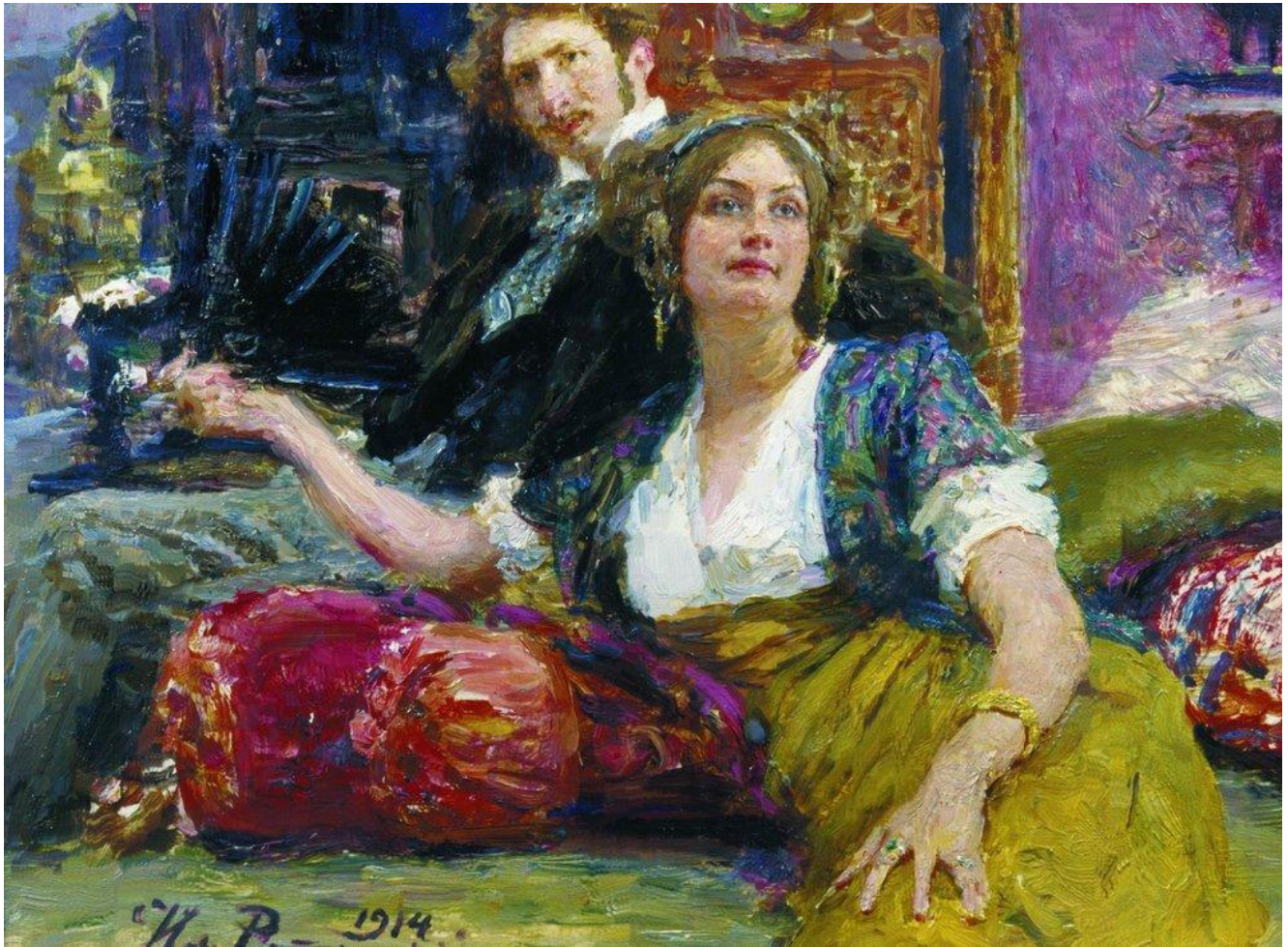


Reflections on the Translation of Poetry

by [Samuel Hux](#) (November 2020)



Portrait of Sergei Gorodetsky with his Wife, Ilya Repin, 1914

I thought I might review Mark Polizzoti's *Sympathy for the Traitor* (2018); then I changed my mind—for no good scholarly or critical reasons, but for cranky ones sufficient enough. The "Traitor" in the title refers to the Italian witticism *traduttore, traditore*, "translator or traitor?"—a serious

literary question. But when I skimmed the index looking for the name *Walter Arndt* and drew a blank I decided to forego the review.

Back in 1964-1965 the *New York Review of Books* was home to the Vladimir Nabokov-Edmund Wilson controversy: Wilson with his elephant-size balls and his self-taught Russian challenging Nabokov's translation of Alexander Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*. Standing in the background, and mightily amused I am sure, was Walter Arndt, whose *Onegin* had won the Bollingen Poetry Translation Prize in 1962.

Arndt, who died at 99 in 2011, was an experienced translator not only of the Russians Pushkin (prose and poetry) and Anna Akmatova but the German Rainer Maria Rilke as well, to identify but a trio of subjects. He was also a scholarly and practicing linguist, with his English, German, French, Russian, Polish, Czech, Greek, Latin, and Turkish. And he had the widest (and maybe oddest) education of anyone I've ever known—or perhaps the proper verb is *met*, since I knew him only as a faculty member of the German department when I was an undergrad at the University of North Carolina a million years ago. Born in Istanbul to German parents in 1916, he was sent back to *gymnasium* in Breslau for 12 years of classical learning, after which he studied Economics and Political Science at Oxford University, and then did graduate work in Business Administration (of all things!) at Warsaw. After a significant lapse of time, he returned to Turkey for a Master's in Mechanical Engineering at the American Robert College in Istanbul. Finally he took a doctorate in Comparative Linguistics and Classics at Chapel Hill where he joined the faculty.

During that “significant lapse of time” as I have called it above: studying in Warsaw in 1939 when Hitler invaded, Arndt joined the Polish military, was captured and escaped from a POW camp, went into the Polish underground, worked with the OSS (the pre-CIA), and then the UN refugee

settlement program until he earned emigration to the U.S. in 1949. His memoir *A Picaro in Hitler's Europe* is fascinating reading. So it should be easy to understand why I don't want his name to be forgotten, and why he leaps to mind when I consider(ed) reviewing the book I'm not reviewing.

Nonetheless I admit to crankiness in backing off from Polizzoti's book, subtitled *A Translation Manifesto*, his having translated more than 50 books according to the blurb. And I? Well, I've published *one* translation of a German poem. But it's a very good translation I do believe! And, furthermore, I have a pet prejudice or two about the art of translation, and I don't want them disturbed by Polizzoti's superior credentials. Could I be more honest than that? Or maybe I'm too modest. Maybe there's a value in a manifesto by the kind of person for whom translations are actually made, not the poet, not the translator, but a serious reader.

So, my easy-to-say (but hard-to-exemplify) Poetry Translation Manifesto: While doing no violation to the intellectual and emotional content of the original, the translator should make the linguistic imitation *sound* as close to the original as possible any way he or she can even if the imitation might *look* alien on the page; anything else is treason. But we need examples, don't we? And where shall we find one? Well . . .

My single published translation appeared not by itself but as an example of something-or-other in an [essay](#) of mine, "December Song: The Ordeal of Poetry in a Secularizing Society" (*NER*, April 2019). "*Schwermut*" (melancholia, gloom, depression, despair) was composed by the poet-playwright August Stramm before he died as a German officer on the Russian front in 1915. "*Schwermut*" reads as if it were a premonition:

Schreiten Streben

Leben sehnt
Schauern Stehen
Blicke suchen
Sterben wachst
Das Kommen
Schreit!
Tief
Stummen
Wir.

If one wishes to render “Despair” in *apparently* proper syntactic English one might offer this: “Striding and striving, / Life yearns, / Shuddering and standing, / Glances seek. / But death grows, / Its coming shrieks! / We are / Deeply / Mute.” Which is four words longer than the German, and while not a radical violation of the intellectual content alters the emotional impact by shattering both the sound and the mood.

My published version both looks and sounds close to Stramm’s German, keeping its conciseness (with a sparseness of syllables) and consequently its mood—although with a punctuation pattern Stramm did not need in German (of course I’ll explain why not).

Striding. Striving.
Life yearns.
Shuddering. Standing.
Looks seek.
Dying grows.
The Coming
Shrieks!
Deeply
Mute
We.

A few necessary grammatical comments: The following words—*Schreiten*, *Streben*, *Schauern*, *Stehen*, *Sterben*, and *Kommen*—since they are *infinitives* could have been rendered as “to stride” and “to strive,” etc., but I have chosen the *participle* form instead, “Striding” and “Striving,” so as not to change Stramm’s accentual pattern of *stressed first syllable* (trochaic rhythm, that is). One word, *Leben*, could have been rendered as “to live” or “living” (either as infinitive or participle) but its *noun* meaning of “Life” seems more precise and takes the accent anyway, and its long *i* instead of the short *i* in the infinitive or participle reverberates with the long *i* in “Striding” and “Striving.” There is nothing I can do with English “Mute” to give it the verb-like sound that the German adjective *Stummen* has and shares with all Stramm’s words ending in *-en*, although the six English words ending in “-ing” in my translation remind the ear of *-en* in German.

Nor is there anything I can do in English (except weakly in “Shuddering” and “Shrieks”) that captures what German words beginning *sch-* and *st-* (pronounced as if spelled “sht-”) here can suggest: eight words affecting the “sh-” sound as in the universal “shush” —be silent!—in a poem about muteness (!) in the face of death—an affect Stramm clearly wishes since he uses *Sterben* (to die, dying) instead of the noun for death, *Tod*.

One more sequence of comments on both grammar/syntax and rhythm: It is imperative to hinder the reader from reading all those participles (whether Stramm’s *Schreiten* or my “Striding,” etc.) as modifiers of the nouns. In other words, they are not like some adjective or adverb modifying *Leben* or “Life.” (That is to say, no one should read the first two lines as “Striding and striving life yearns.”) They are verb-forms used as nouns (the technical term is *gerund*). How do I know, how do we know, these verb-forms are gerunds and thus

nouns? Because while poetic convention (although often ignored) has it that the first word in a line of poetry is capitalized, in German something else is *always* capitalized: *all nouns* (as was the case in 18th century English for instance). Now to the logic of my punctuation, which Stramm did not need.

I want the reader to be forced to halt, to stop, after each period. That is: *Striding* stop. *Striving* stop. They are isolated states of being occasioned by the fact that *Life yearns*. For what exactly we do not yet know. Then *Shuddering* stop. *Standing* stop. Two more isolated states of being, occasioning attempts to understand as *Looks seek–seek* what exactly? Then, the knowledge that *Dying grows*: that is, not just generalized Death which waits for all, but the *act* of dying, something we *do*. Then the *Coming / Shrieks*. Its effect is to render us speechless, silent: *Deeply / Mute / We*. That “We” is “us,” including Captain August Stramm. So, once more:

Striding. Striving.
Life yearns.
Shuddering. Standing.
Looks seek.
Dying grows.
The Coming
Shrieks!
Deeply
Mute
We.

You will not hurt my pride if you don't admire my translation as much as I do, because I won't know your judgment unless you write me. But I'll be satisfied if I can imagine you saying “I see that's a fine poem Stramm created.” At least you have to agree I am true to my manifesto: I do not

violate the intellectual and emotional content of *Schwermut*, and my imitation sounds as close to the original as possible. If you don't agree with that, don't bother writing me!

But I'm not composing this essay as a translator; rather, as I've said, as a reader. I've been told often that I'm a very good reader. I don't mean I've been complemented as an interpreter and judge, a critic. I don't know if I'm a good critic or not, but I know I'm a demanding one and unforgiving, with the patience of a psychopath. I mean I've been complemented for the way I read poetry out loud. And that's really the occasion for these reflections. That is:

Every night around midnight I read to my spouse, my life partner—at her request—poetic classics like Keats, Yeats, The Bard, or some personal favorites like Millay or Aiken or Auden; or sometimes she asks that I read selections from anthologies, some of which include translations. Now we're getting closer to the real occasion: often I will say "I'm skipping this translation," but often she'll say "Just start it," and more often than not will change her mind: "That's enough." And more often than not—I mean much more often—the rejected translation is one in which the translator has insisted on rhyming because the original work rhymes.

So I add to my manifesto: Although I love rhyming poetry I think that in the art of translation the imposition of rhyme in a language foreign to the original poem is *disastrous*—unless the translator has an inexplicable gift most do not have. A genius does appear ever so occasionally (as I shall suggest) but he or she is rarer than God's elect. An acceptable cliché has it that it's very difficult to convey the essence of French or German or Spanish, etc. poetry in English—but less observed is the truth that attempting to convey the essence through rhyme is usually an act of murder. Obviously I need to get more specific.

The temptation to imitate rhyme schemes must be an

enormous challenge, and one might admire the writer who accepts the challenge. The medieval Spanish poet Juan Ruiz loved poems made of consecutive quatrains with each quatrain having a single rhyme, AAAA, BBBB, CCCC, etc. But when I see a translation of a Ruiz poem rhyming thus: art/ impart/ heart/ start–bestow/ overthrow/ grow/ trow–base/ grace/ face/ place–etcetera; I know, and so does any reader, that the translator cannot possibly be conveying the intellectual and emotional content of Ruiz even if he does convey the favorite Ruizian structure: available rhymes just don't grow on trees. The best he can say is "This is how Ruiz's quatrains work"; he cannot say "This is the essence of the Ruiz poem captured." Indeed, the first line of the first quatrain ending in *art* is readable, line 2 ending in *impart* is coherent, line 3 ending in *heart*, 'though awkward, is readable; but since the rhyme must be continued to complete the quatrain, we are told that Love "Can by his power the sluggard spur out of his sleep to *start*"—a line so syntactically distorted for the sake of the rhyme that the reader suffers a crick in the neck, which must have happened to the translator as well.

The greatest challenge in the poetry universe—at least for translations into English—has to be Dante, in part because he may be the sheerly most talented voice in that universe. The *terza rima* is a challenge itself with its ABA stanza followed by BCB, followed by CDC, etc. as in *The Divine Comedy*. But Dante multiplies the challenge: in each *canto* there are roughly 33 stanzas, and once you've employed the A rhyme (say Boom-Doom), once you've used the B rhyme (say Day-Play), once you've done the C rhyme (say Daughter-Water) and so on, you cannot repeat these sounds at end of line in any stanza for the rest of that *canto*. Which means that each time you use those sounds the available sounds become scarcer, unless you invent nonsense words, which is *verboten*.

The problem becomes more acute in English than in Italian, since, for instance, *labor* rhymes with *saber* and

neighbor, and little else that jumps to mind, while there must be dozens and dozens of rhymes with *lavoro*. Chances are that any imitator of *The Comedy* you read who uses *terza rima* will be (perhaps honestly) “cheating”—either by subtly altering the meaning or tone or precise detail in order to keep the rhyme consistent, or will free himself of the burden of not re-employing the rhymes. One of the most successful translations of *The Comedy* in English is John Ciardi’s. No alterations of sense or mood, etc., because Ciardi uses an intelligent modification of the Dantesque stanza: instead of ABA, BCB, CDC, etc. , his triplets go AXA, BYB, CZC, etc.—meaning that X, Y, and Z are free of the necessity to rhyme, with no interlocking of the stanzas.

One of the translator-geniuses I promised before is Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Longfellow’s translations of the European canon are truly remarkable; his rhyming imitations are never treason. For just one instance, his rhymed translations of Lope de Vega are extraordinary, no strain on the syntax, the rhymes sounding inevitable, as if Lope himself had written in English instead of Spanish, or, put it another way, as if there were no difference between English and Spanish. But he had the good sense to translate Dante’s epic in blank verse, and it may be the most readable *Comedy* in English. I hesitate with the “may be” only because I haven’t read them all.

It’s not good manners to interrupt other people—but I’m only violating myself when I interrupt myself, which is what I’m going to do right now; and if the reader objects to a digression he or she may skip this and the next couple of paragraphs. I’m not mentally up to an essay on Longfellow at the moment, but there are a few comments I’m itching to get off my mind. Longfellow has been criminally undervalued by English departments and literati in general for a hundred years or so. But he was a true major-leaguer, who makes me wonder how the celebrated champ of 19th century American

poetry, Walt Whitman, got out of class A ball. I'm not dismissing Whitman's achievement (there's his Lincoln poem for instance) but thinking him a greater poet than Longfellow is like judging Allen Ginsburg to be Robert Frost's superior. Set aside Emily Dickinson, lonely genius of a voice which is like no other, inhabiting her own universe and beyond being rated or subject to comparisons, Longfellow is *the* American poet of the 19th century. And not only American: Wordsworth's lyricism is not superior to his, and nor is Coleridge's or Tennyson's.

Unfortunately, his reputation remains stuck to *Evangeline* and *Hiawatha*, while these wonderful narratives, not suiting the taste of up-to-date aesthetes, are nowhere near his best work, dozens of lyrics such as "The Jewish Cemetery at Newport," dramatic monologues reminding one of Robert Browning's, and of course the translations. Poetry readers in the 1800s in America and abroad loved him and they were right to do so, even though some of his best work was not published in his lifetime, like his incomparable "Cross of Snow," and like . . . Well, like his closet-drama "Michael Angelo." Find me an Eng-Lit prof who's read it and I'll eat his mortarboard.

To grasp the sheer size of Longfellow's mind, comparable to Coleridge's, try on this test: Try to imagine the thought processes of Michelangelo, and finding that task beyond a good imagination, then read "Michael Angelo: A Fragment" and be stunned.

The latest dismissal of Longfellow I've read was a casual, irrelevant, and, given the occasion, pointless putdown by Louise Glück after she was notified of her Nobel Prize selection (another Swedish mystery since her poetry is foreign to musicality, another example of what Gore Vidal once called "Scandinavian wit.") Her tone was that of someone assured, quite naturally, of agreement.

Another genius is Richard Wilbur, whose "Love Calls Us to the Things of This World" incidentally challenges Robert

Frost's "Birches" as, for my money, the greatest blank verse poem of the 20th century, although the super intelligences at *The New Yorker* rejected it back in 1956. Wilbur's translations of Moliere's verse dramas are wonderful, which is an understatement—in rhyming couplets no less. In a mere essay I can't quote them, obviously, but they provide an extraordinary aesthetic experience. I think it was Gabriel García Márquez who said Gregory Rabassa's English translations of his novels surpassed the Spanish originals; I know it was Jorge Luís Borges who complimented Norman Thomas di Giovanni in similar fashion. Were Moliere alive, and assuming him a gentleman, he might exaggerate the same way about Wilbur—and with better cause since Wilbur wasn't translating *prose*.

Wilbur's genius is not only with French (which he knew well) into English. I doubt he knew Russian very well, but I've been reading his version of a poem by Andrei Voznesensky, "Dead Still," and I am stunned by how "Englishly" natural it sounds. Still limited for space, I quote the first few lines: "Now, with your palms on the blades of my shoulders, / Let us embrace; / Let there be only your lips' breath on my face"—and then the last four: "Meanwhile, O load of stress and bother, / Lie on the shells of our backs in a great heap; / It will press us closer, one on the other. / We are asleep." Seek out the entire poem. It's worth it.

I'm sure I've made it clear how much I admire Walter Arndt—but he does not have that Longfellow or Wilbur gift. His translations of Rilke, *The Best of Rilke* (1989), are an object lesson. The very few un-rhymed versions of Rilke's un-rhymed German are excellent. But the book's vast majority of rhymed translations of Rilke's rhymed poems suffer from forced awkward syntax, that awkwardness relieved somewhat when Arndt allows himself the room to avoid strictness—as when, for example, he alters Rilke's ABBA scheme to ABAB, giving himself some breathing room, so to speak. But generally speaking, un-sayable and even un-singable syntax is the cost of be-labored

faithfulness to rhyme schemes. And that's true of Arndt's *Selected Poems: Anna Akmatova* (2003) as well. There is no Russian on the opposing page (as there is German in the *Rilke*) and I couldn't read it if there were, but I know damned well that the first stanza of "Love" cannot correspond to what Akmatova actually wrote: "Now by the heart, furled still / Like a snakelet, its magic brewing, / Now on the white of the sill / Whole days as a dovelet cooing . . ." Arndt was not serving that Russian giant well. Judith Hemschemeyer, in *The Complete Poems of Anna Akhmatova* (1997), renders that quatrain as "Now like a little snake, it curls into a ball, / Bewitching your heart, / Then for days it will coo like a dove / On the little white windowsill." Hemschemeyer throughout goes for rhythm instead of rhyme, and she's right. Even her spelling of the poet's name, the guttural *Akhmatova*, is more rhythmical, more Russian.

There is an interesting paradox here that poetry translators would do well to consider. The *strict* rhyming translation may gain admiration from the reader who says in effect "So-and-So's translation is so *correct*, imitating *Tel-et-Tel's* rhyme," but often, much too often, the insistence on *correct* rhyming makes the translation so much, so very much, *less poetic*! And that is treason.

Speaking of Borges as I did some paragraphs back—much more than merely by the way—no matter the excellence of di Giovanni's prose translations, I can't think off hand of a great Spanish poet who has suffered as much at the hands of his translators. This is in part the responsibility of Borges' widow who exerts extraordinary control over his legacy, Maria Kodama, who must have the most criminal tin-ear of any Japanese-German-Argentinian who ever existed. (I know something of her control of the quality of translations of her late husband's poetry from idle correspondence some years ago with an agent who knew the particulars well.)

I toyed with the idea of entitling this essay

“Building God in a Dark Cup,” but feared losing readers off the bat. That’s an actual line from a very rewarded translator of Borges. In a sonnet on Baruch Spinoza, Borges had a rhyme of *alumbra* and *penumbra* (light and shadow), with Spinoza (in rough translation) construing God in shadows. Kodama’s translator got himself in a pickle with the word “up” for some reason I’ve forgotten, and for the sake of rhyme committed Spinoza to build “God in a dark cup,” which really does take the cake—or the pickle, if you prefer.

Having saved some space by not over-quoting examples of successful and less-so translations, I’m going to conclude this manifesto by providing in print three original *rhymed* poems (so the linguistically adept reader does not have to accept my judgment on faith), one in Spanish and two in French, followed by *non-rhymed* translations of each. I trust that readers who do not feel confident of their grasp of either or both of the foreign tongues, will be able to judge the translations *as poems* nonetheless. All three translations, I am delighted to say, have appeared over time in *New English Review*.

Since I have mentioned Jorge Luis Borges a couple of times, I will begin with his oddly-titled love poem, *1964*:

Ya no es mágico el mundo. Te han dejado.
Ya no compartirás la clara luna
ni los lentos jardines. Ya no hay una
luna que no sea espejo del pasado,

cristal de soledad, sol de agonias.
Adiós las mutuas manos y las seines
que acercaba el amor. Hoy solo tienes
la fiel memoria y los desiertos días.

Nadie pierde (repites vanamente)
sino lo que no tiene y no ha tenido

nunca, pero no basta ser valiente
para aprender el arte del olvido.
Un simbolo, una rosa, te desgarran
y te puede matar una guitarra.

Translated:

Now the world is not magical. It has taken you.
Now you will not share candid moonlight
or languid gardens. Now there isn't one
moon that may not be a mirror of the past,

crystal of solitude, solar agonies.
Farewell to mutual hands and bodies
that love surrounds. Today I have only
faithful memory and deserts of days.

Nothing may be lost (one vainly repeats)
but what one doesn't have and has not had
ever; but to learn the art of forgetting

it is not enough to be valiant.
A symbol, a rose, tears you apart
and they can kill you, the strings of one guitar.

Here is Gérard de Nerval's brief and charming little
"tragedy," entitled merely *Sonnet*:

Il vécu tantôt gai comme un sansonnet
Tour à tour amoureux insoucieux et tender,
Tantôt sombre et rêveur comme un triste Clitandre.
Un jour il entendit qu'à sa porte on sonnait.

C'était la Mort! Alors il la pria d'attendre

Qu'il eût posé le point a son dernier sonnet;
Et puis sans s'émouvoir, il s'en alla s'étendre
Au fond de coffre froid ou son corps frissonait.

Il était paresseux, a ce que dit l'histoire,
Il laissait trop sécher l'encre dans l'ecritoire.
Il voulait tout savoir mais il n'a rien connu.

Et quand vint le moment ou, las de cette vie,
Un soir d'hiver, enfin l'ame lui fut ravie,
Il s'en alla disant: Poutquoi suis-je venu?

Translated:

He lived gaily, a fluttery starling,
By turns amorous, careless, tender;
Somber, sometimes, like a dreamer
Till he heard someone ring at his gait;

It was Death, so he asked him: Please wait
Till I've crossed the T's on my sonnet . . .
Then, with no more ado, he stretched himself out
Trembling, frozen deep in his coffin.

He was indolent, so goes the tale,
Let the ink dry up in its jar;
Wished to know all, knew nothing at all,

And when time was up and this life lost,
When, one winter evening, he gave up the ghost,
He went away saying: Why did I come?

Here is Charles Baudelaire's masterpiece, *La Beauté*:

Je suis belle, ô mortels! Comme un reve de pierre,
Et mon sein, ou chacun s'est meurtri tour a tour
Est fait pour inspirer au poete un amour

Éternel et muet ainsi que la matière.

Je trône dans l'azur comme un sphinx incompris;
J'unis un cœur de neige à la blancheur des cygnes;
Je hais le mouvement qui déplace les lignes,
Et jamais je ne pleure et jamais je ne ris.

Les poètes, devant mes grandes attitudes,
Que j'ai l'air d'emprunter aux plus fiers
monuments,
Consumant leurs jours en d'austères études;

Car j'ai, pour fasciner ces dociles amants,
De purs miroirs qui font toutes choses plus belles:
Mes yeux, mes larges yeux aux clartés éternelles!

Translated:

Mortals, I'm beautiful as a dream of stone,
And my breast, where each one is bruised in his
turn,
Exists to inspire a love in poets
Towards stone, eternal and mute.

Like a sphinx, I hold court in the air;
I join a snow-heart to pallor of swans;
I hate a movement that displaces lines,
I don't cry, I don't laugh; not ever.

Poets, before my grand stances
That seem to be lent by monuments,
Consume their days in strictest labor;

For, to enthrall these docile lovers,
I have mirrors that make all beautiful:
My eyes, large and pure, their brilliance—eternal.

I hope that the reader sees—or hears—that each

translation, by or with the avoidance of an imposed rhyme scheme foreign to the Spanish or French schemes, more aptly captures the essence of the original. I wish I had the space to include some of the rhymed translations that have seen the light of published day for the reader to compare. But I hope that as things stand I have made my point.

The translator—more than by the way—of each poem is the poet-playwright-critic Evelyn Hooven, a regular contributor to *New English Review*. And—full disclosure and again more than by the way—Evelyn Hooven is the person to whom I read each evening around midnight.

«[Previous Article](#) [Table of Contents](#) [Next Article](#)»

Samuel Hux is Professor of Philosophy Emeritus at York College of the City University of New York. He has published in *Dissent*, *The New Republic*, *Saturday Review*, *Moment*, *Antioch Review*, *Commonweal*, *New Oxford Review*, *Midstream*, *Commentary*, *Modern Age*, *Worldview*, *The New Criterion* and many others.

Follow NER on Twitter