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Two Poems by Charles Baudelaire

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Arnold Johnston
The Lovely Ship

Charles Baudelaire
Le Beau Navire

I want to recount—o soft sorceress!—
The divers beauties of your youthfulness;
 I'd paint your charms that you may see
How childhood merges with maturity.

When you go forth your broad skirts sweep the breeze
Just like a lovely ship that takes the seas
 In full sail, following the beat
Of rolling motion, languorous and sweet.

On your neck, long and curved, your shoulders soft,
Your head's uncommon graces are set off;
 With placid air, triumphant smile,
You pass upon your way, majestic child.

I want to recount—o soft sorceress!—
The divers beauties of your youthfulness;
 I'd paint your charms that you may see
How childhood merges with maturity.

Straining the silk before you goes your breast,
Triumphant bosom like a treasure-chest,
 Its panels swelling, curved and bright
As bucklers sparkling when they catch the light.

Contentious bucklers, armed with rose-tipped stings!
A chest of secret sweets, full of good things,
 With perfumes, with liqueurs, with wines
To cause delirium in hearts and minds!

When you go forth your broad skirts sweep the breeze
Just like a lovely ship that takes the seas
 In full sail, following the beat
Of rolling motion, languorous and sweet.

Your noble thighs, beneath the silks they grace,
Arouse obscure desires, make passions race,
 A pair of witches who stir up
A potion dark in a deep-bottomed cup.

Your arms, that could toy with a Hercules,
Are glistening serpents with the power to squeeze,
 Relentless, as if to impart
The image of your lover to your heart.

On your neck, long and curved, your shoulders soft,
Your head's uncommon graces are set off;
 With placid air, triumphant smile,
You pass upon your way, majestic child.

Invitation to the Voyage

My child, sister mine,
Dream with sweet design
Of going off to live, we two!
Loving where we lie,
Loving till we die
In that far country most like you!
Though the sky may burn,
Drown the sun in turn,
To my heart each day appears
Enigmatic, wise,
Like your wicked eyes,
Ever shining through their tears

There naught but beauty, orderly;
There pleasure, peace, and luxury.

Furniture that shines,
Polished smooth by time
Would decorate our chamber there;
Flowers of wondrous hue
Blend their fragrance, too,
With amber's waves of perfume rare.
Ceilings richly made,
Mirrors deep with shade,
In oriental splendor hung,
Whisper and cajole
The lone secret soul
With sweet words in her native tongue.

There naught but beauty, orderly;
There pleasure, peace, and luxury.

Invitation au voyage

See upon these streams
Ships lost in their dreams
Of wandering with sails unfurled;
Simply there to fill
Your least wish or will,
They'll ply the waters of the world
—Setting suns array
The fields at close of day,
The town entire, the waterways,
In hyacinth and gold;
And the world will fold
Itself to sleep in a warm haze.

There naught but beauty, orderly;
There pleasure, peace, and luxury.

Commentary

Charles Baudelaire was born in Paris in 1821. He published *Les Fleurs du mal*, his most famous—and controversial—book of poetry, in 1857. My translation of two Baudelaire poems from this collection—*Le Beau Navire* and *L'Invitation au voyage*—began, as many of my projects do, by chance. I found myself on a committee evaluating an honors project by a student who had chosen to focus on the differences among versions of each poem by several well-known poets and translators. In order to prepare myself for the task, and prior to reading the published translations, I did my own literal versions of both poems.

Having completed the literal translations, during which process I noted Baudelaire's intricate rhyme-schemes and metrics, I then discovered that the published versions either avoided those formal aspects of the poems or chose to approximate them, while at the same time changing the imagery in order to meet the demands of form. At this point, I decided to produce my own versions of each poem, staying as true as I could to the meaning, spirit, and form of the originals. As with one of my earlier—and

ongoing—major translation projects, the songs of Jacques Brel, I had assumed Baudelaire’s poetry had been “done,” only to discover I had my own views on the subject. I had no real desire to denigrate the work of others; I merely wanted to see if I could translate the poems to my own satisfaction.

The basics I brought to the task were a working knowledge of French, a good dictionary; and a good thesaurus. My less obvious qualification was my being a writer—of poetry, lyrics, fiction, drama, and non-fiction—in English, the language into which I was translating the poems. Catching the letter and the spirit of someone’s work demands the ability to be your own thesaurus for units of thought larger than individual words, to find the right idiomatic expression among a range of choices, and to express a thought in a number of ways, with appropriate attention to emotional nuance and wit. The vital requirement for any writer is having the linguistic resources to provide oneself with choices, rather than being stuck with one’s first attempt, whether the task at hand is translation or original composition in one’s own language.

Poetry is often cited as the most difficult writing to capture in another language, because even in its original form a poem attempts to reach beyond the very limits of language. The considerable linguistic challenge posed by poetic translation often means that translators refrain from attempting to deal with the further complications of form, metrics, sound devices, and the like. My experience in translating songs, especially in singable versions, has encouraged me to believe that one needn’t back away from most of these challenges. In any case, my own attempts at translating these poems by Baudelaire have been guided by my commitment to rendering them in English that comes as close as possible to the original French in meaning, spirit, and form.

As for relevance to the theme of vision/seeing, “The Lovely Ship” is allowing the subject of the poem to see herself as the poet sees her, and the poem itself is his idealized vision as a painter with words. And “Invitation to the Voyage” is the poet’s invitation to the poem’s subject to share his vision, a dream of how their shared life might be in his imagined ideal world.

Source text:

Baudelaire, Charles. www.fleursdumal.org