

i didnt get a chance maw say simple breviou-  
mous  
maw please dont listen if im terresillimous maw im  
learning im studying to be a great big novelermist  
maw i changed it i want to be a poetastermous  
ma you dont discuss tergemous  
there are six of us we had already planned a great  
big wedding maw terrillified grass all over you  
i presume

Peter Manson

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Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil*. Translated from the French by Keith Waldrop. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2006. 194pp. \$16.95

Some readers may well doubt that we need yet another translation of Baudelaire. After all, *Les Fleurs du Mal* is by far the most widely read book of French poetry outside France, and we already have a range of good translations, from Francis Scarfe's self-effacing prose renditions to Norman Shapiro's rhymed and metered versions. Learning that Keith Waldrop has chosen the verset form for his translation may do little to assuage this feeling; one might even speculate that Waldrop wants to Whitmanize the poems for our American palate. This suspicion finds some confirmation right off the bat, when in "To the Reader" we get this version of Baudelaire's riff on the vice of ennui:

there is one still uglier, meaner, filthier! Who without grand gesture, without  
a yawp, would gladly shiver the earth, swallow up the world, in a yawn.

Readers familiar with Baudelaire's poems in French, however, will already have noticed something about these lines. Waldrop recreates the first line of the original with a maximum of fidelity in syntax, diction, and punctuation: "Il en est un plus laid, plus méchant, plus immonde!" The next line substitutes "yawp" for Baudelaire's "grands cris," which unlike "grands gestes," does not find a happy cognate in English. In part a literary in-joke, the choice of "yawp" also works, like the original, as a subtly self-mocking form of poetic address. What's more, Waldrop manages to get some sonic play out of "yawp" and "yawn" without sacrificing either the brisk pace or the tone of the stanza-turned-verset.

Waldrop says in his introduction that one of his primary goals was to get closer to the complex tone of Baudelaire. For him this meant retaining the various shades of irony that permeate so many of the poems. He aimed

to avoid the “temptation to be deadly serious” to which previous translators have succumbed. Waldrop accomplishes this in large part by remaining extremely faithful to Baudelaire’s diction. In fact, reading Waldrop one can see why he would call into question the reputed “plainness” of Scarfe’s prose translations, which sit so self-effacingly at the bottom of the page. Consider Scarfe’s decision to render “cortisane imparfaite” as “sinful harlot”; Waldrop sensibly gives this as “imperfect courtesan.” Like the original, this is both more subtle and more insinuating than Scarfe’s version.

When this kind of fidelity is not possible or helpful, Waldrop leavens the high-toned sonorities of Baudelaire’s dominant terms. In “Benediction” the Miltonic lexicon of “pestilence,” “divine remedy,” and “sanctified legions” runs up against “runt,” “gets high,” “pranks,” and “spike” (as in “to spike the punch”). Debunking decorum in this way is an example of what Waldrop translates as “bugging the bourgeois,” and his translations prove that this kind of ludic code-mixing is required to adequately translate Baudelaire, who so delighted in mixing high with low.

Examples abound, but a good one occurs in “Hymn to Beauty”: “De tes bijoux l’Horreur n’est pas le moins charmant.” A literal translation of the line would be “Of your jewels, Horror is not the least charming,” but this sounds too straight. Waldrop’s solution—“among your jewels, Horror holds its own in fascination”—brilliantly brings some honest speech back into the rhetoric, letting out a little air and implicating the speaker of the poem in his own evaluations. Overall, Waldrop’s diction strikes this reviewer as so apt that I am inclined not only to forgive but almost to forget occasional misfires like “a clutch of Demons make whoopee in our brain” (a ghost of “The Newlywed Game”?) or “where love struts his stuff.” In these cases, the subtle ironizing degenerates into kitsch.

Waldrop’s most powerful mode of recreating Baudelaire’s tone is through syntax. Here, too, the dominant trend is to stay as close to the original as possible. This is obviously easier once one has foregone the constraints of meter and rhyme, which force all sorts of difficult contortions. Even compared to Scarfe, Waldrop stays closer to the original word order. Consider this striking version of a stanza from “To the Reader”:

Ainsi qu’un débauché pauvre qui baise et mange  
Le sein martyrisé d’une antique catin,  
Nous volons au passage un plaisir clandestin  
Que nous pressons bien fort comme une vielle orange.

Like some rake, sunk to slobbering, gumming the brutalized  
tit of a superannuated whore, we grasp in passing a clandestine  
pleasure to squeeze hard, as on an overripe orange.

The diction of the translation is even more lurid than that of the original but it does not hinder the movement of the lines. Most importantly, the vivid and rapid effect of “sunk to slobbering, gumming” marvelously succeeds in bringing Baudelaire’s compact image of “kissing and nibbling” fully to bear.

Waldrop’s versets are best suited to Baudelaire’s more rhetorical poems, and especially to invective. We see this in his great version of poem xxv, which begins, “You would take the whole universe to your couch.” This short poem mounts a stately yet outrageous invective that Waldrop carries off beautifully. Notice in these lines how he stays close to the original diction and syntax without allowing them to run roughshod:

Machine aveugle et sourde, en cruautés féconde!  
Salutaire instrument, buveur du sang du monde,  
Comment n’as-tu pas honte...

Blind dumb machine, fertile in cruelties, salutary instrument, world blood-sucker, have you no shame?

And as the bitterness rises, Waldrop does an ingenious job of finding a way to make his repetitions as spittingly loathing as Baudelaire’s:

Le grandeur de ce mal où tu te crois savante  
Ne t’a donc jamais fait reculer d’épouvante,  
Quand la nature, grandes en ses desseins cachés,  
De toi se sert, ô femme, ô reine des péchés,  
—De toi, vil animal,—pour pétrir un génie?

the grandeur of this evil  
in which you find yourself so skilled, has it never made you recoil in terror  
at how nature, great in her hidden motives, uses you, O woman, queen of  
sins—uses you, vile animal—to mold a genius?

Here loathing and self-loathing interbreed. Waldrop’s translations soar in poems like this, perhaps getting closer to Baudelaire’s rich tone than any other English translation.

Waldrop’s versets are less suited to lighter and more musical lyrics like “Invitation to the Voyage,” whose tone cannot be separated from its prosody and visual effect. And yet elsewhere Waldrop does manage some interesting musical effects. Take “Correspondences.” No translator can carry across a line as delicious in its melding of sound and sense as “Comme de longs échos qui de loin se confondent,” which Waldrop gives as “Like long echoes from far away.” But Waldrop’s typical briskness serves us very well when he offers this, a line later: “Vast as night, vast as the light, smells and colors and sounds concur.” Another happy example of this kind of musicality occurs

in the untitled poem xxiv, where Waldrop uses assonance and repetition to evoke the speaker's longing in lines reminiscent of both Wyatt and Hardy:

and love you more, beauty, the more you flee from me, the more you seem  
to me ironically—night's ornament—to generate a space that keeps my  
arms from reaching blue immensities.

It turns out we do need this book.

Dustin Simpson

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Andrzej Stasiuk, *Nine*. Translated from the Polish by Bill Johnston. Orlando: Harcourt, 2007. 240pp. \$23

“Fuck that gun! What do I need a goddamn gun for? I’m a normal guy.” How many of us, in our more stressed out moments, have uttered those words to our closer comrades? Or at least whispered them to ourselves while riding the subway, driving the car, walking the boulevard, browsing the liquor store? Not many, perhaps. But you read Andrzej Stasiuk’s novel *Nine* and these words, and the paranoia they represent, seem *realistic*, appropriate to city life today.

From a Seurat-like euphoria (“Baby carriages like large moving flowers”) to a Philip Guston-like formal funk (“a plate with leftovers looked like a big ashtray”) *Nine* traverses late-nineteenth-century pointillism to late-twentieth-century cartoonism and ends up exhaling a heavy gray cigarette smoke cloud of modernism. Cassettes, radios, televisions, VCRs, remote controls, elevators, escalators, trains, planes, automobiles, pinball machines, phonebooks, tickets, matches, tampons—these are the ordinary objects that fill the cracks of the broken-down city that is *Nine*’s millennial Warsaw. If you thought that modern times were over, read *Nine*, and think again. You’ll be relieved, or perhaps scared. “The Old Spice had been crushed, but there was still something left in the white plastic cover.”

In other words, there’s still something encouraging to be found in Baudelaire’s “The Painter of Modern Life.” *Nine*’s hero/protagonist, the artist of the book, is Paweł. In debt and on the run from loan sharks, he kills time wandering and smoking through the city. Paweł surely carries Baudelaire’s essay in an inside pocket of his beaten leather jacket, for like Baudelaire he realizes that “from the beginning he’d wanted to be at the center, in the navel, pupil, asshole of the city, and that his imagination had raised a series of shining, supernatural images of Downtown in which both the glow and the chill created a perfect mirage.” Inside *Nine*’s borderline slapstick crook