

Jan Owen, *The Offhand Angel: New and Selected Poems* (Eyewear Publishing, 2015)

Charles Baudelaire, *Selected Poems from Les Fleurs du Mal* translated by Jan Owen and introduced by Rosemary Lloyd (Arc Publications, 2015)

As an undergraduate in the 1980s, I took French translation classes with the famous Professor Colin Duckworth at Melbourne University. I was less impressed then than I am now at his story of sleeping in Voltaire's own bed (*sans* Voltaire, needless to say); and we all did grow rather tired of hearing about Samuel Beckett, on whom he was a world authority. I had left university by the time he started acting in *Neighbours*; probably that would have impressed me most of all.

However, his approach to language, as a writer, critic and translator, has stayed with me. He was superb at demonstrating the balance between accuracy and tone in the choice of words; how sometimes a less literal translation could more effectively capture meaning and mood. Nowhere is striking this balance more critical than in poetry.

Hence I was very intrigued by the opportunity to review this double offering: a volume of new and selected poems by South Australian poet Jan Owen, as well as her translation of selected poems from Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* (The Flowers of Evil, or, maybe, The Bad Flowers). An Australian woman in the 21st century, and the 19th century French inspiration for the Decadent movement – it seems an unlikely pairing.

I started by trying to understand Owen's own poetry, which has been recognised by several literary awards. The collection covers a broad range of topics, written with a deft and light touch and filled with scents, colours and muted emotions.

Within several poems, there are lists of colours that are almost poems in themselves, drawing attention to both similarity and difference. In 'The Morandi Museum', the iconic bowls and jars of the artist are 'cream, taupe, terne, green' (50). Guavas, still-lived into more bowls, are a parade of green in 'The Arrival': 'jade, emerald, malachite, vert, ... loden, reseda, celadon, sage' (64). The fish in 'Carp with Suckerfish' are 'bronze, vermilion, white and one pure silver', 'pearled, mottled, plain, and the leader, nacreous persimmon gold' (65). The lists invite you to recite out loud and revel in how grey-scale words evoke vision.

My favourite poems in this collection include 'More on the Dinosaur' about dinosaur sex:

No wonder they almost died out,
with one full minute between stubbed tail and ouch,
their logic couldn't connect cause and effect. (105)

Wait, *almost* died out? Before I get too carried away with *Jurassic Park* disaster scenarios, I remember that the latest research has confirmed that today's birds are the descendants of dinosaurs.

'The Kiss', which opens the collection, gives a fairytale quality to the meeting of a woman and an old-fashioned Polish gentleman, who kisses her hand in a way that is both personal and eternal (9). This man makes another appearance in 'First Love', supplanting her schoolgirl crush on Archimedes with his romantic European moustache and pigskin gloves (28).

'The Egyptian Room', inspired by the South Australian Museum, juxtaposes life and death as impatient schoolchildren interact with the case holding a mummy's coffin:

Stillness rose from the stone and wood
and earthenware: they breathe in mysteries
lightly, carefully touching all they could –
the hunting mural, Khafra's cold black knees. (p 91)

I don't know what it is about the cold black knees; but they are just right here.

Owen rarely applies rhyme across an entire poem as she does in 'The Egyptian Room'; rather rhymes make strategic visits. She frequently uses slant rhymes which you can almost but not quite hear, and every now and then one pops out to startle you, or please you (e.g. 'The Marriage', Leaves section, 48).

There are gems of lines that stick with you: *The art of losing is a one-way trip, the art of letting go is a return* ('The Irises', 102), or *Elastic as phlegm* ('Kohlrabi Soup', 32), which sums up my feelings about kohlrabi soup entirely. However, the poems often seem to lose their way. The hook that gets me in dissipates and a change of direction mars the feeling by the end of the poem.

Having come to grips with Owen's poetic styles and themes, I wondered how her modern approach would deal with the stilted conventions of classical French poetry.

The Baudelaire volume has the virtue of presenting both original text and translation on facing pages, thus becoming the perfect lesson in the translation of poetry. Owen invites the reader to compare how she has overcome the tyranny of rhyme and metre which may hinder a contemporary reading of Baudelaire.

As always with translation, something is lost and something gained in the process. As Owen says in her preface, 'Great classics are absolutes; translations are interim hybrids' (9), and 'It is certainly disappointing to forgo fine shades of meaning or the subtle effects of certain sound patterns' (11). Her aim was to make the translations convincing English poems in their own right. (Fortunately Owen eschews Baudelaire's liberal use of exclamation marks (typical of the era), scattering them more sparsely – they are irritating in both original and translation!)

My first action was to go to my favourite from Colin Duckworth's translation class, 'Harmonie du Soir' (58). It's a strikingly dark poem about love and memory, replete with Catholic imagery. 'Harmonie du Soir' is written in a style called pantoum, supposedly derived from a fifteenth-century Malay form. In the westernised version, the second and fourth lines of each stanza are repeated as the first and third lines of the following stanza. Thus it presents particular challenges to the translator. How does Owen's translation measure up?

The original is full of long vowels which slow you down as you say them. In order to replicate the meaning, Owen has had to abandon the languorous quality, and the shorter vowels give the translation a certain breeziness.

Owen renders *ostensoir* (monstrance) as Eucharist, in order to half-rhyme with abyss and achieve the needed structure of the pantoum. It's a neat solution, but the visual image of the consecrated host on display in an elaborate receptacle above the church altar is submerged. *Reposoir*, the altar of repose, is similarly difficult, as this is a historical feature alien to most Australian readers. 'Le ciel est triste et beau comme un grand reposoir' becomes 'The clear sad sky's an altar and resting place'. It's clean, but somehow unsatisfying.

Some translations work better than others. For example, Owen conveys perfectly the tone of 'L'Albatros' (24), in which the captured bird is made fun of by the sailors – a metaphor for the poet's burden. 'A Carcass' (46) and 'Causerie' (74) are successful in catching both rhyme and metre. 'Les Litanies de Satan' (150-155) beautifully mirrors the pattern of the church responses, turned on their head:

You who with your hardy lover Death
engender Hope – sweetest folly on Earth,

O Satan, pity me my long despair!

In comparing the two volumes, it is inevitable to note the contrast of styles. Owen's poems have an airiness so different to the (frequent) syphilitic gloom of Baudelaire. Her light and fluid use of rhyme is a stark contrast to his relentless rhyming in the convention of French poetry of the time. Her words trip off the tongue, whereas his drip like treacle.

Nonetheless, there is often a synergy between the two. Owen's 'sunset always makes her think of blood' ('One Hundred Famous Views of Edo', 54) surely echoes 'le soleil c'est noyé dans son sang qui se fige' ('the sun is drowning in its own congealing blood'; *Harmonie du Soir*); and there are many more such echoes of common sensory experience. Owen's love of the poetry and respect for language shine through both works.

A recent visit to a well-known Adelaide bookshop confirmed what I had been reading in the literary news: that there is a resurgence of interest in poetry, with a proliferation of creatively-themed anthologies and new works. In this climate, Owen's recasting of Baudelaire for the modern ear is timely and welcome. Here is a final taste ('The Death of Lovers'):

We shall have beds imbued with faint perfumes,
and flowers from sunny lands on shelves above
the sofas deep and welcoming as tombs
will bloom for us as sweetly as our love. (157)

Alice Gorman