Preface

Among the most important French poets of the last decades of the nineteenth century, Paul Verlaine (1844–1896) is considered, along with Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud, and Stéphane Mallarmé, one of the founders of modernist poetics in France. Nowadays, Verlaine's poetry is widely read and studied in secondary schools and universities around the world. This has not always been the case: as a matter of fact, Verlaine did not achieve his canonical status until well into the twentieth century, for during his lifetime his poetry was read and praised only by a few peers, who, in his later years, came to consider him a master. What we now consider masterpieces of French poetry, such as Verlaine's *Poèmes saturniens* [Saturnine Poems] (1866), *Romances sans paroles* [Songs Without Words] (1874), and *Sagesse* [Wisdom] (1880), were published in no more than a few hundred copies that went unsold for many years, while the books of poets who are now almost forgotten, such as François Coppée and Eugène Manuel, were selling tens of thousands of copies in the same period.

The fact is that, contrary to Coppée's and Manuel's naturalist works, the poetry of Verlaine was hardly understood by his contemporary readers. Several early critics lamented that they could not puzzle out what the poet was trying to convey in his verse. Jules Lemaître, for example, maintained that "there is nothing to understand" in Verlaine's poetry, and that his verse is made of "series of words such as one forms in dreams [. . .]. When, by chance, one still remembers them on waking, nothing . . . , the idea faded away."¹ Lemaître had a point, though, when he observed the "vagueness" of this verse, composed mainly of "impressionist notations." Verlaine had himself enjoined the poet, in his "Art poétique" [Art of Poetry] (1874), to "choose all words with some disregard; / No better choice than a somewhat blurred song / That treats clear and not-clear as but one." In *Les Poètes maudits* [The

Accursed Poets] (1884), Verlaine referred to himself with anagrammatic self-indulgence as “Pauvre Lelian” [Poor Lelian], and grouped himself with other poets considered by critics at the time to be “les incompris” [the misunderstood]: Arthur Rimbaud, Stéphane Mallarmé, and a few others.² The kind of poetry that was then deemed almost unreadable and, indeed, a symptom of literary *decadence* was in fact a remarkable source of poetic renewal, based on the ambiguity of words, the musicality of phrases, the indistinctness of poetic images, the indefiniteness of sentiments, and the opacity of symbols, which would culminate in the Symbolist movement in the 1890s.

Why translate the poetry of Verlaine in the twenty-first century? In 1999 two significant translations of Verlaine’s verse were published, by Norman R. Shapiro and Martin Sorrell, in collections of 101 and 170 poems, respectively.³ That in and of itself attests to the sustained interest in Verlaine for Anglophone readers. Twenty years later, the present edition is now the largest translated collection of Verlaine’s œuvre in English, comprising 192 of his poems, many of which have never been translated before. In his Translator’s Note that follows, Samuel N. Rosenberg discusses the formal considerations that guided him in selecting and translating these poems. In this introduction we will offer a few scholarly and thematic considerations that justify the endeavor of translating anew a wide and representative selection of Verlaine’s poems.

Verlaine studies have, indeed, made great progress in the last two decades, particularly since the rediscovery in 2004 of the manuscript of *Cellulairement* [Cellularly], the collection of verse that the poet composed in prison, between 1873 and 1875, and that was never published during his lifetime. The reappearance of this collection some 130 years after its writing has thus prompted scholars to reinterpret several key poems in Verlaine’s work, such as “Sur les eaux” [Upon the Waters] and “Art poétique” [Art of Poetry], that were previously extracted from their original context (see the notes on these poems). Because the selection of poems in the present volume is arranged in the

chronological and thematic order of their composition rather than by their date of publication, often many years later, this edition makes a point of presenting Verlaine's work in the context of the various stages of his life, an approach not taken in other translations.

Many of the poems presented here have not appeared in previous translated editions, presumably because they were not deemed representative of Verlaine as a *decadent* or *symbolist* poet, that is, a poet detached from current historical and political events, who self-sufficiently cultivates his poetry according to the principle of *l'art pour l'art* [art for art's sake]. Thus, we include the long insurrectionary poem "Les Vaincus" [The Vanquished], which was written during Verlaine's socialist fervor at the end of the 1860s. It describes the revolutionary ideal of his youth, something he later renounced, along with his rejection of the very possibility of social poetry, except perhaps in one of the very last poems he wrote before he died: "Mort!" [Dead!].

It is notable that a substantial portion of Verlaine's poetic corpus contains erotic or even *pornographic* texts (in the etymological sense of writings on prostitution). This libertine component of the poetry of Verlaine has generally been relegated to the *curiosa* and the addenda to the poet's so-called "complete works," if not excluded altogether, as is the case in most anthologies. We see no reason *not* to include such a significant aspect of Verlaine's poetics in a translated edition highly representative of his works—all the more because the sexuality and gender roles that the poet displays in his licentious verses strongly challenge the heteronormativity that characterizes traditional lyric poetry. The selection of poems we include from the lesbian collection *Les Amies* [Girlfriends] and the gay collection *Hombres* [Men], translated here for the first time in a comprehensive anthology, are therefore likely to be of great interest not only to general readers and literary scholars, but also to students and scholars in the growing field of queer studies.

Lastly, this volume features a couple of collaborative poems from the *Album Zutique* [Damn Album], a handwritten notebook containing satirical poems and caricatures composed by a group of transgressive poets in 1871–72 that appear in translation nowhere else: "La Mort des

cochons" [The Death of Pigs], which Verlaine wrote with poet Léon Valade, is a scatological parody of Baudelaire's "La Mort des amants" [The Death of Lovers]; and the "Sonnet du trou du cul" [Sonnet on the Asshole], the only poem known to be cowritten by Verlaine and Rimbaud (his lover at the time), is a homoerotic parody of Albert Méral's collection of sonnets *L'Idole* [The Idol].

Verlaine's poetic output was markedly autobiographical. We shall see in the poems that follow the profound impact that his personal experience had on his œuvre: his marriage to Mathilde Mauté de Fleurville, his subsequent affairs with Rimbaud and several other male and female lovers, his conversion to Catholicism, and the tumultuous political events of the time (more biographical details are provided in the chronology, the part introductions, and the notes). Poems represented in Part I, "The Parnassian Years," relate to the launch of Verlaine's literary career within the circle of young poets called "les Parnassiens," who were influenced by Leconte de Lisle's neoclassical and anti-romantic poetics, as well as Théophile Gautier's theory of *l'art pour l'art*. These young poets, led by Catulle Mendès and Louis-Xavier de Ricard, assembled around the collective volume *Le Parnasse contemporain* [Contemporary Parnassus] in 1866.⁴ Verlaine's first personal collections are from this period: *Poèmes saturniens* [Saturnine Poems] (1866), *Les Amies* [Girlfriends] (1868), *Fêtes galantes* [Gallant Festivities] (1869), and *La Bonne Chanson* [The Good Song] (1870). However, the Franco-Prussian War from July 1870 to January 1871 and the Paris Commune from March to May 1871 led to a significant setback in Verlaine's career. Since the poet had taken the side of the insurrectionary *Communards* against the Versailles government, he was effectively banished from the Parnassian circle in the aftermath of the bloody repression of the Commune at the end of May. All established publishers, in the following ten years, refused to publish Verlaine's verse. The poet sought refuge then in underground literary circles, such as the Cercle des poètes Zutiques [Circle of Damn Poets!], which produced the above-mentioned *Album zutique*.

Yet it was the meeting with Arthur Rimbaud, a sixteen-year-old poet, ten years his junior, on September 10, 1871, that came to have the greatest impact on Verlaine's life and works. Poems included in Part 2, "Under the Spell of Rimbaud," reflect this. The disruptive effects of that love relationship with Rimbaud on Verlaine's marriage and, more generally, on his existence have already been extensively recounted in numerous books (see the Selected Bibliography), as well as at least two films: *A Season in Hell* by Nelo Risi in 1971 and *Total Eclipse* by Agnieszka Holland in 1995, featuring David Thewlis as Verlaine and Leonardo DiCaprio as Rimbaud. But what is of interest here is the influence that this relationship had on Verlaine's poetry. The tumultuous encounter with Rimbaud is indeed at the source of some of the most beautiful poems by Verlaine, for example the "Ariettes oubliées" [Forgotten Ariettes], written in 1872 and included in the collection *Romances sans paroles* in 1874. These poems eminently convey the poet's ambivalent and elusive feelings, torn as he is between love for his neglected wife and passionate devotion to his young lover. But the persons involved in this triangular relationship are never mentioned in the poems; it is rather the feelings themselves that become the lyrical subjects of the verse, as in the third "arietta": "The pain in my heart / Is like rain in the city. / What languor is this / That envelops my heart?" We know that this relationship found its dramatic ending in one of the most famous "affairs" in literary history, with Verlaine firing two revolver shots at Rimbaud in Brussels on July 10, 1873, resulting in a hand injury for the victim and imprisonment for the shooter.

During the year and a half that Verlaine spent in prison in Belgium, first in Brussels and then in Mons, which came to an end on January 16, 1875, he did not stop writing poetry, and this is the basis for Part 3 of our edition, "From Prison to Conversion." In fact, several key poems by Verlaine, such as "Le ciel est, par-dessus le toit" ["The sky is, above the rooftop"] and "Art poétique" were written during that very detention. Certain of these poems were meant to be published in a collection of verse entirely composed in prison titled *Cellulairement*

[Cellularly]. However, released, Verlaine thought it preferable to erase all evidence of his imprisonment and to disseminate the poems through later volumes, namely *Sagesse* (1880), *Jadis et Naguère* [Long Ago and Yesterday] (1884), and *Parallèlement* [In Parallel] (1889). Besides, while in prison Verlaine converted to Catholicism, and the final sonnets of *Cellulairement* are accounts of this conversion, as are most poems of *Sagesse*—for example, the verse in *terza rima* “Ô mon Dieu, vous m’avez blessé d’amour” [“O my God, you have wounded me with love”]. From then on, Verlaine’s publications would split into religious and secular—even licentious—collections, as he would explain in *Les Poètes maudits*: “[Pauvre Lelian’s] work beginning in 1880 bifurcates into two very distinct paths [. . .]—books in which Catholicism unfolds its logic and its charms, its blandishments and its terrors; and other, purely worldly books: sensual with a distressing good humor and full of pride in life.” Verlaine tries to justify this discrepancy in his poetic works with reasons that appear dubious from a Catholic standpoint: “I believe, and I sin in thought as by action; I believe, and I repent by thought while waiting for better things. Or rather, I believe, and am a good Christian in that moment; I believe, and am a bad Christian in the next. Memory, hope and the invocation of a sin delight me with or without remorse, sometimes under the same form and furnished with all the consequences of Sin; more often, both the flesh and blood are strong—natural and animal, like memories, hopes and invocations of the first excellent free-thinker.”⁵

The rehabilitation of Verlaine in the literary field did not occur until the mid-1880s, when small literary magazines, such as *Paris moderne* and *La Nouvelle Rive Gauche*, started to publish and review his poems, most of which had been written ten years earlier, such as “Art poétique.” Indeed, several poetry collections that Verlaine published later in his life, from *Jadis et Naguère* to the unfinished *Livre posthume* [The Posthumous Book], through *Parallèlement*, are heterogeneous collections of poems, often composed much earlier. These collections do not therefore appear as such in the present edition, lest they disturb its thematic and chronological coherence.

It is in the 1880s, tied in particular with the publication of the novel *À rebours* [Against the Grain] (1884) by Joris-Karl Huysmans, that the somewhat uncritical label of “decadent poet” was applied to Verlaine and has remained with him to the present day. The poet certainly did little to distance himself from this label, which helped to popularize his poetry among young poets and to promote him as the master of the Decadent movement led by Anatole Baju, the founder of the magazine *Le Décadent* in 1886. For example, in the poem “Langueur” [Languor] (1883), the poet proclaims: “Je suis l’Empire à la fin de la décadence” [I am the Empire as Decadence ends]. Verlaine was nevertheless unwilling to be associated with any literary school, as he told Jules Huret, who asked him, in 1891, why he had accepted the epithet “decadent”: “They threw this epithet at us like an insult; I picked it up like a war-cry; but it meant nothing special, as far as I know. Is the twilight of a beautiful day not worth every dawn? Decadent, basically, did not mean anything at all.”⁶ We are not completely in disagreement with the poet on this last point.

Despite publishing several collections of verse in the late 1880s and early 1890s (presented here in Part 4, “The Last Years”), and though he achieved a certain critical—if not public—recognition, Verlaine lived in poverty and sickness during his last years, dividing his time between cafés and hospitals,⁷ while he was working on *Amour* [Love] (1888), *Parallèlement* [In Parallel] (1889), *Dédicaces* [Dedications] (1890), *Femmes* [Women] (1890), *Bonheur* [Happiness] (1891), *Chansons pour Elle* [Songs for Her] (1891), *Liturgies intimes* [Intimate Liturgies] (1892), *Odes en son honneur* [Odes in Her Honor] (1893), *Élégies* (1893), *Dans les limbes* [In Limbo] (1894), *Épigrammes* (1894), *Chair* [Flesh] (1896), and *Invectives* (1896). Until his death on January 8, 1896, he took part in the animated bohemian lifestyle peculiar to *fin-de-siècle* Paris by frequenting cabarets like Le Chat noir in Montmartre, where he met a multitude of writers, artists, and composers, such as Claude Debussy.

Verlaine is a poet much favored by musicians. It is no doubt impossible to list all the composers and singers who have set his verse to music, from Debussy, who composed melodies for about twenty poems by Verlaine,

starting with the “Ariettes oubliées” in 1888, to Jean-Marc Versini.⁸ But of particular relevance, in addition to Debussy, are the names of Charles Bordes, Gabriel Fauré, Reynaldo Hahn, Ernest Chausson, and, among twentieth-century popular singers, Georges Brassens, Léo Ferré, and Charles Trenet.⁹ One of Verlaine’s most famous lines, from the opening of “Art poétique,” announces the poet’s intention to place musicality at the very heart of his work: “De la musique avant toute chose” [Music before all else]. Many titles of his early poems and collections are directly borrowed from music: “En sourdine” [Muted], *La Bonne Chanson*, “Ariettes oubliées,” *Romances sans paroles*—this latter paradoxical title referring to Felix Mendelssohn’s *Lieder ohne Worte* [Songs Without Words], which, contrary to Verlaine’s, do not contain lyrics and are therefore not sung. Moreover, the *vers impairs* (lines with an odd number of syllables), which are characteristic of popular songs, as well as the striking rhythms that distinguish most of Verlaine’s poems, make them particularly suitable to musical settings—to such an extent that many critics have claimed that Verlaine’s verse tends to dissolve its meaning in the abstraction of music, although this is inaccurate in many ways.¹⁰ The assimilation of poetry to music is certainly a dream that haunted many poets in addition to Verlaine at the end of the nineteenth century, such as René Ghil with his “verbal instrumentation,” or the Mallarmé of “Music and Letters”; but this dream has often led commentators to take a critical shortcut by viewing as identification what is merely analogy or emulation.

That said, the poetry of Verlaine is first and foremost written: before being adapted to music, it is the offspring of the multisecular tradition of French metrical poetry, with its strict prosodic rules. Verlaine, along with Rimbaud, greatly contributed to the loosening of those rules. He is notable for writing unconventional lines of eleven or even thirteen syllables (see, for example, the “Sonnet boiteux” [Limping Sonnet]), thus breaking the 6+6 law of the alexandrine meter, or for not strictly adhering to the rules of rhyming (replacing, for example, rhymes with assonances, or using exclusively feminine rhymes in his lesbian sonnets). The choice made by Samuel N. Rosenberg not to impose a

metrical and rhyming system on his translations, but rather to echo the phonetic and rhythmic aspects of Verlaine's verse in order to convey its euphonic qualities, is therefore particularly effective and consistent with the poet's own practice. Contrary to Rimbaud, however, Verlaine had never intended to rid his work of metrical structures and, as a matter of fact, he strongly rejected the very concept of *vers libre* [free verse] as it was practiced, beginning in the mid-1880s, by such poets as Marie Krysińska, Jules Laforgue, and Gustave Kahn. Concerning the *vers libre*, Verlaine states unequivocally in his interview with Jules Huret that "this is no longer verse, it is prose—sometimes it is just gibberish."¹¹

Whether it is a question of vers-librism, musicalism, instrumentism, Symbolism, or decadentism, we maintain that it is preferable to refrain from categorizing the poetry of Verlaine according to *fin-de-siècle* literary trends. What ranks his verse among the highest expressions of modernist poetry is precisely the fact that it goes beyond the framework that one tries to apply to it. Verlaine is then the quintessential poet of ambiguous meanings, ambivalent feelings, as well as duplicity of character.

—NICOLAS VALAZZA