Before Wisdom:

The Early Poems of Paul Verlaine

Translated from French
by Keith Waldrop and K. A. Hays
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Translator's Introduction

The beginning of May 1874, Paul Verlaine—thirty years old, in prison—learned that his wife’s plea for a legal separation had been granted and that she would retain custody of their young son. Two hours later he sent for the prison chaplain and requested a catechism. Come June that same year he announced his conversion, and in August he confessed and took communion.

He had, of course, at the usual age, received religious instruction and taken communion. But already then, or shortly after, Verlaine was known to be dipping by preference into dirty books—well, probably not all that dirty, perhaps naughty, like Alexis Piron’s Ode to Priapus—and at the age of thirteen he stumbled across a copy of Baudelaire’s The Flowers of Evil. This is more extraordinary than it sounds; it was 1857, the year Baudelaire’s book came out—and was banned. To the adolescent Verlaine those scandalous flowers seem to have revealed immediately a sort of poem he could spend his life writing. (Ten years later he attended Baudelaire’s funeral.)

His fourteenth year, he mailed off to Victor Hugo the earliest of his still extant verses, “Death.” The lack of an answer from the master in exile, while it may have rankled, did nothing to stop further production. He was now, and for good, Verlaine the poet, unsuccessful though he might be in everything else.

Child Wife

To situate the violence of Verlaine’s temperament, biographers remind us of a military father, a doting mother, and a great deal of drink. The mother not only doted but was often in danger—throttled by her son from time to time or even attacked with a knife—and incredibly longsuffering. Occasionally he also pulled a knife on one friend or another who tried to curtail his drinking.
His father died when he was twenty-one. At twenty-five, he met Mathilde Mauté, sixteen, with little delay asked for her hand, celebrated her in a series of poems—The Good Song (La Bonne Chanson), his third book—and married her the following year.

It should be noted that Verlaine was generally considered—and considered himself—physically ugly, repulsive even (thus compared, by some, to Socrates). According to the memoir Mathilde wrote after his death (published twenty-one years after her own) she at first, like everybody, found him unattractive, but then, on a second encounter,

noticed a complete change in his looks as he talked to me. His face seemed illuminated by a joy from within; his gaze, usually dark and glowing, became tender and caressing as he looked at me, his mouth in a smile. He seemed both excited and happy. At that moment, he was no longer ugly, and I thought of the lovely fairy tale of Beauty and the Beast, in which love transforms the Beast into Prince Charming.

Married, they seem to have lived happily enough for a few months. Two catastrophes helped destroy their peace. One was the Franco-Prussian war, declared 19 July 1870, three weeks and a day before the wedding. The danger to Verlaine turned out to be, not so much the Germans (he was adroit at avoiding actual combat) as the boredom of guard duty, leading him back to the alcohol and absinthe he had more or less forsworn. After the surrender of the French army, which ended the Second Empire, he supported the Paris Commune enthusiastically and, upon its collapse, found himself in jeopardy.

The other catastrophe was Rimbaud.
Melancholy

I

Resignation

Still a mere child, I dreamt the Koh-i-nor,
Extravaganza Persian and Papal,
Heliogabalus, Sardanapologus!

My desire built, underneath a gold ceiling,
Amid billowing perfumes and musical din,
Endless harems, paradises of feeling.

Cooler these days, though with ardent tendencies,
But knowing life better now, better at kneeling,
I’ve learned to curb my beautiful frenzies,
Albeit without completely giving in.

Well yes, the grandiose slips away: a pity,
But down with the nice, throw the dregs away.
I still despise the woman merely pretty.
As well as slant rhyme. And friends that pray.
II

_Nevermore_

Memory, memory: what do you want with me? Fall
Prompted a thrush through the vacant air;
Sun meanwhile, over a yellowing forest wind
Invading from the north, thrust its monotonous pall.

We were alone, side by side, we walked in a dream,
She and I, thoughts blown about, like our hair,
When, movingly, she turned to me, her voice
Golden: “Which day of your life has been the best?”

Her clear sweet voice, angelically fresh; my discreet
Smile I thought adequate reply, and certainly blest
I bowed devoutly to kiss her white hand... — Ah,

First flowers, how fragrant! as there slips
In a delightful murmur, the initial _yes_
From adored lips.
V

*Song of Autumn*

The long moan
Of autumnal
   Violins
Assails my heart
In a frail
   Monotone.

Faint and stifled
As the hours
   Toll,
I try recalling
Days gone by
   And cry,

Blown in ways
The wicked wind
   Weaves,
Here, there,
Like the dead
   Leaves.
All my memories, with the squawk of
Roused birds taking wing, fall on me,
Fall with the heart's falling leaves
Around my bent trunk of an alder tree
Mirrored in the nearby melancholy flow
Of the blue river of Regret.
They fall, and then an ill
Murmur, quieted by the damp wind,
Fades by degree into the tree until
Finally nothing is heard,
Nothing but a voice celebrating Her Absence,
Nothing but the voice — languid! —
Which was my First Love, the bird
Singing still, as once, and
In the sad splendor of the rising
Moon, pale and stark,
On this dull melancholy summer night
Full of silence, full of the dark, keeps
Rocking against the sky, stroked by a breeze,
Tree that shudders and bird that weeps.
Spleen

The roses were red, all of them,  
And the ivy all black.

Dearest, at your least shrug  
All my despair comes back.

The sky was too blue, too soft  
The sea too green, the air too light.

Always I dread—such suspense!—  
Your sudden atrocious flight.

I'm fed up with the glossy leaves  
Of the holly, with the shiny boxtree too

And the infinite stretch of the land  
And, alas! with all but you.
My simplicity you never took in at all, not
At all, my poor girl
And, annoyed, forehead wrinkled,
You hit the trail.

Your eyes, reflecting no unkindness,
Unfaithful mirrors of blue,
Took on a sour angle—unfortunate sister—
Spoiling your view.

Your little arms you wave about like
Some hero mean but strong,
 Emitting bitter cries, tubercular, alas!
You, who were essential song.

For the rumble and hiss of storms and of the heart
Have frightened you and—damn!
You've gone bleating to your mother
Like a stricken lamb,

Not recognizing the clarity and honor
Of a love brave and strong,
Joyful in bad times, grave in the good,
Until death forever young.