Translator's Note

De la musique avant toute chose

Music before everything else

That statement, perhaps the best-known single line in Verlaine, opens the poem “Art poétique” with its announcement of the poet’s intention to place musicality, the very sound of lyric poetry, at the heart of his work. But the line is also a prescription for poets in general—and it must be taken as an injunction to anyone translating Verlaine’s poetry. It has certainly been a guiding principle of this translation—though never to the exclusion of the poet’s serious grappling with social, spiritual, even political realities. Verlaine was a poet of music; he was also a poet of meaningful reflection. Superb craft, for him, worked ever in support of feeling and thought.

The musicality of rhyme is an obvious feature of Verlaine’s work, all of which is rhymed. My first formal consideration had therefore to be the use or non-use of rhyme in translation. To rhyme or not to rhyme was the basic, unavoidable question, a question particularly pressing in English, whose morphology does not lend itself to rhyming from French as would the grammatical forms of another Romance language.

While readily accepting Verlaine’s injunction to give fundamental importance to musicality—and while recognizing that that feature is often taken to mean rhyme first of all—I realized that, generally speaking, the search for rhyme in English could too easily denature and distort the text. This is an especially consequential challenge in the case of stanzas comprising very short lines, which offer little opportunity for variation in word arrangements. An insistence on rhyme could produce lexical choices and syntactic configurations that would be regrettably divergent from the original text.

Such difference for the sake of rhyme could be excessive, marking an essential infidelity to the poet’s work—and no translator wants to

be guilty of disregarding the all-important principle of fidelity to the original text!

An important aspect of that fidelity, in my judgment, was the need to respect the autonomy of the individual lines—that is, the need to follow the sequence of the poet’s ideas and images, instead of recasting the stanzas globally and thereby disrupting the movement of his thought.

In accordance with that respect, I had to accept the notion that, more often than not, it would be necessary to forgo rhyme in my English versions.

There are in fact, many prosodic techniques that may be used to express musicality other than uninterrupted rhyming.

I have occasionally used a pattern of partial rhyming, as in the scheme AXYA, where the first and last words rhyme with each other, while the middle lines show no rhyme with first and last or with each other. See, for example, the poem “Seascape” in *Poèmes saturniens* (Part 1, p. 19).

While rhyme achieves its euphony through the recurrence of the final vowel of a word and the consonant that follows, *assonance* achieves a similar end through repetition of the final vowel alone, as in the poem “Green” (Part 2, p. 115), which makes use of both rhyme and assonance with no distinction between the two, as formulated in the scheme AXYA.

Note that “rhyme” and “assonance,” as used so far, refer to recurrences taking place at the end of lines of verse. Both devices, however, may occur within lines, or even across subsequent lines, and, in fact, such *internal rhymes* and *internal assonances* contribute mightily to the musicality of Verlaine’s poetry. I have made abundant use of such internal echoes in my translations. In English as in French, they constitute a significant part of the complex homophony characteristic of this work.

No less relevant to musicality, even though less visible, are *oblique echoes*. In the poem “Seascape” cited above, for example, “maddening” is an indirect phonetic reminder of “menacing,” just as “fearsome” echoes “far,” reinforcing the musicality of the passage.

For a translated text that exemplifies the use of several homophonic techniques, consider the sonnet “Anguish” (Part 1, p. 15). In this text, *alliteration*, the recurrence of word-initial consonants, is a particularly prominent factor of musicality, occurring with nasals and sibilants as well as other sounds, and interwoven with instances of *internal assonance* and the line-to-line fluidity of *enjambment*.

Let us look for a moment at the rather late sonnet “The catalogue arrives” (Part 4, p. 319). It is striking to see how the sheer musicality, the glowing lyricism, of the earlier works is now considerably reduced and, in particular, how the poet’s earlier taste for occasional enjambment has now developed into a veritable fragmentation of the discourse—but still within the confines of traditional meter and rhyming. Notably, along with enjambment—which makes one line flow into the next—this composition introduces the opposite technique of breaking the line of verse, thereby ending the statement before the end of the line. The stanzas are thus linked by enjambment, but at the same time broken into abnormal segments.

As suggested by my final example, an important aspect of Verlaine’s musicality is his treatment of *rhythm*.

The challenge for the translator is to find an equivalent in accordance with the normal English principle of accentual rhythm—that is, patterns of variation between stressed and unstressed units—as opposed to the French principle of meter defined by the number of syllables in the line of verse and by their subgrouping(s).

Where French counts syllables within a numerically fixed frame, English measures stresses, or beats, separated by one or more unstressed syllables. After some number of syllables, French, too, shows stress variation within a given line of verse, but such variation is not a defining feature of French prosody.

There are basically two ways in which French can escape the constraint of a syllable-based line: by *enjambment* and by its apparent opposite, which may be called *fragmentation* or, as in French, *discordance*.

Enjambment involves bringing a grammatically cohesive phrase to its conclusion only in the line following its opening. The phrase is said to contain a run-on line. Verlaine used this procedure frequently in his poetry, and it contributes greatly to the impression of a smooth musical flow from one line to the next. Much less frequently did he make use of *fragmentation*, which entails bringing a grammatically cohesive statement to a full stop *before* the end of a syllabically complete line. My final example, the sonnet “The catalogue arrives,” shows a number of instances of this breaking up of the verse line.

My approach to rhythm in translation is clearly fluid, with the accentual patterns varying liberally from poem to poem and even line to line, without undue regard to metrical regularity. I do what, to my ear, the sense of a given line requires for the achievement of a pleasing acoustical flow. Uppermost in my mind is always Verlaine’s injunction to give musicality its place of privilege.

Much could be said about *lexical* challenges facing a translator of Verlaine—that is, finding the right translation for a given word or phrase.

A very few examples will suffice for this Translator’s Note:

1. The problem of rendering a technical term, such as “petit bleu” (see “The catalogue arrives”). A “télégramme” is no longer an ordinary tool of written communication, but it is still sufficiently understood to require no explanation; the same is true of the English cognate “telegram.” The “petit bleu,” on the other hand, a blue form used for many decades in Paris post offices for rapid delivery of small messages within the city, had no equivalent in English; nor did it remain a viable means of communication long enough to justify its use in French today; in English it is now best replaced by a contextually appropriate word meaning “message.”
2. The challenge of a common French term often used in English, but with a different sense, such as “agonie/agonny” (see “The sound of the horn . . .,” Part 2, p. 125). While the French term evokes

the actual pangs of death, the English word refers only to intense suffering.

3. A play on words, such as “maire et père de famille” (see “Monsieur Prudhomme,” Part I, p. 24). The challenge here is to find a device for conveying in a single utterance the distinct meanings of “maire” and its homophone “mère.”¹

Finally, a word about an issue that faces any translator assembling an anthology. What to include and what not? Nicolas Valazza, in his preface, treats this question—from the points of view of thematic interest and the development of Verlaine’s poetic and life experience over time—as an important part of the rationale for a new translation. I add that certain material was excluded from the start on formal grounds. The corpus contains a small amount of dramatic material. I decided not to translate it. Likewise, I decided to exclude lengthy narrative, contemplative, or expository compositions that fell outside the realm of what we normally call lyric poetry. The focus of this volume of translations, I decided, would be predominantly poetry composed in traditional short forms, such as sonnets, ballades, sets of quatrains and the like. Such pieces do, after all, constitute the bulk of Verlaine’s output and best exemplify his lyricism. I also opted for relatively few compositions heavily marked by allusions to particular persons and events that seemed of questionable interest or significance for modern anglophone readers.

Here, at the end, I must add a word of thanks to Nicolas Valazza for his masterful contribution to our shared volume—and more than a word of deepest devotion to my incomparable Jeff for his inspiring presence and arduous work throughout this endeavor.

—SAMUEL N. ROSENBERG