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Sharon Fish Mooney
On Tasso in Prison

Charles Baudelaire
Sur Le Tasse en Prison
d'Eugène Delacroix

The poet in the asylum, unkempt, weak,
Rolls a manuscript beneath trembling feet.
Beset with vertigo, inflamed with terror,
His soul sinks like a fall down an empty stair.

Mocking laughter fills his prison cell.
Strange and absurd replace reason for a swell
Of Doubts surrounding. Apprehension, Fear—
All multiform and hideous circle near.

Genius is imprisoned in this place of harm.
Grimaces gather, phantom specters swarm;
They cry and swirl and wheel behind his ear.

Dreamer awakened by screams and horror's alarms—
This the soul's emblem—your clouded dreams transformed
Between four walls that Reality stifles here!

Commentary

Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867), best known for his book of collected verse, *Les Fleurs du Mal* [The Flowers of Evil, 1857] was a French poet, art critic, and essayist. The majority of his poems are metrical, reflecting both late Romanticism and the twelve syllable alexandrine tradition. He has been referred to by some as “the father of modern poetry,” a sobriquet that seems to relate not to his poetic style but to his wide-ranging subject matter, much of which was considered scandalous when it was first published.¹ He was also a French translator of the works of Edgar Allan Poe.

Baudelaire’s frequent use of allusions to the visual arts in poetry has long been noted.² One of his favorite artists was Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863) about whom he wrote a number of essays, commenting on the “essentially poetic character” of his art.³ Baudelaire and Delacroix shared a mutual appreciation for the 16th century Italian Renaissance poet Torquato Tasso (1544–1595) who is best known for his epic poem *Gerusalemme Liberata* [*Jerusalem Delivered*]. Tasso suffered a number of physical and mental maladies including delusions that he was being persecuted. He was incarcerated for over six years, initially in a convent from which he escaped, and later in Saint Anne’s hospital/insane asylum in Ferrara, Italy.⁴ Delacroix produced two paintings based on Tasso and his experience.

As an ekphrastic poem, Baudelaire’s “Sur Le Tasse en Prison d’Eugène Delacroix” can be considered a type of translation, transposing the “language” of the visual arts into the written language of poetry. This poem is Baudelaire’s revision of an earlier and unpublished ekphrastic sonnet.

¹ Charles Baudelaire: *Selected Poems from Les Fleurs du mal*. Tr. Norman R. Shapiro. The University of Chicago Press, 1998, p. xxix.

² See, for example, Baudelaire’s poem *Les Phares (Beacons)*, in which he mentions various artists including Delacroix, Rubens, Rembrandt, da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Goya.

³ Pauly, R.M. (2003). “Baudelaire and Delacroix on Tasso in Prison: Romantic Reflections on a Renaissance Martyr.” *College Literature*, 30(2), 120–36. <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/5a9a/818046e522c496a89acb0147239c3c32e73c.pdf>

⁴ Brand, C.P. *Torquato Tasso: A Study of the Poet and of His Contribution to English Literature*, Cambridge University Press, 2010.

We can see another layer and prior example of ekphrasis in Delacroix's two paintings of Tasso (1824 and 1839). These paintings can be thought of as types of ekphrastic translations in their own right, as his initial painting is believed to have been prompted by his reading of a French translation of "The Lament of Tasso," a poem and dramatic monologue written in 1817 by Lord Byron (1718–1824) after Byron visited a cell where Tasso had been imprisoned.⁵

My own translation of Baudelaire's poetry adds another ekphrastic layer. I have viewed a number of Delacroix's paintings, read and reflected on Baudelaire's poem, and then sought to translate the essence of his poem metrically, while not always adhering to a strictly literal translation. I am in agreement with poet and translator Edna St. Vincent Millay who, in her introduction to George Dillon's and her own translations of many of Baudelaire's poems, wrote the following: "The worst translation, obviously, other things being equal, is the one which sounds the most as if it were a translation." She reminds us that an original poem was not a translation, but a poem, and concludes that "...the translation must not be a translation, either!—it must not appear to be."⁶ I interpret her as saying that the translation should reflect the qualities of the original poem. "It is the office of the translator," wrote Millay, "to represent the original poem as faithfully as possible, not only in its mood, its matter, its structure, and its rhythm, but also in its freshness, its sincerity, its vigour, its ease."⁷

My hope is that, in my translation of Baudelaire's sonnet I have been able to capture as many of these qualities as possible, given language constraints. In seeking to do so I've chosen to replace the more traditional French rhythm of alexandrine hexameter with the more traditional English rhythm of iambic pentameter, with some variations, utilizing both true and slant end rhymes throughout.

I have taken some liberties with the original French in order to maintain a metrical structure while seeking to convey Baudelaire's meaning, if not identical word equivalents. Note,

⁵ <https://www.bartleby.com/205/34.html>

⁶ *Flowers of Evil: From the French of Charles Baudelaire*. Tr. George Dillon and Edna St. Vincent Millay. Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1936, p. xxiv.

⁷ *Ibid.*

for example, my use of “asylum” in line one for *cachot*, usually translated as “cell” or “dungeon.” The English “asylum” seems to more clearly describe Tasso’s situation in Saint Anna’s at the time of his confinement.

In line twelve of the sonnet I’ve substituted “screams and horror’s alarms” for “dwelling” or “abode” (*logis*) as it appears that both best characterized his lodging at the time, generally referred to in various references as a madhouse. The *rires enivrants* or “intoxicating laughter” in line five may refer to the laughter of Tasso’s fellow inmates or to the poet’s personal demons, or, more likely, to both. “Mocking laughter” seemed to me to be a good metrical substitution that captured the poem’s original meaning.

The last stanza was the most problematic for me in discerning Baudelaire’s meaning, but I concluded that *le Réel*, translated as “real” or “reality,” is the reality of Tasso’s present situation that, within the poet’s actual and psychic prison, was “choking,” “deadening,” or “clouding” (*étouffe*) his soul’s dreams.

Source texts:

Baudelaire, Charles. “*Sur Le Tasse en Prison d’Eugène Delacroix*,” in *Les Épaves*, 1866. Anthologie de la Poésie de langue française. eBookothèque poétique. http://www.florilege.free.fr/ baudelaire/les_epaves.html See also: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/26710/26710-h/26710-h.htm#p16>

Delacroix’s 1839 painting of Tasso: https://www.wga.hu/html_m/d/delacroix/3/318delac.html