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Translating Baudelaire

JAN OWEN

Abstract

In this article I discuss my approach to translating a selection of poems from *Les Fleurs du Mal*. I aimed for fidelity of tone, and to stay as close to the diction of Baudelaire's original poems as was consonant with musicality and ease of style, the desired outcome being a natural-sounding and convincing poem in English. I decided on traditional verse form, and on iambic pentameter rather than alexandrines. When omissions or additions to the text or divergences were unavoidable I kept in mind Baudelaire's characteristics of style, diction and tone, his ambivalence, use of synaesthesia, and his sensitivity to sounds, scents and the exotic. My selection of poems was representative of Baudelaire's range, I researched as needed, and I revised obsessively in an attempt to correct blurred, stilted and bumpy lines and phrases.

I began translating Baudelaire almost on a whim, since I was going to Paris for a six-month residency. I flicked open *Les Fleurs du Mal* and settled on "Les Plaintes d'un Icare"; it was a challenge to produce a metrical rhymed version, and the fascination of what is difficult pushed me to try more. The first ones were the hardest and went through many drafts. It was like doing Rubik's cube; often the main problems were metrical – getting the detail of Baudelaire's alexandrines into iambic pentameters since they sounded more natural in English. There is no end to the tinkering that can be done. And there is always the salutary anxiety about error; the word or phrase misunderstood, the lapse of tone, the lost implication, and the concern over what has had to be left out.

I aimed for fidelity, a general deference to the source text, while aspiring to the musicality of Baudelaire's poetry, which quite often meant a departure from the literal. Paul Valéry defines the poem as "cette hésitation prolongée entre le son et le sens" [that prolonged hesitation between the sound and the sense] (637). With Baudelaire's poetry, in particular, the sound pattern is not merely a surface effect so much as a deeper, pre-verbal, layer of meaning setting up correspondences and reflecting his perception of the universe – "une ténébreuse et profonde unité": a deep dark unity. My goal was to achieve a convincing poem in English, with occasional gain as well as inevitable loss. A pessimistic view of translation emphasizes what is lost, but the greatest leap of translation is from the writer's initial perception, and how much of that elusive, nuanced experience can be carried into language? Well I'm an optimist; I see literary translation as a sort of re-creation while keeping a difficult balance. Perhaps in the circus of literature the translator is the tight-rope walker, with juggling as a side skill. Part of the balance is the attempt to re-experience the pre-linguistic moment of the source text, to follow the thought processes of the originator, to be receptive to its effect, and then to bring about a similar state of mind in readers of the target language.

Some strategic decisions came about as reasonable compromises following trial and error. I've heard it said that only full rhymes are satisfactory in formal rhyming translations of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, but since English is not rich in rhyme I decided that half rhymes would suffice when necessary, especially when close in sound and effect to the French. I avoided generalization from specified items to their class. Syntax and punctuation necessarily changed: I cut back on the exclamation marks, for instance. Texture, vowel colour and consonant weight could be approximated often. With capitalized abstractions such as Beauty, Death, Suffering and Memory I tended to drop the capital though this cannot well be done in a poem such as "Recueillement"

with its strong personification: “give me your hand, my Sadness”. This occasional side-stepping of allegory, so important to Baudelaire, is certainly open to criticism, I know. With titles and first and last lines, important signal points of a poem, I gave faithfulness a particularly high priority. I felt easier about bypassing a straight and obvious translation when the French words might have been chosen by Baudelaire partly for their rhyme, and when I could pick up a shade of meaning from a similar poem in the collection. I bore in mind Baudelaire’s vocabulary, his characteristic, even favourite, words, his use of ambivalence and synaesthesia and his sensitivity to sounds and scents and to the exotic. Alliteration came when it would. If internal rhyme could not be summoned at the same point as in the French text then it sometimes arrived as a bonus elsewhere.

I researched as I went, checking on details about Paris and the social history of the time, and also following up classical references such as Cybele, Maegera, Pyrrhus and Helenus, Pylades, the river Pactolus and so on. Critical articles on Baudelaire, including critiques of individual poems, helped me to correct some misreadings and outright errors, especially where I had jumped to a conclusion or had confused two words. *Vrille* and *grille*, for example: my first draft of “Les Petites Vieilles” described one of Baudelaire’s little old women as having eyes like a cricket instead of like a gimlet. On checking a critique, I realized my version of “Spleen: *Quand le ciel bas et lourd...*” had a howling error, quite literally: I had found a false friend in the word “hurlement” and made it “hurling” which fitted the context; the correct translation, of course is “howling” which in true Baudelairean style challenged its context.

I looked at other translations only when I had finished my own viable draft since it is too easy to remember another translator’s phrase or solution as your own. And then significant differences called for closer scrutiny. I emailed several ambiguous lines to French translator friends for clarification; in stanza three of “Le Cygne”, “The Swan”, for example, Baudelaire remembers the old Carrousel and uses the phrase “brillant aux carreaux, le bric-a-brac confus” which might mean the jumbled bric-a-brac is shining on the tiles or else shining at the panes. Translators are divided on this. After advice and some checking I finally made it: “The jumbled bric-a-brac glittering at the panes.”

The relationship of the translator to the writer and his or her text is complex: intimate, admiring, ambivalent, exasperated, celebratory, and though you have more freedom when the author is dead, you have less assistance. I agree with Charles Simic who believes that the translator takes on the role of author, and the process becomes a sort of dialogue: “You’re like a medium [...] You stand in the shoes of whoever you’re translating”. When I was hesitating over alternatives, trying to vary verbs and images, or negotiating changes between the singular and plural of a noun, as in “The Albatross”, I asked myself how Baudelaire himself might have dealt with the problem. Translation has been called a lonely task but I found it can seem quite a companionable process especially when the writer has as strong a presence and voice as Charles Baudelaire.

I realized after a while that with some poems where I had been quite literal, the result was stodgy or stilted; I had to loosen up and sacrifice some detail to avoid a crammed effect or rhythmical clumsiness and unlikely rhymes. For example, in “Dawn”: the first draft of one line, “Debauchees were returning, broken by their labours”, became “worn-out womanizers hit the home path” (“Les débauchés rentraient, brisés par leurs travaux”). Conversely, in the poem which begins “tu mettrais l’univers dans ta ruelle”, an early draft was over-exuberant and unnecessarily off-track so I had to tone it down. The early version was “Dead boredom’s turned you cruel. Do you keep tally, / you slut? You’d shove the whole race up your alley!” But this ended up, more accurately, as “You’d have the universe vie for your bed, / you slut. You’re turning cruel because you’re bored.”

The visibility of the translator is, of course, an issue. I needed to guard against a tendency to strain for resolution, to grasp at a mediocre rhyme, to soften or minimize the horrific, or alternatively to exaggerate some lurid details to fill out a line. But it seemed reasonable, when unavoidable, to extend certain phrases or images by innocuous padding so as to achieve a rhyme, a correct emphasis or the right tone or pace. In “L’Albatros”, “The Albatross”, one line describes

the poet as laughing at the archer; in my translation, the poet is “laughing at arrows and slings”. With “The Giantess”, in which the poet imagines he is a cat, I changed the landscape a little; a fairly close non-rhyming translation for the last lines might be:

And sometimes in summer, when the unhealthy suns,
stretched her, listless, across the countryside
I would sleep nonchalantly in the shadow of her breasts
“Like a peaceful hamlet at the foot of a mountain.”

I fixed on:

and when the sultry heat of summer splayed
her drowsily out across an acre of grass,
I'd fall asleep below her breasts, in the shade
like a village nestled up to a mountain pass.

The degrees of formality and informality, the use of “vous” and “tu” for example, created in some poems a shifting or ambivalent mood difficult to echo since the intimate tone of “tu” or “toi” is not directly transposable as it was in Victorian times. Half of the last line of “A Une Passante”, “To a Woman Passing by”, translates literally as “O thou whom I could have loved”, using the familiar “toi” towards the woman, and also the literary form of the past conditional in “toi que j’eusse aimée” giving a formal but delicate tone, a melancholy distance. At the same time, the necessary agreement of the past participle “aimée”, “loved”, with the object of desire, the woman passing by, strengthens the intimate, linguistic link between her and the narrator. There is a movement towards and away which focuses on the moment of passing. The English “you” and our all-purpose past conditional lose those shifting subtleties of feeling. Compare the French and the English of the final two lines:

Car j’ignore ou tu fuis, tu ne sais ou je vais,
O toi que j’eusse aimée, O toi qui le savais!

Where the other is going, neither of us can tell.
Yet I could have loved you—and you knew it well!

A free translation in more everyday speech but, alas, without those nuances.

Shklovsky’s notion of *ostranenie*, defamiliarization, is particularly relevant to Baudelaire’s work. Shklovsky believed that perception should be prolonged, and that art presents things as they are perceived, not as they are known (Lodge 15-16). So I was wary of smoothing out or rationalizing what seemed odd done into English, if it sounded strange in French as well. Baudelaire in fact believed that the beautiful is always strange or somewhat bizarre. The perception of the beautiful and the true does vary from one culture to another: translation involves the representation or suggestion of these and other values, thus of one particular world-view in terms of another. The intrinsic differences between two languages reflect these perceptual differences. We think differently in different languages. As Martin Sorrell points out in his comparison of English and French poetic languages, Yves Bonnefoy sees Platonism as the heart of the French language and Aristotelianism as that of English:

The received wisdom that French tends to abstraction is something Bonnefoy tends to believe. He sees such abstraction as the result of a French desire to seek and map out the “Idea”. The consistent movement is away from the particular, the discrete, and towards the general, the universal. French is a language which reduces, which

excludes. Its constant tendency is to transform the rich diversity of the world into manageable, intellectual categories. For Bonnefoy, a function of this need is that the focus of attention will be on the word rather than on the thing which it signifies. The symbol, not the thing symbolized, carries the weight. The word is the signifier of an eternal form.

(Sorrell 129)

So English is Aristotelian, concrete, values the thing, while French is Platonic and tends to abstraction, reduces and maps the idea, values the symbol. And Laurence Sterne has his *Sentimental Traveller* say “All that can be said against the grandeur of the French sublime [...] is this, that the grandeur is *more* in the *word* and *less* in the *thing*” (79). I have translated some ideas in terms of things but I’ve also moved in the French direction from a concrete to an abstract noun. In “L’Harmonie du Soir”, “Evening Harmony”, I despaired of a rhyme for the final word “monstrance” which sounds unsympathetic in English anyway. I named, instead, the religious celebration itself so the last stanza reads:

A tender heart that dreads the black abyss
 guards every scrap the shining past will spare;
 the sun, in thick blood-light, is drowning there...
 Your memory glows in me like the Eucharist!

Can poetry transcend the innate tendencies of a given language and be precisely “what is preserved in translation” as Miroslav Holub (18) believed? Rhythm, timing, the quality of a silence, line endings and connotations are so elusive. Word connotation is hard to duplicate and it is dispiriting to lose the sometimes ironic effect of homonyms. “Vers” meaning both “lines” and “worms” as well as “towards” suits Baudelaire’s bent very well in these lines from “Spleen: *J’ai plus de souvenirs...*”

Où comme des remords se traînent de longs vers
 qui s’acharnent toujours sur mes morts les plus chers.

I had to be explicit rather than subtle and overstate the “eating away” connotation of remorse:

these lines, long desperate worms trailing remorse,
 devour my dearest dead to eat up loss.

You can trip over unwanted associations: “Agathe” in “Moesta et Errabunda” is not really the French sister of “Agatha”. Another example of a word with different connotations in English and French is “armoire” when translated as “wardrobe” or “cupboard”. Although the straight translation, “a wardrobe in an empty house” is fine for the sinister poem “Le Flacon”, the compliment offered to the young woman in “La Belle Navire” seems cumbersome: “that proud bosom’s like a fine wardrobe...a wardrobe full of good things and secret joys”. Other translators have also balked at that “wardrobe” and chosen “coffer” or simply kept “armoire” with its apt echo of “à moi” or “mine”. Carrying over one everyday word may be more awkward than furniture removal. I finally settled on “cabinet” since it extended well as a metaphor.

There were divergences, omissions and additions as I wrestled with syntax and word order as well as diction: I rendered the famous last line of “Au Lecteur”, “To the Reader”, not as “hypocritical reader my counterpart, my brother,” but as “hypocrite reader, my counterpart, my twin”. Again, for the rhyme. This need to find chiming words can make for ingenuity and serendipity though. Here are some other examples of divergence.

The first stanza of “Correspondences” translates fairly literally as:

Nature is a temple where living pillars
sometimes allow confused words through;
man passes across forests of symbols
which observe him with familiar looks.

I regularized this by a variation and doubling up of the nouns “words”, “pillars” and “forests”.

In Nature’s temple, eerie words and cries
rise from her living pillars and arcades;
a thousand symbols breathe in woods and glades,
and watch us pass, with long-familiar eyes.

In the final lines of “Le Gouffre”, “The Abyss”, I reversed subject and object. “– Ah! Ne jamais sortir des Nombres et des Êtres!” “Ah! Never to get away from Numbers and Beings!” is ambivalent, even ambiguous. My version picks up that uncertainty from a different angle: “Will forms and numbers never let me be?”

In “La Musique”, turning the noun “mirror” to a verb and adding the filler word “there” gave the emphasis needed in the final image of the sea. “D’autres fois, calme miroir/ de mon désespoir!” became “Till dead calm mirrors there/ my own despair”.

In “Le Balcon”, “The Balcony”, stanza three, I believe I kept close to the tone while very freely juggling with the words and phrases.

Que ton sein m’était doux! que ton coeur m’était bon!
Nous avons dit souvent d’impérissables choses
Les soirs illuminés par l’ardeur du charbon.

Literally:

How soft your breast was to me, how good your heart!
Often we said imperishable things
those evenings lit up by the glow of charcoal.

My version:

All my desire,
dear heart, soft breast, was that our words not die,
those evenings lit by the glowing charcoal fire.

I moved towards the tangible in “Bohémiens en Route”, “Gypsies on the Move”; the literal translation would be “the familiar empire of future shadows”, I made it “whose empire is tomorrow’s dark terrain”.

My choice of poems was eclectic, even haphazard, at first, but once about twenty poems were done I began to aim for a balance of subject, tone and length in further poems chosen. As I’ve worked on these translations from *Les Fleurs du Mal* I’ve come to appreciate aspects of Baudelaire’s character and work that seem to receive less critical attention, the empathy and tenderness, say, to be found in some of the love poems and in passages of “Les Petites Vieilles”, “The Little Old Women”. One of the last poems I translated was the first one I ever read: “Une Charogne”, “A Carcass”. This poem, in particular makes me think of Baudelaire’s aim to make beauty out of evil. The following translation was first published in *Shearsman Magazine* in 2012.

A Carcass

Do you remember what we saw, my soul,
that bright summer's day?
Right in our path, a dreadful carcass sprawled
on its bed of pebbles and clay.

With legs thrust up like a woman gripped by lust,
the seething poisonous mass
coolly and cynically offered us, as we passed,
its belly of stinking gas.

Onto this rotting flesh the sun's rays poured,
cooking it to a turn,
rendering to Nature a hundred-fold
what she had laboured to join.

The sky was gazing down on this proud carcass
opening like a flower.
So dreadful was the stench, you sank to the grass
overcome by its power.

Flies were buzzing over the putrid hide,
and black larvae squads
were pouring out like streams of viscous liquid,
animating the shreds.

The body, lifting and falling like a wave,
bubbling, spattering, sighing,
seemed to be vaguely drawing breath, alive,
thriving and multiplying.

An eerie music was rising from that world
like flowing water or wind
or the grain in a winnower's sieve, rhythmically swirled
then tossed up high and turned.

The shapes were effacing themselves as in a dream,
a sketch slow to come right,
on a canvas cast aside, with the artist's scheme

Une charogne

Rappelez-vous l'objet que nous vîmes, mon âme,
Ce beau matin d'été si doux:
Au détour d'un sentier une charogne infâme
Sur un lit semé de cailloux,

Les jambes en l'air, comme une femme lubrique,
Brûlante et suant les poisons,
Ouvrait d'une façon nonchalante et cynique
Son ventre plein d'exhalaisons.

Le soleil rayonnait sur cette pourriture,
Comme afin de la cuire à point,
Et de rendre au centuple à la grande Nature
Tout ce qu'ensemble elle avait joint;

Et le ciel regardait la carcasse superbe
Comme une fleur s'épanouir.
La puanteur était si forte, que sur l'herbe
Vous crûtes vous évanouir.

Les mouches bourdonnaient sur ce ventre putride,
D'où sortaient de noirs bataillons
De larves, qui coulaient comme un épais liquide
Le long de ces vivants haillons.

Tout cela descendait, montait comme une vague,
Ou s'élançait en pétillant;
On eût dit que le corps, enflé d'un souffle vague,
Vivait en se multipliant.

Et ce monde rendait une étrange musique,
Comme l'eau courante et le vent,
Ou le grain qu'un vanneur d'un mouvement rythmique
Agite et tourne dans son van.

Les formes s'effaçaient et n'étaient plus qu'un rêve,
Une ébauche lente à venir,
Sur la toile oubliée, et que l'artiste achève

traced only in hindsight.

Lurking behind some rocks, a restless bitch
sent us an evil look,
watching for the moment she could snatch
her ripped-off morsel back.

– And yet you too will be like this, a foul
stinking abomination,
you, star of my eyes, sun of my soul,
my angel and my passion.

Yes, you will come to this, O queen of grace:
the last sacraments done,
you will go down under the blossoms and grass
to moulder among bones.

Then, my beautiful one, say to the worm
with its kissing, nibbling lust,
that I hold safe the divine essence and form
of my love decayed to dust.

Translated by Jan Owen

Seulement par le souvenir.

Derrière les rochers une chienne inquiète
Nous regardait d'un oeil fâché,
Epiant le moment de reprendre au squelette
Le morceau qu'elle avait lâché.

– Et pourtant vous serez semblable à cette ordure,
A cette horrible infection,
Etoile de mes yeux, soleil de ma nature,
Vous, mon ange et ma passion!

Oui! telle vous serez, ô la reine des grâces,
Après les derniers sacrements,
Quand vous irez, sous l'herbe et les floraisons grasses,
Moisir parmi les ossements.

Alors, ô ma beauté! dites à la vermine
Qui vous mangera de baisers,
Que j'ai gardé la forme et l'essence divine
De mes amours décomposés!

Charles Baudelaire

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