“The Mad Poet” after Horace, *Epistula ad Pisones*  
(*Ars Poetica*, 453-476)

Translation and Commentary: Stephen Rojcewicz

As if he spread filthy scabies, or jaundice,  
Or bigoted fury and lunatic frenzy,  
The mad poet is snubbed and dodged by the wise,  
While ruffian, reckless boys torment and hound him.  
While he belches his stanzas, head in the clouds  
Like a hunter intent on a blackbird,  
He topples over into a well or pit. However long  
He yells, “Help! Citizens!” no one bothers to salvage him.  
If someone would trouble to lower a rope,  
I’d say, “How do you know he didn’t jump on purpose  
And doesn’t want rescue?” and I’d recount  
The extinction of that Sicilian poet:  
Empedocles, longing to be esteemed a god,  
Hurled himself, cold-blooded, into fiery Etna.  
For poets, it should be lawful to kill themselves!  
Who saves the unwilling really commits murder.

This isn’t the first time the mad poet has toppled;  
Dragged out, he’d still remain a mortal,  
He will never relinquish  
His yearning for a spectacular death.  
It’s not clear why he’s cursed to continue writing:  
Perhaps he made water on his father’s ashes,  
Or polluted a spot sanctified by lightning.  
He is mad, for sure. Like a fierce bear  
Who shatters the bars of his cage,  
He frightens off, through his pitiless recitals,  
The ignorant as well as the learned.  
In truth, unyielding, he will clutch anyone,  
Crushing him with all his readings,  
A leech that won’t drop until glutted with blood.

Q. HORATII FLACCI ARS POETICA  
lines 453-476

Vt mala quem scabies aut morbus regius urget  
aut fanaticus error et iracunda Diana,  
uesanum tetigisse timent fugiuntque poetam,  
qui sapiunt; agitant pueri incautique sequuntur.  
Hic dum sublimis uersus ructatur et errat,  
si ueluti merulis intentus decisit auceps
in puteum foueamue, licet “succurrite” longum clamet “io ciues,” non sit qui tollere curet. 
Si curet quis opem ferre et demittere funem, 
“qui scis an prudens huc se deiecerit atque seruari nolit?” dicam, Siculique poetae narrabó interitum. Deus inmortalis haberi dum cupid Empedocles, ardentem frigidus Aetnam insuluit. Sit ius liceatque perire poetis; inuitum qui seruat, idem facit occidenti. 
Nec semel hoc fecit nec, si retractus erit, iam fiet homo et ponet famosae mortis amorem. 
Nec satis apparat cur uersus factitet, utrum minxerit in patrios cineres, an triste bidental mouerit incestus; certe furi, ac uelut ursus, obiectos caueae ualuit si frangere clatros, indoctum doctumque fugat recitator acerbus; quem uero arripuit, tenet occiditque legendo, non missura cutem nisi plena cruoris hirudo.

Commentary:
Having often read praises of Horace’s poetic treatise on poetry, commonly called the *Ars Poetica* [*The Art of Poetry*] although it is formally named *Epistula ad Pisones* [*Letter to the Pisos*], I was quite disappointed in the first English translations I read in the 1960s and 1970s. Most versions seemed to me to be dull, without energy, very pedantic and stilted. No one reading these versions could imagine what made the work important or memorable. Although English translations have greatly improved since then, I would still like to offer a new version of the concluding section, which I have named *The Mad Poet*. These lines (453-476) may be the first ever description of a poetry reading (and you thought today’s amateur poets could be pushy and obnoxious). I translated the section almost literally, trying to use a vigorous vocabulary that still remained faithful to the original Latin. In one instance, I changed the active voice into passive, to allow the English syntax to be smoother.
“Profession of Beliefs,” A Medieval Drinking Song
after the Archpoet (Archipoeta): Confessio

Translation and Commentary: Stephen Rojcewicz

The fire within the goblet
Ignites the soul's true pattern.
A heart soaked through with spirits
Soars straight up to Saturn,
My most delightful savor
Is pure wine in a tavern,
Sweeter than the watery mix
Served by some bouncing slattern.

Certain so-called poets
Flee the public house with curses,
Commit themselves to solitude
As if they lived in hearses,
Devote all hours, wide-awake,
To struggle with reverses,
At last they barely can disgorge
A few clear-headed verses.

These poets in their chorus
Fast and teach resistance,
Shun the uproar of the market,
Always keep their distance.
Trying to create a work
Of undying subsistence,
They die daily in their zeal
For counterfeit existence.

Poetic spirit never grabs
My own imagination,
Unless my belly first has reached
The point of satiation.
As long as Bacchus has the rule
Of sense and cogitation,
Apollo rushes into me,
Dispensing inspiration.

To each and every person
Nature gives employment,
But when I'm on the wagon,
No poems gain deployment,
Yet just one little serving-lad
Restores my true enjoyment,
For I hate thirst and abstinence
Like funereal annoy-ment.

Each and every mortal
Is granted a possession,
Making verses from good wine
Defines my own progression.
A tavern cellar’s choicest cask
Blesses my profession,
A grand vintage vivifies
Lyrical expression.
Archipoeta, Excerpts from *Confessio* (circa 1164)

Poculis accenditur
animi lucerna,
cor inbutum nectare
volat ad superna;
mihi sapit dulcius
vinum de taberna
quam quod aqua miscuit
presulis pincerna.

Loca vitant publica
quidam poetarum,
et secretas eligunt
sedes latebrarum,
student, instant, vigilant,
nec laborant parum,
et vix tandem reddere
possunt opus clarum.

Ieunant et abstinent
poetarum chori,
vivant rixas publicas
et tumultus fori,
et, ut opus faciant
quod non possit mori,
moriuntur studio
subditi labori.

Mihi nunquam spiritus
poetrie datur,
nisi prius fuerit
venter bene satur;
dum in arce cerebri
Bachus dominatur,
in me Phebus irruit,
et miranda fatur.

Unicuique proprium
dat natura munus,
ego numquam potui
scribere ieiunus.
Me ieiunum vincere
posset puér unus,
sitem et ieiunum
odi tanquam funus.
Unicuique proprium
dat natura donum;
egvo versus faciens
bibo vinum bonum,
et quod habent purius
dolia cauponum,
tale vinum generat
copiam sermonem.

**Commentary:**
The Archpoet (Archipoeta) wrote in Latin in the Twelfth Century CE. Helen Waddell has called his *Confessio* (circa 1164) the greatest drinking song in the world (*Medieval Latin Lyrics*, 1929, p. 339). Although his name is unknown, the internal evidence of his poems shows that he was in the retinue of the Archbishop of Cologne, who was also Chancellor to Emperor Frederick Barbarossa. In contrast to the quantitative meter of classic Latin verse, the Archpoet’s verse is accentual, like much of modern poetry. Many of us are familiar with this rhythm, used by the medieval wandering Goliard poets, from the songs in Carl Orff’s *Carmina Burana*, where this poem is known by its first line, *Estuans intrinsecus*. The word *confessio* in Medieval Latin means “credo, acknowledgement, declaration of faith, acknowledgment of beliefs”; I have rendered the title as *Profession of Beliefs*. I translated only excerpts from the *Confessio* (stanzas 13-18), not the entire thirty stanzas.
“Art” after Théophile Gautier, L’Art

Translation and Commentary: Stephen Rojcewicz

Yes, art emerges great
From hardened forms that rebel:
Onyx, slate,
Marble, verse, villanelle.

Instead of phantom shackles,
In order to advance straight,
Tackle,
Muse, close-contoured restraints.

Scorn the easy patterns
Like shoes built extra-wide,
Fashions
In which any foot can slide.

Sculptor, reject and shun
Impressionable clay
Which thumb
Can shape while the mind’s astray.

Struggle with Carrara,
With Paros marble, dure
And rare,
Guarantors of the pure.

Where Syracuse bequeaths
Its resolute bronze
There breathes
The proud, precision stroke.

With delicate technique
Pursue in a vein of agate
The faint streak
Of Apollo’s portrait.

Abstain from aquarelles,
And find, painter, subtle
Pastels
Through the enameler’s kiln.

Color sirens with blue glaze,
Contorting their tails
Hundreds of ways,
Monsters of heraldic shields;

Portray with triplex aura
The Virgin and her Son,
    A sphere
With crucifix above.

Everything passes. Powerful art alone
Prevails for eternity.
    Busts of stone
Will outlast any city.

The austere medallion found
By a provincial laborer
    Under ground
Reveals an emperor.

The gods themselves decay,
But sovereign lines
    Will stay,
More rugged now than bronze.

Sculpt, chisel, engrave!
Let your amorphous dream lock
    An eternal shape
Within the resistant block.
Oui, l’œuvre sort plus belle
D’une forme au travail
  Rebelle,
Vers, marbre, onyx, émail.

Point de contraintes fausses !
Mais que pour marcher droit
  Tu chausses,
Muse, un cothurne étroit.

Fi du rythme commode,
Comme un soulier trop grand,
  Du mode
Que tout pied quitte et prend !

Statuaire, repousse
L’argile que périt
  Le pouce
Quand flotte ailleurs l’esprit :

Lutte avec le carrare,
Avec le paros dur
  Et rare,
Gardiens du contour pur ;

Emprunte à Syracuse
Son bronze où fermement
  S’accuse
Le trait fier et charmant ;

D’une main délicate
Poursuis dans un filon
  D’agate
Le profil d’Apollon.

Peintre, fuis l’aquarelle,
Et fixe la couleur
  Trop frêle
Au four de l’émailleur.

Fais les sirènes bleues,
Tordant de cent façons
  Leurs queues,
Les monstres des blasons ;
Dans son nimbe trilobé
La Vierge et son Jésus,
   Le globe
Avec la croix dessus.

Tout passe. – L’art robuste
Seul a l’éternité.
   Le buste
Survit à la cité.

Et la médaille austère
Que trouve un laboureur
   Sous terre
Révèle un empereur.

Les dieux eux-mêmes meurent,
Mais les vers souverains
   Demeurent
Plus forts que les airains.

Sculpte, lime, cisèle ;
Que ton rêve flottant
   Se scelle
Dans le bloc résistant !

Commentary:
Théophile Gautier’s poem, L’Art, praises the emergence of art from the process of overcoming the difficulties inherent in the material (structured poetic forms, marble, onyx, enamel, etc.). My translation is somewhat loose, attempting to echo the original meter and rhyme scheme. One stanza particularly impressed me:
   Et la médaille austère
   Que trouve un laboureur
   Sous terre
   Révèle un empereur.
Literally, it reads: “the austere coin/medal that a [farm] laborer finds under ground reveals an emperor.” While many ancient coins have been found by farmers ploughing their land, this sentence applies as well to the work of the poetry translator, that laborer who ploughs up original texts, trying to find an equivalent that would reveal for a contemporary audience the beauty and the significance of the poem.