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Poems by Rilke, Catullus, and Baudelaire

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Susan McLean
The Woman Going Blind

Rainer Maria Rilke
Die Erblindende

She sat much like the others taking tea.
At first, the way she held her cup seemed just
a little different from all the rest.
One time she smiled. That almost hurt to see.

And when at last we stood up, chatting on,
and, as the impulse took us, slowly walked
through many other rooms (we laughed and talked),
I watched her there. She followed where they'd gone,

like one who in a little while must rise
to sing before a crowd, a bit withdrawn,
the light from outside, as upon a pond,
shining on her bright, rejoicing eyes.

She followed slowly, letting time pass by,
as if some hindrance had to be transcended,
and yet as if, when the transition ended,
she would no longer go on foot, but fly.

Furius and Aurelius, fellow travelers
beside Catullus, whether he'll explore
far India, where echoing eastern waves
pummel the shore;

whether among the Persians, pampered Arabs,
the Scythians or the Parthians armed with bows,
or lowlands that the seven-channeled Nile
dyes as it flows;

whether he'll trek across the lofty Alps
to visit glorious Caesar's monuments,
the Gaulish Rhine, the terrible Britons who
live furthest hence—

you who are ready to face with me all this,
whatever heaven's will decrees, unfazed,
take a brief message to my girl from me,
not kindly phrased.

May she live on and thrive with her adulterers,
clasp in her arms at once three hundred men,
loving none truly, but sapping and breaking them all
again and again.

Let her not look, as once, for adoration
from me, which by her fault is leveled now,
like a blossom at the edge of the meadow, touched
by a passing plough.

Susan McLean
The Two Sisters of Mercy

Charles Baudelaire
Les Deux Bonnes Sœurs

Debauch and Death are charming girls, a pair
bursting with health and lavish with their favor.
Their rag-draped sides, forever virgin, bear
no children, though they're constantly in labor.

To the baleful poet, bane of families,
Hell's favorite, ill-paid flatterer at courts,
brothels and tombs disclose in bowers of ease
a bed that's never haunted by remorse.

Bedroom and bier in blasphemies are fertile,
like two kind nuns who offer, one by one,
terrible pleasures and delight that harms.

Debauch, when will you shroud me in your foul arms?
O Death, her rival siren, when will you come
to graft black cypress on her tainted myrtle?

Susan McLean
Very Far from Here

Charles Baudelaire
Bien loin d'ici

Here is the hut, a little shrine
in which this girl, dressed very fine,
always prepared and calm, reclines.

One elbow on the cushions rests
as, with a hand, she fans her breasts
and listens to the fountains weep.

This is the room of Dorothy.
—Far off, the breeze and water croon
their pulsating and sobbing tune
to rock this pampered child to sleep.

From head to toe, attentively,
the scented oil and benjamin
are rubbed into her dainty skin.
—The flowers in the corner swoon.

Commentary

Rainer Maria Rilke: *Der Erblindende / The Woman Going Blind*

Rilke's four-quatrain poem in iambic pentameter readily lends itself to four quatrains of iambic pentameter in English, but in order to stay as close as possible to the meaning of the original while trying to preserve the form, I needed to resort to some re-arrangement of information, slant rhymes, and a slight change to the rhyme scheme of the last stanza. In order to make my rhymes work, I was also obliged to supply words that were implied, but not stated, in the original. For example, in the last line of the first stanza, I assume that "it almost hurt" applies to the speaker watching the woman, not to the woman herself, so by adding "to see," I make it clear that the speaker is the one who is nearly pained by watching the woman smile. I also added the words "must rise" to the first line of the third stanza, although no rising is mentioned in the German; however, usually an audience is seated and a singer stands during a concert, so rising would be implied by the metaphor of having to sing before a crowd. In the third stanza, I also moved "a bit withdrawn" later in the stanza than *verhalten*, in order to gain a slant rhyme with "pond" (*Teich*). "Letting time pass by" is not a literal translation of *sie brauchte lang*, which means "she took a long time," but again I felt that it captured the implied meaning. In the last line of the poem, "would no longer go on foot" is not the most direct way to translate *nicht mehr gehen würde* but to use the more literal "would no longer walk" would leave the line a foot short. I thought the measured rhythm of the original needed to be preserved by a slightly less literal wording. Rilke breaks his previous pattern of envelope rhymes in the first three stanzas by using alternating lines in the last. Though I could see that the change could signal closure in the last stanza, it seemed more important to preserve the meaning of the lines than to replicate that rhyme scheme, so I used envelope rhymes in that stanza, too.

Catullus: XI

Catullus's poem 11 is in Sapphic stanzas, but the rhythms of that classical meter are not only relatively unfamiliar to readers of English, but also an awkward fit with the natural rhythms of verse in English. I therefore decided to create an analogous pattern in English of a stanza of accentual verse that has three five-stress lines followed by a two-stress line. This looser pattern allows more varied rhythms than the stricter classical meter, while hinting at that pattern for those who are familiar with it. I have also taken the liberty of rhyming the second and fourth lines, to add more polish to the pattern, though poetry of Catullus's time did not rhyme. The closure that rhyme provides both adds force to the author's voice and emphasizes the truncation of the last line of each stanza, in a poem that talks about a love being cut short. Not trying to rhyme every line gives me a greater ability to stick close to the meaning of the original. Catullus makes many erudite allusions that would not be understood by most English readers, such as using *Eoa*, an allusion to the dawn goddess Eos, to signify "eastern," or *Sagas*, referring to the Sacae, a tribe of Scythians; or *Hyrmanos*, referring to peoples who lived on the Caspian Sea. For these recondite allusions, I have substituted more easily recognized terms that still suggest the great distances and exotic locations implied by Catullus's terms. *Ilia rumpens* is a term that refers to injuring the groin through excessive sexual activity; English doesn't have an exactly equivalent term, so I settled for "sapping and breaking." I have tried to preserve the sharp contrasts between the elevated language of Catullus's description of his projected travels and the harsh language to his former lover, the "Lesbia" to whom he had written his most passionate love poems.

Charles Baudelaire: *Les Deux Bonnes Soeurs / The Two Sisters of Mercy*

Baudelaire's sonnet "Les Deux Bonnes Sœurs" plays on several meanings of *bonnes sœurs*, which could mean not just "good sisters," but also "nuns" and "nurses," since many nuns worked in hospitals to care for the sick. Yet when the nuns are Death and Debauchery, there is the suggestion that he is also playing on the image of the prostitute as a kind of "Sister of Mercy" who ministers to the morally sick, the poets who are prostituting their own art at court ("courtisan" can mean "courtier," but it is also very close to "courtesan"). Neither nuns nor prostitutes are known for having children, but the ironic suggestion that they are constantly "in labor" draws a parallel between the hard work of the nuns and of the prostitutes. The double image of the nun/prostitute is paralleled by the tomb/brothel, coffin/bedroom, and cypress (a tree associated with death and graveyards)/myrtle (a tree sacred to the goddess Venus). Since Baudelaire himself suffered from syphilis acquired from prostitutes, his "tainted myrtle" suggests the diseases that prostitutes spread. Yet Death and Debauchery themselves are rich in health (they will never die) and generous with their kisses. The rags they wear suggest the poverty of most prostitutes, but also the vow of poverty that nuns take. There is a rococo quality in Baudelaire's referring to the *charmilles* ("bowers") of tombs and brothels. The striking image of Debauchery's dirty arms (*bras immondes*) again suggests the poverty and squalid life of most prostitutes, and the ending of the poem, in which Death is described as Debauchery's rival in attractions, suggests disgust and a longing for the end. Though the poem is written in Alexandrines, I have translated it into iambic pentameter because hexameters tend to drag in English, and the number of monosyllabic words in English makes it relatively easy to condense longer French lines into shorter English ones without much loss of meaning. Because there are fewer rhymes in English than in French, I have changed the rhyme scheme so that no more than two lines must rhyme with one another, and I have used some slant rhymes.

Charles Baudelaire: *Bien loin d'ici / Very Far from Here*

Baudelaire's "Bien loin d'ici," an octosyllabic sonnet with the sestet preceding the octave, describes Dorothee, a young prostitute whom Baudelaire encountered on the island of Réunion (note in James McGowan's translation, *The Flowers of Evil*, New York: Oxford UP, 1993, p. 384). The island is east of Madagascar in the Indian Ocean. The poem focuses on the passivity, youth, and sexual attractiveness of Dorothy, who is presented almost as an exotic idol in a shrine. The sensuous details—her fanning her breasts, the weeping of the fountains, the sobbing of the breeze and the distant water, the rubbing of fragrant oils into her delicate skin—combine to suggest a voyeuristic enjoyment on the part of the speaker, symbolized by the swooning of the flowers in the corner. Yet there is also a hint of the boredom of this spoiled child (*enfant gâtée*) and Baudelaire's describing the prostitute as a child makes the scene even creepier. All the weeping and sobbing of the things around her imply a sadness that, along with the title, hints that she herself would wish to be "very far from here." I used a tetrameter sonnet to approximate the effects of the original, but could not duplicate Baudelaire's use of just two rhymes. Instead, I tried to use rhymes that shared a consonant sound (**-ine, -oon, -in**) or a vowel sound (**-eep, -y**), but I still had to use one more rhyme (**-ests**) that did neither.

Source texts:

Rilke, Rainer Maria. "The Woman Going Blind." *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*. Edited and translated by Stephen Mitchell, Random House, 1982, p. 32.

Catullus. "XI." "The Poems of Gaius Valerius Catullus," translated by F.W. Cornish. *Catullus, Tibullus, and Pervigilium Veneris*. Cambridge, 1962, pp. 14, 16.

Baudelaire, Charles. "The Two Sisters of Mercy" and "Very Far from Here." *The Flowers of Evil*. Translated by James McGowan, Oxford UP, 1993, pp. 246, 248.