



PAUL VERLAINE

The Cursed Poets

*Translated from the French
by CHASE MADAR*

GREEN INTEGER 94

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Paul Verlaine , Chase Madar (Translation)

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Assembled from articles published in French journals, the full version of *The Cursed Poets* (*Les Poètes maudits*) was first published in 1888.. Rimbaud, the boy with whom Verlaine had had his infamous affair, Mallarmé, and Verlaine himself need little introduction; figures such as Tristan Corbière and Jules Laforgue, a major influence on the poetry of T.S. Eliot, were lesser known at the time, but are now recognized as major figures. Marceline Desbordes-Valmore is still unknown outside the francophone world, though Goya painted her portrait and Stefan Zweig wrote a study of her. Villiers de L'Isle-Adam is an ultimate Symbolist, after whose drama Edmund Wilson titled his *Axel's Castle*. The translator lives in New York City.

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tENTATIVELY, cONVENIENCE says

review of

Paul Verlaine's The Cursed Poets

by tENTATIVELY, a cONVENIENCE - July 9, 2014

Yadda, yadda, review too long. See the full thing here: <https://www.goodreads.com/story/show/...>

I probably 1st learned about Paul Verlaine thru learning about Arthur Rimbaud (born October 20, 1854) when I was a teenager in the early 1970s. Rimbaud wd've probably been an author I wd've heard about from the same group of friends who wd've exposed me to Hermann Hesse, Kahlil Gibran, & Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. I wd've then read the New Directions Paperbook editions of Rimbaud's A Season in Hell and The Drunken Boat & Illuminations - both translated by Louise Varèse.

In the former, in the introductory "A Rimbaud Chronology" (prepared by Hubert Creekmore for the publisher w/ its "factual data [...] taken largely from the definitive biography of Rimbaud by Professor Enid Starkie" - p vii), I read that when Rimbaud was around 16 he "read everything he could lay hands on including the work of the new poet Paul Verlaine." (p x) "Bretagne, who knew Verlaine, suggested that Rimbaud write to him and himself added an introduction. In the letter Rimbaud enclosed some of his poems and received an enthusiastic reply from Verlaine and an invitation to come to Paris." (p xii)

1871: "Rimbaud's visit to the Verlaine household in Paris scandalized both the conservative family and the neighbors. His wife's parents felt that Verlaine, although twenty years older than Rimbaud, was being debauched by the young man" (p xii) Rimbaud & Verlaine's relationship resulted in Verlaine's leaving his wife & the 2 of them moving to London.

1872: "the following January, Verlaine, ill with influenza, recalled Rimbaud by picturing himself as dying alone in a strange city; and their debauchery was resumed. During this period, Rimbaud felt a growing disgust for Verlaine's sentimentality and wished to separate himself from what he now considered a debilitating influence." (pp xiii-xiv) "When he announced that he was leaving, Verlaine shot at him three times with a revolver, striking him once in the wrist. Mme. Verlaine and Rimbaud managed to quiet his hysteria, but when, on the way to the railroad station, Rimbaud remained firm in his decision to leave, Verlaine again lost control and threatened him. Rimbaud called for police protection. Verlaine was arrested, tried and sentenced to two years' hard labor and a fine." (p xiv)

&, w/ that latter, I, as a young anarchist, parted ways w/ Rimbaud. Given that I was about the same age as Rimbaud was when he went thru this I probably had the strong philosophical inclination to NOT have someone arrested under such circumstances. Now, I'm just glad I've never been shot. "In 1875 he traveled to Germany, and in Stuttgart, Verlaine, just released and full of his new religious zeal acquired in prison, joined him. Of this visit which lasted two and a half days, Rimbaud wrote in a letter to his old friend Delahaye: "Verlaine arrived here the other day pawing a rosary. . . Three hours later he had denied his God and started the 98 wounds of Our Lord bleeding again."" (p xv) Verlaine had it bad. Obviously, Rimbaud gave him something that his wife didn't. "at last in May, 1888 [Rimbaud] returned to Hasar as partner of two established gun-runners and slave-traders." (p xviii) Here, I part ways w/ Rimbaud again.

"When he did not answer a letter from Verlaine, the older poet assumed that he was dead and had an edition

of his poems published in 1886." (p xvii) Rimbaud didn't actually die until November 10, 1891. Now, finally, I get to The Cursed Poets. The translator, Chase Madar, begins w/: "Assembled from articles published in the journals *Lutèce* and *La Vogue*, the full version of *Les Poètes maudits* was first published in 1888. The little book helped build the reputations of the poets; it also helped fortify Verlaine's own renown, and finances." (p 5)

Verlaine's praise for the 6 poets he writes about is enthusiastic, well written, convincing (to me, ie), &, apparently, deeply sincere. I got the impression that Verlaine, does, indeed, obsessively care about poetry & has well-developed ideas about what constitutes *important* poetry. One of the poets praised is Rimbaud. I provided the back-story about Verlaine's relationship w/ Rimbaud partially to show that Verlaine's praise for his writing continued *even tho Rimbaud had him put in prison*. This can be taken to mean both that Verlaine was 'hopelessly' 'in love' w/ Rimbaud &/or that he intended to praise the poetry as great *regardless* of how disastrous his personal relationship may've been w/ him. A lesser man, a man less sincerely dedicated to poetry, might've retaliated against Rimbaud instead of continuing to praise him. I can think of many an ex-girlfriend who destroyed my work upon breaking up w/ me - thusly revealing the petty vindictiveness that made them worth breaking up w/ in the 1st place.

Most of the poets written about by Verlaine were probably obscure at the the time, some are still obscure today: "Rimbaud, Mallarmé, and Verlaine himself don't need my introduction, but the other poets very well might. Tristan Corbière was, with Jules Laforgue, a major influence on T. S. Eliot; his directness and unfussily abrupt prosody have aged well." (p 5) I am, as always glad to learn of the more obscure people - & it's particularly enlightening to have Verlaine's contemporaneous critique.

But the above version of who's obscure by the translator is *not* Verlaine's own at the time of writing over 100 yrs before this edition:

"The name and work of Corbière and those of Mallarmé are assured for the duration of time; some will stay on men's lips, the others in the memories of all worthy of them. Corbière and Mallarmé *have been published*, — that enormous minor detail. Rimbaud, too scornful, more scornful even than Corbière who at least flung his volume square at the century's nose, did not want any of his verse to appear in print." - p 59

"It has to be said: Much of Verlaine's prose is deep purple fustian. A good weave, and made of sturdy stuff, yes, but still deep purple fustian. Often it's been tempting to leach out some of the purpleness, but that is not the translator's role; that would, in fact, go against the translator's humble, professional duty not to try and improve (read: distort) the original work." - pp 5-6

Bravo! No translator shd try to 'improve' the original work - a translator's very difficult job is to try to faithfully present the work in the language the intended readers know. Alas, in the very next paragraph, the translator writes:

"In many instances, the poem given by Verlaine differs from the definitive version; in all cases I have taken the definitive version rather than the one originally given in *Les Poètes maudits*." - p 6

I wd've preferred that Madar, the translator, wd've NOT made this decision. Something's becoming "definitive" is not always w/o a suspicious process behind it. For scholarly purposes, having access to variant versions of a poem might be quite useful for understanding its development etc. To have access to such a rare collection of poetry gleaned from a source as primary as Verlaine is an opportunity wasted by defaulting to more well-known versions. As Verlaine writes, pleading for poems by Rimbaud he knows to exist:

"So let us here beseech all our known and unknown friends who might possess *Les Veilleurs*, *Accroupissements*, *Les Pauvres à l'église*, *Les Reveilleurs de la nuit*, *Douaniers*, *Les Main de Jeanne-Marie*, *Souer de Charité* and anything else signed by this prestigious name, to be willing to send them to us for the probable case in which this work must be finished. In the name of the honor of Letters, we will repeat our prayer. The manuscripts will be religiously returned, once copies are made, to their generous owners." - p 59

Keep in mind, this wasn't the day of photocopiers & scanners. Either he was going to have them hand-copied or typeset or whatever. Copies of poems were RARE. "Definitive" versions of poems might've been Rimbaud's idea of the best one or a Rimbaud scholar's idea of the best one or whatever but that doesn't necessarily discount other versions.

Otherwise, this is a lovely edition insofar as the poems are presented in both French & English. Alas, one thing that's apparently missing are portraits of the poets that the reader learns about having been in the original edition by reading Verlaine's "About The Following Portraits". The only one provided in this edition is of Rimbaud & is the same portrait on the cover of the edition of *Illuminations* that I have (although less cropped in *The Cursed Poets*). Verlaine has this to say about it:

"Étienne Carjat photographed M. Arthur Rimbaud in October 1871. It is this excellent photograph that the reader now has in front of him, reproduced, just like the picture taken from nature of Corbière, by the process of photogravure.

"Is he not the "Sublime Boy" without the atrocious failure of Chateaubriand, but not without the protestation of lips which have long been sensual, and a pair of eyes lost in very old memories rather than any dream, however precocious? A kid Casanova, but even more so a certified expert in love-affairs, doesn't he laugh with his flaring nostrils and his handsome dimpled chin; doesn't he seem to have just said, "go take a hike" to all illusions that don't owe their existence to the most irrevocable will? The proud mop of hair could only be tousled, like cushions gracefully rumpled by the elbow of some sultanesque whim. And this virile disdain for all good grooming, so useless besides the devil's own quite literal beauty!" - pp 10-11

Yes, Verlaine had it bad - but at least he wasn't mediocre about it!

"We might have called them Absolute Poets to be more cautious, but, aside from the fact that caution is hardly in season these days, our title has something for the type of reader whom we hate, and, we're sure of it, something for the survivors among the All-Powerful Ones in question, for the common herd of élite readers — a rude jab of the middle finger that makes us feel better." - p 12

So, apparently, the middle finger gesture dates at least back to the 19th century & was used in France. According to Wikipedia, "The gesture dates back to Ancient Greece and was also used in Ancient Rome. Historically, it represented the phallus. In some modern cultures, it has gained increasing acceptance as a sign of disrespect, and has been used by music artists, athletes, and politicians. Most still view the gesture as obscene." (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_finger) Looking online, I also found this:

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(<http://www.ascii-middle-finger.com/>) Nice! Even the URL's a hoot!

The 1st poet discussed is "Tristan Corbière [who] was a Breton, a sailor, and the aloof scornful type par excellence" (p 13) A "Breton" being a person from Brittany, the Northwest coast of France, an area that interests me more & more partially thanks to the information rc'vd about the area from a friend of mine from there: Brittany's incorporation into France is not necessarily any more welcome than many other such incorporations. Verlaine references his 'Breton-ness' thusly:

"What a Breton bretonning in the grand old style! The child of the moors and great oaks and riverbanks that were! And how he remembers and cherishes, this frightening faux-skeptic, the closely held superstitions of his tender, rustic brethren of the coast!" - p 21

The 1st of his poems presented starts off in French like this:

RESCOUSSE

Si ma guitare
Que je répare,
Trois fois barbare,
Kriss indien,

- The full translation from Madar follows:

If my guitar which I repair, triply barbaric, Indian *kriss*,
Torturer's tool, guillotine, bag of tricks, doesn't do well . . .
If my worse voice can't tell you of my sweet martyrdom . . . — A dog's life! —
If my cigar, comfort and lighthouse, doesn't bother you at all; — Fire for burning . . .
If my menace, passing cyclone, lacks gracefulness; — Mute from howling! . . .
If my soul the sea in flames has no sharp edge — Cooks by freezing . . .
Then I'm leaving!

- pp 14- 15

(Corbière lived from 1845-1875, not quite making it to 30 yrs old) for those of you who, like myself, get a sense of a person's originality or lack thereof based on their placement in a chronology)

1st, I love the poem; 2nd I'm struck by the challenge the translator faces: the original has the last words of the 1st 3 lines of each stanza rhyme, the 4th & last line of each stanza rhymes w/ that of the 4th line in the 1st 3 stanzas & then the rhyme changes so that the 4th lines in the next 3 stanzas rhyme w/ each other AND w/ the final line that stands alone. This rhyme scheme is obviously taut & influences what words Corbière can choose.

Madar's approach to the translating is to not render the rhyme schemes but to opt instead for the sense of the words only. Given that I'm NOT a translator but that I appreciate the extreme difficulties of doing a good job of it, I can only admire the success w/ wch Madar does his job. What I'm reminded of is the Preface written

by Jean Calais to his edition of the poetry of Villon published as number one of "The Pick Pocket Series":

"Some of these poems as a result are literally reckoned and others literally are not. Nowhere did I deliberately deviate from the muse (sic) of the original, and where I did I always believed I was playing an actual rope supplied by Villon. If I have anywhere taken liberties with a particular passage, it is a text which continually liberates its intelligence by the undoing of its adversaries.

"I did take the task "seriously." That is, I wanted to make the best poems possible, ones that would have the directness, the vitality, the immediacy and the energy (not to mention the sunsets) of the original, without sacrificing authenticity and everyday liveliness."

I loved Calais's rendering of Villon but, not being familiar w/ the original French, am not qualified to comment further on the quality of the translation. It certainly got me interested in Villon so I reckon Calais more than did his job there.

All that sd, I can't help but yearn somewhat for poetry translations that accomplish all this AND preserve the rhyme scheme. A tall order, I know, but on a generally formal level (rather than a strictly 'poetic' one), an order prodigiously met by Gilbert Adair in his translation of George Perec's La Disparition, wch Adair translated as A Void. If Adair can take a French novel in wch the letter "e" never occurs & translate it into English w/o having the letter "e" occur EITHER & still preserve the plot of the novel AND have it be 'good' reading than, surely preserving the rhyme scheme in relatively simple poems shdn't be so impossible. Of course, translators aren't necessarily pd well enuf to justify the expenditure of time that might be required, etc, etc..

Onward.

Corbière strikes me as borderline proto-Surrealist in "ÉPITAPHE" ("EPITAPH"), the last section of wch is translated as:

"Of *je ne sais quoi*. — But not knowing where; of gold, — but penniless; of nerves, — but nerveless. Vigor without force; of élan, — but with a sprained ankle; of soul — and no violin; of love, — but of the lowest kind; — Too many names to have a name. —" - p 17

But, in the long run, not really stream-of-consciousness enuf to be Surrealist, too expressive, but successfully I find, of a "*je ne sais quoi*" state of mind.. or being.. I reckon that the "soul" w/ "no violin" is some sort of associative reference a little more metaphorically based than it's preceding pairs & that it's rooted in cultural imagery that wd've been plain to the readers of its time.. But what if "violon"'s rhyming w/ the end word of the next line, "étalon", determined its choice a bit more than its meaning? What if another word, less metaphorical, wd've been chosen if the rhyme had worked that way? That's when I wonder what a rhymed translation wd be like.. A translation that preserves the sound structure & has to resort to straining the metaphor to do it..

Verlaine comments on Corbière:

"As for the rest, we would have to cite the entire section of this book, and then the entire book, or rather it would be necessary to reprint this unique work, *Les Amours jaunes*, which appeared in 1873 and is today nearly impossible to find, a book in which Villon and Pyrrho would be pleased to find an often worthy rival — and the most renowned of today's true poets would find a master (to say the least) of their own stature." - p 18

Indeed. He's got me interested. & I certainly understand the "we would have to cite the entire section of this book, and then the entire book" - as anyone who reads my reviews may groan knowingly! SO, is These Jaundiced Loves "today nearly impossible to find"?! No, thank the holy ceiling light, no. There're copies available online for as low as \$6.21. Do I HAVE \$6.21? No, indeed, I don't, not after losing my last \$6 out of my pocket yesterday. Maybe someone else will find that \$6 & buy These Jaundiced Loves w/ it! Not bloody likely.

& now we reach Rimbaud. I wrote earlier that "I provided the back-story about Verlaine's relationship w/ Rimbaud partially to show that Verlaine's praise for his writing continued *even tho Rimbaud had him put in prison*. This can be taken to mean both that Verlaine was 'hopelessly' 'in love' w/ Rimbaud &/or that he intended to praise the poetry as great *regardless* of how disastrous his personal relationship may've been w/ him." & here's how Verlaine (in translation, ie) introduces the subject:

"We have had the joy of knowing Arthur Rimbaud. Today things separate us from him without, of course, his genius and his character ever having lacked our deep admiration." - p 29

"Here a parenthesis, and if these lines happen to fall under his eyes, then let Arthur Rimbaud know that we do not judge men's motives, and let him be assured of our complete approval of (and dark sorrow at, as well) his abandonment of poetry, provided, as we don't doubt, that this abandonment was for him sensible, honest, and necessary." - p 30

[Coincidentally, while I was reading the above, I was also reading (well, not quite simultaneously) Stephen Emerson's "Letters to Verlaine" in *RAMPIKE* Vol. 23, No. 1]

For the complete review, go here: <https://www.goodreads.com/story/show/...>

Felipe says

On the book itself:

Pocket-sized. The commentary is not shown in original French.

But the main thing wrong with this edition of this book is that the English translations of the poems are not formatted as they should be. Instead the English translations are formatted in prose style where one stanza reads like a paragraph. There are no line breaks nor are the first letters of each line capitalized, so that you may at least know where a new line is supposed to begin.

For an otherwise excellent book, this is a poor translation edition.

david-baptiste says

The first time i read this in english i thought how Verlaine's rather absinthe soaked memories are an odd form of poetry in

their own right--the passages of purple prose, like hothouse-amped versions of the "jungles" in herni rousseau's paintings, themselves inspired by the hot house flowers of the botanical gardens--, many of which

are memories however that turn out as one checks through bios--and others still that are indeed far more in the realm of warmhearted hallucination--
scattered about in the most purple passages are always some gems, insights, details--that are very striking and have that subtlety and illuminated quality of Verlaine's
best poems, with their musicality that each time one reads him after an absence--is evermore striking--
some of Verlaine's passages and remarks also, especially re Rimbaud and those who do not "get" Mallarmé's works--
are very catty in a kind of velvet-gloved claw manner that is quite funny--
his own brand of gay humor--sparkling like the twinkling in his eyes which lights up for all the suffering, very real, he endured--
the passages re Rimbaud are quite amazing for what they do not say, as well as his overinflated and seemingly improvised on the spot versions of Rimbaud's family--Verlaine depicts them as wealthy and important!--
the book includes additions that V made about after the first appearances of the essays--
the book is quite incredible in the sense that when Verlaine was writing of many of the poets--they were barely known at all --
the articles and the book it became as well as the inclusion of great chunks of poetry by each poet--was a huge turning point in French Symbolist (as it is often called) poetry's becoming known to a much larger audience--as well as ensuring the publication and digging up of Rimbaud's poems, his MS as V is never tired of telling, scattered, like the rumors of R--to the winds--
among various persons who did answer his appeals for MS in other's hands--
and also to get some digs in at his ex-wife who had despoiled for ever some of R's letters and MS--

V also is the first person to write of Corbière as a major figure--
a thoroughly enjoyable and fascinating work--when you get tired of some of V's more overabundant soaked passages, he always has a great poem for one to read--the book includes actually its own form of a mini-
anthology of these poets within its pages as V thankfully is a very generous one when it comes to putting the poetry itself center stage

the name in French, "les poètes damnés"--has forever fixed that image with a number of the writers--though it is hard now to think of Mallarmé as being cursed other than by the critics whom V takes apart with great relish--
who have spurned the genius of M--
also V explains some aspects of what makes the poets' works unique and different, new to French prosody in a very clear way, far more illuminating than a great many other works on this subject

it never ceases to amaze me that Verlaine was Pol Pot's favorite poet--
before he became known to the world as Pol Pot--long before--this man previously so invisible had been an excellently thought of lycée teacher of French literature, especially poetry, which he had a great and real passion for--
accounts by some of his former students--who could never reconcile the poetry lover who inspired them though so--with the monster later on who absolutely rejected the west--
and

Marcelow says

good

Joe Pfeiler says

The Cursed Poets reads a bit like an academic project/mini-textbook – a guide that tells bits of the poets’ lives, what influenced their styles, followed by selections of their work as examples.

Poetry is not my favorite writing form, but I was intrigued by the idea of writers who lived outside society norms, and brought their rebellious embracement of counter culture and decadence into their writing (Rimbaud’s *Evening Prayer* and *The Sitters* are good examples). I suppose today they’d be considered “alternative” poets.

But to be able to fully appreciate this book one needs a substantial knowledge of the world of poetry – the writers, their works, and society as it was when they lived and wrote. That knowledge I don’t have, but I still had fun with parts of this book. What an intriguing scamp Paul Verlaine must’ve been!

Jorge says

Sobran comentarios.

Edwin Cajas says

Los poetas malditos

Miy buen ensayo sobre estos grandes poetas. Como introducción a su obra, genial. Recomendado a todos los que lean poesía

Cristhian says

Un dossier fundamental para entender la revolución que dio la poesía en el s XIX que involucraba a este grupo y que venía a romper con el paupérrimo romanticismo soso.

Gracias a ellos tuvimos el dadaísmo y vanguardismo, aunque no les guste reconocerlo.
