

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 carries its own programme for poetry. It is a fascinating and challenging poem to translate. The first stage for your students will be, as always, to get to know the poem as it sounds in French, to become familiar with its 'music'.

You will first want to perform the poem, to read it aloud. Then the students themselves should read it aloud; each group might take a stanza apiece, or each pair, or individual students if they feel confident enough. And they could read it aloud again, 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.*

Reading aloud enables students to hear the rhythms and structure of the poem clearly, and pick up the less heavily stressed language of French poetry compared with that of poems in English. They will hear the nine-syllable line, the poem's stanza structure and each stanza's *abba* pattern of rhyme.

2

It will be useful next, before students start working on their own translations, for them to see a literal, prose translation. And it would be good to remind them that many translators of poetry are not familiar with the languages they translate from, and draw on the intermediary help of literal translations.

At the same time, you might caution students against reliance on 'literary' or poetic translations (of the kind they will attempt themselves) many of which they might find online – not all of them adequate.

My own non-literary translation is offered at this point in the Students' Notes.

*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

I also suggest in their Notes that, since it is a rather mysterious poem, students might 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.*

Which I translated as:

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

I suggested that it sounds rather 'clumsy and unmusical', and invited students to attempt a more persuasive version.

The word *L'Impair* is tricky; it might almost be in code: it appears to refer to Verlaine's preference here for an odd number of syllables (9) rather than the traditional 12 or 8, so a 'revolutionary' change to the accepted rhythm of a line of French.

Equally difficult in some ways will be to decide on English words that convey what is being suggested in French by *vague*, *soluble*, *L'Indecis*, *La Nuance*, and so on.

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

4

To help them decide, I suggest students return to the first stanza, and the first line, and experiment with that. The trot version has:

Music before everything –

That is seven syllables and three heavy stresses, compared to the smooth flow of the French.

De la musique avant toute chose.

The students should expect that their solutions to translating these few words will differ from group to group, pair to pair, individual to individual. Each translation entails choices about fundamental matters of structure, so the translated outcome in English may be rhyming stanzas, free verse, blank verse, a sonnet (or two), and so on.

I suggest they think hard about whether to rhyme their 'Art Poétique', bearing in mind that rhyming translations often misfire because, though it's not always difficult to find rhymes, it's often very difficult to find good rhymes.

A smaller but interesting point. Will students keep or abandon the capitals that Verlaine uses? And why are some words capitalised but others equally central (*l'éloquence*, *la musique*) not?

Their Notes offer students the first five lines of my first draft: I'd go for stanzaic structure, a five-stress line, and with occasional half- or off-rhyme: no full rhyme. The translation, one stresses, is offered to suggest, again, the need to experiment and feel free to do so.

*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.*

The students' awareness of one writer's uncertainties here may act as encouragement. It might be helpful to observe that I'm not sure about using 'musicality' for 'La musique', or about introducing the word 'poetics'. And so on. I stress the need to 'keep listening' to what they write to hear how it sounds in English.

Robert Hull, 2015

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>