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Sylvia Townsend Warner *

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Nine Translations from Baudelaire (1959)

*Sylvia Townsend Warner**

Le Gouffre

Chant d'Automne I

Chant d'Automne II

Remords Posthume

Les Deux Bonnes Filles

Brumes et Pluies

La Fontaine de Sang

from Tableaux Parisiens

La Mort des Pauvres¹

Editor's note: 'How scantily we would exist if not for 19th century France', Warner wrote to William Maxwell on 6 January 1959.² She was reading the journals of the Goncourt brothers, which prompted this comment, in December 1958 and January 1959. The nine translations from Baudelaire are dated 1959, a year when Warner and Ackland made a trip to Brittany in April and May.

*Warner was much involved with French literary culture in the second half of the 1950s. Chatto & Windus published her translation of Proust's Contre Sainte-Beuve in spring 1958.³ Eighteen months later, following its good reception, she wrote to Maxwell that 'I am once again semi-married to Proust'.⁴ She was referring to plans for a revision of Scott Moncrieff's translation of *A la recherche du temps perdu*. Warner and Andreas Mayor worked together on the first volume in 1960 until Scott Moncrieff's nephew and niece, his executors, decided to cancel the plan. Late in 1960 she was commissioned by Chatto to translate *La côte sauvage*, the first novel by Jean-René Huguenin. Her translation, titled *The Shipwreck*, was*

published in 1962, the same year that the twenty-six-year-old Huguenin died in a car accident.

Stendhal was the French nineteenth-century writer to whom Warner most frequently alluded. She more than once thanked David Garnett for having in 1922 introduced her to Stendhal's writings.⁵ Her correspondence with W. J. Strachan gives some indication of her wider engagement with French literature, with discussions of for instance Gide, Musset, Hugo, Peyrefitte and Mauriac.⁶ She remarks to Strachan on 'the appalling non-comprehension of the place of France in English history which exists in almost all standard English teaching',⁷ and commends his translations of French poetry in terms that are suggestive about her own work in this field:

the thing I like most about these translations is that they read like translations, a coat of paint so closely laid on that one is aware of the grain of the wood below. I don't know if that is how you think translations should be – which is why this may be a gaffe; but I hope you share this opinion, because in that case you will know my praise to be the high praise I mean it to be. All the time I read I was sharply aware of the sensations of reading poems in French...⁸

It is difficult to find any references to Baudelaire in Warner's published work or correspondence. She does mention him in a 1974 interview with François Gallix to be published in the next issue of this *Journal*: 'fear is a very good companion to writers... Baudelaire would not have written half as well as he did if he had not been a frightened man'. These translations have never been mentioned in print before now, but Warner thought well enough of them to make both a manuscript and typescript version of her fair copies of the poems in the parallel English and French texts reproduced below.

Le Gouffre

Pascal had his abyss, opening at his feet
Whichever way he turned. Do, think, desire, that pit
Lies under all. Witness my hairs, time and again
Raised on my scalp because the wind of Fear went by.

Above, below, around ... the fathomless, the stretch
Of barren shore, silence, space that lures and appals.
On the dark background of my nights, God with skilled hand
Paints an implacable, ever-changing nightmare.

I dread to fall asleep as one dreads a cavern
Thronged with nameless fears and leading – to what? I see
Only infinity from every window,

And my soul, driven on from one brink to another,
Enviest the Uncreate's insensibility.
– Oh! stay within the bounds of number and person!

Chant d'Automne I

Soon we shall be thrust down in the cold and the mirk.
Farewell, shimmer and light of our curtailed summer!
Already I can hear the death-knock of falling
Billets of wood resound from the courtyard flagstones.

Winter will repossess my whole existence: rage,
Hatred, shudders, loathing, a penal servitude;
And my heart like the sun in his hell of polar
Darkness will be merely a red, frozen lump.

I quake as I hear each log dropped. Were they building
A scaffold it could not echo more hollowly.
It seems as though my brain were the tower that gives way
Under the battering-ram's insensate brute blows.

Lulled by that dreary knock, knock, knock, I tell myself
That somewhere a coffin is being hastily
Nailed together. For whom? Yesterday, summer, now
Autumn – that boding sound has departure in it.

Le Gouffre

Pascal avait son gouffre, avec lui se mouvant.
— Hélas! tout est abîme, — action, désir, rêve,
Parole! et sur mon poil qui tout droit se relève
Mainte fois de la Peur je sens passer le vent.

En haut, en bas, partout, la profondeur, la grève,
Le silence, l'espace affreux et captivant ...
Sur le fond de mes nuits Dieu de son doigt savant
Dessine un cauchemar multiforme et sans trêve.

J'ai peur du sommeil comme on a peur d'un grand trou⁹[,]
Tout plein de vague horreur, menant on ne sait où;
Je ne vois qu'infini par toutes les fenêtres,

Et mon esprit, toujours du vertige hanté,
Jalouse du néant l'insensibilité.
— Ah! ne jamais sortir des Nombres et des Êtres!

Chant d'Automne I

Bientôt nous plongerons dans les froides ténèbres;
Adieu, vive clarté de nos étés trop courts!
J'entends déjà tomber avec des chocs funèbres
Le bois retentissant sur le pavé des cours.

Tout l'hiver va rentrer dans mon être: colère,
Haine, frissons, horreur, labeur dur et forcé,
Et, comme le soleil dans son enfer polaire,
Mon coeur ne sera plus qu'un bloc rouge et glacé.

J'écoute en frémissant chaque bûche qui tombe
L'échafaud qu'on bâtit n'a pas d'écho plus sourd.
Mon esprit est pareil à la tour qui succombe
Sous les coups du bélier infatigable et lourd.

Il me semble, bercé par ce choc monotone,
Qu'on cloue en grande hâte un cercueil quelque part.
Pour qui? — C'était hier l'été; voici l'automne!
Ce bruit mystérieux sonne comme un départ.

Chant d'Automne II

I love the greenish light of your long eyes, my dove,
My fair one, but to-day all sweets are soured for me,
And nothing, not your love, your hearth, our privacy,
Can replace the sunlight glittering on the waves.

Yet love me none the less, soft of heart! Be mother
Though to an ungrateful, though to a spiteful child.
Sister or paramour, be the fleeting caress
Of autumn in splendour, of the sun in setting.

A brief task. The grave waits, and is imperative.
Oh! let me with my brow laid in your lap enjoy –
Even while I sigh for parching summer's white-heat –
The gentle yellow gleam of a Saint Martin's summer.

Remords Posthume

When you shall slumber, my equivocal beauty,
Beneath a monument of ebon marble reared,
When for your house of state and warm chamber you have
Only a trench and a vault where moisture drips down;

When the stone coercing your apprehensive breast
And the limber grace of your indifferent loins
Shall prevent your heart from throbbing and desiring
And your feet from treading what wilful path you choose,

The grave, made privy to my ineffable dream –
For the grave has always understood the poet –
Will say, in those vast nights where sleep dares not set foot,

'How has it profited you, unachieved harlot
Not to know what the dead bewail the loss of?'
And the worms will riddle your skin, like a remorse.

Chant d'Automne II

J'aime de vos longs yeux la lumière verdâtre,
Douce beauté, mais tout aujourd'hui m'est amer,
Et rien, ni votre amour, ni le boudoir, ni l'âtre,
Ne me vaut le soleil rayonnant sur la mer.

Et pourtant aimez-moi, tendre coeur! soyez mère,
Même pour un ingrat, même pour un méchant;
Amante ou soeur, soyez la douceur éphémère
D'un glorieux automne ou d'un soleil couchant.

Courte tâche! La tombe attend; elle est avide!
Ah! laissez-moi, mon front posé sur vos genoux,
Goûter, en regrettant l'été blanc et torride,
De l'arrière-saison le rayon jaune et doux!

Remords Posthume

Lorsque tu dormiras, ma belle ténébreuse,
Au fond d'un monument construit en marbre noir,
Et lorsque tu n'auras pour alcôve et manoir
Qu'un caveau pluvieux et qu'une fosse creuse;

Quand la pierre, opprimant ta poitrine peureuse
Et tes flancs qu'assouplit un charmant nonchaloir,
Empêchera ton coeur de battre et de vouloir,
Et tes pieds de courir leur course aventureuse,

Le tombeau, confident de mon rêve infini
(Car le tombeau toujours comprendra le poète),
Durant ces grandes nuits d'où le somme est banni,

Te dira: «Que vous sert, courtisane imparfaite,
De n'avoir pas connu ce que pleurent les morts?»
— Et le ver rongera ta peau comme un remords.

Les Deux Bonnes Soeurs¹⁰

Death and Debauchery are two willing lasses,
Lavish with kisses and blooming with good health,
Whose ever-virgin wombs under tattered aprons
Still flout the ordinance to bring forth in sorrow.

The baleful poet, arch-destroyer of households,
Minion of Satan, but none the richer for it,
Eyes through the privet-hedge of graveyard and brothel
A bed where never none lay wakeful for remorse.

And the coffin and the couch, pregnant with lewd jokes,
Proffer us, like a pair of obliging sisters,
Turn by turn, terrible pleasures, ghastly delights.

Hot-armed Debauchery, when will you entomb me?
Death with your rival charms, when, Oh when will you come
And graft your cypress-bough on her stinking myrtle?

Brumes et Pluies

Autumns in your decline, winters, bedraggled springs,
I love and praise you, O lullabying seasons,
For thus enveloping my heart and brain alike
In a misty winding sheet and a vague burial.

In these great plains of time where the cold tempest plays,
Where night after long night the weathervane grows hoarse,
My soul more readily than in the warmth and flush
Of May unfolds its black bat's wings with amplitude.

Nothing is sweeter to the heart where mourning shows
Congregate, and on which the hoarfrost has long since
Gathered, O wan seasons, queens of our calendar,

Than the monotony of your unlighted skies;
Unless it be, in some moonless twilight coupled,
On an adventured bed to lull sorrow asleep.

Les Deux Bonnes Soeurs

La Débauche et la Mort sont deux aimables filles,
Prodigues de baisers et riches de santé,
Dont le flanc toujours vierge et drapé de guenilles
Sous l'éternel labeur n'a jamais enfanté.

Au poète sinistre, ennemi des familles,
Favori de l'enfer, courtisan mal renté,
Tombeaux et lupanars montrent sous leurs charmillles
Un lit que le remords n'a jamais fréquenté.

Et la bière et l'alcôve en blasphèmes fécondes
Nous offrent tour à tour, comme deux bonnes soeurs,
De terribles plaisirs et d'affreuses douceurs.

Quand veux-tu m'enterrer, Débauche aux bras immondes?
Ô Mort, quand viendras-tu, sa rivale en attraits,
Sur ses myrtes infects enter tes noirs cyprès?

Brumes et Pluies

Ô fins d'automne, hivers, printemps trempés de boue,
Endormeuses saisons! je vous aime et vous loue
D'envelopper ainsi mon coeur et mon cerveau
D'un linceul vapoureux et d'un vague tombeau.

Dans cette grande plaine où l'autan froid se joue,
Où par les longues nuits la girouette s'enroue,
Mon âme mieux qu'au temps du tiède renouveau
Ouvrira largement ses ailes de corbeau.

Rien n'est plus doux au coeur plein de choses funèbres,
Et sur qui dès longtemps descendent les frimas,
Ô blafardes saisons, reines de nos climats,

Que l'aspect permanent de vos pâles ténèbres,
— Si ce n'est, par un soir sans lune, deux à deux,
D'endormir la douleur sur un lit hasardeux.

La Fontaine de Sang

I sometimes feel that my blood is welling from me,
As water with rhythmic sobs wells from the fountain.
I can hear the long-drawn murmur of its flowing
But when I fumble for the wound, no wound is there.

On through the city as through a water-meadow
Turning cobblestones to little islands it flows,
And every creature quenches its thirst at it,
And every hue of nature it tinges red.

I have often implored cozening vintages
To lull for half a day the terror that saps me;
Wine makes my sight sharper and quickens my hearing.

And I have sought from love a forgetful slumber.
Love only lends me a mattress stuffed with needles
By whose means these cruel hussies will get their drink.

La Fontaine de Sang

Il me semble parfois que mon sang coule à flots,
Ainsi qu'une fontaine aux rythmiques sanglots.
Je l'entends bien qui coule avec un long murmure,
Mais je me tâte en vain pour trouver la blessure.

À travers la cité, comme dans un champ clos,
Il s'en va, transformant les pavés en îlots,
Désaltérant la soif de chaque créature,
Et partout colorant en rouge la nature.

J'ai demandé souvent à des vins captieux
D'endormir pour un jour la terreur qui me mine;
Le vin rend l'oeil plus clair et l'oreille plus fine!

J'ai cherché dans l'amour un sommeil oublieux;
Mais l'amour n'est pour moi qu'un matelas d'aiguilles
Fait pour donner à boire à ces cruelles filles!

'La servante au grand coeur dont vous étiez jalouse'¹¹

That kind willing servant whom you were jealous of,
And who sleeps out her sleep under a grassy plat¹² –
We ought at least to take her a handful of flowers.
The dead, the hapless dead, have heavy ills to bear;
And when October, who lops and trashes old trees,
Puffs his melancholy wind among their gravestones
They must surely think the living very heartless
To sleep, as sleep they do, tucked up warmly in bed,
When for their part, ravaged by dismal trains of thought,
With no bedfellow, no kind crony to chat with,
Old freezing skeletons laboured at by the worms,
They feel the winter snows drip and the century
Drain away while never a friend or kinsman's hand
Renews the tatters that hang on their iron rails.

If when the log hisses and sings in the twilight
I saw her peacefully sit down in the armchair –
If in some cold blue night of midwinter I chanced
Upon her, crouched in a corner of my bedroom,
Grave-faced, and risen from her last long sleep to gaze
With brooding motherly look on the child grown man,
What could I find to say to that faithful spirit
Seeing the tears starting from her sunken eyelids?

'La servante au grand coeur dont vous étiez jalouse'

La servante au grand coeur dont vous étiez jalouse,
Et qui dort son sommeil sous une humble pelouse,
Nous devrions pourtant lui porter quelques fleurs.
Les morts, les pauvres morts, ont de grandes douleurs,
Et quand Octobre souffle, émondeur des vieux arbres,
Son vent mélancolique à l'entour de leurs marbres,
Certe, ils doivent trouver les vivants bien ingrats,
À dormir, comme ils font, chaudement dans leurs draps,
Tandis que, dévorés de noires songeries,
Sans compagnon de lit, sans bonnes causeries,
Vieux squelettes gelés travaillés par le ver,
Ils sentent s'égoutter les neiges de l'hiver
Et le siècle couler, sans qu'amis ni famille
Remplacent les lambeaux qui pendent à leur grille.

Lorsque la bûche siffle et chante, si le soir
Calme, dans le fauteuil je la voyais s'asseoir,
Si, par une nuit bleue et froide de décembre,
Je la trouvais tapie en un coin de ma chambre,
Grave, et venant du fond de son lit éternel
Couvrir l'enfant grandi de son oeil maternel,
Que pourrais-je répondre à cette âme pieuse,
Voyant tomber des pleurs de sa paupière creuse?

La Mort des Pauvres

Death is what consoles us, Death is what we live by,
Death is our aim in life, alas! and the one hope
That like a strong cordial mettles us, fires our brains,
Puts heart in us to keep going until nightfall.

Yonderside of the storm and the snow and the hail
It is the light pulsing on our dark horizon;
It is the good old inn, licensed for one and all,
Where we may eat and sleep and settle down at last.

It is an Angel whose magnetic hands dispense
Sleep and the gift to dream oneself in paradise,
And who trims up the bed for poor and naked folk;

It is the crown of Gods, the granary of souls,
The beggar's purse and the dear land of his fathers,
It is the portal thrown open on unknown skies.

La Mort des Pauvres

C'est la Mort qui console, hélas! et qui fait vivre;
C'est le but de la vie, et c'est le seul espoir
Qui, comme un élixir, nous monte et nous enivre,
Et nous donne le coeur de marcher jusqu'au soir;

À travers la tempête, et la neige, et le givre,
C'est la clarté vibrante à notre horizon noir
C'est l'auberge fameuse inscrite sur le livre,
Où l'on pourra manger, et dormir, et s'asseoir;

C'est un Ange qui tient dans ses doigts magnétiques
Le sommeil et le don des rêves extatiques,
Et qui refait le lit des gens pauvres et nus;

C'est la gloire des Dieux, c'est le grenier mystique,
C'est la bourse du pauvre et sa patrie antique,
C'est le portique ouvert sur les Cieux inconnus!

Notes

- *1893–1978.
- 1 This is Warner's contents list of the selection. The poems were first published in the following editions of *Les Fleurs du Mal*: 'Le Gouffre' (1868); 'Chant d'Automne I' (1861, as 'Chant d'Automne'); 'Chant d'Automne II' (1868, printed for the first time along with 'Chant d'Automne I' as 'Chant d'Automne II'); 'Remords Posthume' (1857); 'Les Deux Bonnes Filles' (i.e. 'Les Deux Bonnes Soeurs') (1857); 'Brumes et Pluies' (1857); 'La Fontaine de Sang' (1857); from *Tableaux Parisiens* (1861, i.e. 'La servante au grand coeur dont vous étiez jalouse' from the section 'Tableaux Parisiens'); 'La Mort des Pauvres' (1857).
 - 2 *Letters*, ed. William Maxwell (London: Chatto & Windus, 1982), p. 171.
 - 3 Claire Harman, *Sylvia Townsend Warner: A Biography* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1989), p. 270.
 - 4 *The Element of Lavishness: Letters of Sylvia Townsend Warner and William Maxwell 1935 – 1978*, ed. Michael Steinman (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 2001), p. 80; letter of 27 October 1959.
 - 5 *Letters*, p. 295; to David Garnett, 5 March 1977. See also *Sylvia & David, The Townsend Warner/Garnett Letters*, ed. Richard Garnett (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1994), p. 58 (letter of 17 December 1955) and p. 66 (letter of 24 January 1962).
 - 6 *The Living Curve: Letters to W. J. Strachan, 1929–1979*, ed. Christopher Hewett (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1984).
 - 7 *The Living Curve*, p. 45; letter of 25 February 1945.
 - 8 *The Living Curve*, p. 97; letter of 21 April 1948.
 - 9 The *Pléiade* edition has a comma after 'trou' at the end of line 9.
 - 10 Warner titles this poem 'Les Deux Bonnes Filles' in her index of the translated poems but, correctly, 'Les Deux Bonnes Soeurs' in the body of her typescript and manuscript.
 - 11 Warner gives the poem no title beyond 'from *Tableaux Parisiens*' in her manuscript and typescript versions.
 - 12 Warner clearly has 'plat' (rather than 'plot') in both her manuscript and typescript versions. The third definition of 'plat' in the OED is 'An area of land (usually of small extent)'.