



DIVERSIONS

translations by
colin john holcombe

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Diversions

Colin John Holcombe

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Diversions: A Book of Occasional Translations

by Colin John Holcombe

To Sukanya Dutta in fond admiration of her work.

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INTRODUCTION

As far as is possible, these pieces are close renderings, respecting the form, content and rhyme schemes of the original. The few free translations are indicated by 'After the . . .' in the footnote. Many of the pieces first appeared on the www.textetc.com site, where workshop notes and text sources can be found. As the title of the collection suggests, these are simply poems that captured my interest at one time or another.

There are many views on translation. Some readers feel that, whatever else a translation achieves, it must be poetry. Ideally, the translation should have the same appeal in the translated language as the original enjoyed in its own language. If new words have to be introduced, or original words left out, then so be it. Yet for others, such an approach is anathema. They wish to read the poem in the original language and look to the translation to help that process — when the plainer the rendering the better.

I have tried to bring these views together, and show it's possible to create faithful renderings that read as acceptable poetry if the full resources of English verse are deployed. Accordingly — but for Trakl's *Grodek*, where the original is written in lines of unequal length — I have adopted strict forms throughout. Theoretical arguments for and against free verse are pointless when what matters is the quality of the end result, but it has to be said that contemporary styles do not generally have the techniques needed to bring over the form and beauty of the originals, particularly in the Persian and Chinese traditions, where complex conventions are an essential part of the poetry.

Writing in *Dedication of the Aeneid*, Dryden remarked that: *On the whole I thought it fit to steer between the two extremes of paraphrase and literal translation; to keep as near to the author as I could, without losing all his graces. . . I have endeavoured to make Virgil speak such English as he would himself have spoken if he had been born in England, and in the present age.* Such has also been my intention, aiming for a middle style that is not hopelessly antiquated nor cheapened with street slang. What is moving, powerful and beautiful in the original should at least have an echo of those qualities in the translation.

FROM THE FRENCH

Quand vous serez bien vieille

When old and sat in evening's candle-light,
the skeined wool spun beside the fireside blaze,
you'll read my verses, marvel, sing of days
'when I was beautiful in Ronsard's sight.'

No servant toiling, half asleep at night,
but starts to hear my name, and, waking, stays
to hear your homage in my well-wrought praise
retrieve your loveliness from time's despite.

But I in earth, a disembodied guest,
shall in the shade of myrtles have my rest,
while huddled up in hearth, a crone you'll stay
regretting love and those past vows you scorned.
Believe me, live. By afterwards be warned
to gather in life's roses of today.

Sonnet 43 from Le Second Livre des Sonnets pour Hélène (1578) by Pierre de Ronsard.

Sonnet XXII

Since she is ever winter to me, ice and snow,
and is with icicles completely kirtled round
and loves not me but only how my verses sound,
why then indulge in foolishness, not let her go?

What good to me that name and state and lineage show
how honourably and sweetly I'm in prison bound?
There's no such grey, beloved, on this tonsure found
that you alone of all would gladly take me so.

A child is love, no doubt, but cannot hide his eyes
and say in lofty state and looks your grandeur lies
that you with contumely may spurn this heart's true vow.

So love me, though the April of my years is fled,
I beg of you, with grey hairs spent upon my head,
and I will love the same a you as I am now.

Sonnet 22 from Le Premier Livre des Sonnets pour Hélène (1578) by Pierre de Ronsard.

Sur la Mort de Marie

Just as one sees, upon a branch, the rose in May:
to beauty's primal youthfulness its head is bent.
In sky its brilliant colours call up discontent;
with tears the dawn will sprinkle it at break of day,

So will, in love and grace retained, the petals stay
to flood the trees and garden round with their rich scent,
but to excessive heat and battering rain are lent,
and languish, one by one unfurl, and fade away.

So you, for all the expectations of your youth,
though earth and sky to you in homage speak the truth,
are felled by fate, and must like them in dust repose.

These are the obsequies that tears and grief assume:
a bowl of milk, a basket topped with fragrant bloom.
Alive and dead, your body in this still the rose.

Sur la Mort de Marie, published 1578, by Pierre de Ronsard.

Three sonnets of Pierre de Ronsard (1524-85), a central figure of the French Pléiade group, whose fusion of mythology and nature in tender lyricism gave great impetus to our Elizabethan age of songs and sonnets. The first and third sonnets are among the most celebrated of Renaissance work, much richer in their music and phonetic patterning than is possible to duplicate in English.

Boaz Sleeping

Overcome with weariness, he kept
to the same rough quarters as before:
all day had seen him on the threshing floor
and now, by sacks of wheat, tired Boaz slept.

He possessed, this good old man, large fields of wheat,
and barley too: was just, and passing rich.
His mill ran cleanly, fairly; he didn't switch
a neighbour's castings from the furnace heat.

His beard was silvered as an April stream;
his sheaves lay broad and open as the day.
Leave this or that to gleaners he would say.
Thoughtful this old man: a kind regime.

Far from him was any crooked road.
He walked through guileless probity in white:
he backed the poor in dispute, and for their plight
from his own granaries the fountains flowed.

To labourers and family, though not in sight,
Boaz was faithful, generous, if cautious too.
Girls gazed more favourably than age has due,
for if youth has beauty, age has might.

The old return beyond the alteration
of days about them to the source of truth.
With fires of passion blaze the eyes in youth
but to the old there comes illumination.

* * *

So, Boaz slept that night among his own,
beside the millstones, rubble, darkened rows
of stretched-out harvesters whose heaps were those
of ancient custom, kept to, cast in stone.

From their days in tents, beyond the flood,
the tribes of Israel took as chief their law:
it guided and supported when they saw
still fresh the prints of giants on the mud.

* * *

As Jacob slept, so did Judith. Spread
out, with eyes fast shut, was Boaz. Far
above him, falling from a door ajar
in the heavens, a dream took up his head.

And in that dream he saw an oak tree climb
as from his loins into the very sky:
a chain, a line of people, to whom in time
a king would come with psalms, and a god die.

How can that be, within the inner house
of soul, the old man murmured, since the sum
of eighty years is come upon me, come
and gone: no sons are left me, or a spouse.

How long ago it seems the one I wed
has gone and left my couch for yours, Yehova:
but what she was, she is, as though carried over
by one half living still to one half dead.

A race from out my blood: how can that be?
How shall I glory with the dawn's first ray
if none of mine are with me through the day?
Mine is survival and longevity.

I am as trees stripped in the winter, think
at evening, soberly, on what has been.
To the tomb, continually, now I lean
as the ox does, heavily, down to drink.

So spoke old Boaz, turning, eyes betrayed
by sleep to God and not the sudden heat.
The cedar sees no roses in its shade,
nor he the woman stretched out at his feet.

* * *

As she slumbered, Ruth, a Moabite,
was still near Boaz with her breasts undone,
hoping, who can say, some half-begun
glance would open into morning light.

Boaz did not know that Ruth was there,
nor Ruth herself what God intended. Well
that there came the perfume of the asphodel,
and Galgala lay within the light wind's care.

The night was solemn, august and bridal. There flew
or not among the shadows hesitating
a host of angels in that hour of waiting,
a tempest as though of wings, a flash of blue.

The sound of Boaz breathing kept the hours:
the water trickled quietly through the moss:
Nature at her sweetest, when months emboss
the summits of the hills with lily flowers.

* * *

Ruth now pondered; Boaz slept. The clink
of sheepbells carried: darkness innocent.
An immense blessing fell from the firmament.
It was the hour of quiet, when lions drink.

Rest in Ur and Jerimadeth. The flowers
of darkness enamelled their sombre rest
and a crescent, thin and clear, lit up the west
as Ruth, unmoving, wondered through the hours:

What god — her look half lifting through its bars —
what summer reaper out of times unknown,
in leaving her so carelessly had thrown
that golden sickle in the field of stars?

Boöz Endormi from *Légends des Siècles* (1859) by Victor Hugo.

Victor-Marie Hugo (1802-85) was the greatest of the French Romantics, writing a prodigious quantity of poetry, plays, essays and novels, creating some 4,000 drawings, and taking a prominent part in Republican politics. Much of modern poetry is founded on his work, which dealt with the great social, artistic and political issues of the day. His productions were well known and respected: over two million joined his funeral procession from the Arc de Triomphe to the Panthéon where he was buried.

Hugo's work encompassed the careers of Nerval, Baudelaire, Rimbaud and Mallarmé, and passed in style from the narcissistic Rousseau, through the exiled wanderings of Chateaubriand and Lamartine, and the distant splendour of Vigny to an individual and vigorous pantheism. Man was but an element of external nature manifest in occult forces and divinity.

Boöz Endormi retells the biblical story of Ruth and Boaz: while Ruth sleeps at his feet, Boaz dreams that a tree grows out of his body, a revelation that he is to be the founder of a new race. It is a typical piece — vigorous and strongly modelled — which also contains several of his most celebrated lines, notably *L'ombre était nuptiale, auguste et solennelle* and *Cette faucille d'or dans le champ des étoiles*. The *Jerimadeth* was Hugo's invention, to meet the rhyme, and I have similarly been forced to replace what is *veils* in the original's last stanza with *bars*.

Autumn Song

Inconsolable winds
bring violins,
and autumn's part
is monotonous
and languorous,
pain to the heart.

Suffocating, pale
halting and stale,
slowly hours creep,
gather and fall.
So I recall
past days and weep.

Tossed this way
and that as winds may,
one with the grief.
Hither and yon,
carried and gone:
dead the leaf.

Chanson d'Automne from Paul Verlaine's *Poèmes saturniens* (1867)

Paul Verlaine's (1844-96) *Poèmes saturniens* was well received, and in 1870 he married Mathilde Mauté, sharing the apartment with his in-laws and the young poet Arthur Rimbaud. An affair with Rimbaud broke the marriage, however, and Verlaine then led a Bohemian life in London and Brussels. The affair ended in 1873 when Verlaine tried to shoot his friend in a drunken quarrel. He was jailed for 18 months and wrote *Romance sans paroles* (1874). Thereafter, life was more difficult: homosexual affairs, excellent poetry but also long periods of drinking and hospitalisation. Verlaine's funeral was a public event, but the man died destitute.

Chanson d'Automne places music above content, and achieves vowel harmonies impossible to convey fully in English (the closed, dead sounds of *feuille morte*, the reverberation of *l'automne*, etc., emphasised by the delicate interlacing of single and feminine rhymes.)

The Sky is Here

The sky is here above the roof,
so blue, so soft.
A palm here sways above the roof
soaring aloft.

A clock-tower in the sky we see
chimes low and faint.
A bird that's calling from a tree
echoes its plaint.

My God, my God, how life is here
calm and sweet.
How murmuring the sounds we hear
far from the street.

What have you done, you who are known
weeping each day?
Tell us what you have done to have thrown
your youth away.

After Le Ciel est, par-dessus le toit in Sagesse (1881) by Paul Verlaine.

A simple poem of sentiment, which may reflect Verlaine's thoughts on a tranquil family life he left behind. As in the previous poem, *Le Ciel est, par-dessus le toit* represents a moment of exquisite sensation, and shows Verlaine's superb craftsmanship in controlling the delicacy, imprecision and soft shading of the stanzas.

A free translation: the original says 'town' rather than 'street', and simply asks what has happened to youth, rather than why it has been thrown away.

Memory

I

Clear water, like the salt of childhood tears:
the white of women's bodies opened in the sun,
and truth, beyond walls or the silk oriflammes, won
out with the valour of a maid pure in her years.

The frolic of angels in their moving blaze of gold,
imponderable arms sparkling with the coolness of the grass,
having the blues of heaven as the sky's bed to pass
under the canopy of shade into the arch and hill's fold.

II

The stones, under the water, extend as in a clear broth,
and depths, freckled in prepared beds of pale gold,
and frocks of girls are there, faded, green as mould,
and willows, and unhampered birds, in the day's cloth.

Round as the eyelid, with the warmth of a gold louis,
jets the marsh marigold, fresh in its wedding vows.
The mirror at prompt noon, jealous of the day's drowse
tarnishes into a sphere, heat-flecked but dear to us.

III

Too upright is Madam in the meadow's prairie scene.
The sons of toil are in the cotton-fields, settled as white cloud.
In her fingers she twirls her parasol, tramples it, too proud
to watch her children reading in the flowering green,

Their books in red morocco. Of what they think or dream —
as on all paths a thousand angels flare upon the day —
of hopes lost in high mountains, she cannot follow; her way
is glistening dark and cold, as is the shadowed stream.

IV

Regret of arms satiated and celibate,
beds as those of saints on moonlit April nights,
and the tear-wet joy falling on abandoned river sites,
and the rotting evenings in August that these germinate.

Under walls let her weep now: the winds possess
only the high poplars, tremulously blown.
Underneath in lead, unglinting, weighed in stone,
an old dredger labours, the small boat motionless.

V

Flotsam, plaything of these waters that nothing hinders,
in my boarding of this still boat, O arms too short!
Not this flower or that, which is yellow, however sought,
or the blue one, friends, in waters grey as cinders.

Ah, for the powder of the willows, the plume of blood
in wings, roses from the reeds dragged from time's jaws!
The boat does not move although the chain draws
on through a waterlogged eye, without banks, to mud!

Mémoire from *L'Ermitage* (1892) by Arthur Rimbaud

Arthur Rimbaud (1854-91), a brilliant but tormented soul, gave up poetry altogether when he was twenty-one, and this poem was probably written when he was eighteen. He travelled widely, but came home from trade in Ethiopia to die of cancer. Rimbaud's poetry contains some of the most evocative images of childhood in the French language, but is often difficult to follow — sudden juxtapositions, unexplained characters, and ambiguities of meaning. Here the poet seems to be remembering the hours when he and a brother would sit in their uncle's boat at Charleville, letting it drift with the current, and which now appear as a dream of freedom run into the mud. The girls are probably his sisters, and the woman his mother, the tyrannical woman left to cope when her freedom-loving soldier of a husband ran off leaving her with five children to bring up. The white cloud may refer to the white shirts of workmen, or (as I have accepted here) an allusion to slavery in the US cotton fields.

The virgin, vivid and beautiful today

The virgin, vivid and beautiful today.
Will a blow for us from the drunk wing break
beneath the frost of a forgotten lake
clear flights of glaciers not fled away!

In past magnificence of another day
the swan remembers its freedom, but cannot make
a song from surroundings but only take
on the sterile dull glint of the winter's stay.

Out of white agony the whole neck lies
in a space inflicted that the bird denies.

Cold and immobile in its feathered being,
not in horror of earth but to brightness gone:
a dream wrapped in scorn, and a phantom, seeing
how futile is exile for the Swan.

Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui from *Poésies* (1887) by Stéphane Mallarmé

Mallarmé (1842-98) was the high priest of the Symbolism movement that extended the evocative power of words to express the feelings, sensations and states of mind that lie beyond everyday awareness. Poets policed the area they arrogated to themselves, and sought to correct and purify the language that would evoke its powers. Syntax was rearranged to achieve an allusive, enigmatic, and musical style.

Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui is the most celebrated poem of the Symbolist period, but is more musical and enigmatic in the original French. The swan alludes to the poet, who dreams of an ideal world beyond the dull harshness of everyday existence.

Cemetery by the Sea

The sail of doves this tranquil roof assumes
palpitates through pines trees and the tombs.
Imperturbable midday, of fire
and sea, the sea beginning each occasion
to bring such riches in from contemplation:
great settlements of calm the gods inspire.

How intricately the sea's surf disappoints
itself in unseen glitter of diamond points.
Peace seems self-conceived. Settling as though
into an abyss of emptiness the sun pours
out its artistry on an eternal cause.
Time's an instant, and Dreaming is to know.

That temple to Minerva's intelligence,
water's calmness, shows such reticence.
Proud-lidded depths and the Eye's reproof
that wells up from sleep beneath the flame.
And the silence, that makes my soul the same
under the myriad gold waves that slope this Roof.

Temple of Time, parsed to a single sigh.
To this accustomed and pure instant I
climb now with the sea around me, born
of this look, making supreme oblations,
but seeing in its peaceful scintillations
the sea sow on my altitudes such sovereign scorn.

As the fruit's taste is moulded into pleasure,
and delight loses itself in its own measure
of absence in mouths where it is no more,
so I sense myself in the emanations
in a sky singing the soul's cremations,
dissolving in surf on that murmurous shore.

Look, beautiful heaven, true heaven, how I change,
after so much pride, so much strange

idleness, but even here, in my potency,
immolating myself in this bright space,
across the houses of the dead a trace
passes to plunge me into the shadowy.

Giving my soul to the sea's flare at solstice,
and therefore into that admirable justice
whose burning weapons are not by pity stayed,
I take on your purity, extending that bright
reflection of yourself, but the light
supposes my half still as a gloomy shade.

Ever for me, to and in myself alone:
out of that rapture is the poetry grown.
Between the emptiness and pure event,
I await the echo of that internal power,
that sonorous and dark, bitter reservoir
of nothingness ringing, to which the soul is bent.

Can you, feigned prisoner of this foliage, know
the boughs dissolving in this water's glow?
Around that dazzled secret, eyes are closed.
What body leads me to so loose an end
or forehead to the earth where bones are penned,
all these dead by the flickering light composed?

Earth's speck that's sacred, full of fire despite
being so insubstantial, and will offer light.
This place, occasioned by torches, pleases me.
The gold and stone and sombre trees assume
a mass of marble trembling in the gloom,
and on my tombs, and faithful, sleeps the sea.

Keep off the idolaters, let sea meanwhile
reflect the solitary of poet's smile,
that I may pasture here my mysteries:
white-cluster round me, undisturbed, the graves,
and let the doves be prudent in safe conclaves,
the daydreams vain as angel deities.

Future's toil is elsewhere. In the soil about
the brittle insect scratches at the drought.
All summer in this desiccating wind
abstracts, I do not know how, to essences.
And life is vast, drunk on absences,
and bitterness is soft, and the mind thinned.

The dead are hidden well in this warm earth
where mysteries resunnd give up their worth.
All the noon up there, unchanging blue:
the midday thinks and only suits itself,
and all around a head of brilliant wealth
which is the change, the secret change in you.

Only me you have to hold your faints,
my penitence and doubts, and my constraints
are broken facets in your crystal flare.
Where, under the marble, all night wait,
lost among tree roots in their wandering state,
a people already, who emerge to air.

Into a thickness otherways they melt,
an absent whiteness in the red clay's welt.
The gift of life is fled to flowers, the years
of frank familiarity in speech,
individual graciousness, the souls in each:
and larvae spin their silk where there were tears.

Girls' shrieks, love's teasings in their eyes,
and teeth and eyelids moistened with their sighs,
the charming breast that bares and bids delay,
the blood that wets the lips that whisper yes,
the fingers fending off that feigned distress:
the earth resorbs them and returns to play.

And you, great soul, who hope to find some dream
beneath the colours that must shift and seem,
some sight the wave and gold will give in shades
of permanence although the flesh expires —

for self is porous and the world retires,
and the thirst for sainthood even fades.

How thin that immortality in gold
and black, the hideous laurels that we fold,
consoling death at some maternal breast.
A trick that's beautiful: a pious lie.
Who does not know that, or could still deny
the emptied skull goes laughing to its rest?

The ancestors, the uninhabited heads
lost under the shovel, where the earth spreads
in footsteps more than living may discern:
the rodent and the irrefutable worm
in those drunk under the table of life affirm
that life is food, as I too in my turn.

Are they loves, perhaps, or hates?
The tooth is intimate with me and waits
despite whatever name I fabricate.
It will see, want, think, touch, keep,
in daylight's consciousness or in my sleep,
repeating life will hold me to this state.

Zeno of Elea, cruel lies
your arrow pierces with, how fast it flies,
vibrating in the air but cannot move.
The sound gives birth to me, the arrow kills;
the sun the shadow of the speeding tortoise fills
as soul a swift Achilles cannot prove.

But no, I stand within the future's court
and break my body out of inward thought.
Drink, my breast, the birthing wind, and sing
of heightened freshness in that bursting sea:
a saltiness will salve the soul in me,
and waves return me as some living thing.

Sea, what great delirium we're in
with torn off chlamys and with panther skin.
The thousand thousand idols in the sun

drink the Hydra of your flesh, where the blue
tail returns the effective remorse in you
as silent commotion settling into one.

The wind rises. We must try to live. Look:
an immensity of air opens and shuts my book.
Waves shatter on the rocks. Break, with bright
glitterings with my pages flown away,
and rejoice, waves, falling into spray —
on this calm roof with sailcloths fretted light.

Le Cimetière marin from *Charmes* (1922) by Paul Valéry

Paul Valéry (1871-1945) first wrote in the Symbolist manner, but later, after his 20-year break from poetry, became more analytical and uncompromising in his search for ultimates: *Poetry is simply literature reduced to the essence of its active principle. It is purged of idols of every kind, of realistic illusions, of any conceivable equivocation between the language of 'truth' and the language of 'creation'.* Valéry stressed the mental process of creation, his poems being a by-product, though a perfect one: Valéry was an exacting writer, taking days to find the right word. A similar intensity marked his private studies, which were not to master any branch of the sciences or mathematics, but to investigate the relationships between them, and how each expressed a different aspect of human thought. *The mind is a moment in the response of the body to the world*, he once said.

In *Le Cimetière Marin*, the sea acts as a symbol for the understanding between man and nature, which is profound but not wholly logical. A celebrated but difficult piece, the poem records Valéry's meditations at Sète on the Mediterranean coast, where the poet spent his youth and is now buried. As so often with Valéry, the narrator is detached, absorbed in his own thought processes, and the poetry exists more in the connotations and resonances of the words themselves than the larger world the words may refer to.

Clara d'Ellébeuse

Down the years it's Clara d'Ellébeuse
I love, who went to old-time boarding schools
and came, warm evenings, under linden trees
to read her magazines of other days.

It's her alone I love and on my heart
I feel the blue light of her throat in flame.
Where is she? Or happiness's part
when into her bright room the branches came?

Perhaps it may be that she is not dead
— or else the both of us have long been so.
The cold wind's leaves across the yard have spread,
brought in by summers' endings years ago.

Do you remember those great peacock feathers
and that tall vase, with seashells heaped around?
How once we learned of shipwrecks and of weathers
on Newfoundland's Great Bank, its fishing ground?

Come, my precious Clara d'Ellébeuse,
together let us love if you exist.
Old gardens have old tulips in their midst.
O come quite naked, Clara d'Ellébeuse.

Clara d'Ellébeuse by Francis Jammes (1868-1938)

In contrast to the intellectual difficulties and polished phrasing of the late Symbolist poetry of his time, Jammes wrote simple lyrical pieces about the Pyrenean countryside where he grew up, and of women he imagined but often hardly knew. His mother and modest circumstances prevented marriage until 1907, but Jammes eventually produced a large family, and an equally copious output. Clara d'Ellébeuse is one of his best known pieces.

The Song of the Ill-Loved

To Paul Léautaud

*I was singing this refrain
in 1903, not knowing my
love and phoenix were the same,
and if they fled the evening sky
they were reborn when morning came.*

One night of London fog and flame
a ne'er-do-well resembling my
love was passing: up he came
and showed me such a knowing eye
it made me lower mine in shame.

With that young tough I had to go
who hands in pockets took his ways
whistling through the parted row
of tenements as Red Sea waves:
he the Hebrews, I Pharaoh.

May waves of brick fall ton on ton
if any man has loved you more.
I am king of Egypt's son,
his sister-queen, his army corps,
if you are not my only one.

At a turning of the street, ablur
with housefronts lit in sullen flare,
and red fangs stuck in fog's thick stir
that wailed about the housefronts there:
a woman very much like her.

It was that savage look above
the neck she undid, with a scar.
I recognized, if drunk enough,
in woman reeling from some bar,
the falsity of even love.

The wise, far-travelled Ulysses
returning home, his journeys done,
found dog came shuffling on its knees
and wife beside the cloth she'd spun
still waited for him over seas.

And Shakuntala's royal mate,
when tired of war, returned, became
enamoured of her famished state,
and saw the look in eyes the same
that petted a gazelle of late.

I thought of happy kings whose part
betrayed by love and yours I'd lose
in whom all lovings ever start —
between false shadows I must choose
that made me ever down at heart.

Regrets that build the hell we know,
and sky's forgetting what we swore.
A kiss the famous kings would sow
oblivion on their riches for,
who sold themselves to picture-show.

I winter in my past come back.
May Easter sun revive at last
this frozen heart with warmth I lack
far worse than forty of Sebaste
who died upon their icy rack.

What is memory, my soul,
but a vessel where we sail
too deep to drink the waters whole.
In dawns so beautiful we rail
against life's saddening evening stroll.

Farewell, false love, confused with pain
her going from me will have cost,
and also her I would not feign,
that one in Germany I lost
and shall not ever see again.

O Milky Way, whose sisterly
white streams flow on through Canaan's land.
The white of lover's bodies. We
must follow swimmers left unmanned
and swim to further nebulae.

Memories I have recourse
to: April, dawn, another year.
In happiness I sang the course:
a manly song to those most dear
the moment love returned in force.

Aubade Sung to Laetare a Year Ago

Come, Pâquette, it is the spring.
Let us walk these pretty woods.
The farmyard hens are chattering.
The dawn in pink and pleated hoods
announces love is conquering.

Mars and Venus here will prance
and kiss about with maddened lips:
openly they take their chance.
Beneath the leaves the roses slip
on, naked gods renew their dance.

Come, the present time is queen
in all its tender flowering.
Warm and touching nature's been
with Pan through forest echoing,
and humid bullfrogs haunt the scene.

Many gods with death have diced,
it is for them the willows weep.
Great Pan, love, Jesus Christ —
all are dead, and alleys keep,
with Paris tomcats, solemn rites.

I who know the lays for queens,
and such laments for all the years,
for eels with slaves made epicenes,

and that long tale of lover's tears,
and all the songs of siren scenes.

He trembles love may be untrue,
who worshipped idols all his life.
The memories of her I knew,
and, dead like Mausolus's wife,
must still repine and wait for you.

More faithful than the mastiff dog,
or master ivy to the oak,
or like the Cossack Zaporog:
a pious but a thieving soak,
who's bound to steppes and decalogue.

My crescent like a burden bear,
the which astrologers consult.
I am the Omnipotent: take care,
my Zaporogs, to not insult
the dazzling Sultan that you hear.

Become my faithful subjects: so
the Sultan wrote to them, but, loath
to hear, they laughed and, apropos
to answering him, returned and, wroth,
composed this by the candle's glow.

Reply of the Zaporogian Cossacks to the Sultan of Constantinople

Wretch worse than foul Barabbas was,
go sport that evil angel's horn,
as gross Beelzebub's is yours.
One fed on refuse we will scorn
and not attend your Sabbath draws.

A rotten fish of Salonika,
with nightmares necklaces impart
to pulled out eyes besotting her,
your mother with a liquid fart
gave birth to colic blocking her.

Hangman of Podolia's lover
who sucks off crust from rancid sores,
where mare and pig become another:
keep your riches, you'll have cause
to pay for what your ointments smother.

* * *

O Milky Way, whose sisterly
white streams flow on through Canaan's land.
The white of lover's bodies. We
must follow swimmers left unmanned
and swim to further nebulae.

The panther eyes I had to shun,
and beautiful but still a whore's,
those Florentine, false kisses won,
in which the bitterness restores
distaste for what we might have done.

When looks across the evening brim
with stars that tremble in their haste,
and eyes in which the sirens swim,
and kisses blooded with such taste
to make our fairy grandfolk grim.

In truth it is for her I'm sent,
and in my heart and soul's recall,
and on that bridge where life's resent
it may not have her sent at all
to tell her that I am content.

My heart and head are emptied wide,
all heaven's flowing out of them,
and, heaped-up Danaïdes aside,
what happiness must I condemn
to be again a little child?

I'd not forget, though far I rove,
my dove upon the whitened road.
O marguerite in leaves unclothed,

my distant island, Désirade:
such rose you are and tree of clove.

May satyrs and Pyraustus,
and flitting fires of Aegipans,
make destinies as damned as Faustus.
That neck in noose on Calais sands —
what holocaust of pain it cost us.

Grief that doubles future mourning
of unicorn, of capricorn:
the doubtful flesh the soul is warning.
Flee the god's flamed pyre in scorn
as stars the flowers in the morning.

Misfortune's god with ivory eyes,
and pale with mad priests still adorning
victims dressed in dark robed guise:
vain and purposeless this mourning.
Do not, misfortune, trust their cries.

And you who, trailing after, wake
the god of my gods dead this autumn,
and measure how much dust will make
my rights upon the earth that sought them:
you are my shadow, my old snake.

In the sunlight that you crave,
to which I led you, you remember,
a wife to whom I am a slave,
both mine and nothing but an ember
burning out I cannot save.

Winter's dead and dressed in snow,
the beehives burned were white as well.
The gardens and the orchards show
how singing birds on branches tell
of April's brightness spring will know.

Death of deathless argyraspids
that carry snow on silver shields.

In white the dendrophore forbids
the spring that to poor people yields
a smile to moisten brimming lids.

And I who have a heart as gross
as those fat bottoms sat upon
by Arab women: love I chose
brought all the pain I've undergone:
the seven swords unsheathe their woes.

The melancholy swords beget
no shadowed sharpness in distress,
but plunge in folly and regret
beyond conceived unhappiness.
How can you ask me to forget?

The Seven Swords

The first sword is of silver made
and Pensive is its trembling name,
the snowy winter sky its blade,
and Ghibelline its blooded claim:
when Vulcan made it, death he paid.

Named the second is Noubosse,
a joyous rainbow it appears
which gods at weddings wield and toss.
It killed the thirty musketeers,
and was bequeathed by Carabosse.

The third is blue and feminine,
but cypriape it is not less.
Called the Puck of Faltenin,
it's carried on a cloth's caress
become in Hermes dwarf of mien.

The fourth is what is called Milady:
gold the river, green in eddies.
Shore-girls in the evening, shady,
bathe in reverence their bodies,
and rowers sing there ever daily.

Fifth, the Saint-Faggot is bright
and is the fairest of distaffs.
A cypress on a tomb, alight
where four winds kneel and force their draughts
in torches' flaming, night on night.

The sixth has metal famed and glorious.
It is the friend of those soft hands
from which the morning ever parts us.
Farewell. Come roads to other lands.
The cocks grow weary of their chorus.

The seventh one is under cover,
languishing as woman's rose,
and I am glad the latest comer
shuts the door on all of those
who, like me, never knew their lover.

Milky Way

O Milky Way, whose sisterly
white streams flow on through Canaan's land,
the white of women's bodies: we
must follow swimmers left unmanned
and swim to further nebulae.

The demons of our gambling earn
a song to guide our heavenly step,
yet violins for which we yearn
are lost, and mortals dance who wept
down slopes to which they can't return.

The unknown future hides its face,
where kings may shake with folly's course,
and stars still shiver in their place.
The women slept with who are false:
the deserts histories efface.

Old Regent Luitpold with rights,
made twice the guardian of mad kings:
perhaps his memory alights

on glow-worms' pallid waverings,
or firefly gold on summer nights.

Near chateau lacking chatelaine
a boat with barcaroles, that sees,
with white lake softly laid upon
by springtime's ever-trembling breeze,
a dying siren sail as swan.

Upon the silvered lake one day
the king had drowned himself. His look
was like his mouth and drifted, lay
beside the bank and, sleeping, took
on what the changing sky can say.

June's sun is burning as a lyre,
it hurts my fingers. With an air
of sad delirium I never tire
of Paris, beautiful — aware
I have no heart to there retire.

It seems forever Sundays go,
and barrel-organs sob for these
or whine along drab streets below,
while Paris flowers on balconies
put out as Pisa's pictures show.

And nights of Paris, cut with gin
that crackle in electric haze,
with green the tramways flare, and in
foolhardy rides down vertebrae
mechanically will hum and grin.

Here the cafés fill with smoke
and loves of gypsies run amok,
and snuffling siphons spurt and soak,
and waiters come in loincloth smock
towards the words of love I spoke.

I who know the lays for queens,
and such laments for all the years,

for eels with slaves made epicenes,
and that long tale of lover's tears,
and all the songs of siren scenes.

La Chanson du Mal-Aimé from *Alcools* (1913) by Guillaume Apollinaire.

In this long poem, reflecting on his unhappy affair with Annie Playdon, Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918) brought back the values of song to serious French poetry. The imagery is sometimes baffling, and the trains of thought even more so, but it may help to know:

Stanza 7: Shakuntala is a Sanskrit play by Kalidasa.

Stanza 10: Forty of Sebaste were Christian soldiers martyred in AD 320 by being left naked on a frozen lake.

Aubade is a rural invitation to love.

Stanza 15: Pâquette is short for pâquerette or Easter daisy.

Stanza 22: Zaporogian Cossaks were models of fidelity to Moscow, and so hostile to the Sultan of Constantinople.

Stanza 25: Rotting fish may be an allusion to Balkan corruption under the Ottomans.

Stanza 26. Podolia is a part of Poland obtained (i.e. ruined) by the Ottomans in 1672.

Stanza 28: The Florentines had the reputation of being moneylenders and traitors.

Stanza 29: Danaïdes: Zeus impregnated Danae in a shower of gold: an allusion to emotions wasted on Annie Playden.

Stanza 32: Désirade is an island in the Antilles.

Stanza 33: Pyraustus is a fabulous insect supposed to live in fire.

Aegipans is an epithet of pans and satyrs.

Stanza 39. Argyraspids, literally 'with silver shields' were Alexander's bodyguard. Dendrophore refers to certain gods, to those carrying sacred trees in processions or members of certain guilds in Roman times.

Stanza 40. French says 'arse of Damascus ladies'.

Stanza 43: Carabosse was an evil fairy that gave unfortunate gifts.

Stanza 44. Cypriape may be a conflation of 'Cypriot' and 'Priapus'.

Hermes Trismegistus, or thrice great, is attributed by Neoplatonists to the Egyptian god Thoth, but has here been shrunk to a dwarf: another of Apollinaire's *recondite* jokes.

FROM THE SPANISH

To Margarita Debayle

Margarita, how beautiful the sea is:
still and blue.

The orange blossom in the breezes
drifting through.

The skylark in its glory
has your accent too:

Here, Margarita, is a story
made for you.

A king there was and far away,
with a palace of diamonds
and a shopfront made of day.
He had a herd of elephants,

A kiosk, more, of malachite,
and a robe of rarest hue
also a princess who was light
of thought and beautiful as you.

But one afternoon the princess
saw high in the heavens appear
a star, and, being mischievous
and wilful, wanted it brought near.

It would form the centrepiece
of a brooch hung with verse, pearl,
feathers, flowers: a caprice
of course of a little girl.

But also, because a princess,
exquisite, delicate like you,
the others then cut irises
roses, asters: as girls do.

But, alas, our little one went far
across the sea, beneath the sky,
and all to cut the one white star
that gave her wondering a sigh.

She went beyond where the heavens are
and to the moon said, au revoir.
How naughty to have flown so far
without the permission of Papa.

She returned at last, and though gone
from the high heavens of accord,
still there hung about and shone
the soft brilliance of our Lord.

Which the king noted, said: you,
child, drive me past despair,
but what is that strange, shining dew
on your hands, your face, your hair?

She spoke the truth; her words shine
with the clear lightness of the air:
I went to seek what should be mine
in that blue immensity up there.

Are then the heavens for our display,
with things that you must touch?
You can be altogether too outré,
child, for God to like you much.

To hear that I am sorry, truly,
for I had no plans as such. But,
once across the windy sky and sea
I had that far-off flower to cut.

Whereupon, in punishment,
the king said, I'd be much beholden
if you'd go this moment and consent
to return what you have stolen.

So sad was then our little princess
looking at her sweet flower of light,
until and smiling at her distress
there stood the Lord Jesus Christ.

Those fields are as I willed them,
and your rose but signatory
to the flowers up there that children
have in dreaming formed of me.

Again the king is laughing, brilliant
in his robe's rich royalty.
He troops the herd of elephant,
in their four hundred, by the sea.

Adored and delicate, the princess
is once more a little girl
who keeps for brooch the star and, yes,
the flowers, and the feathers, the pearl.

Beautiful, Margarita, the sea is,
still and blue:
with your sweet breath have all the breezes
blossomed too.

Now soon from me and far you'll be,
but, little one, stay true
to a gentle thought made a story
once for you.

A Margarita Debayle in Poema del Otoño y Otros Poemas (1910) by Rubén Darío.

The Nicaraguan Félix Rubén García Sarmiento (1867-1916), a founding member of *Modernismo*, was one of the supreme technicians in the Spanish language, but led a life of tragicomedy: divorced parents, brought up by an aunt in León, journalism, liaison with the unfaithful Rosario Murillo, marriage to Rafaela Contreras, forced marriage to Rosario, short-lived government posts, failed journalistic ventures, constant drinking, womanising, travel, contentment with Francisca Sánchez who bore him several children, kidnap by Rosario and death by cirrhosis of the liver in his boyhood town of León.

Song of Autumn in Springtime

Youth's heavenly treasure, from on high,
now you leave, nor come anew.
When I would cry, I do not cry. . .
and at times I cry without wanting to. . .

Plural has been the celestial
history of the heart beneath:
undefiled as a girl is in our bestial
world of travail and of grief.

She looked to me as the dawn dresses
itself, and smiling as a flower.
Her hair was sombre; from those tresses
night and hardship forged their power.

Timid I was as a child,
and she, naturally, was
to my love's ermine more the wild
Salomé and Herodias.

Youth's heavenly treasure, from on high,
now you leave, nor come anew.
When I would cry, I do not cry. . .
and at times I cry without wanting to. . .

More consoling, the other was
more expressive and discrete;
but also flattering because
a one I never hoped to meet.

Nonetheless, such tenderness
came with passion to unite
beneath an unconcealing dress
Bacchante's posture and delight.

My dream she took, sung to, willed
to sleep, a baby, warm and safe.
That small, unhappy thing she killed
for want of daylight, want of faith. . .

Youth's heavenly treasure, from on high,
now you leave, nor come anew.
When I would cry, I do not cry. . .
and at times I cry without wanting to. . .

My lips for another were a jewel case,
to her belonged such a little part:
she would kiss me and embrace,
her mad teeth to chew my heart.

Was it not excessive, this
pageantry of passion with
eternity its synthesis:
redoubled fierceness in belief?

Love is frail as is the body,
there are no Edens to befriend,
and folly to think for anybody
that flesh and springtime have no end.

Youth's heavenly treasure, from on high,
now you leave, nor come anew.
When I would cry, I do not cry. . .
and at times I cry without wanting to. . .

So many others, many climates,
countries phantomed with my thought.
What are they, rhymes, but connivants
for loveliness to keep her court?

How hard I sought! In vain the princess
waited and was sad for me.
Life is heavy and a bitterness:
what we sing of cannot be.

Though time is obstinate as stone,
still endlessly for love I thirst,
grey-haired, by the roses grown
as beautiful as were the first.

Youth's heavenly treasure, from on high,
now you leave, nor come anew.
When I would cry, I do not cry. . .
and at times I cry without wanting to. . .

Yet more to me dawn's aureate sky!

Canción de Otoño en Primavera from *Cantos de vida y esperanza* (1905)
by Rubén Darío

Originally influenced by the Parnassians and Góngora, *Modernismo* aimed for a verse of intricate and brilliant imagery, taking the visual arts as a model. With Darío, the movement absorbed the musical evocation of the Symbolists, along with its preciousness, eroticism and exotic reference. Musicianship of language and prosodic virtuosity are pre-eminent in Darío, whose poems in no less than 37 metres and 136 stanza patterns did much to reinvigorate Spanish poetry. The vocabulary was equally diverse, and included borrowings from antiquity onwards and his own coinages. The usual symbols of a para-religious approach to poetry (taken from dreams, occultism and depth psychiatry) appear, but Darío had his own: centaur (human and bestial traits), forest (gradation from gross to ethereal) and the swan (purity and eroticism).

One of the best-known of poems in Latin America among the older generation, *Canción de Otoño en Primavera* is an intensely personal piece, though not strictly autobiography. At forty, with two marriages behind him, and incapacitated for long periods by the drinking that was to kill him a decade later, Darío had every reason to reflect on the spoiled hopes of youth.

Autumn Poem

You, meditating on some other,
hand on chin curled,
think to have let fall, brother,
the flower of the world.

Emptily you lament and count
all of them sorrow,
say what is past will discount
pleasures tomorrow.

Forgetting that the iris with rose
in fragrance will wed,
as too will proud myrtle shows
deck the grey head.

What the soul delights in, it kills,
as expire they must,
all lovers that Zingua wills
to feed her lust.

And you call the kind, harmless hour
catastrophes,
and you expect thereafter the sour
Ecclesiastes.

Bedazzled by Sunday do you not remember
how love began:
and how it died on Ash Wednesday an ember,
O soul of man!

Up the blossoming mountain climbs
the soul from harm.
So say Anacreon and rhymes
of Omar Kayyam.

Escaping evil and in this
past all advice:
did not the evil of artifice
adorn paradise?

And beautiful and bright
surely days are
in a woman captured, a rose and one white
evening star.

Lucifer shines; in happiness drunk
sings the rough sea.
Yet Sylvanus is in the trunk
of green beech tree.

Shall we say, then, that life is pure,
entrancing and clear,
regal in all sweetness and sure
of springtime near?

And shall we say that in the midst
of injuries
and of insults when the reptiles twist
glowing in furies?

What good that we are conscious
of baleful faces,
or the emnities, or of Pontius
Pilate's smooth graces?

Whenever the land finishes, and flat
the tide's motion,
we are as we were, mere foam of that
eternal ocean.

Let us wash then our clothing
of stanch'd prose
but dream also of betrothing
the mystic rose.

Flowers, flowers in each moment,
hold to the lark's song,
that one whole day in the firmament
be honey long.

We are all abundantly crowned
with love's corona:
so each of us finds the ground
of our Verona.

Even at the last hour comes truth,
singing so as
to comfort us and say, Ruth,
glean for Boaz!

As in flowers, rich in their nascent
blossoming spent,
is not the dawn then but of fragrance,
adolescent!

Dance after the Sylvani or Eros,
be lusty again,
and as the world was, amorous
as all nymphs then.

Since time disgraces as disease,
you must know the
wiles to conquer him, Cydalise,
Cythia, Chloe.

After Cypris comes Priapus,
hard on the prowl,
as Hecate hunting for Diana
has dogs howl.

Yet she, beautiful but blind
to all in her chiffon
imaginings goes down to find
Endymion.

Now to the place of roses belongs
orange blossom:
so we will hear the Song of Songs
and Solomon.

What in adolescence can hurt you?
Love will flower
as the dawn does, and in virtue:
what bliss that hour!

Unhappy he who waits too long;
and worse those
who spin out forever a song
that no love knows.

Here and in far lands a palace
where blood burns:
woman is that glittering chalice
for which love yearns.

She who is spent breath and flame
must everywhere
unfasten and sublime the same
into fine air.

Relinquish to longing its scope:
deeply inhale:
in the fragrance of women our hope,
our holy grail.

Feast on what the body has,
as appetite must:
what of it afterwards continues but as
ashes and dust?

Glory in the flame and prize
the flowering sun:
tomorrow is the passion of eyes
even undone.

Embrace the harmonies of Apollo,
sing of the south:
for you will lack in the days that follow
even a mouth.

You will not let the good things blot
out their true worth,
because you know you are not
yet under the earth.

Remember also that which freezes
or restricts
is the dove that Venus releases
over the Sphinx.

Out of hardship there comes to aid us
Anadyomene:
As also from the work of Phidias
comely Phryne.

In the sweetness of apple continues
the Biblical man:
and sits in our veins and sinews
unregenerate Adam.

What is living but a bestowing,
a libation,
a universal and overflowing
fecundation.

All that is heaven beats forward to
eventual glory,
which out of love's contest is our true
heart's story.

Pain contains and offends us, this is
continually fate:
but given also is the flowing noesis
of the world's state.

And ours also a vibrancy
as seashell the surf
sounding in its sufficiency
sunlight and earth.

Salt in our arteries presses
its bloodline and sweep
as sirens in wavering tresses
keep tritons from sleep.

Fence us in then with ilex and laurel,
and deeper entrust:
we, centaurs inclined, have no quarrel
with satyr's lust.

In us abundances pour
headlong their breath,
as richer in love's realms we draw
and deeper to death.

Poema del Otoño from *Poema del Otoño y Otros Poemas* (1910) by
Rubén Darío.

Darío's poetry and prose made an indelible mark in Hispano literature, but he had no real followers. Nonetheless, *Poetry*, he said, *will exist as long as there is a problem of life and death. The gift of art is a superior gift that allows you to enter into the unknown of the before and into the ignored of the after, in the world of dreams and meditation. There are no schools; there are poets. The true artist understands all the ways and finds beauty in all forms. All the glory and eternity are in our conscience.*

Poema del Otoño is a typically virtuoso piece, illustrating the range of Darío's affiliations and enthusiasms.

Triumphal March

Comes the parade now with one accord,
marching comes the army and the clear, bright bugling begins.
Fearsome is the glittering of each reflected sword,
with gold and steel amassing the moving paladins.
Now under arches they are passing white Minerva and her Mars,
with fame and all her triumphs their lengthy trumpets raise.
Ovations in the standards that in solemn glory pass,
carried by the athletes with heroic hands of praise.
Cavalry as well their furious weapons sound;
they champ upon the bridle these horses of the war.
Cacophony of hooves is the sounding of the law.
In kettledrum and ground
the rhythmic marching of the feet.
Under arches they are crowned
their fierce triumphs are complete.

At once the sound of bugles is now magnified,
the chorus strong,
sonorous the song;
enveloped are the standards in the thunderous golden throng
speaking of a people in their august national pride,
resonant of battle, inexorable advance.

The lion's mane,
harsh plumes and pike and lance,
fierce bloods that drenching stain
the earth for
the dark dogs that reign:
death and glory govern war.

The aureate sounds,
the advent witnessing
of glory claimed and won.
Magnificent, they leave their lofty mountain grounds,
gliding on the winds with unfurled darkening wings,
arriving with the victory, the golden condors come.

Now passes the parade.
Pride in the grandfather as to the child
are heroes' beards displayed,
the once full golden curls now edged with ermine white.
The beautiful of women make their wreaths of flowers.
Under porticos their faces full blossom as a rose,
and the most beautiful of those
turn in their warmest smiles to the fiercest warriors.
Honour to him carrying the captured standard through the air,
honour to the injured and to the loyal:
to those fallen by a foreign hand, and still so lying there,
bugles and laurel.

Nobility of sword that former glory wears,
panoplies of praise new wreaths and crowns incur,
the swords of the grenadiers, old but strong as bears,
the brothers of those lancers that one time centaurs were.
With shouts the air around
the warlike trumpets sound.
The swords of other days,
their steel hard-forged by hand.
The resounding glory stays,
the sun on these new victories plays,
the hero at the head of his own fiery band
and for all that leave their homeward fold.
The one who has defied, as to his armour wed,
the summer suns of red.
The wind and freezing cold,
the night and frost,
the hatred and death that for his country's sake
all saluted with bronze voices in the triumphal trumpet march they make.

Marcha Triunfal from *Cantos de Vida y Esperanza* (1905) by Rubén Darío.

Another poem in a form of Darío's own invention — unlike the popular tango piece that follows. The Brazilian Alfredo LePera did much to improve the literary quality of tango lyrics, but was killed in a plane crash at Medellín in Colombia, along with the singer Carlos Gardel and travelling musicians.

My Dear Buenos Aires

One day, my dear Buenos Aires,
that day when I see you again,
no more will be pain or forgetting.

There, in the street where it heard
my uncertain promises of love,
the lamp looked down on my loved one,
bright to me as the sun.

Today I'd return, if luck let me,
to my port and my only love.
How sadly I hear the accordion
tug at the reins of the heart

Here, Buenos Aires, with flowers
I could wish my life have its end.
In your arms could be no disappointments,
no regret at the years come again.

In crowds the memories are passing,
long trails of them, sweet with emotion.
I want you to know in remembering
the pains go away from the heart.

In those streets, from suburban windows
a little girl saw me and flowered:
when again shall I see that gladness,
and eyes smiling and gazing at me?

In the most fighting of backstreets a song
begs for our courage and love;
surely a sigh and a promise will
wipe out the tears at the wrong.

One day, my dear Buenos Aires,
that day when I see you again,
no more will be pain or forgetting. . .

Mi Buenos Aires Querido by Alfredo LePera (1900-35)

FROM THE ITALIAN

The Infinite

Ever dear to me was this small hill,
the hedgerow round it that obstructs the view
of boundless distances where the earth and sky
merge as one. My sitting there, my gazing out
on spaces limitless, unending silence, on
the depths of quietness my thoughts can sense
undo the heart almost. I hear the wind
ruffle the hedgerow and I must go on
balancing an infinite silence with this voice.
So come to mind the eternal and the dead
seasons, the present and the living, the sound
of them: immensities in which my thoughts drown,
though sweet to me the foundering in such sea.

L'Infinto from *Versi* (1826) by Giacomo Leopardi

Leopardi (1798-1837), the greatest Italian poet since Dante, incorporated words or phrases from earlier poets, but revitalized the meaning by scrupulous attention to sound and rhythm while employing the simplest of vocabularies. Though life for Leopardi was only pain and boredom, it allowed him to concentrate on his shadow world of *solid nothingness*, whose cornerstones were remembrance and infinity. Leopardi indeed opened the door to Modernism's divorce from social obligations, and to a *poésie pure* that anticipated the Symbolists. The man himself became increasing eccentric in his dress, behaviour and eating habits, however. Nearly blind at the end, his ill-health exacerbated by excessive study, Leopardi died in Naples of an asthmatic attack.

This poem was written in September 1819, and is set above the poet's home town of Recanati, where the slope affords a view from the distant Apennines to the Adriatic Sea below.

FROM THE GERMAN

A Pine Tree is Standing Lonely

A lone pine tree is standing
on a hard, bare northern height.
It sleeps while all around it,
is white in snow and ice.

Its dreams are of a palm tree
far off in morning lands
alone and quietly grieving,
in rock and burning sands.

Ein Fichtenbaum Steht Einsam from Heinrich Heine's *Buch der Lieder*
(1827)

Heinrich Heine (1797-1856) is best known for his bitter-sweet lyrics, but wrote in many forms, including sonnets, odes, ballads and biting satire. He combined a lyricism of great simplicity and purity with an ardent and melancholy disposition. His language was not new, but he added levels of speech through the mingling of conventionally poetic, conversational and commercial terms, and strengthened its rhythmic vitality. Heine used traditional, folk-like imagery to extend the remit of Romanticism, and his stay in Paris deepened a preoccupation with social issues. He was a perplexing man, and the poetry combines surface lightness with probing thought, faith with cynicism, hope for a better world with doubts that the arts would achieve very much. The poems can have many failings — sentimental, self-centred, ambivalent and shallow — but Heine is also the creator of many mysterious and beautiful pieces whose grace has never been surpassed.

Ein Fichtenbaum Steht Einsam has long been a popular piece among anthologists, translators and composers.

Autumn Day

Lord, a lofty summer! Time to lay
encroaching shadows on the sundials now
and let in meadowlands the winds have sway.

Command the fruits to fullness and consign
another two more days of southern heat
to bring them to perfection and secrete
the last of sweetness in the bodied wine.

He who has no house will not rebuild,
and he who is alone will long stay so,
and wake to read, write endlessly, and go
up and down through avenues now filled
with leaves and restlessness, blown to and fro.

Herbsttag from *Das Buch der Bilder* (1906) by Rainer Maria Rilke

Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926) made the passage from the exquisite musicality and introverted world-weariness of fin-de-siècle verse to a muscular clarity in his *New Poems* and then opened up new realms of experience in the *Duino Elegies*. Many of the poems in *The Book of Hours* are extraordinarily beautiful, and can be appreciated with little German, but the work in *New Poems* was more direct, Rilke having learned from Rodin to record objectively what he saw, and not create at secondhand from the history or musical associations of words.

Herbsttag is a densely patterned poem in the original, with many beautiful cadences:

*und auf den Fluren laß die Winde los
wird wachen, lesen, lange Briefe schreiben*

giving an overall impression of beauty, stateliness and regret made personal by the speaker's loneliness.

Grodek

The evening glints with the sound
of deadly weapons, the forests, the golden plains
and the blue lakes, over which the sun
darkly rolls. Night encompasses
fallen warriors; the wild muttering
of their broken mouths.

Now silently gathers in the grazing lands
a red cloud, the dwelling of an angry god
that spills with blood. A cool moon and
under it the roads run to putrid blackness.

Beneath the golden branches of the night and stars
the sister's shadow moves through the silent grove
to greet the spirits of the heroes, the bleeding heads,
and quietly, in the reeds, sound the darkening flutes of autumn.

How proud is the desolation, on whose altars today
the spirit's scorching flames draw on the vast suffering
of unborn grandsons spilled!

Grodek by Georg Trakl (1887-1914)

Georg Trakl, born in Salzburg, was an expressionist poet, one of those needing to distort the outer world to express intense internal realities. Unlike many in the movement, and more so in painting, Trakl did not dispense with traditional craft to render raw and hurtful emotion, and *Grodek* is a haunting piece in free verse form. Trakl was a deeply disturbed man, however, often taking refuge in heavy drinking and drug abuse. He served on the eastern front in the Galician town of Grodek as a medical officer, suffering a nervous breakdown. The poem was written while convalescing at the Krakow military hospital, shortly before its author committed suicide.

FROM THE GREEK

Choral Ode to Colonus

Strophe

Colonus, stranger, come to calm
in limestone white and woven shade:
a land of horses, thick with tales
of loveliness that none dispute.
Far from sun's or tempest's harm,
in wine-dark ivy through the glade,
our constant guests, the nightingales,
pour out their sweet and joyful sound.
Sacred too is each leafed thing
endowed with berries and with fruit
as, nymphs attending, revelling,
Dionysus walks this ground.

Antistrophe

Here are crocuses in gold,
and over them the white narcissus
nods on Goddesses of old
from dewed awakening, dawn to dawn.
And through this flows the Cephisus,
unendingly, from fountains drawn:
its stainless waters daily trace
their fecundations on the plain,
so blessing it with quick increase.
The Muses cannot hide their face
nor Aphrodite ever cease
to visit us with golden rein.

Strophe

There is a gift more versatile
than famed in Asian countries grows

or on the Dorian Pelop's isle:
I speak of grey-leafed olive trees
those self-renewing nourishers
of children, giving age its ease,
but terror to our spearmen foes.
Our youths are not its ravagers
nor may the aged with their hand
destroy this bounty of our land.
They stand impregnable, are never felled
but in Athena's eye's are held
sleepless in her grey-eyed stare,
as too in Morian Zeus's care.

Antistrophe

Another praise I have to tell
is for our mother city, writ
in glory of the son of Cronus,
with might of horses, might of sea,
the god Poseidon, such is he
who to master horse has shown us
how to keep with iron bit
their powerful anger in our thrall.
More prodigal to us as well
he's given us the oar to meet
the hand that hauls us over seas,
giving it a wondrous ease
to follow on the rise and fall
of the Nereids' myriad feet.

From *Oedipus at Colonus* by Sophocles (c.496-406/5 BC)

The famous ode to Colonus celebrates the village near Athens where Sophocles was born, but is also a reflection on the former splendour of an Athens then humbled by the Second Peloponnesian War and brought under a dictatorship. An almost line-for-line rendering, but one which adds rhyme not found in the original.

Chorus from *Oedipus at Colonus*

No man of sense will crave a longer span
of life that wearies him with added pain.
There is no wedding song or dance in death
but Hades' emptiness and end of breath.

Not to know the light is best for man,
and, next, to fast go back to whence he came.

After Oedipus at Colonus by Sophocles (c.496-406/5 BC)

Chorus from *Antigone*

All conquering love, you level wealth
and furrow cheeks of girls asleep.
You reach from sea to meanest farm.
No god escapes, not one, and man
succumbs to madness, brief day spent.
Honour fails and kinsmen fight.
In eyelids of the bride who yearns
for wedded joy lies sheathed your power.
Even the great from the beginning,
when Aphrodite mocks them, yield.

To strain the edict, through the tears
we cannot staunch, Antigone
takes up her room where all may sleep.

After Antigone by Sophocles (c.496-406/5 BC)

Fragments from celebrated choruses to show translation possibilities. The first is in pentameters and rhymed, the second in tetrameters and unrhymed. Both are compressed, free translations — the first especially so as the original Greek runs to 16 lines.

FROM THE LATIN

Sirmio

Dearest of islands and peninsulas
of standing waters or the boundless seas —
for both the glittering sea god Neptune holds —
how willingly, Sirmio, I come you you.

I scarce believe I've left the plains of Thynia
and Bithynians to safely reach you here.

What blessedness to lay aside old cares,
and come, mind burdened with its travelling,
at such a cost, wearily, to our own home,
and take again our ever-longed-for bed:
alone the recompense for all our toils.

Hear me, Sirmio: let your rapture meet
with mine, and make your Lydian waves delight
whatever laughter issues from this house.

Carmen 31 by Gaius Valerius Catullus (84-54 BC)

Catullus, who did much to bring new measures into Latin poetry, had returned (56 BC) from diplomatic service in Thynia when he wrote this poem, which records a happy period in that short and troubled life.

Carmen 51

He seems to me a god, or if
that's possible, still more divine,
that other in your company
who sees and hears

you laughing softly. Sense at once
is snatched away at seeing you,
and, Lesbia, in my mouth
there is no voice.

My tongue is quelled, and subtle fire
flows down my limbs; my ears are filled
with siren tumult: dark eyes burn
twice black as night.

Your sloth, Catullus, that's to blame,
the idleness that flourishes
in kings and wealthy cities: makes them
desolate.

Carmen 51 by Gaius Valerius Catullus (84-54 BC)

Another famous poem, which describes the poet's early encounter with Lesbia. If the woman was indeed Clodia, the 'other' may be her husband.

Catullus was born in Verona around 84 BC of a prosperous and socially prominent family. His father owned a villa at Sirmio and entertained Caesar when he was governor of Gaul. The poet went to Rome in 61, where he fell in love with the 'Lesbia' of his poems, very probably Clodia, a member of the aristocratic Claudian family and the wife of Q. Caecilius Metellus Celer. The fascinating but rapacious woman soon tired of the inexperienced young man, but he made her into the subject of some of the finest Latin lyric poems.

In 57 Catullus went to Bithynia on the staff of Memmius, governor of the province. Government service did not suit Catullus, however, and a year later he returned to Italy, probably living in Rome the remainder of his short life. His poems sometimes complain of poverty but their author seems to have owned a villa near Tibur in what is modern Tivoli.

The 116 poems derive from a single manuscript, and are very mixed, ranging from the witty, brilliant and moving, to the downright obscene. Many are modelled on approaches of the learned Greek scholar-poets at Alexandria in the Hellenistic period, who produced elegant, allusive, and highly finished work of a variety of topics. Catullus' poems are often failures, or only good in parts, but the collection contains some of the most poignant poetry in the Latin tongue.

Love's Ecstasy

O happy me! O night of radiance, and you,
sweet bed that's strewn with such delights!
What declarations when the lamp was lit, what fights
and tussles when the light was doused!
With breasts undone she teased me as we wrestled: then,
with clothes drawn up, she feigned delay.
Her breath fell on my eyelids thick with sleep: she hissed,
'Is this the way you finish, sluggard?'
Such length of arms' embraces as we changed positions,
kisses lengthening on the lips!

No pleasure comes from sightless acts, and you must know
that eyes go forward in desire,
as Paris found who met the Spartan naked, coming
from the bed of Menelaus,
as splendidly undone was chaste Diana, where
Endymion as naked lay.

So do not come to bed still wearing clothes, or my
delirious hands will rip them off.
Avoid the further angering me, or your bruised arms
will bear their witness to your mother.
Allow no loosened breasts prevent our playing, look
for shame to those who've given birth.

Let's feast our eyes with lover's scenes: for days bring on
the night from which no day returns,
and pray that we ever are like this, bound in chains
that none at daybreak can undo,
and close as murmuring doves are, that is man and woman
one and so completely joined.
Who looks for limit to love's madness finds no end,
for love will never have enough.
And sooner earth betray the farmer with false crops,
or jet-black horses draw the sun,
or streams call waters back to source, or deeps dry up
and leave their fish in cindery earth,

than I should think to loan my love-pains to another:
hers in life, and in my death.

Grant she give me such a few more times: a year
with these would serve me for a life.

Grant she give me many of such nights, from each
I am more godlike than before.

Grant that everyone run so through life, their limbs
be weighted down as though with wine —
there'd be no blows from daggers, nor from ships of war
would bones be tossed to Actium's deeps,
nor Rome attacked by its own triumphs, shown forever
grieving with its hair undone.

Posterity would surely raise their cups to us
who did not injure any gods.

You give, in glory in our loving, all your kisses,
yet those kisses are but few.

As petals wither from the garlands, fall in cups
and drift at loss there listlessly,
so we, who fill ourselves with lovers' breath, may find
tomorrow fate will shut us in.

Elegies Book Two, XV by Sextus Propertius (c.57- c.1 BC)

A celebrated poem in the second book of the Elegies that portray Propertius's turbulent relationship with the difficult Cynthia. The poetry is noted for its individual style, its great sensitivity to feelings and the senses, and its wide range of proper names suggestive of distance, antiquity and legendary splendours. In part at least, Cynthia was a real woman, a courtesan named Hostia, and this poem was written around 25 BC.

A fairly close translation, where the Latin hexameter-pentameter couplet has been rendered by an English hexameter-tetrameter. Endymion is the shepherd boy on Mt. Latmos in Caria with whom Diana fell in love. Actium is the naval battle of 31 BC, in which Octavian defeated Antony and Cleopatra.

Cornelia

Make sad no more my grave with weeping, Paullus: those
deaf shores will drink your tears unmoved.

Prayers may move the gods above, but, Charon paid,
the path is fixed unalterably.

The god of that halled gloom may hear, but his dark door
will give no passage to our prayers,
and when the dead wind through the Underworld, a pall
of white shuts off the burnt-out pyre.

So howled sad trumpets when the harmful fire was thrust
beneath the bier and bore me off.

What good was in my wedding, Paullus, forebears' triumphs,
children's pledges for my name?

Cornelia has not found the Fates more yielding: all
I am is what five fingers hold.

Condemned to darkness and the shallow drift of waters,
sedges clutching at my feet,
it's true I come too early here, but for no crime,
nor kindlier treatment for my shade.

If some Aeacus sit as judge before the urn
then let him weigh my lot as called,
his brothers counselling beside the chair of Minos,
forum silent with its Furies.

With Sisyphus at rest, and Ixion's wheel suspended,
Tantalus's thirst assuaged,
no Cerberus today to bark at evil ghosts,
but chain unloosed and he at rest,
I'll speak my case: and, if not truly, have the sisters' task
of punishment weigh down my arms.

If any fame derives from fine ancestral trophies
ours are old Numantian bronze,
and, equally, Libōnes of my mother's line,
our house supported either side.

In time, with maiden's toga changed for nuptial torch,
and other headband in my hair,

I joined your couch — let stone record — to leave it, Paullus,
married to a single man.

I swear by forebear's ashes, those which Rome respects
in Africa ground down to dust,
by Perses spurred on by Achilles' name, who crushed
the house by that forefather swelled,
that never have I loosened censor's laws, nor brought
one sin to cause this hearth to blush.
Cornelia never tarnished those illustrious trophies,
was exemplar to her house.

My life continued spotlessly. I lived in fame
between two torches: life and death.
Nature showed me conduct drawn from my own blood,
no fear of judge proved happier.
Whatever sentence come from that harsh urn, no shame
attaches to those sat with me —
not Claudia, spired Cŷbele's rare servant, who
with rope pulled free the stranded goddess,
nor you whose spotless linen dress brought hearth to life
when Vesta would take back her fire.

I have not injured you, my mother, dear Scribonia:
naught is wanted but this death.
Aclaimed by mother's tears and city's lamentations,
bones are blest by Caesar's sighs.
I died as worthy to be called his daughter's sister:
tears he showed, who is a god.
Twice was my brother seated in the curule chair,
appointed consul when his sister died.

And still I earned the matron's robe of honour, was
not taken from a childless house.
More blessed, I did not wear a mother's mourning dress,
and every child stood by my end.

Lepidus and Paullus, solace after death,
in your embrace my eyelids closed.
Daughter, model born in father's year as censor,

hold like me to one alone,
which is the greatest triumph that a woman earns:
completing her conjugal life.

To Paullus I commend the pledges of our love;
my care for them burns on in ash.
Perform the mother's part as father; this whole troop
of mine is thrust into your arms.
You'll kiss them when they cry, and add a mother's kisses:
all the house is now your charge.
And if you're sad then do not show it: when they come
deceive their kisses with dry cheeks.
Be nights enough to wear out thoughts of me with, Paullus,
dreams enfolded round my shape,
and when in secret you address my semblance, speak
such words as I would answer to.

If house-door face another's wedding bed, a wary
mother on the couch once mine,
then honour her and, children, praise your father's marriage:
winning her she'll yield to you.
Do not extol the mother past too much, the new
will take unguarded speech as slights.
If he remember me, consoled by shadows, holding
still my ashes dear to him,
he may then find his old age softened, and avoid
the sorrows of a widower.
Let time that was removed from me fill out your years,
my offspring please an ageing Paullus.
So will the house continue. I go willingly
if many mine extend its span.
My speech is ended. Rise from tears my witnesses:
the earth will give what life has earned.
To virtue heaven opens: let my worth convey these bones
honourably to ancestors.

Elegies Book Two, XIII. by Sextus Propertius (c.57- c.1 BC)
A celebrated elegy addressed to Lucius Aemilius Paullus Lepidus, who
was elected consul in 34 BC and censor in 22 BC.

Tristia

Whatever little now remains I rest
in you. I know that always you will care
for us, and keep your wits about you, lest
men strip the panels from the shipwreck there.
They raven for our blood, as will the fold
goat on the wolf unwatched with hungry thoughts
to snatch at us before our case is cold,
or vultures drop on an abandoned corpse.
We have our brave supporters, but it's you
who largely drove them off, for which goodwill
my wretchedness is witness, here as true
as griefs with which I feel the burdens still.

Excerpt from *Tristia*, Book One, VI: 6 by Publius Ovidius Nāso (43 BC-AD17)

Ovid's Ovid's poetry was enormously popular in first century Rome, and has been an important influence on European poetry from the Renaissance to the present. He wrote pleasingly from the first: *Amores*, *Heroides*, *Ars Amatoria* (The Art of Love) and *Remedium Amoris* (The Remedy of Love). The *Metamorphoses* were some 250 interwoven stories written in the epic hexameter. His *Fasti*, an irreverent but informative poem on the Roman calendar, was terminated by the poet's removal to the Black Sea, the penalty for some political indiscretion. There, in a garrison town among non-Latin-speaking barbarians, he wrote *Tristia* (Sorrows) and *Epistulae ex Ponto* (Letters from the Black Sea), both protesting at his unjust exile with fine elegy and independence. Augustus and Tiberius remained unmoved by the poet's situation, however, and Ovid was not recalled.

A short excerpt suggesting the possibilities of rhymed quatrains even for the unrhymed couplets of the original.

FROM THE PERSIAN

Ghazal 1

Sâqî : pour for us the cup's release:
for love, once easy, brought on difficulties.

The loved-one's ringlets in the Saba wind
unloose the musk of heart-blood's essences.

What love has sanctuary when camel-bell
rings out life's burdens and adversities?

The wine on prayer-rug and wise men's words
reveal in taverns their authorities.

Who safe on land, light-burdened, looks for threat
of wave or whirlpool in obscurities?

My art has ended as a name in doubt:
we hear in gatherings but mysteries.

Be never absent from your love, Hâfiz,
but, having found it, leave the world in peace.

Khajeh Shamseddin Mohammad Hafiz Shirazi (c. 1320-1388)

Hâfiz, the great lyric poet of Iran, is famous for his *ghazals*, poems of 6 to 15 rhymed couplets linked by unity of subject and symbolism rather than by a logical sequence of ideas. Much of the vocabulary is allegory. The beloved is a quest or obstacle, and from her black curls come darkness, obscurity, snares, imprisonment or withdrawal of favour. The first and last lines are in Arabic: the concluding Arabic *ahmilhâ* (ignore the world) refers us back to the Arabic *nâwilhâ* (bestow it) of the first line. The poem introduces the *dîvân* or collection of poems which oscillate from love and doubt, between the world as men describe it and as the poet sees it.

Ghazal 97

Vain are wine and art, not built on stone
unless the words are God's own will foreknown.

If the heart's difficulties are from heaven hidden,
what hurt has any wise man's knot unsewn?

The world in wonder on its axis turned
is in a thousand recollections strown.

Now brood on Solomon and take his bowl:
your skull, in this, is also Bahman's bone.

Kai and Kawus to the winds are gone:
and where is Solomon's high-splendoured throne?

What breathes in tulip and the sighs of Shirin
will be by blooded tears of Farhâd shown.

Can men or tulips from their coloured bowl abstain,
though in it time's unfaithfulness be thrown?

Remain with me and, if the place be ruined,
in that arrival is our treasure sown.

No breeze from Oratory gave me permission
in journeying my Roknâbâd disown.

Hear the harp, Hafiz, its silken strain
in wine's deep happiness to you is known.

Khajeh Shamseddin Mohammad Hafiz Shirazi (c. 1320-1388)

Bahman was the father of the legendary founder of the Sasanians, and appears in Ferdowsi's *Shahnama*. *Qubad*, *Kai* and *Kawus* were 13th century Seljuk rulers. *Jamshed* is a mythical Persian king loosely identified with Solomon: by popular mythology, everything in the world was revealed to the gazer into Jamshed's bowl. *Farhâd* and his lover *Shîrîn* are characters in a long poem by the Persian poet Nizâmî (1140-1203), loosely modelled on the adventures of the Sasanian ruler Khusru, the successful rival of Farhâd. The *Oratory* (which now exists as a flower-garden) was an open space for prayers. *Roknâbâd* is the stream near Shiraz so loved by Hâfiz.

Except in Love of You

Except in love of you, a soul I cannot see or see.
and love as snare for souls that I must see, must see.

Repose or patience in myself I do not find or find.
but through excessive favour that I see and see.

Show kindly to me in your face what pain must be:
no remedy beyond that face I see or see.

Far off, how distant is the goodness of that face:
in me no immortality I see or see.

Clutch at this hand, my friend, lest in the whirlpool fall
a one who only nothingness can see and see.

Come, set face to justice, put my work in place:
no self without that heaven can I see or see.

Irâqî, without your guidance, in this world must travel:
perplexed continually, who does not see or see.

Irâqî (died 1289)

Fakhrû'd-Dîn Ibrâhîm, better known as Irâqî, was born in Hamadan (Persia) but was drawn by a young dervish to Multân in India, where he became a devotee of Shaykh Bahâ'u'd-Dîn Zakariyyâ, in time marrying the master's daughter. At the Shayk's death, twenty-five years later, Irâqî travelled to Mecca, Turkey and Egypt, and finally to Syria, where he died, in Damascus, in 688/1289, being buried in the Sâlihiyya Cemetery beside the great mystic Shaykh Muhiyyu'd-Din ibn'l-'Arabî.

A devotional piece where much of imagery clearly carries mystical overtones.

Envious are Azar's idols of a face

Envious are Azar's idols of a face
beyond all artistry of mine to trace.

You are a picture from a vision, real
to men of Adam as our houri race.

For idols I have travelled wide horizons,
but met, in much encountered, no such case.

From me go peace and comfort: you continue
the more in elegance and moving grace.

From your high splendour my life is set, falling
and following, as is the custom, you apace.

Let not the flower's white freshness you depict
by faithlessness be pillaged, or disgrace.

Fallen, a stranger in your city, Kushraw begs
for the sake of God you know another's place.

Abu'l-Hasan Yamînuddin Amîr Khusraw (1253-1325)

Amîr Khusraw was born in the village of Patyali (Uttar Pradesh) to an Indian mother and a Turkish military nobleman. His father had fled Transoxiana before the Mongol advance to serve the Delhi Sultans, but died in 1262, leaving the son in the care of a rich maternal grandfather. The boy studied Persian at Maktab and produced his first collection of poetry *Tuhfatus-Sighr* in 1272. Thereafter Khusraw served as court poet to a succession of Delhi Sultans, from Balban to Mohammad bin Tughlaq, creating five *dîvâns* and much occasional writing. He was also a soldier (captured by and escaping from the Mongols in 1285) and a gifted musician (laying the foundations for Indo-Muslim music and inventing several new instruments). *Azar* is the father of Abraham, a noted maker of idols.

The Cloud Rains

Cloud raining, and I from my friend am separated:
how can, on such a day, the hearts be so separated?

You and rain and cloud are standing to make farewells
and I weeping, and you and the rain separated.

Though leaves are new risen, passion is fresh, and the garden green,
the nightingale is silent, from its sanctuary separated.

As the hair grows, from root to head-top, I am bound in service:
how can all that longing suddenly be separated?

Let not, when tearfulness holds you in the pupil of vision,
my eye from that tearfulness be separated.

My pride in observance that stays on from this
retains its luxury of looking though so separated.

In its hundred conceptions the eye is of dust
make haste if you'd not from acceptance be separated.

What would you think, that my soul would leave
with the guardian and garden then so separated?

Nor will your beauty continue if from Khusraw kept
as a flower from its thorn when so separated.

Abu'l-Hasan Yamînuddin Amîr Khusraw (1253-1325)

A poem with many plays on words, particularly with *sar* (head), *sabz* (*green*) and *sabzah* (*greenery*). *Sabz* also means dark when applied to the down of the beloved's lips, so that the beloved is identified with a garden — which is now silent/disgraced or its lover (nightingale/poet) is so.

FROM THE CHINESE

Deer Stockade

Emptiness. Mountains. No one unless
in these low voices overheard.

Sense falling into forest depths,
green in suncast mosses overhead.

Wang Wei (699-761)

Wang Wei, one of the three great poets of the earlier Tang Dynasty, was a man of outstanding talents: courtier, administrator, poet, calligrapher, musician and painter. Far more than the mercurial Li Bai or the plain-spoken Du Fu, Wang Wei was a successful official — he amassed several fortunes and gave lavishly to monasteries — but preferred the quietness of his estate in the Changnan hills south of the capital.

The Deer Stockade has seen many translations. The rendering here respects the basic structure (4 lines of five characters), the rhyme scheme, and the extended parallelism of the original Chinese, where:

Lines 3 and 4 repeat in reverse the meaning in lines 1 and 2: the world of the senses is an illusion. 'Overhead' repeats in reverse 'overheard'.

Presence contrasts with non-presence: clear in the first line, blurred in the second, more so in the third, and then sharply defined in the clear visual image of the fourth — achieved by sound patterning (e.g. diphthongs in line 2, 'e' sounds in line 3).

Ying alternate with yang elements. Permanence of mountain rising from impermanence (emptiness). That definite emptiness (no one) morphing into vague presence (voices). Dissolving again (sense is lost in darkness) and then regrouped in a definite image (suncast in mosses).

Vertical movement (looking up at mountain) pass to horizontal (voices heard followed by re-entering) and thence back to vertical (overhead).

Into My Room

Into my room comes the smell of cold bamboo,
and beyond the courtyard: fields, wilderness, a full moon.
I watch the water drops collect from the clear dew,
and stars in their glimmering, that soon
go out. A glow-worm flits across the dark,
and bird-calls strike the water, a sharp platoon
of thoughts, echoing and anxious, through
which night fades into its thin, sad tune.

Du Fu (712-70)

Du Fu, the greatest poet of a country devoted to poetry, believed himself a failure. He gained little distinction in the official examinations, but remained a minor civil servant uprooted by the An Lu-shan Rebellion that destroyed the first Tang dynasty. He was usually poor, and occasionally near starvation. The major turning points in his life were his meeting and friendship with Li Bai, and the Rebellion, which opened his eyes to the sufferings of the common people. Li Bai was the greater technician — an astonishing technician — but it's Du Fu's humanity that speaks across the centuries.

Du Fu wrote this piece around 764, after he had left government service. The poem starts quietly with the smell of bamboo and description of his surroundings, but the final line simply says: 'bare sorrow peaceful night died' — a commonplace the translator must make something of. The full moon often denotes the home, and I have supposed the author is reflecting on how everything falls away in the end — the water droplets, the stars, the bird calls — into what poets have always known, that inexpressible and unfathomable sadness of life.

The rendering is close, reproducing Fu Du's rhyme scheme, but introduces *platoon* for the poet's sharp feelings of melancholy.

Ballad of Beautiful Ladies

It is the third month festival at Chang'an
and the beauties by the river in the warm spring air
walk virtuous, walk regally, and in gestures share
what their tight-knit bodies breathe aloud.
Woven unicorns and peacocks strut on proud
as gauzes beneath flaunt the courtesan.
On their heads? Ringlets, glittering shapes:
as a kingfisher flares each feathered cloud.
And on their backs? Waistbands with pearls
more thickly embroidered than slim backs bear:
and prouder than these, than the preening swan,
are the kith of the favourite all wait upon.

From jade-green ewers the juice escapes:
purple hump of camel, white fish from the pan.
From crystal plates have the horn chopsticks dropped:
ornaments lie scattered, stomachs bowed.
But still from kitchens comes the same rich fare
despatched by horses and an elaborate care
extends to the panpipes: their hauntings bear
an urgency here as only hunger can.

A minister, unnoticed in the jostling crowd,
steps from horse to carpet to silk sedan.
The catkins of the willow are white on the ground
as a bluebird with a letter links clan to clan.
Power is restless, but the hot words vowed
burn deeper than the minister's unbridled stare.

Ballad of Beautiful Ladies by Du Fu (712-70)

The poem was written during Du Fu's residence (around 753, in no exalted capacity) at the Tang imperial court in Chang'an. Du Fu is making veiled social comment but is also drawn to the spectacle — Chang'an was the

richest and most populous city in the world at the time. There is an affectionate tone in a poem that understands the realities of court life, its jealousies, and the brief lives of its beauties.

Though Du Fu was more Confucian than Buddhist in his outlook, he was also aware of the unreality of the scene, how it contrasted with the grinding poverty of the world outside. The richness of costume and the culinary delights have an almost suffocating superfluity: Du Fu uses surplus, satiated, surfeited. The splendour being used to please the favourite Yang Guifei is unnecessary, indeed immoral, serving only to distract Emperor Xuanzong from his larger responsibilities. Nature obtrudes in the fall of poplar flowers. The gold (daytime) splendour of (real) peacocks is contrasted with the night-time (lunar) silver of (imaginary) phoenixes. The food is so rich that disorder and lassitude follow. The drums and pipes call up spirits of the ancestors, though no one is listening. The bluebird, a traditional bearer of love-notes, is a reference to the improper affair being conducted by the powerful minister Yang Guozhong.

Though the rendering above is fairly close, and reproduces Du Fu's rhyme scheme, a closer rendering can be achieved with rhyming couplets:

In Chang'an's Winding River Park the air
has spring in prospect and the beauties there
are virtuous and regal, demure and proud:
voluptuous the bodies, veiled and loud.

As golden peacocks they flare in gauzy drapes,
or are legendary unicorns in silvery shapes:
the sheen and ornament of each plumed head
outdazzles the kingfisher's jades and red.
On each slim back a waistband presses
satiated with pearls and with heavy dresses.

The scented favourite has brought her kin,
favoured with dynasties of Guo and Qin.

A great hump of camel, purple, brims from the pot,
white slivers of fish, whether they will or not
dally with chopsticks of rhinoceros horn:
in all the appetites are overdrawn.

Continually the riders, though they lift no dust,
post out with delicacies: in the air a just
perceptible answering to which pipes and drum
raise ghosts of the hungry in the crowds which come.

Quietly, reigned at his tent, the minister steps down
from his horse to the carpets with a haughty frown.

Unnoticed, the poplar's frail drift of white
as a bluebird with a letter flits from sight.
Though illicit and severing, these summons brook
no slackness in obedience or answering look.

Ballad of Beautiful Ladies by Du Fu (712-70)

Rhyming couplets do not capture the texture of Chinese verse, but even less successful in this regard are free verse styles deriving from Ezra Pound and Arthur Waley. Chinese is a compact but allusive language, and its classical poetry is written with echoes of lines by famous earlier poets, and by strict rules regulating the number of characters to a line, the rhyme schemes and the tone patterns — it's as elaborate as the European tradition at its most formal.

The River Merchant's Wife: A Letter

How simple it was, and my hair too,
picking at flowers as the spring comes;
and you riding about on a bamboo
horse; playing together, eating plums.
Two small people: nothing to contend
with, in quiet Chang Gan to day's end.

All this at fourteen made one with you.
Married to my lord: it was not the same.
Who was your concubine answering to
the thousand times you called her name?

I turned to the wall, and a whole year passed
before my being would be wholly yours —
dust of your dust while all things last,
hope of your happiness, with never cause

To seek for another. Then one short year:
at sixteen I sat in the marriage bed
alone as the water. I could hear
the sorrowing of gibbons overhead.

How long your prints on the path stayed bare!
I looked out forever from the lookout tower,
but could not imagine the distances there
held you still travelling, hour by hour.

Now thick are the mosses; the gate stays shut.
I sit in the sunshine as the wind grieves.
In their dallying couples the butterflies cut
the deeper in me than yellowing leaves.

Send word of your coming and I will meet
you at Chang-feng Sha by the mountain walls.
Endless the water and your looks entreat
and hurt me still as each evening falls.

After the Chinese of Li Bai (701-762).

Li Bai was born in 701 in the Gang Xiao Sheng territory of China, and when five years old followed his merchant father to Sichuan. He may well have been of central Asian stock, or a descendent of an unsuccessful rival for the dragon throne. Of an independent and bohemian nature, and well-off, Li Bai never sat the *shin-shih* examinations, nor bothered much about finding a position, but by impressing the many scholars who befriended him with his poetry, he was brought to court notice, and in 742 appeared before Emperor Xuanzong. He became a member of the Han-lin Academy, an appointment that lasted only two years. The association between China's most gifted literary magician and its dilettante emperor was not a happy one, and Li Bai was exiled from court on several occasions, the result of dubious political connections and the poet's distaste for tradition and authority. Li Bai continued his wanderings, and in 755 he joined the force led by the emperor's sixteenth son, Prince Lin, just surviving subsequent capture and a death sentence when the old emperor died. There are many legends surrounding Li Bai's death, but he probably died at Dangtu, possibly of cirrhosis of the liver or mercury poisoning, in Anhui province in 762.

A very free rendering, as was the famous version by Ezra Pound. A more word-for-word rendering is not always the answer, however, as the literal version below indicates. Li Bai's rhyme scheme has been rendered in pararhyme, but if the result is more faithful to the prose sense of the original, it is less effective as a poem.

Your woman first, hair covering forehead,
playing at gate and picking flowers:
there you came riding on your bamboo horse,
throwing blue plums round the trellised house.
Just two small people, not vexed or worried,
in Chang Gan village, and always close.

At fourteen I surrendered whatever powers
I had to be yours, but only was
shy and embarrassed, could not turn my head
however you called, if a thousand times.

At fifteen that stopped; I smoothed my brows,
desired to be one with you: as life consumes
that which is mine into ash with yours,
nor climb to the tower with lookout cause.

At sixteen my lord on his distant journey
left on the river that after him foams.
For five months already I have empty hours,
find monkeys sound sorrowful to the skies.

The moss you marked in that unhurried
parting stays green along the floors:
that moss is now too thick to clear
when leaves and wind come soon this year.

Eight months: the butterflies have me gaze
on the heart and its hurting, make me stare
on couples fled westward over orchard grass:
I find myself blushing, as when you're near.

Send me a letter, wherever you are,
whatever you go to is my homeward there.
Morning and evening, if through San Ba Gorge,
on banks I will walk on to Chang Feng Sha.

The River Merchant's Wife: A Letter by Li Bai (701-762).

Some 1,100 of Li Bai's poems survive, and are noted for rich fantasy, brilliant improvisation, unmatched technical felicity, and for Taoist and alchemical leanings — the Tao, unknown and unfathomable, lying behind the flow of pattern and process in the universe, which we can abstract into concepts but not fully comprehend. Li Bai was a strong character, making a vivid impression on everyone he met, but he was also boastful, callous, dissipated, irresponsible and untruthful. His saving quality is the poetry, which is as unforgettable now as the man was in life.