

## Translating a poem from French

### 'Art poétique' by Paul Verlaine (1844–96)

**Paul Verlaine** was well known among artists and musicians in Paris before he became one of the most famous 19th century French poets. He was publishing poems by the time he was 19, with his first collection coming out in 1866. He was soon leading an all-too-adventurous life, first joining the Garde Nationale and becoming a Communard in the upheavals of 1870, but fleeing Paris for Calais soon after, with his wife Mathilde. Then he left Mathilde and their son and returned to Paris to live with the young poet Arthur Rimbaud. Their stormy relationship took them to London and elsewhere, and finally to Brussels, where Verlaine, in a drunken, jealous rage, shot and wounded Rimbaud in the wrist, for which he went to prison. Later episodes in his life included a time in England teaching, first in Boston then in Bournemouth. Back in France he fell in love with a pupil, who tragically died young. Verlaine died at 51, a drug addict and alcoholic.

The tragically unsavoury, sad life contrasts with the beauty of the poems and the effect they had on contemporaries, particularly musicians and painters. Debussy's setting, for instance, of Verlaine's 'Clair de Lune' is so well known we are apt to forget Verlaine's part in inspiring it. Famous painters painted him. They knew there was something 'different' and unforgettable about Verlaine's poetry. That memorability accounts for an interesting historical fact: lines from his 'Chanson de l'automne' – 'Les sanglots longs / Des violons / De l'automne' – broadcast on the radio in France in 1944 were the signal that the D-Day invasions would start in two weeks. Poetry can be useful!

#### 1

The celebrated poem below is not like any poem written previously in France; it carries its own programme for poetry with it: that is its subject.

The first stage in translating it is to get to know it as it sounds in French, to become familiar with its 'music'. First your teacher will read the poem aloud. Then, perhaps taking a stanza a piece, you yourselves, in groups or pairs or individually if you feel confident enough, can read it aloud a second time, even a third.

### **Art Poétique**

*De la musique avant toute chose,  
Et pour cela préfère l'Impair  
Plus vague et plus soluble dans l'air,  
Sans rien en lui qui pèse ou qui pose.*

*Il faut aussi que tu n'aïles point  
Choisir tes mots sans quelque méprise :  
Rien de plus cher que la chanson grise  
Où l'Indécis au Précis se joint.*

*C'est des beaux yeux derrière des voiles,  
C'est le grand jour tremblant de midi,  
C'est, par un ciel d'automne attiédi,  
Le bleu fouillis des claires étoiles!*

*Car nous voulons la Nuance encor,  
Pas la Couleur, rien que la nuance !  
Oh ! la nuance seule fiancée  
Le rêve au rêve et la flûte au cor !*

*Fuis du plus loin la Pointe assassine,  
L'Esprit cruel et le Rire impur,  
Qui font pleurer les yeux de l'Azur,  
Et tout cet ail de basse cuisine !*

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

*O qui dira les torts de la Rime ?  
Quel enfant sourd ou quel nègre fou*

*Nous a forgé ce bijou d'un sou  
Qui sonne creux et faux sous la lime ?*

*De la musique encore et toujours !  
Que ton vers soit la chose envolée  
Qu'on sent qui fuit d'une âme en allée  
Vers d'autres cieux à d'autres amours.*

*Que ton vers soit la bonne aventure  
Eparse au vent crispé du matin  
Qui va fleurant la menthe et le thyme...  
Et tout le reste est littérature.*

The readings aloud will enable you to hear the rhythms and sound-textures of the poem clearly. French is a much less heavily stressed language than English, but you will be able to hear the nine-syllable (with four light-stress) line clearly all the way through. You will also hear, of course, the poem's stanza structure, and each stanza's *abba* pattern of rhyme.

## 2

Before you start on your own translation it would be a good idea to consult one or two existing translations. A good literal, prose translation should help resolve most problems of word-meaning that you might have. 'Literary' or poetic translations (translations of the kind you will be doing yourselves) will help you less. They will almost certainly give you misty views of the meaning of parts of the poem.

Here is my own attempt at a word-for-word, non-literary translation, in plain prose.

*Music before everything – and for that go for uneven metre – as mistier  
and more melting in air, without anything in it which weighs or fixes.*

*It's also necessary that you choose your words with some haziness:  
nothing being more appealing than that grey music where the  
ambiguous and the exact meet.*

*It amounts to beautiful eyes behind veils, the immense day  
trembling at noon, the blue disarray of clear stars in a cool autumn sky!*

*For we still desire the nuance, not colour, only the nuance! Only the nuance draws the dream to the dream and the flute to the horn!*

*Avoid the killing epigram, the cruel wit and crude laughter that bring tears to the eyes of the Sky, and all such low confections.*

*As for eloquence, take it and wring its neck! You'll do well, while you're in this frame of mind, to have rhyme behave a little more wisely. If we don't look out, where will it take us?*

*Who is there to speak of the crimes of rhyme? What deaf child or primitive group devised this cheapest gewgaw that sounds hollow and fake under the file?*

*Music then, again and always. Let your verse be a winged thing that we apprehend as it flies from a soul on its path to other skies and other loves.*

*Let your verse be the fine adventure scattered on the eager morning wind that travels scented with mint and thyme – all the rest is 'literature'.*

### 3

You should now have not only a feel for the music of the poem, but also a good grasp of its literal meaning. It is, though, a rather mysterious poem, and it would be good to spend time discussing some of its central statements, and their meanings. For instance, early in the poem we are invited to:

*préfère l'Impair  
Plus vague et plus soluble dans l'air,  
Sans rien en lui qui pèse ou qui pose.*

Supposing you re-read my word-by-word version of those lines:

*go for uneven metre – as mistier and more melting in air,  
without anything in it which weighs or fixes.*

I imagine you'll find it too clumsy and unmusical to be part of a poem. So how might you translate these lines more persuasively, so that they might become – sound like – part of a poem? The word *L'Impair* is tricky; it might almost be in code: it refers to Verlaine's preference here for an odd number of syllables (9) rather than the traditional 12 or 8. It was

one of his 'revolutionary' changes to the accepted rhythms of French verse.

Equally difficult in some ways will be to find English words for French terms suggesting uncertainty or ambiguity: *vague*, *soluble*, *L'Indecis*, *La Nuance*, and so on.

Other questions arise straightaway: will it be possible in our English translation to use this same line-length, rhyming pattern and stanza structures as the original?

#### 4

To help you decide, you could turn back to the first stanza, and the first line, and experiment with that. Can you make a nine-syllable, or a four-stress English line of it? What happens to that first line in the rough prose translation?

*Music before everything –*

That will hardly do – seven syllables and three heavy stresses, compared to the smooth flow of the French, which also pronounces – albeit gently – at least two of those two final 'e's.

*De la musique avant toute chose.*

Each of your writer's solution to translating these few words will be different. Each group or pair or individual is making his or her or their new poem in English. Each writer needs to feel free to make choices about fundamental matters of structure, so that Verlaine's rhyming stanzas may become, in English, free verse, blank verse, a sonnet (or two), and so on; and become a rhyming or non-rhyming poem.

Rhyme is particularly hard to decide about. In a rhyming translation rhymes can too often sound less 'right' than in the original, simply because, though it's not always difficult to find rhymes, it's often very difficult to find good rhymes. Then as for line-length, the English five-stress line (as in much Shakespeare) might preserve some of the 'regular' feel of Verlaine's syllabic line. And you might feel it would be

good to preserve the sense of the stanza – as far as possible – within the bounds of the translated one.

A smaller but interesting point: will you keep or abandon the capitals that Verlaine uses? I'm not even sure why some words are capitalised and others (*l'éloquence, la musique* – important words) are not.

But those are only my personal thoughts, offered to illustrate not just how you might go about your translation, but also how precarious it is. Which makes it even more important that you feel free to go your own way.

## 5

Finally, it might help you to see the first five lines of my first draft. I've decided to try it in stanzas, with five-stress lines and occasional half- or off-rhymes, but no full rhyme.

*Poetry as art  
More than anything else, it's musicality  
we aspire to. Let us then start welcoming  
the off-beat, the asymmetrical, the glancing.  
We need a poetics that shies from what's neatly  
precise, or insistent, or weighty.*

It is a first draft. I'm not sure about using 'musicality' for 'La musique', or about introducing the word 'poetics'. But one can't be sure. A translation is an adventure, and there are no right and wrong answers. There is stimulating hard work (there are many more lines to go!) but there is much satisfaction, even fun, to be had. You need to keep listening to what you and your co-workers write, so as to hear how it sounds in the English music of the poem you're making with materials borrowed from Verlaine.

**Robert Hull, 2015**

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Material about Verlaine and the poem itself can be found on these websites:

<http://www.aestheticrealism.net/poetry/art-poetique.htm>

<http://www.aestheticrealism.net/poetry/art-poetique.htm>

<http://verlaineexplique.free.fr/jadisetn/artpoete.html>