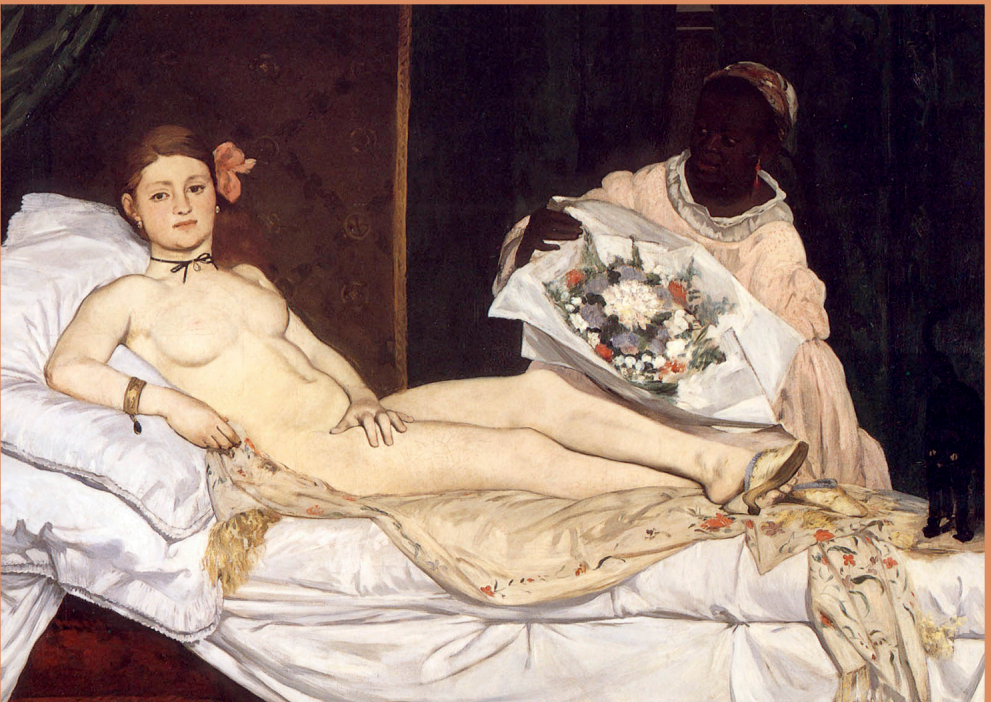


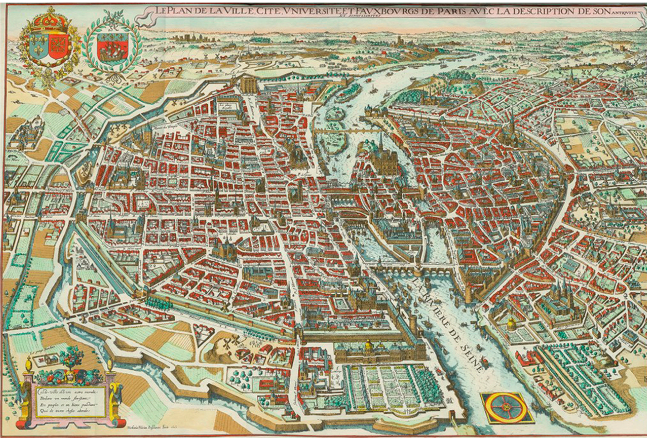
# DESIRES

SIXTY-FIVE FRENCH POEMS  
PLUS A SMALL BUT FAMOUS GERMAN ONE

TRANSLATED BY  
JOHN FRASER



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The translations and notes have appeared at various times in <http://www.jottings.ca/john/voices/index.html>, first posted in 2004.

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Cover images *Louise-Marguerite de Lorraine, Princesse de Conty* (1588–1631); *Pierre de Ronsard* (1524–1585); Édouard Manet, *Olympia* (1864).

Nano Reid (1900–1981) co-represented Ireland at the 1950 Venice Biennale.

Benoit Tadié's translations include Joyce's *Dubliners* (*Gens de Dublin*) and the selection of Hart Crane's poetry in a forthcoming anthology of American poetry in the Bibliothèque de la Pléiade.

This book is without the customary scholarly apparatus. If anyone needs information about quotations or allusions, it should be available at [fraserj@eastlink.ca](mailto:fraserj@eastlink.ca).

*Desires* is for Timothy Steele and Clive Wilmer.

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## Foreword

There are ways and ways of knowing French. You can know the language superficially or you can know it in depth, reaching the deep layers and undercurrents that enable you to feel, among other things, how it has changed over the centuries, or what it is that makes poetic language poetic. John Fraser displays this kind of knowledge throughout his beautiful anthology of French poetry.

But the great merit of his work does not consist only in getting the translations equally right whether the poets belong to the fifteenth century or the twentieth, nor in the technical prowess of translating French syllabic verse into English lines that scan. It lies above all in the choices and decisions he makes, resulting in a very original and valuable perspective on five centuries of French poetry.

This is very much an anti-Norton anthology. There is no pretence at exhaustiveness, no scholarly criteria to distinguish between first-second- and third-rate, no desire to pigeonhole the various poets and give each a definitive place in the canon. There is no canon, in fact. But neither is this, on the other hand, a purely subjective or amateur “personal best”. It focuses, in what I read as a political gesture, on the Renaissance and romantic-symbolist periods, on either side of the great classical age when power was centralized under Louis XIV and Richelieu, language codified in the *Académie*’s dictionary, and literary morals regulated by the “*règle de bienséance*.”

Renaissance and Romantic poems are, for us, much more alive than those of Racine, Boileau, or La Fontaine. They sometimes echo the linguistic underworld of thieves and argot. They come across in the same way as early-1930s pre-Code movies do for the Hollywood aficionado (see John Fraser’s illuminating development on this theme in his Introduction). Some scholars would perhaps shudder at the idea of having Ronsard placed on the same level as the obscure Le Petit, or Nerval with Aristide Bruand, the *chansonnier* of now-forgotten late-19<sup>th</sup>-century Pigalle cabarets, or, again, Apollinaire with Brassens, Bruand’s late-20<sup>th</sup> century equivalent. But these are all poets with a highly individual voice, that John Fraser has not only heard but captured and kept alive in his beautiful translations.

The poets here can, through the power of their words, propel us into very different worlds. Read Fraser's Villon, and you're standing at the foot of the Montfaucon gibbet, and can feel with him "the possibility of being hanged, and the aftermath for the dangling body" (JF's note). Read his translation of Le Petit's wonderful *Adieu des Filles de Joie à la Cité de Paris*, and you enter "low" districts like the Butte Saint-Roch, and begin to feel the ill wind of moral and political change that would soon turn Le Petit himself into a martyr of freedom of expression. These translations, and the notes that accompany them, do not merely transpose and contextualize: they are intensely empathetic and get the there-ness and then-ness of the poems for the reader.

Though I do not wish to impose any over-arching interpretation onto the whole collection, it seems to me that the key to John Fraser's endeavour is the idea of poetry as a form of resurrection. Because poetry has evocative powers that are beyond the reach of other forms of literature and communication, it can, at its best, like the best of the visual arts, resurrect worlds which have disappeared.

This idea comes out in the running image of the poet as Orpheus that emerges here and there in the collection and asserts itself strongly with Nerval's famous "El Desdichado" and Durry's little-known "Prière d'Orphée", on which the collection closes—a fit answer, across five centuries, to Villon's opening "Ballade des Pendus", and countering the sense of mortality without which the idea of resurrection itself would make no sense.

As Ezra Pound wrote, "a great age of literature is perhaps always a great age of translations". Ours is not, but it might be if more publishers were interested in publishing poetry, or if they paid their translators better—and especially if there were more people like John Fraser around: a big series of "ifs", admittedly.

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## Preface

### I

Apart from the Villon, the poems in Part One come from:

Jean-Paul Goujon's 1000-page *Anthologie de la poésie érotique française* (Fayard, 2004), in which he provides a 135-page history of erotic French poetry, and the 320-page edition of 2008 with the same title.

Louis Perceau's *Pierre de Ronsard et la Pléiade* (1928) and *Théophile de Viau et les Libertins* (1935), in his *Le Cabinet Secret du Parnasse* series;

Thomas Pogu's *Claude Le Petit, Oeuvres Libertines* (2012).

All the poems are in my revisionist online anthology, *A New Book of Verse*. There are more poems there by Villon and Ronsard, and by poets in Part Two, translated by other hands. For *A New Book of Verse* (contents), "Powers of Style," and "Personals," to which I refer from time to time, google to *Voices in the Cave of Being* and use the index bars below the image.

Including the French originals would have made *Desires* too long, and, besides, I do my own typing. But I've provided the first two lines of all the poems, plus complete texts of two of them. A number of the originals can be found in *A New Book of Verse*, which a well-known American poet recently called "your wonderfully various and distinguished anthology."

### II

I talk about metrics in the notes about Aragon and Durry. The subject is important, but not mysterious. Meaning and feeling in language come in part from speech emphases. The words "I never gave him any money" have at least a dozen distinct meanings, depending on which words are stressed, and how. Metre, an affair of modular units ("feet"), is a means of maximizing the control of emphasis, meaning, and hence feeling.



When things are well done in formal poems in English, the poems themselves can tell you how to read or speak them without your knowing about metrics (in contrast, mostly, to their creators). With formal French poems, you will simply not get sufficiently the speech flow without an elementary knowledge of French metrics. The lines will seem arbitrarily irregular, and you will be missing out on one of the great pleasures in poetry.

Discussions of French metrics can become very complicated, as can games of chess. But all that is essential when you're watching a game or trying to play one is the moves permitted to pawns, knights, bishops, castles, and royalty. Knowing those, you can proceed.

Knowing the equivalent facts in French verse is a bit harder, since syllables can be silent or voiced, depending on context. But the basic rules are clear, and easy to acquire, and well worth doing so. Nineteenth-century French poetry, especially, is one of the world's great literatures.

### III

I did not set out to do a book of translations. I simply found recently that I'd translated a lot more poems for *A New Book of Verse* since 2002 than I'd realized. They were poems that I particularly wanted to do and felt capable of attempting.

When I went through Goujon's major anthology not long ago, I wasn't out to fill a quota or *épater la bourgeoisie*, any more than when I added Carew's "A Rapture," or Colman's "Don Leon," or "The Ball of Kirriemuir" to *A New Book*. I was looking for quality, for felt life, for the *je ne sais quoi*, the certain something—for poems whose point was not just to be erotic. These were principally in the Renaissance and 17th century. Several of them are also in Michel Jeanneret's *La Muse lascive; anthologie de la poésie érotique et pornographique française (1550–1660)* (2007). There may be lots of usables that I've missed. There appears to be a whole unmapped subcontinent out there.

But in fact very few of the poems here use The Words, and *Desires* is not inaugurating a new eBookit line of "One-Hand Books."

Desires? For what? Well, obviously for that, and that, and a bit of that and, oh, that too. But also the comfort of simple food after a hard day's



walking, and mercy for the unjustly imprisoned, and divine forgiveness for ill-spent lives, and the social delights of a great city, and the sun's mind-nurturing warmth, and the release of one's beloved from the dark underground kingdom, and more, more.

But this isn't *Sixty-Six Types of Desire*, and you don't have to wonder, when entering a poem, what particular desire it encapsulates. The presence of desiring was what I noticed after the fact.

#### IV

I'm fascinated by Benoit Tadié's suggestion about "resurrection" in his wonderfully generous and reassuring Foreword, all the more welcome as coming from someone himself perfectly bilingual, and whose translations of Hart Crane will be appearing in one of the prestigious Pléiade anthologies.

I would have said that I don't consciously approach poetry in that fashion. I almost don't think of "poetry" at all, as distinct from individual poems. The latter, at least those that I care for, and a lot of which are in *A New Book of Verse*, seem to me, rather, to be speech acts, with the emphasis on "acts" as distinct from mere statings. They are the live utterances of possible selves, not to be confused with the characters of biography.

Personally, except where there are obscure references, as with Le Petit's "Adieu," or where a poet is heavily autobiographical, like Yeats, I've rarely felt the need to find out more about the biographical or "period" context of a poem, in the expectation that doing so would make it more real, rather than cluttering it up with inferior prose discourse. The contexts that matter are other poems by the poet, though not in the sense of building up a realworld profile, plus poems by others that help one to see a poem's individuality, or lack of it, more clearly.

Where the idea of resurrection does indeed come into play, though, is when you want to share with others the felt life in voicings, particularly out on the edges of the culture map, or when they're commonly misperceived. And what can count is indeed, yes, to change a pastness into presentness.

The resurrection of texts that would be better off staying dead simply produces zombies, of which there are more than enough. But it was exciting when Randall Jarrell refurbished Whitman's "Song of Myself," and D.H. Lawrence revised classic American literature, and Leavis gave us a sophisticated and *witty* George Eliot. Ezra Pound and Yvor Winters were enthusiastic *sharers* of what they had come upon during their ranging across the centuries in search of quality.

And yes, it's thrilling feeling a poet like Claude Le Petit coming into present being, the way that in the old darkroom days an image emerged on the blank printing paper after you put it into the developer tray.

## V

The process isn't simple, of course. When I'm mentally saying over and over and never tiring of a poem like Wyatt's "They flee from me," it's not a matter of putting on period drag or seeing in the mind's eye the bearded face of Holbein's drawing of the poet. The voice, the "I" in the poem, is free of such irrelevancies. But it isn't quite our own, or one of them. Have a look at those verbs in the first stanza:

They *flee* from me that sometime did me *seek*  
With naked foot, *stalking* in my chamber.  
I have *seen* them gentle, tame, and meek,  
That now are wild and do not *remember*  
That some time they *put* themselves in danger  
To *take* bread at my hand, and now they *range*,  
Busily *seeking* with a continual change.

All of them are active verbs, which Ernest Fenollosa in *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*, which was so important for Pound, identified as a major strength of Shakespeare's dramatic verse. But they're not all how one would say things now, are they? Nowadays it would be constructions like "stay away from," "come looking for," and so on.

I've no idea how and why the softening occurred, and of course it was only partial. Wordsworth *wandered* lonely as a cloud, and those clouds of his *floated* on high. But the muscular tension to those lines of Wyatt's isn't normally ours. So that, yes, one is indeed experiencing a recovery of *partial* difference, just as one experiences present-day

differences, also partial, when entering into some of the numerous “other” Englishes.

At such times, to reverse Gertrude Stein’s famous *mot* about Oakland, there’s more there there.

## VI

For me, in any event, it’s been an almost physical ache when something that especially spoke to me was generally invisible or derided. It hurts to feel that there will simply be, for eternity, a *hole*, and that there may not be enough minds out there to welcome a revenant. I’ve done some welcoming myself in print. But I’m still exasperated by my inability (having only so much energy) to get the unbowlerized 1941 text of *Road Floozie*, with its felt life and its fascinating quasi-existentialist anticipation of *Thelma and Louise* (1991), back in print.

*Road Floozie? Road FLOOZIE?* What on earth does *Road Floozie* have to do with French poetry? What’s next—*King Kong* as Orphic Descent?

Well, actually ...

## VII

My gratitude to Benoit Tadié, wonderfully un-*snob*, to whom I could take puzzlements without being given lectures on the ineffable subtlety of the French language, and whose quiet encouragement was the beacon that reassured me that I wasn’t far out on waters where I had no business being.

And to the members of my seminar “Traditionalism and Experimentation in Poetry, 1880–1920,” over the years, some with a lot more French than mine, some with less or occasionally none, who had no problems with a back-and-forthing between originals and translations, and a concern with formal features and the recording of poems, and for whom, during the free-form discussions, it was always *ad rem* and not *ad hominem*.

What made it work was that we were all the time looking at individual poems, not at the hypothesized lives-and-thoughts of poets—that and the fact that it was obviously also a learning experience for myself.

## Introduction

The time when the intellectual affairs of America could be conducted on a monolingual basis is over. It has been irksome for long.

Ezra Pound, “French Poets” (1918)

“I’m sorry, Monsieur. I learned English for three years in school, but I haven’t understood anything that you’ve been saying.”

Postmaster in the Provence village of Seillons-Source-d’Argens (1964), replying, in French, to my introduction to him, in French, of myself and my wife, who would be staying there, along with a couple of friends, for the summer.

### I

I’m not a poet and I don’t know French, I mean KNOW it. I wouldn’t be able to chat with a waiter about the Tour de France (or anything else), I need subtitles, and when I finally made my way through Proust’s masterpiece it was in the two-volume Penguin translation. I’m not even a translator. The translations here are the only ones that I’ve done, and I haven’t sought publication for them elsewhere, though Durry’s “Orpheus’ Plea” appeared in the excellent Classics journal *Arion*.

But the French itself isn’t all that big a problem, really. If you can recognize tenses and have a good enough dictionary or two (one of mine is the Collins-Robert), you just look up words, pick the most likely-sounding equivalents when there are options, throw in some And’s, But’s, and When’s, and *voilà!* translation.

The problem is with the English. How anyone ever manages to do a translation that rhymes, makes sense, and feels like the original is as mysterious to me as weaving with a dozen different-coloured threads. Personally I had trouble enough with those *quartiers aisés* in Laforgue’s “Complainte des Pianos.” Pianos, pianos in—in what? wealthy neighbourhoods? comfortable neighbourhoods, well-to-do neighbourhoods. But “comfortable” and “well-to-do” both made my line dactylic. Recently “well-off” popped up from somewhere and is right metrically and semantically.

Metrically? Well, yes. For me, a translation of a metered poem that isn't itself metered in some fashion is likely to be a crib or a promissory note ("If you were lucky enough to know Belarusian, you'd enjoy the graceful wit of this love poem"), not a poem in its own right, even if sometimes it's the best that one can do. So that's when the tweakings and the returns to the dictionaries start, among them, from time to time, the great *Littré*.

Often, fortunately, given the flexibility of accentual-syllabic verse, a few words added here and there will do the trick. It didn't take much for Pound to turn Fenollosa's notebook translation of "The River Merchant's Wife" into immortal verse. Personally, too, I've stayed as close to the syntax, diction, and lineation of the original as I could, while giving a feeling of speakable English, not translationese. There's nothing original about all this.

My own Independence Day came when I realized that it's more important for a poem to feel like a poem than for it to pass at every point a language exam. As witness Pound's enduringly influential *Homage to Sextus Propertius*.

Actually, which may seem like *chutzpah*, there may be something to be said for having to fumble one's way through a foreign wordscape. You don't instantly know what a word "obviously" means, and in fact it may not, when you really get down to it, quite mean that, and sometimes, if you don't know realworld facts, won't wholly yield up its secret, like that *trait de bistre* in Gautier's "Carmen"—a line of bistre? a stroke of bistre? a touch of bistre? a dash of bistre? a splodge? a swirl? What would someone like that gypsy tart have *looked* like back then? Nowadays, apparently, brownish-yellow bags under the eyes are things to cover up.

You can also avoid, perhaps, in your fumbblings, a too consistent style from poem to poem.

## II

Personally I'm pleased by how different from one another some of the texts here seem. They don't sound like me, they read like poems. And I'm no poet, never compose poems or phrases in my head, never even want to. Yet the following is a poem, isn't it?

**Sad Notion / *Fantaisie triste***

*I' bruinait... L'temps était gris,*

It drizzled, weather grey on grey,  
No glimpse of sky... The atmosphere,  
Oozing out above the City,  
Fell in a mist on where we were.

Something was blowing, no direction,  
Not North, not a familiar kind.  
It slithered between neck and collar  
And turned to ice upon our shirts.

We plodded onward through the fog,  
Just making out other gloomy forms.  
We were following behind a hearse  
Bearing a departed friend.

Christ! how cold your back became,  
Made worse because of the slow pace;  
The marrow clotted in your bones,  
Colds and bronchitis fouled the air.

There wasn't a sparrow anywhere,  
Not a chaffinch, not a dove;  
Water was running down the tombs,  
And over there—that one was his.

And I told myself, thinking about him,  
Whom I'd seen laughing in September.  
Christ, how cold he'd be tonight!  
It's sad dying in December.

Aristide Bruant (1851–1925)

And this?

**I dreamed that Phyllis / *Je songeois que Phyllis***

*Je songeois que Phyllis, des Enfers revenue,*

I dreamed that Phyllis, returning from the shades,  
As beautiful as she'd been by the light of day,  
Wanted her phantom to make love again  
With me, like Ixion, coupling with a cloud.

Her spirit glided into my bed, stark naked,



And said, “Dear Thyrsis, here I am again,  
I’m only lovelier now in that gloomy place  
Where fate detained me after you had left me.

I’ve come to make love again to the loveliest lover,  
I’ve come to die again in your embraces.”

Finally, when the adored had consumed my fire,

She said, “I’m off, I’m returning to the dead,  
And you who boasted of having fucked my body,  
Can boast, now, of having fucked my soul.”

Théophile de Viau (1590–1626)

The originals of these two poems can be found at the end of this introduction. I would like to have been able to provide originals for all of the poems. But it would have made the book unwieldy, and taken too long to do. As a compromise, I’ve included the first two lines of the French (and in one case German) for each of them.

### III

The translations were done for my free revisionist online anthology *A New Book of Verse*, Anglo plus some French and German, in which there are numerous translations by other hands. The ones here in *Desires* are of untranslated poems, or poems with translations too firmly locked into copyright, or poems the translations of which by others I didn’t care for, or ones where I simply wanted to have a go so as to appreciate them better.

I’ve wanted in *A New Book* to challenge some over-familiar configurations—Doc Williams and his damn wheelbarrow, Doctor Johnson and the foolishness of all our big ambitions, Ronsard as the quintessential lover of Yeats’s romantic adaptation (“When you are old and grey and full of sleep”), etcetera.

So I was glad to come across the poems by Ronsard included here. They fitted with my sense of French, going back to Villon, as permitting a greater acknowledgment of the indecorous or unaesthetic physical body than was possible in English, with its concern with soul.

And then, *voilà*, a thousand welcomes to Jean-Paul Goujon’s thousand-page *Anthologie de la poésie érotique française* (Fayard 2004), from which almost all the other Renaissance poems come,

followed by Claude Le Petit, *Oeuvres libertines*, edited and introduced by Thomas Pogu (Paris, Éditions Cartouches, 2012), which allowed me to close off Part I with Le Petit's magnificent 300-line "Farewell of the Pleasure Girls to the City of Paris" ("Adieu des filles de joie à la cité de Paris").

#### IV

Part II, starting with the one German poem, Hölderlin's famous "Hälfte des Lebens" ("Half of Life") is a miscellany of largely nineteenth-century poems. I didn't choose them on any tidy principle, though Eros, above and below the waist, is a presence, along with some radical politics, and death in various guises, and a sense of transitoriness that makes pleasurable moments all the more precious. The first group seems to me classical—classical, not neo-classical. The second is more romantic.

There is much more variety in the second group, with more forms and more subtle and individualistic modes of feeling. But there are also continuities between the two parts, and I find that thinking about Pre-Code movies helps to spell them out.

#### V

What makes the Pre-Codes (1928–1933) so exciting now is not that they're defiantly indecorous, well, apart from some stocking-tops, and underthings, and an occasional discreet glimpse of partial nudity.

The narratives in them about a variety of sexual relationships are not hemmed in by Church-endorsed markers about what can and can't be dealt with, and what virtue looks like, and marriage, and what the guardians of good order are like, and what deviations from good order are like, and how things inevitably turn out (badly) for deviants. There is no Breenland cadre of lovable Irish-American priests and submissive Sisters. There's a moving drama of self-determined virtue, though, in the unironical Salvation Army movie *Laughing Sinner* (1931), with Joan Crawford and Clark Gable.

And sexual desire is a *force*, coolly exploited by Barbara Stanwyck, herself in actuality from down in the working class, as she sleeps her way to the top in *Baby Face* (1933). In *Possessed* (1931), the patting

down of some loosened hairs, the straightening of a white bow tie, and their Cialis cheerfulness leave no doubt as to why Gable and Crawford are an hour late for their dinner party. Can one seriously imagine Grant and Hepburn and the others, their characters I mean, actually *doing* it?

All this is without even passing through those portals into the domain of the island tropics where the only controls are those that individuals fail to impose on themselves, and rum is the *Coke-de-pays*, and desire *throbs*, and sweat drips, and violences explode.

The male protagonists aren't all the Amiable Handsomes—Taylor, Coop, Flynn, Grant, McCrea, Young, Powell, Tone, Montgomery, others—, and when Code heroes appear in Pre-Codes they haven't yet had their studio images locked into place. Gable's gangster in *A Free Soul* (1931) is a brute without a hint of redeeming qualities. His rich lawyer in *Possessed* in the same year is an honorable gentleman. Elsewhere he's a song-and-dance man, and a committed, likeable Salvation Army officer.

Relationships pre-Code don't have to be always hustled along with snappy dialogue, as if the audience's attention will start flagging otherwise. The audiences stay focused because they simply don't know how this or that well-heeled guy will behave, or dissatisfied wives, or working girls trying to rise, in this America with loosened morals in which individuals are feeling their way in a destabilized late-Boom and post-Crash society.

There is more emotional heft and suspense in a minor Joan Crawford and Robert Montgomery movie like *Untamed* (1930) than in all those oh-so-charming vehicles of the Code-controlled later Thirties.

There's no longer in the Pre-Codes the clear division between the rich and powerful of historical romances (“I love you, I love you, I *LOVE* you!”) and the “little people,” including the doomed ones presented with unsparing naturalism in Von Stroheim's *Greed* (1924). And the frat-boy types in evening attire at the dancing parties are coarse and callow, not the firm-jawed, high-collared, Wall Street winners of Charles Dana Gibson's drawings, or the Thirties smoothies to come.

## VI

What we have in all this is a mode of non-“period,” non-formulaic realism, with varied and meaningful dialogue rather than wise-cracking and persiflage. And monsters, much more *there* with sound than the ones in the Twenties, threaten both upper and lower lives. There are no automatic privilegings.

In the sublime *King Kong* (1933), which belongs up there with *Citizen Kane* and *Singin' in the Rain*, the flawless quiet realism, with its lovely decencies, of the interactions between Wray, Armstrong, Cabot, and the skipper at the outset is followed by the harsher realism of terrified individual crewmen beyond the Wall indiscriminately seized by scaly jaws or sent plummeting down onto the jagged rocks in the gorge, with worse to come—villagers bitten in half by giant teeth or ground down into the mud by giant feet, and later the supreme unfairness of the woman plucked from sleep in the high-rise hotel and sent screaming down towards the Manhattan crowd that she might normally have been a member of herself.

Each time one hopes, for a moment, that the victims, given movie conventions, will be spared—that the crewman up in the tree will successfully dodge the toothed head, that the man desperately shifting positions on the fallen tree across the gorge will be rewarded, that the screaming woman, after Kong sees that she isn't Ann, will be returned to her room. No such luck. At least the village toddler sitting on the dusty ground in the path of those giant feet is snatched away at the very last minute by someone brave or desperate enough to take the risk. But it could easily have gone the other way. There had already been the precedent in *Frankenstein* of the little girl whom Karloff tosses into the lake.

Like Death in Breughel's “The Triumph of Death” and Nashe's “In Time of Pestilence,” Kong kills *everyone*, both out there and back in the Manhattan of taken-for-granted hotel-sleeping, train-riding, evening-dressed theatre-going. But aching as he is with an unappeasable pure desire for Ann Darrow and the lost freedom of his prehistoric kingdom, he isn't monstrous in the sense in which we speak of human behaviours as monstrous.

## VII

This is definitely not the World According to Mayer, with its pristine costumes dry-cleaned before each day's shoot and its category protections. It hasn't yet been Nortonized.

Not that bad things don't happen in The Norton, but mostly to less than wholly good persons and under the rubric of Tragedy, which at least lends some dignity to them. And yes, you can be naked in bed with Marlowe, and Donne, and that most French of 17<sup>th</sup> century poets Rochester, and there's occasional unPetrarchan eroticism elsewhere. But not the kinds of "modern" details that one finds in Part One. And no disturbing corporeality, with its reminders that youth's indeed a stuff will not endure—no horrible deaths or pain-wracked lives, no bedroom angers and sullen silences, no waning of desire.

Oh, and go easy with that old-style religion, please, with its hells, and martyrdoms, and tombs, and worms, and flames, and *exclusions* from the bliss which, like Club Med in apotheosis, or Louis B. Mayer's Golden Age America with voice-over by Judy Garland, is an American birthright. LitLand is where you *escape* from *Gutshooter* and *Flayed IV*.

## VIII

With its plethora of information about all the works and ideas that matter, and the eschewal of "evaluation," meaning the possibility that some works of LITERATURE are junky—I mean, who are *you* to presume to challenge the accumulated wisdom of society across the centuries?—the two-volume soup-to-toothpicks chronological Norton, in its successive metamorphoses, has been a powerful force on behalf of a duplicitous conservatism.

It's all out there to be *appreciated*, stretching as far as the mind can reach, from horizon to horizon, like London as the plane descends towards Heathrow.

Metro-Goldwyn-Norton.

But in *Howards End*, when Mr. Millionaire Wilcox, treating Margaret Schlegel to a bang-up beefy lunch at Simpson's-on-the-Strand, tells

her that it's so thoroughly Old English, Forster drily calls it "no more Old English than the works of Kipling."

The TradCult canon, THE canon, too, was essentially the creation of late-Victorian imperialism, with the markers of England's greatness set down under Good Queen Bess and her predatory sea-captains, Britain's Milton epically outdoing Imperial Rome's Virgil, the Soul-and-Nature franchise taken up by Wordsworth and Shelley, robust English Character embodied in the big-subjects loquacity of Tennyson and Browning, and fin-de-siècle anthologies of Jacobethan lyrics with titles like *Sweet Silver Swan*, along with the Shropshire-Laddish populating of an economically depressed countryside with characters out of Imperial-Roman pastorals.

And all of it, to my mind, claustrophobic, even when one factors in the overarching double-plus-immortal spirit of Albion's Will. When there are only monsters out there beyond the boundary wall, and every work and period inside it has been certified Good In Its Own Way, irreconcilable positions and arguments for real become bad form, or beside the point, or both. The cultural relativism deplored by authoritarian traditionalists in fact starts *there*.

The Pre-Codes provide spaces in which to breathe freely and do one's own thinking. As do, for me, the poems in *Desires*.

## IX

The poems in both parts—the speaking voices, the mental processes, the realword connectings—are essentially realistic. Which carries no implications as to what their authors may do elsewhere. Like *A New Book of Verse*, this is an anthology of poems, not poets. You won't find me referring to a poet's "thought." And a poem only needs to happen once for new possibilities to be revealed. There is only one "They flee from me" in Wyatt's oeuvre, only one "The Garden" in Marvell's.

And there is a further link between the two parts.

The so-called libertine, or free-thinking, poems in Part One are marked by a non-adversarial feeling for the erotic body (we are not into any soul/body dichotomizing), and a frankness about its enjoyment, including its enjoyment by women speaking with their own voices. Just look, for example, at the Princesse de Conty's splendid

**Stanzas in Which a Lady Speaks / *Stances où une Dame Parle***  
*J'ayme bien ces pourtraits au blanc d'une muraille,*

I'm fond of those portraits drawn on whitewashed walls  
In which the *things* are the centre of attention,  
But I laugh at those idiots, all that riff-raff,  
Who make them huge, their own being so small.

They're hoping that the *thing* in a lying picture  
Will make us run after them, but they're so wrong.  
Our cunts don't follow naturally behind  
They don't behave like hares. They're hunting-birds.

Driven by some craving in its nature,  
The bird isn't naive, it knows its prey.  
It has to see a fist well stuffed with meat  
If you want it to drop down and be sociable.

Cunts and goshawks both have this in common,  
They require real flesh, and hunger after more.  
There's also this difference between the two,  
One pounces on its prey, the other melts beneath it.

Louise-Marguerite de Lorraine (1588–1631)

Her portrait is on the cover of this book.

It was a mode of discourse that was suppressed in the second half of the seventeenth century as neo-classicism in the service of the evolving pseudo-Augustan state, with Boileau as its literary ideologue, took over.

The burning of the twenty-three-year-old Claude Le Petit at the stake in 1662 for blasphemy and indecency, in the Place de Grève near Notre Dame, in front of a festive crowd and massed officials, sent a powerful message, as had the imprisonment of Théophile de Viau earlier in conditions so bad that he died shortly after his release. He too had been condemned to the stake, but escaped on some technicality.

But anthologies had a continuing existence under the counter or in manuscript, and 19th-century French poets were obviously aware of them. I'm not speaking of the merely erotic. There had been plenty of fucking-the-milkmaid verses and showcasings of *The Words*. Rather, it was a sophistication about sophisticated minds that are inseparable



from bodies, free of the after a while tedious homage to unattainable mistresses of the heart.

## X

All of which was in striking contrast to things across the Channel, where the highly political worship of a rouged and plastered Virgin Queen had made inadvisable a sonneteering celebration of (nudge-nudge, wink-wink) virgins Losing It, let alone enjoying themselves while doing so. And the Petrarchan cult of the spiritually finer and unobtainable Other made it harder to see flesh-and-blood women as individual beings with minds and desires of their own, and sex as an affair of complex social relationships, including the fact that desire fades or shifts direction.

I am speaking of writing that enjoyed an acceptable visibility and contributed to the shaping of aspiring minds. The seethe of sexuality in 18<sup>th</sup>-century London, fascinatingly described by Vic Gattrel in *The First Bohemians: Life and Art in London's Golden Age* (2013), didn't do so, apart, marginally, from the memoirs of John Cleland's adored Fanny Hill. Neither did the visual and verbal erotica that flourished in Holywell Street bookshops, off the Strand, during most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, on which, and much else, including the great Vauxhall pleasure gardens, see Cyril Pearl's still highly entertaining *The Girl with the Swansdown Seat* (1955). And while the aristocracy went on doing what they'd always done, they didn't write about it.

The diction-chaste *Memoirs* (1825) of Regency courtesan Harriet Wilson is still a classic of the unintimidated speaking voice. But while France went on evolving sexually in the ways charted in Marilyn Yalom's fascinating *How the French Invented Love* (2012), romantic England, where literary sex, insofar as it reared its poetic head, was predominantly an affair of souls yearning, mingling, aspiring, parting, mourning, regretting, etc (with some pretty weird realworld relationships), dead-ended in the inexorable thwarting of aspiration and desire in Hardy's rural mindscapes.

## XI

From which D.H. Lawrence, having himself experienced the hang-ups of Paul Morel in *Sons and Lovers*, would have to write, and think, and

marry, and fight his way free, not without creating problems for others with his success-or-failure dichotomies, most young males not being lucky enough to have a beautiful sexy thirty-three-year-old German aristocrat come along just when (to judge from the screw-ups *à deux* in his *The Trespasser*) she was needed.

Over in Dublin, Stephen Dedalus had had a more “French” initiation during his dealings with friendly whores when he was fifteen. But his creator, who in Paris would have had access to far stronger erotica than was indulged in furtively by Mr. Bloom, had needed for a while, in a still breathtaking group of letters, to violate multiple taboos with an eroticized young Nora Barnacle during their own marriage, in order to free himself, like Georges Bataille in his orgies, from residual supernaturalism, and be able, later on, to accommodate in *Ulysses* a broad range of social-sexual behaviours in Western Civ. He *knew* Nighttown.

Both of them brought the Words, with their invitations to visualization, back up from under the counter for middle-class readers, Lawrence defiantly, through the mouth of his instructive gamekeeper, Joyce as a normal part of realworld discourse. And both gave very serious space to the sexuality of women. In *New Bearings in English Poetry*, F.R. Leavis, who had been sneered at by official Cambridge in the Twenties for his voiced acquaintance with *Ulysses*, could declare two years after the death of Lawrence that “Every sensitive modern is (or feels himself to be) intimately aware of the experience of the opposite sex.”

As poems like Gautier’s “Solitude” and the ones in Verlaine’s *Femmes/Hombres*, brilliantly translated by Alistair Elliott, demonstrated, the full inwardness of some experiences couldn’t be conveyed *without* the Words.

The greater French candour, and areas not posted with No Trespassing signs—Too Immoral, Too Unpoetic, Too Low, Too Unmanly, Too Unwomanly—contributed to 19<sup>th</sup>-century poetic mindscapes that could accommodate poets masturbating, dormitory-girl sex, lovers crazy-wild on cheap wine, lecherous archbishops, naked clowns, busy brothels, and more—not always at the center of a poem, let alone as problems to be solved, but simply facts of life, along with celebrations of vitality, charm, contentment, and some heroic Orphic voyaging.

## XII

There were more direct continuities in France, too, which I'm not scholar enough to do more than gesture towards. I've come to disbelieve in coincidences. One can see tens of thousands of movie shots over the years without the mind's eye ever registering duplicates. And if one immediately thinks "Baudelaire" while reading the following by Le Petit, it isn't because by some quirk of fate Le Petit had anticipated elements to be found in Baudelaire.

### **To the Curious Reader / *Au Lecteur Curieux***

*Estant hier en desbauche au faubourg Saint-Germain,*

Last night, after a debauch in the Faubourg Saint-Germain,  
Between midnight and one, in a surly mood,  
And groping my way alone from street to street  
In search of a brothel where I could rest till morning.

Half on foot, half on my hands and knees,  
And as filthy up to my arse as a ploughshare,  
I saw up ahead beside the wall, like a whore,  
A great spectre, as thin as a rake, in action.

If anyone was ever surprised, it was me.  
You could have finished me off with a feather.  
I never was so taken aback in my life.

You'll want to know what I'm talking about, I'm sure.  
But, Reader...oh, why not? It happens, as you'll find out.  
It was—God forgive me—a devil fucking you.

Personally, too, I sense the opening of the published version of Mallarmé's "Le Pitre Chatié" ("Yeux; lacs, avec ma simple ivresse de renaître") in

### **To Her Thighs/Aux Cuisses**

*"Quoi? bessons pilotis, quoi? gemelle colonne"*

"What?—foundations of legs? What?—a twin column..."

Plus a Mallarméan aspect to the ascent from one figurative level (architecture) to another (music).

And how about a Who's This? for

Musiciens de triqueniques,  
Enchifarnés et pulmoniques...  
À quoi bon tout ce tintamarre,  
Et ce charivari barbare?...  
Nous n'aimons pas ces viandes creuses  
Ni vos grimaces maupiteuses ...

The lines are from Le Petit's "Stances irrégulières" (*Oeuvres libertines*, p.110).

Pogu opens his Preface to *Oeuvres libertines* by saying that the actor and screen-writer Jean-Claude Carrière (b.1931) has declared that, for him,

the greatest French poets, apart from Rimbaud and Baudelaire, are unknown... Those are the licentious Baroque poets of the 17th century, whom Boileau and neo-classicism smote with sudden death. They're named Jean de Lacépède, Jean-Baptiste Chassignet, Claude Hopil, Pierre de Marbeuf ... I affirm that they figure among the greatest French poets, infinitely superior to Lamartine and Alfred de Musset, who've been sold to us as the most eminent representatives of our poetry ...

The handful of poems by those unfamiliar names that I've been able to access didn't seem all that wonderful to me, and the translating itch didn't return. But that kind of praise suggests that some interesting revisionism may be going on about the supposed great tradition of French poetry.

It might even have consequences for the kind of Anglo anthologising of French verse in which the only *serious* French poetry of the past fifty years has been post-Surrealist free-verse celebrations of the transformative linguistic power of *La Poésie*, a bias in which poems like Jeanne-Marie Durry's magnificent "Orpheus' Plea," or the vibrant populist lyrics of Georges Brassens, are mere *vers de Mama*, or vulgar cuttings-up in the servants' quarters.

### XIII

But what about the differences, which are also considerable?

Terms like “realistic” and “realism” are tricky, of course. There is still today the felt pressure of Realism as a container, an excluder, an inhibitor. This, it seems to declare, is how Realworld really is, and realworld causality, and realworld consequences, particularly in Part I. There are the kinds of nasties enumerated in Théophile de Viau’s “Satire”:

They say my sister rides on top;  
I’ve had a run-in with the Law;  
My money’s just gone down the drain,  
And now I see the moon is waning.

...

I’m pissing broken glass and fire;  
I only spit the thickest mucus;  
I’ve almost gone completely bald;  
I’ve got the plague! I’ve got the pox!

...

Etc.

There are penalties for imprudence. The sodomitic Jacques Chausson, burned alive in Le Petit’s sonnet about him, is followed shortly by Le Petit himself, who had too trustingly in “To the Reader” praised the tolerance of the authorities. Unfortunates twirl on the Law’s gibbets. Realworld is not just “I” and “You”, it is also a whole lot of Them. “I fall upon the thorns of life, I bleed”—O woe, woe, woe, O the unfairness of it to wonderful Me!

If that’s the “Real,” it is not, in poetic Mindworld, what you want, is it?

#### XIV

So, in one thought-sequence, a disconnect from language as embodying benign transcendent realities—Love, Truth, Beauty, and the like, with the Poet as empowered transmitter—was followed by a compensatory disconnect from the Real as intellectual constrictor, diminisher, depleter, whether morally (Duty, Tradition, Order, Virtue, etc) or in the inexorable workings of impersonal Nature as revealed by Science.

But poetry for some, doing its own untrammelled creating, was able to reconnect with the Real by virtue of being true to the devices and desires of each poet's heart, absorbed in the most interesting kind of exploring, namely that of one's own unique self and its experiences. Such-and-such is especially real because what is being described *really happened*.

The term *psychological* realism means more than that, though—means that what is articulated is more than just the hopes or memories or experiences of this or that particular mind, so vivid to itself and so inaccessible directly by others. It corresponds in some way to the way things are more widely.

And when poems are good and feel true, it isn't because of an assumed or inferred correspondence with events in the lives of their makers. They would be just as good if anonymous, or coming to you as by this or that author of whom you've never heard or know effectively nothing. Like some of those here.

## XV

If the poems in Part One are largely action-oriented, those in Part Two are more about feelings and states of mind. And they feel, well, real, whether it's someone remembering Venice while at the ballet, or the comfort of a simple meal after long travelling, or lying awake in a prison dormitory, or rapt in the throes of literary composition, or noticing an odd kind of beauty on the battlefield, or being truly loved and loving.

But if the term "Romantic" referred originally to the heightenings, speedings-up, supernatural wonders, exotic locales, larger-than-life characters, dramatic actions, etc, of medieval romances, and to a fondness for those "worlds" in contrast to the slower, duller, everydayness of the here and now, then we do have a dichotomizing of sorts in the poems here.

But it's a more complex one than what Edwin Arlington Robinson nailed in pathetic small-town Miniver Cheevy, who "loved the days of old / When swords were bright and steeds were prancing," and "cursed the commonplace."

## XVI

In “Why I Write,” George Orwell recalls how for a time, early on, he had a curious base-line realist narrative of the here and now going on in his head while he was doing things. “He stubs out the cigarette, gets up from the armchair, and goes to the window, where he stands looking down at the empty street, hands in pockets”—something along those lines.

But the presents in the poems here are not like that. Things are in flux. Snow is coming, a holiday season is ending, an adolescent’s mind tacks and veers, relatives die and yet are half alive in the mind, someone marries once twice thrice, schoolgirls menstruate and get married off, a former lover is back in Town, a writer is wasting his time with his tawny mistress, the innocent are suffering in the king’s prisons, corpses lie decomposing after battles, the peasantry may not remain subservient, cops aren’t respected, and nothing quite fits in the Germany of 1919 where the values of decent girls change under the pressures of hunger.

And the present is permeated with memories true or false, and fantasies, sometimes coming unbidden, and reminders to others (including an actual queen) of past doings, and speculations about what others are feeling.

But while the here-and-nows are partnered with elsewhere, the elsewhere are themselves, whether memories or fantasies, not vaporous or over-idealized. Gautier’s Venice is slimmed down to a few brilliant details, but not dreamlike. The chateau of Nerval’s reverie is four-square. The romantic yearnings of Laforgue’s school-girls are poignantly understandable.

There is lots of motion, too. A mouse scurries soundlessly, crows swoop and gouge, a gondola glides, a train whistles and starts with a jerk the way they did in steam-days, a youth rambles singing under lime-tress, a smiling waitress fills a tankard for you in a comfortable tavern, gravedigger-death scratches at your door, the cholera is coming to town.

And Orpheus descends into Pluto’s dark kingdom and makes his way through stony tunnels and clustering curious shades to plead for the



snatched Eurydice’s release and induce Pluto to recall his own past feelings of empathy.

But while these are strongly individuated poems, virtually the only one in which the poet is gazing figuratively at his own navel is Francis Jammes’ “It’s going to snow....” Poets, at least in these poems, are looking outwards. Jammes himself is talking about language.

The rhetoric can be figurative and transformative, too, with the dead moving around, and bullets *being* stars, and a muscular density of metaphors in Durry’s “Orpheus’ Plea,” and Queneau’s “I’m not so scared”, and Corbière’s “To the Memory of Zulma.” The ellipsis marks in the last-named are in the original.

**Tristan Corbière (1845–1875)**

**To the Memory of Zulma and twenty gold francs**  
*wild virgin beyond the barricade*

She had youth’s twenty golden years  
I had the youth of twenty francs,  
And we put them into the same bag,  
Invested them in a joint venture  
In an untrustworthy spring night.

The moon made a hole in that,  
Round as a five-franc piece,  
Through which our fortune ebbed...  
Twenty years! twenty francs!—and the moon!

Small change, alas, those twenty francs,  
And small change, too, those twenty years!  
And the moon made hole upon hole  
In one joint venture after another...  
—It was like a joint fate.

.....

I found her again—many springtimes,  
Many twenty years, many twenty francs,  
Many holes and many moons—  
Still a virgin, still only twenty  
And—a colonel in the Commune.

.....

Then later: chasing passers-by  
For twenty sous, no twenty francs now...  
And afterwards: a common grave,  
A free night with no moon holes.

## XVII

In none of them are fantasy or self-deception being forced to confront what Yeats called “The desolation of reality” and Stevens memorably encapsulated in “The Snow Man,” with its “nothing that is not there, and the nothing that is.”

The exhilarations of love are real. The unstable romanticism of adolescence is real, so memorably evoked in Rimbaud’s “Romance/ Novel,” with the sheer lovely thereness of the June night, the lime-trees, the distant sounds and drifting scents, the expansion of mind—and then the charming little miss, and his novelistic agonies for weeks, and then—hoop-la!—back to the simpler café pleasures, but with no disillusionment. It isn’t the masturbatory arc of Gautier’s “Solitude.”

And there can be meaningful passions, and anger, and an indignant fighting back against the over-class, like in Michel’s poems and Brassens’ two irreverences.

And losses are not to lie down and weep and give up for.

Zulma, heroically, was a colonel in the revolutionary Commune, and her persistent Louise-Michel-like passion isn’t foolish. In Aragon’s “Love which isn’t a Name”, the idea of a man’s married happiness in love, after earlier screwings around like those, maybe, in “Beer-hall *Magick* Germany,” is given substance in his analysis of how things came together for the two of them. In “Orpheus’ Plea,” Durrty gives us the dynamic back-and-forthings of mind between present, past, and future that make possible a sustained and undiscouraged effectiveness in pursuit of a goal.

## XVIII

So, enjoy. There’s a rich variety of attitudes here—indignation, compassion, deep love among them, with others to which it’s harder to put a name, which means that the authors have reached out beyond familiar categories and role-playings.

You're not locked into a single mode or modes as a reader.

You don't have to be the icy undeceivable forensic expert, knowing that bodies are buried, however cunningly the poet-poem has concealed them. Or the sympathetic auditor for the intense confider rabbiting on interminably about the psychodrama of her or his love-life, with its soaring *this-time* relationships going inevitably flat, and the depressed or angry self-analyzing.

You don't have to envy the sophisticate who's on easy terms with so many Names, and who could no doubt whistle you the whole of *Les Miz* or sit right down and play that Toccata of Galuppi's. You don't have to nod and grunt appreciatively as the pub acquaintance reminisces about his rural boyhood, with its wonderful mum, and colorful relatives, and fascinating neighborhood eccentrics, and an aroma of damp tweed. Or applaud, a little guiltily because not sufficiently engaged oneself ("Where do I sign up?"), indignant PC sermonettes about current affairs.

Or track back, mouth agape in uncomprehending awe, from Theorist D's quarrel with the assumptions of Theorist C's discussion of Critic B's explication of Poet A's poem about the impossibility of communication.

As in the Pre-Codes, there is air and space here, and poems aren't all one kind of thing whose codes you are expected (will it be on the exam?) to crack, or documents needing grounding in the lives and times of the authors, or bearers, in their complex interlocking symbolism, of Great Big Poetic Truths requiring the interpretations of a pedagogue-priesthood, or a dance of Empsonian ambiguities.

## XIX

But wait a minute, wait a minute. If all that's so, what's *left*? I mean, bathwater and babies and all that?

I was starting to wonder about that myself a bit.

Well, how about a remarkable opening up, rather than closing down into a single mode, of a whole variety of mind-workings, with the here never just here, and the elsewhere never just off and away there?

We're out there in imagination in seaside resorts out of season, and the myth-charged Bay of Naples, and wintry landscapes, and the rooms of sexy Spanish tarts, and wonderful summer nights, and market punch-up with cops. All of it with such tactility—the feel of sun and rain on your skin, the taste of good beer and cheap wine, the smash of waves against breakwaters, the pleasant smell of old furniture, the thrill of nakedness, the tumble of hair.

And when you enter into other consciousnesses, they are ones that open up into Realworld, not the imagined romantic minds of corsairs, prancing knights, beckoning damsels, famous (Victorianized) Renaissance artists.

I myself am especially thrilled by poems like the *Princesse de Conty's* whose voices might be coming from the next room.

There are indeed continuities of mind across the centuries and millenia, regardless of changes in beliefs and conventions. The individuals who drew on the walls of the Chauvet Cave thirty-thousand years ago those flat-browed humorless lionesses tautly hunting, just as we see them today in nature documentaries, were not mere generic servants of rituals or chronicling.

Theirs was the same intent and, yes, intelligent, gaze that artists from the Renaissance on could have brought to the teeming, dangerous, energy-charged life of that hot valley. And if individual from the two groups had met, they would have been able to communicate with mutual respect thorough their seeing hands.

## XX

What matter most, it appears to me, are the displayed powers of empathy.

If I haven't said much about Part One, it's because the poems are simpler and self-explanatory. What is sought in them is not a different Elsewhere but a more intense and physically intimate Here. What is noteworthy, though, is how present, or felt as present, the interior beings of the sexual others, the objects or agents of desire, are.

Delight is not just what Honeybunch could let you have if she'd only stop being so damn *stubborn*. Delight is what goes on in this mind/

body, and this, and this, not always in quite the normal fashion (that lute, that great big leather-covered dildo). Le Petit's farewell of the whores is a hymn to all the enjoyments that had been possible in the various parts of a still partly feminized and eroticized city.

In Part Two, minds reach out into more varieties of mind—silly but sensitive male adolescents, prisoners, tavern maids, exuberant soldiers, strong-armed market women, nuns, as well as ghastly social climbers and sensation-seeking upper-class types. In Part One, with its couple of real aristocrats, we have the kind of democracy of the body wittily evoked by Auden in the last stanza of "Heavy Date":

When two lovers meet, then  
There's an end of writing  
Thought and Analytics:  
Lovers, like the dead,  
In their loves are equal;  
Sophomores and peasants,  
Poets and their critics  
Are the same in bed.

In Part Two there's also more in the way of a cultural equality.

Those delightful well-to-do young Paris girls in Laforgue's "Ballade of Return" don't negate the lowlifes of Verlaine's "Howling with the Wolves." Monarchs are merely human. Sensation-seeking upper-class types are disgusting. The Church is reactionary. Cops are fair game for a punch-up. The Napoleonic Arc-de-Triomphe heroics dwindle when seen from a maternal perspective. And there are very few class-separating cultural allusions that everyone who is anyone, don't you know, recognizes, and that don't require clarifying for *hoi polloi*.

Nor is there a self-flattering heroizing of the Poet as a new post-Napoleon aristocrat. The most romantic of the ones here, Musset, does his own self-ironizing. It's not obvious that his ill-wishers are wrong about his wasting his time, and a former love affair, so important for him, is neither recalled accurately by him nor, seemingly, imprinted indelibly in the mind of Her.

The youthful mind-voyages of the young Rimbaud through romances are, well, youthful, and the flesh-and-blood young miss in her little

button booties is obviously amused by his fervent pelting of her with sonnets. Gautier orgasms in “Solitude” and the soufflé goes flat.

Always, too, these authors have turned their own individual experiences, whether recalled directly or transmuted, into more-than-merely-personal psychological realism, their authority coming not because they are theirs but because they are representative and recognizable. And have been *shaped* into ballades, sonnets, quatrain narratives, cabaret songs, marching songs, quasi-dialogues, dramatic monologues, and forms not easy to label, including the brilliant inventions of Laforgue’s “Lament of the Pianos.”

The poets here would have understood that the question to ask of a poet about work in progress is not, What are you trying to say?, but, What are you trying to *do*?

And out of the experiences described in Rimbaud’s lovely “Romance”—the caressing June air, the romantic setting, the quasi-eroticism (that naughty little star throbbing and melting up there), the encounter, and what he has done with them—a flawless poem pulsing with life has come, the four parts, with two stanzas in each, forming a narrative that is itself a short-story, in which Papa in his awesome high collar and the charming little miss of good family are not the value-charged embodiments of *real* social reality, and the very different reality of the cafes to which he returns is itself an affair of crafted and symbolic rituals and fictions.

If one had to do any political categorizing, the poems in Part Two would largely fall left-of-center with respect to power and authority—very decidedly left of center in the poems of Desbordes-Valmore, Michel, Bruant, Brassens.

## XXI

Here are the French originals of the two poems whose translations I gave at the outset.

### **Fantaisie triste**

I’ bruinait... L’temps était gris,  
On n’voyait plus l’ciel... L’atmosphère,  
Semblant suer au d’ssus d’Paris,  
Tombait en bué’ su’ la terre.

I' soufflait quéqu'chose... on n'sait d'où,  
C'était ni du vent ni d'la bise,  
Ça glissait entre l'col et l'cou  
Et ça glaçait sous not' chemise.

Nous marchions d'avant nous, dans l'brouillard,  
On distinguait des gens maussades,  
Nous, nous suivions un corbillard  
Emportant l'un d'nos camarades.

Bon Dieu ! qu'ça faisait froid dans l'dos !  
Et pis c'est qu'on n'allait pas vite  
La moell' se figeait dans les os,  
Ça puait l'rhume et la bronchite.

Dans l'air y avait pas un moineau,  
Pas un pinson, pas un' colombe,  
Le long des pierr' i' coulait d'l'eau,  
Et ces pierr's-là... c'était sa tombe.

Et je m'disais, pensant à lui  
Qu'j'avais vu rire au mois d'septembre  
Bon Dieu ! qu'il aura froid c'tte nuit !  
C'est triste d'mourir en décembre.

Aristide Bruant (1851–1925)

### **Je songeais que Phyllis des enfers revenue**

Je songeais que Phyllis des enfers revenue,  
Belle comme elle estoit à la clarté du jour,  
Vouloit que son phantosme encore fit l'amour  
Et que comme Ixion, j'embrassasse une nue.

Son ombre dans mon lict se glissa toute nue  
Et me dit, cher Thyrsis, me voicy de retour,  
Je n'ay fait qu'embellir en ce triste séjour  
Où depuis ton despart le sort m'a retenue

Je viens pour rebaiser le plus beau des Amants,  
Je viens pour remourir dans tes embrassements.  
Alors quand cette idole eut abusé ma flamme,  
Elle me dit: Adieu, je m'en vay chez les morts,  
Comme tu tes vanté d'avoir foutu mon corps,  
Tu te pourras vanter d'avoir foutu mon ame.



The originals of most of the other poems are in *A New Book of Verse*, along with more French and German ones, with translations of them by other hands. Baudelaire is there, of course, as are Hugo, and more Mallarmé, and Valéry's "Cimetière Marin." A number of the poems, plus translations, are in Angel Flores' indispensable *An Anthology of French Poetry from Nerval to Valéry*, from which I got my own basic self-education in French poetry.

## XXII

*A New Book* isn't all what used to be called highbrow, though.

There are major poems and strong high thinking there. But it's also, when you mosey around in it, a bit raffish and pre-Code, a kind of anti-Norton, with lots of conventional boundaries ignored, and numerous unfamiliar names, and no-one allowed more than ten poems, and some notable absences—sort of as though romantic-authoritarian Louis B.'s golden MGM had got jumbled up with Warner's, and RKO, and Monogram, and Gaumont, and Pathé, and Hammer, and New World, and operations not to be mentioned in decent company.

We are, in effect, simply back into poetry-as-poems, without the unique ascription of magical powers and insights to the writers of them—I mean, one doesn't talk about THE Playwright or THE Short Story Writer, does one?—and no obligation to go, respectfully, the Life-and-Thought route, with its assumption, like Spencer Tracy's Father Flanagan about boys, that there is no such thing as a Bad Poem.

S.L. Goldberg wrote an important book about *Ulysses* called *The Classical Temper* (1961). In its way, *A New Book*, like Joyce's Western Civ compendium of high-cult and low-down and lots of in-betweens, is also classical, but *echt* classical and not Neo—the classicism of all the Classics, with the wild and crazy doings of the gods in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and the sex-and-violence of Greek tragedies, and the grotty goings-on in Apuleius, and Petronius, and bitchy over-sexed poem-writers *being* Romans and not just imagining themselves as such.

Plus, in *A New Book*, a cornucopia of forms and expressive formal devices that have some of the sexiness of good-and-great black and white cinematography. With largely absent free-verse, to complete the

analogy, being like movie colour, and easier for the average photographer to make lively.

# Poems

## Part One

François Villon (1431–?) **Note 1**

### **Ballade of the Hanged / *Ballade des Pendus***

*Freres humains qui après nous vivez,  
N'ayez les cuers contre nous endurcis*

O brother men who live on after us,  
Don't let your hearts set stonily against us;  
If you yourselves can pity us poor wretches  
God will the sooner have mercy upon you.  
You see us dangling here, three, four, five, six,  
As for the flesh which we indulged so much,  
It's shredded, eaten up, and rotted away.  
And we the bones will soon be dust and ashes.  
Let nobody make fun of our misfortune,  
But pray to God that he forgive us all.

If we claim you as brothers, don't reject us  
Scornfully, though we were put to death  
By Justice, for you know that as things are  
Not everyone is born with the same good sense.  
Plead for us, now that we are dead and gone,  
To the son of the ever-blesséd Virgin Mary  
That his compassion not cease flowing for us,  
Preserving us from the thunderbolts of Hell.  
We are the dead, let none of you torment us,  
But pray to God that he forgive us all.

The rain has leached and softened up our skin  
And the sun shriveled it and burned it black.  
Magpies and crows have winkled out our eyes  
And ripped away our eyebrows and our beards.  
Never at any moment have we been still,  
Spun here and there while the wind shifts about  
As the whim takes it, never ceasing to mock us,  
Pecked and pocked by birds worse than a thimble.  
Don't *you* become one of our company,

But pray to God that he forgive us all.

Prince Jesus who has dominion over all,  
Keep Hell from claiming lordship over us,  
There truly isn't anything we owe it.  
O men, there's nothing here for mockery,  
But pray to God that he forgive us all.

**Anonymous, ca. 1480**

**Watching His Lady / *En voyant sa dame***

*En voyant sa dame au matin  
Pres du feu où elle se lace*

Watching his lady in the morning  
Beside the fire as she laces up,  
Where is the heart that was growing bored  
With looking at her lovely tits?

So says many a friendly chap  
Describing confidentially  
Watching his lady in the morning.

In a beautiful satin corset,  
When you're hugging and kissing her,  
That's what drives the boredom off,  
Despite Old Scary, the guardian dog,  
Watching his lady in the morning.

Pierre de Ronsard (1524–1585) **Note 2**

**O Love, I'm not complaining / *Amour, je ne me plains***

*Amour, je ne me plains de l'orgueil endurcy  
Ny de la cruauté de ma jeune Lucesse*

O Love, I'm not complaining about the arrogance,  
Or the cruelty of my young Lucrece,  
Nor about how she lets me languish without relief;  
I'm complaining about her hand and her dildo.

It's a great big *thing*, fashioned near here,  
With which she chastely corrupts her youth all night.  
*That's* her prudence about Love,  
*That's* how she cheats on a loving concern for her.

And in return, a stinky breath,  
Goo like egg-white between sticky sheets,  
A sunken eye, a pale and wan complexion  
Show what a base pleasure grips her all night.  
It would be better to be Phryne or Laïs up front  
Than pretend she's chaste Lucretia and do that.

**Pierre de Ronsard (1524–1585)**

**Song / *Chanson***

*Douce Maistresse touche  
Pour soulage mon mal*

To relieve my pain,  
Sweet mistress, touch  
My mouth with yours,  
Redder than coral,  
Your arms tight  
Around my neck.

Our faces close,  
Gaze into my eyes,  
Let your dart pierce  
My anxious heart,  
A heart living only  
For Love and you.

It was so valiant  
Before your beauty  
Stole it from my breast  
To make its your slave,  
But it's happy suffering,  
Just so it dies yours.

Oh you lovely, my eyes  
Are seething, seething,  
Kiss me, my darling,  
A hundred kisses;  
And then? Do I lie in vain  
Upon your bosom ... ?

Sweet mistress mine,  
I can relax now.  
No need to wake you.  
I'm happy just watching  
Your lovely eyes drowsing  
Happy when I see them  
Asleep underneath me.

But how about a kiss or two,  
To reopen them...?

Oh, you're being wicked,  
You're simply killing me  
I'm dying in your arms  
And it doesn't bother you.

My dear sweet enemy,  
To be really nice  
Please revive me  
With a well-placed kiss ...  
Ah! how the sweetness  
Flows up to my heart.

I love the sweet storm  
Of continual passion,  
When we crave the same,  
And can come together.  
It will be such bliss  
When I really die of love.



**Pierre de Ronsard (1524–1585)**

**From a Courtesan to Venus / *D'une Courtizanne à Venus***

*Si je puis ma jeunesse folle  
Hantant les bordeaux, garantir*

If my wild youth can be assured,  
During its time among the brothels,  
That it will never have to know  
Buboes, cankers, or pockmarked face,

O Venus! bosom friend of Bacchus,  
I promise you that you'll inherit,  
My little sponge and my hairpieces,  
My rouge, my mirror, and my comb.

**Pierre de Ronsard (1524–1585)**

**O long winter nights / *Ah longues nuits d'hiver***

*Ah longues nuits d'hiver, de ma vie bourrelles  
Donnez moi patience, et me laissez dormir*

O long winter nights, bane of my existence,  
Give me endurance and allow me to sleep.  
The very mention of you makes my whole body  
Shudder and sweat, you treat me so cruelly.

Sleep, however briefly, never hovers over  
My always-open eyes, and I can't press  
Eyelid upon eyelid, but only groan,  
Suffering, like Ixion, unending pain.

Old dark of earth, the dark of hell,  
You hold open my eyes with chains of iron,  
And ravage my body with a thousand stabbing pains.

To stop them for ever, let death come to me.  
O death, our common haven, our human comforter,  
Put an end to my suffering, I beseech you with clasped hands.

**Cristofle de Beaujeu (1552–1635?)**

**It's a curious law / *C'est une estrange loy***

*C'est une estrange loy de souffrir que l'on couche  
En une mesme chambre, et l'amie et l'amant*

It's a curious law that permits putting  
Beloved and lover in the same bedchamber  
But separated, and not even daring  
To relieve themselves, let alone open their mouths.

Lovers, I'll tell you why this touches me.  
Right beside my bed lies every day  
She whose beauty wounds me without respite.  
For me Love is always a skirmishing.

Like when you see an amorous doe  
Emerging with lowered head from her thorny lair,  
Eye still half-closed from an untroubled sleep,  
So this beauty steps from her bed in the morning,  
And I die watching as she gently stretches out  
Her arms in the shining rays of the fire of her eyes.

**Jean-Édouard du Monin (1557–1586)**

**To Her Thighs / *Aux cuisses***

*Quoi? bessons pilotis, quoi? gemelle colonne  
Soutien de la chapelle, ou marglier est mon coeur*

What?—foundations of legs? What?—a twin column,  
Supports of the chapel where my heart keeps watch?  
White marble joists, why do you quake in horror  
When, priest-like, in your temple I hum a motet?

Many a lovely church likes my fine voice,  
And what if I plunge down low, if the sound's not harsh?  
My bass is natural, it's the choir that's flat;  
I land right back on the note when I happen to stray.

I know how to count a pause and hold a silence  
I can fit in with three, or four, or seven others.  
So, oh you pillars, please enjoy my music.

Don't risk creating a discord with those protestings.  
Once you've tasted the honey of my sweet songs  
You'll never want to confess to another minstrel.

**Anonymous (published 1616)**

**For the Lute of a Young Lady / *Pour escrire dessus le luth d'une damoiselle***

*Sy vostre main blanche et legere  
Anime et donne au luth la voix*

If your delicate white hand  
Can rouse the lute and give it voice,  
Think what that hand could bring about  
For an instrument not made of wood.

Believe me, beautiful musician,  
While you still possess the choice,  
Try moving your ass a little more  
And your fingers a little less.

The lute can amuse you for a while,  
But the enjoyment doesn't last,  
After a bit it bores and tires.

But a p---k does just the reverse;  
Its everyday mode of intercourse  
Can make a year seem like a month.

## Héliette de Vivonne (1558–1625)

### The Lute / *Le Luth*

*Pour le plus doux esbat que je puisse choisir  
Souvent, apres disner, craignant qu'il ne m'ennuye,*

For the sweetest enjoyment that I can choose,  
Often, after dinner, so as not to be bored,  
I take hold of the stem and work upon it,  
Bringing it to a state that will give me pleasure.

I throw myself on my bed, and, still gripping it,  
Enfold it in my arms and press it to me;  
And, moving it firmly with ravishing ease,  
Among a thousand sweet sounds, I achieve my desire.

If, by mischance, at times it happens to slacken,  
I tauten it with my fingers, and then, anew,  
Enjoy the pleasure of such mellifluous handling.

And so my well-beloved, though highly strung,  
Watches and pleasures me. Then softly from it,  
Tired but not gluttoned, I finally withdraw.

**Mathurin Regnier (1573–1613)**

**Condensed Confession / *Abrégé de Confession***

*Puisque sept péchés de nos yeux  
Ferment la barrière des Cieux*

Since the seven sins of the eyes  
Bar the way that leads to Heaven,  
Reverend Father, I promise you  
To abominate them in every way,  
Just so I don't encounter any  
Impatience and lasciviousness.

Those two come naturally to me:  
Neither castigation, nor laws,  
Nor noble words can hold me back  
And when a simple-souled repentance  
Would like to turn me away from them  
My nature makes it impossible.

I've done my best to avoid them both  
By saying over my Paternosters  
And reading in the Holy Book  
But in the midst of all my struggles  
Comforters whisper in my ear  
That actually they're perfectly normal.

It isn't God who's listed them  
Among the ranks of our enemies;  
Some second Pandora has been at work  
Who, wanting to torment mankind,  
Has spread that calumny about Him  
With her own mischief-making hands.

For I don't know any Augustinian,  
Or Carmelite, or Celestine,  
However firm and full of zeal,  
However perfect in devotion,  
Who, when out in the real world,  
Could honour so severe a law.

So please arrange it, as I've said,  
That I can be given proper credit  
So as to be pure of conscience

Like the blessed Saints of old,  
And eliminate from that rigid list  
Impatience and lasciviousness.



**Louise-Marguerite de Lorraine, Princesse de Conty (1588–1631)**

**A Lady Speaks / *Stances où une dame parle***

*J'ayme bien ces pourtraits au blanc d'une muraille,  
Dont seulement l'object esmeut nos appetits,*

I'm fond of those portraits done on whitewashed walls  
In which the *things* are the centre of attention,  
But I laugh at those idiots, oh that riff-raff,  
Who make them huge, their own being so small.

They're hoping that the *thing* in a lying picture  
Will make us run after them, but they're so wrong.  
Our cunts don't follow naturally behind  
They don't behave like hares; they're hunting-birds.

Driven by some craving in its nature,  
The bird isn't naive, it knows its prey.  
It has to see a fist well stuffed with meat  
If you want it to drop down and be accessible.

Cunts and goshawks both have this in common,  
They require real flesh, and hunger after more.  
There's also this difference between the two,  
One pounces on its prey, the other melts beneath it.

**Théophile de Viau (1590–1626)**

**I dreamed that Phyllis / *Je songeois que Phyllis***

*Je songeois que Phyllis, des Enfers revenue,  
Belle comme elle estoit à la clarté du jour,*

I dreamed that Phyllis, returning from the shades,  
As beautiful as she'd been by the light of day,  
Wanted her phantom to make love again,  
While I, like Ixion, coupled with a cloud.

Her spirit glided into my bed, stark naked,  
And said, "Dear Thyrsis, here I am again,  
I'm only lovelier now in that gloomy place  
Where fate detained me after you had left me.

I've come to make love again to the loveliest lover,  
I've come to die again in your embraces."

Finally, when the adored had consumed my fire,

She said, "I'm off, I'm returning to the dead,  
And you who boasted of having fucked my body,  
Can boast, now, of having fucked my soul."

**Théophile de Viau (1590–1626)**

**Stanzas / *Stances***

*Quand tu me vois baiser tes bras,  
Que tu poses nus sur tes draps*

When you see me kissing your arms  
Laid there naked on the sheets,  
And whiter than the linen itself;  
When you feel my burning hand  
Wandering upon your breasts,  
Cloris, you well know I love you

Like the Faithful gazing heavenward,  
With my eyes turned towards your eyes,  
Upon my knees beside your bed,  
Urged on by a thousand burning thoughts,  
I keep my mouth shut and allow  
My pleasures to sleep on with you.

Hypnos, happy to have you there,  
Prevents your eyes from seeing mine  
And keeps you under his control,  
Allowing you so little freedom  
That, brought to a full stop, your spirit,  
Neither murmurs nor draws breath.

The rose dispensing its perfume,  
The sun distributing its warmth,  
Diana behind her night-sky horses  
A Naiade floating in the water,  
And the Graces in a painting,  
Make more noise than does your breath.

So here I'm breathing next to you  
And wondering how it comes about  
That your eyes so sweetly rest.  
I cry, O Heaven, how can you lightly  
Draw from such a lovely thing  
So cruel a hurt as I endure

**Théophile de Viau (1590–1626)**

**A raven croaks ahead of me / *Un corbeau avant moy croasse***

*Un corbeau avant moy croasse  
Une ombre offusque mes regards*

A raven croaks ahead of me,  
A shadow falls across the scene,  
Two weasels and a pair of foxes  
Cross the space through which I'm passing;  
My horse's steps become uncertain,  
My footman takes a nasty fall,  
I listen to the thunder crackling,  
A specter shows itself to me,  
The voice of Charon summons me,  
I see the centre of the Earth.

That stream's returning to its source,  
An ox is climbing up a steeple,  
Blood is flowing from a rock,  
A viper couples with a bear;  
On the height of an old tower  
A serpent lacerates a vulture;  
Fire is burning in the ice,  
The Sun has darkened in the sky  
The Moon is just about to fall  
That tree has left its normal spot

**Théophile de Viau (1590–1626)**

**Phyllis, everything's fucked / *Phyllis, tout est foutu***

*Phyllis, tout est foutu, je meurs de la verole,  
Elle exerce sur moy sa derniere rigueur*

Phyllis, everything's fucked, I've got the pox.  
It's turning all its deadly force against me:  
My cock hangs down without a trace of life,  
My speech is garbled by a stinking ulcer.

Thirty days in the sweatbox, vomiting muck!  
Never have such pains dragged on so long.  
The strongest mind couldn't survive this languor,  
And absolutely nothing can comfort me.

My closest friends don't dare approach me now.  
I don't dare touch myself in this condition.  
Phyllis, this all comes from having screwed you.

O Lord, I'm sorry for my rotten life,  
And if this time your fury doesn't slay me,  
I solemnly swear to only do ass-fucking.

## Théophile de Viau (1590–1626)

### Satire / *Satire*

*On m'a dit que ma soeur chevauche;  
J'ai faict rencontre d'un sergent;*

They say my sister rides on top;  
I've had a run-in with the Law;  
My money's just gone down the drain,  
And now I see the moon is waning.

Our days are going nowhere fast;  
My planet's in an unlucky house;  
Fortune must really hate my guts  
To persecute me as it does.

I'm mad and constantly complaining;  
Everything sucks, everything's trouble.  
Fuck it, destiny's screwing me.  
I'm mad as hell about my fate.

I'm pissing broken glass and fire;  
I only spit the thickest mucus;  
I've almost gone completely bald;  
I've got the plague! I've got the pox!

My kidneys are filled up with stones;  
I can't find anyone to fuck;  
The sacred oil in Rheims Cathedral  
Will dry up sooner than my gout.

I get no joy from lute or song;  
I don't find any farces funny.  
To hell with boys, to hell with arses!  
Curses on trollops and their cunts!

A man at fifty's all washed up;  
Virtually nothing good remains.  
Christ but the fates are screwing us;  
To hell with them, to hell with Nature.

Help won't arrive from anywhere;  
My rotten luck's insatiable;  
Men try to steer me towards God,  
Who's no more useful than the Devil.

Empty shades of Acheron,  
Phantoms, demons, gloomy shores,  
Petróne, Arétin, Maugirón,  
Are nothing more for me than shadows.

Gaius Petronius Arbiter (ca.27–66 AD), epicurean alleged author of the *Satyricon*.

Pietro Aretino (1492–1556), bisexual satirist, playwright, erotic poet.

Louis de Maugiron (1560–1578), one of the court “darlings” of Henri III.

**François de Maucroix (1619–1708)**

**To His P---k / *Contre Son V[it]***

*Je ne puis plus bander le jour;  
La nuit, des misteres d'amour*

I'm no good any more by day;  
At night, with its mysteries of love,  
I feel a bit more competent.  
I could still give a little pleasure.  
My prick is similar to ghosts;  
It only reappears by night.

Poor penis, with its drooping head,  
Poor penis, without strength or grace,  
Was it beneath you that my Chloris  
Thrust herself so often upwards  
Was it you that the young Iris  
Gripped inside herself like tongs?

What a sad showing you make now,  
Priapus with the essence gone,  
And such a melancholy air.  
To ease your wretched lot a little,  
Maybe you can find a hand  
Willing to massage your head.

ca. 1650



**Marie-Catherine de Villedieu (1640–1683)**

**Delight / *Jouissance***

*Aujourd'huy dans tes bras j'ay demeuré pâmée;  
Aujourd'huy, cher Tircis. ton amoureuse ardeur*

Today in your arms I've lain there in a swoon;  
Today, dear Tircis, your amorous energy  
Has wholly triumphed over my modesty;  
I yield to the rapture that enchants my soul.

Your adoring fire has finally disarmed me;  
All my happiness is in our embraces;  
I no longer care about virtue and honour,  
Since I love Tircis and am loved by him.

Oh you enfeebled souls who aren't aware  
Of the sweetest joys that one can taste on Earth,  
Go learn the transports ravishing my soul.

A gentle languor steals away my mind;  
I die between the arms of my faithful lover;  
And it's in this death that I discover life.

**Claude Le Petit (1638–1662) Note 3**

**Sonnet on the Death of Chausson / *Sonnet sur la Mort de Chausson***

*Amis, on a brûlé le malheureux Chausson,  
Ce coquin si fameux, à la tête frisée;*

Friends, they have burned the unfortunate Chausson,  
That famous rascal with the curly hair.  
His valour becomes immortal with his death.  
No one will ever die in a nobler manner.

He sang with a gay air the mournful dirge.  
He put on without blenching the stiffened shirt.  
And from the blazing pyre of the lit faggots,  
He gazed on death unawed, without a tremor.

In vain the confessor beseeched him in the flames,  
With crucifix in hand, to think of his soul.  
Lying below the stake when the fire had downed him,  
The villain turned his filthy rump to Heaven,  
And so as to die at last as he had lived,  
Presented his arse, the rogue, to everyone.

Jacques Chausson (1618–1661), writer.

Stiffened shirt > tunic impregnated with sulphur.

Claude Le Petit himself died at the stake the following year, in part because of this poem.

**Claude Le Petit (1638–1662)**

**On My Book / *Sur mon livre***

*Courtisans de Priape at du père Bacchus,  
Vigoureux officiers des nocturnes patrouilles*

Courtiers of Priapus and Father Bacchus,  
Energetic officers of nightly patrols,  
Venerable fuckers with inexhaustible balls,  
Expert virgin-takers, master cuckold-makers,  
And you, trollops, with your dogs and unbeaten rumps,  
Who turn our amorous weapons into distaffs,  
Ladies of Harlotry, spurting for us like gargoyles,  
And you, deplorable buggers and procurers of arses;  
All of you, come to the brothel of these lubricious muses;  
The spirit which enjoys satirical discourse  
Will ejaculate for sure, listening to these harmonies.  
This book will flourish without fear of the flames;  
They tolerate places here to pleasure the senses;  
They'll also tolerate pleasuring the mind.

**Claude Le Petit (1638–1662)**

**To the Curious Reader / *Au Lecteur Curieux***

*Estant hier en desbauche au faubourg Saint-Germain,  
Entre une heure et minuit, dans mon humeur bourrue*

Last night, after a debauch in the Faubourg Saint-Germain,  
Between midnight and one, in a surly mood,  
And groping my way alone from street to street  
In search of a brothel where I could rest till morning,

Half on foot, half on my hands and knees,  
And as filthy up to my arse as a ploughshare,  
I saw up ahead beside the wall, like a whore,  
A great spectre, as thin as a rake, in action

If anyone was ever surprised, it was me.  
You could have finished me off with a feather  
I never was so taken aback in my life.

You'll want to know what I'm talking about, I'm sure.  
But, Reader...oh, why not? It happens, as you'll find out.  
It was—God forgive me—a devil fucking you.

**Claude Le Petit (1638–1662)**

**Farewell of the Pleasure Girls to the City of Paris / *Adieu des Filles de Joie à la Cité de Paris* Appendix**

*Esprits, qui faute de matières  
Croupissez dans l'oisiveté*

*The poet speaks first.*

1. You wits without a subject matter  
Who lounge around in idleness,  
Withholding from posterity,  
The flashes of your brilliant minds,  
Learn while you peruse these lines,  
That it insults the Universe  
    To consume on credit the incense of the Muse,  
    To play a silly trick upon poor Fame,  
    When with a major theme you get puffed up,  
    Multiply dog-eared pages, and empty ink-horns.
2. So remain out there in silence,  
You brooding children of the night,  
Taste without fear, and quietly,  
The joys of being nonchalant;  
I sing, in despite of Destiny,  
The sad Farewell of all the Whores,  
    The mortal ruin of their dying trade,  
    Which won't at all profane the sacred stream.  
    I'd sooner render in verse the whoring muse  
    Than behave elsewhere in prose like a whore myself.
3. O muse in the service of Cytherëa,  
Who rhyme so often without fee,  
Who make a meal of roasted dog  
And similar kinds of nourishment:  
To put some flesh upon your ribs  
With just a bit of extravagance,  
    I'll give you a feast, my merry Eratine;  
    So guide my quill with your eye upon its flight,  
    Seated on your rump, show me the way,  
    And start your sisters, the Nymphs of Cypris, talking.
4. I see the first of them appearing,

Big Joannie with her ruby nose,  
Who used to carry off the prize  
In the most famous of occupations:  
Far from weeping for her past sins,  
You see her cast her gummy eyes  
Around, seeking some new embrace  
In this disastrous episode  
Which took her from the moneybags  
On the broad high road to ruin.

5. Behind the old redhead there come  
Other stars in their profession,  
Each of whom in her own quarter  
Consumed the best days of her life;  
And with their dwindling energies  
Seeking satisfaction in vain  
From the gentle power of Nature,  
One sees these ruined skeletons  
Having to buy with interest  
The love which formerly they sold.

6. Their sorry state is public now  
As was their burning love before,  
And all when reading the new law  
Rail against the policy;  
Demoiselles from the Marais,  
Courtesans of the Louvre Palace  
“Princesses” of the Copper King,  
Denizens of the Butte Saint-Roch,  
All are sent out upon the highway,  
Poor cocottes, so cockless now.

7. Catin, Suzön, Marottë, Lise,  
With their main assets unemployed,  
Weep for many a page and lackey  
And the loss of their arrangements;  
Fanchon misses her dumpy one;  
Nillette her dirty-minded gawker,  
Janneton her group of ruffians  
Who, egged on by her blandishments,  
Swindled from unfortunate soldiers  
Their food and ammunition money.

8. After the proud exotic flowers  
Come the hues of roses and lillies.  
The Nichons and the Amarillis,  
The Climenes and the Amarinthes,  
Dreaming of the delightful nuzzlings  
That they'd enjoyed from gentlewomen,  
Hunter and prey consumed together;  
The common hazard of such friendships  
Has changed them from fun-loving lassies,  
Into poor pitiable "girls."

9. The proper mistress with her merchant,  
The street-girl with her dirty arse,  
Both driven along by the same fate,  
Swell the numerous company,  
With noblewomen in it too,  
Old Nymphs with their decaying loves;  
In short, all of the good ladies  
Who lacked sufficient self-control,  
Having burned with the same flame,  
Share in a common destiny.

10. Joannie, whose time-ravaged looks  
Served as a beacon for their journey,  
Had left the faubourgs well behind,  
With her lamenting company;  
Their drawn-out sobs and piercing cries  
Which they directed towards Paris,  
Awakening her memories,  
She turned her back to the countryside  
And standing up upon a mound,  
Broke her silence with these words:

11. "Excellent witness of our disgrace,  
As formerly of our delights,  
Preserving through our activities,  
The continuity of your races,  
Charming abode of libertines,  
Refuge of the divinities,  
Through whom Venus is adored,  
Paris farewell, delicious Paris,  
Your loss will end the celebrating

Of the poor little eyeless god.

12. Fine favorites of the Penatës,  
Sacred guests within their houses,  
Dear residents of those compartments  
That shelter male and female rats,  
Famous citizens of Paris,  
Farewell dear friends, so well beloved,  
Who, with your innocent transgressions,  
Drive the eyes of Hymen crazy,  
Creating from your legitimate fires  
The immortal lineages of bastards.

13. Noble and energetic youths,  
The creators of our ecstasies,  
Whose energy is unalloyed  
By any worries or regrets,  
Farewell to you, dear carefree children,  
And please, seeing how we are now,  
Spare a tear for our misfortunes.  
Alas, Cupid when he's at bay,  
Without your eminent patronage,  
Loses the arrows from his quiver.

14. Supports of our declining flames,  
Rustic and shallow animals,  
Amorous provincial sots,  
Badly taught in the ways of women,  
Poor ignorant cuckolds yourselves,  
How many jingling quarter-crowns,  
So as to learn about our morals,  
Have you extracted from your pockets,  
While the officers of the provinces  
Present to everyone their petitions.

15. You swashbucklers and ruffians,  
Patrollers of the cobblestones,  
Duellists who from a gull  
Extract so many free repasts,  
How many savoury bits and pieces  
Which you insert into your snouts  
Go up in smoke now from this change,  
And if you once were our supports,



Observe during our downfall now  
How we were formerly also yours.

16. Liquid and magnificent field,  
Floating above the crystal bed  
Of the princess of Coräl,  
That favourite and dear companion,  
The gracious nymph with the green eyes;  
Farewell, oh Seine, to whom the world  
Owes a portion of its glory;  
How many times (sweet memory)  
Have we, upon your ivory bed,  
Helped to create the stock to come.

17. How many beautiful excursions  
On the sweet current of your waters  
Which, with the debris of rushes,  
Made a bed for Naiadës;  
Suresnes, Ablon, Chaillot, Saint-Cloud,  
Saint-Denis, Asnières, Chatou,  
Increased their rents accordingly;  
Forever keep to your famous course  
And upon your gliding waves  
Retain the memory of our passions.

18. Masterpieces of architecture,  
Farewell great palaces dedicated,  
To the glory of posterity  
And the humbling of mere nature,  
Highest efforts of inspiration,  
Placë Royale, lovely Marais,  
Farewell triumphant residences,  
Where in the bosom of our loves  
We whiled away so many hours,  
The most delightful of our days.

19. Farewell, great garden which I love,  
The refuge of a thousand beauties,  
Who to escape from harassment  
Withdrew into the arms of Flora,  
Great parterres and famous trees,  
Where monarchs used to take their pleasure,  
Dear witnesses to our deceptions,

And our secret amorous ways,  
Farewell delightful Tuilleries,  
You'll never see us any more.

20. O most magnificent of works,  
You immense hanging promenade,  
Where chance permitted in times past  
So many different kinds of use,  
Farewell Pont Neuf; farewell the suburb,  
Where the wonderful Luxembourg  
Lets you see its glorious buildings  
And its so delightful gardens,  
Where the dawn refreshes the grasses  
Abundantly each summer morning.

21. Grounds formerly a refuge for us,  
Sites sacrificed to Palemön,  
Memorably singled out  
By the beginning of a flood,  
Fields almost deserted now  
Where formerly the myrtle envied  
The vines for giving us their shade,  
Place of a hundred crystal streams,  
Fecund with numberless miracles,  
Farewell, oh famous Gobelins.

22. Shrines of the conqueror Indies god,  
Habitat of games and laughter,  
Where one can see the son of Cypris  
In the carousing and the toasts;  
Venerable and holy altars,  
The secure home of humankind,  
Adorers of the flowing cup;  
Taverns, pull out all your corks  
And come with us to Guadaloupe  
To make new fortunes for yourselves.

23. You who of the singer of Thrace  
Copy the charming harmonies,  
And among the entertainments,  
Deserve to be given the place of honour  
Farewell, you merrily playing fiddlers,  
Farewell, harmonious choruses,

Farewell, all that ravishing music;  
Find yourselves some new Apollo;  
For the present forced departures  
Will mean more instruments to finger.

24. The honour of our wandering flames,  
Magnificent and rare machines,  
Famous enemies of the sun,  
Stately rolling apparatus,  
Journeying sturdy little houses,  
Delicate and charming prisons,  
Farewell cabs and carriages,  
Wedlock is now your sole recourse,  
And if you don't chase after nuptials,  
Bid the race farewell for ever.

25. And you who, in this situation  
Where our misfortunes overlap,  
See your rickety enterprise  
Come to naught and beaten hollow,  
Console yourself, my poor Sautour,  
Fate's played a dirty trick on you;  
Renters and coachmen on the routes  
Where your activities are continued  
By those thirty-two vehicles,  
Will be the Phaëtons of our day.

26. And now to wind up my laments,  
Farewell convenient meeting places,  
Where we have turned so many tricks,  
Profaning the most sacred things,  
Farewell Minimes and Célestins,  
Carmës, Jësuites, and Augustins,  
Farewell Palais and Sainte-Chapelle,  
If your Temple was defiled  
By our unlawful burning lust,  
We've certainly paid a price for it.

27. O race of innocents to come,  
Who'll see while you peruse these lines  
That the World is being cleansed  
Wholly of Nature's trouble-makers.  
What say you, coming century?

Here's what can help keep you informed,  
About these melancholy matters,  
Which led, in this brutal century,  
Because we were too welcoming,  
To our ending up in the Hospital.

28. But this is the absolute decision  
Handed down by destiny,  
Which by a roguish influence  
Heaven seems to consider just :  
Since fate considers the matter settled,  
Let's all desire what it desires;  
My dear sisters, let's trim our sails,  
And since down in these lower parts,  
People have looked on us as stars,  
We'll be stars, too, up in the heavens.

29. Smitten by the sword of fate,  
All that I regret is your charms  
Which provided such good feasts  
For the messengers of Venus,  
But console yourselves, dear sisters,  
You have tasted the sweetnesses  
The most delightful of this life;  
The time that you have so misspent  
Causes Envy to die of rage,  
Since you have been well paid for it.

30. Blind deity of the heavenly race,  
Whose law extends to everyone  
And who are witnessing the decline  
Of our beneficent occupation,  
Sovereign master of our senses,  
Who in return for our adoration  
Reward us with such ecstasies,  
You too are vanishing from this scene.  
May it be that the new world  
Will bring the old one to its senses?

31. Sweet Prince of delicate delights,  
Love, I commit into your hands,  
The interests of humankind,  
And vengeance on the conspirators;

You have already so much honour  
That you don't need in righteous fury  
To show that all yield to your darts;  
In the present devastation,  
It would be better to take it easy,  
Rather than have you push on further."

32. With that, Big Joan at last fell silent,  
Going straight to Scipion  
From a deeply felt devotion,  
With her secular company.  
I who heard their conversation,  
And witnessed how they bore themselves,  
Put my confidence in the Muse,  
The Muse who with sincerity,  
Not being one for making excuses,  
Left it all to posterity

## Part Two

Friedrich Hölderlin (1770–1843) **Note 4**

### Half of Life / *Hälfte des Lebens*

*Mit gelben Birnen hänget  
Und voll mit wilden Rosen*

Brimful with yellow pears,  
and wild roses, the land hangs down  
into the lake,  
and drunk with kisses,  
you lovely swans,  
you dip your heads  
into the calming holy water.

But I... I...,  
where, oh where, when winter's come  
do I find the flowers,  
and the sunlight and shadows,  
of Earth?

Walls stand there,  
voiceless and cold.  
In the wind  
weathervanes clatter.

**Marceline Desbordes-Valmore (1786–1859) Note 5**

**The Young Chatelaine / *La Jeune Châtelaine***

*“Je vous défends, châtelaine,  
De courir seule au grand bois.”*

“I forbid you, my chatelaine,  
To wander alone in the big wood.”  
There I was, all out of breath,  
And this was for the second time.  
I wouldn’t have got up the nerve  
To go along that long, lost path,  
But how I love its leafy shade!  
My noble lord has forbidden it.

“I forbid you, lovely girl,  
To sing that mocking roundelay.”  
By the time I had gone to sleep  
I had retained it all by heart.  
Since then I’ve gone on singing it,  
Never missing a single bar.  
Heavens, how it enraptures me.  
My noble lord has forbidden it.

“I forbid you to raise your eyes  
And let them rest upon my page.”  
Now his image everywhere  
Follows and obsesses me.  
I understand him, for, by chance,  
He too got lost in that same wood.  
Why do I keep on eyeing him?  
My noble lord has forbidden it.

My noble lord has now forbidden  
The poor young kid to talk at all;  
And his delicate clear voice  
Can’t say anything without trembling;  
How he must suffer from his silence.  
So much time for conversing lost!  
But, my page, what’s to be done?  
My noble lord has forbidden it.

**Marceline Desbordes-Valmore (1786–1859)**

**My Room / *Ma chambre***

*Ma demeure est haute,  
Donnant sur les cieux;*

My abode is high up,  
With a view of the heavens,  
The moon is the landlord,  
Pale and serious;  
Below, when the doorbell rings,  
What does it matter?  
There's nobody there  
When it isn't him.

Hidden from others,  
I embroider my flowers;  
Though I seem calm  
My soul is in tears;  
From here I look at  
The clear blue sky;  
I can see the stars,  
But also storms.

Opposite mine,  
A chair waits;  
It was his;  
For a short while, ours;  
Marked with a ribbon,  
The chair sits there,  
Resigned,  
Like myself.



**Marceline Desbordes-Valmore (1786–1859)**

**A Triumphant Arch / *Un arc de triomphe***

*Tout ce qu'ont dit les hirondelles  
Sur ce colossal bâtiment,*

All that the swallows have to say  
About this colossal edifice  
Is that it was because of them  
That such a monument was raised.

Their nests sit there so peacefully,  
Despite the bustling roads below,  
That they've turned the top into their club  
For gossiping about life and love.

Swiftly, through this gigantic gate  
Displaying the triumphant dead,  
A swallow carries without fanfare  
A grain of hemp to her little ones.

Inside the helmet of Victory,  
Another sits happily on her eggs,  
Which, knowing nothing of history,  
Proudly hatch as if in their home.

Do you want to read what lies below  
The exploits covering the marble?  
The gentle cries of a host of heads  
Come from the great half-open book.

The smallest bird, returning to France  
Says to others along the route,  
“Come and see our mighty nest.  
We'll have somewhere for you to stay.”

For when one's high up in the clouds,  
The cannons are no more audible  
Than sensible people laughing below,  
And enjoying each other's company.

The war is like a cricket's chirp  
For a bird who's soaring nearer God.  
And even the most prodigious hero,  
Can't be seen from so high up.

So that is why the host of swallows,  
Taking their ease on the edifice,  
Say that it was because of them  
That God had such a monument built.

**Marceline Desbordes-Valmore (1786–1859)**

**Canticle of the Mothers / *Cantiques des Mères***

*Reine pieuse aux flancs de mère  
Ecoutez la supplique amère*

Pious queen with a mother's breasts,  
Hear the bitter supplication  
Of widows down to their last sou,  
Whose sons are now your prisoners.  
If you want the Lord to love you,  
With pardon even for a jailer,  
Pray with a humane concern  
For all the prisoners of the king.

It's said that tears have been perceived  
In those compassionate eyes of yours.  
May the Lord let those tears be shed  
Upon the heart of our misfortunes.  
Bring calm to this demented land,  
Start the springs of mercy flowing,  
And pray with a devout concern  
For all the prisoners of the king.

For these, Madam, are your own children,  
Adopted from the depths of your soul  
When, while they still possessed their freedom  
They gathered under your golden boughs.  
Recall in the face of royal hatreds  
What they did earlier with their chains,  
And pray with a practical concern  
For all the prisoners of the king.

Don't you feel your woman's bowels  
Trembling as each day's funerals  
Transport their griefs along our streets?  
The final grave has grown so large!  
Nobody's tried to kill *your* daughters.  
Restore to us our families.  
Pray with a motherly concern  
For all the prisoners of the king.

Like Queen Esther kneeling down,

Saintly in her humiliation,  
Between the hangman and her people,  
Return the sword into its sheath.  
Your soldiers' eyes are downcast now,  
Blood is heavy, hatred tiring;  
Pray with a courageous concern  
For all the prisoners of the king.

Madame! the jails are full to bursting.  
There isn't air there for so many,  
Our children only come out dead!  
When, then, will remorse set in?  
More beautiful than innocence,  
Let it come now and chasten power.  
Pray with a passionate concern  
For all the prisoners of the king.

It's hunger—you can trust our tears—  
Which feverishly honed the weapons.  
You simply can't imagine hunger.  
It kills. Finally, one revolts.  
O you, whose milk is flowing still,  
Our dried-up breasts cry out to you,  
Pray with a womanly concern  
For all the prisoners of the king.

Observe how a just Providence  
Deals with an unjust oppression,  
How she opens, with her torches,  
All the fortresses and tombs!  
Liberty is the air she breathes,  
Who grinds a rock down to a plain.  
Pray with a prophetic concern  
For all the prisoners of the king.

If our cries rekindle war,  
A hard heart will receive no pity.  
He who's never displayed forgiveness  
Will find himself cast out by man.  
His cruelty will be pursued  
In the afterlife with hateful names.  
Queen! pray with an innocent concern  
For all the prisoners of the king.

O queen, who devoutly say your prayers,  
O woman, who with downturned eyes  
Knows how to read the book of God;  
By the ills we see displayed there,  
By the Cross that bleeds and pardons,  
By the high power that's given you,  
Queen! pray with self-denying concern  
For all the prisoners of the king.

Before you donned your temporal crown,  
God wrote on your angelic forehead  
As an imperishable gift.  
"Love! Love! Mercy! Mercy!"  
Like a dove sent into the storm,  
Breathe these words aloud in their goodness.  
And pray, with our intense concern,  
For all the prisoners of the king.

Redouble your divine example.  
Madame! the loveliest of temples  
Is the heart of the people; go there!  
The King of Kings selected it well.  
O you! beloved like our own mother,  
Ponder our bitter supplication,  
And pray, with your own sublime concern,  
For all the prisoners of the king.

**Gérard de Nerval (1808–1855) Note 6**

**The Cousin / *La Cousine***

*L'hiver a ses plaisirs ; et souvent, le dimanche,  
Quand un peu de soleil jaunit la terre blanche,*

Winter has its pleasures, and often, on Sunday  
When a little sunshine yellows the white ground,  
One goes out for a walk with a girl cousin ...

—Now don't you make us have to wait dinner,

Says her mother. And when one's had a good look  
Outside the Tuileries at the flowered dresses under the black trees,  
The young girl feels cold ... and points out to you  
That the evening mist is starting to rise.

And one goes back, talking about the lovely day  
That one's sorry has ended so soon (flirting discreetly),  
And you smell from the bottom of the stairs,  
Coming in with a big appetite, the roasting turkey.

[ca 1830–32]

**Gérard de Nerval (1808–1855)**

**Fantasy / *Fantaisie***

*Il est un air pour qui je donnerais  
Tout Rossini, tout Mozart et tout Weber;*

There is a melody for which I would give  
All Rossini, all Mozart, all of Weber,  
An ancient tune, languishing and funereal,  
Which has for me its special secret charms.

And every time that I happen to hear it,  
My soul becomes a couple of centuries younger;  
It's the age of Louis the Thirteenth, and stretching before me  
Is a green slope, gilded by the setting sun.

Then a brick chateau, with stone quoins  
And window-panes tinged with reddish hues,  
Surrounded by great parks, and with a river  
Laving its feet and gliding between flowers.

Then a lady in her high window,  
Fair, with dark eyes, in an old-fashioned dress,  
Whom perhaps, in another existence,  
I have seen before and am now remembering.

**Gérard de Nerval (1808–1855)**

**Myrtho / *Myrtho***

*Je pense à toi, Myrtho, divine enchanteresse,  
Au Pausilippe altier, de mille feux brillant*

Myrtho, I think of you, O divine enchantress,  
On lofty Pausilippe, aglow with a thousand fires,  
Your brows drenched with the lights of the Orient,  
And dark grapes mingling with the gold of your tresses.

It is from your cup too that I have drunk rapture,  
And from the secret glints of your smiling eye  
When I was found praying at the feet of Dionysus,  
The Muse having made me one of the sons of Greece.

I know why the volcano has reopened down there...  
It is because your nimble feet touched it yesterday.  
And suddenly the horizon has been covered with ashes.

Since the time when a Norman duke broke your clay idols,  
Always, under the branches of Virgil's laurel,  
The pale hydrangea joins with the green myrtle.

[1854]



**Gérard de Nerval (1808–1855)**

**The Disinherited / *El Desdichado***

*Je suis le Ténébreux,—le veuf,—l'inconsolé,  
Le Prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie;*

I am the Darkling One, the widower, the unconsoled,  
The Prince of Aquitaine in the ruined tower.  
My only Star is dead, and my constellated lute  
Bears the Black Sun of Melancholia.

In the night of the Tomb, oh my lost Comforter  
Restore Posillipo and the Italian sea,  
The flower that pleased my devastated heart,  
And the trellis where the Vine and Rose unite.

Am I Eros or Phoebus? Lusignan or Biron?  
My brow's still flushed from the embrace of the Queen.  
I have dreamed in the Grotto where the Siren sings...

And twice, as a victor, I've traversed Acheron,  
And interwoven upon Orpheus' lyre  
The sighs of the Saint and the Fay's ecstatic cries.

**Alfred de Musset (1811–1857) Note 7**

**To Juana / À Juana**

*O ciel! je vous revois, madame,  
De tous les amours de mon âme*

Wonderful! So you're back, madame,—  
Of all the lovers in my life,  
You the tenderest and the first!  
Do you remember our affair?  
I've treasured it in my memory:—  
It was, I believe, in the late summer.

Ah, Marquise, when one thinks about it,  
The days that one consumes in frenzy  
Give us the slip and fly away !  
But really and truly, my long-lost love,  
Though no-one knows it, in the winter,  
I'm twenty still, and you eighteen.

Ah yes! my Love—and cross my heart!—,  
If the rose is a little paler now,  
It's still retained all of its beauty.  
Never was any Spanish head  
So beautiful, so crazy-wild.  
You remember that summer, don't you?

All those evenings? that big quarrel?  
You gave me—how I remember it!—  
Your golden necklace to calm me down,  
And for three nights, I swear to you,  
I woke up every quarter-hour  
To gaze on it and give it kisses.

And your duenna, oh cursed duenna,  
And that diabolical day  
When, O my Andalusian pearl  
You did your best to blow away  
Your ancient spouse with jealousy,  
And your young lover with delight.

Be careful, though, madame marquise;  
Such love, whatever people say,  
Can resurrect itself sometimes.

When a heart has filled itself with you,  
Juana, the space simply becomes  
Too big for any other love.

But what am I saying? So goes the world.  
How can I fight against the tide  
With waves that never cease advancing?  
So close your eyes, your arms, your soul;  
Adieu, my life,—adieu, madame.  
That's the way of the world down here.

Time carries off upon its wings  
The springtime and the darting swallows,  
And life and the departed days.  
All of it vanishes like smoke,  
And so does hope, and so renown—,  
And I, who felt such love for you,  
And you, who don't remember it.

**Alfred de Musset (1811–1857)**

**To Pépa / *A Pépa***

*Pépa, quand la nuit est venue,  
Que ta mère t'a dit adieu ;*

Pépa, when the night has come  
And your mama has said goodnight  
And, half undressed under the lamp,  
You're bowing your head to say your prayers;

At the hour when the troubled spirit  
Yields to the wisdom of the night,  
At the moment of taking off your cap  
And having a look under the bed;

When sleep has flooded in and covered  
Your family out there around you'  
O Pépita, you charming girl,  
What, my love, are you thinking of?

Who knows? Perhaps of the heroine  
Of some unfortunate romance;  
Of all the things that hope foretells  
And cruel reality denies;

Perhaps of those majestic mountains  
That give birth only to a mouse;  
Of lovers in romantic Spain;  
Of candies; of, perhaps, a spouse;

Perhaps of the tender confidences  
Of a heart naïve as your own;  
Of your dress; of airs to which you dance;  
Perhaps of me—perhaps of nothing.

**Alfred de Musset (1811–1857)**

**To Julie / *A Julie***

*On me demande, par les rues,  
Pourquoi je vais bayant au grues,*

They ask me on the boulevards  
Why I'm out gaping at the tarts,  
Puffing on my cigar in the sun,  
And what's happened to my youth,  
What's come of all those wakeful nights  
During three years of idleness.

Julie, give me your lips again.  
The wild nights that exhausted you  
Have dulled the lustre of their coral.  
Sweeten them with your breath again.  
Give them to me, my dark-skinned lovely,  
Give me your pure-blooded lips.

My printer yells at the top of his voice  
That his machine stands always ready  
And that mine can't do a thing.  
Snug in their admiring cliques,  
Worthy citizens announce  
That, oh dear! I'm all washed up.

Julie, do you have any Spanish red?  
Yesterday we were out of our minds;  
Go and see if there's still some left.  
Your mouth is burning, burning, Julie.  
Let's think of something quite fantastic  
To waste us utterly, body and soul.

They say that my wild oats are finished,  
That I have nothing left in my guts,  
That I'm so empty it's alarming.  
I think that if I were worth the effort,  
They'd ship me off to St. Helena,  
Bearing a cancer in my heart.

Well, my Julie, you'd better expect  
To see my ashes one of these days.  
Like Hercules upon his rock.

Since it's of you that I'm perishing,  
Open your robe, O Deianira,  
So that I can mount my pyre.

Hercules' wife Deianira unintentionally poisoned him, and his  
body was burned.

**Théophile Gautier (1813–1872) Note 8**

**On the Lagoons / *Sur les Lagunes***

*Tra la, tra la, la, la, la laire!*  
*Qui ne connait pas ce motif?*

Tra la, tra la, la, la, la laire!  
Who doesn't know that melody?  
It captivated our mamas,  
Tender and gay, mocking and plaintive.

The air of the Venice carnival,  
Sung of old along the canals,  
And which a breath of sportive wind  
Has wafted into the ballet!

As it is played, I seem to see,  
Gliding along in a blue furrow,  
A gondola with its curious prow  
Shaped like the neck of a violin.

And then, on a chromatic scale,  
Her bosom shimmering with pearls,  
The Venus of the Adriatic  
Rises pink and white from the waves.

The domes across the azure water,  
Following the pure line of the phrase,  
Swell like the rounded forms of breasts  
Lifted by a sigh of love.

The skiff lands and deposits me  
(Casting its line around a post)  
In front of a rose-coloured palace,  
On the marble of a flight of steps.

With its palaces, its gondolas,  
Its masquerades upon the sea,  
Its sweet sorrows, its wild mirth,  
All of Venice lives in that air.

A single string, vibrating,  
Restores on a pizzicato,  
As it once was, joyous and free,  
The city of Canaletto.

**Théophile Gautier (1813–1872)**

**Carmen / *Carmen***

*Carmen est maigre; un trait de bistre  
Cerne son oeil de gitana*

Carmen is thin; a yellow brown  
Bistre rings each gypsy eye.  
Her hair's a sinister-looking black;  
The Devil tanned that hide of hers  
The other women say she's ugly,  
But all the men are driven wild;  
And Toledo's own Archbishop  
Sings mass upon his knees before her.  
For on the nape of her tawny neck  
Is twisted an immense chignon  
Which, when unfastened in her room,  
Forms a cloak for her little body.  
And from that nakedness explodes  
Her mouth with its triumphant laugh;  
A burning pepper, a scarlet flower,  
Coloured with the blood of hearts.  
Thus it is that the mulatto,  
Beats the loveliest high-born ladies.  
And with the fiery light of her eyes  
Restores the flame of the satiated.  
In her piquant ugliness, she has  
A grain of salt from the ancient sea  
Where Venus, pungent and alluring,  
Rose naked from the bitter gulf.



## **Théophile Gautier (1813–1872)**

### **Solitude / *Solitude***

*Je bande trop. De ma culotte  
Je sors mon vit qui décalotte*

I've such a hard-on. From my britches  
I take my prick out, which discloses  
Its mushroom top.

Alone up in one's room at noon,  
Dialoguing with a dong's  
No fun at all.

My pecker whacks against my belly.  
Somehow or other it must enter  
Arse, mouth, or quim.

But I don't see my pretty neighbour  
Flashing those killer looks of hers  
From her balcony.

In vain Sir Cock displays his crest,  
There isn't any skirt in the house,  
Not a bonnet.

With prick in hand, ambiguously,  
Lacking a cunt, I call upon  
The Widow Fist.

Great Venus, masturbationist,  
The solitary consolation  
Of lovers,

Since I am stuck here mistress-less  
Grant me at least in my distress,  
Your airy pleasures.

Grant to me a skillful hand  
Which knows how with a firm caress  
To grasp the organ.

And set the semen-pump to work  
Between the fingers gripping it  
Like a vagina.

Teach me, I'm a novice here,  
This sport which Tissot calls a vice,  
This hidden game,

Which the little Cupid plays,  
Blunting his erotic arrow,  
Far from Psyche.

Resting my feet on the window-sill,  
Slowly at first I start to jerk  
And then, hey presto!  
I'm off *en route* to ecstasy,  
Squeezing the pillar from its base  
Up to its crown.

But the Chimera opens the door,  
A woman enters, what a bosom,  
What a waist,  
Who pulls her gown and petticoat up,  
Shoves her great mound beneath my nose,  
With its curly bush,

Then smiling at me, turns around,  
Not knowing where I like to plant it,  
And offers her hole.

Rubens, you simply must admit  
That by the grandeur of her arse,  
Your art's surpassed.

But I grab hold of her by her haunches,  
And open those white thighs of hers  
With my knee.

Already my triumphant rod,  
Finding the slit in the apricot,  
Makes it a hole.

Gripping my cheeks, raising her bum,  
Her feet in the air, like in a group  
By Clodion,  
She absorbs the whole of my rod,  
And brings to life the wring-and-twist  
Of Messalina.

A flood of warm prostatic liquor  
Wetting the temple's portico,  
Foams copiously.  
Beneath the shock of the thrusting cock,  
She cries with every jolt she gets,

“Faster, faster.”

Her eyes roll up in ecstasy,  
She impales herself up to the hilt  
As formerly  
Deep in the lair of god Priapus,  
Girls embedded in their bellies  
The wooden tool.

My weapon runs her through and through.  
The spasm comes, a gush of jism,  
A burning jet spouts,  
Pouring from my prick like lava,  
Spouts, subsides and, from its slather  
Ejects my gland.

When I have thoroughly drained my tube,  
I see the succubus soar away,  
With her lovely boobs.  
I become flaccid, I go limp,  
And I regret my offering  
To the false Venus.

On my fingers like a sheet,  
Already cold, the white stuff spreads.  
Game over.  
And you can turn your microscope  
Upon the product of my syncope,  
Spallanzani!

**Louise Michel (1830–1905) Note 9**

**The Crows / *Les Corbeaux***

*De la Germanie à l'Ukraine,  
Ils ouvrent leur ailes au vent*

From Germany to the Ukraine,  
They're spreading their wings upon the wind,  
And casting down over the fields  
Their raucous, rasping, rattling cries.

For them the harvest is superb;  
The dead are there, oh you black birds,  
Strewn among the grass like wheat.

Go, and from eyes brimmed with darkness  
Drink your fill as though from cups;  
Go, you crows, you numberless crows,  
You'll all find your thirst is quenched.

Then, up again on beating wings,  
Carry the new flesh to your nests;  
Your little ones are hungry there.

Go, you crows, take without fear  
Those terrible and sacred scraps;  
Against you there'll be no complaints  
You are pure, you black, black birds.

Go to the peoples now enslaved  
Go, sowing the blood of the brave;  
May it spring up in days to come.

**Louise Michel (1830–1905)**

**Circus Song: Bullfights / *Chanson du Cirque: Les Courses des taureau***

*Les hauts barons blasonnés d'or,  
Les duchesses de similor,*

The high-and-mighty gilded barons,  
The duchesses in their pinchbeck finery,  
The wild-eyed keep-it-coming girls,  
The debauchees with livid faces,  
Want a good time. Ah! yes, indeed.  
Jack the clown's a decent lad.

It's crimson blood they're out to see.  
Before, as a red slaughter-house,  
Paris for them was only theatre;  
And now they're hankering after more;  
They're thirsty for it. Ah! yes, indeed.  
Jack the clown's a decent lad.

Maybe they're looking even further.  
After the circus comes the scaffold;  
With the morgue rounding out the fun.  
Today, it's simply animals;  
Tomorrow, men. Ah! yes, indeed.  
Jack the clown's a decent lad.

The jaded rich are after blood,  
Which puts ideas in beggars' heads,  
Beggars dying in misery.  
All the better! Let there be war!  
They won't be saying for much longer,  
Jack the clown's a decent lad.

## Louise Michel (1830–1905)

### Hey, cholera / *V'la le choléra*

*Parait qu'on attend le choléra  
La chose est positive*

Seems they're expecting cholera  
It's absolutely certain  
Don't know just when  
But they know it's coming.

The pharmacists keep repeating  
It's coming for sure  
Buy our disinfectants  
Sulphur and chloride

The sextons and clerics  
Keep up their chanting  
To lure dummies  
Into their holy booths

Capital's being assembled  
To manufacture coffins  
They'll sell coffins  
At the cemetery gates.

Every day before noon  
Stiffs will be brought  
To a huge trench  
Filled up by the gross.

High over Sacré Coeur  
The good Lord chants with his clique  
And the bigots take up the refrain  
Death to the Republic

Hey cholera hey cholera  
Hey cholera's coming  
You'll all die of it  
From end to end of the city

**Stéphane Mallarmé (1842–1898) Note 10**

**The Punished Clown (earlier version) / *Le Pitre châtié***

*Pour ses yeux—pour nager dans ces lacs, dont les quais  
Sont plantés de beaux cils qu'un matin bleu pénètre,*

For her eyes—to bathe in those lakes whose banks  
Are planted with lovely lashes which a blue morning penetrates—,  
I, I your clown, Muse, hopped through the window  
And fled from our booth where your lamps smoke.

Intoxicated by the grass, I plunged like a traitor  
Into those forbidden lakes, and, when you called me,  
Laved my naked limbs in the water over the white pebbles,  
Forgetting my clown's costume on the trunk of a beech tree.

The morning sun dried my new-found body  
And, far from your tyranny, I felt the snow of glaciers  
Cooling my cleansed flesh,

Not knowing, alas! as the hair-grease and make-up  
Floated away on the water, oh Muse,  
That that muck was all a part of genius.

**Paul Verlaine (1844–1896) Note 11**

**Howling with the Wolves / *Faut Hurler avec les Loups!***

*Je m'suis marié le cinq ou l'six  
D'Avril ou d'Mai d'l'anné' dergnière,*

*Théâtre des Folies-Hainaut.*

*Music by M. Pablo de Herlañes.*

*Sung by Edmond Lepelletier*

Got married on the fifth or sixth  
Of April or May in the past year.  
Was widowed on the ninth or tenth  
Of July, can hardly remember it

—Oh my dear chap! you're going to say,  
What rotten luck! How I pity you!  
—One has to howl with the wolves, you know!  
I'll whine a bit.

Although the loss of my better half  
Was a pretty tough blow for me to take,  
After a bit I got hitched again,  
Just so as not to lose the habit

—Oh my dear chap! you're going to say,  
This time it'll be your lucky star...  
—One has to howl with the wolves, you know!  
I'll laugh.

But apart from liking to bare it all  
While the other stopped with a modest knee,  
Josephine has, I'm telling you,  
The same nature as dead Céleste...

—Oh my dear chap! you're going to say,  
This time you've really got luck to spare.  
—Well, I don't want to howl with the wolves.  
I'll hang myself.



**Paul Verlaine (1844–1896)**

**False Impression / *Impressions Fausses***

*Dame souris trotte,  
Noir dans le gris du soir,*

Lady Mouse scurries,  
Dark in the twilight,  
Lady Mouse scurries,  
Grey in the dark.

They've rung the bell,  
Sleep, little prisoners!  
They've rung the bell:  
Time for beddy-byes.

No bad dreams:  
Just think of your loves.  
No bad dreams:  
Only pretty girls.

The brilliant moonlight...!  
Deep snores from near me.  
The brilliant moonlight,  
For real.

A cloud passes;  
It's black as a coal-cellar,  
A cloud passes.  
Look, daybreak.

Lady Mouse scurries,  
Pink in the azure rays.  
Lady Mouse scurries:  
On your feet, lazybones!

**Paul Verlaine (1844–1896)**

**Boarding School Girls / *Pensionnaires***

*L'une avait quinze ans, l'autre en avait seize;  
Toutes deux dormaient dans la même chambre*

One of them was fifteen, the other one sixteen,  
The two of them slept in the same room.

It was a sultry evening in September:

Slender, blue-eyed, their skins a delicate pink.

They've each removed, so as to be more comfortable,

Their thin nightgowns, delicately scented with amber.

The younger one spreads her arms and arches her back,

And her sister, putting her hands on her breasts, kisses her,

Then falls on her knees, and goes absolutely wild,

And her mouth plunges tumultuously

Below the pale gold, into the mysterious darkness;

And the younger one, while this is going on, tots up

On her charming little fingers the waltzes promised,

For the coming dance, and, a little pinker, smiles gently.

Tristan Corbière (1845–1875) **Note 12**

**To the memory of Zulma wild virgin beyond the barricade and  
a Louis / *A la mémoire de Zulma vierge folle hors barrière et  
d'un louis***

*Elle était riche de vingt ans  
Moi j'étais jeune de vingt francs*

She had youth's twenty golden years  
I had the youth of twenty francs,  
And we put them into the same bag,  
Invested them in a joint venture  
In an untrustworthy spring night.

The moon made a hole in that,  
Round as a five-franc piece,  
Through which our fortune ebbed...  
Twenty years! twenty francs!—and the moon!

Small change, alas, those twenty francs,  
And small change, too, those twenty years!  
And the moon made hole upon hole  
In one joint venture after another...  
—It was like a joint fate.

.....

I found her again—many springtimes,  
Many twenty years, many twenty francs,  
Many holes and many moons—  
Still a virgin, still only twenty  
And—a colonel in the Commune.

.....

Then later: chasing passers-by  
For twenty sous, no twenty francs now...  
And afterwards: a common grave,  
A free night with no moon holes.

[Ellipsis marks sic]

**Aristide Bruant (1851–1925) Note 13**

**Blackie / *La Noire***

*La Noire est fille du canton  
Qui se fout du qu'en dira-t-on.*

Blackie's a good old country girl  
Who doesn't care what people say,  
And we're not worried about her morals.  
Not with that pair of pointed tits!  
And so we sing as we march along,  
"Hooray for Blackie and her tits."

She has two eyebrows and two eyes  
Blacker than the black of her hair,  
And flashes of lightning in her eyes  
That bring your blood up to the boil.  
And so we sing as we march along,  
"Hooray for Blackie and her tits."

Her breath, just like her country skin,  
Has the fragrance of new fruit.  
When you inhale it between her teeth,  
You think you're breathing in the spring.  
And so we sing as we march along,  
"Hooray for Blackie and her tits."

Blackie has only one true love,  
Her lover is the Regiment,  
And the Regiment knows it well.  
Blackie has become our mascot.  
And so we sing as we march along,  
"Hooray for Blackie and her tits."

Comrades, we swear upon her charms,  
Bismarck won't lay a finger on her.  
For her, in the shadow of the Flag,  
We'll simply bump the bastard off.  
And so we sing as we march along,  
"Hooray for Blackie and her tits."

## Aristide Bruant (1851–1925)

**Oh, the bastards! / *Ah les Salauds!***

*I's sont des tin', i's sont des tas,  
Des fils de race et de rastas,*

They've real shithouse and dungheap souls,  
With stale old blood or shyster dads,  
And snooty old hags on family walls,  
Oh, the bastards!

They almost all have honours ribbons  
And prissy mugs like country priests,  
They never did any barracks time,  
Those bastards!

Almost all have puny builds,  
With darling little hands and feet,  
And bellies popping out like bags,  
Bastards!

Word has it that these repulsive types  
Single-mindedly spend their days  
Jockeying for status at the trough,  
Such bastards!

At night they do their salon time,  
Breaking wind in their fancy pants,  
With tremolos like muted horns,  
The dirty bastards!

After which they're off on a spree,  
Stuffing themselves voraciously,  
Sucking it up from all the bottles,  
The greedy bastards!

And then they're into curious holes,  
Cheek by jowl with dukes and kings  
Behind the shutters of bordellos,  
The asshole bastards!

Next day while being driven home,  
Their mouths still taste the pisspot wine  
Which they were swilling in the dives,  
The stinking bastards!

So, then, it's absolute swine like these,  
Poncing around all la-di-da.  
Who have the gall to call *us* drunkards?  
The lousy bastards!

They've real shithouse and dungheap souls,  
With stale old blood or shyster dads,  
And snooty old hags on family walls,  
Oh, the bastards!

**Aristide Bruant (1851–1925)**

**Sad Notion / *Fantaisie triste***

*I' bruinait... L'temps était gris,  
On n'voyait plus l'ciel... L'atmosphère*

It drizzled, weather grey on grey,  
No glimpse of sky... The atmosphere,  
Oozing out above the City,  
Fell in a mist on where we were.

Something was blowing, no direction,  
Not North, not a familiar kind.  
It slithered between neck and collar  
And turned to ice upon our shirts.

We plodded onward through the fog,  
Just making out other gloomy forms,  
We were following behind a hearse  
Bearing a departed friend.

Christ! how cold your back became  
Made worse because of the slow pace;  
The marrow clotted in your bones,  
Colds and bronchitis fouled the air.

There wasn't a sparrow anywhere,  
Not a chaffinch, not a dove;  
Water was running down the tombs,  
And over there—that one was his.

And I told myself, thinking about him,  
Whom I'd seen laughing in September  
Christ, how cold he'd be tonight!  
It's sad dying in December.

**Arthur Rimbaud (1854–1891) Note 14**

**Romance / Roman**

*On n'est pas sérieux quand on a dix-sept ans.  
—Un beau soir, foin des bocks et de la limonade.*

I

You're just not serious when you're seventeen!  
A fine night—goodbye beer and lemonade,  
The rowdy cafes, the dazzling chandeliers!  
You're under the lime-trees on the promenade.  
Lime-trees smell so good on fine June evenings!  
Sometimes the air's so sweet that you close your eyes.  
The breeze laden with sounds—the town's not far—  
Wafts the fragrances of vines and beer...

II

Look! Up there you can see a tiny scrap  
Of dark blue, framed by a little branch,  
And pricked by a naughty star that melts there,  
Throbbing gently, tiny and pure white.  
A June night! Seventeen! You're becoming tipsy.  
The sap is like champagne, and goes to your head...  
You ramble. You feel upon your lips a kiss  
Which flutters there like a little live thing.

III

Your wild heart goes on fabulous voyages.  
Then, in the pale light of a street-lamp,  
A girl with a charming little air passes,  
In the shadow of her papa's awesome high collar.  
And since she finds you marvellously naïve,  
All the time trotting along in her little boots,  
She turns her head, quickly and alertly—  
The songs die on your lips.

IV

You're in love now—taken until August.  
You're in love—your sonnets make Her laugh.  
Your friends all give you up; you've become a bore.



—Then the Adored, one evening, deigns to write you.

That night—you're back in the glittering cafés.

Calling out for beer or lemonade ...

You're just not serious when you're seventeen,

With lime-trees out there, green, on the promenade.

**Arthur Rimbaud (1854–1891)**

**At the Green Tavern, 5:00 p.m. / *Au Cabaret Vert, cinq heures du soir***

*Depuis huit jours j'avais déchiré mes bottines  
Au cailloux des chemins. J'entrais à Charleroi*

For a whole week I'd been ruining my boots  
On those stony roads. I came into Charleroi,  
To the Green Tavern; I ordered slabs of bread,  
Buttered, and some lukewarm ham.

Contentedly, I stretched my legs out under the green  
Table. I studied the artless patterns  
On the wallpaper. And it was lovely  
When the girl with the big tits and sparkling eyes—

You wouldn't scare *that* one with a kiss!—  
Laughing, brought me the buttered bread,  
And the warm ham, on a coloured dish

(Pink-and-white ham, scented with a clove  
Of garlic), and filled a huge beer mug, whose foam  
Was turned to gold by a late sunbeam.

**Jules Laforgue (1860–1887) Note 15**

**Ballade of Return / *Ballade de retour***

*Le Temps met Septembre en sa hotte,  
Adieu, les clairs matins d'été*

Time stows September in his sack,  
Goodbye to cloudless summer mornings!  
Waiting, Winter coughs and shivers  
Inside his overcoat of snow.

When the casinos have put on  
Their final café-concert shows,  
The beach is melancholy indeed!  
Come back to us, you Paris girls.

Always the sobbing ocean breaking  
Against the irritated groynes,  
The winds of autumn muttering  
Ad nauseam their lamentations,  
A sky perpetually grey,  
Rain pouring down torrentially,  
It really isn't very gay!  
Come back to us, you Paris girls.

Whoops! the train whistles and jolts, you're off.  
Ahead awaits enchanted Paris  
And all its winter-long delights,  
The opera, the bouquets, the tea-hours,  
Oh, all the thrills of worldliness.  
Let's go. Open again the shutters  
Of the deserted sad hotel!  
Come back to us, you Paris girls.

Queens of gracefulness and beauty,  
Come, you delicate enchanters.  
Resume your proper regal sway:  
Come back to us, you Paris girls.

**Jules Laforgue (1860–1887)**

**Lament of Pianos Overheard in Well-off Neighbourhoods /  
*Complainte des pianos qu'on entend dans les quartiers aisés***

*Menez l'âme que les Lettres ont bien nourrie,  
Les pianos, les pianos, dans les quartiers aisés!*

Pianos, pianos in well-off neighborhoods  
Tug at a soul nourished by Literature.  
First spring nights, no topcoat, chaste strolls,  
To the tune of nerves misunderstood or shot.

These children, what are they dreaming of,  
Playing those boring ritornellos?

—“Evening schoolyard confidences,  
Bare Christs on dormitory walls!

“You go away and you leave us,  
You leave us and you go away.  
Putting up and letting down our hair,  
Doing endless embroideries.”

Pretty or bland? Sad or sensible? Still pure?  
Days, it's all one to me? Or World, I want you *now*?  
And if still virgins, at least as to The Wound,  
Knowing what sheets are lily-white at confession?

Good Lord, what do they dream about?  
Gallant knights? Expensive lace?

—“Hearts in prison,  
Sluggish seasons!

“You go away and you leave us,  
You leave us and you go away,  
Grey convents, Sulamites yearning in chorus,  
Arms crossed over our little breasts.”

With Nature's spigot turned one fatal day,  
Hey, physiology and its peculiar ferments,  
In the unending ball of our strange streets:  
Boarding-schools, theatres, newspapers, novels.

Goodbye, sterile ritournellos,  
Life is real and criminal.

—“Cubicle curtains ...  
May one come in ...?”

“You go away and you leave us,  
You leave us and you go away.  
Maidenly rose blushes fade,  
Truly! And when is *he* coming ... ?

He’ll come. And some of you will feel, poor dears,  
Always as if failing test after test,  
While others complacently want nothing more  
Than the daily round of snobbery and couture.

Bored to death? Embroidering suspenders  
For a rich uncle with a dowry?

—“Never! Never!  
If you only knew! ...

“You go away and you leave us,  
You leave us and you go away,  
But you’ll really come back soon  
To take care of my problem—won’t you?”

And it’s true, the Ideal drives them crazy,  
That bohemian vine, even in wealthy quarters.  
Life’s there; the intoxicating flask  
Will be (of course) diluted with clean water.

Also, they’ll soon be playing  
More precise ritornellos.

—“A solitary pillow,  
A too-familiar bedroom wall.

You go away and you leave us,  
You leave us and you go away.  
Why didn’t I die at Mass?  
O months, O underwear, O meals!”

**Jules Laforgue (1860–1887)**

**Lament about Forgetting the Dead / *Complainte de l'oubli des morts***

*Mesdames et Messieurs*

*Vous don't la mère est morte*

Ladies and gents,  
Whose mother's dead,  
That's the old gravedigger  
Scratching at your door.

The dead  
Are under the ground;  
They hardly ever  
Come out.

You're smoking into your beer,  
You're winding up an affair,  
Out there the cock's crowing,  
The poor dead, away in the country.

Grandpa sat bent,  
Finger to temple,  
Sister was crocheting,  
Mama was trimming the lamp.

The dead  
Are discreet,  
They sleep a lot,  
In the cooler.

You had a good dinner?  
How did the affair go?  
Ah well, the still-born  
Don't require TLC.

Make a precise entry  
In the account-book  
Between a couple of dances:  
Mass and upkeep of tomb.

It's gay,  
This life;  
Eh, sweetie?

Eh?

Ladies and gents,  
Whose sister's dead,  
Open up to the gravedigger,  
Knocking on your door.

If you don't pity him  
He'll come (no hard feelings)  
And drag you off by your feet  
One night when the moon's full.

Importunate wind  
Raging away!  
The deceased?  
They get around...

**Francis Jammes (1868–1938) Note 16**

**It's going to snow... / *Il va neiger ...***

*Il va neiger dans quelques jours. Je me souviens  
de l'an dernier. Je m'en souviens de mes tristesses*

It's going to snow in a few days. I remember  
the previous year. I remember my unhappiness  
beside the fire. If someone had asked, "What is it?"  
I'd have said, "Don't worry. It's nothing."

I thought a lot last year, up in my room,  
while the heavy snow was falling outside.  
Nothing came of it. Now, like then,  
I smoke a wooden pipe with an amber mouthpiece.

My old oak chest-of-drawers always smells good.  
But I was being stupid, because things  
couldn't change, and it's make-believe  
to want to drive away the things that we know.

So why do we think and talk? It's curious;  
our tears and our kisses, *they* don't talk,  
and we understand them all the same, and the footsteps  
of a friend are sweeter than sweet words.

We've christened the stars without considering  
that they're not in need of names, and the numbers  
that prove that the lovely comets out in the dark  
will miss us, won't *make* them pass by.

And even now where are my old unhappinesses  
from last year? I can hardly remember them.  
I'd say, "Don't worry. It's nothing,"  
if someone came to my room to ask, "What is it?"



**Francis Jammes (1868–1938)**

**The young girl... / *La jeune fille ...***

*La jeune fille est blanche,  
elle a des veines vertes*

The young girl is white,  
she has blue veins  
on her wrists, in her open  
sleeves.

You don't know why  
she laughs. For a moment  
she cries, and that  
is piercing.

Is it that she doubts  
that she captivates you  
while picking flowers  
along the road?

Sometimes you'd think  
that she understands things.  
Not always. She speaks  
softly.

“Oh my dear! oh! la! la!  
... Just imagine ... Tuesday  
I saw ... I tried...” She talks  
like that.

When a young man's suffering,  
at first she's silent  
and doesn't laugh at all, quite  
astonished.

On the back roads  
she fills her hands  
with prickly heather,  
and ferns.

She's tall, she's fair-skinned,  
she has very soft arms.  
She stands straight and bends  
her neck.

**Guillaume Apollinaire (1880–1918) Note 17**

**The Synagogue / *Le Synagogue***

*Ottomar Scholem et Abraham Loeweren  
Coiffés de feutres verts le matin du sabbat*

Ottomar Scholem and Abraham Loewerin  
On the Sabbath morning in their green felt hats  
Walk to the synagogue along the Rhine  
Past the slopes where the vines are reddening  
They are arguing and yelling things one would hardly dare  
translate  
Bastard conceived during a forbidden time or May the Devil poke  
your father  
The old Rhine lifts his streaming face and turns away to smile  
Ottomar Scholem and Abraham Loeweren are in a rage  
Because during the Sabbath you can't smoke  
And Christians are passing by with their lit cigars  
And because Ottomar and Abraham both love  
Lia with her sheep's eyes and a tummy that sticks out a little  
Nevertheless in the synagogue one after the other  
They'll kiss the Torah while raising their fine hats  
Among the foliage of the Feast of Tabernacles  
Ottomar will smile at Abraham as they sing  
They'll lower the key freely and the sonorous male voices  
Will make a Leviathan groan in the depths of the Rhine like a  
voice of autumn  
And in the synagogue full of hats they'll shake their four sacred  
switches  
*Hanoten ne Kamoth bagoim tholahoth baleoumim\**

[\* "He who wreaks vengeance on the Gentiles and punishment  
on peoples."]

## Guillaume Apollinaire (1880–1918)

### The Seasons / *Les Saisons*

*C'était un temps béni nous étions sur les plages  
Va-t'en de bon matin pieds nus et sans chapeau*

That was a great time we were on the beaches  
Got there early in the morning barefoot and hatless  
And quick as the flick of a toad's tongue  
Love skewered crazies just like it does the wise

Did you know galloping Bill  
When he was in the army  
Did you know galloping Bill  
When he was a gunner  
In the war

That was a great time The time of the baggage-master  
We were packed together tighter than in a bus  
And stars passed overhead singed by the shells  
When the horse-drawn battery arrived at night

Did you know galloping Bill  
When he was in the army  
Did you know galloping Bill  
When he was a gunner  
In the war

That was a great time Days vague and nights vague  
The big shells created scraps for our log dugouts  
Some aluminum where you concentrated  
On polishing until evening amazing rings

Did you know galloping Bill  
When he was in the army  
Did you know galloping Bill  
When he was a gunner  
In the war

That was a great time The war keeps going  
The gun-crew have polished rings now for months  
The leader listens in the shelter of the woods  
To the repeated song of an unknown star

Did you know galloping Bill

When he was in the army  
Did you know galloping Bill  
When he was a gunner  
In the war

**Guillaume Apollinaire (1880–1918)**

**A Bird is Singing / *Un oiseau chante***

*Un oiseau chante ne sais où  
C'est je crois ton âme qui veille*

A bird is singing I don't know where  
I think it's your soul that watches  
Among all the tuppenny soldiers  
And the bird charms my ear  
Listen it's singing tenderly  
I don't know on what branch  
And everywhere it enchants me  
Night and day weekdays and Sundays  
But what to say about this bird  
About the metamorphosis  
Of the soul into a song in the shrubbery  
Of a heart into sky and sky into roses  
The bird of soldiers is love  
And my love is a girl  
More perfect than a rose and for  
Me alone the blue bird sings  
Bird blue like the blue heart  
Of my love whose heart is heavenly  
Sing your sweet song again  
To the deadly machine-guns  
Which chatter on the horizon and then  
Are maybe stars that someone is sowing  
So the days and the nights pass  
With love blue as the heart itself

## Guillaume Apollinaire (1880–1918)

### Lul de Faltenin / *Lul de Faltenin*

*Sirènes j'ai rampé vers vous  
Grottes tiriez aux mers la langue*

Sirens I have crawled towards  
Your grottos you stuck out your tongues  
At the seas as you danced before the breakers  
Then beat those angel wings of yours  
And I listened to the conflicting songs

A weapon O my troubled head  
I shook a branch stripped of its leaves  
To drive away the tepid breath  
Exhaled against my excited cries  
By your terrible silent mouths

Off yonder is that marvellous thing  
Compared with it what are you worth  
The blood spurts from my lances' tips  
It is my nature and I confess  
To the murder of my double pride

If the boatmen have rowed far off  
From your lips above the surface,  
Thousands of enchanted creatures  
Scent the trail to the rendezvous  
With my well-belovèd wounds

Their starry animal wild eyes  
Light up my powers of sympathy  
What does it matter if I equal  
The wisdom of the constellations  
Since Night it's I who make you starry

Sirens I am at last descending  
Into a gaping hole Your eyes  
I love The steps are slippery  
Far away you look like dwarves  
Who didn't lure the passer-by

In the careful and cultivated  
I've seen our forests burst with green

And the sun crow above the waves  
As sailors yearn for spars and masts  
To put on foliage once again

I descend and the firmament  
Suddenly stings like a medusa  
I'm burning now atrociously  
My arms alone are the excuses  
And the torches for my torment

Birds you stuck out tongues at the waves  
Yesterday's sun is back with me  
The lance-heads cover us with blood  
In the lair of the Sirens far  
From the flock of oblong stars

**Louis Aragon (1897–1982) Note 18**

**Beer-hall *Magick* Germany / *Bierstube Magie allemande***

*Bierstube Magie allemande*  
*Et douces comme un lait d'amandes*

Beer-hall *Magick* Germany  
And sweet as almond-milk  
Mina and Linda greedy lips  
Who so much want to be coarse  
And whose voices are still childish  
Persist in humming to themselves  
The tune *Ach du lieber Augustin*  
Which a passer-by whistles in the street.

Sofienstrasse: my memory  
Brings back the room and wardrobe  
The water singing in the kettle  
The mottoes on the embroidered cushions  
The skylight of fake opaline  
*Böcklin's Isle of the Dead*  
And the mousseline peignoir  
Which opens and gives ideas

Pleasure taken and always ready  
O Gaense-Liesel of defeats  
Suddenly you turn your head  
And offer me  
The tempting nape of your neck  
Girl of Sarrebrück  
Who lowered herself to turn a trick  
For a piece of chocolate

And I who judge her what am I  
Tacky happinesses tacky highs  
There's such a loss of wonderment  
That I don't recognize myself  
Quicky encounters quicky exits  
Is this the way men live  
And their kisses follow them afar  
Like suns in orbit

It's all a matter of decor



Changing beds changing bodies  
But to what end since it is still  
I who betray myself  
I who fritter myself away  
And my shadow bares itself  
In the all-alike arms of girls  
Where I thought I'd find a home

Light heart fickle heart heavy heart  
The time for dreaming is so short  
What should I do with my days  
What should I do with my nights  
I didn't have love or a dwelling place  
Anywhere to live or die  
I wandered like a rumour  
I slept like a tumult.

It was a senseless time  
They'd brought the dead to the table  
They were building sand-castles  
They mistook wolves for dogs  
Everything was topsy-turvy  
Was the play meant to be funny  
If I performed my role badly  
It was because nothing made sense

In the Hohenzollern quarter  
Between the Sarre and the barracks  
Like flowering alfalfa  
The breasts of Lola bloomed  
She had the heart of a swallow  
On the couch in the brothel  
I'd stretch out beside her  
While the pianola hiccupped

She was brunette and white  
Her hair fell down over her hips  
And during the week and on Sundays  
She opened her bare arms to all  
She had eyes blue like faience  
And toiled valiantly  
For an artilleryman from Mayence  
Who never got over it

There are other soldiers in town  
And at night civilians show themselves  
Put more mascara on your eyelashes  
You'll be leaving soon Lola  
Another glass of liqueur  
It was in April at five a.m.  
That into your heart  
A dragoon plunged his knife  
  
The sky was grey with clouds  
There were wild geese flying  
Announcing death in their passage  
Over the houses on the quais  
I saw them through the window  
Their sad song pierced my heart  
And I thought I recognized there  
Something of Rainer Maria Rilke

**Louis Aragon (1897–1982)**

**Love Which Isn't a Word / *L'Amour qui n'est pas un mot***

*Mon Dieu jusqu'au dernier moment  
Avec ce coeur débile et blême*

My God right up to the last minute  
With this feeble bloodless heart  
When one's a shadow of oneself  
How how to how is  
How is love possible  
Or even giving this torment a name

Yet it's enough for you to appear  
With that special look  
While you adjust your hair  
For me to revive and know again  
A world inhabited by song  
Elsa my love my time of youth.

O strong and gentle as a wine  
Like the sun against the windows  
You restore Being's caresses  
You restore a thirst a hunger  
To live once more and know again  
Our story right up to the end.

It's a miracle being together  
With the light shining on your cheek  
With the breezes playing around you  
Every time I see you I tremble  
As if this were the first date  
For a young man who resembles me

And as to getting used to it  
If I can't if that's a fault  
Can one ever get used to flames  
They've burned you up before you do  
Oh may the eyes of my soul burst  
If they ever take the clouds for granted

Your mouth for the first time  
Your voice for the first time  
Soaring to the highest spot of the wood

The tree trembled to its roots  
It's always the first time  
When your dress touches me in passing

Take this heavy throbbing fruit  
Toss away the rotten half  
You can bite the lucky part  
Thirty years gone and thirty more  
Bite deep bite deep  
My life is in your hands.

Truly my life begins  
On the day when I met you  
You whose arms knew how to steer  
Through the dreadful ways of my madness  
And show me the region  
That only virtue could make fertile.

You came to a disordered heart  
To drive away the evil fevers  
And I blazed like a holly berry  
At Christmas between your fingers.  
Truly I was born from your lips  
My life begins with you.

**Marie-Jeanne Durry (1901–1980) Note 19**

**Orpheus' Plea / *Prière d'Orphée***

*Maître, ó maître nocturne, maître  
Roi des nuits, prince des métaux*

Master, nocturnal master, master,  
King of the darkness, lord of metals,  
The scent of the sun and living things  
Is flowing in the folds of my cloak!  
The dead held in your vice-like grip  
Trembling open wide their nostrils.  
I am the ocean and the boat,  
Motionless dark master of roots!

Master hid in the depths of night,  
I now can view your dreaded face.  
By what miracle of hope,  
Dark star of paralyzing cold,  
Up to that throne devoid of being  
Where you are reigning have I come?  
On the dark marble of your tablets,  
I've flashed the light of a bare arm,

What air do you know, you who are breathing  
In the close place which the wind shuns?  
Do you hear the footsteps of the living?  
All is sound and light and motion  
On earth where water flows and quivers:  
Seated solitary and brooding,  
Think of those who dream together.

Do you know the living flesh and fruit  
That swell to ripeness in the light?  
Your rule is over ruined bodies,  
Over phantoms without substance,  
Over the silences of stones.  
Your fixed eyes underneath your brows  
Are slowly lowering their lids:  
See, I have brought gifts for you,  
Tangy lemons and sweet apples,  
A comb of honey, a little bird,

A nest made out of feathers and moss,  
The frail tassel of a reed  
Softer than the tender muzzle  
Of a deer, a fleck of wool,  
And the delicate threads of webs  
That morning places on the fields.

Inhale, touch, taste, look!  
Do you know the beauty of the world?  
The flowers open in my voice,  
You only know the underside  
And the dry infertile depths.  
Your rule is over what has ended,  
Over woods that winter strips.  
Yesterday on earth it rained.

Do you hate mortals, king of the dead?  
Broad wings glide up there above you,  
Heavy, muted, like remorse.  
Soundlessly among the shades,  
From their gloomy flights you glean  
Only emptiness, grief, fear.  
Your portal which my voice profanes,  
Is kept by Apathy and Absence.

Here everything is fleeting, hazy,  
Or else more permanent than stone:  
Gliding vapors, surging waves  
Of confused sighs, or massive blocks  
Of dense abrasive minerals.  
I struck with my fist. Under the impact  
Only I trembled. Bowed, I advanced.  
Ah, such a thirst to see your face  
In the formless night of hell!

Nothing stirs in your memory  
When I speak of youth to you,  
When I tell the trembling tale  
Of hopefulness and promises.  
With what memory of caresses  
Could I soften your severity?

But silently your fingers knit,  
Resting there on your rigid knees.

Alas for the music which has moved  
Unmoving mountains, savage wolves.  
Alas for the kisses and the taste  
Of juices reddening my mouth!  
I didn't come as a conqueror!

But all the same, look round you; all  
The shapes here in the pathless dark  
Are eddying like smoke about me.  
They've never drunk the morning dew  
Or the blood of sacrifices,  
The only watering of their soul  
Has been with tears and angry passions.

My fading track is being followed.  
All of those beings who are enslaved  
By death are suffering and recalling.  
No hunger of theirs has been assuaged!  
Your bloodless folk belong to me.

They belong to me in the distress  
And happiness of former times.  
My rhythms aid and give them pain.  
Their sightless eyes are turned towards  
The entire universe through me.  
A human voice is all that's needed  
And your bitter host reject  
The forgetfulness of your domain.

Forgetfulness? How could I forget  
Her who was alive and mine!  
Bound by an eternal knot,  
Our separate bodies are as one.

The living love. Me, I love you,  
Lost and dead woman. I desire you,  
You who are gone, and whom I sense  
In every fibre of my being.  
Let a god ignore my pleas,  
I am the slave, he is the master,  
But nothing will make disappear  
As long as I remain alive  
The faith from which you can be reborn!

Alas, your presence is a dream!  
You haven't risen from the tomb.  
The days begin and end as usual,  
And the past vanishes bit by bit.  
I am both the torch and flame  
Of a dwindling sad cortege.  
How lovely was your happy laugh!  
But laughing here is sacrilege.

Innumerable fingers touch me.  
You are everywhere and nowhere.  
What mouths place kisses on my mouth?  
What arms are wrapped around my neck?  
My eyes stray. I am driven wild.  
I think I see you, but it's the void  
Which sweeps me onward in its eddies,  
Peopled by the greedy phantoms.

From the torments which I endure,  
Spare, oh master of the abyss,  
She who launched on summer days  
Ecstatic songs to the gods of the peaks.  
You who weigh man and his crimes,  
Place me in the scales, I'm lighter  
Than the innocence of victims:  
All I can do is love and sing.

Alone, you judge alone in the pit!  
But you yourself love somberly.  
Source of suffering, you too suffer!  
Your silence is like that of a dark  
Tower upon which tempests and vultures  
Beat in vain under the clouds:  
But in your underground abode,  
You've known a radiant mirage.

Your own goddess was rapt by you  
In a swirl of chariot horses,  
In a frenzy of desire.  
It was the season of renewal,  
She had gone out gathering poppies  
And lilies in her springtime robe.  
She was tall, erect, and radiant.



Her breath flowed across the land  
And reached you in your hideaway.  
Her tresses floated in the air,  
You surged up from the opened pit,  
Your heavy kiss bit into her neck,  
You abducted her and raped her,  
Grazing on her motionless flesh.

Gripping in your powerful arms  
The drooping body of the goddess,  
You plunged back into the clayey lair.  
How you were enamoured of her,  
Priestess of your shadowy stronghold,  
The recluse with submissive eyes,  
Bowing down before your harshness!  
But you had to reign without her.

How can one hold as prisoner  
The daughter of the crops and groves,  
The adored springtime prophetess  
Of all which wakes and trusts in life,  
The tender gleaner in the autumn,  
Among the late flowers in the fields?  
Your captive but also your equal,  
You gave her back to the upper air!

It wasn't the outcry of her mother  
Which conquered. An untroubled sleeper,  
You cherish the dark in your domain!  
There's no importance for the sower  
Of night and anger and ill-will,  
In the suffering of men and gods!

You didn't yield her up to force,  
But to desires that you discerned  
Beyond the seeming sundering.  
At last your soul began to know her  
In her paleness and privacy,  
The chaste queen, the faithful one,  
Who's penetrated deep within you.

Strangers shut off by massive walls  
From one another without recourse,  
It's seemingly a hopeless struggle,

But suddenly a gap appears  
Through which two hearts can be laid bare.  
She deciphered your mystery  
And, forgiving, understood.  
God of dead hearts, you know the worth  
Of a goddess with a woman's heart.

But more alone, still, than an outlaw,  
Regret parches and famishes you.  
What you must sacrifice is your pride.  
Sooner her distant task, her joy,  
Her royal tread beyond the tomb,  
The emptiness lit by her going,  
Than her unconsolable scorn.  
She is your dream and not your prey.

She unites what you tear apart,  
Restores that which you destroy.  
She's your redemption and your beacon,  
And your memory leads her on.  
Inflexible in your domain,  
You've granted her a dispensation.  
A weightless people follow her.  
You finish, she begins.

But faithful all the time to you,  
She senses when you want her back.  
Willingly, gravely, she descends  
Towards him who is deprived of her.  
She shines down there among the dead!

She is to you more than herself!  
Oh give me back now my own good!  
Or else take me. No blasphemy  
Will issue from me. I belong,  
This poor sad man, this nobody,  
To nothingness, to dust and ashes,  
But let my shade have the support  
Of the shade that used to be my light.

Mingled in infinity  
Let our essences be as one!  
Under the heavens I am banished  
From happiness. I howl at the moon.

I roam and scent. I importune  
The land and sea with my complaints.  
Monarch of losses and misfortune,  
That which I love you've taken from me!

Astonish us! Let me be in her  
As she in me, the same for ever.  
But woe if, like a too stern father,  
Your power to which I yield myself  
Establishes her among the dead!  
Free, oh free into upper air,  
In their tenderness and peace,  
Two beings chosen by your mercy!

Each on the other intent, mingling  
Our looks, voices, minds, hearing  
Upon the threshold of slow night  
The murmuring of swaying branches.  
The spouse becomes a fiancée,  
The old love is still young and strong,  
Old unhappinesses are healed,  
Two mortals have attained their haven.

I see my dream, I almost touch it,  
Restore it, Lord of destiny!!  
Surging up from the lower depths,  
Return to me the morning star!  
Consent and I'll obtain through you  
The being I love above all others.  
So near and yet alas so far!  
As she was, let her be reborn!

A moment of human happiness,  
A moment earthly, tangible!  
You only need to open your hand.  
Allow a life to escape your maze!  
Let me see the invisible,  
Seize that which escapes and flees me,  
You are the arrow, I the target,  
Your eyes frighten me in the night.

Allow us our whole destiny,  
To live together, know together  
The love and enduring comradeship

That intermingle and entwine.  
Let us in the course of the years  
Grow old together and, assenting,  
One day before you reappear  
Together in death. Watch, wait,  
The world passes and you remain.  
We are shallow and evanescent.  
Towards you all the hours are heading,  
They strike upon your reefs and sink.  
Massive and unchangeable,  
You are the inevitable end.  
You seize hold of death and life,  
O god, tamer of the untameable!  
You know it, everything ends in you,  
No need for cunning and deception,  
We'll come back down under your roof,  
Joined in the confusion of death!  
Be careful, though, if you refuse me!  
Time knows how to hollow out  
The powers that the gods abuse:  
The gods themselves can also die!

1976

**Raymond Queneau (1903–1976) Note 20**

**I'm not so scared of that / *Je crains pas ça tellement***

*Je crains pas ça tellement la mort de mes entrailles  
et la mort de mon nez et celle de mes os*

I'm not so scared of the death of my guts  
death of my nose death of my bones  
I'm not so scared for this mosquito  
christened Raymond family name Queneau

I'm not so scared of where books end up  
the quais the toilets the dust the ennui  
I'm not so scared as someone who scribbles lots  
and distills death into a few poems

I'm not so scared of Night flowing softly  
under the wormy rim of the eyelids of the dead  
she's gentle is Night the kiss of a redhead  
honey of noon at the south and the north poles

I'm not so scared of that Night or of the final  
sleep that will be as heavy as lead  
dry as lava dark as the sky  
deaf as a beggar moaning beside a bridge

What scares me is unhappiness tears pain  
and dread and bad luck and too great an absence  
I'm frightened of the abyss bulging with sickness  
time space and the mind's mistakes

But I'm not so scared of that lugubrious imbecile  
who'll come and collect me on the end of his toothpick  
My gaze will be vacant and placid by then  
my courage all used up on the present's gnawings

Some day I'll sing of Ulysses or maybe Achilles  
Aeneas or Didon Quixote or even Panza  
some day I'll sing of the happiness of the tranquil  
the pleasures of angling or the calm of villas

Today tired out by the hour that's been  
trudging like an old nag around the dial  
I've umpteen excuses in this bony skull  
for murmuring plaintively this song of nothing.

**Georges Brassens (1921–1981) Note 21**

**Hecatomb / *Hecatombe***

*Au marche de Briv'-la-Gaillarde,  
A propos de botts d'oignone*

In the Brive-la-Gaillarde market,  
Apropos of a bunch of onions,  
Several dozen strapping wenches  
Had a real set-to one day.

On foot, on horseback, in a carriage  
The coppers (not a good idea)  
Came to have a go at the task  
Of interrupting the affray.

Now naturally, under every sky,  
It's a well-established rule  
That when it comes to beating up cops,  
Everybody works together.  
Those furies, losing all restraint,  
Threw themselves upon the coppers  
And created, you can take my word,  
A pretty stirring spectacle.

And seeing those gallant constables  
Within an inch of going under,  
Me, I was thrilled, for I adore them  
When they're in the form of corpses.  
From the garret where I live,  
I urged on the ferocious arms  
Of the cop-killing termagants,  
Crying "Hip, hip, hip hooray."

Frenziedly, one of them grabbed hold of  
The old police sergeant heading the gang  
And made him cry "Death to the Pigs!  
Death to the Law! Vive Anarchy!"  
Another gripped, unlady-like,  
The cranium of one of the louts  
In between her enormous thighs,  
Bearing down on it like a vice.

The most obese of all the women,

Opening her distended bodice,  
Bludgeoned with her swinging tits  
Everyone coming within reach.  
They tumbled, tumbled, tumbled down,  
And according to informed opinion  
The hecatomb that occurred that day,  
Was simply the greatest of all time.

Judging finally that their victims  
Had had their fill of whacks on the head,  
These furies, as a final outrage  
Before they went back to their onions,  
These furies—I can hardly dare  
Say it, it's so truly gross—  
Would even have cut off their things.  
Luckily they didn't have them.

## Georges Brassens (1921–1981)

### The Nun / *La Religieuse*

*Tout les coeurs se rallient à sa blanche cornette;  
Si le chrétien succombe à son charme insidieux*

Everyone is drawn to her white-winged headdress.  
If the Christian feels its insidious appeal  
The firmest pagan, the most upright atheist  
Let themselves go at times and believe in God.—  
And the choirboys' little bells go tinkle tinkle.

It seems, though, that beneath that awesome headgear,  
Which she puts on for mass so scrupulously,  
The little sister hides—it's a real scandal—  
A ponytail and seductive little ringlets—  
And the choir-boys are getting restless in their stalls.

It seems that underneath her big serge habit  
She wears, coquette, a pair of silken stockings,  
With lacy underwear and fancy trimmings,  
Everything for the Devil to enjoy.—  
And the choirboys start to have improper thoughts.

It seems that in the evening, like many others,  
At a time when her fellow sisters have gone to bed  
Or are piously trotting out their paternosters,  
She strips in front of her tall dressing mirror—  
And the poor choirboys burn with a real fever.

It seems that she leisurely studies her nude body,  
From the front, in profile, and even, alas, from the rear,  
After having casually hung her habit  
From the arms of the cross, as though it were a clothes-stand.—  
The devil is slipping in among the choirboys.

It seems that turning a knowing eye to the heavens,  
She says, "Well, Lord, you did a pretty good job."  
Then she adds, with a further touch of malice,  
"The curvature of the back's a definite find."—  
And the choirboys are now in serious torment.

It seems that when midnight comes it's even worse.  
One hears mingling in a strange harmony



The love-struck voices of angels panting  
And that of the sister crying, "Again! Again!"—  
And the wretched choirboys are perspiring.

And monsieur le curé, whom these sounds dismay,  
Tells himself correctly that the good Jesus  
With his head, alas, already loaded with thorns,  
Certainly doesn't need something else added.—  
And the choirboys, nodding their heads, agree

That this is all rumour, tittle-tattle, rubbish,  
Malicious lies circulated by Satan,  
No sexy ringlets under the white wings,  
No pony-tail, only a shorn skull.—  
And the choirboys' faces show their feelings.

No abnormalities in that rigorous heart,  
No ribbons under that severe habit.  
One will never see those wings upon Christ's head.  
The lucky chap can rest on his cross in peace—  
And the choirboys sadly masturbate.

END

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### 1. Villon: ballade-master

#### I

The title of Villon's best-known poem seems to be up for grabs, including variously "L'Épitaphe Villon," "Ballade des pendus," "L'Épitaphe en forme de ballade que fait Villon pour luy et pour ses compagnons, s'attendant estre pendu avec eux" ("The epitaph in the form of a ballade that Villon made for himself and his companions while waiting to be hanged with them"), and, in Galway Kinnel's 1982 double-text edition, simply "Ballade."

I've fallen back on "Ballade of the Hanged." "Ballade of the Gibbet" would be appropriate in English terms, given the English distinction between gallows, where hangings took place, and gibbets, where the corpses of the hanged were displayed as warnings. The speaker and his five companions here are evidently now simply skeletons and have

been up there a good while. It is “nous les os,” we bones, that are speaking.

But the English distinction didn't obtain in Paris, where one structure could serve both purposes and *gibet* covered them both. Besides, the focus is on the dangling figures, not what they're dangling from.

The idea of Villon composing so complex a poem while awaiting execution sounds apocryphal, like the image of Yeats pacing the floor of his new home that night composing “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory.”

In any event, the possibility of being hanged, and the aftermath for the dangling body, was a grim reality in Villon's Paris.

## II

The four fifteenth-century manuscripts (none in Villon's own hand), Kinnell reports, were virtually without punctuation.

Copying his text was a pleasure, since it contains almost no accent marks, apart from the two cedillas. All that was really needed was a cedilla to show when a C was soft, and an acute accent to indicate when E was pronounced AY.

But of course talk about “the” pronunciation of French back then is fictional, given the large number of regions with their different cultures and different ways of speaking.

Now for a bit of the Dull-but-Usefuls. Skip to section V if you don't want it.

## III

One can't pick up Villon's collected poems and start absorbing them, any more than one could put on skis for the first time and swoop gracefully downhill. But the margins of obscurity can be narrowed when one settles down with anthologized and translated poems like “Ballade of the Hanged,” “Ballade of Big Marge,” “Ballade of Dead Ladies,” “Ballade of the Lovely Armouress.”

Modern French is difficult for Anglos because of the gap between spelling and pronunciation, in contrast to Spanish, Italian, and

German. Villon's French, and that of Renaissance poets, is further complicated by differences between spelling then and now.

But one doesn't have to be put off as if by a wall of thorns, at least if one has a dictionary like the Collins/Robert that gives etymologies and a sufficiency of examples of words in use in their several meanings.

French poems back then, as later, needed to be read (a) with ear as well as eye, plus (b) an acceptance of the unEnglish fact that the lines in a ten-syllable poem will contain ten syllables, no more, no less (ditto for other lengths), and (c) that since French had fewer words than English, individual words can have a lot of meanings, but (d) that by and large, they aren't articulating unfamiliar concepts.

A surprisingly large proportion of words from back then have been retained in the language, but with changed spellings. If a word looks as though it's performing a familiar function, it probably is.

Words like *cuers*, *voiez*, *tost*, *cy*, *pouldre*, *nostre* may not be in your dictionary.

But here is the first stanza of "Ballade of the Hanged," from Kinnell. The italics are mine,

Freres humains qui après nous vivez  
N'ayez les *cuers* contre nous endurcis  
Car *se* pitié de nos povres avez  
Dieu en aura plus *tost* de vous mercis  
Vous nous *voiez cy* attachez cinq six  
Quant de la chair que trop avons nourrie  
Elle est pièce dévorée et pourrie  
Et nous les os devenons cendre et *pouldre*  
De *nostre* mal personne ne s'en rie  
Mais priez Dieu que tous nous *vueille* absouldre

If we're being told not to harden something, well, how about *cuers/ coeurs* (pronounced the same)? *Plus tost* may not immediately suggest *plutôt*. But wait, there's that little hat (circumflex) over the O. Which signifies a dropped S, as in *côte*, *hôtel*, *hôpital*, and so on.

No-one ever informed us of that in my highschool, any more than they explained that the labeling of sometimes very short stretches of dialogue in Molière's *Le Malade imaginaire* as a numbered "Scene"

indicated that a character had entered or left the stage, which must have made it easy to locate items during rehearsals.

A couple of other details to notice. The dead are hanging there. They say, “You see us fastened”—where? What work is *cy* doing? *Ci* in later French means “here”. Which fits. And a glance around will show I and Y doing similar tasks.

All those pairs of sounds are the same, if one’s earing and not just eyeing. (No one ever pointed out in school that French *place* in a Provençal pronunciation sounds the same as Spanish *plaza*, where Z is our hissed S.)

And if their bones will soon be *cendre et pouldre*, how about dust and ashes, or ashes (cinders?) and powder/dust? So we have another dropped letter. Villon and others may have sounded the L in *pouldre* and *absouldre*. The S in *endurcis*, rhyming with *six*, would certainly have been sounded.

All of which is more than enough about an un-favorite literary topic. But having glanced at such differences from modern spelling, it’s easier to hear the sounds in one’s head, and to look words up in the dictionary in the knowledge that only a character or two may need changing in order to restore familiarity.

Why not just read a modernized text? Well, yes, but suppose there isn’t one, as is the case with most of the Renaissance poems here? If you can’t try substitutions, you can’t use the dictionary. You will also be missing out on the aural texture that comes with more of the consonants voiced.

#### IV

*Debuer* could, it appears, mean “washed with lye.” But what would have been a familiar process then would draw too much attention to itself here in English. It would have evoked for French readers up until fairly recently the washerwomen boiling, pounding, and soaking clothes in a communal washing-place.

We ourselves saw it still going on in “our” Provence village in the 1960s. It figures prominently in Zola’s best novel, *L’Assommoir*.

Enough about vocabulary.

## V

The ballade form, in its several manifestations, is a given—three stanzas with the same rhymes in each, the same line at the end of each stanza, the reversal in the middle of each stanza, the concluding envoi repeating elements in the preceding stanzas.

So the art of writing a ballade is partly a matter of achieving naturalness in a highly stylized form, with everything anchored to, or tied together by, the repeated refrain.

The version here, technically a *ballade supreme*, is more difficult than the basic one with eight-line stanzas and a four-line envoi.

## VI

Ballades in modern English have tended to be light and in octosyllabics, emphasizing play and cleverness, and being, perhaps, more song-like, as is Villon's own lovely "Où sont les neiges d'antan?" ("Where are the snows of yesteryear?")

In the decasyllabic "Frères humains" the movement is slow and not at all playful. The hemmed-in-ness of the form answers to the plight of the hanged, who have no forward-reaching expectations beyond the hope of not being consigned to hell.

The stanzas are individuated, too.

In the first stanza we're presented with the situation—the skeletons, the gawking or joking visitors—and a demand for a recognition of a shared humanity.

In the second, there's a fuller analysis of the ethical situation—an acknowledgment of having no right to sympathy, but a hope nevertheless for mercy, including the mercy of Jesus, since otherwise there will be the torments of hell.

In the third, the physicality of it all is presented in such a way that the six almost seem to have been alive while the birds pecked out their eyes.

Finally, in the envoi, there's a reaching out directly to Jesus, going over the heads of the more or less Decent Citizenry.

## 2. Ronsard and the body

The standard text of “O Love I’m not complaining:” has “Portia” in the last line. In *Le Cabinet Secret du Parnasse: Pierre de Ronsard et la Pléiade* (Paris 1928), Louis Perceau lists a repeated “Lucesse” as an alternate reading, and I’ve opted for that, slightly modified, to avoid the too-strong pull of Shakespeare’s Portia, not yet in existence at the time.

I’d be surprised if there were an equivalent to this poem in the English Renaissance, and not just because it’s indecorous, but because of the straightforward acknowledgment of the beloved (or lusted-after) as an individual character with her own physical being and desires. What kind of profile could we construct even of Donne’s partner in “Going to Bed”?

The consciousness here, as in Villon’s “Ballade of Big Marge” where they fart while love-making, of the everyday shared corporeality of the Other probably permits more in the way of substantial psychological interactions. Ronsard’s lazy, lie-abed young Marie feels more realistically “there” for me than Herricks’ gorgeously theatrical Corinna. And the awareness of the body, even when unverballed, may still be there in the relatively abstract classical tragedies of Corneille and Racine. Racine’s famous “C’est Vénus tout entière / à sa proie attachée” doesn’t come out of thin air.

But much was lost when the robust French classicism of the Renaissance was chastened into neo-classical propriety; and an important aspect of French Romanticism was the restoration of corporeality.

In the same anthology, *Pierre de Ronsard et la Pléiade*, there’s a six-hundred-line poem in decasyllabic couplets, “La Vieille Courtisane,” by Ronsard’s fellow-poet Joachim du Bellay, in which a retired and nominally repentant old courtesan describes her guilt-free and largely successful career—losing her virginity to a mere “serf” (sic) when she was twelve or thirteen; three years with a priest during which she acquired social skills; setting up in business in Rome behind a façade of respectability; having a conversion which didn’t take; opening a “boutique” (sic); etc. And a free spirit.

La liberté de pouvoir deviser,

D'aller en masque, et de se déguiser,  
Siffler de nuit par une jalousie,  
Faire l'amour, vivre à sa fantasia,  
Sans esprouver la facheuse prison  
De ne pouvoir sortir de la maison  
Sans un valet, et, sans conger du maistre,  
N'oser monstrier le nez à la fenestre;  
Ce seul desir mon esprit chatouilloit ...

The freedom to have casual conversations,  
To wear a mask and go out in disguise,  
To whistle through a shutter in the night,  
Make love, live out one's fantasies  
Without the exasperating restrictions  
Of being unable to leave the house  
Without a footman or, without permission,  
Dare to show one's nose at the window—  
That above all was what my soul desired...

There's no cruelty in the narrative, or obscenity, but she was surely an ancestress of Sade's Juliette.

As to Ronsard's *glaire espessie*, literally, thickened egg-white, a google almost at random a few years ago brought up the following on an advice site:

When I use a dildo and I cum, my cum is almost like a guy's cum, not as thick though. Whenever I pull out the dildo, the end is covered in my cum. It's not that much, maybe a teaspoon full, but I'm worried I might have a health problem.

### **3. Claude Le Petit: Paris Eros**

The two most fascinating “destroyed” works in French literature may be Sade's immense MS *Les Journées de Florbelle, ou la Nature dévoilée*, burned after his death by the police, at the request of his son, and Le Petit's *Le Bordel des Muses*, burned along with him. The only known surviving copy, according to Perceau, was stolen from the Bibliothèque Nationale in 1850. But might not it or some other copy still be gathering dust somewhere?

Baudelaire obviously knew “Au lecteur curieux”.



For notes and comments on “Adieu des filles de joie à la cité de Paris,” see Appendix.

#### **4. Hölderlin: formatting**

I’ve not seen these particular lines staggered in translation elsewhere, but Hölderlin himself staggered “In Socrates’ Time” and several other poems. It seems a natural way of slowing down the progression through an Englishing, in which, absent German syntax, too much work is required from the symbolic elements and the precise verbs, adjectives, and adverbs.

#### **5. Desbordes-Valmore, protest poem**

Desbordes-Valmore was one of the six poets whom Verlaine discussed in the second edition of his *Les Poètes Maudits* (1880), along with Corbière, Rimbaud, Mallarmé, and a couple of others—which is to say, some heavy-hitters. As well as writing poignantly and intelligently about love, she could also speak with political forthrightness.

“Cantiques des Mères” is addressed to the wife of King Louis-Philippe on behalf of the silk-weavers of Lyons who had been imprisoned after a labour conflict in the 1830s. The poem is in a ballade-like mode, with a repeated refrain, that would not have been out of keeping in the fifteenth century of Villon.

But there is nothing fustian about it, and in the middle of the French Romantic period, it has a verbal and moral clarity, and a sense of the speaker and the auditor as both being under the governance of the same values, for which there was no equivalent in English Romanticism.

The ballade- or quasi-ballade form is repetitive and incremental rather than linear and developmental, and hence more impersonal and public than sonnets or couplets, which have to get somewhere and which had dominated in the English Renaissance. You could address the Queen of Heaven in a ballade if you wished, without being either disrespectful or servile, conscious also of owing loyalty to, and being sustained by, the traditional values of art as craft. Here the recipient, who had only been queen for two or three years, is dignified by the mode.

## 6. Gérard de Nerval

The poems here are four of his best.

### Fantasy

The chateau in “Fantaisie” would have been one of those large brick country houses with stone edgings at the corners, not a stone castle. The scene is peaceful, the brick walls warm in the sunset. Louis XIII reigned from 1601 to 1643.

### Myrtho

Posillipo, which figures in a couple of the poems, is described by Richard Sieburth in his *Selected Writings of Nerval* (1999) as a “volcanic ridge projecting into the Bay of Naples, site of Virgil’s grave.” The important fact of its being volcanic is missing from guidebook descriptions in which it is simply a headland at one end of the Bay.

According to Wikipedia, “In the following centuries [Virgil’s] name became associated with miraculous powers, his tomb the object of pilgrimages and pagan veneration.” Among the “relatively severe” eruptions of Vesuvius (Wikipedia again) were ones in 1834, 1839, and 1850.

The name “Myrtho” is apparently an allusion to Venus, to whom the dark myrtle was sacred, entwined in the poem of that name with the pale Christian hydrangea.

### The Cousin

This charming poem, so different from “El Desdichado,” is a salutary reminder of how grounded Nerval was when his mind-storms weren’t raging. Its realism is different from dogmatic Realism, being concerned with psychological pleasures at an undramatic level, without any ironical undercutting, and leaving the spaces of his own mind free to be those of an intellectual who can still enjoy simple things.

The good-natured (petit?) bourgeois dinner-party to come (he is glad to be included in the ritual) awaits, its primary pleasures sufficiently defined by the aroma of the cooking goose. More romantic and better-class doings, inferred from this side of the railings, are probably going

on under the trees of the formal and formerly palace gardens, with him seeing and knowing more than she does. And there's the comedy of her naiveté, a little cautious when being out unchaperoned with a man, even if a cousin, and his mild flirtatiousness, but without pushing it, and the two levels of their conversation about simple things after she wants to get back to the security of home.

Rimbaud would have known the poem.

## **El Desdichado**

In Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*, according to Wiki,

On the first day of the tournament, a bout of individual jousting, a mysterious masked knight, identifying himself only as "Desdichado" (which is described in the book as Spanish for the "Disinherited One", though actually meaning "Unfortunate"), makes his appearance and manages to defeat some of the best Norman lances.

Aquitaine had been a major expanding and contracting political region, its history going back many centuries. A mind whose span had dwindled down now to the equivalent of a single ruler in a *ruined* tower had lost a great deal of potency.

There's something a bit obscure about being given a kiss, or quick peck, on the forehead that reddens it. Embarrassment? Or particularly potent lips? But "baiser" also signifies fucking. The embrace by a whole body (not necessarily doing the whole ton) would be more likely to create a flush.

"The Lusignans were among the French nobles who made great careers in the Crusades." (Wiki article) The twelfth-century noble who became King of Jerusalem and Cyprus was in myth (Sieburth) a descendant of a mythical one.

In an elaborate mythological narrative, a Lusignan marries the powerful fairy Mélusine and loves her despite finding that she is really half serpent. Eventually she abandons him "howling horrible vengeance and cursing the Lusignan fortresses she had built. Her cry is meant to signify the death of one of the heirs of Lusignan."

The Biron who might have come the most immediately to mind was the soldier-politician who, after playing an important part in the American War of Independence and the French Revolutionary War, was guillotined during the Terror. But romantic French ears would also have heard the name of their hero “Byron.”

Sieburth offers a 16th-century Duc de Biron, “famous as a lover and adventurer.” But given the amount of worldly journalism in Nerval’s oeuvre, a more effective contrast would be between a modern public figure ending badly and a richly romantic and empowered one of myth.

I see that Wiki says that in Greek mythology Acheron “was known as the river of pain, and was one of the five rivers of the Greek underworld.” The dead were ferried across it. “Traversed,” rather than “crossed” slows the progression down a bit.

The cries of a fairy would be a bit vague. Calling out in the woods? In what fashion? A beckoning? A bigger contrast with the saint’s sighs would be if they were to be erotic ones. But “the” Fairy would seem to invite in Mélusine. So is it just death-dealing cries in anger?

I don’t see why we can’t have both—Bacchante energies of love and hate, contrasting all the more with the saint’s denials. Saint Anthony, sort of? The archaic “Fay” (as with the Arthurian Morgan le Fay) is a way of avoiding the by now inescapable sense of airy prettiness that “fairy” suggests.

If one takes “El Desdichado” to be a succession of analogies with Nerval’s states of mind and experiences, present and past, rather than an allegorical quasi-dramatic-monologue, one presumably has to speculate about what would be most immediately in his and his readers’ minds with each of them. I’m speaking of the dramatic energies in the names, not of what in his actual life he may be referring to, at least not in the sense that we now have talk, with the aid of scholars, about the particularities of such-and-such a romantic relationship with a woman with a name and face and all, as if that were the *real* reality of the poem.

To do that would diminish the poem, making it less universal. (Imagine letting some specific Boston hostess into “Prufrock”!) There are many lost comforters across the seas and centuries. The particular

headland of Posillipo, and the warmth and harmonizing of the Med, on the other hand, are *there*, publicly, which is why we can feel the land of lost delight in the poem. (Cf. Goethe's "das Land wo die Zitronen blumen.")

## 7. Musset, ironical Romantic

Quintessentially French-Romantic, costumed, I'm sure, as in numerous movies—the tapering pants fastened with a strap under the boot, the fancy waistcoat, the cutaway jacket, the tired top hat. Side whiskers maybe, or moustache. And ironically self-aware.

No, she does not remember (he reminds himself) those "unforgettable" moments and times earlier. And the heads of adored girls may be stuffed with romantic clichés, or, well, simply be empty. But there is social heft to the third poem in his awareness of how his romantic withdrawal from the realworld directives, his time-wasting, his *flaneur*-saunterings along the boulevards appear to others. There is the possibility of destruction, too, in his affair with the "lower" gypsy-like figure.

## 8. Gautier: eroticizing

There are other lovely and/or memorable poems or parts of poems in Gautier's *Emaux et Camées (Enamels and Cameos, 1852–1872)* from which "On the Lagoons" and "Carmen" come. A book brought to many anglophone readers' attention by Ezra Pound's praise of it, and which I myself first read in Paris in 1946 in one of those elegant, paper-bound numbered editions.

"On the Lagoons," with its interpenetration of past and present, and its graceful eroticism, evokes brilliantly that theatrical Venusian city, "joyeuse et libre," "joyous and free," that demonstrated that it was possible to be in major decline ("Once didst thou hold the gorgeous East in fee," Byron informed it) without succumbing to guilt and despair.

"Carmen est maigre" ("Carmen is ...") is the best-known of Gautier's poems now, I imagine, at least for English-speaking readers, again because of Pound. See those lines in his "To a Friend Writing on Cabaret Dancers":

‘CARMEN EST MAIGRE, UN TRAIT DE BISTRE  
CERNE SON OEIL DE GITANA’

And ‘rend la flamme’,  
you know the deathless verses.

Pound did have an extraordinary ability to dramatize writing and make you want more of it and maybe attempt some yourself.

Here are the first two stanzas:

Carmen est maigre– un trait de bistre  
Cerne son oeil de gitana;  
Ses cheveux sont d’un noir sinistre;  
Sa peau, le diable la tanna.

Les femmes disent qu’elle est laide,  
Mais tous les hommes en sont fous:  
Et l’archevêque de Toledé  
Chante la messe à ses genoux;

Gautier obviously had something very precise in his mind’s eye, and major drawings had been done in bistre, by Rembrandt among others, and a meaning of “trait” is “stroke,” as in a stroke of the pen.

But did she have a raccoon look like Musidora’s Irma Vep in Feuillade’s *Les Vampyres* (1915)? Could a single stroke of make-up surround an eye? And is bistre, here, yellowish or brownish?

There are images of current “gypsy” make-up online, a couple with “Gypsy Eyes” written across them. Dark lines are set close to the arcs of upper and lower lashes in one. In another the dark area extends further outwards. This, in any case, is nowadays.

And what about her body, if one wants an octosyllabic line that starts with Gautier’s zip, and given that she’s petite? Thin? Lean? Skinny? I think it has to be “skinny.” “Maigre” became “meager” in English, with implications of insufficiency or deprivation (a meagre breakfast). “Thin” is neutral and a bit flat. “Lean” is a plus these days. “Skinny” has a touch of the gamine.

Which doesn’t leave much room in the rest of the line, though.

In “Sweeney Among the Nightingales,” written just after the Great War to End Wars, when he and Pound, as Pound recalled later, had *Emaux et Camées* in mind, Eliot gives us:

Grishkin is nice. Her Russian eye  
Is underlined for emphasis,

“Carmen is lean; each gypsy eye / Is circled with a line of bistre....” ? But that makes her, absent what's to come, too much of a feral beauty, and in principle the closer you stick to Gautier's own phrasing the better.

“Soot brown” was apparently an 18<sup>th</sup>-century English term for bistre.

And yet, and yet—“sooty bistre” feels blurred, as if either contrasting it with some other kind of bistre, or adding a quality that isn't instantly there the first time. “Yellow” works instantly. And besides, if you want to highlight dark exotic eyes, do you really put dark around them? “Yellow-brown” has some credibility, and energizes the opening line. “Bistre” would have been charged with colour for readers at the time.

An online translation that opens with “Slender is Carmen, of lissome guise” feels and for all I know is actually “Nineties” in its spelling-out of the poetical feelings assumed to be in the words. Which was very much what the modernism of Pound was a turning away from.

Norman R. Shapiro, in his rhyming translations of the complete *Emaux et Camées* in Théophile Gautier, *Selected Lyrics*, makes her “gaunt” and the shadow around her eyes “bronzed.” It's as if there were two different plausible images of her in that first stanza. But maybe things have been cleared up in some scholarly article or note. Or maybe the meanings are so obvious if you're French or an Anglo-Franco prof that no-one has seen any need for elucidation.

“Chante la messe” feels as though it could be an idiomatic indicator of enthusiasm, like “He really went to town about it.” I can't find dictionary support for that, but the term is slightly problematic if you're not an old-style French Catholic. Yes, of course it's a metaphor, but one that's both precise and vague. It seems unlikely that he's (figuratively) singing a whole mass, since it's *the* mass, not *a* mass. But is he rapt, as if singing part of a mass?

As to “Solitude” (in Goujon’s 2008 *Anthologie de la poésie érotique*), an anthology of masturbation poems would not, I imagine, be heavy in the hand. A couple of J.V. Cunningham’s epigrams would be in it, obviously. But “Solitude” would surely be the flagship poem. I wish I could have rhymed. The poem isn’t included in Shapiro’s *Selected Lyrics* of Gautier (2011).

I see that Charles-Timoléon de Beauxoncle, Sieur de Sigogne (ca. 1560–1611) has a 66-line poem titled “Godemichy” in Louis Perceau’s *Maturin Regnier et les Satyriques* in his *Cabinet Secret* series. I wonder what else is out there. But works that are merely scandalous are of limited interest.

“Samuel Auguste Tissot (1738–1797), a Swiss doctor, published in 1760 a booklet ‘Onanism - a Treatise on the Illnesses caused by Masturbation’. He enumerated as consequences: TB, loss of vision, digestive problems, impotence and madness. His views were soon accepted as established medical opinion.” (Web)

“The French sculptor Clodion (1738–1814) is best known for small terra-cotta groups in the rococo style, depicting nymphs and fauns in an erotic and playful manner.” (Web)

Valeria Messalina (AD 22?–48), wife of Emperor Claudius, “once challenged the famous Roman prostitute Scylla to an all-night sex-athon, whereby the winner was the one who copulated with the most men. Messalina won. She copulated all night and although Scylla gave up at dawn, exhausted, Messalina continued zealously, all through the morning.” (Web)

Lazzaro Spallanzani (1729–1799). “Italian physiologist who made important contributions to the experimental study of bodily functions and animal reproduction.” (Web)

## **9. Louise Michel, indomitable anarchist**

It’s piquant that the intensely private Emily Dickinson, and the intensely public Louise Michel—Communard and subsequent indomitable propagandist for Anarchism, despite imprisonments, exile, and police harassment—were born in the same year, 1830.



But in her larger-than-life Romantic courage, compassion, sense of occasions, brilliant manipulation of the authorities, and, in her commitment to the cause of what she saw as true social justice, selflessness, Michel was one of those organically unified figures, like Victor Hugo—whom she admired, learned from in her poetry, and corresponded with for years—who are simultaneously public and private.

Like Germaine de Staël, she was obviously quite impossible if you were trying to make her do or stop doing something against her wishes. But she was loved by many, and a true saint of radicalism.

I don't know whether her crows or those in Rimbaud's "Les Corbeaux" came first, or whether there was coincidence or, as seems more likely dialogic adaptation.

"Chanson du Cirque" feels as though it was written in response to Paris Society's taking a fashionable interest in bull-fights of the *mise à mort* kind in, at a guess, the decadently thrill-seeking 1890s. The Bloody Week of street-fighting in May 1871, and the executions of twenty-thousand active or suspected Communards were barely two decades in the past.

Michel reportedly hated cruelty to animals.

According to Wikipedia, "Jacques Bonhomme" was the contemptuous term of the aristocracy for the peasants who revolted in northern France in 1358, in the so-called Jacquerie. Apparently "Jacques" came from the short jacket worn by peasants. "Jacques Goodfellow," one suggested rendering of "Bonhomme," doesn't sound particularly contemptuous to me. "Goodman Jack" might be more condescending, but neither seem to me to resonate now. "Clown" was of course an older English term for yokels, as in Shakespeare, and still, in some contexts, carries imputations of clumsiness and ignorance. But the clumsiness of circus clowns is only a feigned clumsiness.

Bull-fights had been going on since 1830 in the restored Roman arena in Arles.

The lower-case "sacré coeur" in "V'la le choléra" presumably fuses ironically the Catholic doctrine of the compassionate Sacred Heart of Christ and the sepulchre-white Sacré Coeur Basilica perched on top of Montmartre. According to Wikipedia,

The purpose of making a church dedicated to the Sacred Heart, with its origins in the aftermath of the French Revolution among ultra-Catholics and legitimist-royalists, developed more widely in France after the Franco-Prussian War and the ensuing uprising of the Paris Commune of 1870–71.

Though today it is asserted to be dedicated to the honor of the 58,000 who lost their lives during the war, the decree of the Assemblée Nationale, 24 July 1873, responding to an appeal by the archbishop of Paris by voting its construction, specifies that it is to “expiate the crimes of the Commune.” Montmartre had been the site of the communards’ first insurrection, and many dedicated communards were forever entombed in the subterranean galleries of former gypsum mines where they had retreated, by explosives detonated at the entrances by the Army of Versailles. The construction of this highly controversial edifice began in 1875 and continued until 1914.

## **10. Mallarmé: clown and creation**

This version of “Le Pitre Châtié” comes from an 1864 notebook of Mallarmé’s. On my website I say a few words about the revised version of the poem published in 1887 and the linguistic energizing in it, beginning with the mysterious first line, “Yeux, lacs avec ma simple ivresse de renaître”—mysterious, that is, if one doesn’t know the earlier version. (Voices in the Cave of Being>Other Rooms>Vision and Analogy xix-xx.)

The earlier version is obviously a symbolic enactment and critique of the Romantic fantasy, strongest among young German males, of the pure young woman as a beautiful soul, repository of a spirituality that will transform and focus creatively the untidy life of the male. On the disjunctions of such relationships in practice, see, for example, Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* and Penelope Fitzgerald’s marvelous historical novel *The Blue Flower* (1995) about the two-year fixation of the poet Novalis on an ordinary, ill-educated, unintellectual, but amiable young miss of a respectable family, who’s puzzled by his intensity and the insights that he attributes to her.

The first version of the poem is already pretty concrete in its evocation of the excitement of the early stages of such a relationship, before it

has settled down into routine. The “she” of the poem, as distinct from the ambitions generated by her, is there only as the pair of eyes into whose attributed interior mindscape of symbolic values, above all purity, one feels oneself being erotically and somewhat narcissistically drawn.

But the male messiness, show-offiness, self-dramatization, wildness, even clownishness are, alas, all part of the dynamics of creativity. Of creativity in general, or that of this particular figure? A friend and correspondent of Mallarmé’s noted that at one point earlier, Mallarmé had in fact written “de ma génie,” maybe more honestly.

Mallarmé was a very tactile poet, but in a very different fashion from Villon or the Ronsard of the erotica, setting up physical sites in which intense but narrowed ranges of emotions are elicited—a frozen lake, a buried temple, a fallen boulder, a mysteriously empty room, etc.

The punished clown? The chastised clown? The chastened clown? The purified clown?

The Muse will punish him by withdrawing her inspiration from him because of his disloyalty, his belief that he no longer needs the traditional cultural dialoguing of audience-related poetry but can have an unmediated access to the Absolute, as with the purer-than-pure cold of the distant glacier, a taste of whose waters has entered these lakes.

But do we feel him, in his consciousness, as chastised, purified, or, in his realization of where his egoistical and more than a little adolescent impetuosity has landed him, chastened?

I take the text of the poem and the information about its provenance from Stéphane Mallarmé, *Oeuvres complètes*, texte établi et annoté par Henri Mondor et G. Jean-Aubry (Paris, Gallimard, 1945), pp. 1416–1417.

For a fix on Mallarmé’s polarities, the poem should be paired with his also early “Une Nègresse” (“Une nègresse par le démon secouée / Veux goûter une enfant triste de fruits nouveaux...”)

## 11. Verlaine: variousness

### I

The poems in Verlaine's one-volume *Oeuvres poétiques complètes* in the Pléiade series occupy over a thousand pages. A lot of them haven't normally figured in selections for Anglo readers.

His thirty-some under-the-counter erotic poems (not in that volume) are remarkable, and can be found in industrial strength in *Women/Men, Femmes/Hombres* (2004), accompanied by Alistair Elliott's brilliant translations. They are the convincing utterances of someone who was truly bisexual, reveled in the bodily activities on both sides of the line, including the smelly parts, enjoyed his partners as individuals, and was not, at a time when it was a strong presence in erotica, sadomasochistic.

I would like to have included in *A New Book of Verse* the exuberantly heterosexual "Gamineries" (rendered by Elliott as "The way the ladies ride"), and its also joyously explicit homosexual counterpart "Même quand tu ne bandes pas ... " (Elliott's "Even without presenting arms..."). But I stretched Elliott's generosity to the limit with his superb Heine translations, and, to be honest, there seemed a risk of the two "outlaw" poems overwhelming the more delicate ones.

The two poems are online in French. Translations of them *have* to be in formal verse, and I can't imagine this being done better than by Elliott.

"Pensionnaires," not in that book, comes from *Oeuvres poétiques complètes*. The girls were not doing anything illegal, and it is unlikely that the staff, privately at least, would have been appalled had it come to their attention. This is not the grim kind of clerical school of Laforgue's "Complainte des Pianos."

The tone is very different from that of Baudelaire's "Femmes Damnés: Delphine at Hippolyte," one of the poems that had got *Les Fleurs du Mal* into trouble with the authorities a quarter of a century earlier.

—Descendez, descendez, lamentables victimes,  
Descendez le chemin de l'enfer eternal!  
Plongez au plus profonde du gouffre, où tous les crimes,  
Flagellés par un vent qui ne vient pas du ciels

Bouillonnent pêle-mêle avec un bruit d'orage.

Descend, descend, lamentable victims,  
Descend the road of eternal hell!  
Plunge to the depths of the gulf, where all the crimes,  
Whipped by a wind which doesn't come from heaven,  
Seethe pell-mell with the sound of thunder.

It seems likely that it is Verlaine, with his cultural omniverousness, his ability to speak with unforced naturalness in a variety of forms, his alertness all the time to realworld details, his unironical commitment to each act of poetic definition, his all-too-human common humanity, and his continuing affirmativeness even under the most appalling conditions (often of his own making) who is the most viable of the great 19th-century French poets as a continuing presence now in poetic creation—Verlaine and, in his less turbulently visionary poems, Rimbaud.

## II

In the great later-19th-century French dictionary of Emile Littré, the saying “Il faut hurler avec les loups” is defined as, “Il faut s'accoutumer aux manières de ceux avec qui l'on se trouve quoique'on ne les approuve pas.” / “One must become accustomed to the manners of those with whom one finds oneself although one doesn't approve of them.”

My Cassells dictionary gives, “do as others do.” Online we have “repeat what others say so as to better become one of the group,” “repeat what everyone says without giving a personal opinion,” and “so as not to look bad in other's eyes,” and “join in criticisms or attacks on someone so as to conform to the dominant opinion.”

Online suggestions for English equivalents are: “when in Rome, do as the Romans do,” “bay with the pack,” and “go with the flow.” In Verlaine's poem, the last of those seems the most functional, given what appear to be shifts in meaning between the first stanza (grieve, but accept the way things are), the second one (that's good; behave the way others behave), and maybe even the third (see, what did I tell you, go along and you'll get along).

It's a curious idiom, and different in its connotations from what "bleating with the flock" would be. Wolves, whether the implacable sledge-hunters of myth or the small family units of actuality, are free-ranging and plurisignative, at times deadly ("homo homini lupus"), at others, as with the infancy of Romulus and Remus, nurturing. The American "It's my night to howl" signified cutting loose for a bit and having a good time.

Since the English lines are all pretty much the same length, I didn't follow the indentings of the French.

## **12. Corbière: concreteness**

A moving poem by for me, because of his vocabulary, the most difficult of the principal 19th-century French poets. Remarkable in the concreteness of the metaphors—the weightiness of money, the drama of being young together and trying to get by. You feel those pockets, those francs, the sous that she begs for. And what a concluding line!

So much is compressed into "a colonel in the Commune," that last fling of the working classes and bohemians against a bourgeoisie increasingly powerful in the city. With appalling massacres ensuing, mass imprisonment, exiles.

Traces of working-class attitudes would remain in the cabaret songs of Aristide Bruant and others in Montmartre.

## **13. Bruant: argot, and translation**

It feels a bit presumptuous to have tackled one of Bruant's more heavily argotic lyrics, "Ah! les Salauds." But then, what would "presumptuous" mean in this connection? Something, maybe, like presuming one could mount a skateboard for the first time at age fifty and waltz away downhill?

I don't think it's quite that bad here. There are doubtless errors and missed subtleties, but at least there's now a coherent narrative and attitude, and there are limits to what can be done with octosyllabics and three-line stanzas, at least if one's preserving the basic metre. Could some translator manage to keep the same rhyme sound going in the third and fourth lines, I wonder? Peter Dale, maybe, considering

what he did with Corbière's "Cris d'Aveugle"? But meanings would surely have to be elastic.

I'm out of sympathy with the attitude that if you can't get everything right, you can't have anything, as though you were translating an exam text. (Five errors, sorry pal, F for Fail, better luck next time.)

Something, assuming it's not serious falsification, seems to me better than nothing, and getting some of Bruant's Villonesque texture (more natural-feeling than in W.E. Henley's lively argot ballade adjoining it in *A New Book of Verse*,) and Montmartre class-feeling, seems to me indeed something.

Yes, no doubt a bit presumptuous. But I couldn't locate a translation by anyone else. And I was drawing on the excellent Collins- Robert French Dictionary (9th ed., 2010), the online XM Littré v 1.3, and J. Marks' very helpful French-English *Dictionary of Slang and Colloquialism*, also dipping, without much luck, into other print and online dictionaries.

Only nine words in the Collins start with "tin", the only relevant-feeling one, "tinette," being defined as "latrine." Collins gives "dungheap" as a meaning of "tas." Marks gives "un vieux tableau" as "an old frump, old has-been, a painted old hag." I took there to be word-play with "painted."

Marks gives "w.c." as one meaning of "endroit" (basically, "place" or "spot"). Since a *maison clos* was a brothel, it seemed to me that there could be a triple play on the locale, the jakes (all that drinking), and where you'd plant your member. To judge from "quality" drawings online, there could be inventive goings-on in quality brothels.

Ribbons would be those narrow little bits of ribbon, like miniature medal ribbons, that civilians wore in lapel buttonholes to indicate the Légion d'honneur, etc. "Calot," forage cap, I took to be a reference to obligatory military service.

A repeated brief refrain in English, with no rhyming function, can be a momentary speed-up and lowering of energy. Using translator's licence, I assumed in *A New Book of Verse* that with a broad-spectrum term like "salauds," particularly if given varying degrees of emphasis and body-English during performance, an audience would have been filling out the term in their heads in a variety of ways—jerks, wankers,

swine, oafs, etc. Also, there's a bit of compensation for the lost weighting of the rhymes. The substitute words that I've picked are more or less related to ones in a list of French synonyms for "salaud" that I found online.

But here in *Desires* I've contented myself with qualifications of "bastard."

"I's" is a slang contraction of "Ils." "Oùsqu" is "Où", I've no idea why.

The texts of "La Noire" and "Les Salauds" come from Aristide Bruant, *Poèmes choisis extraits de Dans la Rue avec quelques souvenirs pour servir de préface* (Seghers 1962).

Unfortunately the definitions in Bruant's 468-pp. *Dictionnaire Français-Argot, nouvelle édition augmentée d'un supplément* (Flammarion, 1905) only go in one direction, from standard words to argot synonyms.

"Derrière," for example, has ninety-five synonyms. Some, like "rue aux pets" (fart-street), are reasonably self-explanatory. But what is one to make of ones like "verre de montre" (watch-glass), "joufflu," "juste milieu"...?

The poem, I have since discovered, is online, with a translation into non-argotic French. I'd say that I did pretty well. And my "They don't do any barracks-time" makes better sense of "On leur-z'y voit pus [plus] les calots" than does "On n'y voit plus les yeux."

#### **14. Rimbaud: Under the trees and in the tavern**

##### **I**

"Romance" must be one of the best-loved poems in France (what would their top hundred look like, I wonder?), and one of the most charming in any language.

"Roman"/romance/novel/romantic novel? It's like a compressed short story, and it's about romanticism, the romanticism of male adolescence, and it's all the more remarkable as coming from someone who was about that age when he wrote it. Talk about self-knowledge! Talk about genius!



## II

It moves along so fast.

Four sections, two stanzas each, roman-numeral dividers.

Setting of the scene in the first section.

In the second, out alone under those trees, the mind racing, fantasizing.

In the third, the encounter—marvelous.

And then so much happens in the fourth that you can hardly believe, in memory, that it's just eight more lines, two of them virtual echoes of lines in the opening stanza. And you don't need to be told more about those two months, or about him, or about her—his cliché cravings and posturings, the guys fed up with this new earnestness, can't he talk about anything else?

And then, so brilliantly, and again so convincingly, the spell is broken and the goddess-worshipping goes poof when the flesh-and-blood and maybe a bit ironical little miss in a solid family finally replies. No, he'd really rather be with the gang than be tied down to her.

“Serieux” here is a seriously used French term, meaning serious-minded, responsible, solid.

## III

There's a nice contrast between the classical plainness of the opening stanza and the romanticism of the second section, in which the excited mind notes details like that cute little bit of deep blue sky with a wanton star, just the one stanza doing duty for all the other things he may have noted. (Plus, surely, sexual connotations.)

And none of it's schmaltzy. The breeze carries noises from the town, plus a smell of beer (with explanatory parenthesis—the town's not far). And things go suddenly sharp in the light of that street lamp, her papa's stiff detachable collar fashionably high, her little button boots trotting along to keep up with him, and he probably doesn't even notice that she's looking back. She's got a little mind of her own, probably knowing how to sweet-talk papa when she needs to.

## IV

“Robinsonner” means making like Robinson Crusoe (voyaging sailor). Was this Rimbaud’s coinage? It’s not in the multi-volume Robert dictionary. Céline has a hither-and-yonning character in *Journey to the End of the Night* called Robinson.

The basic rules of French verse are being followed, I think, including those “e’s” at the end of every other line (see the note on French metrics.) And not a superfluous word anywhere.

At seventeen!

Now for a bit of pedantry.

## V

There’s no exact equivalent in English for “promenade” in the French sense. No-one says, “See you on the promenade,” unless it’s a seaside resort.

The *Robert Dictionnaire alphabétique et analogique de la langue française* (1966) indicates that a promenade (a formal area planted with trees where people can walk) could be on a boulevard, in a public garden, a square, a park, or, as on the Riviera (and in Britain), along a sea-front.

The one in this poem is outside the presumably small town (“la ville n’est pas loin,” it isn’t far), so “park” was tempting for its contrast with those cafes and its greater privacy. In England it would be the park, though no doubt a less formal one than the small, orderly, rectilinear French type, with gravel walks.

However, “promenade” is surely too much part of the no doubt famous line (“On va sous les tilleuls verts de la promenade”) to make the substitution acceptable.

And if Rimbaud, so precise and concrete in his diction, had had a park in mind, he would probably have contrived to use the word. For that matter, “boulevard” would have fitted the metre and rhyme scheme, if that’s what he’d meant. So I’ve stayed with “promenade” and will no doubt regret it if I later find some bolder spirit saying “park.”

## VI

But what, in equivalent English words, are we to see with those “lustres éclatant”? What is he recoiling temporarily from? (given that subsequently the cafés themselves are “éclatant”?)

Apparently “lustre” means “chandelier.” But for “éclat” my modest 680-page Cassells dictionary gives me “Burst, sudden bursting; crash, clap, peal, sudden uproar; shiver; splinter (of wood, stone, brick, etc); brightness, refulgence, glare, glitter; luster, pomp, magnificence; renown, fame; gaudiness (of colours); rumour, scandal”.

And for the verb “éclater,” “To split, to shiver, to break into pieces, to burst, to explode; to make a loud and sudden noise, to clap; to cry out, to exclaim, to break out, to blaze out; to shine, to sparkle, to flash; to show, to manifest itself.”

Wow! Talk about indeterminacy, when two short signifiers (the mix of straight and curving lines “éclat” / “éclater”) can be attached to such an abundance of non-textual goings on, each linkage becoming a separate “sign.”

## VII

Some exclusions are obvious. The chandeliers are presumably not exploding or crashing, etc. But are they glaring, glittering, blazing, or sparkling (though probably not shining, too mild)—anyway doing things that can become wearying to the eye/mind?

And what does the word “chandelier” make one see. For me, certainly, the first thought is of the elaborate dangling cut-glass ornaments below the light source, like the one that memorably crashes down onto the audience in *The Phantom of the Opera*. Would there be things like that in small-town French cafés around 1870? If so, it would make for an effective contrast with the new green leaves of those lime-trees.

But the basic chandelier would presumably be the multi-branched candle-holders, whether or not with decorations (cf. the one in Edgar Allan Poe’s story “Hop-Frog”), now, presumably (ca. 1870) with gas jets instead of candles. But were they fish-tail jets, or did they heat incandescent mantels, which seems more likely. And if there were

lamp-shades, would they be white translucent porcelain globes, or ones made of fabric? Globes would certainly be brighter.

Simply staring at the two words, “lustres éclatant” (or at the word “tapisseries” in “Au Cabaret Vert,” see below) as if one could somehow reach directly through to a three-dimensional physical reality back around 1870 doesn’t work.

However, one needn’t simply throw up one’s hands and say, “Who knows what they mean?”, opting for the supposed “indeterminacy” so beloved of the kind of academic who gets a thrill from, magus-like, revealing to the boobs that the world is really QUITE DIFFERENT from what they have hitherto supposed.

No, if I wished, I could look at more texts and try to find out in one of our local libraries how those kinds of cafes might have been lit at that time. (At least I’m now reasonably comfortable about that wallpaper in “Au Cabaret Vert”.) And we can be sure that there was no blur in Rimbaud’s own mind when he wrote those words.

## VIII

When you contemplate the poem on the page, the dictionary entry, possible books or articles about the history of lighting, possible photos or paintings of cafes at that time (in Van Gogh’s “Night Café” it’s oil lamps), and the general loose montage-like sense you have of three-dimensional French cafés, you’re into a useful reminder of how desirable it is to keep resisting the natural tendency of the mind to oversimplify the meanings of the term “text.”

As it’s now come to be used, we have an extension of the basic, the primary idea, as seen in printed or written words, of something human-made and communicative—we have the extension of this to lots of other things, including music scores, street signs, statues, dances, clothing, and so on and so forth, with the term “reading” stretching to include understanding, decoding, interpreting, and the rest of it.

Which is OK in itself, and I’ve used the term “text” myself here at times in that fashion, but it’s unstable, and when it’s used to make people uncomfortable, as in French-intellectual-type pronouncements, like “War is a text,” it encourages a collapsing back of the three-dimensional organic world into something that can be manipulated and

changed at will, as you would change a computer text by a click on the mouse (with intellectuals at the keyboard, naturally).

## IX

But again, which word is right here for whatever is going on with those chandeliers (and cafés)?

If one wants to be Heideggerean and try getting at the root, there does seem to be the sense of a forceful, attention-seizing pushing out, whether with lightning, an explosion, or the sudden visibility of a politician.

Glaring? Dazzling? Flaring? After all, doing something with flair seems a bit like doing it with *éclat*.

I've settled provisionally on "dazzling."

But "brilliant" would cover both the lights and whatever's below them, and would make possible that little shift at the end whereby it's now the cafes and not the chandeliers that are "*éclatant*" when he returns to them, perhaps with a hint of the "brilliant" talk, as they see it, of him and his pals, untroubled by bossy little girls who see him as naïve and laugh at his poems.

## X

Oh, and the opening line of the poem is a bitch to translate metrically. "On n'est pas sérieux quand on a dix-sept ans."

"One isn't serious when one is seventeen.?"

Flat, and going by too fast, absent the caesura in the twelve-syllable French line. "One" is probably a bit old-fashioned these days, though very useful.

"Nobody's serious at seventeen."

A colloquial exaggeration, but maybe a bit too absolute, given that "On" in French has some of the particularity in it of English constructions like, "One does get a bit fed up with people pestering one for the name of one's dentist." It's particular in line 4 when "One goes/walks under the lime-trees on the promenade.

“You’re never serious when you’re seventeen.”

Definitely too absolute.

“You’re not grown-up yet when you’re seventeen.”

Patronizing and too wide-angle. Intellectually? socially? sexually?

Also, a twelve-year-old could be praised as “un garçon sérieux.” The other day I watched a couple of kids at the barber’s. The boy, maybe three, was restless and moved around in exploratory boy-fashion. The little girl, maybe two, sat on the floor unsmiling and totally focussed on a bag of edibles from which she was patiently extracting items and unwrapping them. Serious. Serious-minded. *Sérieuse*. And still quietly thoughtful when her father picked her up. You could see the woman she would grow into.

My own stab at the line is also open to objections, I’m sure. But if you were to ask someone how on earth they could have done something so dumb, I think they’d be more likely to say “You’re just not serious when you’re seventeen.” than “Nobody’s serious when they’re seventeen.”

## XI

I talk about “Au Cabaret Vert” a bit in “Powers of Style,” in *A Bit of This and a Bit of That about Poetry*. It’s fascinating how, as you move through it, you don’t know where the poem’s going, and first expect maybe a bit of adventure (was he on the run?) and then, maybe, a bit of sexual adventure. And then you find that the sentence that starts in the seventh line keeps going, sweeping over the division between octave and sestet (even muting slightly the first sentence in the sestet by making it parenthetical), and ending up with the foam on a beer-mug, which may have been a freebie, since if he’d ordered beer he’d presumably have said so.

It’s a lovely poem. In his 1918 essay on what were at that time modern French poets, Pound said that the art of poetry hadn’t advanced since then.

You don’t forget that green table, the pink-and-white ham, the touch of garlic, and how the beer (poured no doubt from a pitcher) comes up inside the big beer mug, probably porcelain or earthenware, and the

foam as it rises above the rim is caught by a ray of late-afternoon sunshine and glows golden.

The comfort of primary things. Also a sonnet very skillfully managed for expressive purposes.

## XII

To judge from Google (a term becoming as generic for me as The Dictionary is for freshmen), Charleroi, in Belgium's biggest coal district, was heavily industrialized by then—iron, steel, glass—and not at all pastoral or idyllic.

A cabaret (nothing to do with song-and-dance here) was what my dictionary describes as “an inferior kind of wineshop, tavern, pot-house....” “Inn” makes it sound too much like one of those picturesque English rural pubs. Hence my “tavern.” *A moitié froid* and *tiède* may technically mean lukewarm, but there seems to be some French culinary distinction here about degrees of warmth, and you wouldn't go into an English pub and order some nice lukewarm ham, please. Warm is warm—comfortable.

Or had he said, “Do you have any ham?” and she said, yes, but it's lukewarm, and though he might have preferred it cold (or hot?) he says, “No problem”?

A friend suggested substituting “lounged at the table” and “Gilded by the declining sun” for what I have here. But “lounged” is an abstraction from Rimbaud's precise physicality. So is “declining sun” vis-à-vis “rayon de soleil”/ray of sun/sunbeam. The sun's declining is what we infer from the facts that it's five in the evening and that the sunbeam is “late” and presumably, if it can penetrate into the room, coming from relatively low in the sky.

Until I settled down recently with two or three translations by others and a dictionary, I'd assumed that “arriérée” meant “from behind,” and had written, “Which a ray of sunlight lit up from behind.” Which I still like, but it's wrong.

### XIII

I concluded years ago that it's vastly preferable, even in a seminar, to muddle around in the original, however faultily, than to examine only translations. Pound gave you courage for that, both in his own bold translatings, some of them partly mistranslatings but coherent good poems in their own right, and in his assertion, which Leavis pounced on and savaged, that you only need to know a few hundred words in a language in order to read this or that poem.

But Leavis was talking about how to *teach* reading, and Pound about how to read on your own, and he had enough truth there to make it relevant to teaching reading too. For if you do know, or have dictionaried, enough of the words in a dual-text edition, you're in a much better position to feel your way into this or that poem.

I'm glad I taught myself enough Italian at age eighteen to be able to read the opening lines of Dante's *Inferno*—"Nel mezzo del camin di nostra vita / Mi retrovai per una selv' oscura / Que la diretta via era smarita"—and recognize their unadorned clarity of a sort that you only got in English in lines like "They flee from me that sometime did me seek / With naked foot, stalking in my chamber."

I'm also glad (though it came much later) to be able to read, with relatively literal understanding, "Da stieg ein baum! O reine ubersteigung / O Orpheus singt. O hoher baum in ohr," the start of the first sonnet in Rilke's very great *Sonnets to Orpheus*. For what you can't get without that kind of minimal consciousness is how the lines in a poem go, the kinds of pace and weight, the rhythms, the play of syntax, so important in Rilke.

### XIV

It occurred to me years ago, though I didn't dare say it professionally, that students of "English" agonizing for hours over the Old English text of *Beowulf* would have been far better off being led through enough ancient Greek to have been able to get a feeling for the opening dozen lines of *The Odyssey*. As it is, people in English go on talking about "Homer" as if they knew his texture the way they know the texture of *Paradise Lost*.



I don't imagine that you could persuade any Classicists of this, any more than you could persuade professors of French that you had any right to talk about French poems unless you "knew" French—which of course they would be happy to instruct you in if you would enroll in their classes.

But muddling around in the original with a dictionary, and comparing translations, can help to inhibit that process by which you infer the meaning of words from the "meaning" of the poem, as you've loosely extrapolated it, a process like that by which a bad actor or reciter extrapolates a generalized mood (angry, ironical, joyous, whatever) and then overlays the whole text with it.

## XV

A bit more, just a bit, about words. Sometimes a dash of scholarship pays off.

I had been uneasy about that "tapisserie" that he was gazing at in the tavern while waiting for the food to arrive.

The translator for the Penguin edition, Oliver Bernard, gives it as "wallpaper." Wyatt Mason, in his more swinging translation in his *Rimbaud Complète* in the Modern Library, has him looking at "a tapestry." What, I wondered, would be likely to have been on the walls of a Belgian tavern in an industrial town in 1870?

For you do, don't you, want to be able to envisage, at least somewhat, what's going on in this at other points very precise poem, with its ripped boots, green table, buttered bread, garlic-scented ham, etc? Would there in fact have been wallpaper back then? Or might there have been wall hangings of some kind? But if so, what kind? Crude embroidery? Appliqué?

## XVI

Well, the Littré *Dictionnaire de la langue française* (1885), close enough to the time of the poem, informs us that, as a secondary meaning ("tapestry" being the primary one), "It's also used of all kinds of materials ... serving to cover or decorate the walls of a room."

And then, in Henri Clouzot's *Le papier peint* [wall-paper] *en France du XVIIe au XIXe siècle* (1931), I found that wall-paper in fact progressed from low to high, beginning as something that in the 17th century would serve "to cover the rooms of artisans, wardrobes, or the insides of cupboards" and which was made by humble wood-engravers (who also made playing cards) and would be patterned with "grotesques" and with medleys of flowers, fruits, animals, and little figures. Wallpaper, in other words, was originally what you had when you couldn't afford something better.

Given the persistence of cultural forms, that settles it well enough for me, unless I were to make enquiries of someone who knows the history of design, such as a stage designer. So wallpaper it is. No doubt this point has long since been settled somewhere by someone more scholarly than myself.

## **15. Laforgue and those girls**

I marvel at the ability of translators like Peter Dale and Patricia Terry to render poems in verse that not only scans but rhymes. But they don't entirely resolve certain problems of literal meaning that I've had with "Complainte des pianos", nor does Graham Dunstan Martin's prose translation in the Penguin Classics volume.

Various things are clearer to me now, including the fact that the kind of guesswork required would be a good deal helped by one's being at home in the social and literary cultures of those years. But at least there are clarities here to be discovered. He is thinking about them—the girls—and not about himself, or about himself thinking about them, and it isn't a dance of Hart-Cranean would-be profundities.

The syntax of the first two lines, in which "Menez" is a directive ("lead," "conduct"), wouldn't go naturally for me into English, so I took the liberty that I did.

The sexual element now seems to me pervasive, partly because of a fillip from Verlaine's boarding-school poem and one or two other bits of reading, partly because of what a French friend recalled some years ago about her own upper-bourgeoisie schooling in the late Thirties, early Forties.

His strolls are chaste, i.e., not in search of tarts or assignations. What are the girls thinking of as they practice? How about arm-in-arm confidings in the evening schoolyards of their boarding schools? And that handsome crucified man up there on the open-space dormitory wall has only a bit of fabric hiding his interesting parts.

I'd assumed that the "You" is a parent, since a scenario involving the narrator would be too complicated. But why only one parent, and would he/she be expected to resolve her "problem"? Graham Dunstan Martin reports in the notes to his Penguin Laforgue that "Tu t'en vas et tu nous quittes, / Tu nous quitt's et tu t'en vas" comes from a popular song, so we could be elliptically into their imagined romantic-love dramas.

Laforgue's figures of speech point to realworld phenomena and behaviours. They're not mysterious/mystical / mystifying. He moves fast. He doesn't want the intelligent reader to have to take time-out to interpret/translate a statement like "They know the reddest sunsets make the whitest avowals" (Martin).

If "gras" and "couchant" are thought to evoke figuratively the sun going to bed, that's because of what human bodies do literally. In convent-schools, Sunday "confessions" are more charged than the vaguer "avowals" of—of whom, of what? I like "blanc" being both figurative and (bed sheets) literal. Are girls themselves being discreetly silent, or do they know something of the world at second-hand?

According to Wikipedia, *La Sulamite*, a scène-lyrique by Emmanuel Chabrier, was performed in Paris in March 1885. "Within an oriental setting in high-walled gardens, the Sulamite, at first sad because of the absence of her loved one, soon feels his approach, calls him, sees him running and collapses finally in his arms in the longed-for ecstasy, among the delighted congratulations of her companions, happy with her good fortune." Apparently Shulamith in *The Song of Songs* prefers a simple shepherd boy to the great King.

Martin sees the keys to "being" (être) as menstruation. If, as seems reasonable, a flow is intended, "spigot" makes things more kinetic than the idea of a key. The long metal rods, with cross-bars at the top, which were inserted through the holes in metal disks set in the sidewalk in order to turn on or off water mains were a species of key. But they would be unlikely to come to Anglo readers' minds now.

“Psst!” is a beckoning, not a shushing.

Roses fade with their bushes (rosiers) unwatered. But “rosière” in my Collins-Robert dictionary is “village maiden,” and “rosir” is “to grow or turn pink, to blush slightly ...” Blushing less as dormitory sex becomes familiar?

The curtains would be around individual bed-spaces in an open dormitory. Another girl is coming in, maybe?

I take “If you only knew” to be a reference to the dormitory stuff and dread of the “wounding” male. The ideal hero of the mind will clear up that problem for her—she hopes.

The idea of a flask of the lab kind or (Peter Dale in his virtuosic complete poems of J.L.) decanter being baptised makes little sense here for me. It presumably would set a seal of approval (the Church’s?) on the contents, but the poem seems to be about deprivation and the thwarting or taming of desire. Diluting and weakening the contents feels more appropriate. So I was pleased to find “to water down” (wine, milk, etc) as a fifth meaning of the term in Collins-Robert.

Drops that intoxicate? Cf. Scotland’s wee draps of usquebaugh? Collins-Robert gives “brandy” as a third meaning.

Relatedly, I can’t see a plunge into sexual experiments (essais) after the convent-school gates have closed behind them. It wasn’t that easy for the young to escape family and societal controls. The guilt felt by the members of the more sensitive first group of, I take it, wives would be more likely to result from a sense of their own sexual failures with their husbands, and/or their not becoming pregnant.

There could also be a feeling of incapacity in the daily running of households, no doubt under the gimlet eyes of mothers-in-law.

At the end, separate bedrooms. That was probably a normal practice among the well-to-do, with individual dressing-rooms. But he doesn’t come to her now, or only rarely. She stares at the unchanging blank wall beside her bed.

Is the couplet about playing more exact ritornellos a reference, as Martin suggests, to sexual rhythms? That would suggest more

heterosexual enjoyment than I find in the poem. Pregnancy and children might be more to the point.

*My Webster's New World College Dictionary* (4th ed.) gives as the principal meaning of ritornello, "an instrumental interlude before or after an aria, scene, etc in early, esp. 17th-cent, operas." So ritornellos, less demanding technically, are away from the dramatic intensities.

But on the Web there's: "A ritornello is a passage of music that returns. It acts as a unifying factor." Laforgue was strongly interested in music, but I don't know enough to draw inferences here.

An advantage to a less than perfect grasp of French is that one learns, chasteningly, not to take things for granted. My deduction that the casinos in "Ballade of Return" had done with their last, possibly yodeling, or at least vocal merry-makers took off from the idea of the Tyrol. But non! And no, even, to Peter Dale's "When the casinos close the show / With the last Tyrolean whirls," with its intimation of guys in leather britches and little green hats slapping their thighs and yodeling as buxom maidens whirl in a flurry of petticoats.

I am not able to grasp how the music sounded. But apparently by the 1880s, this was a form of popular song that had begun some decades back with yodeling, but had become increasingly sophisticated, so that it was now a matter of technically difficult vocalizing and phrasing, with yodel-derived aspects, which could be used for comic or other purposes.

Cabaret songs, of which Aristide Bruant up in Montmartre was the master composer-performer, were more or less working-class in attitude (though not necessarily in the composition of audiences) and linguistically realist. Café-concert songs were apparently a notch or two higher up socially. But no doubt boundaries blurred and the casino patrons, in addition to sweet-sour sentiments about l'Amour, would have had plenty of risqué double-entendres to laugh at.

Toulouse-Lautrec, who did the poster-portraits of Bruant, Yvette Guilbert, and others, would have known all about both kinds. As would Laforgue.

There was nothing in England in those years to equal the wealth of French popular song, just as there was no café life and the artistic groupings that it permitted.

## 16. Jammes: almost nothing, and yet...

A lot of charm in the absence of strong feelings, and yet with permeation by feeling selves. That girl is so real. Pound quotes “La Jeune Fille” and the first four stanzas of “Il va neiger.” in “French Poets” (1918), without indicating that the latter is incomplete. The article is still worth reading.

## 17. Apollinaire’s “Lul”

### I

I embarked on the translation of this poem knowing nothing about it. I was looking for something else from *Alcools* (1913) to replace the first seventeen stanzas of “La Chanson du Mal Aimé” that had been sitting in *A New Book of Verse* a little oddly, and “Lul” was in the same stanza form and had what felt like the same crispness. It was also a convenient length. Since I couldn’t seem to get enough enlightenment from the translation in Donald Revell’s dual-text *Poems by Guillaume Apollinaire*, I thought I’d have a go at it myself, always a good way of acquiring a poem.

Having more or less finished, I turned to Philippe Renaud’s *Lecture d’Apollinaire* (Editions de l’Age de l’Homme, 1969) and Scott Bates’ *Guillaume Apollinaire* (Twayne, 1967) in search of enlightenment, and was pleased to learn that the poem is famously obscure. So some of the uncertainties weren’t just mine.

It was also pretty clear from the conflicting interpretations described in Renaud’s eight-page discussion that this was unlikely to be one of those instances where things shake down into a consensus, meaning in this case a start-to-finish interpretation—with detailed references to Apollinaire’s life, maybe—of the allegorical narrative.

Since I mistrust that kind of reading anyway, and am far from being inward with Apollinaire, I wasn’t going to venture there myself. Nor does this in fact seem a poem that invites that kind of decoding. It isn’t like the version of Mallarmé’s sonnet “Le Pitre Châtié,” for example, that I translate and talk about elsewhere.

## II

“Lul de Faltenin” isn’t a reprise of some particular episode in Classical mythology, nor does it have a clear narrative line at the Classical level. It seems to be, rather, an evocation, via a variety of Classical allusions, of sexual hungers, fears, confusions, compulsions too powerful and conflicting to be neatly tidied up. One doesn’t just say, “Ah, Ovid!” like Radar in *M.A.S.H.*, as if that was what an allusion was about, and now one can go home.

It’s the difference between “Like Pluto’s ravishment of Proserpine” and “Like virgins snatched away to hidden lairs.” The latter is likely to bring the former to mind, but the former owes its strength to its epitomizing a variety of sexual seizures.

In a curious work of Jungian criticism by D. Streatfeild, James Hadley Chase’s ravishment novel *No Orchids for Miss Blandish* (savaged by George Orwell) is seen as a modern variant of the Proserpine legend, a suggestion that draws attention to the ongoing fascination of that basic narrative, present in several poems in *A New Book*.

Apollinaire seems to be subverting the conventional, smooth French neoclassicism of the well-educated, which was why, among other things, he could matter so much to André Breton during the years when the latter, sickened by the dulce et decorum rhetoric of the Great War, was feeling his way towards what would become Surrealism.

The poem is really outside the broad linguistic zone of *A New Book*. But there are local clarities and an intelligible progression of concerns, and we don’t have either mysticism/mystification or the ingenious interconnections and conceptually overloaded terms that figure in accounts, the author’s among them, of Hart Crane’s “At Melville’s Tomb.”

Moreover, the poem joins the others in *A New Book* that involve underworlds, largely classical. I didn’t set out with that in mind as a theme to be explored. I’ve simply liked individual poems by Campion, Hugo, Nerval, Tennyson, Rilke, Lawrence, Hope, Pinsky, Harrison, Stallings. But the idea of another kingdom below us, with different rules, and emergent energies, and the possibility of two-way descents, Orphic and other, is major.

### III

We can be pretty sure about a couple of things. One is that what looks like a classical reference in “Lul” will be one. The other is that what looks like an erotic reference will be one.

Apollinaire’s intense interest in the erotic, the clandestine, the taboo was notoriously on display in the same year as “Lul” in his anonymous and still disturbing Sadean oeuvre-alimentaire (pot-boiler), *Les Onze Mille Verges* (1907), in which he took the governor off his imagination, leading to the appearance six years later of *L’Enfer de la Bibliothèque Nationale*, the pioneering bibliography of vaulted erotica that he and Louis Perceau published in 1913.

But for me the references in “Lul” take us into the intense and problematic realm of Eros, rather than being banal autobiographical allusions. If, as has been suggested, there is auto-eroticism here, the fantasies of a Guillaume Apollinaire reading Sade are likely to have been more interesting than the fantasies of an Alex Portnoy with his baseball glove. They may, indeed, have issued in *Les Onze Mille Verges* (The Eleven Thousand Rods/Penises).

### IV

“Lul” apparently meant “penis” in Flemish, a language that Apollinaire, who lived for a while in Belgium, took an interest in, and “Faltenin” may have been derived from “phallum tenens,” which would be sort of like conflating actual etymologies and creating “Cock of Peosfaesl.”

Sirens in the general use of that term are dangerously, perhaps fatally, attractive females. However, before simply closing off the case with “prostitutes” or, higher up, “courtesans,” one should keep in mind that Paris at that time was the most eroticized city in Europe. It abounded in brothels catering to every taste, including S/M, some of them putting on shows that interfaced with the also abounding erotica (often published in Belgium) that included *Les Paradis Charnels ou le Divin Breviare des Amants* (1903), the how-to guide by A.S. Lagail (Alphonse Gallais) to a hundred-and-thirty-six heterosexual positions, each with its own name (“The Double Scissors,” “The Silent Prayer,” etc), without even getting into S/M.



So the allure evoked by the term “Sirens” was not just a matter of Irma la Douce or Boule de Suif. For the uninitiated, brothels (maisons clos), their shuttered facades in their portrayal by Eugène Atget marked only by street numbers, would indeed be cave-like sites of Pompeian mysteries.

Aristide Bruant’s *Dictionnaire Français-Argot* (1905) lists almost three hundred slang terms for prostitutes.

## V

The physicality of “rampé” (crawled, crept) immediately shuts out the image of Odysseus tied to the mast as his crew row past the perilous coast, their ears plugged with wax. If “sirens” was a slang term for prostitutes, though I don’t see it in Bruant, there could have been an initial ambiguity for literate readers, as if a poem in English were to open, “Tarts, in so many shapes and sizes.” “Crawled” suggests an approach from land, along beach or cliff, rather than in—what? a rowboat, in which, unless at night, he would have been immediately visible to the sirens looking out to sea.

“Seas” seems to be a pretty rich term in French, to judge from the entry in the online *Dictionnaire Littré*, where we progress from literal meanings to increasingly symbolic ones—an immense powerful otherness, as it were.

The horses referred to are almost certainly those in Walter Crane’s seven-foot-wide painting “The Horses of Neptune” (1892), in which the long crest of a breaking wave becomes ten leaping white horses with flowing manes, with a bearded Neptune glimpsed in his chariot behind them. Apollinaire, who has a friendly reference in an art review to some drawings by Crane, would have known this Symbolist work, which is on the Web now. Since the word “horses” by itself conveys little visual information, I have substituted “breakers.”

“In Roman mythology,” the online *Myth Encyclopedia* informs us, “the Golden Bough was a tree branch with golden leaves that enabled the Trojan hero Aeneas to travel through the underworld safely.” In Dante, a divine messenger, with a touch of his wand, gains admittance for Dante into the city of Dis, which is guarded by the Furies, including the Gorgon herself. In the episode in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* in which the young Dionysus is kidnapped by pirates ignorant of his

identity, he manifests himself garlanded and with a wand as the boat is smothered in vegetation and wild beasts fiercely prowled.

The branch in “Lul” is from a willow-tree, slender and without blossoms (foliage?), a poet’s sought protection. Since sirens traditionally sing, I take those terrible mute mouths to be vaginas.

## VI

What the marvel is would seem to be up for guessing—poesy? creation? Nor am I sure whether it’s better than the Sirens or, if grammar permits, himself.

“Otelle” is apparently a term from heraldry, here meaning lance-tips, by analogy with the shapes of peeled almonds—and, of course, phallic. A knight would have had more than one lance. There’s too much about lances online for me to attempt precision. But here’s a sample.

Grail tradition associates the “Holy” or “Bleeding Lance” with the sacred chalice. In stories of the Holy Grail, Longinus’s lance is occasionally glimpsed dripping blood into the cup passed during the Last Supper. This is the spear which gave the Fisher King wounds which would not heal. His injuries could only be cured by the miraculous powers of the sacred instrument which inflicted them.

However, one may not need to get in that deep if a lance is primarily an implement with which a knight challenges others—challenges his world—and if the immediate association of blood-tipped penises is with deflowered virgins. Here, though, the blood is jetting from the lance-heads. So... ?

In Octave Mirbeau’s *Le Jardin des Supplices* (1899), a condemned man in the Imperial Chinese garden of tortures is slowly masturbated to death by a silent older woman, expiring in agony with a jet of blood. Apollinaire would have known that novel. I have no idea if the concept is being evoked here, though the image would have been hard to keep out. But if it’s in play, then the “murder” to which he is confessing might be that of his two overworked cojones.

In Alfred Kubin’s drawing “Lubricity” (1901–1902), a naked woman cowers away in a corner from a huge hairy dog-like creature sitting

back on its haunches in the foreground with a long stiff narrow penis jutting diagonally in her direction. Its tip, the shape of a reversed heart, is spear-like, with a stream of semen descending from it.

In a review, Apollinaire mentions in passing that a German cubist (his first name mistakenly given editorially as Albert) is called Kubin.

## VII

After I failed to make sense of “à mon aspect” (stanza 3) in terms of appearance/appearing, memory kicked in and googling took me to heraldry and astrology, both of them thematically relevant fields, where “aspect” is a technical term. In heraldry it gives us the stance of an emblematic creature (frontal, side-on, lying down, etc.) And in astrology it points to something like an intersecting of fields or lines of force, and to a configuration of stars that are affecting things thereby. In such a reading, he’s under his own control, not that of the stars.

Rowers here, fleeing those siren heads just visible, flower-like, above the surface, are more general than Odysseus’s crew. Sensible as they humanly are, the “animal,” with its contrasting ideology, urges on the speaker in another direction. If one has to choose, they feel to me like land animals. It has been suggested (Renaud) that those starry eyes are up in the constellations. But there aren’t all that many constellations, and here the animality urges him on rather than reproving him.

“Gaping hole” seemed to me more energetic and hungrier than “hungry cave” or “avid grotto,” or some such.

The episode of Dionysus, the pirates, and the vine-covered ship figures in Canto II of Pound’s *Cantos*. In “Lul” it is obviously a good thing for sailors to have a Dionysus-like desire for transformation.

The firmament—the overarching sky, and now, as he descends, the overarching cavern roof—becomes like one of those poisonous jellyfish hanging domelike in the water. “Meduse” is the French term for jellyfish, presumably because of the resemblance between the stinging tendrils and the writhing serpentine locks of the Gorgon Medusa.

The constellations in the mapped heavens, pure and far from the sexual activities now going on in the lair of the Sirens, involve points of light

connected up with straight lines, some of them in fact forming irregular oblongs. But is that in fact what is intended by oblong stars?

## 18. Aragon: versification

### I

“Bierstube Magie allemande” is probably the best-known of the numerous poems in a variety of forms composing Aragon’s *The Unfinished Novel* (*Le roman inachevé*, 1956), a quasi-autobiography in which, as the Stalinist certainties crumbled, he swerved away from Soviet Realism and endeavoured to re-access the experiential realities of his—his own, not Socialist Man’s—individual development.

The 1966 Gallimard edition of the book glosses “Bierstube” as “Brasserie” and “Gaense-Liesel” as “La Liesel à l’oie, statue à Strasbourg” (“oie” meaning “goose”).

With one small exception, only proper names and the first letters of lines are capitalized in the French text. “Magie” means “magic” (noun) in both German and French. I have assumed that what we have is the name of the beer-hall, parallel with constructions like “Café Etoile” (Star Café), and not an ascription of magical powers.

I’m not 100% certain of what’s going on in the Gaenze-Liesel bit.

The poem was famously adapted by songwriter Léo Ferré, a matter of omissions at the outset. See “Est-ce ainsi que les homes vivent?”

Yves Montand was among the important performers of it. I have been helped with some difficult lines by the translation provided in *Yves Montand Paris Recital*, recorded live at the Théâtre d’Etoile and surely one of his greatest performances. His phrasing is predominantly accentual-syllabic, which is the natural way to sing.

### II

To hear the poems here by Aragon as verse, it’s advisable to put out of one’s head the too often repeated claim that, in contrast to English accentual-syllabic verse (most typically, the iambic pentameter), French verse is only syllabic, as if all that French writers and their

readers need do is see whether or not there are the requisite number of syllables per line.

Insisters on this may be insufficiently conscious of the variations possible in English verse. Stresses, so-called, are relative to other syllables, not absolutes. “Upon,” “recalled,” and “shortchanged” are all iambs. “Then rose the King and moved his host by night” and “The murmuring of immemorial elms” are both what are considered iambic pentameters.

But in French, the stresses in polysyllabic words normally fall on the final syllable. In English it’s Paris, in French *Paree*. Hence the incomprehension when a French visitor to London asks the way to “PiccadillEE CirCOOS” rather than PIC-a-DILL-y CIR-cus.

Lines of formal French verse may indeed sound oddly irregular and indeterminate in the manner of syllabic verse in English (not a form natural to the language). But, in addition to having done the equivalent of hearing Paris as *Paree*, this is likely to be because of the so-called mute “e” on the ends of numerous words, which has no duration when followed by vowels, but when followed by words beginning with consonants is like a weak, at times an almost notional, version of the second “e” in Goethe, or not so weak when you’re down in Provence with Italy not far off.

(“Tristesse,” “cendre,” “pense,” “nourrie,” “gaie,” etc.)

The classical twelve-syllable French alexandrin is a special case, and I’m not speaking of that here.

But the Aragon poems sing along pretty much like iambic eight-syllable English verse, as do those by Théophile de Viau and others. And to my ear the ten-syllable lines of Villon don’t sound notably different from English ones.

It helps to know that in the kind of French verse that I’m speaking of here there are no extra syllables introduced, as in

How long, we wondered, would the tempest last?  
The great oak tree was shuddering to the blast,  
But at least the windows and shutters were made fast.

Ten, eleven, and twelve syllables, but the mind's ear still hears them as the same basic kind of line. That wouldn't happen in French, where ten syllables means ten syllables, no more, no less. However, since one or more "sounded" mute-e may be among them, a line can be rhythmically quite light.

Since the mute "e" may be on the end of a one-syllable word, you can also have the equivalent of reversed feet in English: "Cette douleur sans souvenir." "Drinking the wine of summer's blaze." If uncertain about where a stress falls in a word, try exaggerating another syllable or syllables: "DrinkING." No, no, that's not how it's said. And two-syllable words in which both syllables are equally stressed are so uncommon in English as to be effectively invisible.

The big thing is not to be intimidated, any more than if an oenophile insisted that one shouldn't be drinking vintage wines unless one's able to pick out those subtly intermingled flavours of scorched tarpaper, roadkill fawn, and the like.

To hear French verse as verse, however imperfectly, can be a great pleasure, and when one does so, the meaning is likely to become clearer too.

## 19. Marie-Jeanne Durry: Orpheus descends.

### I

"Orpheus' Plea" ("Prière d'Orphée") is the self-sufficient first and best section of Marie-Jeanne Durry's *Orphée* (Paris, 1), the other two parts being "Le Dieu répond" ("The God replies") and "La remontée" ("The ascent"). Its octosyllabic stanzas rhyme, ballade-style, ababbcbc. Here is the opening one

Mâitre, ô maître nocturne, maître,  
Roi des nuits, prince des métaux,  
L'odeur du soleil et des êtres  
Ruisselle aux plis de mon manteau!  
Les morts serrés dans ton étai  
Frissonnants ouvrent leurs narines.  
Je suis la mer et le bateau,  
Maître immobile des racines!

I happened upon *Orphée* in the stacks in 2011 when I went to Durrý's book on *Alcools* in search (unsuccessfully) of enlightenment about Apollinaire's notoriously obscure "Lul de Faltenin." I had never heard of her, and she doesn't figure in the several anthologies of French poetry on my shelves, where, after a bit, vers libre spreads out over the twentieth century like the grey squirrel eliminating the red.

In the preface, in which she reports having worked on *Orphée* in private for thirty years, Durrý remarks that its form might look like a challenge to her times. But, she goes on, there was nothing aggressive about her choice. There *wasn't* any choice. "Il n'y a pas eu de choix. Pas de doute et donc point de délibération." No hesitation, so no debate. Behind "Prière d'Orphee" there would have been octosyllabic stanzaic poems by Villon, Hugo, Valéry, Apollinaire, Aragon, and others.

In "Prière d'Orphée," which from now on will be what I mean by "the poem," Orpheus descends into the underworld and pleads with Pluto for the return of the dead Eurydice, reminding the dark god of how he too had been moved by human emotions when he snatched the lovely Persephone for his queen, allowing her to return to Earth once a year as the harbinger of spring.

The operatic nature of the poem, like an expansion of "Che faró" in Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice*, has no doubt been to its later disadvantage. But seizures, imprisonments, losses, rapes, grievings, sacrificings, negotiating with the Enemy and so on were part of the climate of the Occupation. In 1950 Cocteau's *Orphée* would take beautiful Jean Marais down into the Underworld, followed by the Brazilian *Orfeo Negro* nine years later, and Cocteau's outright allegorical and score-settling about the post-Liberation purges *Le Testament d'Orphee* in 1960.

The demands of the rhyme scheme, and the diminishing in octosyllabics of the portentously adjectival and adverbial, holds the poem back from a Hugoesque magniloquence. And the self-sufficiency of each stanza permits without strain the shifts in moods and modes as the speaker tries different ways, not perhaps always self-consistent, of getting through to the seemingly unreachable dark ruler.

This is a heuristic progression, not the steady rhetorical argumentation of Valéry's "Ébauche d'un serpent." It was energized, I'm sure, by the

felt power of totalitarianism after the Liberation as the Stalinists, Aragon prominent among them, sought to move in on the vacuum left by the departing Nazis and settle accounts with French fascists.

## II

With respect to form, here is the opening stanza again:

Mâitre, ô maître nocturne, maître,  
Roi des nuits, prince des métaux,  
L'odeur du soleil et des êtres  
Ruisselle aux plis de mon manteau!  
Les morts serrés dans ton étau  
Frissonnants ouvrent leurs narines.  
Je suis la mer et le bateau,  
Maître immobile des racines!

When formal French verse is called syllabic, this doesn't mean that it's all monotonous with no expressive speech emphases in it. Of course there are. In French the stressed syllable in a word or a phrasal unit is predominantly the last, "stress" meaning (as in accentual-syllabic English verse) its weight relative to the other syllables, not some predetermined degree of thump. The weight can be very light. Verse like that of the stanza here is syllabic in the sense that the number of syllables per line is fixed and the number of stresses is not.

Here, to simplify slightly, the lines are eight-syllable, by virtue of the use made of the mute-e. When "e" at the end of a word is followed by a consonant at the start of the following word, it counts as a syllable whether or not it is actually sounded, which may depend on a variety of speakers and circumstances. Thinking of it as a weaker form of the second "e" in "Goethe" helps, I find. In any event, recognizing it is essential for getting the syllabic structure of a line right.

In the stanza here, the effect occurs with the second "maître," "nocturne," "prince," and "immobile." Also, "-ent" in "ouvrent" has a sound value.

In my translation, I've taken advantage of the flexibility of accentual-syllabic English, verse, in which the number of stresses (here four per line) is basically fixed but the number of syllables per foot (here four feet per line) may vary.



Partly I wanted to have the flow of verse rather than the stop-start movement of translationese. But I also wanted to slow down the verse, given the loss of the rhyming that achieves that in the French. So there is a good deal of variation, often resulting from how the French goes, I wasn't trying for precision and failing to achieve it. What I was doing was for the ear, not just the eye, and feels speakable.

## **20. Queneau: solid surrealism**

Surrealist-strong statements and imagery linked to narrative in a back-and-forth with Realworld.

One can get so tired of the kind of Surrealist or Surrealistic poem consisting of strings of "poetic" phrases and assertions held together only by whatever associative processes in the poet's mind have put them there, the poetry being simply detached from Realworld, except perhaps that of literary publication.

In one of his several fascinating interviews, the Surrealist-influenced movie director Georges Franju recalls a young man telling him excitedly that he'd just come up with a great surreal image. A man puts a phone into a pot of jam. But no, Franju told him, that wouldn't be surreal. What *would* be surreal would be someone taking a phone *out* of a pot of jam.

With the latter we are into narrative, as we are in those transformative poems of Apollinaire's. How did the phone get there, one's mind wants to know. With the other approach, it's simply psychological. What was he thinking of when he did that?

## **21. Brassens, populist**

Robust French anarchism and anti-clericalism. "The Nun" is very funny. There's a memorable nun-moment in Franju's remake of Feuillade's *Judex*, his sad consolation prize for being denied *Fantomas*. At bay in a water-mill, the bad Diana Monti, in white-winged coiffe and all, coolly starts to remove her habit (hiss of indrawn audience breath) and stands there in a moment in her black cat-suit, the wings still on her head, then coolly drops down through a trapdoor into the mill-stream below, leaving the wings floating on the surface.

END

## Appendix

### Claude Le Petit's "Adieu des filles de joie à la cité de Paris."

#### I

The text of "Adieu des filles de joie à la cité de Paris" that I've used is in Claude Le Petit, *Oeuvres Libertines*. Édition présentée, établie et annotée par Thomas Pogu (Paris, Éditions Cartouchée, 2012). Its spelling there is modernized.

The poem can also be found in the facsimile edition of Frédéric Lachèvre's *Claude le Petit; complément à sa bio-bibliographie* (Paris 1913), in the *Les Libertinus du 17e Siecle* series.

"Petit" was a family name. He wasn't Little Claude.

The occasional umlauts on proper names are provided by me to indicate, in the interests of scansion, when an E-mute needs to count as a syllable, plus some places where a word might be mispronounced. My versification is flexibly accentual-syllabic, with four principle stresses per line, after the three introductory five-stress stanzas. Rhyme was utterly beyond me. Pogu's notes are few and brief.

#### II

In *Le Cabinet Secret du Parnasse: Théophile de Viau et les Libertins*, the great bibliographer of erotica, Louis Perceau, who charted the Enfer of the Bibliothèque Nationale with Apollinaire, gives 1657 as the date of first publication of "Adieu."

I've been able to make some kind of sense of most of the allusions in it. But I was defeated at first by the reference to Guadaloupe in stanza 23. It didn't appear to be a low-life area of the city. But why would tavern-keepers be going to Guadaloupe when the "girls," as I took it, were off to French Canada?

I could find no references to specific deportations before 1657, even in Erica-Marie Benabou's massively researched *La prostitution et la police des moeurs au XVIII siècle, présenté par Pierre Goubert* (Paris 1987), who begins her narrative in the 1660s, when the purification of Paris, and closing of brothels, was intensifying.

Fortunately a lingering scholarly conscience finally led me to Gustave Lanctot's *Filles de Joie ou filles du Roi* (1964). In it, Lanctot argues indignantly, as a French-Canadian, with a lot of evidence and complex hypotheses, that the good citizens of Montréal and Québec had no desire to see their thinly-populated province become a dumping ground for undesirable, and in fact *expelled* loose women. So there was no intake of them from France.

Martinique, Saint-Christophe (St. Kitts), and, yes, Guadaloupe in the Antilles were apparently another matter, as was Louisiana.

Moreover, prior to 1663, emigration was handled by private companies, with no chain-ganged deportations, as distinct from the pressure exercised by magistrates when "immoral" women were offered a choice between emigration and confinement in one of the Paris "hospitals."

Later on, though, after the government became involved, there was a disgusting episode in which, as quoted by Benabou,

The convoy of 17 women made an initial stop at the Bicêtre Hospital where the chain was put in place (the women were chained at the waist). They left Paris at the end of February 1719 and reached the port of Rochefort on March 16, in a pitiable condition, ... exhausted by the journey, perishing of hunger and cold, in rags ....

Which caused the authorities there to behave with some decency towards them. (Benabou, p. 87)

"Filles de joie," a term still in use, is less pejorative than "putains" (whores). "Good-time girl" is among the English terms for prostitute. But "putains" is the term in stanza 2. Georges Brassens in "La complainte des filles de joie" points out sardonically how unjoyous the modern working lives of many of them actually are.

"Filles du Roi" refers to the respectable women whose emigration to French Canada was encouraged and at times financed by the Crown after Louis XIV took an interest in his American domains.

### III

I have read or dipped into the following books in search of enlightenment about Renaissance and 17th-century Paris. They left me with a lot of guessing to do. I've also googled.

Beik, William, *Louis XIV and Absolutism; a Brief Study with Documents* (2000)

Benabou, Erica-Marie, *La prostitution et la police des moeurs au XVIII siècle* (1987)

Chadych, Danielle et Dominique Laborgne, *Atlas de Paris; Évolution d'un paysage urbain*. Photographies Jacques Lebar (2007)

Hazan, Eric and David Fernbach, *The Invention of Paris* (2010)

Hazan, Fernand and others, *Dictionnaire de Paris* (1964)

Hillairait, Jacques, *Dictionnaire historique des rues de Paris*, two volumes (1961).

Hillairet, Jacques, *Gibets, Pilonis et Cachots du Vieux Paris* (1956)

Horne Alistair, *Seven Ages of Paris* (2002)

Jones, Colin, *Paris; Biography of a City* (2004)

Kettering, Sharon, *French Society 1589–1715* (2001)

Lanctot, Gustave, *Filles de joie ou filles du roi; étude sur l'émigration féminine en Nouvelle-France* (1954).

Ranum, Orest, *Paris in the Age of Absolutism* (1980)

The 1310 lines of Le Petit's "Paris Ridicule," first published in a book in 1668, did not help to clear up any of my puzzlements.

Though using the same stanza form as "Adieu," the poem is so different in manner from "Adieu," and contains so many allusions, that I won't attempt any summarizing. The Bièvre, here the filthy Gobelins river, is called a chamber pot for pigs. A reference to Jesuits as having degenerated into "pedagogues and floggers of little kids" could have

contributed to the author's dreadful end if the poem circulated in manuscript.

He had, it seems, been a pupil of Jesuits himself. In two general stanzas about the Place de Grève, the principal execution site in the city is a "terrain where a hundred times more men have been massacred than in war."

Lanctot speaks on p.66 of a "brochurette" (little brochure) which

describes "The Adieu of the [Filles de Joie] to the city of Paris," who after their detention in the prison of the Conciergerie, set out for America, saying:

Adieu, Pont-Neuf, Samaritaine,  
Butte Saint-Roch. Petits Carneaux,  
Où nous passions des jours si beaux,  
Nous allons en passer aux îles,  
Puisqu'on ne nous veut plus aux villes.

But those lines are not in the two texts of the poem that I've looked at, and neither is the reference to the Conciergerie.

### **Stanza 3**

Cytherea: Aphrodite, "the Greek goddess of love, beauty, pleasure, and procreation." (Wikipedia)

Eratine: "a nymph, daughter of Venus." (Pogu)

Cypris: Aphrodite, "born on the island of Cyprus, which was also one of the principal seats of her worship." (Wiki)

### **Stanza 4**

I've taken "Au grande chemin de l'hôpital" in the figurative sense offered in my Collins-Robert dictionary (9th ed, 2010). But the hospital could be literally one of the city institutions brought together by Louis XIV in 1656 under the rubric of General Hospital, and which served among things as a place of uncomfortable confinement for beggars and prostitutes.

On the Web there's a photo of a large red sore on a syphilitic nose. Are there any implications in Jeanne's "nez de rubis" beyond her being a drinker?

## Stanza 6

The Palais referred to here I take to be the royal palace of the Louvre, rather than Richelieu's Palais Royale nearby. But the colonnaded grounds of the latter would for fifty years in the late 18th and early 19th century be the intellectual and sexual centre of the city.

The Butte Saint-Roch, as described in Jacques Hillairet's prodigious *Dictionnaire historiques des rues de Paris* (1963), from which the shortened Wikipedia account comes, was originally a large mound or hillock outside the city wall, north of the Tuileries, and approximately where the Opéra is now, composed of building debris and trash. In the 15th century coiners, heretics, and so forth were tortured, burned, or boiled alive there. The great city gibbet of Montfaucon was on another mound, further out to the northeast and now the site of the Parc des Buttes Chaumont, enjoyed by the Surrealists.

After its incorporation into the city, says Hillairet, the Butte Saint-Roch "remained a place with a terrible reputation, covered with sordid hovels and the dwellings of beggars, mountebanks, exhibitors of bears, conjurers, and charlatans. On its slopes were inns and taverns ..."  
Whores from there, while apparently not the lowest of the low (those being on the Right Bank near the Ile de la Cité), would not have been quality.

The French line goes, "Les Infantes du Roi de Cuivre." Pogu glosses this as an allusion to Herod, king of Chalcide, a name coming from the Greek, where it means copper. Which makes no sense to me in this context.

The reference is more likely to be to Henri IV (1553–1610), whose bronze equestrian statue was set up on the Pont Neuf six years after his assassination. During his reign, copper was used for a popular small coin, the *double tournois*, which was now being created by mechanical means, rather than manually.

The Web reports that

Henry's womanising became legendary ... His sexual appetite was said to have been insatiable, and he always kept mistresses, often several at a time, as well as engaging in random sexual encounters and visits to brothels.

I don't know whether the term "Infantes" implied actual offspring or was a friendly name for the kinds of girls whom he had patronized.

### **Stanza 8**

The French goes,

Songeant aux bons coups de museaux  
Qu'ellës avaient des demoiselles,  
Mangeant le chasseur et la proie.

"Coup de museau," my dictionary tells me, is the kind of nuzzling that a puppy seeking milk gives its mother. Since "demoiselles" means ladies, I've taken this to be a reference to sexual advances to serving-girls, in which lesbian encounters a woman, conventionally the hunted, was also the hunter.

### **Stanza 10**

"Faubourg" translates as "suburb", but it's a misleading term if suggesting the tidy districts of 19th- and early 20th-century Paris and London.

To judge from period maps, the Right Bank at that time was still tightly enclosed within the city ramparts, with little but fields and gardens beyond, along with the Buttes and the Montmartre hill.

The Left Bank, outside the smaller walled area that included the Latin Quarter (the name coming from the language spoken in the medieval University), was where the development was beginning that in the 18th century would make the Faubourg St. Germain, with its palatial homes and walled grounds, the most fashionable area in the city, as it still was in Proust's time.

The melancholy troop in the poem would presumably have left through the western end of the city.

## **Stanza 12**

The classical Penatēs were guardian household deities. I'm not sure what kinds of dwellings are referred to here. Brothels?

The French goes, "Chers habitants de ces cloisons / OÙ nichent maints gros rats et rates." The most likely option for "cloisons" (dividers) would seem to be "compartments." Is the reference here to tiny slum rooms made by dividing up formerly respectable older houses? The male and female rats, in any event, presumably aren't just literal rodents.

## **Stanza 16**

I see that there is a "Coral Princess" line of cruises and hotels, so there is a long association of the two terms. Coral in Musset's poem "À Julie" characterises the lips of his mulatto mistress. Coral islands, chiefly in the Pacific, were the exotic tops of coral reefs. Probably, since ivory also figures in the stanza, Le Petit was trying to increase the exotic feel and imagined depth of the Seine. The villages referred to were on the river to the west of the city.

## **Stanza 18**

Google speaks of "the extensive building program which Henri IV undertook in Paris from 1600 to 1610, focusing on the Place Royale (now called the Place des Vosges), the Place Dauphine, rue Dauphine, the Pont Neuf, and the Hôpital St. Louis."

The today highly desirable Marais (literally "marsh") district on the Right Bank was at that time (Google again) "the French nobility's favorite place of residence," with lots of urban mansions.

## **Stanza 19**

The gardens of the Tuileries Palace were at that time at the extreme western end of the walled city..

## **Stanza 20**

The broad Pont Neuf, begun in 1601 under Henri IV, was apparently the famous equivalent back then of the Eiffel Tower as an iconographic demonstration of advanced French technology. Running across the western tip of the Ile de la Cité, it was free of the houses



that lined the three other bridges, and became in effect a new *place* or square, site of a rich variety of activities.

In his *Paris: The Biography of a City* (2004), Colin Jones reports that “Pedlars jostled against a motley crew of bouquinistes (second-hand booksellers), pamphlet sellers, pickpockets, acrobats, dog-barbers, street entertainers, flower-sellers, umbrella-hire merchants, and recruiting sergeants.”(158). Plus, needless to say, filles de joie.

The Luxembourg Palace and its lovely grounds were in the faubourg outside the city wall on the Left Bank. It was built in the early 17th century by Marie de Medicis, the second wife of Henri IV—political intriguer, patron of the arts, and regent, as queen, to the young Louis XIII.

In the early 18th century, it became the residence of the young widowed Duchesse de Berry, who, according to Wiki, and with what seems a thematic appropriateness,

was notoriously promiscuous, having the reputation of a French Messalina relentlessly driven by her unquenchable thirst for all pleasures of the flesh. The Luxembourg palace and its gardens thus became stages where the radiantly beautiful princess acted out her ambitions, enthroned like a queen surrounded by her court. In some of her more exclusive parties, Madame de Berry also played the leading part in elaborate “tableaux-vivants” that represented mythological scenes and in which she displayed her appetizing young person impersonating Venus or Diana.

The Classics lived!

### **Stanza 21**

Pogu glosses “Palemon” as, “In Greek mythology... the name that Mélacerte bore after he had been made a god.” I don’t know what is intended here.

I take the following information from “*Discours de l’inondation arrivé au faubourg S.-Marcel-lez-Paris, par la rivière de Bièvre 1625,*” *Variétés historique et littéraires, Tome II.*

The river Bièvre, on whose banks the Gobelins dye and tapestry works had their mill, was on the eastern edge of the city and was used by

many other works—tanneries, slaughter-houses, and so forth. It had an irregular configuration, including two or three lagoons, and patterns of flood and drought that were exacerbated, along with toxic pollution, by all the commercial disruptions of its flow.

A year before the 1625 flood, there was an engineer's report on the situation, made at the request of the proprietors of the Gobelins works, with whose name the river in those parts was associated. But evidently those works weren't responsible for the flood, as the lines here seem to imply. There was another flood in 1665, and one again in 1679, in which the river rose fifteen feet.

The numerous streams referred to in this stanza would seem to have been the result of low-lying land and pressures from the river system.

### **Stanza 23**

I've no idea what is meant by "Temples du dieu vainqueur des Indes."

For awhile I thought that "Guadeloupe" might be the slang name for a low-life area. But Guadeloupe here is the Caribbean island, of which one learns from Google that "in 1635, from the island of St Kitts, the French sent a group of settlers to Guadeloupe; they quickly took control of the island, and all but destroyed the few remaining natives that considered it home."

Guadeloupe and Martinique in the Antilles were where women like the group described here would have been headed, in vessels, provided prior to 1663 by private companies. Because of the prosperous sugar trade, Guadeloupe would be fought over with the British.

Cypris: Aphrodite.

### **Stanza 23**

Chantre du Thrace: Orpheus

Car ces pratiques violentes  
Vont bien faire des violons."

In a charming "libertine" poem, H el ene de Vivonne speaks in 1618 of holding and tuning the neck of her lute before taking it up to lie on her in her bedroom, where she tightens its strings again when they slacken. I take there to be a word-play here in "Adieu" about how the forcible

removal of “the girls” meant that now there were a lot of male “instruments” with nowhere to go.

#### **Stanza 24**

Cabs and coaches apparently were starting to replace the sedan chairs which navigated a city some of whose Vieux Paris streets were reportedly barely six feet wide and deep in filth. Evidently cabs played the same sexual roles that gondolas did in Venice.

What seems intended by “L’hymen est votre seul resource” I take to be that now the Paris vehicles will have to concentrate on “legitimate” sex for their fares.

#### **Stanza 25**

A nobleman, and his wife or sister, who had hoped to make a fortune by starting a cab line after finally getting a royal licence, went broke. But I can’t now find his name and am not certain that he’s the individual being referred to here.

#### **Stanza 27**

I couldn’t duplicate the word play of “Pour être trop hospitalières / Qu’on nous réduire à l’hôpital.” “Hospitable” wouldn’t work as a quasi-rhyme word.

“Hospital” here refers to the cluster of institutions on the Left Bank, partly religious in origin, that had grown up during the first half of the seventeenth century and performed a mixture of functions, including educating orphans, caring for the sick and destitute, and “reforming” beggars and “loose” women. They included the Hôpital Salpêtrière, the Hôpital Bicêtre, and the Hôpital Scipion.

Despite the repressive puritanism of Catholic organization, they evidently shouldn’t be thought of wholly in Foucaultian terms. The large numbers of beggars and prostitutes and the more or less criminal “rookeries” of Hugo’s *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, exacerbated by the rebellious fighting—the *Fronde*—in France between 1648 and 1653, and the squalor and misery of the poor in general were less charming in fact than in fiction.

## Stanza 32

A tant se tut la grande Jeanne,  
S'en allant droit à Scipion  
D'une grande devotion.

Unless there's an idiom here, the idea of her going to the great Roman general Scipio Africanus makes no sense.

A more appropriate reference would seem to be to the Hôtel Scipion (hotel here in the sense of town mansion), which in French Google's words "was successively a hospice for the old (1622) [and] a childbirth hospital (1656) for the General Hospital." It also, according to Lanctot, contained the bakery and butcher's for the whole hospital system, so work there may have been pleasanter than in the other institutions.

If the "girls" had been offered a choice earlier between deportation and repentance, it would seem understandable for Jeanne now, given the contrast between the city's recalled riches and the Caribbean simplicity (after a probably horrible voyage) to opt for ostensible repentance. The ending feels scamped to me. But it would be a mistake to expect from the "girls" a libertine defiance.

### **About the poem as a whole:**

This may have been the first important celebration of Paris in verse. Apparently there had been nothing corresponding to Dunbar's "To the City of London," with its refrain of "London, thou art the flower of cities all" (Edinburgh he excoriated for its filth and lack of civic pride) and Spenser's "Prothalamion" ("Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song."). As *Le Petit* intimates to those wits at the outset of the poem, with their search for, presumably, noble subjects, the city itself, high and low, was a worthy subject, as it would be in the 19th century for Balzac, Baudelaire, Zola, and others.

In its cinematic shifting from stanza to shapely octosyllabic stanza, each with its own mode of progression, displaying aspect after energetic aspect of that complex urban organism, the poem in effect was truly classical.

Its variegated Paris contrasted with the neo-classical idea of a new Rome—Augustus' Rome of the great imperial buildings and dramatic

rectilinear spaces, rather than the actual Rome of the monstrous Coliseum, and the crowded vibrant streets away from the Forum.

The Paris of “Adieu” is a city without an emperor or grand designer, a city that had evolved multifariously, and with a strong female component.

The poem was a brave and moving protest against the de-eroticizing of Paris that was going on under the combined pressures of Catholic zealots and the sought transformation of the city into an imperial power-centre under an absolute monarch. The numerous allusions to Venus, Cupid, and nymphs as presences in it are reminders of the quasi-divinity of Eros, the Renaissance counter-force, observable in numerous paintings, to Mars.

The poem was probably the last important classical poem for a century and a half to have a stanzaic voice recalling Villon’s. And the dominance of French neo-classicism, promoted from above, with its official favorites corresponding to Augustus’ Virgil and Horace, was not simply the result of inevitable cultural trends or the irresistible persuasiveness of Boileau.

When “heretical” poets are imprisoned in conditions so foul that they die within a couple of years after their release, like Théophile de Viau, or are burned at the stake, watched by a large crowd, it sends a powerful cultural message.

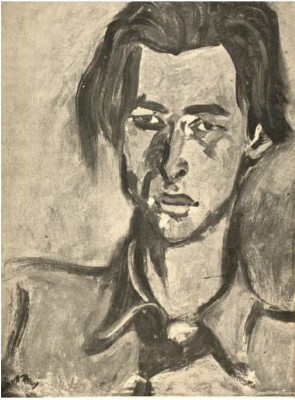
According to Louis Perceau, “Adieu” appeared when its author (the seventeenth-century’s Rimbaud) was nineteen. Five years later, in 1662, he was burned at the stake in the Place de Grève, the principal site of torture-killings, for blasphemy and offences against morals. Apparently he was strangled first, after the offending hand had been cut off.

The published and unpublished works that were condemned along with him were so thoroughly incinerated that all that remains of his most offensive book, *The Brothel of the Muses; or, The Nine Virgin Whores*, is a handful of poems and a fascinating list of contents, including titles like “On Crabs, after Cutting the Hairs on My P,” “On Shaking the Prick; Sonnet,” “Against the Cunt and for the Arse,” “Against the Arse and for the Cunt” (shades-to-be of Verlaine), and “The Respectable Fucker.”

We are still here in the France of Villon and Rabelais. It was with that France that 19th-century Paris poets, accessing it through anthologies, would restore connections, rather as we now inhale the heady air of Pre-Code movies and realize how sanitized the Breen-ruled “Golden Age” of the Hollywood Thirties really was.

## About the Author

Portrait of A Young Man by Nano Reid, 1949



**JOHN FRASER** was born in North London in 1928, and has degrees from Oxford (Balliol) and the University of Minnesota, where he did a Philosophy minor, wrote the article on 20<sup>th</sup> century American and British poetics for the Princeton *Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, and co-created the quarterly *GSE*, which appeared on time for three years.

From 1961 until his retirement in 1993 as George Munro Professor of English, he taught at Dalhousie University, where he gave the graduate seminar “Traditionalism and Experimentation in Poetry, 1880–1920.” In 1990 he delivered the Alexander Lectures at the University of Toronto.

His other eBooks are *Nihilism, Modernism, and Value*, *A Bit of This and a Bit of That about Poetry*, and *Thrillers*.

His three print books were published by Cambridge University Press, and articles of his appeared in the *Partisan Review*, *Southern Review*, *Yale Review*, *Cambridge Quarterly*, *Studio International*, and other journals.

Reviewers found his widely noticed *Violence in the Arts* (1973) “both scholarly and extraordinarily interesting” (*New Republic*), “continuously stimulating” (*Economist*), “profoundly illuminating” (*Psychology Today*), the product of “an extremely agile and incessantly active mind which illuminates almost every subject it touches” (*Spectator*). A reviewer of *America and the Patterns of Chivalry* (1982) called it “a brilliant and utterly absorbing work. There are not many learned books which have the unputdownable quality of a thriller; this is one of them.”

He was married to the artist Carol Hoorn Fraser (1930–1991), who is featured on his website, [jottings.ca](http://jottings.ca), which contains the equivalent of several more books, including the major revisionist Web anthology *A New Book of Verse*.

His first stay in France was in 1934. Subsequent visits included two months in Paris in 1946 and two summers in a hill village in Provence. His first French movie was *Quai des Brumes*, at the lovely Academy cinema on Oxford Street. He was an avid reader of *Midi-Minuit Fantastique*.

He is in Wikipedia as **John Fraser (critic)**.