

READING EDITION

COMMENT IN MOTION

TRANSLATIONS

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FLUCTUANT SYLLABIC VERSE

COMMENT IN MOTION

A Quarterly of Fluctuant Syllabic Verse

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Followed by translations of poems by Dante, Scève, Louise
Labé, du Bellay, Goethe, Hölderlin, Heine, Hugo, Gautier,
Baudelaire, Bécquer, La Forge. — GROVER JACOBY, *Translator*

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FLUCTUANT SYLLABIC VERSE

In the seventeenth century, attempts were made to interest readers of English poetry in adaptations of the French Alexandrine. At that time it was not realized that a large percentage of French classic Alexandrines were susceptible of being counted in two ways; in other words, there existed a *de jure* Alexandrine and a *de facto* one. The *de jure* Alexandrine was a twelve-syllable line, but the beauty of this classic measure issued from the gently swaying fountain of a fact that twelve was not always twelve in the spoken, *de facto* Alexandrine whose variations reappear in the fluctuant syllabic verse in the first section of this volume.

Firstly, the fission of some French diphthongs adds to the syllabic count. Secondly, within the line, the letter “e” in cases where it is usually not pronounced in French, was considered pronounceable theoretically and then counted as an extra syllable. In actual practice this extra syllable was in a large number of cases not uttered, and thus the Alexandrine became flexible, and a certain “free rhythm” entered the citadel of classic French prosody. To this day the camouflage persists with such success that most people pay no attention to a presence that governs the cadence of the French verse of several centuries, but accept this flexibility without giving it conscious recognition.

The French Alexandrine is very often recited as a nine, ten, eleven or thirteen syllable line. Counts have been taken of the number of syllables in classic Alexandrines spoken by experts at the Collège de France, and these variations have been substantiated.

In my translation of Alexandrines and of decasyllabic verse in this volume, I have employed these variations, though I did not find it possible or necessary to pay attention to the occurrence of the letter “e” since English is governed by different laws of pronunciation from French. One might say that an invisible letter “e” as a kind of guardian angel has accompanied me in this experiment. The translations in fluctuant syllabic verse contain all these variations of the twelve syllable line (lines where twelve is not twelve but nine, or ten, or eleven, or thirteen) and also the varying hemistichs and placements of the internal caesura. Here is a list of these lines accompanied by indications of the variations in the hemistichs (in parentheses):

Nine (four and five, five and four)

Ten (five and five, six and four, four and six)

Eleven (six and five, five and six, four and seven, seven and four)

Twelve (six and six, seven and five, five and seven)

Thirteen (six and seven, seven and six).

For example, one should be able to find in a decasyllable one of the three pairs of hemistichs in the syllabic arrangements listed within the parentheses following the word “Ten”.

In these pages the French rule of ending the first hemistich in a line on the accented syllable has not been followed closely since the pronunciation of English does not call for the exclusive fall of the accent on the last syllable of words. The caesura under consideration is the one near the center of the line, and the natural ending of a phrase usually determines it. Where the phrasal structure fails to indicate the attribution of a monosyllabic verb to one or the other of the hemistichs of a verse, the verb in question should be assigned to the line’s second hemistich.

Grover Jacoby

NOTE: It is advisable that the reader of fluctuant syllabic verse be somewhat caesura-conscious; however, this special awareness is not necessary for reading the translations from the poetry of Goethe, Heine, Hölderlin, and Laforgue in this volume.

Translations in Fluctuant Syllabic Verse

Comment in Motion · No. 2 · Issue p. 47 · Scan p. 12

FROM THE “VITA NUOVA”

Dante Alighieri

So very gently there, and modestly appearing
Is my lady then, when coming toward you,
That every tongue trembles, is in all things mute,
And the eye, for looking, has not sufficient daring,
And as she goes there, her praise within her hearing,
Clothed with humility, she gives to all their due,
And it appears, indeed, she is something come to
Show us a miracle, while on earth here faring.

So pleasing shows herself, to those who look nigh,
That through the eyes she gives the heart a sweetness
That none may understand who have not known it,
And it appears as though there moves a spirit
Full of love and smooth and that has left her lips,
That to the soul goes, saying, “Breathe in sighs!”

FROM "THE ANTIQUITIES OF
ROME"

Joachim du Bellay

Newcomer searching for Rome in Rome
And nothing of Rome in Rome perceiving,
The ancient arches, palaces worth seeing
And the ancient walls, all that bears Rome's name.

Look at this pride and ruin: the same
As that under its law the world was leading,
Who to conquer all, turned conquered being,
The prey of the ages which all things consume.

Rome that of Rome is now the monument,
Rome, Rome's one conquest—in any event.
Yet only the Tiber toward the sea escaping

Remains now of Rome, O world inconstant!
All that stands firm is of time's unshaping,
And all that which flies is to time resistant.

SONNET II

Louise Labé

O precious brown eyes, O wandering look,
O warmest sighing and scattering of tears,
O nights of darkness that one vainly attends,
O days which show forth and vainly come back,

O saddest of complaints, O desires that stick,
O times all now lost and resulting sorrows,
O thousands of deaths, each extending its ruse,
O worst of all evils threatening to strike.

O laugh, O brow, hair, arm, finger, hand,
O plaintive lute, viol, the bow or sung word:
O wealth of torches to consume any woman!

Weighed down with such fires, I am complaining
That in so many places, with my heart's groping,
No single spark over you has yet flown.

SONNET V

Louise Labé

O clearest Venus who wander the skies,
Hear now my voice as it plaintively sings
Of my long labors and the grief in things,
All the time your face at the zenith shines.

My sleepless eye grows tenderer still
And in more weeping, with you present, lets go;
How my bed with tears must so overflow
For seeing what slavery you witness at will!

Mankind's weary spirit is always drawn
To a soft repose and to sleep till dawn.
While the daylight lasts I can scarce last too,

Until then finally, when almost shattered
I have gone therewith to my bed all tired,
I must weep misfortune the whole night through.

SONNET VII

Louise Labé

One sees the dying of each animated thing
When from the body goes the subtle soul.
You are that better part and I the mortal whole.
Oh, where are you then, o soul to whom I cling?

Do not leave me faint through long tracks of time,
Nor let salvation be lost by your delay,
And give back that part, that prized half, this day.
Risk not for your body a chance loss of its prime.

Shelter well your body, lest it be ended
In this so amorous meeting and review.
Leave out severity; leave all unattended

By any harshness, but by graces from you
Who with great sweetness render me beauty,
Before so cruelly, now most favorably.

SONNET IX

Louise Labé

The very same moment of starting to capture
In my bed's softness a longed-for repose
My pitiful spirit from my own self retires,
Incontinent going toward you in surrender.

For then it must seem in my breast so tender
I have all that good for which it aspires,
For which it so deeply releases these sighs
That with all this sobbing I thought it would tear.

O sleep that is sweet, night of mine and of joy,
A grateful repose, tranquillity-filled,
Extends through my nights the trace of this dream:

If my amorous soul find never a way
To enjoy in truth the possession of good,
Then in shape of a lie let it have the same.

SONNET XII

Louise Labé

Lute, companion of all my distress,
Irreproachable witness of all my sighing,
With firm control of what is so wearing,
How often with me you sound our laments.

And bothered by tears as with some great nuisance,
With some pleasant fate, now only commencing,
You turn it all to sudden lamenting,
Feigning the note that of sorrow sings.

And should you desire to have things different,
You loosen your strings and leave me silent:
But having been seen with my grief exhaled,

Giving all favor to my sad complaint:
To enjoy my own grief I find constraint,
Hope for sweet sickness as sweet an end,

SONNET XIII

Louise Labé

Ah, only to be in that breast ravished
That of him, indeed, for whom I live dying,
If only with him I might be spending
The rest of my days by envy untouched,

If holding me tight, he would say: Dear Friend,
Let us be content with the shared assuring
That no tempest nor strait nor waters running
Can put us apart till our lives end.

If held in my arms with all that closeness
Even as ivy the tree encircles,
Death should come there by envy driven,

While in all sweetness his kiss should alight
And should my spirit on his lips take flight,
I, more than living, would die happy then.

SONNET XVIII

Louise Labé

Only kiss me once more, once more, yet again.
Give me another, replete with your savour.
Give me another, replete with your langour.
Then I shall render four kisses that burn.

Alas! You complain? when this sickness I lighten
With the sweet to the taste and giving ten more.
Thus with our kisses at ease mixed together
Let us have pleasure in sharing them then.

Thereby double life to each of us follows.
At last each in himself and the other now lives.
Allow then my love to think of some folly.

I always am ill when my life is discreet
And able to feel in no way content,
If away from myself I make no sally.

SONNET XIX

Louise Labé

Diana lingered in the wood's thickness
With many a beast by her violence borne down,
All in the freshness, by her nymphs crowned.
While I went dreaming as my custom is,

Without ever thinking, I heard a voice
Therewith in calling: "O nymph all astounded—
Are you not so with Diana around?"
And seeing me there without bow or case:

"Whom do you find now, my friend, as you go,
Who thus takes away your arrow and bow?"
"I take notice," I said, "of a passer too

Only to cast at him all of my arrows
And the bow after, but he then gathers,
Selects from among them and riddles me through."

SONNET XXI

Louise Labé

What height is the man most worthy of love?
Of what stoutness? What hair? And indeed what color?
Who the most honeyed of his eyes by far?
Who wounds so surely where no cure may save?

What song to what man, if one had it to give?
Who pierces in singing with all of his dolor?
Whose very sweet lute can do even more?
What kind of nature is one ready to love?

No desire is in me to say with assurance,
For in all of my judgment the God Love used force.
But I know quite well; my feelings are sure

That of all beauty one could ever dispose,
That all of the art which might aid nature
Can never obtain that my great love grows.

SONNET XXIII

Louise Labé

Alas! What good is it, the whole of your praise
That spent all itself on my golden hair
And on my eyes which it sought to compare
To two darting Suns where the God Love draws

The cause of your torment and finds his arrows?
Where are you, tears, which refuse to endure?
And where is your Death which at last would honor
Your immovable love, your repeated vows?

Thus, it is plain that end of your malice
Was but to enslave me, pretending service,
Forgive me, my Friend, forgive me this time

That I being outraged, in anger and spite:
In knowing you martyr as much as I am,
Wherever you are, I take some comfort.

DEDICATION OF HIS WORK
TO DELIE

Maurice Scève

Not of Venus the ardent sparkling,
Still less the arrows of Cupid well aimed:
But indeed my deaths you keep renewing,
I desire herein, should well be described.

And I am aware you are reading here
Many an error. And no harsher epigrams!
But love—anyway—on seeing the writer
Ordains for your sake they pass through his flames.

FROM “DELIE”

Maurice Scève

XVI

To all gods together your love is preferred.
That is the God Love's own urgent command.
But proud death, turned sad, would have the last word,
At me aimed the arrow by his cruel hand,
And when I from need have made my demand,
Has denied it to me as being pernicious.

But why over me, you far too officious,
Are you wasting both power and fury,
Since in my deaths, Delia ingenious,
Has from the first with glances killed me?

JUNE NIGHTS

Victor Hugo

When the day, in summer, has left heaped with flowers,
Through reeling drenched space the plain pours its scent;
Ears holding half murmurs, eyes drowned in sleep's powers
You are part giving way, in sleep that's transparent.

The stars now look purer; restored is the shade.
A half light from day tints the unending dome.
The sweet and pale dawn waits for darkness to fade,
Seems to stray all the night down its aerial home.

THE ALBATROSS

Charles Baudelaire

Often for pleasure, the crew, gathered on board,
Capture the albatross, vast birds of the sea
Who with indolent flight direct themselves toward
The great acrid chasms ships sweep over free.

These lords of the azure, confined to deck floors,
When suddenly dragged there, must let great white wings
Sadly trail at their sides like some pair of oars.
Their walk is embarrassed—the piteous things.

The great wingéd traveller looks awkward and weak.
The wonder of loveliness turns homely and droll.
One sailor annoys him, a pipe at his beak.
His limping is mimicked by a merciless soul.

The poet compares to this prince from the clouds.
The dweller in tempests laughs at risk in all things,
But exiled on earth among hooting crowds
His movements are fettered by giant-like wings.

TO A PASSERBY

Charles Baudelaire

With the street's prolonged cry my deafened ears rung.
Majestic and slender, sorrowing and grand,
She swept by me there with a sumptuous hand,
Hem and embroidery finely poised where they hung,

Agile and noble as with a carved limb.
I breathed in intensely with a prodigal will
The sweetness that draws, the pleasures that kill,
From her eye, livid sky with storms nascent and dim.

A flash, then night closes! O fugitive grace,
Whose one rapid look has left me reborn.
Am I only to find you outside time and space?

Elsewhere, far from here, too late, nevermore;
Not to know where you went, nor you where I go!
I could have loved you, I feel that you know.

P A S T E L

Théophile Gautier

I love to see you in your oval frames,
The yellowing portraits of the old-time belles,
Holding in your hands roses that have paled,
As one might expect with last centuries' flowers.

The wind of winter, in touching your cheek,
Has killed your carnations and your lilies there.
The patches you wore are stains or not seen;
In the shops near the Seine, you lie worse for wear.

It is gone at last, the charmer's sweet reign,
The Parabére with the Pompadour
Will find only subjects that rebel in our day.
With them in their tombs, their love is no more.

But you, however, portraits unrecalled,
You are breathing bouquets of departed scent
And smiling now with that melancholy
At the faded memory of your dead gallants.

FROM “RIMAS”

Gustavo Bécquer

—I am consuming, belong to the twilight;
I write a symbol with passionate glow.
My soul is now filled with longing for pleasure.
Now are you seeking me? —No, hardly, no.

—My forehead is pale, 'neath braided soft light;
I offer all happiness, endless yet new;
I guard all tenderness as a great treasure.
Now are you calling me? —No, no, not you.

—I am a dream, an impossible one,
Vain phantom of fog, vain phantom of light,
Indeed incorporeal, an intangible being.
I cannot love you. —Come, come tonight.

Other Translated Poetry

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ENCORE UN LIVRE

Jules Laforgue

My book appears; I long to be
Away from all these common fellows,
Away from money, hails, and hellos,
From all our phraseology.

Another Pierrot, I guess,
Is dead from chronic orphanhood,
A heart so full of dandydom
And lunar, queer, a mortal mess.

The gods have left; the snouts endure.
Ah! Things are getting worse each day.
I've had enough; I slip away
To the Inclusive Sinecure.

THE VIOLET

J. W. von Goethe

A violet in the meadow grew,
Retiring soul that no one knew,
It was a charming violet.
There came a youthful shepherdess,
So light of step, of mind no less,
Thereto, whereto
The meadow was in flower.

Ah! Might I be, the violet thought,
The perfect flower nature wrought,
And for a little while yet,
Till fainting I am plucked by her
And on her bosom might endure
No more, no more
Than lasts the quarter hour.

Alas! Alas! She came that way;
The violet, disregarded, lay—
A trampled little violet!
It sank and died and still was glad:
Since I must die, I'll die
Through her, through her
As she goes stepping by.

HEIDENRÖSLEIN

J. W. von Goethe

Rose-let of the boy perceived,
Rose-let in the heather,
Fresh as morning and young-leaved,
Therefore he is far from grieved,
Races up to greet her.
Roselet, roselet, roselet red
Roselet in the heather.
Lover's words: I'll tear your stalk,
Roselet in the heather.

Roselet then: My thorn will talk!
No one can forget the shock!
No one says: I get her.
Roselet, roselet, roselet red,
Roselet in the heather.
Wildly now he, taking, breaks
Roselet in the heather.

Roselet rears and pricks and sticks.
Helpless, though, she wails her luck,
Endures the things that fret her.
Roselet, roselet, roselet red,
Roselet in the heather.

THE SONG OF THE SPIRITS OVER THE WATERS

J. W. von Goethe

Water-likened
Man's soul must be:
From heaven down,
Then up to heaven.
Earth receives it
Again below
In eternal drift.

It flows from the high
Steep precipice—
Clear jet,
Then shatters gaily
In waves of cloud
Upon smooth rock,
And lightly received
It moves in veils,
Rushing with lightness
Down to the depths.

Cliffs interrupting
Athwart the plunge,
It foams in anger
Straight down the stair
That leads below
Where the chasm is.

It coils through field, vale

In a level bed.
It opens as lake
Wherein the star-faces
Refresh themselves.

Wind is the wave's
Dear paramour.
Wind stirs to the surface
The billow's foam.

Water-likened
Man's soul must be!
Like to the wind
Man's destiny!

THE HUMAN BOUNDARY LINE

J. W. von Goethe

When the age-old
Holiest father
With easy hand flings
Out of intervolved cloud
His blessing of lightning
Over the earth,
Then do I kiss
The lower hem of his cloak,
And my faithful breast
Fills with innocent awe.

With the gods
May not any man
Measure himself.
Reared upward
And touching the stars
With his scalp,
He has no
Certain foothold
And is the plaything
Of wind and cloud.

Standing firm
With linked skeleton
On the certain
And lasting earth,
He hardly vies

With the oak
Or the vine,
In no way compares.

What separates
Men from gods?
Before us there sweeps
The succession of waves,
An eternal stream:
The waves that lift us
Swallow us,
And we sink.

A little ring
Delimits our life,
And the chain of existence
Is forever strung
With generations.

DAS GÖTTLICHE

J. W. von Goethe

May his given aid, goodness,
Man's luster be.
Naught else retrieves him
From all other creatures
That we know.

All hail to the unknown
Higher beings
Apprehended of us.
May man be their like;
May his ways lead
Toward faith in them.

For without feeling
Great Nature is:
Light glows alike
For good and bad,
And to the offender
Come starlight and moonlight
As over the innocent.

Winds and currents,
Thunder and hail,
Plunge ever onward,
Fastening ever
In their hurry
On this man or that.

Even so, fortune,
Tossed through the crowd,
Seizes some youth
Curly and faultless,
Then on some hairless,
Some guilt-weighted head,
After harsh and eternal
Tremendous laws,
Must we all fully
Describe, as we go,
The circle of life.

Only man
Performs the impossible:
He can determine,
Select and bring judgment.
He can endow
The instant with permanence.

He alone gives
To good its due,
Punishes evil,
Heals and saves,
Drawing together
The stray and the wanderer.

And we honor
All the immortals
As though like mortals,
They did with greatness
What best we do—
In all of our littleness.

May man's luster be
In his given aid, goodness.
Let him tireless
Fill all needs rightly.
Make him our archetype
Of scarce-perceived beings.

MIGNON'S SONG FROM
"WILHELM MEISTER"

J. W. von Goethe

Do you know the land where the lemon-tree blooms,
The orange hangs golden in leafy glooms,
A soft wind glides down from the blue of space,
And high bay and myrtle lift in still grace?
Are your thoughts on it?

Thereto! Whereto

I might, my loved one, soon go with you.

You know the house? Roofed columns set aright.
The hall glows rich, a room in glancing light,
The statues standing with a marble stare:
Have you suffered, my child, in someone's care?
Are your thoughts on it?

Thereto! Whereto

I might, my salvation, go with you.

You know the peak, its trail among the clouds?
The mule must find its way with mists in crowds.
In caverns lives the dragon's ancient brood,
Rock plunges down, and over it the flood;
You know it well.

Thereto! Whereto

We go our path! O father, I and you.

NOTE: This translation contains marked transitions in rhythm not to be found in the original. Since these transitions serve a function that seems of some interest, the translation has been retained. Novelty may not be priceless, but it is not always to be

disparaged.

FROM “DIE HEIMKEHR”

Heinrich Heine

49

Heart, my heart, withstand depression,
Lift the weight of destiny.
Spring's bright newness gives us free
What was lost in winter's session.

Still alive we own creation!
All the world wears loveliness!
And, my heart, why hope for less?
All, yes, all remains love's ration.

FROM “VERSCHIEDENE”

Heinrich Heine

The fraulein stands on the seashore
And sobs with never a pause.
It is the dramatic sunset
Which is the pathetic cause.

My fraulein, be more cheerful,
It's only another showing.
Dismiss the thought of departure.
Own it a coming and going.

FROM "DIE HEIMKEHR"

Heinrich Heine

76

As dark as any dreams
The houses extend away;
Well-wrapped in an overcoat
I hurriedly go my way.

The cathedral's talkative bell
Announces twelve o'clock.
With all of her kisses and charms
My darling attends my knock.

For companion I have the moon
Who lights my way from on high.
At last I arrive at her door
And lift my voice to the sky:

"I thank you for listening well,
For making my pathway bright.
The moment has come to part.
The rest of the world needs light.

If you find some enamoured creature
With a plaintive lonely song,
Give him the comfort then
You gave me ever so long."

BUONAPARTE

Friedrich Hölderlin

Here are the holy vessels, the poets,
Wherein life's wine, the spirit
Of heroes, keeps eternal,

Buc ut dae that of he this youth hh here,
The quick: one, would it not split any
Vessel that presumes to contain it?

May the poet leave him untouched, this spirit like nature's,
For such stuff shames masters into apprentices,
He is not for poems, to live and remain in them.
He lives and remains in the world

TO THE FATES

Friedrich Hölderlin

Grant but one summer, you powers!
One autumn for me of ripe song
That my heart with willingness, . of sweet
Playing sated, then may die.

The soul, unpossessed of its godly right
In this life, rests not below in Orcus;
Se et, if the holy thing bees lyin
a ose to my heart, the poem, show oa forth,

Th en welcome, i Cail sulence OL a shadows:
Content am I, though my lyre
D escend 4 not with a me. = For once
As the gods I lived, and what more is there?