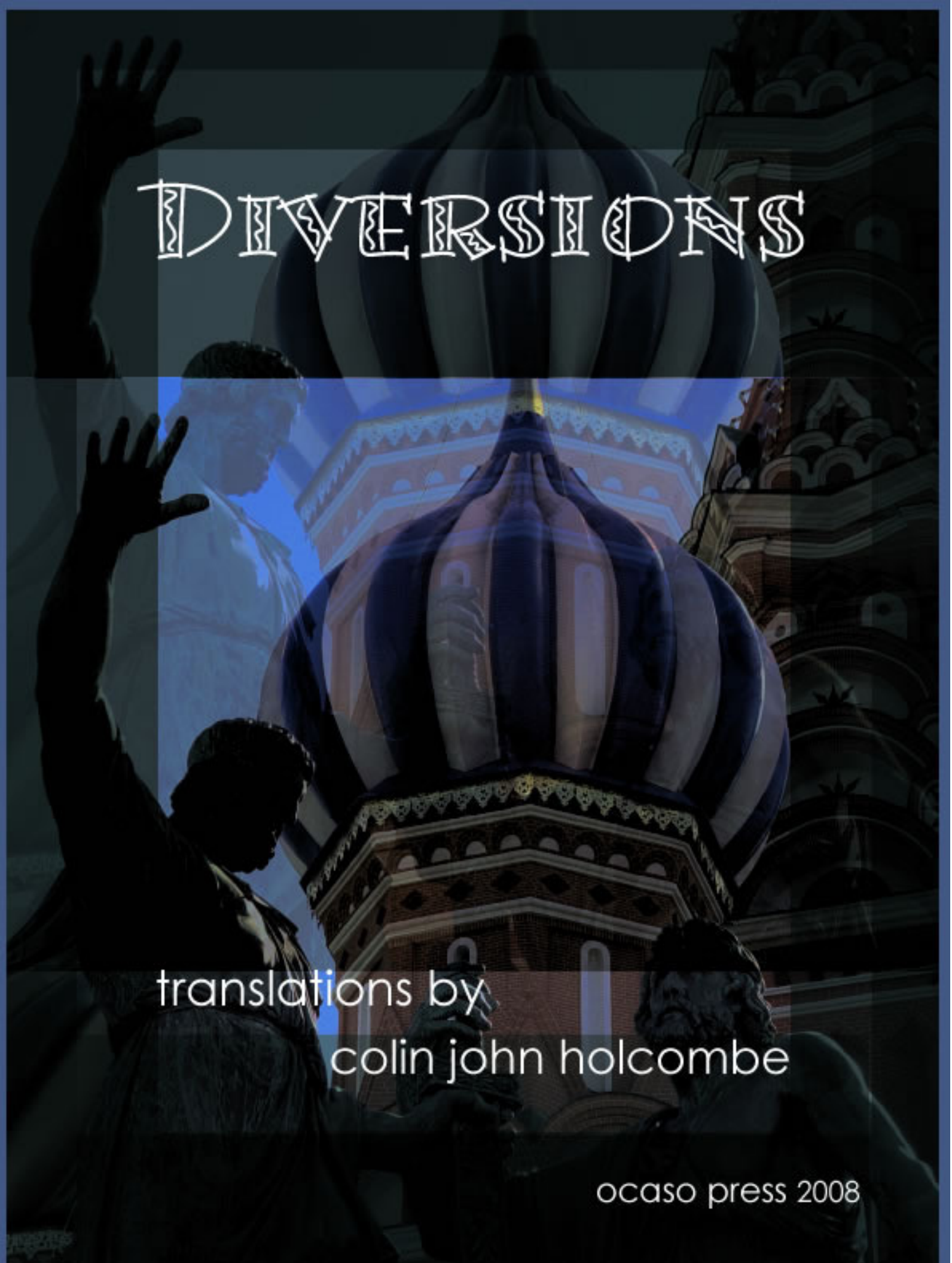

DIVERSIONS

translations by
colin john holcombe

ocaso press 2008

Diversions

Colin John Holcombe

Ocaso Press 2008-2019

Diversions: A Book of Occasional Translations

by Colin John Holcombe

To Sukanya Dutta in fond admiration of her work.

Published by Ocaso Press.

Last revised: January 2012.

Translations

From the Sanskrit

From the Greek

From the Latin

From the Persian

From the Russian

From the Chinese

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 and www.ocasopress.com sites, 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 achieve, 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. What is moving, powerful and beautiful in the original should at least have an echo of those qualities in the translation.

Selections from Pushkin, Sophocles, Euripides, Virgil, Propertius, Catullus, and Racine are taken from my fuller translations of these authors (also freely available from Ocaso Press).

In this July 2019 update I have added a poem by Du Fu, and 13 poems from the Russian, by Pushkin, Tyutchev, Fet, Nekrasov, Blok and Vasiliev.

FROM THE FRENCH

Quand vous serez bien vieille

When truly old, in evening’s candle-light,
sat skeining wool before the fireside blaze,
you'll read my verses, marvel, speak of days
'when I was beautiful in Ronsard's sight.'

And then no maid, if nodding through the night,
but starts at mention of my name, and stays
to hear the homage of 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 old head 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 sprent 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 whose first flowered loveliness rich looks are lent,
with brighter organdies the very skies resent,
while dawn with tears will sprinkle it at break of day,

So will, in love and gracefulness, the petals stay
to haunt the trees and gardens round with sweetest scent,
but, in the undue heat and drumming rain's descent,
they one by one unfurl, and fade and fall away.

So you, for all the expectations of your youth,
though earth and sky in homage speak but frankest truth,
respond to fate, and like them in the dust repose.

These are the obsequies that tears and grief assume:
a bowl of milk, a basket topped with fragrant bloom:
so shall in life and death your body bloom but 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.

Phèdre

They will love forever.
And as I speak, ah, deadly thought,
it is the fury in my love they thwart.
What can exile do to wrench apart
a thousand vows that join them at the heart?
No, never can their happiness assuage:
Oenone, pity me my violent rage.
Aricia must die. I'll have my spouse
be stirred to wrath against that odious house.
There'll be no trivial penalties for her
who is more flagrant than her brothers were.
Provoked, my jealousy will have her pay —
for what, and wherefore when my reasons stray
to ask of Theseus, my husband? — burn
for things unlawful, and the passions turn
from husband living to the son instead?
How hair in horror bristles on the head!
My measure of transgressions is complete,
I reek with foulest incest and deceit.
My hands propel me and would not repent
if blood they bathed in cried out innocent!
How can I venture in the sun's bright rays
who is my ancestor, and blesses days?
He is the foremost, gave my father birth
and all my family now on the earth.
What night of sanctuary can I now turn
to? Minos, my dread father, holds the urn,
that destiny in which their lots are cast,
those poor, pale, trembling sinners, first to last?
How shuddering and fearful will his presence stare
at that dark shadow of his daughter there,
and know how heinously her crimes exceed
what hell will groan at and must heed!
For what, my father, do these horrors yearn
that now I see you drop that fearsome urn?
What further punishments can you devise

than butchery by which your bloodline dies?
Forgive me that I let a god in wild
1290. reprisal sow her fury through the child.
Never the once to what it sought for came
this heart, but sadness only, and to shame.
Phaedra in sighs, with which her path was rife,
in agonies gives back a painful life.

Phèdre (Act IV Scene 6) by Jean Racine (1639-99)

The celebrated speech of the ruined queen in Act IV, Scene 6. Racine's plays are profoundly moving, pessimistic and amoral. With a character described as voluptuous, uneasy and jealous, Jean Racine was an ambitious courtier, an astute businessman, and a frequenter of actresses, but he was also a childhood believer in the Jansenist doctrine that man is a miserable creature saved only by God's grace, and playwriting seems no longer to have interested him in later life.

The poet was born to modest circumstances in 1639, orphaned at a young age, and brought up on charity. He was given a first-class education by the Jansenists at Port Royal, however, and spent a further two years at their college of Beauvais. Rejecting their sober teachings, however, Racine began writing for the theatre in 1660, and by the time of *Phaedra*, performed in 1677, had nine plays to his credit, several of them masterpieces of the French classical theatre and containing some of its greatest poetry. *Phaedra* was poorly received, however, and Racine retired to marriage and a court position, though returning a decade later with two further plays: *Esther* and *Athaliah*. He died of cancer in 1699.

Phèdre observes the supposed rules of classical drama, but is only loosely modelled on plays by Euripides and Seneca.

ABNER

In Temple custom, yes, I come to praise
our God on this revered of solemn days,
and celebrate with you what would be still
were laws as handed down from Sinai's hill.
How times have changed! For when the dawn's first red
by sacred trumpet had been heralded,
the Temple with its festooned porticoes
was thronged by worshippers. In endless rows
they progressed to the altar, there to yield
the first of fruits they'd gathered from the field,
with blessings of the universal god to ask,
that priests were scarcely equal to the task.
But now that one audacious woman's cast
her shade on blest occasions of the past,
there are of fervent worshippers but few
who dare recall to us the ways we knew.
The rest are sunk in dire forgetfulness
and even to the shrine of Baal would press,
in shameful mysteries so far gone
as curse the name their fathers called upon.
Athaliah soon will leave small doubt
of aims in having even you dragged out,
and in her gloomy savagery reject
those last few vestiges of feigned respect.

JOAD

What do these dark presentiments presage?

ABNER

Can you be holy and escape her rage?
The faith that ornaments your diadem
is just what Athaliah must condemn,
and long devotions such as yours assault
her mind with dark suspicions of revolt.

She envies merit in another's life,
and Josabeth she hates, your blameless wife,
and if you are the high priest Aaron's heir,
your wife's the late king's sister. Be beware
of Mathan all the more, for that false priest,
in goading Athaliah is not least
of pressing dangers while he prowls around
in search of virtue to dispatch or hound.
A Levite still, but foreign mitre wears
40. in ministering to Baal and vile affairs.
So much our Temple galls him, he'd have reft
the greatness from it of the God he left.
To injure you no wiles are too refined:
he seems to pity you, and has combined
a soft, persuasive and forgiving air
with depths that cloak his baleful scheming there.
He paints you as determined to withhold
what salves her sovereign appetite for gold.
You guard the Temple, and to you alone
50. is known the treasure of King David's throne
Athaliah, strikingly, these past
two days, has shown a shrouded, sombre cast
I watched her yesterday, and saw advance
across her features such a furious glance,
supposing that our Temple vastness held
a God that injured and her force repelled.
Believe me, as I think, the less I doubt
that on your head her wrath must soon burst out,
when God's own inner sanctuary may feel
our Jezebel's bloodthirsty daughter's steel.

JOAD

He who calms the wave and tempest can,
if need be, undo plots of wicked man.
I hearken, Abner, to His holy will,
fear God alone, although the threats instil
concern for me, I note, and gladly too.
You hate injustices and would pursue

the promptings that a Jewish heart is sent.
Heaven be praised, but how to stay content
with good indrawn and wrath denied its power?
70. Is faith sincere when actions never flower?
Eight years ago a foreign irreligious
offshoot of great David's royal house,
unpunished, wallowed in our princes' blood,
usurping crown and rights of nationhood,
The offspring of her very son she killed
and raised her arm against what God has willed.
You act on this frail state as caveat,
and, reared in camps of King Jehoshaphat,
commanding when his son, King Joram, reigned,
80. reassuring when the anxious towns sustained
their shock at sudden death of Ahaziah,
you made, when Jehu came, his foes retire.
'My God I fear,' you say. ' His word is true.'
And so, by own mouth, He answers you.
'Why show such zeal for laws if all I see
are sterile vows by which you honour me?
What do I need of sacrifice? It mocks
my majesty, this butchered goat or ox.
The blood of your dead kings cries out unheard.
90. Break off your covenants with those who erred!
Cast out from common people cause for shame,
then make me sacrifice, and speak my name.'

ABNER

What can one do when people lack resolve?
All strengths has Judah lost, and slow dissolve
now those of Benjamin. That brave instinct
is like our royal lineage: quite extinct.
'Our God withdraws himself from us in shame
who was so jealous of our Hebrew name.
He sees, unmoved, our former power laid low,
100. and, wearied of us, lets no mercy flow.
No longer do his dreaded hands display

those endless wonders to our minds today.
The Ark is mute; it speaks no oracles.'

JOAD

What time was more endowed with miracles
than ours today? What power so manifest,
though eyes will have no truth of it confessed?
Ungrateful people, where the greater part
will strike the ear but not the trembling heart.
Must I tell you, Abner, sing with praise
the wide, prodigious wonders of our days?
For which of Israel's tyrants has He not
pulled down; what promises has He forgot?
The irreligious Ahab was a brief excerpt
within the field of blood he had usurped.
The dreaded Jezebel has also been
by horses trampled near the present scene:
dogs drank the blood of that inhuman queen
whose body lay dismembered and obscene.
False prophets were confounded in advice
when flame from heaven consumed the sacrifice.
Elijah brought the elements to such a pass
that skies were closed by him and turned to brass.
Three years without a drop of rain or dew,
Elisha's voice that raised the dead anew.
Know, then, Abner, what these signs portend:
the God today that's with us knows no end,
and as he shines His glory forth at will
is ever mindful of His people still.

Opening scene of *Athalie* by Jean Racine (1639-99)

The power of Racine's writing is seen immediately in this opening scene of *Athalie.* The play was written for private performance at court, and has something of the gloom and piety that marked the later years of the Sun King's reign. It was staged in 1691 by the convent girls at St Cyr, and so belongs to the period between the Counter-Reformation and the grand operas of the following century.

Boaz Sleeping

Overcome with weariness, he kept
the same rough quarters as he'd had 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 guiless 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 sheep-bells 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 had enamelled sombre rest.
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*.

The Voyage

I

The child enamoured of his maps and stamps
has universe enough for appetite,
but those vast lands beneath the blaze of lamps
are stale and petty in remembered light.

We leave one morning with a fevered mind,
our hearts weighed down with bile and enmity,
but following rhythms of the waves we find
infinities are lulled to finite sea.

Some joy to leave their native skies,
some fear their birthplace, some events
foretold by drownings in a woman's eyes,
or Circe's tyrannous and dangerous scents.

Escaping that bewitchment, men embrace
new light, new heavenly latitudes arrayed
in fire, where sun and icy winds efface
the wounds that incandescent kisses made.

The truest travellers are those that sail
for travel's sake, undeviating, gone
on destinies as light balloons prevail
that find no answer in their floating on.

But those with lusts as vague as cumulous,
as raw recruits suppose is cannon flame,
will dream of vast unknowns, voluptuous
and changing, which the spirit cannot name.

II

We imitate — oh, horror — balls and tops,
from which the need to know is never gone:
in dreams they waltz and bind, as never stops
the sun, by cruel angels driven on.

A destiny that’s wholly ours, a goal
that has no final anywhere for those
who, like poor foolish Man, the hopeful soul,
go running everywhere for their repose.

Our hearts are like a fine three-master, sent
on orders from the bridge: look sharp ahead.
On love and glory, happiness we’re bent —
until the lookout shouts: Hell! Rocks instead!

The watch that sees an island hove in view
makes destined Eldorado his belief.
Imagination riots through the crew
till morning brings them shipwreck on the reef.

Must lover of the far and tropic strands,
be thrown in irons, or tossed to sea and shark?
On sailor, drunk, inventing new-found lands,
reality will leave a bitter mark.

The vagabond who shuffles through the mud
will have the scent of paradises loom:
with bright Capuas will conceptions flood
as light illuminates a slum-town room.

III

Enraptured travellers, what noble stories
we read in eyes as deep as ocean reaches.
So show us memories in all their glories,
those chests of jewels composed of stars and ethers.

We wish to break the boredom of our jail
to cross without the help of wind or steam,
that, with our spirits stretched out like a sail,
the wide horizons are what memories seem.

So say: what have you seen?

IV

The stars we've seen,
the waves, the desert sands, yet all, despite
the shocks and unforeseen mishaps, has been
too often boring as our current plight.

The sunset's glory on empurpled sea,
the city's brilliance as the sun goes down
awake such longing in the heart that we
are drawn to drink reflections in and drown.

Not fabled lands or cities packed with crowds
of pilgrims, ever set our hearts on fire
as can those solemn mysteries of clouds
where chance so anxiously evokes desire.

Our gross enjoyment only adds to sin,
lust fertilizes pleasures never done.
The old tree thickens up its bark-like skin,
and has its branches strive to reach the sun.

Will you grow then tree, and suffer no defection
from what tall cypresses most lordly are?
We've culled some pictures for your vast collection,
for those who'd worship beauty from afar.

We've bowed to monstrous idols, made salaam
to thrones bejewelled with every lustrous gem.
The palaces we've wrought with unreal charm
would ruin bankers just to dream of them.

Our eyes have sunk in such flamboyant dresses,
dyed women's teeth and nails, the lurid kind,
and snakes a clever mountebank caresses,

V

And then, what then?

VI

O trivial, childish mind.

You've missed the most important thing, to see —
though most unsought for, this gross world we're in:
from ladder's foot to top, and fatally —
the boring spectacle of age-old sin.

Proud woman, admiring what vile nature gave,
is slave without amusement or disgust.
Man the avaricious tyrant, grasping slave
to slave, and running gutter of her lust.

Excited hangman, sobbing martyr: those
who find in blood's thick perfume nothing odd,
the despots whom their poisoned powers depose,
and peoples brutalized, who kiss the rod.

The many faiths like ours, serenely wed
with sins to heaven, where sanctity entails —
as will voluptuary of a feather bed —
a love of hair shirt and the scourge of nails.

Our much admired humanity that's shod
with faults that from the first misled its days.
Throughout its agony it screams to God:
'My Lord and fellow, how I hate your ways!'

The bold and not so foolishly insane
who flee the bounds that destiny calls wealth,
or fall to opium's immense domain:
so stands the world's eternal bill of health!

VII

What bitter knowledge we must bring away.
The world is small, monotonous, and what we see
is always us, tomorrow as today:
green horror lost in sands of ennui.

So must we leave? Or stay? If that can be,
remain. If not, then hide or fast be gone
if you'd escape that watchful enemy:
Time gives no rest to those still roving on.

So go apostles and the wandering Jew.
No ship or coach can help them. None on earth
escapes that fearsome net, though some have, too,
acquired the skill to kill the thing at birth.

But if at last it overburden days,
we can still cry, Set sail! and onward fare,
as did the travellers to China gaze
on distance, with the sea-wind through their hair.

Embarked upon that sea of Darkness, heart
as fresh as some young passenger's, you hear
the voices, sad and beautiful, impart
a longing to be ever drawing near

the perfumed lotus fruit. For here it grows,
the one you hunger for. Come, eat and swoon
into a strange, sweet drunkenness that knows
no end to this perpetual afternoon.

In that familiar voice we note the Spectre,
the arms of Pylades stretch out to please.
'Swim out, refresh the heart in your Electra',
cries she, for whom we've one-time kissed her knees.

VIII

Weigh anchor, Death, old captain! Time to sink
these lands that weary us far out of sight.

And though the sea and sky be black as ink,
the hearts that you know well are filled with light.

Pour on the poisons that assuage as well.
From fire that purges thought we'd plunge on through
the abysses that may be Heaven or Hell
and in the depths of Unknown find the new!

Le Voyage from Charles Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal* (1857)

Le Voyage by Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) is an important poem by an important poet, but one resisting a fully literal translation. The sense is often incomplete, and the rhymes standing for symbols larger than the poem itself. What does *Et nous allons, suivant le rythme de la lame / Berçant notre infini sur le fini de mers* mean exactly? The solution here has been to round out the sense as much as possible from the collection itself, i.e. from the horror, disgust and boredom that Baudelaire imagined around him.

The final stanza is one of the most seminal in modern literature, and has spawned a long line of inwardness, which extends from the Symbolists to today's radical criticism. Whether Baudelaire truly saw the world in these terms is difficult to say, but the Second Empire certainly didn't relish such offal being thrown in its face, and prosecuted the author and publisher for an offence against public morals. Given the hypocrisy of the *gratin*, the smug respectability of the bourgeoisie and the wretchedness that Zola documented in his novels of the city, the portrait is not wholly unreal, but the two offenders were convicted and fined, though not imprisoned. Six of the poems suppressed in the first edition were issued as *Les Épaves* in 1866.

Baudelaire suffered from indifferent health, pressing debts, and an inability to compose regularly. He was a careful craftsman, however, using sounds and the sense of smell to create atmosphere, and employing words that took on an independent existence, standing for matters not wholly spelt out in the poem. The references to drugs, deviant sex, and oppressivenessness of life in a big city were thought scandalous at the time, but have since become part of Modernism.

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 Ceil 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 rather 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 lilies, beneath walls or the silk of oriflamme,
won 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 in grass that’s thick and celibate
as beds of saints on golden 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, intimate with water that is grey as cinders.

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

After *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. 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 many small departures from a literal rendering here try to give some of the originating experiences back to Rimbaud’s disconnected images, and produce something that works better in English.

Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujoud'hui

The virgin, the vivid and the fresh new day.
Will a blow for us from its drunk wing break,
in hauntings forgotten beneath this frosted lake,
the clear ice-falls of flights not yet fled away?

In past magnificence of thoughts today
the swan remembers its freedoms, but cannot make
a song from regions surrounding, but only take
on the sterile, dull glint of the winter's stay.

Out in 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,
as a dream wrapped in scorn, and a phantom, seeing
how ineffectual is exile for the Swan.

Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujoud'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 aujoud'hui is the most celebrated poem of the Symbolist period, and no English rendering captures the haunting beauty of the first line. The version here aims at the sense — to the extent this is possible in such an enigmatic poem — and alludes to the passionless, cold art of poetry as Mallarmé envisaged it.

Cemetery by the Sea

The walk 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 is offered 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 sweet, and the mind thinned.

The dead are hidden well in this warm earth
where mysteries resunned 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:
Not for you is the irrefutable worm:
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, 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 sails of 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.

A slightly free rendering that aims to get beneath the literal expression to the originating thoughts and sensations in this most intellectual of poets.

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 Zaparogs, 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 bony ways
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 made her wonder, long and 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, in splendour from on high,
how soon you go, 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:
sweet 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, in splendour from on high,
how soon you go, 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, in splendour from on high,
how soon you go, 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
flesh and springtime have no end.

Youth, in splendour from on high,
how soon you go, 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, in splendour from on high,
how soon you go, 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!

Cancíon 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 preciosity, eroticism and exotic reference. Musicality 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, *Cancíon 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 enmities, 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 staunched 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 left an indelible trace on Hispanic 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

La Divina Commedia

When past the mid point of our life
I woke within a threatening wood,
the straight way through it lost in dark.

How hard to say what I retain
of that fierce forest, wild and rough.
The mere remembering brings on fear

and bitterness foreshadowing death,
but I will speak of good as well
and of the other things I saw.

I do not know what brought me there,
or if some slumber came to make
me err and leave the narrow path,

but at the foot of higher ground,
just where the valley petered out
that once with terror pierced my heart,

I saw the overlooking slopes
were lit with rays from that great sun
that guides us on our joyful path.

My fear was then a little stilled,
and in the waters of my heart
the life returned from that hard night

as one who is exhausted, turns
to see the perils of the deep sea waves
from safety of the blissful shore.

In this my thoughts, though fleeting on,
were backward veering to the gate
that guards our course beyond the grave.

My body, in indifferent shape,
toiled on and up that bare ascent,
though feet held steady with the weight.

Not far from where the slope grew steep,
I saw a Leopard, lean and swift,
its body showing mottled spots.

At my approach it did not move
but only glowered and threatened me,
that many times I turned on back.

Opening of *La Divina Commedia* by Dante Alighieri (c.1265-1321)

Dante's Divine Comedy recounts the author's journey through the three realms of the dead, and lasts from the night before Good Friday to the Wednesday after Easter in 1300. The poem is written in terza rima (i.e. rhymed aba, bcb, etc.) and runs to 14,233 lines.

Though a passable approximation to terza rima stanza can be written easily enough in English:

The mid-part of our life already crossed
I found myself within a wood that bore
no path, the straight way into darkness lost.

How hard to speak of it. The forest wore
a look so savage, drear and threatening
that mere remembering brings fear once more,

with premonition of death's bitter sting.
But there was goodness too, and I shall tell
of sights encountered there in everything.

the pentameter line needed to meet the rhyme scheme is much longer than the Italian, making for padding and a slower pace. In this case, it seems better to concentrate on content more than outward form, and aim to reproduce some of Dante's energy in simple unrhymed tetrameters, however short on their melodic aspects.

The Infinite

Always dear to me this unfrequented
hill and hedge that so obstructs the view
of endless distances, where earth and sky
would merge as one. In sitting here and gazing
out beyond those boundless intervals
of space, on more than human silences,
through depths of quiet that I pretend to know,
the heart is overwhelmed almost. But with
the wind that's murmuring among the leaves
I must go on comparing an infinite
silence to this voice. So come to mind
the eternal and the dead seasons, the present
and the living, the sounds of them. In such
immensities my meditating drowns,
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

The Elfking

Who rides so late through wind and wild?
It is the father with his child.
He has the boy held close in arm,
and warm he keeps him, safe from harm.

‘My son, why turn your face aside?’
‘It is the Elfking, father, at our side.
His crown and tail, now can’t you see?’
‘The mist, my son, is all there be.’

‘Come, go with me, for we shall play
such happy games throughout the day.
By seas will coloured flowers unfold,
my mother robe you out in gold.’

‘My father, my father, can’t you hear,
the Elfking whispering in my ear?’
‘My child, be calm: the mind deceives:
the wind, it rustles through the leaves.’

‘For now, my pretty one, we’re riding through:
my fine-bred daughters wait on you:
how nightly they will dance and leap
and, singing, cradle you asleep.

‘Father, don’t you see the Elfking where
his daughters hold their gloomy lair?’
‘My son, I only see what’s there:
grey willows glimmer in the air.’

‘If not so willingly, my lovely boy,
for you it’s force I shall employ.’
‘He has me, father, seizes arm,
I fear the Elfking’s done me harm.’

Now terrified, the father rides,
with hurt and effort: all besides,
for at the farm to which he’s fled
the child within his arms lay dead.

Der Erlkönig from *Die Fischerin* (1782) by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) was a man of prodigious talents. The greatest lyric poet in the German language, the author of several novels, of innumerable essays, translations and critical works, of an extended dramatic poem of 57 years' writing, and of many plays that are still performed, Goethe also found time to make major advances in botany, geology, anatomy, optics and colour theory.

Goethe was educated privately by his father, learning several languages and mixing with the varied personalities of Frankfurt's fairs, French occupation and the crowning of the Holy Roman Emperor. Goethe's duties at Weimar were onerous — causing him to eventually flee to Italy — but he was sustained by an unfailing confidence in his gifts and opinions. Some of his most beautiful ballads, songs and love poems date from this hectic period. All intellectual matters fascinated Goethe, and he saw no dichotomy between artistic and scientific interests. Though increasingly divorced from court life, Goethe's was always an independent spirit that recognised kindred aspirations in those around him, making Weimar an influence on artists and thinkers in Germany and beyond.

The Erlkönig (Elf or Alder King) is a popular piece that was set to music by Schubert and others. The story derives from Danish folk tales, and Goethe based his poem on a Danish work translated into German by Johann Gottfried Herder.

The rendering a little free in places — to meet the rhyme needs and maintain the lyric energy.

Mignon's Longing

You know the land where lemons grow, in gold
the oranges from darkest leaves unfold?
Where winds scarce stir about the soft blue skies,
and myrtles congregate, and bay trees rise?
You know them well?
For there, far on,
with you, who are my dearest, I'd be gone.

You know the pillared roof the house assumes,
the spacious hallways and the splendid rooms,
where marble statues stood to gaze at me?
What's befallen you, poor child, that we
must know them well?
For there, far on,
with you, my own true guardian, I'd be gone.

You know the pass and cloudy mountain peak,
the path through mists the cautious mule-trains seek,
where caverns guard the dragon's ancient brood,
where crags rear menacing and floods intrude?
You know them well?
For there, far on,
the path is leading, father. Let's be gone.

Mignons Sehnsucht from *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (1774) by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

The opening lines are some of the best known in German. The poem appeared in Goethe's novel *Sorrows of Werther*, but soon acquired a life of its own, being set to music by Schubert, Schumann, Wolf, Strauss and others. The allusion is to Italy, which Goethe famously toured between 1786 and 1787.

To the Two Fates

One more summer grant me, mighty ones,
and one more autumn fit for ripening,
so that my willing heart may with the sweetest
playing then be sated and may die.

The soul that in its life is not divinely
touched does not in Orcus rest below,
but once I have attained that holy end —
the poem that my heart is set on — I

shall welcome peace inside the shadow-lands
and be content, although my lyre may not
descend with me. For like the gods I shall
have lived, and there is nothing more to need.

An die Parzen from *Sämmtliche Werke* (1826) by Friedrich Hölderlin

Hölderlin's was a particularly unhappy life. Johann Christian Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843), who counted Hegel and Schelling among his childhood friends, grew up to be an excellent Hellenist, more at home in the classics than the everyday world. For employment he travelled from one distasteful residence to another until he found work as a tutor in the home of a Frankfurt banker. In good Romantic fashion, Hölderlin there fell in love with his employer's young wife, Susette Gontard, being obliged to move on once again when those feeling were reciprocated — to Stuttgart, Switzerland and France. Susette, whom he corresponded with, died of influenza in 1802. Hölderlin returned home, insane, to his mother's house, and though there were brief intermissions from the illness, probably schizophrenia, he withdrew from the world completely in 1807, being cared for during the remaining 36 years of his life by Ernst Zimmer, a carpenter who admired his work. Hölderlin still wrote a little, received visits from the curious, but no support came from family or state. The Zimmer family were the only mourners at his funeral.

In *An Die Parzen* (to the two Fates) Hölderlin is recalling the Pindaric role of poet-seer, and the poem is not in pentameters are here translated but in a free form approximating to the Alcaic metre.

Bread and Wine

1

Far about the city is at rest. The silent
streets are lit by torch-hung carriages, which rumble
past. The world goes home, contentedly, still totting
up the day's accumulated loss and gain,
and peace now settles on the home, on busy market-
place for crafts and empty stalls of flowers and wine.
From far-off gardens comes the sound of some stringed song
that's played for lovers maybe, or some lonely soul
who thinks of youth that was and of now distant friends.
The cooling fountains fall by scented flower beds
and bells ring out across the twilit air. A watchman;
noting time, now calls the hour, and breezes rustle
through the topmost parts of trees. See how the moon,
that silhouette of earth, comes stealthily abroad,
and night, phantasmal with the stars, though doubtless few
of them will have much care for us, but still she is
a thing astonishing, unknown, a stranger whose
solitary, sad brilliance shines on mountain tops.

2

Exalted kindness of the night is wonderful,
and no one knows the where she comes from nor the where
she goes. She moves the world and hopeful souls of men,
and not the wisest of them knows what she prepares.
It is the highest god that loves you very much,
designs it so, for all you veer to sober day.
Sometimes clear eyes prefer the shadow's joys, and what
she tempts us with before it is the time to sleep:
it is the faithful who can stare into the dark.
We celebrate with songs her starry wreathes because
she blesses both the dead and those who've lost their way.
Though she herself, forever, is the freest spirit,
we ask oblivion and holy drunkenness
that in the hesitating interval there still

be something permanent for us within the dark:
a joy in words' outpouring as true lovers have
in sleeplessness, a fuller cup, a bolder life,
and sacred memories we keep renewed at night.

4

And did, beloved Greece, you truly house the great
celestials once, which we heard tell of in our youth?
An overarching festival whose floor was oceans,
tables, mountains, built of old for simple need?
Where are those temples, where the thrones, and where the vessels
brimmed with nectar, songs that celebrated gods?
Where shine, where shine the oracles with what they said?
For Delphi sleeps, and where is that great practice now?
Or Fate appearing with abundant joy, as thunder
incontestably came out of clear blue sky?
Father Aether, one called out, and so it flew
from tongue to tongue a thousand times, for no one suffers
life alone. Such wealth gives joy, the more when shared
with strangers: exultation gathering power in sleep.
Father! So the cry resounds throughout its travels,
down through signs our parents gave us. So accomplished
come the gods, and, out of terror shaking, falling
as the day comes forth from shadows, down to man.

5.

At first they come unnoticed. Children look them out
but find their joy too dazzling. Men become afraid,
so that a demigod will hardly know by name
the crowds of people coming with their gifts. But still
they come. Their courage fills his heart with joy, though gifts
become so overwhelming as to seem unholy:
things which he had blessed with kind but foolish hand.
Such matters gods will tolerate, if for a while,
but then must show themselves, and people know the source
of happiness for what it is: the open day,
the face of him now manifest, whom formerly
they called the One and All. Secretly the knowledge

fills each breast. For so men are, and even when
a god pours out his bounty for them, still they fail
to recognize those gifts, requiring time to grow
accustomed to them, slowly cherish them, for then
the praise will come spontaneously, as flowers do.

7

We come too late, my friend. For, true, the gods live on
but somewhere high above us, endlessly, a different
place they graciously inhabit but with little
care for us, or knowledge how we live or die.
Weak vessels can't continually contain them, nor
will men endure such fullness of their being long,
for all that life become some dream of them. Like sleep,
distress and night will make us strong, until the bronze-
wrought cradles breed sufficient heroes, hearts to match,
as strong as gods, or as they were when thunder
came announcing them. Meanwhile, I often think,
it better that we stay asleep than live companionless,
awaiting mere events, bewildered what to do
or say. What use are poets in such vacant times,
unless, you say, they're like the wine god's ministrants
that move from land to land throughout the holy night.

Brod und Wein from *Sämmtliche Werke* (1826) by Friedrich Hölderlin

Five stanzas from the ten-stanza, impressive but rather repetitious Brot und Wein (Bread and Wine). The poem is not in hexameters as rendered here but — to puzzle contemporaries, and defeat this translator — in rhythmic units that reflect Hölderlin's deep knowledge of Greek verse. The last three lines have become something of a talisman: what role has poetry in the unheroic contemporary world?

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.

The Two

She held the goblet out to him.
Her chin and mouth were as the rim.
So easily the manner filled
her movement not a drop was spilled.

His hands looked firm but soft as air.
He rode, she saw, a yearling horse.
She felt his careless gesture force
her stay her horse, which quivered there.

But when, however, from her grasp
he took the goblet they both found
it awkward, when they could not make
each trembling hand the other take
and fold it in a mutual clasp.
The dark blood rolled upon the ground.

Die Beiden from *Ausgewählte Gedichte* (1904) by Hugo von Hofmannsthal

An understated and sophisticated piece, not as artless as it seems. Though the union first appears to have failed, the shedding of blood in the symbolic last line shows the two are indeed bound in mutual harmony.

Hugo von Hofmannsthal's (1874-1929) literary gifts were recognised at an early age, but he soon turned from poetry to adapting the plays of Sophocles, Caldéron and Molière for the Vienna stage, and to writing comedies. One is well known through being set to music by Richard Strauss: *Der Rosenkavalier*.

Autumn Day

A lofty summer, Lord! It’s time to lay
your shadows on the sundials now, and let
once more in meadowlands the winds hold 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.

Antique Torso

We cannot see the famous head, nor learn
how eyes like apples would have ripened, yet
the torso glows, as if a lantern set
the gaze to hold its gleam in, quiet and stern.

How else would it be difficult to read
the dazzling curve of chest, the placid hips,
the loins, the smile that tells about the lips
of that dark centre where genitals seed?

Indeed the stone itself would seem defaced,
and short the lucid fall to shoulder, graced
by no beast's fierceness in its glistening skin.

Nor would we feel the broken edges rife
with starburst's showering rays. You're always in
their watchful sight. You must change your life.

Archaïscher Torso Apollos from *Neue Gedichte* (1907-1908)

Like Cézanne, whose work he knew, Rilke tried in new ways to 'record his sensations before nature' — here in a rather exploratory fashion, leaving some overwriting and novelties the translator must bridge to make a persuasive poem.

In this poem the correspondence is between Rilke's fragmented existence and the battered but luminous state of the Greek torso.

The Panther

So wearily this iron cage is told,
the gaze in passing cannot take in more
and, though the bars have grown a thousand-fold,
has nothing out there worth the looking for.

But yet the strong, redoubled paddings turn
their steps into a tightening circle till
the ritual, mesmerizing movements earn
a stunned suspension of that powerful will.

And then the pupil's gliding shutter shows,
if silently, a view distinctly his:
a stilled intensity in limbs that flows
into a heart that hears what only is.

Der Panther from *Neue Gedichte* (1907-1908)

A popular piece that has been much translated. Once again the writing is simpler and more direct, but by no means easy to understand. Most translators believe Rilke is commenting on the hopelessness of the panther's imprisonment and render the last line as an approaching death, literal or metaphorical. In fact it just says *and hears in the heart on to be*, which suggests another interpretation, one developed more in the *Duino Elegies*, where Rilke examines the significance of this world to its fleeting inhabitants. A similar significance is possibly being asked of the panther, whose look turns inward to see a more intense world than that offered by its brutal and mechanized surroundings.

The rendering is fairly close, as far as is possible with novel thoughts conveyed in traditional form.

Sonnet 7

So, praising, yes! It was to praise he came,
the way the ore comes taciturn from rock.
His heart a winepress with no lasting frame,
but giving endlessly to human stock.

Yet not in funerals would the voice escape,
or fail when godhead held him in its power.
All things will turn to vineyard, all to grape,
when southern sentience can reach its hour.

But nothing in the burial vault of kings
would contradict the praise, not musty things,
nor shadows falling from the gods instead.

He is the messenger who always stays,
who carries bowls of fruit deserving praise
across the distant thresholds of the dead.

Die Sonette an Orpheus, Erster Teil (1922)

A poem from Rilke's last work — a collection of some fifty-five sonnets produced in the happiness of have finally completed the *Duino Elegies*. These rapid outpourings are only broadly made sonnets by the rhymes: i.e. the rhyme schemes are exact but the metre is broken, the line lengths vary, and the content is not very logically put together.

The rendering retains the rhyme scheme, and Rilke's sympathetic engagement with inanimate objects, but the original is far more idiomatically expressed, the ecstatic tone just about holding the poem together.

Grodek

The evening echoes with the sound
of deadly weapons: forests, golden plains
and deep blue lakes, and over these the sun
now darkly rolls. Night encompasses
the fallen warriors; a fevered muttering
from broken mouths.

There gathers, silently, among the grazing lands
a dark red cloud, the dwelling of an angry god
that spills with blood. A placid moon and roads
that run out everwhere to black decay.

Beneath the golden branches of the night and stars
the sister's shadow travels through the quiet grove
to greet the spirits of the heroes, the bleeding heads,
and solemnly, among the reeds, the darkening flutes of autumn sound.

How proud is desolation on whose earlier shrines today
the spirit's scorching flames drink in the countless griefs
of grandsons yet unborn.

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 SANSKRIT

Vairagya Shataka 50

Half the hundred years of man
is stillness of the night,
and half again but mewling and
the dotage of old age.
In the interval wait illness,
the death of friends, and fret,
and happiness a water bubble
that passes in a breath.

Bhartrihari (possibly 7th century AD)

As is often the case with Sanskrit writers, little is known for sure about Bhartrihari, though he is one of the more popular, still widely read and quoted. He may have been the Buddhist grammarian mentioned by the Chinese traveller I-tsing, who visited India in the 7th century AD, but the attribution is unclear, and Bhartrihari appears in his work more a worshipper of Shiva. Tradition makes him a king of Ujjain in the 1st century BC, who abdicated in favour of his brother over disgust at his queen's infidelities. Bhartrihari has certainly some unflattering things to say about women, but does not appear the pampered ruler so much as the shrewd and needy Brahmin. There are also stories of his vacillating character, drawn equally to pleasure and spiritual matters, and so continually moving between court and Buddhist cloisters, but again they are no more than anecdotes. Bhartrihari's works combine scraps of writings by other poets, including Kalidasa, but these may be later interpolations.

Each of Bhartrihari's three shatakas or collections has one hundred cameo pieces. The Srngara gives us pictures of love and lovemaking. The Vairagya advocates a gradual withdrawal from worldly matters, and the Níti deals with ethical conduct.

Níti Shataka 100

Brahma is the boundless thrown
as potter turns the clay;
ten troublesome rebirthings Visnu
undertook on earth;
Shiva in a begging bowl
held out a skull for us;
perpetually in homage, sun
goes wandering through the sky.

Bhartrihari (possibly 7th century AD)

Bhartrihari's pieces are sharply cut cameos, brilliant poems in miniature, to which the only equivalent in European languages may be the scattered fragments of the Greek Anthology.

The Meghaduta or Cloud Messenger is a masterpiece of Sanskrit literature, and was composed by the court poet Kalidasa some time before AD 634 in northern India. A Yaksha or nature deity begs a passing cloud to carry a message across the subcontinent to his grieving consort in the fabled city of Alakā. The first part describes the journey the cloud must make, which is north-westwards across present-day Madhya Pradesh, and then northwards into Tibet. The second part moves the story to Alaká, where the Yaksha depicts his consort’s sadness, and tells the cloud what to say to her. Under this fiction, Kalidasa presents a sympathetic portrait of northern India, and weaves in the various moods of love traditional in classical Sanskrit poetry.

About its author, who wrote five or six other great works, little is known, but he may have served one of the pre-Gupta rulers of northern India at Ujjain.

Meghaduta

A year from amorousness: it passes slowly.
So thought a Yaksha by his master sent,
for scanting duty, to the Rāmagiry:
to mope in penance groves as banishment
by rivers Sītā's bathing there made holy.

Āshādha's ending on the mountain found
him weakened, gold ring slipping from his wrist,
and mixed his pleasure as a cloud came down
so playfully to hug the summit mist,
as elephants in heat will butt the ground.

In tears withheld he took his fall from grace,
from wealth attending on the King of Kings.
The otherworld that brimmed in cloudy air
was still discomfort when far longing brings
a breath to hold him to that neck's embrace.

With now the rainy month stood close at hand,
to fresh Kutaja blooms he adds his plea
and asks most courteously the cloud bring news
of welfare to his loved-one—words that she,
revived to hear of him, will understand.

How can a cloud so moving, mixed and got
of water vapour, fire and wind be used
by Yaksha appropriately as messenger?
But he in eagerness and grief confused
mistakes as sentient a thing that's not.

Such clouds the ending of the world presage;
you minister to form at will. Though kin
I plead for are by power detained, better
to be by majesty refused than win
an approbation of base parentage.

Opening of the *Meghaduta* by Kalidasa (before AD 634)

Gita Govinda

See the clove-tree with its creepers
in the warm malaya breeze.
Hear the honey bee and cuckoo
murmuring in cottage glade.

Look to Hari in the spring time,
dancing with his youthful women:
endlessly the ache encircles
one who's solitary, my friend.

Traveller's brides are rent by passion;
much they wander in their pain
to see bakula flowers, unruffled
with their swarms of honeybees.

Look to Hari in the spring time,
dancing with his youthful women:
endlessly the ache encircles
one who's solitary, my friend.

Garlanded with leaves, tamāla trees
are overcome by musky scent:
as love-god's nails, kinshuka buds
must lacerate the youthful heart.

Look to Hari in the spring time,
dancing with his youthful women:
endlessly the ache encircles
one who's solitary, my friend.

Keshara trees with golden pistils
reign as sovereign of the spring,
and bees the arrows lovers take
from trumpet quivers of their flowers.

Look to Hari in the spring time,
dancing with his youthful women:
endlessly the ache encircles
one who's solitary, my friend.

How the young karuna flowers
laugh at prudishness, and spears
of sharp ketaka buds attack
the separated, lovelorn one.

Look to Hari in the spring time,
dancing with his youthful women:
endlessly the ache encircles
one who's solitary, my friend.

When air is thickly wreathed with jasmine,
and fragrant mādhavī will catch
the notice of the forest hermit,
what will youth then not commit?

Look to Hari in the spring time,
dancing with his youthful women:
endlessly the ache encircles
one who's solitary, my friend.

Here tendrils of the atimukta
clasp the bristling mango buds,
and all around the Brindavan
is watered by the Yamunā.

Look to Hari in the spring time,
dancing with his youthful women:
endlessly the ache encircles
one who's solitary, my friend.

At the feet of radiant Krishna
Jayadeva speaks, remembering
how spring returned to forest meetings
colours every hint of love.

Look to Hari in the spring time,
dancing with his youthful women:
endlessly the ache encircles
one who's solitary, my friend.

* * *

The wind that hums like arrows brings
to hearts the frank ketaka tree —
inflaming them as forest clothes
itself with jasmine’s pollen scent.

The hungry bees at mango shoots,
the cuckoo’s fever in the ear:
sweet days when travellers will think
how breaths were tangled into one.

* * *

Again her girlfriend told her: see there, Rādhā,
how he wantons, friends with all.
So Mura's enemy, embracing many:
how that trembling eagerness invites.

Third song from the *Gita Govinda* by Jayadeva (AD 12th Century)

The Gita Govinda—a cycle of Sanskrit songs, commentaries and invocations depicting Krishna’s courtship of the cowherdess Rādhā —was the most popular and influential poem to emerge from medieval India. The text was added to temple inscriptions, set to music, choreographed for dance, and studied as a religious text.

Jayadeva brought song into classical Sanskrit verse, and developed the association with a beauty not easily matched in English. While the prose meaning of Gita Govinda can be brought over reasonably well, despite many ambiguities in the Sanskrit text, and the restricting form of English stanzas, the aesthetic qualities that make Gita Govinda supremely worth reading have to be created independently. Classical Sanskrit poetry was sonorous, repetitive, ornate, formal, ambiguous, and conventional. Its long lines with their various but intricate quantitative metres have no counterpart in English, any more than our explicit words have a religious dimension. My solution has been to use English verse devices to explore a text winnowed down to the bare bones of its Sanskrit meaning.

FROM THE GREEK

Choral Ode to Colonus

Strophe

Colonus, stranger: here is 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 ever joyful sound.
Sacred too is each leafed thing
endowed with berries and with fruit
as, nymphs attending, revelling,
Dionysus walks this ground.

Antistrophe

Here bloom crocuses in gold,
and on their graves the white narcissus
guards the 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.
Inviolate, they're 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

CHORUS

Strophe (chorus turns to dance in one direction)

Of all the follies known to man
the worse is seek some longer span:
wrathfully I give him voice
as lacking in his rightful sense.
Beyond the modicum there come
but sufferings, and muted choice
that heaps on wearily the sum
of absences as joys go hence.
There is no wedding dance in death,
no warmth or frolic at the gate:
the same Deliverer will wait
on Hades and its empty breath.

Antistrophe (chorus reverses direction of dance)

Never to have known the earth
is the best befalling man
but if he once is given birth
he best go back as fast he can.
Folly is the name of youth,
nothing lasting or in truth.
Is it strange that these are lost
but still exact their fearful cost
in faction, envy, war and strife,
and curses to the end of life?
And so comes age that marks him out
as most afflicted and no doubt
infirm, dispraised, without a friend,
companionless to meet the end
in sore afflictions age must send.

Epode (sung after)

All too clearly of that case is he,
1240. but stands not in that state alone,
for we are like him in this dread
of tempest by the winter sea
that lashes headlands facing north
from every side to pound the stone
and lash such troubles on our head:
from where the sun at sunset stands,
from where the sun is setting forth,
and from the gloomy, northern lands.

End of Stasimon

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. Both are rendered in tetrameters, the first rhymed and the second unrhymed.

Well, when your children with their father went
into the bride's own house, we servants felt
much comforted. We'd heard the mission spelt
an end to your misfortunes, kind release
1140. from public quarrels keeping both from peace.
First someone kissed the children's hands, then some
one else their soft blond heads, and I, become
quite joyful at the prospect, took them through
into the quarters one time graced by you
but honoured by another mistress now.
The princess gazed at Jason. All saw how
she kept from looking at the children, turned
her cheek away, averted eyes, and spurned
this issue from that earlier marriage bed.
1150. But then your husband chided her and said
his princess should be kinder, and should more
respect the family he had before.
'Return your comely face to us', he said,
'and be by your own husband's feelings led.
Receive their gifts, and bid your father make
an end to my sons' exile, for my sake.'

And when she saw the finery she had
not strength to long resist him, and was glad
to sanction all he asked. And then, with party barely
1160. from the house, she gazed the more and fairly
laughed at things there given her. She took
the many-coloured gown, and, at its look
against her person, put it on. She placed
the crown on top, and saw its beauty graced
the beauty of the hair she had arranged
before the smiling mirror. With these she changed
from lifeless image to a deity.
She got up, skipped about the room, to be
a queen delighting that her white feet made
1170. an embassy for what the clothes displayed.

But as again the mirror turned to show
the long smooth tendons of the legs below
there came a change, a sudden change, and she
could feel her skin discolouring, and see
her legs begin to shake. She grasped a chair
to save herself from falling. A servant there,
that Pan or god possessed her, gave a shout
of joy at first, but with the white foam coming out
the mouth, the eyes protruding and the skin
1180. now pale and bloodless and half turning in,
changed this at once to wail — when servants went
to king and Jason, in their horror sent
in haste down passages with stumbling feet.

Speedily as athlete in his heat
returned from his six-plethra sprint, they came
and found the woman with her anguished frame
on two sides hung with pain. She groaned, a sound
quite horrible, and from the circlet round
her head shot out a strange, devouring flame,
1190. and from the garment given her the same,
but inward, eating up the whitened flesh.
In vain she tossed and tried and tried afresh
to throw it off, or even from her chair
leap up and shake the circlet from her hair,
but still it held. The more she shook the more
the fire roared up in fierceness than before.
She fell, rolled on the floor, but in a guise
that only father still might recognize.
Her eyes and handsome face did not aspire
1200. to shape, and from her head the blood caught fire,
and bones shed flesh as will a pine-torch sweat
its resin: poison bit her deeper yet.
A scene of horror, with the poison such
that all, and wisely, were afraid to touch.

Except her father, who had stumbled last
and ignorant into the room. Aghast,
he stooped, embraced his daughter, groaned and said,

‘Ah, wretched creature,’ as he kissed her head,
‘what god could wreak such frenzy, to consume
the hopes of this old man beside his tomb?
Without my daughter, and so shamefully too,
I would not now be left, but go with you.’

But when he came to rise, lamentings past,
he found his body to the dress bound fast
as ivy with the laurel shoots is intertwined,
and all he did thereafter seemed designed
to hold him tighter: all his heaves and groans
but pulled the aged flesh more off his bones.
Fiercely he struggled, but as fast grew tired:
his body gave its breath up, and expired.
The two then lay there in their dreadful sleep,
old man and daughter, making all to weep.

What happens now is not for me to say
except that punishment will not delay.
But of the larger issues, life itself:
that seems a spectacle of miraged wealth,
and those who craft their speeches only pay
respect to foolishness and empty sway.
In wealth one may be luckier than the rest
but not in blessings: none is truly blest.

From the Sixth Episode in Medea by Euripedes (c 430 – 406 BC)

The long Messenger’s speech in the sixth episode of Euripides’ Medea, which leaves nothing to the imagination. *Medea* was put on in 431 BC, together with his *Philoctetes*, *Dictys* and *The Reapers*, but won only third prize, losing out to work by Euphorion and Sophocles.

Scholars are divided on how Euripides appeared to his contemporaries, as the upholder or scourge of orthodox morality, but his plays certainly became more popular in later centuries.

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, Simio, 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 the great man 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.

The Georgics

Invocation

How are the fields made joyful and what stars advise
us turn the earth, Maecēnās? How may vines be fastened
to the elm? What husbandry will manage cattle,
breed the ox? What knowledge have the thrifty bees?
With such I start my song. And you, O radiant lights
that lead the seasons in their fruitful dance, and you,
both Līber and propitious Cerēs, who have turned
Chāonian acorn lands to thick-sown fields of wheat
and mixed in drafts of Archeloüs new-made wine;
10. and Fauns, you rustic deities who serve for local
powers—so dance you Dryad girls and gods—your gifts
I celebrate. And Neptune giving birth to neighing
horse when your great trident struck the earth, and you,
the dweller of the woods, for whom three hundred head
of snowy cattle browse the Ceōs thicket lands;
Tegean Pan that guards the flocks, though much you love
Maenales lands, come, leave your own Lycaeus groves
and favour us; Minerva of the olive gift,
and you, young man, who first revealed the curving plough,
20. Sylvānus, planter of the pliant cypress tree,
and you, obliging gods and goddesses who watch
our fields, to nourish native fruits we have not sown,
and make the heavens so plentifully water crops.
And you, great Caesar, who in time will join the gods,
in unknown company, but choosing, it may be,
to safeguard cities, care for lands, become the source
of wondrous harvest on the widespread earth, the seasons'
potentate that wears his mother's myrtle crown,
who broods on boundless seas, the sovereign breath
30. that mariners to far-off Thūlē look to, Tēthys
furthers, winning you as son-in-law with waves,
or as a star which lengthens out the warmth of summer
months you blaze in Virgo, free of grasping claws

now fiery Scorpio has withdrawn her arms and left
a worthier portion to you of the heavens. Be as
you will, for Hades wants you not as king, that power
should overwhelm itself, although Ēlysium
bewitched the Greeks, for Prōserpina could not hear
her mother calling and return to earth. Assent
40. to what is here so rashly ventured on, regret
with me the ignorance of country ways, and grow
in your divinity accustomed to our prayers.

Georgics One 1-42 by Virgil (70-19 BC)

Propagation of trees

To start with nature's ways of propagating trees —
10. most various. Untouched by man, some grow to shade
the fields spontaneously, and share the winding breadth
of streams: the pliant osier does, the clinging Spanish
broom, the poplars and the willows, silver-leafed.
Some from fallen seeds spring up: the soaring chestnut,
the broad-leafed oak in groves of mighty Jupiter,
the common oak believed oracular by Greeks.
Yet others sprout as suckers from the roots, to speak
of elm and cherry. The sweet bay even of Parnassus
starts as shoots beneath its widespread mother's shade.
20. So naturally are given us our shrubs and trees,
the sacred groves and all things green. Yet other is
what practice finds out for itself. A mother tree is
pollarded for slender saplings: some to plant
among the furrows, some to put down through the fields,
the staves then four ways split and tipped with sharpened oak.
Still other trees are made by branches bent to earth
and pegged expectantly for ends to tuft with shoots.
Still others have no roots at all, and here the pruner
need but scatter cuttings for fresh growth to take.
30. And when an olive trunk is cut — how strange to note
— a root is promptly put out at the base. And often,
harmlessly, a tree trunk turns to other types:

a pear tree so transformed will bear engrafted apples
and plum’s encarnadined with stony cornel cherries.

Georgics Two 9-34 by Virgil (70-19 BC)

Orpheus and Eurydice

'Not for nothing do the wrathful powers pursue,
and great the crime for which you pay, which would
be worse had fate not intervened. It’s Orpheus
in piteous grieving for his wife intends this curse.
For she, the death-doomed girl, in headlong flight, escaping
you along the riverbank, did not beneath
her feet observe the river snake within the grass.
460. Her friends, the water Dryads filled the mountain tops
with their lament: the crags of Rhodopē and high
Pangaeus wept, the Rhēsus warrior lands, Getae
and Hebrus and the Actian Ōrithÿia.
In solace on that lonely shore, continually
of his sweet wife he sang, on lute of tortoiseshell,
from daylight’s first of dawning till the day retired.
Taenarum’s jaws he braved, the lofty gate of Dīs,
and through the groves of gloomy horror, on he went
to where the powers of Hades dwell, its fearsome king
470. holds court, and hearts can never yield to human prayer.
There, song-awoken, came the insubstantial shades
of Erebus, the wraiths of those deprived of light,
innumerable as birds find refuge in the leaves
when evening comes, or wintry rain will clothe the hills:
men, matrons, noble-hearted heroes, boys,
unmarried girls and youths conveyed to funeral pyres
amid their parents’ tears—all that the black mud
and loathsome reeds of Cōcÿtus within the sluggish
waters of that hated lake bind fast, and which
480. the Styx imprisons with its ninefold twisting coils.
Then spellbound stood those very halls of death, the pit
of Tartarus, and Furies with their serpent-twisted
locks. With triple mouths agape stood Cerberus.

The winds fell silent. Still was Ixiōn’s turning wheel.
But when, returning, each false step avoided, with
a saved Eurydicē there close behind him pressing
to the light — for so had ordered Proserpine
— a sudden madness fell on Orpheus, no doubt
excusable, if spirits had that power to grant.
490. He stopped, and on his loved Eurydice, at that
first threshold of the air, looked back — when all was lost,
immediately the treaty with that ruthless king
lay abrogated and undone. Thrice thunder rolled
above the dark Avernian pool. What madness has destroyed
both me, in misery she said, and Orpheus?
Relentlessly the fates recall me and my eyes
once more are veiled in sleep. Farewell, for into darkness
I am borne away, and hands outstretched to me
can no more meet than mine. Then into nothingness
500. she faded out, like fumes dissolving in the air.
And though long afterwards he’d clutch at shadows, yearn
for message, never did she see him more. Nor did
the Orcus ferryman allow him one more time
a passage through that sundering marsh. To find again
his wife what could he do? What powers were there,
what words to say? The Stygian boat conveyed her off,
by then both still and cold. For seven long months, beneath
a soaring rock, beside the lonely Strÿmon, under
freezing stars, it's said, he sat and wept his sorrows
510. out, the words but heard by tiger and the quivering
oaks. So mourns the nightingale within the poplar’s
shade for brood she’s lost to that rough-hearted lout
who, spying young, will pluck them, unfledged, from the nest.
Night long she weeps, and from a branch wells up her song
to fill with sadness all the fields and woods about.
No thoughts of love or bridal song now move his soul:
through Hyperboreal ice and snows of Tanais,
Rīphean lands forever locked in frost, he goes
still mourning his Eurydice and Pluto's sundered
520. vow. At last the Thracian women, scorned amid
their sacred orgies to nocturnal Bacchus, seized

the youth and scattered pieces of him through the fields.
But even then, the head torn off from marble neck
and midway floating down the Oegrian Hebrus stream,
the voice cried out : ‘Eurydicē’, and from his ice-
cold lips and fleeting breath ‘Eurydicē’ was heard
reverberating and murmuring down the river’s length.

Georgics Four 453-527 by Virgil (70-19 BC)

Epilogue

And so I've sung of husbandry of fields and herds,
560. of care for trees when Caesar, victor on the wide
Euphrates, hurled the thunderbolts of war. While he,
who gave his laws to willing nations, started on
a path to heaven, I in Parthenopē’s flowery
lap, have learned the undistinguished arts of peace.
So Virgil: a youth once dallying with shepherd’s lays,
who sang of Tityrus beneath the beech tree's shade.

Georgics Four 559-566 by Virgil (70-19 BC)

The *Georgics*, ostensibly a guide to agriculture, and the most finished of Virgil’s productions— indeed of all Latin literature — was written between 37 and 29 BC as the last phase of civil wars left Octavian in sole command of the Roman world. Social unrest, what happens when men do not work sensibly together for some common good, forms the backdrop to the *Georgics,* which is divided into four Books. The first opens with an invocation to the Muses, cites Maecenus and Octavian, deals with the growing of crops and weather lore, and ends with an extended prayer to Octavian. The second considers the cultivation of trees, especially the grape and olive, and contains a loving description of the Italian countryside. The third covers the rearing of animals, especially cattle, horses and sheep, and ends with the dreadful Noricum plague. The fourth is more mixed: it opens with a mock heroic description of bees and bee-keeping, moves into the epic style with the tale of Aristaeus and thence into the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. The ending has a short tribute to Octavian and a quote from Virgil’s previous work, the *Eclogues*.

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 of 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 Cỹbele'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 Four, 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
goad 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 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.

Ode 1.5

What slim, rich-scented youth, on roses lain,
now courts you, Pyrrha, in the grotto's shade?
Why fasten each blonde skein
of hair into that modest braid?

Unless for one who learns that gods can change,
and even faith will meet adversities
when sudden storm clouds range
across the dark, tempestuous seas.

Yes, he will love you in those golden hours,
for ever beautiful in that rapt gaze.
But swift the light wind lours
on innocence in that soft haze.

Your looks delight him and outdazzle day,
but more through grief the powerful sea god roves.
With votive hung, I pay
my penance in these storm-drenched clothes.

Ode 5, Book One by Horace (65 – 8 BC)

Ode 3.2

Once bred to hardship, let the boy advance
until his wartime training take its course,
and bound to cavalry and fearful lance,
he check the Parthians' ferocious horse.

Wide skies and constant perils make the life
of action foremost. When the walls concede
a view to tyrant's daughter or a wife
the very sight of him spells fear indeed.

Alas that any novice, new to war,
provoke the lion, for its fierce reply
will make the battleground a waste of gore
that kills all combatants. But yet to die

for one’s own country is both sweet and just.
Retreat won’t spare the coward, though he run
exposing back and greaves, for in disgust
comes death to settle with the fearful one.

Repugnant to his honour stands defeat:
he keeps unsullied his high conduct still,
nor does he waver, varying to meet
the shameless populace’s changing will.

True virtue earns a pathway to the stars
denied the multitude, and also brings
  contempt for this moist earth that only mars
   the paean on its upward wings.

A silence loyally kept is its reward,
and he who Ceres’ secrets would reveal
  will never find a roof of mine afford
   him home, or loose the fettered keel.

The good are often counted one with thieves,
which late-come justice even then confounds.
  But if revenge fall short, she rarely leaves
   the criminal whose steps she hounds.

Ode 2, Book Three by Horace (65 – 8 BC)

Ode 3.30

I’ve reared a monument more durable that brass
and loftier than the pyramids, those regal towers
that not devouring rain, nor yet unbridled powers
of north wind’s storms can batter down — for all there pass

immeasurably the long succession of the years,
and fleeting time itself. I shall not wholly die,
but find my praise will Libitina’s self defy
while silent virgin on the Capitol appears

beside our Pontifex. Such echoings evoke
the powers that come from humble parentage, from where
the fierce Áufidas with its roarings fills the air,
and Daunus, stinting water, rules her simple folk.

By me, the first devising, Latin verse was led
to replicate Aeolian measures. High praise
is merited, Melpōmenë: for you the bays
of Delphic laurel willingly adorn this head.

Ode 30, Book Three by Horace (65 – 8 BC)

Ode 4.7

The snows are fled away, the fields new grassed,
and trees now flourish with their leaves' rebirth.
The streams, diminishing, flow quietly past
and fresh-apparelled is the new made earth.

In blatant nakedness the Graces play,
and happily with Nymphs are chorusing.
Recall, as hour on hour thins out the day,
immutably there passes everything.

Cold melts before the western winds, and spring
is soon upon the summer's traces, then
comes autumn with its ripe fruit scattering,
when lifeless seems the winter's chill again.

Though moon on moon restore the heavens' waste,
we go on deathward all the same, and must
with Tullus, and with Ancus lie, and haste
with good Aeneas into dreams and dust.

Who knows what time we have, if gods on high
will add tomorrow to our fleeting wealth?
Take all the hand can hold, for why deny
yourself what heir will scarcely keep himself?

When you are dead, Torquatus, and must meet
the court that splendid Minos holds, no stir

of eloquence, or family, or good may cheat
that fate, or take you back to what you were.

Diana left the pure Hippolytus
she loved where night with Hades ever reigns,
and not from best of friends Pirithoüs
could Theseus remove the Lethean chains.

Ode 37, Book Four by Horace (65 – 8 BC)

Like Virgil, Quintus Horatius Flaccus came from undistinguished provincial stock. His father was a freedman of Venusia in southern Italy who gave his son the best education his frugal means could supply, sending him to Rome at the age of twelve and then to Athens. When twenty-one, without any military training, the young man enlisted as an officer in the Republican army, and seems to have served without disgrace until the defeat at Philippi, when he returned home to a minor post in Rome's civil service. Three years later he was introduced by Virgil to Maecenas, who acted as patron, finding him a public and eventually the small farm in the Sabine hills that was to be his refuge and support in later life..

Horace has none of the depths and brooding pity of Virgil. Beside Catullus, he seems flat and tame. But Horace appeals to a wider circle than either, and his 'golden mediocrity' produced a sane, slightly self-deprecating honesty in lines that have served as proverbs to the educated classes ever since. The range of subject matter was narrow, and his praise of patriotism is not popular today, but after such extended dexterity and lightness of touch, further developments in the Latin lyric seemed hardly worth the effort: Horace had taken the form to completion.

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 that 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)

Fakhru'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.

Your high splendour is my life, in 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.

For you the eye has become now a hundred chinked,
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 s*ar* (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 RUSSIAN

I Loved You

I loved you, love you still, that adoration
perhaps commemorates your lingering sway.
I would not trouble you with dedication
that hurts or saddens you in any way.

I loved so silently, so hopelessly,
all turned to envy as such shyness can.
God grant a true and tender love may be
as fully given by some other man.

I Loved You by Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837)

Alexander Pushkin was born in 1799 to an ancient aristocratic family and died of a duelling wound in 1837. In that short and often thwarted life, Pushkin modernized the Russian language, widening its vocabulary, removing archaic terms, and employing tones of address that would make Russian a fit vehicle for a century of poets, novelists and short story writers, many of them deservedly world famous.

Given Pushkin's libertine reputation, his own identification with the dissident heroes of Romantism, the amorous gossip of the times and the innumerable love poems he dashed off, it is exceedingly difficult to know how seriously to take Pushkin's protestations. Certainly he fell in love on occasion, perhaps on many occasions, but he could also be the disenchanted sceptic depicted in Eugene Onegin. Exiled to Kishinyov, a remote outpost in Moldavia, for example, he devoted much time to writing, but also plunged into a life of amorous intrigue, hard drinking, gaming, and violence. At Odessa he fell in love with and seduced the wife of his superior, the kindly Count Vorontsov, governor-general of the province, who was eventually obliged to ask for Pushkin's removal when the affair became too public.

In short, Pushkin's love poetry was self-inspired by many women, but the greatness of the poetry does not necessarily reflect the depth of his affections. Poetry and love (spiritual and carnal) remain somewhat different entities. Pushkin was no worse than his dissipated contemporaries, of course, but his affairs were not too edifying, despite the legions of poetry lovers wishing to believe otherwise. As W.B. Yeats remarked, 'The poet is not the man who sits down to breakfast.'

Remembrance

When this, the clamorous day for men who sow and reap,
    grows still, and on the silent town
there fall the insubstantial veils of night and sleep,
    toil's recompense here settling down,
then come for me across the stillness of the night
    slow-burning hours that drag their course,
and through the overpowering darkness comes the bite
     of every serpent of remorse.
 Dreams seethe about me; fretful infelicities
     beset my over-burden soul.
Before my eyes, and silently, the memories
     unwind, an ever-lengthening scroll
that makes me stare with horror at the wasted years
     and, trembling, curse my natal day.
How bitterly I wail, but know no bitter tears
     can wash the sorry script away.

Remembrance by Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837)

Pushkin in a serious vein: a poem well known through Maurice Baring's translation. I have restored the original alternation of hexameter and tetrameter lines, but not reproduced the feminine rhymes.

The poem following is a favourite of Pushkin lovers, and has been widely translated. The crucial question is how seriously we're to take the inveterate womaniser, the scamp who bragged of 113 great loves before marriage. I take the poem as a waggish piece, with tongue firmly wedged in cheek, and so replicate the feminine rhymes. A more charitable view

would be simply to take it as accomplished light verse, which was popular in Pushkin's circle.

Confession

Reviling you, for you I sigh,
even as my love is shaming.
Against all sense am I proclaiming:
conquered, at your feet I lie.

Away from you I’m bored and yawning,
with you sad, though I endure
again a passion that is dawning
in my soul for one so pure.

How innocent that girlish chatter,
then I hear your step next door:
instantly my poor wits scatter:
what is all this longing for?

You smile, and happiness I’m feeling:
turn away and dark is day,
but at the torment I’m revealing,
one pale hand is all you pay.

Diligent, you’re bent to needle:
against that look the heart is feeble.
By those eyes and curls beguiled
that I’m astonished, of all people,
staring at you as a child.

Should I tell you, when together
of the jealousies I know,
or when you walk in frightful weather
I dread the distances you go.

And in the carriage to Opochka
with tears so silent, out of sight,
the corner piece must be the watcher,
as at piano late at night.

I do not dare to ask for love.
Pity me, my dear Alina.
For every sin and misdemeanour
I beg alone of Him above!

My angel: let's pretend it’s so.
How easily you could deceive me,
when, my darling, please believe me,
how happily I would not know.

Confession by Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837)

Confession was written while Pushkin was still popular, wildly so before his marriage in 1830. The twentieth century sees what was published later as his crowning achievement, but the public of the time was less enthusiastic. His *Boris Gudunov* (1831) was met with faint praise and loud blame, and by 1834 Pushkin was seen by the younger generation as a relict of the past. Pushkin was never a Romantic, moreover, and the profundity beneath the light touch has often been compared to Mozart. Russian literature was a decade behind that of the west.

The Gypsies

The gypsies in their noisy way
that far through Bessarabia roam
are camped across the river, stay
in threadbare tents that make their home.

But they are free. The heavens keep
their welcome for this peaceful race.
Between the wagon wheels they sleep:
the folded rugs give each his place.

A fire burns. Around the blaze
are people on their dinner bent.

In open fields the horses graze;
a tame bear’s loose behind the tent.

The steppelands come alive with sound
when on the morrow all are found —
while children cry, and women sing —
to exit from their camping ground
to beats the marching anvils bring.

For now there’s only silence where
the night for nomads takes its course.
The bark of dog or neigh of horse
comes thinly through the steppeland air.

The lights are doused, and everywhere
a calm collects. The moon is bright.
The camp beneath its heavenly care
is flooded with a silver light.

But one old man is not asleep
and from the warmth the ashes keep
still gazes from his tent to see
across the steppeland's distant sweep
the night mists glimmer hazily.

There went his daughter, far from sight —
so much in love of freedom grown
she often wandered on her own.
She will return, but now the night

is dark about him, moon foretold
to leave its cloudy-pillared state,
yet no Zemfira comes, and cold
the scraps of food left on his plate.

But here she is, and with her too,
impatiently, a young man fares
towards him now, no face he knew.
’This man, my father,’ she declares,

‘will be our guest tonight. I lead
one lost in steppelands, one I found
far wandering from the funeral mound,
that, keen to learn our gypsy creed,

would now adopt our easy ways.
Although the law may seek his end,
Aleko is my choice and stays
my follower and closest friend.’

The Gypsies (opening) by Alexander Pushkin

Autumn Evening

What lordly airs the autumn evening has;
what charms are here, mysterious and sweet.
The trees are brilliant, mixed but ominous,
their leaves fall red and rustling at our feet.

A blue that’s lightly touched with fog now forms
above this sadly-orphaned forest spot:
a premonition too of coming storms,
of cold and gusty winds, as like as not.

Exhaustion, injury, a going hence,
from everything a smile that’s fading out,
which, could we read intelligence, we’d sense
as suffering — shy and holy and devout.

Autumn Evening by Fyodor Ivanovich Tyútchev (1803-73)

Tyútchev is now regarded as the true descendent of Pushkin: the little poems sent to Sovreménnik are known by heart across Russia and the love poems speak of an anguish that no one will wish to experience. All the poetry, except some the savage invective of the political pieces, which sometimes rise into true eloquence, is pantheistic, profoundly pessimistic and dualistic, indeed Manichaen. The Cosmos around us is always at the mercy of Chaos. Our existence here is fleeting and precarious. Tyútchev's Russian is a little more archaic than Pushkin's, and he has none of the great poet's range, but the Romantic style marries vivid imagery with classical order.

Silentium

Be silent, hide yourself, conceal
the things you dream of, things you feel:
As the stars in motion, let
these marvels from ascension set.
Let depths of soul then stay unheard.
In awe reflect without a word!

The flowering heart is not divined
so can some other know your mind?
Or say what you are living by
when thoughts once spoken are a lie
The water's clouded when it's stirred,
so drink the spring without a word:

So live within your self's control:
a world is centred in your soul,
a world of strange enchanted thoughts
that noisy flare outside distorts.
By day's hard glare be undeterred;
take in those songs without a word.

Silentum by Fyodor Ivanovich Tyútchev (1803-73)

Last Love

How much more gently at the end
we love, and superstitiously.
Shine on, shine on, let evening send
our last love out more brilliantly.

Shadows cover half the sky,
the west is but a glimmering space.
But stay a little, don't deny
my love this long enchanted place.

Let blood run thinly in the veins,
the heart yet lacks no tenderness.

In me still and long remains
that you of bliss and hopelessness.

Last Love by Fyodor Ivanovich Tyútchev (1803-73)

On the Eve of the Anniversary of August 4, 1864

Solitary, I walk along this quiet road:
in peaceful light the glow of evenings end.
My heart is heavy and my steps are slowed:
you see me, do you now, my dearest friend?

To dark and darker now the earth has grown,
the last light glows and gutters to its end.
Here is the world we both have known:
you see me, do you now, my dearest friend?

We mark in prayers and sorrows what befell
us both tomorrow on that fateful end,
to where, my angel, souls may dwell:
you see me, do you now, my dearest friend?

On the Eve by Fyodor Ivanovich Tyútchev (1803-73)

Tyútchev's poetry, occasional and never abundant, was rediscovered by Nekrásov, and remains celebrated for his lyrical poetry, especially the intense love poetry that has a passion and poignancy like nothing else in Russian. Many poems were written for Elena Denísieva, his daughter's associate, with whom he had an affair that did little to harm his reputation but wholly ruined hers. When, in 1864, Mlle Denísieva died, Tyútchev was plunged into grief and despair, his guilt only sharpened by the forebearance shown by his wife and the brilliant figure he continued to cut in society as Russia's greatest wit and conversationalist. The poems are the more remarkable in that he used Russian infrequently: his wives did not speak Russian, and Tyútchev's everyday speech and correspondence was in French.

Clear and Golden

Clear and golden is the sunlight’s end,
nor from their breaths the conquering springs withdraw.
Do not remember me, my dearest friend
nor think our love was all too shy and poor.

The breathing earth gives up aromas yet;
and sky unfolds into its breathy wealth:
rich and imperishable will all suns set,
and quietly, bay on bay, repeat itself.

What is happiness, and what is there
to feel ashamed about? Surely now because
of that great light and beauty everywhere
it’s madness not to take it as it was.

Clear and Golden by Afanásy Afanásievich Fet (1820-92)

Afanásy Afanásievich Fet was the son of a Russian squire and German wife. At his own expense, he published a volume of poems in 1840 that showed little promise, but was sending to the Moskvityánin some of his most perfect lyrics only two years later. Fet was a devotee of the aesthetic aspects of poetry, and was appreciated as such by the creative writers of his time, but not by critics who saw these gently melodic pieces as little better than 'moonshine'. But for Druzhinin the chief property of Fet's talent was 'the ability to catch the elusive, to give an image and a name to what was before him nothing more than a vague, fleeting sense of the human soul, a feeling without an image and a name'. After 1863, and especially in the 1880s, Fet's poetry becomes more difficult, metaphysical and condensed. The greatest achievements in the last years were the love poems, remarkable in a man of seventy, but more so for the saturation of experience compressed into hard outlines.

See How Many Goods I Pack

See what worthy goods I pack:
fine braid and cotton for your hair.
Pity me and do not lack
what these manly shoulders bear!

Until the night-time fills the skies,
within the rye I'll wait, and show
how dark will be those dark, dark eyes:
everything I have must go.

Think what prices I have paid:
so don't be cautious, do what's right.
Your lips will make a fine brocade:
come, my sweet, and snuggle tight.

The night assumed a foggy cast,
but on the jolly fellow fares:
The long-awaited comes at last,
and now the merchant sells his wares.

How carefully, carefully Katya trades,
apportioning what soon is lost,
but then that care in kissing fades:
he bids her name her highest cost.

She only knows the night is deep,
and what there happened so befell
her where the springing rye would keep
her secret hidden, none to tell.

How easy now to bear the load,
the strap marks do not hurt the skin:
in all I offered her she showed
a preference for that turquoise ring

So not the chintz or coloured scarf,

the shift, or any useful thing.
She wouldn’t wear for hay’s behalf
the girdle made for harvesting
.
It was the ring, for all I pressed
her, she’d have nothing of my fare.
'Why flaunt myself with all the rest
if one I want is nowhere there?'

So girls no better than they ought
will stoop to play their silly tricks:
I it was sweet vodka brought,
but she who still refused my gifts.

So you, unyielding one, now wait,
take all I promised, all my wealth,
flaunt the treasures that you hate.
I come to Pokrov, not in stealth,
but celebrate your soul's estate:
I'll lead you to the church myself.

See How Many Goods I Pack by Nikolay Alexéyevich Nekrásov (1821-72)

Nikolay Alexéyevich Nekrásov gave up his studies at St. Petersburg University for literature, which prompted his bullying squire of a father to stop the allowance. For three years, Nekrásov lived in direst poverty, experiencing at first hand what was to be a constant theme of his work: the sufferings of Russia's oppressed classes. But by 1845, through an astonishing amount of hack journalism, commercial acumen and genuine critical taste, Nekrásov had become the principal publisher of a new literary school, which in time brought out all the leading names of Russian literature in the mid-to-later nineteenth century.

Critical opinion is still divided over the man, between those who despise his style (which concerned him not at all) and those who value the searing frankness of his views (which he saw as the obvious truth). He was undoubtedly the greatest civic poet of the second half of the Russian nineteenth century, and there are poems that only he could have produced: *Who Can Be Happy in Russia?, Frost the Red-Nosed*, and the piece translated above.

Stormy Weather

Let the month shine out and bring
a happiness to life together.
In my soul of love the spring
will not undo the stormy weather

Answering to a dead man's gaze,
the night is stretched above the street:
and dull the poor, sick eyes that blaze
with poison that is sharp and sweet.

Though vain is passion, in the frost
of crowds and early dawning mists
I wander as a soul half lost
but find one cherished thought persists.

Let the month shine out and bring
a happiness to life together.
In my soul of love the spring
will not undo the stormy weather.

Alexander Aleksandrovich Blok was born into a sheltered and intellectual environment. His father was a law professor, and his mother the daughter of the rector of St. Petersburg University. The technical mastery of Pushkin, and the apocalyptic philosophy of the poet and mystic Vladimir Solovyov were important influences on Blok, who developed inovatory rhythms where sound and musicality were paramount. Blok worked for a commission investigating crimes of the imperial government, and later directly for the Bolsheviks, whom he felt represented the will of the people. ‘Terrible, sweet, inescapable, imperative’ was how he expressed it in his poetry, which was represented by the novel in verse *Dvenadtsat* (1918; The Twelve) and the poem *Skify* (1918; “The Scythians”). Blok vividly expressed the mood of the time, but quickly became disillusioned with the Bolshevik government, practically ceasing to write poetry thereafter.

Natalya

The windows, squinting through the summer air,
are stupefied to find no curtain there.
No lace to hide and tease and have its fun
but startling, to the looker-on proclaim
that here's Natalya in their gaping frame:
how well she fills it, our unwedded one.

I've just the one request to make,
that you be sensible, for heaven's sake.
I'm talking of that short-sleeved top you've got,
in which your long, ferocious body nests:
let's have no golden cannon balls for breasts:
no: just to look at them, I sure could not.

The sturdy flesh, I love, its wholesome zest,
and then the widespread eyebrows broadly vexed
to feet, the soles of them, and all the nails.
The night will see your shoulders shed their wings,
and look: your lips disclose judicious things,
and in your moving, too, good sense prevails.

Your smile, how faint it is, how small and far
that I would have you as the smiling are:
for then how beautiful you'd be, and graced
with all that's giving, and your 'touch me not'
be like the upturned touch your mouth has got
at its two ends, and where your soul is placed.

And when you walk, my love, all look at you,
and praise and magnify the things you do,
the most intelligent, at every hand,
and in the wake of your great moving say,
'A peach she is, she has a swan-like sway:
a wondrous beauty is abroad this land.

She walks and trees are green in every shoot.
She walks and nightingales are mad and mute,

She walks and motionless the great clouds grow.
She walks and harvest corn is now her hue.
In her is love awoken, warm and true,
as sunlight dresses her from top to toe.

She walks and then so lightly it behoves
the tarts like trotting foxes in their droves
to stop and have their startled hair prefer
the smell of dogs or wide, goose-pimpled hips,
or feet so calloused when a new shoe slips:
all pause and falter and make way for her.'

In her eyes the summer eats and drinks,
and, unafraid of what Vertinsky thinks,
or what the wolves will eat, or devil give
who knew old Nekrasov, his tales of wrong,
but with the Kalinushka sang along,
are we who haven't yet begun to live.

The first fine weeks of June are in the air:
our land sees merry-making everywhere.
There is no trash about such great events
but great delight appears in everything:
a bride that's only starting out to sing:
the grooms are tuning up their instruments.

Guitars at evening, an infernal noise,
but aren't the tractor-drivers splendid boys —
washed, clean-shaven, with their caps askew?
Life is happiness, so do not linger,
take this ring, my love, from off my finger:
my wedding ring it is, and wrought for you.

I praise Natalya of the good tomorrow,
that life has joys and sadness, smiles and sorrow.
Let any doubt of that be gone from sight,
and have the flowering of her blanket keep

Natalya long in moans and short in sleep:
I sing the praises of the wedding night.

Natalya by Pavel Vasiliev (1910-36)

(Vertinsky was a well-known Russian cabaret singer, and Kalinushka is a folk-song.)

Pavel Vasiliev was one of many writers, artists and intellectuals who disappeared in the Great Purges of the 1930s. He was born in the city of Zaisan (now in Votochnyi Kazakhstan Oblast) to a Cossack family and had his first poem published at the age of 16. Abandoning studies at Novosibirsk University, he spent two years as a sailor and gold miner, experiences he later described in two books of essays, *Gold Exploration* and *People of the Taiga* (both 1930) and in 1928 moved to Moscow, where his promise was immediately recognised. Publications followed rapidly: an epic poem *Song About the Death of the Cossack Army* (1928 to 1932), *Troika* (c. 1933), *Fists* (1934), *The Salt Rebellion* (1934), and the lyric cycle *Poems for Natalya* (1934). Vasiliev was one of the last great exponents of 'peasant poetry', a movement in 20th Century Russian and early Soviet Literature, epitomized by Sergei Yesenin. Vasiliev himself used folkloric elements, musical rhythms and violent, colorful imagery in describing the Siberian countryside and its rapid transformation under communism.

His boisterous love of life, not to mention his rowdy hooliganism and outspoken contempt of Stalin and Stalinism, made him an obvious enemy of the state. He was arrested briefly in 1932, expelled from the Union of Soviet Writers and then barred from publishing in 1934. In February 1937 he was arrested once more, convicted of treason, and shot at Moscow's Lefortovo Prison on July 16, his ashes being buried in an unmarked mass grave at the Donskoi Cemetery.

FROM THE CHINESE

Seeing Off Assistant Prefect Du

Seen from Chengdu walls it's Shaanxi nears,
while you, past mist and snow, on Sichuan gaze.
For all the sadness, in our spirit stays
assurances, throughout long travelling days,
our country furthers its true friends' careers.
Still, at the earth's far doors, we stay as neighbours.
So at this new-come parting of the ways
let's not be children now who'd show their tears.

Seeing Off Assistant Prefect Du when he left to take up a post in Shuzhou by Wang Bo (AD 650-76)

Wang Bo was thought ambitious and conceited but created deeply nostalgic pieces on the sorrows of a scholar-administrator's life.

Dispelling Sorrow

In wine I sunk my soul: went south through river lands.
Broke hearts of Chu girls dancing careless on my hands.
Now, ten years on, I wake from Yangzhou dream: it stands
not well to be a heartless name with courtesans.

Dispelling Sorrow by Du Mu (803-52)

A rather cryptic poem. 'Careless on my hands' is a reference to the great Han beauty Zhao Feiyan, so light it was said that she could dance on the emperor's hand. Yangzhou, literally 'green mansions' is a euphemism for courtesan quarters.

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).

Restless Night

A smell invades my room of cold bamboo.
Outside are fields, half courtyard that the moon
lights up. I watch the drops collect from the clear dew,
and stars in their faint glimmering, that soon
go out. A glow-worm flits across the dark,
and bird calls strike the water, a sharp platoon
of thoughts that threaten me but pass on through
to sorrows emptying in the night's clear tune.

After 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 to starving. 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 cold smell of bamboo and description of his surroundings, but in the final line 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 a little free, reproducing Fu Du's rhyme scheme, but inserting *platoon* for the poet’s sharp feelings of melancholy.

Spring Prospect

A splendid realm betrayed by man
where now but streams and hills remain.
Prodigious spring, where Chang'an ways
are thick with streets of trees and grass.

A grief that's palpable, our cares
reciprocating flowers' tears:
a startled heart that fears the time
when, like a bird, it's far from home.

For three months now the beacons pour
their warning smoke into the air.
Ten thousand taels of gold we'd give
to hear that home ones were alive,

but nothing comes. With that great pledge
of duty much undone by age,
I scratch at hair grown white and thin,
where once the pin of office shone.

Du Fu (712-70)

A much-anthologised piece, which follows the rules governing *Shi* poetry. Between the opening and closing couplets, both in parallel, the interior two couplets must be parallel in theme and grammar. In this case, 'tears' is parallel with 'wounded', 'time' with 'homelessness' (one in time and one in space), 'flowers' with 'bird' (natural world), 'tears' with 'startle' (emotional response), 'beacons' with 'home letter' (messages) 'three' with 'ten thousand' (numbers), 'months' with 'gold' (measures). The third couplet exhibits the required turning away, here from nature to the human world. The beacon fire (warning of nomad invasions) is contrasted with the wished-for message from home. The three months (a long time) is paralleled by the thousand gold taels (a large amount) — which is linked to catastrophic events and so to a terribly long time. The final couplet rounds off the poem by paralleling the poet's careworn appearance, ravaged by time and grief, with a country equally affected. It's part of the Confucian vision of unity in man, country and universe.

Ballad of Beautiful Ladies

It is the third month festival at Chang'an
and the beauties by the river in the fresh spring air
walk virtuous, walk regally, on this third day show
what rich accompaniments their fine bones share.
With silvered unicorns embroidering the thin gauze skirts,
each golden peacocks walks in shimmering flare.

On their heads? Ringlets, with green-blue shapes
of glittering adornments in their elaborate hair.
And on their backs? Waistbands with pearls
10. more thickly embroidered than slim backs bear,
and behind high screens are the Qin and Guo,
the favourite’s sisters much attended there.

In jade-green ewers a rich juice brims:
purple hump of camel, white fish from the pan.
From crystal plates have the horn chopsticks dropped,
with appetites larger than stomachs 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.
Illicit and severing is that furious stare:
so do not approach him: stand back: beware.

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 regulated 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!
20. I looked out forever from the lookout tower,
but could not imagine you travelling there,
past the Qutang reefs, in the torrent’s power.

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, past San Ba walls.
Endless the water and your looks entreat
30. 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.

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.