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Three Poems by Alfred de Musset

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Zack Rogow
Three Poems by Alfred de Musset

Alfred de Musset

To Ulric G.

À Ulric G.

No eye, Ulric, has plumbed the sea's deepest caves,
Not a diving heron, or an old salt on board.
The sun snapped its rays on those waves,
Like a vanquished soldier breaking his sword.

And Ulric, no eye has pierced the swirls
Of your sorrows, angel who's had his fall.
In your head and heart you carry two worlds,
Those nights you walk by my side, hunched and small.

At least let me catch a glimpse of your soul,
Like a child leaning over the water too far;
You, life so full, pale from kisses you stole—
Me, so young, envying your sins and your scars.

July 1829

Zack Rogow

Alfred de Musset

I love the first shiver of winter

Sonnet

I love the first shiver of winter! That day
When the stubble resists the hunter's foot,
When magpies settle on fields fragrant with hay,
And deep in the old chateau, the hearth is lit.

That's the city time. I remember last year,
I came back and saw the good Louvre and its dome,
Paris and its smoke—that whole realm so dear.
(I can still hear the postilions shouting, "We're home!")

I loved the gray weather, the strollers, the Seine
Under a thousand lanterns, sovereign!
I'd see winter, and you, my love, you!

Madame, I'd steep my soul in your glances,
But did I even realize the chances
That soon your heart would change for me too?

Zack Rogow

Alfred de Musset

Venice

Venise

In Venice of the red walls,
Not a ship stirs at all,
Not a fisherman afloat,
 No lanterned boat.

Seated alone on the strand,
The great lion stirs to stand,
And stretches out his paw
 With its bronze claw.

Around him groups of crafts,
Sailing vessels and rafts,
Like herons in the dark
 Rest in an arc,

In the smoky lagoon they sleep,
While in fog turning deep,
The wind gently whips
 The flags of the ships.

The moon—which hides its eyes
Behind patchwork skies
With their star-flecked clouds—
 Now half veiled.

Leaving Santa Croce Church
The abbess with a lurch
Reaches up to drape
 Her surplice in her cape.

And the ancient palaces,
And the porticos so serious,
The stairways carved in white
 For all the knights,

And the bridges and the squares,
And the statues' mournful stares,
And the ribboned seas
 Trembling in the breeze,

All are silent, except the guards
With their long halberds,
Who patrol crenellations
 Of arsenal stations.

—Now more than one will wait
Beneath the moon's porcelain plate.
She listens with one ear—
 Is her dandy near?

Getting ready for the ball,
She arranges her shawl,
In the mirror at her task,
 Dons her black mask.

On her perfumed divan,
La Vanina bedecked for her man,
Snoozes close to her lover,
 Tugging the cover.

And Narcissa, the wild,
In her gondola has piled
A feast to help forget
 Till moon and sun have met.

And who, here in Italy,
Is not without some folly?
Who doesn't keep for love's blaze
All the best days?

Let's let the horloge
Near the palace of the old doge
Keep track during his nights
Of ennui that bites.

Let's count, my beauty, instead,
On your rebel lips of red
All the kisses given...
Or forgiven.

It's your charms we should count,
Mark sweet tears as they mount—
The real price of these nights
And their delights!

Commentary

I've always had a soft spot for the Romantic movement, for the furtive meetings of utopian revolutionaries in Paris garrets, and for the trysts of freethinking aristocrats in limestone townhouses in the Faubourg Saint-Germain. Alfred de Musset (1810–1857) was no stranger to that world. Bad boy of the French Romantic era, he was known for his many affairs, notably with George Sand, the older woman in their relationship; and for his alcoholism and partying.

With such biopic lives, it's easy to forget that the literary celebrities of the Romantic movement became famous for their writings. Alfred de Musset is best remembered for his plays, including *Lorenzaccio* and *On ne badine pas avec l'amour* [*No Trifling with Love*]. But he was also a wonderful poet, full of delicious ennui and angst. I've chosen three of his early lyrics to give a sense of his work. The poet was only eighteen when he composed "For Ulric G." in honor of a fellow Romantic, Ulric Guttinguer, twenty-three years his senior.

Whenever a translator goes down the road of creating English versions of rhymed, metered poetry, there is a definite fork where s/he has to choose one path or the other: prioritize the meaning, or take the road less traveled by and try to recreate the form. I attempt to do both, which leaves me bushwhacking somewhere in between. Alfred de Musset's poem "Venice" is particularly tricky in this respect, because the lines are so short, especially the four-syllable fourth line that ends each quatrain with a flourish. I've come as close as I could in those last lines to the short syllable count.

My goal is to create a poem that is true to the emotions and the music of the original, while aiming for a version that is *agr able* in English. Robert Frost famously said, "I could define poetry this way: it is that which is lost out of both prose and verse in translation." Yes, exactly right, but poetry is also what the translator is able to put back into a poem that is true to the author's style, intent, and meaning, and also preserves the kinetics of the poem. Since so much of the music of words is lost in translation, I feel that intensifying the imagery is allowable in certain cases, if that imagery is a reflection of what is already in the poem. I have tried to do that in certain places in de Musset's poems.

I was particularly pleased to translate these poems in Venice, where de Musset took a memorable trip with George Sand. My deep thanks to the Emily Harvey Foundation for the residency that allowed me to work on these.

Source text:

de Musset, Alfred. *Poésies*. Hachette, 1949, pp. 54–58.