Michel Houellebecq is well known and in fact notorious as a novelist in the English-speaking world. In spite of his three books of poetry, few readers are aware of him as a poet. In reality, it is as a poet that Houellebecq started his career and began to make his name in Parisan literary circles. After publishing his poetry manifesto Rester Vivant in 1991 (Staying Alive), Houellebecq went on to publish his first collection of poems, La Poussée du bonheur, in 1992 (The Pursuit of Happiness). The Art of Struggle, originally entitled Le Sens du combat, was published in 1996 after his first successes as a novelist. It went on to be the first collection of poems to win the Prix de Poésie. In 1999, by now established as a novelist—thanks to l'Extinction du domaine de la lutte (Whatever), in 1994, and Les Particules Élémentaires (Atomised) in 1998—Michel Houellebecq published Renaissance, Re-Birth, his third and last book of poetry to date.

At the time of the release of Houellebecq’s first books of poems and novels, an intense web of debate had developed around sexuality and emotion based on the ideals of freedom inherited from the 1960s. Mixed with the rising impetus of free-market globalization, the texture of the language used in this debate was almost featureless. Its aim was to universalise human affect into a set of communicable and easily manageable psychological traits. It set out to influence the most intimate aspect of our lives. Self-help books and commercial psychoanalysis became the first port of call when things did not feel right, and there was a sense that perhaps a more gentle and politically correct form of consumerism could cure the ills of consumerism itself. In the midst of such a
culture came Houellebecq, a depressed, nonchalant figure whose very way of smoking cigarettes—holding them between his middle and ring finger—seemed to signal his dissent from the world. An animosity began to grow against Houellebecq in the media, and one of the reasons was that Houellebecq had an opposing vision of contemporary modernity from the prevalent talk of "diversity" and "multiculturalism". At the title of his novel Platform (published originally as Plataform in 2001) encapsulates, the content of all his novels suggests that the feel of the world is becoming more and more homogeneous. The world has been sterilized rather than enriched by the growing network of media communication. This idea of homogeneity translates for Houellebecq into the most intimate aspects of our sense of self. As he put it in an interview with the musician and writer Philippe Sollers, his works convey the intuition that "today, we can no longer experience desire independently from advertising". Generally, as his eponymous character in Platform suggests, Michel Houellebecq has a strong "inflating that more and more, the whole world would come to resemble an airport". Like Baudelaire, his greatest poetic influence, Houellebecq is the aesthetic ambassador of his own modernity. His attitude to life has trickled into a singular way of writing. Like his own demeanour, Houellebecq’s poetry exaggerates rather than reconciles the discrepancies between the projection of happiness constructed by consumer society and his personal and contemplative experience of it. During his appearances on French television at the time of the release in the Nineties of his first two novels, Houellebecq gave a fascinating depiction of someone who had not so much overcome as mastered the ill of his own depression, to the extent that depression had itself become an art. As a poet Houellebecq noticeably shapes his emotional nonconformity into a critique of the world which has made him, and he makes his social inadequacies into his choice of weapon. In French, "sensor" can mean either "way" or "sense", and "combat" can mean "struggle" or "fight". Le Sens du combat conveys Houellebecq’s will to carve out and sculpt a place for collective feelings of discontent within a consumer-driven, universalizing appropriation of affect.

As many of his critics have observed, Houellebecq unashamedly projects his own dejection into his works. The same could be said by the Art of Struggle. But in return for these intense, disdainful views of subjectivism, Houellebecq manages to seize, internalize and depict human beings' emotional relationship with the fleeting nature of the global free market. What is there to be mourned, one might ask, in everything that we gain from the constant renewal of objects and possibilities? Houellebecq’s answer is developed from a different premise. What we fail to mourn in our sense of constant growth and expansion is for him the kernel of our discontent. In insisting on his own sense of loss in a world of abundance, Houellebecq shows that no authentic form of renewal or regeneration can occur without formulating and accepting the value of what is left behind. The invariable celebration characteristic of consumerism changes our capacity to experience loss into a form of melancholy arising from our failure to mourn. At their best, the poems of The Art of Struggle are able to express these unprocessed feelings with simple, moving irony.

I’ll go home with my lungs
The tiles will be freezing.
As a child I loved sweets
And now nothing matters.

There is a sense in The Art of Struggle that the most direct way of incarnating these feelings of unnormalized loss is in lyrical form. By giving a recognizable form to loss, Houellebecq’s lyricism opens the invisible and often downtrodden side of our consumerism to criticism and change. Houellebecq’s poems are thus not a window onto his own internal world. They shape his darkest intuitions into light, illuminating and clarifying in the process some of the
most dismaying aspects of our contemporary culture. For that reason, and in spite of the palpable sadness of some of the poems, Houellebecq's lyricism is both aesthetically and intellectually stimulating for the light it throws on our collective experience of modernity as a paradoxical form of loss through gain.

One idea which Houellebecq grapples with in The Art of Struggle is that we do not only live in a free-market economy but in a free-market society, where human beings themselves have been incorporated within a system of exchange. His evocation of modern architecture is particularly telling in relation to this vision. In his essay Approach du désastre” (“An Approach to Disaster”), published in Interventions in 1998, Houellebecq describes the modern city, with its see-through architecture and its open-plan office spaces, as a set of structures operating with the same intent as supermarket shelves. This mental picture is translated, so to speak, into the following line in the first poem of The Art of Struggle: “Nous sommes prisonniers de notre transparence” (“We’re prisoners of our own clear selves”). It is thus not surprising to see in the poems that the GAN Tower has replaced the Eiffel Tower as the authentic emblem of modern Paris. The GAN Tower is in La Défense, an area of Paris which Houellebecq knows well for having worked there as a computer programmer before making a living from his writing.

At first glance, Houellebecq’s poetic enterprise might seem to have stopped in 1999, but in fact poetry has remained an essential part of his project as a novelist. Poems are often inserted in the novels and at times, as is the case in La Possibilité d’une île (The Possibility of an Island), published in 2005, they play a major role in the plot itself. This dialogue between prose and poetry is significant in the writing of The Art of Struggle, and the poems echo some of the themes and characters in his novels. Prose poems also have a significant place in Houellebecq’s poetry: the subjectivity of his melodic prose is soaked in the sensibility of his poems. There is no explicit narrative or plot in The Art of Struggle, yet one can identify a path, a progression in the way the poems enrich and support each other’s craft. As the poem goes called ‘So Long’ in French, ‘A Long Farewell to the Sound of Poems’, The Art of Struggle develops a wider conversation with literary tradition as a form of collective memory. Houellebecq’s aim is not to inform our lives with the grandeur of past poetic exploits in a way that might leave us feeling impoverished, or more frustrated still with our day to day lives. In their generous approach to form, the poems incorporate tradition within the scope of the reader’s everyday life in such a way that it can be experienced as a tangible collective legacy.

II

Translating poetry is often thought of as especially difficult or even pointless: poetry seems to rely so much on tone, and rhythm, and sometimes rhyme rather than the combination purely of meaning. To translate poetry is to be immersed in the power of words and their forms, and poetry shows the power of words to reveal everything that separates us as well as everything we share. In translating The Art of Struggle, our main concern was to capture its tone, the attitude of the poet towards his subject, the way the poem makes meaning in the way it sounds.

But tone itself is produced in various forms and structures which themselves do not translate transparently from French into English. This is true of prose as well as verse, although especially evident in verse. Many readers will know that French verse is organised differently from English. In the French language the metre of a line of poetry or a whole poem is created on the basis of the number of syllables in the line, while English verse is organised according to the number of stressed and unstressed syllables in the line. Stress is produced in the poetry of both languages, and rhythm created in the interplay of the stressed and the unstressed. But rhythm is not produced in the same way, nor heard in the same way.
One way to respond is to adopt a meter in English appropriate to the meter of any particular poem in French. Perhaps the blank pentameter produces the same canonical effect, the same effect of tradition and history, as the alexandrine in French, for example. But we did not want to impose one way of hearing any particular meter in either language. Metre is at the heart of the verse poems of Michel Houellebecq’s book. We wanted to communicate the way the book uses metre to give substance to the sound of the voice, to the way metre is communicated, and thinking, as well as a sense of imprisonment or blindness.

But still, the voice will not sound the same in different languages, nor will the memory of people speaking have the same resonances for any one of us. We have adopted meters which to us seemed flexible enough to convey the sound of reading each one of Houellebecq’s verse poems - the sound of reading aloud, or silently, or the effects of hearing the poem reverberate. Sometimes a four-stressed line seemed right as a response to the twelve-syllable French alexandrine, established in French neo-Classicism, brutalized in French Romanticism. But sometimes a three-stress line seemed right, for Houellebecq’s like others hears the possibilities of the alexandrine in response to the rhythms of the voice, whether a spoken voice or an inner one. Sometimes his poems in the eight-syllable meter need a four-stress line to come to life in English, it seemed to us, but sometimes three— or eight-syllable in French has a history stretching back through Symbolism and Romanticism and the Renaissance and beyond, and can be made to sound differently in response to different experiences and associations. For the duration of our journey in English through each one of Houellebecq’s poems in French we stayed with the meter we chose, or rather which imposed itself on us and tried to stay alert to variety and surprise as well. That has been our way of recreating the effects of Houellebecq’s attraction to the various French metres in this book, and his ability to stretch them, remould them and renew them.

But what about rhyme? Rhyme and metre often work as inseparable counterparts, and that is true of Houellebecq’s poetry as well. But it is not true of all verse poetry. And the art-forms of rhyme and meaning are not, cannot be the same in different languages. Rhyme can create hidden associations in one language where in another, a rhyme at the equivalent point might create a kind of deadness in the association stumbled upon originally. In translating poetry the relation of rhyme to meaning asks questions of the translator which have no answer, and also of the reader. Sound or meaning?

But sound is in the service of meaning, the sound reverberates because of the meanings discovered. This is language, not music that is the approach taken here: translating Le Sens du corbillard (The Art of Struggle), the ways high and low of the struggle which Houellebecq carries. It is a struggle to give voice to depersonalization, and to personify, to the falsity of private emotion and the falsity of life without it; to the competition between economic and affective humanity. There is a journey in Houellebecq’s book, and although there is no departure or arrival, there is rhythm, a rhythm of vacancy—disheartening, or witty—and weight: an oppressive weight, which is also the weight of meaning, of experience, and the ways of affirming your own living and dying in a body, and in a voice.

This is a journey in poetry, and in our translation of this journey meaning leads sound, even though the meaning is made in sound, in poetry. As much as metre, we have translated rhyme into the presence of rhyme, this has been our way of affirming Houellebecq’s poetry and the poetic in general, of affirming a way of thinking which has broken its dependency on versification, whether spoken or beyond the telling. Or can that dependency ever be broken? Poetry invites alertness, an intimate and unresolved questioning, and the alertness we offer here to the effects of rhyme in a presence of sound patterns in the poems in English. We hope they will speak to the explicit rhymes of Houellebecq’s poems, and to the invitations of poetry.
to hear, hear differently, to hear our own familiarity with life and meaning differently.

The rhythms and rhymes of poetry are as much to do with the memory of them as with hearing them again now. But memory can be a cruel one as much as an illuminating and energizing one. And love-hate relations with the traditions of verse and its assumptions are promachus differently in different languages. Here the conversation is limited to English and French ways of writing poetry, but the differences are still as palpable as ever. How to translate not just a rhythm but a way of hearing life?

Translation is made in the moment when the uniqueness of a word sounds differently to different people. In prose poetry as much as in verse, the rhythms of spoken language, of oral monologue, of the memories of emotion and response, are not the same in any two languages. Idioms are not heard alike by two individuals, even if we are each aware of those differences and use them to communicate. It is not a question of being faithful or treacherous to the original; for how could we agree on what that faithfulness would be? This is not only an effect of translation, but part and parcel of the language we use generally: the language we use to communicate thoughts which are no longer there and which as a reader you will not have witnessed in the making. We communicate, agree or disagree on the basis of the relations, distances and proximities which we sense in relation to our own experience, and which we sense might share with others; or we might resent others for not responding as we do to this sense of relation. Conversation arises from the way we hear differently, and such is the way of translation too.

We have tried to translate not just words but effects; not just sentences but structures. "How would you say that in English?" The question is both a necessary and a treacherous one. If I say something as I think you would, or I would, or if I said it in a way I hope you will understand, I am appropriating something as much as translating it and disseminating it, I am mixing it mine as much as giving something to you in an unimpeded state. "How would you say that?" - the question engages in an immediate way both with what is lost and gained in translation. Without asking the question we would not be translating but glossing in a way giving a literal account of only one meaning out of the many meanings that words can have. And when sentences and verses are put together in French, they preserve familiar expressions and impressions which others might be in another language. Without asking the question "How would you say that?" we would not be translating, but obfuscating, giving in to the illusion that how things sound in French or any language can be transported into any other without sounding simply unusual, or worse still quaint, a kind of tourist, arm's length appreciation of French. But our purpose is to translate Houellebecq's injunction to the reader to engage.

How is an allusion heard - and how is it heard in different languages? It may not be heard at all. What a familiar to one reader may be unknown to another. The success of an allusion is even more sensitive in translation and in the attempt to carry it over from one language to another. One translator may in any case hear different things from another. In addition to Baudelaire, Houellebecq's poetry in verse and prose moves to other poets in French, both in content and form, and they range from Villon, to Rimbaud, to Verlaine and to Ponge - or so it has appeared to us. Even if they are heard, allusions to French poets will not carry the same resonance in English as they do in French itself: think of Eliot's appropriation of poets in French and other languages. Allusion is another way for a poet to engage with the experience of readers, to invite readers to engage with what is familiar to them and with their own intimate memories. We have translated allusion into the presence of allusion, an invitation to readers to hear their own living responses. Echoes in English have emerged in the course of our translators' journey and we have allowed them to remain at various points, and hopefully live. In that way we have tried to bear witness to Houellebecq's plea to his readers to engage with their own subjectivity.
In *The Art of Struggle* Michel Houellebecq is concerned with the loss of meaning and a return of the lyric—all with the loss of emotion and its return with the loss of a sense of personhood and the mourning of the person. But the book is also a critique of the person and a critique of its mourning. When meaning is lost or being lost, the only thing left to hold on to is the forms of meaning, its now empty shells, empty of meaning, but not emotion. What once was meaningful is meaningful still in the gestures we retain, reminding us not so much of what it is we have lost but that we have lost something. What have we lost, then? A sense of self, its importance and its depth, and mourning is not enough to give it back its voice.

For Houellebecq, emotion seems to have been quantified in every way imaginable from desire on the one hand to deliver on the other. There is nothing left of us but what appears, or can be made to appear in habitual and consumerist responses so pervasive they are barely noticed. But *The Art of Struggle* is a struggle towards some sort of resistance, or an extended meditation on the possibility of resistance itself. The vocabulary of our attachments has become impoverished, it seems; how shall we even wish to respond to each other with desire rather than in slogans? The book offers a journey towards resistance and rebirth, to renewed despair as much as hope in its own increasing weight of emotion, and thought, in its own brutal as well as lyrical battles with complacency. Read as whole, as one might a novel, *The Art of Struggle* is a struggle in words with the power of words to limit and enliven, to seduce and enthrall.

A systematic emptiness of experience, an implacably observed emptiness of meaning, grows into an investigation of social and emotional evolution possible, or tragically unlikely?

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— Delphine Gruss, Timothy Mathews, July 2010
AU SERVICE DU SANG

Je ne pars plus vraiment en voyage
Car je connais l’endroit
Et je connais mes droits,
Et j’ai connu la rage.

Au service de l’humanité,
Assis dans la cité,
Je connais bien ma chambre
Je sens la nuit descendre.

Les anges qui s’envolent
Dans la splendeur des cieux
Et qui retrouvent Dieu,
Les femmes qui rigolent.

Attaché à ma table,
Assis dans la cité,
La lente intensité
De la nuit impalpable.

La nuit dans la cité,
La lente immensité,
La vision très cruelle
Détachée sur le ciel
D’une forme qui bouge
Qui palpite, qui est rouge.

Au service du sang,
Des dégâts peu conscients,
Des fers d’amour cruelles
Des éclats du réel ;

IN THE SERVICE OF BLOOD

I no longer go on trips, really,
Because I know the place
And I know my rights,
And I’ve lived through rage.

In the service of humanity,
In the middle of the estate,
I know my bedroom well
And feel the night descend.

Angels take flight
In the glory of heaven
They will find God;
And the women have fun.

Tied to the table,
Sat in the estate,
The slow intensity
Of the relentless night.

At night in the estate
The slow immensity,
The cruel vision
Torn off from the sky
Of a shape that moves
Pulsating and red.

In the service of blood
The sleepy disgust,
The cruel ends of love
The blown-up bits of the real;
Tout cela pour quoi faire?
L'idée d'une vision
La fin d'une chanson
Les hommes qui désespèrent

Qui attendent la rage
Et les corps béatés
Qui s'accroupissent, blessés,
Dans l'espoir du carnage.

J'apporte l'allumet
De la haine finie.
Je fais tremper mes dents
Et je ressens le mal.

Je connais bien les ruses
De la chair écrasée
On me dit que j'abuse,
Je me sens justifié

Par l'humaine souffrance,
Par les espoirs déçus
Par l'écrasement dense
Des journées superfluës.

Je ne suis pas serein,
Mais je suis dans ma chambre
Les anges me tiennent la main,
Je sens la nuit descendre.

And all that for what?
The idea of a vision
The end of a song
Men losing hope

Waiting for rage
For exploding bodies,
Squatting, wounded,
Hoping for carnage.

I bring the ingredient
Of the final hatred,
My teeth are grinding,
Evil seeps in.

I know the tricks
Of a crushed flesh
I overdo it, I'm told
But I feel exonerated

By human suffering,
By hopes dissatisfied
By the dense crushing
Of superfluous days.

I am not serene
But I am at home,
Angels are holding my hand
I can feel the night falling.
La lumière évolue à peu près dans les formes.
Je suis toujours couché au niveau du dallage.
Il faudrait que je meure ou que j'aille à la plage ;
il est déjà sept heures. Probablement, ils dorment.

Je sais qu'ils seront là si je sors de l'hôtel,
Je sais qu'ils me verront et qu'ils auront des reproches,
J'ai un schéma du cœur. Près de l'atrie aorte,
Le sang fait demi-tour ; la journée sera belle.

Tout près des parasols, différentes mammifères
Dans certains sont en laisse et font bouger leur queue ;
Sur la photo, l'ai fait d'être un enfant heureux ;
Je voudrais me coucher dans les ombrillères.

Unobjectionably the sun crosses the sky.
I've still got my head on the pavement.
I shall die or go to the beach;
It's seven, I'm sure they're asleep.

I know they'll be there when I leave the hotel,
I know they'll see me, and have on their shorts;
I know the diagram of the heart. By the sorts,
Blood does a U-turn; today will be fine.

Various mammals by the beach umbrellas
Some on a leash and wagging their tails;
In the photo I look like a blissful child;
I'm going to lie in the shade of the weeds.
DESCRIPTEUR REMPART
CONTRE LE LIBERALISME

Nous refusons l'idéologie libérale parce qu'elle est incapable de fournir un sens, une voie à la réconciliation de l'individu avec son semblable dans une communauté qu'on pourrait qualifier d'humaine.
Et d'ailleurs le but qu'elle se propose est même tout différent.

Nous refusons l'idéologie libérale au nom de l'encyclette de Léon XIII sur la mission sociale de l'Évangile et dans le même esprit que les prophètes antiques appelaient la ruine et la malédiction sur la tête de Jérusalem.
Et Jérusalem tomba, et pour se relever, elle ne mit que moins de quatre mille ans.

Il est indiscutable et avéré que tout projet humain se voit de plus en plus évalué en fonction de purs critères économiques,
De critères absolument numériques,
Mémorisables sur fichiers informatiques.
Cela n'est pas acceptable et nous devons lutter pour la mise en évidence de l'économie et pour sa substitution à certains critères que j'oserais appeler éthiques.

Et quand on licencie trois mille personnes et que l'on entend bouleverser sur le code social de l'opération il me prend une crève faceaux d'étrangler une demi-douzaine de conseillers en audit,
Ce qui serait une excellente opération,
Un égorgage absolument bénifique,
Une opération pratiquement hygiénique.

A LAST STAND AGAINST
THE FREE MARKET

We reject liberal ideology for failing to show the way, or a route, to reconciliation between the individual and his fellow beings in a community at least to some degree human. And besides, the aim of liberalism is altogether different.

We reject liberal ideology in the name of the social mission of the Gospel, which is enshrined in the papal encyclical of Leo XIII; We reject liberal ideology in the voice of the Old Testament prophets calling ruin and destruction down upon Jerusalem. And Jerusalem fell, and did not rise again for four thousand years.

It is unquestionable and widely accepted that all human endeavour is measured against purely economic criteria, entirely numerical criteria captured in digital files. That is not acceptable. We must fight for an economy restrained by the people and subjected to different standards I would venture to call ethical.

And when three thousand people are laid off and I hear someone blathering on about the cost in human capital of this adjustment I am filled with a furious desire to strangle half a dozen financial experts, Which would be an excellent adjustment, A completely beneficial cutback, A health-and-safety upgrade.
Le Père Mercier plante dans son cœur une orange centenaire. La plante est vert fleurissant. Soumis les pétales de fleurs de printemps, des fleurs humains, un homme qui souhaite grandir.

La chaleur est intense. Les feuilles sont au point de s'évanouir. Le ciel est bleu, comme une toile peinte. Les oiseaux chantaient. Le silence était parfait.

Les antennes de télévision,
Comme des insectes réceptifs,
S’accrochent à la peau des captifs
Les captifs rentrent à la maison.

Si j’avais envie d’être heureux
J’apprendrais les danses de salon
Ou j’achèverais un ballon
Comme ces artistes merveilleux

Qui survivent jusqu’à soixante ans
Entourés de jouets en plastique
Ils éprouvent des joies authentiques,
Ils ne sentent plus passer le temps.

Romantisme de télévision,
Sens charité et vie sociale
Effet de réel intégral
Et triomphe de la confusion.

TV antennae
Like reception insects
Stick to the skin
Of captive spectators,
Captives on their way home.

If I wanted to be happy
I’d take to the ballroom
Or get a balloon
Like the autistic do

Some live to be sixty
Enchanted by their plastic toys
They experience true joy
In different to time.

TV sentiment,
Sens, issues and donations,
Triumph of the real
And confusion etc.
SO LONG

Il y a toujours une ville, des traces de poètes
Qui ont croisé leur destinée entre ses murs
L'eau coule un peu partout, la mémoire murmure
Des noms de villes, des noms de gens, cours dans la tête.

Et c'est toujours la même histoire qui recommence,
Horizons effondrés et salons de massage
Solitude assumée, respect du voisinage,
Il y a pourtant des gens qui existent et qui dansent.

Ce sont des gens d'une autre espèce, d'une autre race,
Nous dansons tout vivants une danse cruelle
Nous avons peu d'amis mais nous avons le ciel,
Et l'infinie solituder des espaces :

Le temps, le temps très vieux qui prépare sa vengeance,
L'incertain bruissement de la vie qui s'évapore
Les affleurements du vent, les gouttes d'eau qui rouleux
Et la chambre jaune où notre mort s'avance.

A LONG FAREWELL TO
THE SOUND OF POETS

There's always a city and traces of poets
Who have met their destiny within its walls,
Water is leaking, and memory whispers
Names of cities, people, loots in your head.

And it's the same story over and over,
Collapsing horizons and massage parlours
Solitude accepted in the neighbourhood's rules,
Even so people are living and dancing.

They are people of another species, of another race,
Eyes wide alive dancing the dance of cruelty;
We have few friends but we each have the sky,
The infinite kindness of open spaces;

Time and time so old broods on its return,
The vague murmurs of the passing of life
The howling wind, the water rattling
The yellowing walls of our death approaching.
Quand la pluie tombait en rafales
Sur notre petite maison
Nous étions à l'abri du mal,
Blottis auprès de la raison.

La raison est un gros chien tendre
Et c'est l'opposé de la perte
Il n'y a plus rien à comprendre,
L'obéissance nous est offerte.

Donnez-moi la paix, le bonheur,
Libérez mon cœur de la haine
Je ne peux plus vivre dans la peur,
Donnez-moi la mesure humaine.

There was a hard rain falling
On our little house.
We were sheltered from danger,
Huddled up to reason.

Reason is like a shaggy dog
Nothing is ever lost
And there is nothing left to learn,
Only the path to obedience.

Give me peace, and happiness,
Free my heart from hatred
I can't go on in fear,
Put me in time with humanity,
Give me the measure of life.