ignore où tu fuis, tu ne sais où je vais,  
Ô toi que j'eusse aimée, ô toi qui le savais!<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Scott, *Translating Baudelaire*, p. 96-97.

<sup>13</sup> *Fleurs du Mal*, p. 93. Here is one translation that preserves the sonnet form:

Amid the deafening traffic of the town,  
Tall, slender, in deep mourning, with majesty,  
A woman passed, raising, with dignity  
In her poised hand, the flounces of her gown;

Graceful, noble, with a statue's form.  
And I drank, trembling as a madman thrills,  
From her eyes, ashen sky where brooded storm,  
The softness that fascinates, the pleasure that kills.

A flash . . . then night! - O lovely fugitive,  
I am suddenly reborn from your swift glance;  
Shall I never see you till eternity?

Elsewhere, far off! Too late! never, perchance!  
Neither knows where the other goes or lives;  
O you whom I would have loved! O you who knew it!

C. F. MacIntyre, trans., *One Hundred Poems from Les Fleurs du Mal* (Berkeley: U of California Press, 1947), pp. 92-3; final line modified for accuracy.

Scott gives us two villanelle versions: a less radical free verse villanelle, which ‘enacts the poet’s attempt to transform a set of aural pressures and disorders [as in ‘la rue assourdissante autour de moi hurlait’] into an exclusivity of the eye.’ But his rhymed villanelle translation is an extraordinarily bizarre rendering which highlights a number of issues: this villanelle, for instance, projects the encounter not, he says, ‘as a unique, once-and-for-all event, but as something repeated, habitual, as a kind of Muybridgian cinematic sequence, a series of frames slightly differentiated from each other, where the repetition itself takes the woman away, confirms her in an otherness’.<sup>14</sup> This sense of the poem as rendering something habitual corresponds with Albert Thibaudet’s prescient celebration of this sonnet—anticipating Walter Benjamin’s take on it---as having become ‘consubstantiel à la poussière dorée du boulevard’, so that male Parisians, as they stroll along eying the women who pass by and away forever, repeat to themselves the final alexandrine—Ô toi que j’eusse aimée, ô toi qui le savais!—to shape and savour their urban experience.<sup>15</sup> This villanelle may also better convey the sense of the theatricality of the street—downplaying the cliché of the romantic encounter which the sonnet form helps to mythify, with its very irritating, deludedly narcissistic final clause, ‘o toi qui le savais!’ Here is Scott’s fearless translation:

Her motion elastic, her furbelows Stygian—  
Marooned on a refuge, by the din of the street,  
My whole self convulsed as she passed callipygian,<sup>16</sup>

Her figure as svelte as her cadence was Phrygian  
And legs statuesque and galbous<sup>17</sup> and fleet.  
Her motion elastic, her furbelows Stygian,

An hypnotic *douceur* and Salome’s religion  
Were locked in her look which I drank till replete;  
My whole self convulsed as she passed callipygian,

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<sup>14</sup> *Translating Baudelaire*, p. 99.

<sup>15</sup> Albert Thibaudet, *Intérieurs: Baudelaire, Fromentin, Amiel* (Paris: Plon, 1924), p. 22.

<sup>16</sup> *callipygian* = having shapely buttocks.

<sup>17</sup> *galbous*, from the French *galbe*, of curved shape

Her eyes full of storm and so hauntingly strygian.<sup>18</sup>  
Was she grieving *grande dame* or a whore on her beat,  
Her motion elastic, her furbelows Stygian?

And then she was gone, slick-fast as a widgeon,<sup>19</sup>  
To beyond all beyond, to where none ever meet.  
My whole self convulsed as she passed callipygian,

Too late, but she knew, this canny Parisian,  
That love at last sight puts the city on heat,  
Her motion elastic, her furbelows Stygian.  
My whole self convulsed as she passed callipygian.<sup>20</sup>

Even more fearless than the translation itself is the justification: ‘On what grounds’, Scott asks, ‘has the initial choice, to transform this sonnet into a villanelle, been made? Well, there may be grounds for hoping for an improvement.’ Detailing some flaws, he observes, ‘Opting for another form, then, may offer an opportunity to put things “right”—to better integrate prostitute and widow, sanctioned form and novelty, and to achieve greater tonal insistence, not to sacrifice troubling urban incident to rhetorical romantic convenience.’<sup>21</sup> His version highlights the linking in the Baudelairian canon of the widow and streetwalker, both of whom mark an emptiness: one of loss, the other of mutual degradation. The *passante* causes a rebirth in the poet that is not just a rekindling of sexual desire but also already nostalgia for imagined loss. This translation also reduces what Scott calls the ‘hollow amplitude’ of Baudelaire’s 10th and 11th lines —‘ne te verrai je plus que dans l’éternité?’ —a grandiloquence that undermines the complex specificity and drama of the encounter.<sup>22</sup> But this translation is a daring gamble, especially since the Baudelairian rhymes, which include a rare *rime léonine*, involving the last three syllables—*majestueuse/fastuese*—are transformed in English into the sequence *stygian*, *callipygian*, *Phrygian*, *strygian*, not to mention *widgeon*. In English multi-syllabic rhymes especially when linked with dactyls, push verse

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<sup>18</sup> *strygian*, from the French *stryge*, vampire.

<sup>19</sup> *widgeon* = a species of duck.

<sup>20</sup> Scott, *Translating Baudelaire*, pp. 97-98.

<sup>21</sup> Scott, *Translating Baudelaire*, p. 99.

<sup>22</sup> Scott, *Translating Baudelaire*, pp. 98-99.



towards doggerel. But Scott shrewdly notes that translation captures the temporality of a text in a way interpretation cannot, here giving the taste both of nineteenth-century doggerel and of the modern fortunes of this text, incorporating Benjamin's phrase, 'love at last sight'.<sup>23</sup> At any rate, it is a bold interpretive gesture that captures readers' attention and cannot but provoke a reaction.

This sonnet was made famous by Benjamin's brief commentary, but Clive Scott's radical translations work better to confer meaning on the original, strengthening some features, bringing others to prominence and encouraging an irreverence that we should find intellectually productive.

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.