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Richard Hibbitt

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Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

On Translating Verlaine's Prose

Richard Hibbitt

University of Leeds

It is probably safe to say that the French poet Paul Verlaine (1844–1896) is not known as a writer of prose. In fact, it may come as a surprise to learn that there is enough material extant for a Pléiade volume entitled *Œuvres en prose complètes*, edited by Jacques Borel and published in 1972. These writings span from 1867 to 1895 and are divided into the following sections: *Œuvres d'imagination*; *Œuvres autobiographiques*; *Œuvres critiques*; *Œuvres polémiques*; *Voyages*; an appendix containing a translation from Byron; the contents of Verlaine's notebook; and some pieces written in English, including the enjoyable 'My Visit to London' (published in *The Savoy*, April 1896). Many of these pieces can be classified as travel writing or autobiographical sketches; there is also a fair number of critical articles, prefaces, and reviews, although Verlaine was not as prolific a reviewer as many of his contemporaries. The best-known pieces are *Les Poètes maudits*, Verlaine's six short articles on different nineteenth-century poets, including himself.¹ As for what we would today call creative writing, or short fiction, many pieces are brief character sketches of one or two pages; others can be categorized as short *contes* or longer *nouvelles*. Although some of these appeared during his lifetime, most were published for the first time in *Œuvres posthumes* (1903).² What is striking is how conventional these texts often seem – usually narrated in either the first or third person and in the past tense, with setting, character, dialogue, and plot all present and correct. One might think perhaps of Guy de Maupassant as a touchstone. It would also be easy to believe that these works were by one of many writers who wrote for the myriad newspapers and journals at a time when print was the hegemonic mass medium.

Like Charles Baudelaire's prose writings, Verlaine's prose pieces are characterized by their relative brevity; unlike Baudelaire, there is no preface to a collection of prose poems that offers insights into how he viewed the medium. Jacques Borel suggests that Verlaine's prose pieces can

often be seen as ‘l’anecdotique envers’ of his poetic work, which can be understood as the ‘anecdotal flipside’ or ‘discursive counterpart’.³ In other words, the medium of prose allowed Verlaine to explore some of the themes in his lyric poetry through discursive narrative exposition. This would also explain why he gravitated more towards the conventional form of the short story than to the experimental prose poems of Arthur Rimbaud’s *Illuminations*, published with Verlaine’s help in 1886. The naturalist short story as practised by Maupassant, Alphonse Daudet, and others frequently enables a form of succinct and trenchant social commentary that also appealed to Verlaine, who prefers this type of *conte* to the *conte fantastique*; there are few ghosts, hallucinations or doppelgänger to be found in Verlaine’s prose, which tends to be canny rather than uncanny.⁴ Thematically, there is an interest in character types which recalls the ‘physiologies’ described by Walter Benjamin in ‘Das Paris des Second Empire bei Baudelaire’ (1938). Writing about how the ‘physiologies’ transformed crowds of people into recognizable types, Benjamin suggests that ‘everyone could – unencumbered by any factual knowledge – make out the profession, character, background, and lifestyle of passers-by’.⁵ But Verlaine, like Maupassant and many of their contemporaries, is more interested in probing the psychology of human behaviour than simply repeating well-known tropes about nineteenth-century Parisian life, which is why his prose works go beyond stereotypical descriptions to more interesting areas such as motivation, desire, agency, sexual politics, double standards, and the tension between the individual and society.

Verlaine’s poetry has been translated into English many times on both sides of the Atlantic, both as collections and as single poems, although the sheer amount of material precludes a complete collection. Most English versions opt for a selection of poems taken from the different collections, which often veer inevitably towards a ‘greatest hits’ approach favouring the earlier work, with some interesting variations in recent translations. The first known collected translation of Verlaine poems, Gertrude Hall Brownell’s *Poems of Paul Verlaine*, was published in 1895, a year before his death.⁶ Two new volumes appeared in 1948: *Selected Poems*, translated by C. F. MacIntyre, and *Forty Poems*, translated by Roland Gant and Claude Apcher.⁷ These were followed by Jacques

Leclercq's *Poems* in 1961, Doris-Jeanne Gourévitch's *Selected Verse* in 1970, and Joanna Richardson's *Selected Poems* in 1974.⁸ Two new translations were published in 1999: Martin Sorrell's *Selected Poems*, featuring 170 poems from different periods of Verlaine's life, and Norman H. Shapiro's *One Hundred and One Poems*.⁹ The most recent translation, Samuel N. Rosenberg's *Paul Verlaine: A Bilingual Selection of His Verse* (2019), divides Verlaine's career into four chronological sections: 'The Parnassian Years'; 'Under the Spell of Rimbaud'; 'From Prison to Conversion'; and 'The Last Years'.¹⁰ Each new translation brings new poems to the attention of anglophone readers and provides readers of all ages and linguistic backgrounds with new insights into Verlaine's work.

Despite this plethora of translations, there are no collected English translations of Verlaine's prose.¹¹ The task of translating Verlaine's prose is therefore accompanied by a sense of liberty; unlike in the case of his poetry, the translator has no qualms about accidental imitation or the challenge of emulating popular and critically acclaimed versions. This article considers some of the questions that Verlaine's prose poses to translators, considering in particular dialogue and register. It ends with my own attempt at translating a passage from his short story 'Deux mots d'une fille', part of a group of seven short texts written between c. 1886 and 1890 but first published posthumously in 1903, under the title 'Histoires comme ça'.¹² I consider here how Verlaine uses the short story form to offer an ambivalent critique of contemporary French society that can be interpreted as both a celebration and an indictment of perceived fin-de-siècle decadence: his contempt for deceit and hypocrisy is tempered by a fascination with the nuances of language and behaviour and a keen desire to chronicle the mores of his time.

Verlaine's Translators

In his preface to Samuel Rosenberg's recent English translations of Verlaine's selected poems, Nicolas Valazza notes that 'a substantial portion of Verlaine's poetic corpus contains erotic or even *pornographic* texts (in the etymological sense of writings on prostitution)'.¹³ He goes on to argue that 'the sexuality and gender roles that the poet displays in his licentious verse strongly challenge

the heteronormativity that characterizes traditional lyric poetry'.¹⁴ Valazza's insights are also relevant to Verlaine's prose works, where an interest in prostitution is combined with an indictment of hypocrisy. 'Deux mots d'une fille' relates a man's enduring attraction for a female prostitute despite her fickle behaviour towards him. The first-person narrator's tone suggests an equal sympathy towards both parties in this unconventional yet mutually beneficial relationship. The narrator's tone is also telling in 'Charles Husson', the tale of an eponymous pimp who is unexpectedly propositioned by another man; when the two men go upstairs to a hotel bedroom, the excluded female prostitute, swearing to exact her revenge, informs an off-duty policeman who agrees to arrest the couple. The story ends with an unfinished paragraph of one sentence: 'Et c'est ainsi qu'encore une fois la morale fut sauvé, que force restait à la Loi, que...'.¹⁵ The ellipsis here invites the reader to finish the sentence off. The narrator's ironic declarations expose the double standards at play: a policeman might turn a blind eye to clandestine unlicensed female street prostitution, but could be persuaded to expose a gay liaison in the knowledge of the ensuing scandal.¹⁶ One might add now that morality, the law and heteronormativity *avant la lettre* were all maintained. In this regard Verlaine's prose work 'Charles Husson' constitutes a counterpart to the homoerotic poems collected in *Hombres*, mostly written around the same time (1887–1891) and only published clandestinely after his death in 1903. It can also be read as a counterpart to the more implicit treatment of homosexual love in a poem such as 'Il faut, voyez-vous, nous pardonner les choses', from *Romances sans paroles* (1874). Writing in prose enabled Verlaine to make a point about inequality in a more direct and, ironically, acceptable manner to the censor. Instead of encoding contentious erotic references or discounting any hope of officially publishing explicit material, prose allowed Verlaine to consider matters of sexual politics in both a literally and figuratively prosaic style, drawing on the quasi-documentary approach of Naturalist fiction that had dominated the previous two decades. Writing in prose was therefore not simply an opportunity to try out a different form; it also enabled Verlaine to criticize the hypocritical heteronormative systems of

control and punishment that would later lead to the downfall of Oscar Wilde on the other side of the Channel.

Verlaine's relationship with decadence has already been discussed by a number of critics, most notably by Philip Stephan.¹⁷ As Stephan shows, one consensus in the 1880s was that Verlaine's main contribution to decadence was in his refinement of sensation, which Maurice Barrès saw as 'le dernier degré d'énervement dans une race épuisée' [the utmost degree of enervation of an exhausted race].¹⁸ But at the same time Verlaine's interest in imprecision, evocation, and suggestion was a precursor of the contemporaneous interest in Symbolism, which shows the limitations of associating writers with specific schools or manifestos (and with schools or manifestos *tout court*). As far as Verlaine's prose is concerned, it is striking that his conventional use of narrative technique is matched by an overwhelming interest in contemporary settings. In *Zoom sur les décadents*, Julia Przyboś argues that French decadent works set in the present often share a disgust with contemporary democratic society, while those set in the past – often ancient Rome or a vague Middle Ages – testify to a shared practice of 'revisionist creativity'.¹⁹ We can certainly see this in Verlaine's prose works, although Verlaine's satirical contempt for certain contemporary attitudes hardly seems to evince exhaustion or disgust. On the contrary, his prose writings seem to exude a surprisingly healthy vitality, both in their resilient syntax and their interest in the workings of desire.

At this juncture it is useful to consider Joris-Karl Huysmans's *À rebours* on two counts. First, the description of Verlaine's nuanced, ambiguous, delicate, vague, and musical poetry that appeals to Des Esseintes accentuates the contrast with his more robust, explicit, and unequivocal prose, which is not mentioned in the novel (most of Verlaine's prose writings date from after its publication in 1884). Second, Huysmans's own stylistic choices in *À rebours* also establish a contrast with Verlaine's prose style: Huysmans turns towards description of the interior and reduction of dialogue, anticipating Marcel Proust; Verlaine uses concise exterior description and dialogue to express character in the same way as many nineteenth-century prose writers before him. Their

interest lies in the treatment of similar themes, such as same-sex love and the corruption caused by cynical profiteering, although Verlaine's prose writings do not evince any particular contempt for the notions of progress or democracy. In fact, the most noticeable influence on Verlaine's prose is the Naturalist school of writing associated with Émile Zola's Médan group, including both Huysmans and Maupassant. If *À rebours* famously marks a rupture with Naturalism, Verlaine's prose pieces can be seen to continue their influence, similar to Paul Bourget's technique in novels such as *Le Disciple* (1889), which combines an accentuated interest in psychology with inherited Naturalist interest in the effect of environment and heredity on human behaviour. In the same way that we might see Verlaine's well-known 1883 poem 'Langueur' as a poem about decadence rather than an attempt to write a poem in a decadent style, many of his prose pieces can be seen as attempts to write about themes appertaining to contemporary society, without any attempt to essay *l'écriture artiste* or narrative experimentation with temporality or interior monologue.²⁰

In the introduction to *French Decadent Tales*, his 2013 collection of translated short stories for the Oxford World's Classics series, Stephen Romer suggests that the one quality which the wide range of texts in the book share is 'self-consciousness so developed that it comes to resemble a set of symptoms'.²¹ This collection does not feature any of Verlaine's tales, which did not come across the translator's radar when working on the project.²² In contrast to familiar decadent pathologies, most of the protagonists in Verlaine's prose writings display relative health; he is interested in their appearance, their idiosyncrasies, their behaviour and their speech. But although Verlaine's prose writings may not be obvious contenders for an anthology of decadent tales, the example discussed at the end of this article will show how they shed a different kind of light on fin-de-siècle mores.

The potential translator of Verlaine's prose can learn a great deal from the translators of his poetry, especially with regard to his use of register. Verlaine's fascination with slang, dialect, and idiolect is apparent throughout his correspondence, for example in his letters written from London, when he listens carefully to the use of street slang and reports back on it to his friends.

In a perceptive review of the two collections that came out in 1999, by Norman R. Shapiro and Martin Sorrell respectively, Adam Piette gives the following appraisal of Verlaine's use of register and lexis:

He wanted French poetry to have the freedom, fluidity, energy, and sprightliness of demotic street French, particularly the French he heard on the backroads and in the bars after his tramping marathon with Rimbaud. This desire to cross high poetic diction with slang rhymed gracefully with his Baudelairean dream of a poetry that could speak the whole self.²³

Here we see another affinity with Huysmans's *À rebours*, namely Des Esseintes' admiration for the rich linguistic range in Petronius' *Satyricon*. Verlaine's use of dialogue in his prose writings similarly reveals a good ear for colloquial speech, as well as an occasional humour and sense of *joie de vivre* that is familiar from some of his poems, particularly the exchanges between the *commedia dell'arte* characters in *Fêtes galantes* (1869). As with the poems, the dialogue also gives his prose pieces a theatrical element that places them in the present tense; we listen to the exchanges between characters being played out before us, as if imagining a radio or stage play. It is this theatricality which presents an intriguing challenge to prospective translators of the prose: do they update the dialogue, as one might do in the theatre with a new translation of Molière, for example, or do they aim for a target-text lexis that seems appropriate to the late nineteenth century?²⁴ Romer opts for the latter in his approach to translating late nineteenth century French prose:

While trying to keep a sprightly pace, I have retained as far as possible vocabulary and usage that would seem appropriate in stories from the same period in English. Nothing dates faster than inappropriate modernisation in this kind of prose fiction.²⁵

This caveat about inappropriate modernization notwithstanding, translating Verlaine's prose comes with a sense of freedom; moreover, the translator of prose does not have to decide on a strategy for negotiating the familiar relationship between rhyme and lexis in source and target text.²⁶ In some respects the challenge is the same, however, for example with regard to updating lexis. Rosenberg gives a specific example in his 'Translator's Note', with reference to the late poem 'L'Arrivée du catalogue' (1895), which he translates as 'The Catalogue Arrives'. Considering the late nineteenth century Parisian form of postal communication known as 'le bleu' or 'le petit bleu',

a closed telegram sent by pneumatic tube to post offices across the city and delivered by messengers, Rosenberg argues that this archaic term ‘is now best replaced by a contextually appropriate word meaning “message”’; in the event he renders ‘Un petit bleu’ as ‘answer’.²⁷ Translation choices are of course always moot; one could counter here that ‘Un petit bleu’ might be successfully retained as ‘A *petit bleu*’, familiar to those readers who associate it with Proust’s Odette, and within easy reach online for anyone coming across it for the first time. But the general point is a good one: the translator always has to keep the reader’s expected knowledge in mind. Joseph Acquisto’s praise for Rosenberg’s translations on the book’s back cover highlights his ability to convey Verlaine’s voice: ‘The translations capture and reproduce Verlaine’s variety of registers and style in lively renderings that are faithful to the spirit of the buoyant original verse.’²⁸ What interests me about this well-deserved encomium is the place of temporality; such a statement could have been written at any time over the last one hundred and fifty years, which might indeed be Acquisto’s point. But how do we reconcile this ability to reproduce the variety of registers with the aforementioned question of whether to update the lexis?

At this point I would like to bring in another Verlaine translator, John R. G. Turner, winner of the British Comparative Literature Association/British Centre for Literary Translation’s John Dryden Translation Competition in 2009.²⁹ Turner’s version of Verlaine’s ‘A Poor Young Shepherd’ from *Romances sans paroles* provides an example of how Verlaine’s lexis can be successfully updated. The source text draws whimsically both on popular song (in the reference to Valentine’s Day) and on Classical antecedents (the possible allusion to Corydon, which invites a queer reading of the text):

J’ai peur d’un baiser
Comme d’une abeille.
Je souffre et je veille
Sans me reposer:
J’ai peur d’un baiser!

Pourtant j’aime Kate
Et ses yeux jolis.
Elle est délicate,

Aux longs traits pâlis.
Oh! que j'aime Kate!

C'est Saint-Valentin!
Je dois et je n'ose
Lui dire au matin...
La terrible chose
Que Saint-Valentin!

Elle m'est promise,
Fort heureusement!
Mais quelle entreprise
Que d'être un amant
Près d'une promise!

J'ai peur d'un baiser
Comme d'une abeille.
Je souffre et je veille
Sans me reposer:
J'ai peur d'un baiser!³⁰

Rather than keeping the English title for the translation, Turner opts for a pun in 'DeliKate', thus setting the tone for his playful rendering of the source text, which mirrors its rhyme scheme and conveys Verlaine's hexasyllabic metre through two amphibrachs:

DeliKate

I'm frightened of kisses
That hurt like a bee sting.
The blighter of this is
My slumber's a beating:
I'm frightened of kisses.

I do fancy Kate though:
Eyes couldn't be kinder,
She's so delicate, though
Her looks are a blinder.
Do I fancy Kate, though!

St Valentine's Day! It's
The day I must fess up.
What gets in the way: it's
A great day to mess up,
St Valentine's Day. It's...

She gave me her promise.
Declared she'd be glad to.
Where I'm coming from is

It's hard on a lad too
This close to a promise:

I'm frightened of kisses
That hurt like a bee sting.
The blighter of this is
My slumber's a beating:
I'm frightened of kisses!³¹

Turner's translation succeeds in maintaining the giddy sense of trepidation and promise while updating the lexis to twentieth-century British English ('beasting', 'blighter', 'fancy', 'lad') with a more recent locution ('fess up') that brings it closer to contemporary usage. The poor young shepherd from the source text is now a young man from many possible backgrounds, rural or urban. The simultaneous foregrounding of rhythm and rhyme also gives the translation a spontaneous feel, as if it had been improvised in a rap battle. This specific musical quality harks back to the source text's possible origins in the popular songs that Verlaine and Rimbaud heard in London in the early 1870s. The register may now be closer to a pop song than to a pastoral folk song, but the translation still retains the vibrancy of the lyric voice.³²

Deux mots d'une fille

The remainder of this article considers the extent to which it might be possible to draw on Turner's approach to translating Verlaine's poetry when translating his prose. Although the aforementioned theatricality of the dialogue in his short stories may lend itself to an updated translation, the narration itself is anchored more firmly in a recognizable fin-de-siècle Parisian milieu. In practical terms this means that a modernizing approach may have uneven results, as Romer warns. There is also the question of why we might want to translate Verlaine's prose, beyond the primary aim of making it available to interested anglophone readers; do we want to recreate a period piece, or do we want to activate the source text's potential for a contemporary audience? Both approaches are valid; it can also be argued that they are not mutually exclusive – who defines what this potential is, and how it should be activated? In a recent piece on his translation of *Gertrudis*, a 1927 collection

of prose poems and narrative pieces by the Catalan poet J. V. Foix (1893–1987), Lawrence Venuti proposes a method of reading a translation which he terms ‘intercultural historicism’.³³ This approach entails reading the translation in juxtaposition with a contemporary text, which allows the reader to see areas of thematic and stylistic convergence and divergence. As Venuti explains:

A translation of a past text from the source culture is analyzed from the vantage point of a pertinent contemporary text in the translating culture which is in turn analyzed from the vantage point of the translation. The differences that come to light in the critical dialectic are ultimately historicizing, indicating the different historical moments in which each text was produced.³⁴

This intercultural historicist approach may also shed light on many translations that have set out to achieve a similar hybrid affect without this explicit theoretical underpinning; it also implies a specific analogy with the process of adaptation and with the discipline of comparative literature, per se. The extent to which intercultural historicism may be better suited to poetry or drama than to prose is a matter for further debate. My own view is that updating lexis and register is a suitable approach to translating Verlaine’s prose, but that the translation should resist the desire to foreground a particular contemporary register; here I agree with Romer’s view on how easily slang dates. Similarly, to my mind translations of prose should also resist the temptation to embellish the semantic material in the source text, which sometimes happens in new translations of classical theatre repertoire; I have in mind here Patrick Marber’s *Exit the King*, a wonderfully inventive adaptation of Eugène Ionesco’s *Le Roi se meurt* (1962) that was staged at the National Theatre in London in 2018 and described as a ‘new version’.³⁵ Based on the translation by Donald Watson – which was the only script available to buy in the National Theatre bookshop – it could not resist the occasional innuendo that took it into *Carry On* territory, for example in an exchange between the two queens about the kingdom being full of holes.³⁶ My approach to translating Verlaine’s prose aims to update the text without attempting to place it in a specific period or to add any cadenzas.

What follows below is a translation of an extract of dialogue from the short story ‘Deux mots d’une fille’, mentioned previously, in which a nameless first-person narrator recounts the

story of his friend, X, who lives in a *bôtel garni* [boarding house] for workers that doubles as an informal *maison de passe* [a seedy hotel frequently used by sex workers and their clients]. At the start of the text X recounts his preference for prostitutes and petty thieves over those who gain money through fraud and corrupt business practices. The narrator then takes over the narrative to recount X's story himself: 'je vais vous donner à la troisième personne, et tout bonnement, son récit qui vous eût été, sans nul doute, lyrique à l'excès' [I will tell you, in the third person and quite simply, his story, which no doubt you would have found excessively lyrical].³⁷ X's story begins with his initial relationship with one of the sex workers, Marie, which ends in a quarrel and her departure from the hotel. Six months later she returns and rents out another room, to X's great delight, although he soon realizes that she is intending to carry on seeing clients and that she also has another lover, Célestin. Having stayed with X for several more months and nursed him through illness, she eventually leaves him again for Célestin, who, it gradually transpires, is also her pimp. Her second departure is announced in this exchange:

Le lendemain, elle vint prendre le café et passa le reste de la journée, dîner payé par elle compris, jusqu'à minuit, heure à laquelle elle se rhabillait, quand X.:

'Et où vas-tu comme ça?'

Elle:

'Chez nous, parbleu, chez...'

'Chez Célestin?'

'Eh bien! oui, chez Célestin. C'était de lui tout ce que je te disais hier.'

'Et il accepte que tu sortes comme ça?'

'Tu t'en plains?'

'Non, mais...'

'Tu trouves ça maquereau, dis la vérité.'

'Ma foi!...'

'Que veux-tu? Aussi son ouvrage ne va pas toujours. Il me gronde parfois tout de même de sortir. Ah! je l'aime bien, je te l'avoue. C'est l'homme qu'il me faut. Je te dis, toi, tu es trop chic, tu es un monsieur, trop savant pour moi. Seulement, tu as été bien gentil, pas jaloux...'

Pas Jaloux! quel éloge dans quelle bouche!

'...Pas embêtant, pas sciant. Et j'ai eu pour toi un béguin qui dure encore et durera, je te promets... Oui. Célestin est mon grand, de béguin. Mais c'est égal, va, j'ai été bien contente de toi cet hiver... et tiens, je n'osais pas te le dire, je...'

'Tu...?'

'Eh bien, là, si j'ai couché tous ces mois-ci avec toi, C'ÉTAIT POUR ME CONSOLER!'³⁸

I have rendered this:

The next day she came over for coffee and stayed the whole day, including for dinner, which she paid for herself. At midnight she started getting ready again. X said:
 ‘Where are you going at this time?’
 To which she replied:
 ‘Back home, for God’s sake, back to...’
 ‘Back to Célestin’s?’
 ‘Yes, of course, back to Célestin’s. It was him I was talking about yesterday.’
 ‘And does he let you go out at this time of night?’
 ‘Are you complaining?’
 ‘No, but...’
 ‘You think he’s a pimp, don’t you?’
 ‘Well, yes!...’
 ‘What can I say? His other work dries up sometimes. And besides sometimes he tells me off for going out to work. But I like him a lot, I can tell you that much. He’s the man I need. I told you, you’re too posh for me, you’re a gentleman, too intelligent. Although you have been very nice and you haven’t been jealous...’
 Not jealous! such praise coming from such a mouth!
 ‘...you haven’t been annoying, or a pain. And I had a crush on you which I still have and I’ll keep on having, I promise... Yes, Célestin is my main crush. But it doesn’t matter, I’ve been really happy with you this winter, and, you know, I didn’t dare tell you, but I...’
 ‘What?’
 ‘Well, um, the reason I’ve kept on sleeping with you for all these months was TO CHEER MYSELF UP!’³⁹

My translation aims to reproduce the colloquial register of the source text through lexical choices that situate it neither in the late nineteenth century nor in any other specific period or cultural space, contemporary or otherwise. Of course, this desired neutrality of register and lexis is relative and subjective. But the aim is to produce a text which might also be adapted to other media – film, radio, theatre, television – and to different periods and settings. With regard to Venuti’s method of intercultural historicism, I do not have a specific third text in mind; if anything, the third text here is based loosely on an amalgam of mid twentieth century postwar British English sources, encompassing new wave cinema, kitchen sink dramas, or the early plays of Harold Pinter or Shelagh Delaney. At the same time this approach also aims to look back to the serialized novels of the nineteenth century and forward to the TV soap operas of the twenty-first.

This attempt to provide a geographically and socially non-specific translation of a fin-de-siècle French short story also aims to demonstrate the ongoing relevance of certain themes of decadence. The most pertinent is the intriguing dynamic of the relationship between the two protagonists, Marie and X (whom Marie refers to as Ernest, suggesting that both the narrator and

the author can't control her). This relationship transcends the stereotypical love of a rich man for a female prostitute who stays with him for his money, or the *Pretty Woman* version of Cinderella where the rich knight in armour rescues the damsel in distress. There are elements of both free will and tenderness in Marie's final shouted declaration that she has carried on sleeping with X as form of consolation, a choice that we might interpret as a third space between Célestin and an autonomous life as a sex worker (at one point Marie arrives at the hotel with a black eye; although we are not told who was responsible, the implication is that Célestin may have hit her). There is an interesting mutual respect between the two protagonists that prefigures some of Michel Houellebecq's musings on economic and erotic capital, but with less cynicism.⁴⁰ In retrospect the narrator's initial thoughts about his friend's interest in the behaviour of sex workers make sense. But Verlaine is careful to avoid excessive sentimentality: some time after the scene translated above, X happens to see Marie in a café; they go to a hotel room, whereupon she promptly runs off with his wallet. The next time that he sees her, she tells him not to be angry and says that they should remain friends, despite her behaviour:

'[...] MAIS J'AI BIEN FAIT, tu sais.'
Il faut croire qu'il le savait. Car il la voit toujours. Du moins, j'en suis sûr, puisque il ne me l'a pas dit, et là pour moi finit son récit.

['BUT I DID THE RIGHT THING, you know.'
We have to believe that he did know. Because he still sees her. At least, I'm sure of it, since he hasn't told me, and that for me is the end of his story.']⁴¹

The short story ends with this final intervention from the narrator, who assumes that X's relationship with Marie continues, based undoubtedly on mutual understanding, and, arguably, on mutual exploitation.

Writing recently about Georges Simenon in the *London Review of Books*, John Lanchester makes an interesting distinction between English and French novels that bears quotation in full:

The reader whose idea of the novel is formed by the English canon may at some stage start to read books in the French tradition. At that point, it may suddenly seem that everything one has previously read has essentially been children's literature. Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope, even Austen and Eliot, are all wonderful writers, but their work is founded in wish fulfilment, happy endings and love conquering all. The side notes and off notes and

internal dissent are all there, of course, but they are subtextual, subtle, inexplicit. The main current of the English novel is in the direction of Happy Ever After, along the lines of Miss Prism's deathless observation: 'The good ended happily and the bad unhappily. That is what fiction means.' When you turn from that tradition to the work of Laclos, Flaubert, Balzac, Stendhal, Maupassant and Proust, it's like getting a glass of ice water in the face. Everybody lies all the time; codes of honour are mainly a delusion and will get you into serious trouble; the same goes for love; if you think the world is how it is described in consoling fictions, you have many catastrophic surprises in store. Above all, the central lesson of the French tradition is that people's motives are sex and money, and you can write about those things as sex and money, directly, no euphemisms required.⁴²

Like many distinctions between national traditions, this one adumbrates an astute insight based on years of reading. Where might we locate Verlaine's prose works in this model? X is motivated by sex but has no concerns about money, as far as we know; Marie is motivated by both sex and money, even if her relationship with X enables her to separate them for a while. But what might be a largely accurate appraisal of Zola's *Nana*, or Maupassant's *Bel-ami*, seems to underplay the unspoken possibility of affection, tenderness, and love in Verlaine's 'Deux mots d'une fille'. In this respect Verlaine's prose echoes the moments of optimism to be found in many of his poems.

One objective of Naturalism was to equate the origins of human behaviour with basic animal motivations of survival and reproduction, played out in different forms of desire, greed and selfishness. In some respects, decadence locates these same concerns in a fin-de-siècle context that draws on analogous historical periods and similar interests in decline and renewal. But at the same time decadence allows for the possibility of alternative forms of community where relationships are not simply transactions based on the value of economic capital. It is with regard to this possibility that translating Verlaine's prose becomes more than simply a project of introducing the minor work of a great poet to a wider audience; it is also part of the aim to introduce a further example of decadence both to the same audience and to critics from all linguistic backgrounds.

¹ Paul Verlaine, 'Les Poètes maudits [1884 et 1888]', in *Œuvres en prose complètes*, ed. by Jacques Borel (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1972), pp. 633–91.

² Paul Verlaine, *Œuvres posthumes*, 2 vols (Paris: Messein, 1903).

³ Jacques Borel, 'Avant-propos', in Verlaine, *Œuvres en prose complètes*, pp. xi–xviii (p. xvi).

⁴ The exception is 'La Main de Major Müller', the story of an army officer who loses a hand in a duel. According to one of the characters in the story, the preserved hand becomes animate and eventually helps the dying officer to kill

himself out of mercy. This text may owe a debt to both Gautier's 1840 short story 'Le Pied de momie' and Balzac's 1831 novel *La Peau de chagrin*.

⁵ Walter Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*, trans. by Howard Eiland et al. (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 70.

⁶ *Poems of Paul Verlaine*, trans. by Gertrude Hall Brownell (Chicago: Stone & Kimbell, 1895). Arthur Symons published 'Tears in my Heart' (a translation of 'Il pleut dans mon coeur') in *The Academy* (12 July 1890), p. 31, and other individual translations were published in reviews and periodicals and within verse collections by Ernest Dowson and John Gray around this time too.

⁷ *Selected Poems*, trans. by C. F. MacIntyre (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1948); *Forty Poems*, trans. by Roland Gant and Claude Apcher (London: Falcon Press, 1948).

⁸ *Poems*, trans. by Jacques Leclercq (Mount Vernon, NY: Peter Pauper Press, 1961); *Selected Verse*, trans. by Doris-Jeanne Gourévitch (Waltham, MA: Blaisdell Publishing, 1970); and *Selected Poems*, trans. by Joanna Richardson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974).

⁹ *Selected Poems*, trans. by Martin Sorrell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) and *One Hundred and One Poems*, trans. by Norman H. Shapiro (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999).

¹⁰ *Paul Verlaine: A Bilingual Selection of His Verse*, trans. by Samuel N. Rosenberg (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019). Hereafter abbreviated as *A Bilingual Selection*.

¹¹ To my knowledge there are no published English translations of Verlaine's prose at all, not even in the selections of poetry.

¹² For 'Deux mots d'une fille', see Verlaine, *Œuvres en prose complètes*, pp. 168–82. It has recently been republished within *Histoires comme ça, avec 'Gosses'* (Angoulême: Editions Marguerite Waknine, 2013).

¹³ Nicolas Valazza, 'Preface', in *A Bilingual Selection*, pp. viii–xvi (p. x). Italics in original.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Verlaine, 'Charles Husson', in *Œuvres en prose complètes*, pp. 150–54. This short story was published in *La Revue indépendante* in December 1888. In the posthumous publication of Verlaine's collected works it was given the alternative title of 'Rampo', which was one of the names given to the many informal gambling games that took place in bars with dice or counters. All translations suggested here are my own, unless otherwise stated.

¹⁶ For a study of the relationship between law, morality, and free will during the period, see Ruth Harris, *Murders and Madness: Medicine, Law and Society in the Fin de Siècle* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

¹⁷ See Philip Stephan, *Paul Verlaine and the Decadence: 1882–1890* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1974); A. E. Carter, *The Idea of Decadence in French Literature, 1830–1900* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978); and Ellis Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

¹⁸ Maurice Barrès, 'La sensation en littérature: La folie de Charles Baudelaire', *Les Taches d'encre*, 1 (5 November 1884), 3–26, and 2 (5 December 1884), 21–43 (p. 27). Quoted in Stephan, *Paul Verlaine and the Decadence*, p. 163.

¹⁹ Julia Przyboś, *Zoom sur les décadents* (Paris: Corti, 2002). For a brief précis of this idea in English, see also Julia Przyboś, 'Polish Decadence: Leopold Staff's *Igrzysko* in the European Context', *Nordlit*, 28 (2011), 79–87 (p. 79).

²⁰ This initial appraisal of Verlaine's prose works should not overlook some of the more experimental pieces that he wrote, particularly the fragments collected in 'Gosses'. A critical study of his prose work remains a desideratum of the research. To date the most comprehensive one is Benoît Abert, 'La prose de Verlaine: Vers une esthétique de la contrariété', unpublished MA dissertation, University of Lille, 2015. I would like to thank Professor Jessica Wilker of the University of Lille for drawing my attention to this work.

²¹ Stephen Romer, 'Introduction', in *French Decadent Tales*, trans. by Stephen Romer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. xi.

²² Email exchange with Stephen Romer, 29 June 2020.

²³ Adam Piette, 'Review of *One Hundred and One Poems* by Paul Verlaine: *A Bilingual Edition*, trans. by Norman R. Shapiro, and *Paul Verlaine: Selected Poems*, trans. by Martin Sorrell', *Translation and Literature*, 9.2 (2000), 258–66 (p. 260).

²⁴ I am thinking, for example, of Ranjit Bolt's version of Molière's *Le Misanthrope*, translated as *The Grouch* and first performed at the West Yorkshire Playhouse, Leeds in 2008. See Claire Brennan, 'All Rhyme, but no Reason in Glossy Grouch', *The Observer* (24 February 2008) <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2008/feb/24/theatre1>> [accessed 28 June 2020].

²⁵ Romer, *French Decadent Tales*, p. xxxvii.

²⁶ See Samuel Rosenberg's interesting account of his approach in 'Remarks on Translating the Poetry of Paul Verlaine in English', *Nouvelle-Fribourg* (Summer 2017) <<http://www.nouvellefribourg.com/universite/remarks-on-translating-the-poetry-of-paul-verlaine-into-english/>> [accessed 28 June 2020].

²⁷ Samuel Rosenberg, 'Translator's Note', in *A Bilingual Selection*, p. xx. See pp. 318–21 for his translation of 'L'Arrivée du catalogue'.

²⁸ Joseph Acquisto, quoted on the back cover of Paul Verlaine, *A Bilingual Selection*.

²⁹ See 'Seven Tricky Verlaines, translated by John R. G. Turner', *Comparative Critical Studies*, 7.1 (2010), 124–30. See also four further translations published in *PN Review*, 37.3 (2011). Turner's translations have been commended three times for *The Times* Stephen Spender Prize, in 2011 and 2012.

³⁰ Paul Verlaine, 'A Poor Young Shepherd', in *Oeuvres poétiques complètes*, ed. by Yves-Alain Favre (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1992), p. 93.

³¹ © John R. G. Turner (2020). I gratefully acknowledge the author's permission to reprint this translation here. A collected volume of Turner's Verlaine translations is currently under consideration by Carcanet Press. An earlier version of this translation was sent speculatively first to *The Guardian* and then to the *Independent* to mark the wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton in April 2011. Sadly, both newspapers declined to publish it. I would like to thank Turner for his instructive comments on the first version of this article and for many conversations about Verlaine over the last ten years, including an annual session on translation with students at the University of Leeds taking the module 'The Pleasures of French Poetry'.

³² Turner wonders now whether the rhythm for 'DeliKate' may have been inspired by the parodic music-hall song 'Burlington Bertie from Bow', credited to William Hargreaves: 'I'm Burlington Bertie, I rise at ten-thirty | And saunter along like a toff' (email exchange, 2 July 2020).

³³ Lawrence Venuti, 'Translation, Publishing and World Literature: J. V. Foix's *Daybook 1918* and the Strangeness of Minority', in *Sociologies of Poetry Translation: Emerging Perspectives*, ed. by Jacob Blakesley (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), pp. 45-65 (p. 55).

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ See 'Exit the King', *National Theatre* <<https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/shows/exit-the-king>> [accessed 30 June 2020].

³⁶ Marber's version was developed from Eugène Ionesco, *Exit the King*, trans. by Donald Watson (London: Samuel French, 1973).

³⁷ Verlaine, *Œuvres en prose complètes*, p. 169. Jacques Borel notes that the text is a thinly disguised version of Verlaine's personal experience of a similar relationship (see *Œuvres en prose complètes*, p. 1203).

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 180-81.

³⁹ I would like to thank Catherine Kaiserman for her very helpful comments on my translation of this passage.

⁴⁰ The significance of both economic and erotic capital is introduced in Houellebecq's first novel, *Extension du domaine de la lutte* from 1994 (translated into English under the title *Whatever* in 1998, although a more literal rendering would be 'Extension of the domain of the struggle'). At the end of *Soumission* (2015, translated as *Submission* in the same year), the narrator, a specialist on Huysmans, pays for sex workers to visit his flat; since he also orders food to be delivered, he no longer needs to leave home. Houellebecq's fiction continues the lineage of the nineteenth-century Naturalist novel into the twenty-first century in several ways, from the use of conventional narrative techniques (narration, plot, characterization, dialogue) to the interest in sociology and the controversial reflections on identity.

⁴¹ Verlaine, *Œuvres en prose complètes*, p. 182.

⁴² John Lanchester, 'Maigret's Room', *London Review of Books*, 42.11 (4 June 2020), 9-12 (p. 11).