

**“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 decedit 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  
 narrabo interitum. Deus immortalis haberi  
 dum cupit Empedocles, ardentem frigidus Aetnam  
 insiluit. 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 apparet cur uersus facitet, utrum  
 minxerit in patrios cineres, an triste bidental  
 mouerit incestus; certe furit, 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.

leunant et abstinere  
poetarum chori,  
vitant 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 puer unus,  
sitem et ieiunum  
odi tanquam funus.  
Unicuique proprium

dat natura donum;  
 ego 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.



**Théophile Gautier: *L'Art, from Émaux et Camées (1852)***

Oui, l'oeuvre sort plus belle  
D'une forme au travail  
    Rebelle,  
Vers, marbre, onyx, émail.

Point de contraintes fausses !  
Mais que pour marcher droit  
    Tu chausse,  
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 pétrit  
    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.