

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

# FRENCH POETRY

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## GENERAL OVERVIEW OF FRENCH LITERATURE

French literature has its roots in the late Middle Ages, and is from its origins inflected by the pre modern world view of late antiquity. Epic and lyric both thrive in the growingly sophisticated work of the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries. Without a sense of nationhood, however, even the strong individuals among these writers—Christine de Pisan, Francois Villon—seem almost to be voices creating in a geopolitical vacuum.

By the sixteenth century the French monarchy had consolidated much that was undefined in earlier centuries, and the great Renaissance voices we hear—the Pléiade, Rabelais, Montaigne—come through to us with that individuality Montaigne proclaimed to be the keynote of his entire opus, a massive testimony to the simple nature of being here as a human being. In a poet like Ronsard we begin to hear the tones of love, romance, hope, pathos which mark the multi sided lyricist in its increasingly accessible contemporary form. We *hear* Ronsard.

The seventeenth century, much of it presided over by a rich, powerful, despotic, and stimulating monarchy, imposes on us, to this day, as the *Grand Siècle*, the *Great Century*, of French culture. During this period, as France grows into cultural self-awareness, there is an explosion of powerful, and publically supported theatre: the great tragedies of Racine and Corneille, the comedies of Moliere, which so sharply mock the foibles of the rising Middle Class. Prose writers as diverse as the maximist duc de la Rochefoucauld or the subtle social analyst, Mme. de Lafayette, converge on the traits of a rapidly evolving social and economic culture, in which the elite still retains the sense of *noblesse oblige*, and the person on the street looks up with admiration.

The eighteenth century, an age of ‘Enlightenment,’ brings the new science, and its new egalitarian mentality, to the front of social awareness. Diderot and his associates, in creating the *Encyclopédie*, bring to general attention the new world views of a modern society raising questions about traditional values, and especially about the traditional religious world views of earlier France. Brilliant thinkers, like Voltaire and Rousseau, plunge into the effort to describe and promote a new world, in which mankind will improve at avoiding traditionalist pitfalls, and at acquiring self-awareness. Needless to say, this is a century of prose, not of poetry.

The nineteenth century, ushered in by the Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, traverses a roller coaster of political transformations and upheavals, sees the nation move into new cultural complexities of a world gradually becoming international. With the growth of the cities, urban culturoscapes attract the attention of writers fascinated with the texture of the real: Balzac, de Maupassant, or Flaubert, who anatomizes life in the loneliness of the heart in the provinces. Where once, at century’s beginning, there was the effusiveness of Romantic poetry, in Lamartine or de Musset, now there is the cold abstract poetry of Valéry or Mallarmé who, at century’s end, seek refuge in the cold air of the pure.

The twentieth century, as all Westerners know, is the period when mankind decided to tear things apart and start all over again. Surrealism is one of the byproducts of this World War chaos, and we see it thrive in the poetries and manifestos of Breton and Aragon. Brilliant novelists, like Gide and Sartre, look closely at the character of their evolving society, and at the vise, between joy and despair, which increasingly constricts modern man. Inner life novelists like Marcel Proust and Francois Mauriac go into those places of despair, envy, hope, and frustration which increasingly mark the character of the person in the middle, the little person caught in the juggernaut of our time. One of the finest minds, and stylists, at work on defining the contemporary human condition is Albert Camus, whose small masterpiece, *The Stranger*, has crystallized in itself a sense of the entire perplexity of trying how to relate to the rapidly self-transforming twentieth century.

## MEDIAEVAL

### Overview

Though the deep origins of both the people and the language of France must be traced as far back as the tribe of the Galli, a tribal group living on the borders of the declining Roman Empire, and ultimately destined to build their Gallo-Roman dialect into what we call Old French, the language form in which we find the first authentic texts of French literature, is found in the 11th century.

From the outset, the creative output of this culture devolved about a variety of kinds of expression: religious poetry, chansons de gestes, 'songs of heroic deeds,' and epic style romances.

Four short works, chiefly of linguistic interest, were written in the tenth century. In the eleventh century, The importance of the Church and of feudalism are indicated by the three types of literary productions: saints' lives, neo-Latin religious works; and *chansons de geste*, poems concerning the mighty deeds of heroes. Both the large number and the excellence of *chansons de gestes*, poetic romances, and lyrics written during the twelfth century, have led critics to call this the Golden Age of mediaeval French literature. This poetry shows an increase in polish, in sophistication, and in social consciousness over that of preceding centuries.

The thirteenth century is noteworthy for its prose romances, its drama, its satire, its lyrics, and its allegory. Much of the literature of this century reflects the rise of the bourgeoisie. It shows an increasing tendency toward rationalism, realism, and cynicism. The literature of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries shows the disastrous effects of the Hundred Years' War. There was at that time little opportunity or inspiration for imaginative works. A few narrative poems, a few prose chronicles, and a few lyrics were written, but as a whole the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were literarily sterile.

### Unit discussion questions

Christine de Pisan has become an object of attention among Feminist critics. Do you see why? Is she a proto Feminist in her writing? What attitude did her culture tend to have, toward the place of women in society?

Is there a meeting point between the sacred and the criminal, in the work and thought of Francois Villon? Is that a meeting point which you can identify in other parts of mediaeval French culture? Architecture? Sculpture? Music?

What is the meaning of the 'grail' in *Perceval*? Does that epic centrally concern religious ritual, or is it primarily a simple Bildungsroman quest narrative?

What kind of devotion of the Virgin Mary quickens in the *Roman de la Rose*? Is this a literary or a devotional text?

Does Roland die a hero in the *Chanson de Roland*? Or was he a fool not to call Charlemagne to his military aid?

## Poetry

### Lyric

#### Christine de Pisan

**Christine de Pisan.** Christine de Pisan (1363-1430) was a remarkably self-willed and creative lyric poet, eminent to us now for the vigor with which she stood up for women's rights, in an era when women were being viewed as breeders and beauties, and on the street and in literature widely viewed as harlots. Christine was none of those things, and deeply resented this harsh male dominated attitude.

**Life and work of Christine de Pisan.** Christine de Pisan was married at fifteen to a French nobleman, who died ten years later, leaving her a widow with three children dependent on her. Unlike most women in her situation, at the time, she managed to create a role for herself as a professional writer, the first such in the West. The capacity for this self-creation lay in her early exposures to literature and culture. Born in Venice, her father a Councillor to the City of Venice, she remained in the shadows, learning, marrying, mothering, but from early childhood on conversant with major libraries and book collections, in that cultural crossroads environment. Until the mid 1390's she wrote ballads, heavily tinged with chivalry and chivalric lore, a chief stock of her reading. After her husband's death she began to show her works, which were of great autobiographical as well as chivalric interest, and she gained widespread attention among the noble courts of France. It was in that fashion, as her work was heard and read, that she won appointments as court writer for several dukes and finally for the King of France, Charles VI. In this professional life she supported herself and her children, and ultimately completed some forty one books in a thirty year period of writing.

**Themes in the work of Christine de Pisan.** The major collections of Christine de Pisan's work are her *Book of the Three Virtues*, a history of her nation—which was barely conscious of its nationhood at this time—from the Trojan War to the founding of France. Her second, and most widely read and influential, book was *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1405). In that book she imagines a symbolic city in which women are greatly admired and emulated—a fantasy that lies deep in Christine's drive. The greatest of the female virtues—Reason; Justice; Rectitude—are celebrated and virtually divinized in this text, which especially needs understanding against its background.

**The background of Christine de Pisan's defence of women.** There has been much discussion of Christine de Pisan's so called feminism. The distinguished Existentialist thinker, Simone de Beauvoir, believed Christine de Pisan was an early feminist, interested in gender issues; others followed that conception, making her something of a hero to some in the 'women's movement' of the last century. However we see Christine's strong position, we know it was aired conspicuously, in her time, by her public critical attacks on the poet Jean de Meung, and his *Roman de la Rose*. In that chivalric epic, Jean de Meung celebrates the wonder of women, while at the same time denigrating them. It would be fair to say that, in the epic, Jean de Meung slanders and vilifies women, agents of seduction, untrue spirits, vulgar sluts. The language he adopts is from the streets, and expressed current attitudes bitterly familiar to Christine de Pisan.

### Reading

#### Primary source reading

*The Book of the City of Ladies*, trans. Brown-Grant, 1999.

#### Secondary source reading,

Willard, Charity, *Christine de Pisan: Her Life and Works*, 1984.

#### Further reading

Altmann and McGrady, eds., *Christine de Pisan: A Casebook*, 2003.

#### Original language reading

Kosta-Thefaine, Jean-Francois, *La Pretresse et la guerrière*, 2008.

### **Suggested paper topics**

Was Christine de Pisan a feminist, as we might understand the expression today, or was she simply a talented woman of her time playing at the chivalric rules of male female give and take? Is it easy to misinterpret gender attitudes at a distance of several centuries from ourselves? Why?

Review the attitude toward woman in fourteenth century France. What kinds of freedom did women have? Study the problems Christine de Pisan had, in acquiring the inheritance due her on her husband's death. Do you think those problems were at the root of her fierce defense of women?

**Excerpt** <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/ballad-v/ttp>

Since, O my Love, I may behold no more  
Thy sovereign beauty that was all my cheer,  
My heart is given up to sorrows sore :  
For though the wealth of all the world were here,

There is no ease but in beholding thee  
Who art afar ! Whence I of tears am fain  
Mourning the happy days that used to be :  
Yet unto none but thee may I complain.

Doubt not of this, true love whom I adore,  
Thine image in my soul is ever clear :  
I think but on the blessedness of yore  
And on thy beauty, simple-sweet and dear.  
So fiercely smiteth love, I may not flee  
Nor may my soul the dread assault sustain :  
Death could not bring a sorrier weird to see,  
Yet unto none but thee may I complain.

Alas ! one only mercy I implore.  
When I am dead (as I to death am near)  
Pray for me, and thy praying shall restore  
My wounded spirit : shed one tender tear.  
Great were my comfort if my piteous plea  
Might touch thy heart, if sorrow might constrain  
Thy lips to sigh, such need of sighs have we.  
Yet unto none but thee may I complain.

Sweet flower, to whom I do abandon it;,  
My heart is broken down with bitter pain  
For one whom Fortune would not have me see :  
Yet unto none but thee may I complain.

## Villon, Francois

**Francois Villon; the mystery of his work and life.** Francois Villon (1431-disappears into the mist, ca. 1480) ) was the strongest French lyric poet of the Middle Ages, and to our day one of the most influential French poets, regularly translated, staged, and put to music around the globe. And yet this man was a rascal, as they said in his time, meaning actually a serious criminal. How is this state of affairs possible? Is it not significant that he was born in the same year in which Joan of Arc was burned to death at the stake, as a supposed heretic.

**Villon's Life.** Born Francois de Montcorbier (or Des Loges or Corbueil or Corbier) he assumed the surname of his foster father, who was a Professor of Canon Law kind enough to take Villon into his house, after the early death of Villon's parents. Francois received both a Bachelor's and a Masters degree at the University of Paris (1452) and seemed destined to be a clergyman; but on the way to that career he became associated with a band of vagabonds and thieves and got into serious and lifetime trouble with the law. (In 1456 he was involved in a 'scuffle' argument in which he was apparently found guilty of murdering a priest—who was part of the brawl; not long after he was suspected of involvement in the robbery of the chapel of the College de Navarre, after which he given a sentence of banishment—later reprieved; whereupon he set out on four years of wandering, one step ahead of the law, writing his major poetry —*Le Grand Testament*—and, as we know from his poetry itself, picking up every nuance of the street and underworld language of the time.

**Villon's Work.** Villon's poetic output was small. His two longest works were *Le Petit Testament* (1456) and *Le Grand Testament* (1461), in which he bequeathes many imaginary objects and qualities to his friends and enemies—who range from dignitaries to ruffians. Inserted within the Testaments are many short lyrics, chiefly ballades and rondeaus. Two famous lyrics are the 'Ballad of Lost Ladies' and the 'Ballad of the Hanged.' Many of these poems are difficult to interpret today, because they turn on in-jokes, slang, or the kinds of socially unpermitted language of the streets—the attack level we find in the *Roman de la Rose*, which Christine de Pisan found so objectionable.

**Villon's world view.** Villon is justly praised for the depth and sincerity of his emotions and for the vigor and precision of his style. He combines feeling with a hearty sense of humor. He can weep over the transiency of beautiful things, and yet jest grimly about his approaching execution. He has infinite zest for physical pleasures—wine, food, warm shelter in winter, beautiful women. Nature, for him, is nearly always harsh or cruel, and he has great pity for poor suffering rascals. Yet he never whines with self-pity, nor does he blame his own miseries on Fate; he confesses his guilt and prays only for God's mercy and forgiveness. This last preoccupation of Villon is deeply typical of his time, clerical throughout and saturated with the doctrines of the Church, but living the secular life to the hilt, as though to guarantee oneself enough to confess.

## Reading

### Primary source reading

Georgi, D., editor and translator, *The Poems of Francois Villon*, 2013.

### Secondary source reading

Fein, David, *Francois Villon Revisited*, 1997.

### Further reading

Kinnell, Galway, translator, *The Poems of Francois Villon*, 1982.

### Original language reading

*Le Testament*, "Ballade de bonne doctrine," ed. Richner and Henry, 1974.

## Suggested paper topics

Do you know other poets than Villon whose lives and works were created from the social depths, in or out of crime? Is there a tradition of the poet as a social misfit? When did this tradition form? Where? Does it apply today? Does this tradition have a presence in Asian, as well as Western, literature?

Does the dark and often cruel humor of Villon's poetry go with the Christian world view which forms the backdrop of his work? Is there room for play in the Mediaeval Christian world picture, which offers assurance of salvation but keeps the sinner, which we all are, hanging cheerfully on the brink? Is the gargoyle tradition, on Gothic churches, part of this dark hilarity of the Christian Middle Ages?

**Excerpt <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/ballade-to-our-lady/>**

*Lady of Heaven and earth, and therewithal  
Crowned Empress of the nether clefts of Hell,—*

*I, thy poor Christian, on thy name do call,  
Commending me to thee, with thee to dwell,  
Albeit in nought I be commendable.*

*But all mine undeserving may not mar  
Such mercies as thy sovereign mercies are;  
Without the which (as true words testify)  
No soul can reach thy Heaven so fair and far.  
Even in this faith I choose to live and die.  
Unto thy Son say thou that I am His,  
And to me graceless make Him gracious.  
Said Mary of Egypt lacked not of that bliss,  
Nor yet the sorrowful clerk Theophilus,  
Whose bitter sins were set aside even thus  
Though to the Fiend his bounden service was.  
Oh help me, lest in vain for me should pass  
(Sweet Virgin that shalt have no loss thereby!)  
The blessed Host and sacring of the Mass  
Even in this faith I choose to live and die.*

*A pitiful poor woman, shrunk and old,  
I am, and nothing learn'd in letter-lore.  
Within my parish-cloister I behold  
A painted Heaven where harps and lutes adore,  
And eke an Hell whose damned folk seethe full sore:  
One bringeth fear, the other joy to me.  
That joy, great Goddess, make thou mine to be,—  
Thou of whom all must ask it even as I;  
And that which faith desires, that let it see.  
For in this faith I choose to live and die.*

## Epic

### Chanson de Roland

**The French Epic.** *The Chanson de Roland* was one of many heroic songs, some of epic dimension, which circulated throughout France in the Middle Ages, and which were very popular from the 12th to the 14th centuries. (We need to note that France was during this period not yet quite France, but was a loosely bundled together collection of duchies and kingdoms, in which royal courts hosted entertainment both for the nobility and for the man and woman serving as serfs on the manor.) These songs were recited (to music) by a group of *jongleurs*, who were no doubt familiar with the basic outlines of the songs they performed, but at the same time improvised as their genius permitted. The writing down of this traditional heroic material is hard to date, but we are in any case certain that composers came along, in the course of time, who brought tales to a certain fullness, and that then clerics were primarily responsible for the written texts. In the case of the epic before us, the *Chanson de Roland*, the decisive composer, Tuoldus by name, was the one who wrote out the text of the epic, containing some 4,004 lines, in the form we now call the Oxford manuscript. The date of Tuoldus' brilliant composition was between 1140-1170.

**The hero of the epic.** The hero of the *Chanson de Roland* is a noble knight fighting in the army of Charlemagne. (Note: the fighting involved, and described in the poem, dates from three hundred years prior to the composition by Tuoldus.) The plot of the tale is complex as is the significance of it, and we have to marvel at the internal brilliance of the oral popular tradition. It goes like this. The army of Charlemagne is engaged in combat with the Saracens in Spain; the armed conflict between Christians and Muslims is raging. Charlemagne decides to propose a truce to the Saracens, and thereupon the French army, under the command of Roland, decides to send a deputation to Spain to negotiate a settlement. Roland chooses his uncle, Ganelon, to carry out this sensitive mission. Ganelon accepts the assignment, but with deep resentment, because he knows the fatal dangers of the mission, and suspects Roland of wanting to get rid of him. So deep is Ganelon's resentment that instead of negotiating a peace settlement he plots with the Saracens to ambush Roland and his men as they withdraw from Spain. The treacherous ambush takes place, Roland finds himself and his men cut off, and then Roland makes a gesture which characterizes him and brings the moral energy of the epic to the fore. In his pride and honor he refuses to call on Charlemagne's help, which he could have done by blowing Roland's famed hunting horn—which acquires almost a magical power here. Only when it is too late does Roland, expiring, blast out his lungs into the trumpet, but the gasped fury is so strong that the hero dies in the effort, and is in that moment taken up into heaven. In the aftermath, still within the epic, Charlemagne fights the battle of Roncevalles, finally making the Saracens his servants.

**The Christian Tenor.** The contemporary reader must work to assess the Christian tenor of this epic. Roland is called *proulx*, brave, but one must read into this trait his entire knightly dignity. (We are reading about the world of Charlemagne, which was itself already touched by early mediaeval Christianity. At the same time we are reading a poem composed *at the time of the Crusades*, when the image of the faithful knight hero was predominant.) Roland's ascension into heaven is a credible event horizon, given a pervasive world view that includes the everpresent possibility either of salvation or damnation.

## Reading

### Primary source reading

*The Song of Roland*, trans. Crossland (Cambridge, Ontario, 1999), pp. 1-78.

OR

Project Gutenberg <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/391>

### Secondary source reading

Keen, Maurice, *Chivalry*, 1984.

### Further reading

*History of Old French Literature*; Holmes, Urban (Nook Books, 2012).

### Original language reading

*La Chanson de Roland*, ed., tr. Joseph Bedier, 1937 (and often republished)

### Suggested paper topics

What kind of hero is Roland? Does he use good judgment in sending Ganelon to negotiate in Spain? Is his refusal to call for assistance, after the ambush of his forces, heroic or foolish? What do you make of his instantaneous ascension into heaven? Does that event indicate God's total approval of Roland's behavior?

The *Chanson de Roland* was apparently composed, as a full scale epic, some three centuries after the events that form its material. From what perspective does the epic seem to be written, that of the participants in the 'original events,' or that of the world of the composer, Turoludus? Do many epics reflect a significant time gap between the composer's perspective and that of the participants in the original events of the epic?

**Excerpt** <http://www.wright.edu/~christopher.oldstone-moore/roland.htm>

XXX

Oliver mounts upon a lofty peak,  
Looks to his right along the valley green,  
The pagan tribes approaching there appear;  
He calls Rollanz, his companion, to see:  
"What sound is this, come out of Spain, we hear,  
What hauberks bright, what helmets these that gleam?  
They'll smite our Franks with fury past belief,  
He knew it, Guenes, the traitor and the thief,  
Who chose us out before the King our chief."  
Answers the count Rollanz: "Olivier, cease.  
That man is my good-father; hold thy peace."

LXXXI

Upon a peak is Oliver mounted,  
Kingdom of Spain he sees before him spread,  
And Sarrazins, so many gathered.  
Their helmets gleam, with gold are jewelled,  
Also their shields, their hauberks orfreyed,  
Also their swords, ensigns on spears fixed.  
Rank beyond rank could not be numbered,  
So many there, no measure could he set.  
In his own heart he's sore astonished,  
Fast as he could, down from the peak hath sped  
Comes to the Franks, to them his tale hath said.

LXXXII

Says Oliver: "Pagans from there I saw;  
Never on earth did any man see more.  
Gainst us their shields an hundred thousand bore,  
That laced helms and shining hauberks wore;  
And, bolt upright, their bright brown spearheads shone.  
Battle we'll have as never was before.  
Lords of the Franks, God keep you in valour!  
So hold your ground, we be not overborne!"  
Then say the Franks "Shame take him that goes off:  
If we must die, then perish one and all."

### Roman de la Rose

**Overview** This chivalric romance epic length poem reveals one of the fullest expressions of chivalry and romance in the high Middle Ages, the 13th century. It is in the first part of the poem that these qualities are on display, for that part reflects the dominant chivalric mode of mediaeval sensibility. That first part, 4058 lines of heroic pentameter, was composed by Guillaume de Lorris, ca. 1230. It is entirely about the art of love, mediaeval style—suggestive perhaps of Ovid’s *Art of Love*, but strongly tinged with courtly values. The second part of the poem, taken on at the death of Lorris, was composed by Jean de Meun, who began his work in 1275, and composed 17, 247 lines of the same verse pattern. His work, as we shall say more fully, was of a deeply different tenor from that of Lorris, more worldly and cynical. The result is a double epic, consisting of two sharply different, though remotely related, parts.

**The Themes of the *Roman*.** The theme of both parts of the poem is love, of course, and the way to understand ladies and win the one you want. The first part, in which chivalry and romance dominate, starts with the implication that the poem is a dream, related by a lover. The lover’s first steps, as the poem opens, carry him to a high wall, which surrounds the castle of a nobleman, a castle called *Dedit*, or *Pleasure*. The lover is counseled by the Love God on the best way to pursue the lovely lady he seeks within the *hortus conclusus* (the enclosed garden) which lies within the castle walls—and which in the thought of the time served as a metaphor for the perfect womb of the Virgin Mary. In the course of setting up a plan for the lover, the Love God dispenses a great deal of useful advice on female psychology—no small part of the wide fascination of the text in its time. In the later portion of the poem, while still holding to the dream castle theme, the poet Jean de Meun studs his advice on love with many warnings about the degraded nature of women. For Jean de Meun *Raison*, *Reason*, becomes the presiding deity, and the spokesperson for caution in the battle ground of romance. But Jean de Meun goes farther, in his spirited assault on the many vices of his time. He takes particular aim against sodomy, which was a sin for the Church, and which seems to Jean to be a beastly deviation from nature. The allegorical deity Genius is assigned especially to the attack on the sodomites, whom he urges to use their styluses to write on the beautiful tablets, women, God has provided for them. Genius wishes sodomites to burn in hell, and in addition ‘may they suffer the loss of scrotum and testicles.’ It is this kind of attack, and a wide range of scurrilous languages Jean de Meun employs, that in part account for the widespread fascination with this text of his.

**The Influence of the *Roman de la Rose*.** More than 300 manuscripts of the *Roman* were in circulation not long after its composition, which testifies to the attraction of the work. Part of the poem was in its time translated from Old French into Middle English, and one of the translators, reputedly, was Chaucer.

## Reading

### Primary source reading

*The Romance of the Rose*, trans. Hargan, 1999.

### Secondary source reading

Lewis, C.S., *The Allegory of Love*, 1936. (Old, but absolutely the classic on the topic.)

### Further reading

Huizinga, Johan, *The World of the Middle Ages*, 1989.

### Original language reading

Zumthor, Paul, *Essai de poésie médiévale*, 1972.

### Suggested paper topics

Look at some of the illustrated mediaeval manuscripts of the *hortus conclusus*, to see what ravishing concepts of beauty and peace are summoned up there. Can you see why the lover, in the first part of the *Roman de la Rose*, needed advice on how to proceed within the castle walls? What is the relation between the doctrine of the closed garden and Catholic tradition concerning the birth giving of Mary?

Look into the intersecting world perspectives of Christine de Pisan, Francois Villon, and Jean de Meun. Can you see why Christine de Pisan eagerly joined the public debate about Jean de Meun's work, and why she so disparaged it? Can you imagine Francois Villon reading Jean de Meun? What would his attitude have been?

**Excerpt** <http://www.library.rochester.edu/robbins/medsex-heckelR1>

### The God of Love and the Affair of the Heart

The God of Love, who had maintained his constant watch over me and had followed me with drawn bow, stopped near a fig tree, and when he saw that I had singled out the bud that pleased me more than did any of the others, he immediately took an arrow and, when the string was in the nock, drew the bow -- a wondrously strong one -- up to his ear and shot at me in such a way that with great force he sent the point through the eye and into my heart. Then a chill seized me, one from which I have, since that time, felt many a shiver, even beneath a warm fur-lined tunic. Pierced thus by the arrow, I fell straightway to the earth. . . . I took the arrow in my two hands and began to pull hard at it, sighing as I pulled. I pulled so hard that I drew out the feathered shaft, but the barbed point called Beauty was so fixed inside my heart that it could not be withdrawn. It remains within; I still feel it, and yet no blood has ever come from there.

I was in great pain and anguish because of my doubled danger: I didn't know what to do, what to say, or where to find a physician for my wound, since I expected no remedy for it, either of herbs or roots. But my heart drew me toward the rosebud, for it longed for no other place. If I had it in my power, it would have restored my life. Even the sight and scent alone were very soothing for my sorrows.

I began then to draw toward the bud with its sweet exhalations. Love selected another arrow, worked in gold. It was the second arrow and its name was Simplicity. It has caused many a man and woman all over the world to fall in love. When Love saw me approach, he did not threaten me, but shot me with the arrow that was made of neither iron nor steel so that the point entered my heart through my eye. No man born, I believe, will ever dislodge it from there, for I tried, without any great joy, to pull the shaft from me, but the point remained within. Now know for a truth that if I had been full of desire for the rosebud before, my wish was greater now. As my woes gave me greater distress, I had an increased desire to go always toward the little rose that smelled sweeter than violets.

## Chretien de Troyes

**Chretien the man and writer.** Chretien de Troyes (1135-1190) was a learned and imaginative courtier, who served for many years at the court of Marie de Champagne, a setting in which he gained his sharp eye for behavior and psychology, and learned the ways of the world in a protected environment. In that elite world he carried out an active writing life, and though *Perceval* is the text which most carries his name today, he was prolific in many versions of romance: in the *Erec*, the story of a patient and long-suffering wife—the story which the English poet Tennyson retells in *Geraint and Enid*. *Lancelot the Cavalier of the Cart* tells of the amour of Lancelot and Guinevere. Other surviving works are *Yvain, the Cavalier of the Lion*; *Percival the Gallois*; and *William of England*. Chretien was the greatest of the French Romancers and the first to organize the Arthurian tales into a cycle. He was also the first to introduce into written literature Lancelot and his love for Queen Guinevere.

**Chretien's Perceval.** The *Perceval* itself is the fifth romance of Chretien, a 9000 line poetic account of both the life of Sir Gawain, and of the grail legend, which deals with the fate of the chalice from the Last Supper of Jesus Christ. That Chalice was ultimately saved by the faithful Jew, Joseph of Arimathea. In Chretien's account of the grail legend much attention is paid to the character of the young knight, Perceval, who is raised as something of a wild child, in the forests of Wales, and sets forth on adventures—first to the castle of King Arthur. While at Arthur's court, Perceval distinguishes himself by an act of remarkable bravery, by killing a knight who has been harassing the king. Perceval falls in love with Blanchefleur—a lady of distinction at the court—thereby showing his sensitivity to the finesse of love—this is, after all, Romance literature. While returning one day to King Arthur's castle—the fictive *geography* of these events is hazy—Perceval comes upon an aged ill man, whom the texts calls The Fisher King, a figure of royalty sitting in an area of depressed land situated next to a body of stilled and stagnant waters. (This figure is inherently mysterious, a representative of the sickness of the land or the times.) While staying with the Fisher King, Perceval beholds a strange procession including a beautiful lady carrying a bleeding lance; the wounded King seems some kind of representative of a Christ transpierced. On return to Arthur's castle, Perceval is confronted by a very ugly woman who asks him why he had not inquired of the Fisher King the reason for the King's illness. It is here that the *Perceval* section of the Romance breaks off, leaving us with a sense that a great mystery had lain before our knight, and that he had not altogether fathomed it, or its healing/saving potential.

**Perceval and Eliot.** The American poet T.S. Eliot, in his long poem *The Wasteland*, reaches to Chretien's vision, of a world sick and despondent, and needing to be asked the right questions as a step toward healing. This is a powerful example of the living energy of a classic literary insight.

## Reading

### Primary source reading

Chretien de Troyes, *Perceval, the Story of the Grail*, tr. Bryant, 1996.

### Secondary source reading

Loomis, Roger, *The Grail: From Celtic myth to Christian symbol*, 1991.

### Further reading

*The New Arthurian Encyclopedia*, ed. by Lacy Norris, 1991,

### Original language reading

Koehler, E., *L'aventure chevaleresque*, 1974.

### Suggested paper topics

What is literarily compelling about the legend of young Perceval and his search for the grail? Is there a luring mixture of concrete quest with vagueness, which makes one feel in the presence of a mystery? What seems to you the relation between the tale of Perceval, and that of the far worldlier Gawain, the subject of the second half of this Romance epic?

Look at the Parzifal epic by the contemporary German poet, Wolfram von Eschenbach, and study its relation to the (earlier) work of Chretien. Each poet is concerned with both the adventurous and the spiritual quests of their heroes. Which hero seems to you the more complex and interesting? Which hero learns the most from his quest?

**Excerpt** <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/theme/perceval>

*For a noble beginning  
A romance can begin worthily  
With the most enjoyable tale there is:  
That is, the [Story of the] Grail, whose secret  
No one should ever reveal or recount;  
For the story might reveal so much  
Before it's recited to the end  
That someone could suffer for it  
Who had not violated the secret;  
The wise thing, then, is to leave it  
And simply pass it by;  
For, unless Master Bliu is lying,  
No one should reveal the secret.  
Now listen to me one and all  
And you will hear a tale  
That will be a delight to listen to,  
For in it will be the seven guards,  
Who throughout the world have charge  
Of all the good stories that have ever been told.  
These writings will recount  
What sort of people the seven guards are,  
How [they act] and what end they will come  
to;  
For you have never heard the story  
Told or recounted truthfully;  
Yet how and why the powerful country  
Of Logres was destroyed  
Was noised and bruited widely;  
Time was, it was much discussed.  
The kingdom went to ruin,  
The land was so dead and desolate  
That it wasn't worth two bits;  
They lost the voices of the wells  
And the maidens who dwelled in them.  
Indeed, the maidens served a very important  
purpose:  
No one who wandered the highways,  
Whether at night or in the morning,  
Ever needed to alter his route  
In order to find food or drink;  
He had only go to one of the wells.  
He could ask for nothing  
In the way of fine and pleasing food  
That he would not have forthwith...*

## 17<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

### Overview

At the beginning of the century, and in anticipation of the sharp classicism of the 17th century, there was at this time considerable literary scourging of the attitudes of the late Renaissance. The poet Malherbe (1555-1628) violently attacked the mannerisms, affectation, and exaggeration of the later poets of the Baroque period. His emphasis on impersonality, clarity, sobriety and purity and precision of diction virtually killed lyricism, and substituted eloquence in its place.

The destructive criticism of Malherbe, the rationalism of Descartes, the absolutism of the court, the elegance and refinement of the salons, and the stabilizing influence of the Academy—all these combined to clear the way for French classicism, which was triumphant in the last half of the century. Boileau (1636-1711), who succeeded Malherbe as literary dictator, continued the work of purifying diction, and propounded the literary dogma of French classicism: Truth alone is beautiful. The poet should imitate nature, which is true. Reason should dominate the poet's work. Poetical expression should conform to good taste. Imitation of the ancients should be cultivated. Originality is not novelty of idea but the perfect expression of an idea. These ideas of Boileau were immensely influential, and he summed them up in a brilliant *Art Poétique*, which was of immense importance in both England and France.

During the last decades of the seventeenth century literary discussion revolved around the Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes (1687-1715), the Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns, over whether the ancient authors were superior to the modern ones. At stake was one's view of whether the arts were progressive, and, in a wider sense, of whether human cultural life is progressive.

## 18<sup>th</sup> century

Unlike the literary productions of the seventeenth century, the literature of the Age of Enlightenment was more concerned with content than with form and technique. Much of it was utilitarian, purposive, and didactic. "It was dominated by a skeptical philosophy, a hatred of any form of tradition or authority, and a desire for political and social reform..." The watchwords of the age were reform, freedom of thought, and tolerance. Seventeenth century authors superseded the ancients as models, but classical forms and genres were still employed, and the rules of Boileau's *Art Poétique* were not questioned. Wit and cosmopolitanism were frequent ingredients, and, after the middle of the century, "sensibility" became popular.

Quite understandably, all eighteenth century French literature is prose. Voltaire, it is true, wrote many types of poetry, and at the end of the century Andre Chénier (1762-1794) wrote interesting lyrical and philosophical poems.

In the field of the essay, Montesquieu (1689-1755) was one of the leaders. His *Persian Letters* (1721) were satires on Parisian culture. Of more importance was his *Spirit of the Laws* (1748), an analysis of various governments which demonstrates that they are the results of moral, economic, and physical conditions, and that human laws are relative. Another distinguished essayist was the Comte de Buffon, who wrote a thirty-six volume *Natural History* (1749-1788). The most famous and influential undertaking of the eighteenth century was the *Encyclopedie* (1750-1777), of which the principal editor was Denis Diderot, and to which most of the leading intellectuals of the time contributed. The *Encyclopédie* attempted to gather and systematize all knowledge about the sciences, arts, and trades. Its contributors, however, used it for attacking tyranny in all its forms, and for championing individual liberty and human reason in all their forms. The work played a large part in the development of ideas which would be influential in the French Revolution.

While stage drama was weak in this period, the French novel reached its maturity at this period. Marivaux began two novels of which the main feature was psychological analysis, the Abbé Prévost (1697-1763) wrote one now famous novel, *Manon Lescaut* (1731), and Bernardin de Saint Pierre (1737-1814) wrote *Paul et Virgine*, a sentimental novel deeply involved with nature, which proved an important precursor of Romanticism.

## 19<sup>th</sup> century

**Overview** French literature of the nineteenth century can be roughly divided into two sections.

The first half of the century can be called by the term Romantic, for it picks up on tendencies evident in the French literature of the late 18th century, like the *Querelle des anciens des modernes*, which reflected a growing interest in the expression of feelings, and in independence from the past, which had the germs of the Romantic in it. But that is just a literary beginning, to the change in sensibility the Romantic heralds in. The first half of the 19th century in France also explodes with political and social energies, in which were released many of the open feelings and freed thoughts which became part of the Romantic perspective in literature and the other arts, as well as in morals and philosophy. The declaration of Napoleon as consul, in 1799, and Emperor in 1804, was the launching pad first for great French optimism, that a new era of growth and justice was at hand, and then for growing dismay at the abuses and humiliations of Napoleon. After Waterloo, in 1815, a despotic monarch was chosen to lead the nation, then replaced by a revolution, then a second (constitutional) monarchy was called in, headed by Louis Philippe, who was again replaced in 1848, by Louis Napoleon, a nephew of Napoleon I. As a result of these many changes, and the uncertainties accompanying them, creative forces, as well as hindrances, were freed in the society, and took expression in new literary voices which seem to come from a different world from that of Malherbe and Boileau, in the preceding century.

A survey of French literature of the last half of the nineteenth century consists in large measure of a discussion of four *isms*: realism, naturalism, Parnassianism, and Symbolism.

By 1842 the old forms of Romanticism that had been triumphant during the fourth decade of the century were already on their way out, although Hugo and a few others continued to write some Romantic verse for many years thereafter. Realism, of which there had been distinct traces since 1830, now received a powerful boost from several sources: first, the large number of eccentric—and usually indigent—writers and artists who lead a “Bohemian” life in the Latin Quarter of Paris, and who scoffed both at the ugly mediocrity of the bourgeoisie, and at the egoistic pessimism of some of the Romantics; and second, the caricaturists and painters of the Barbizon school (especially Corot and Millet) who reacted against the violence and unreality of the Romantic school of painting; the Barbizon artists turned to French landscapes and simple life for their subjects.

After 1850 two kinds of realism became discernible: first, artistic realism promoted by the proponents of “art for art’s sake,” a school of which Théophile Gautier was a prominent member, and in which we might well want to include Flaubert and the Parnassians; second, the schools of realism or naturalism, which Emile Zola, the founder of naturalism, defined as “the formula of modern science applied to literature.” Naturalism actually went a step beyond the earlier realism in targeting the sordid and unsavory for particular attention.

### Discussion questions

Can you see a case for considering Alfred de Musset and Alphonse de Lamartine as the quintessential Romantic poets? If so, what traits do they share? If not, what authors seem to you to epitomize the Romantic spirit in France?

The lyrics of Mallarmé and Rimbaud are profoundly different, the one condensed and pure, the other expansive and visionary. Do you see something in common to the work of these two writers?

## Poetry

### Lamartine, Alphonse de

**Alphonse de Lamartine; life and Works.** Alphonse de Lamartine (1790-1869) was born in Macon in Burgundy, of an old aristocratic family. After a happy childhood, he went to school at the Jesuit Seminary in Belley. Then he spent four years of leisure and reading at Milly. In 1811, while traveling in Italy, he became infatuated with a young cigarette maker in Naples, whom he later idealized in the book *Graziella*. Returning to France, he served first as a member of the royal guard of Louis XVIII and later as an attaché to the diplomatic corps at Naples. In 1816 he fell in love with Mme. Julie Charles, who died the following year; she inspired many of his poems. The publication of *The Poetic Meditations*, in 1820, assured his fame. In 1829 he was elected a member of the *Académie Française*. After the fall of Charles X, he gave up his diplomatic career and campaigned for a seat in the Assembly. At first unsuccessful, he was eventually elected (1833), and from then until 1848 played an increasingly important role in national politics. He opposed the bourgeois government of Louis Philippe. Directly after the Revolution of 1848 he was the virtual dictator of France—for about three months. Then the fickle and radical mob abandoned him for the glamorous Louis Napoleon, and Lamartine retired permanently from politics. Always extravagant and generous, he now fell into financial difficulties and spent the last years of his life writing continually, principally hackwork for periodicals.

**The poetry of Lamartine.** The chief literary influences on Lamartine were the Bible, Rousseau, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, Chateaubriand, Petrarch, Tasso, Milton, Ossian and Young. Whereas Chateaubriand wrote about religion, nature, and himself, Lamartine wrote about religion, nature, and women; and, like Chateaubriand, he often associated two or perhaps all three of the topics in one work. His religious is vaguer and less orthodox than that of Chateaubriand, but it is also deeper and more idealistic, sometimes inclining toward pantheism. Lamartine's imagination is aural rather than visual; his descriptions are usually lacking in color—done principally in blacks and whites and grays. He prefers to describe floating or soaring things—clouds, winds and waves—it being, as a critic observed, his nature to dematerialize everything he touches. Much of his love poetry is idealistic and Platonic, and, like that of Petrarch, tends to identify the physical with the spiritual. It often displays a note of melancholy.

**Some individual works.** Some of Lamartine's best individual lyrics are 'The Lake,' which combines melancholy, love, and appreciation for nature; the 'Crucifix,' in which he associates his love for Elvire (Julie Charles) with his religious beliefs; and 'Song of Love,' a poem to his wife. *Jocelyn* is a long narrative poem which tells of the pure love of a priest for a young girl, and of his renunciation. The 'Fall of an Angel' is a long (11,000 lines) epic about an angel who, through love for a human woman, becomes human himself. Lamartine also wrote several prose works. *Raphael* (1849) and *Graziella* (1852) are semiautobiographical novels. The first is partially based on his love for Mme. Charles; the other on his affair with the Neapolitan cigarette maker. The *History of the Girondins* (1847) is an inspirational but untrustworthy account of one portion of the French Revolution; the book helped to foment the Revolution of 1848.

## Reading

### Primary source reading

<http://poemsintranslation.blogspot.com/2010/04/lamartine-lake-from-french.html>

### Secondary source reading

Fortescue, William, *Alphonse de Lamartine: A Political Biography*, 1983.

### Further reading

Mackay, John, *Inscription and Modernity: From Wordsworth to Mandelstam*, 2010.

### Original language reading

Benichou, Paul, *Le Sacre de l'écrivain*, 1985.

## Suggested paper topics

Do you see a bond between Lamartine's Romantic poetic creativity, and his political prominence? Was it his belief that the individual should express and promote all his skills and talents? In whatever realm?

Does Lamartine's poetry mark a sharp break from the French lyric of the century that preceded him? Where, in French poetry before Lamartine, would you have to go to find the deep expression of lyric emotion? Would it be Ronsard?

**Excerpt** [http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Alphonse\\_de\\_Lamartine](http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Alphonse_de_Lamartine)

If greatness of purpose, smallness of means, and astonishing results are the three criteria of a human genius, who could dare compare any great man in history with Muhammad? The most famous men created arms, laws, and empires only. They founded, if anything at all, no more than material powers which often crumbled away before their eyes. This man moved not only armies, legislations, empires, peoples, dynasties, but millions of men in one-third of the then inhabited world; and more than that, he moved the altars, the gods, the religions, the ideas, the beliefs and the souls. Philosopher, Orator, Apostle, Legislator, Conqueror of Ideas, Restorer of Rational beliefs... The founder of twenty terrestrial empires and of one spiritual empire — that is Muhammad. As regards all standards by which human greatness may be measured, we may well ask, is there any man greater than he?

Sometimes, only one person is missing, and the whole world seems depopulated.

Time, arrest your flight! and you, propitious hours, arrest your course! Let us savor the fleeting delights of our most beautiful days!

I say to this night: "Pass more slowly"; and the dawn will come to dispel the night.

Let us love the passing hour, let us hurry up and enjoy our time.

Love alone was left, as a great image of a dream that was erased.

Limited in his nature, infinite in his desires, man is a fallen god who remembers the heavens.

What is our life but a succession of preludes to that unknown song whose first solemn note is sounded by death?

## **Musset, Alfred de**

**Musset, Alfred de; his significance for his time.** Alfred de Musset (1810-1857) was a French poet, dramatist, moralist, and arguably one of the first French Romantic poets, who fit many of the stereotypes frequently attached to that breed of creator: susceptibility to intense and idealistic amour, vanity, powerful imagination, and, interestingly enough, an interest and involvement with the public sphere. He is especially remembered for his *Confession d'un Enfant du Siecle* (1836), *Confession of a Child of the Century*.

**Musset, Alfred de: life and career.** De Musset was born in Paris. His family was upper class but poor, in the sense that de Musset's father was stingy and refused any money for his son. De Musset's mother was a society hostess. Between the two not very nurturing parents, Alfred de Musset carved out a private world, in which as a youngster he created and acted out mini-plays, and told poems and stories to himself. At the age of nine de Musset was sent to the distinguished Lycée Henry IV, where he displayed his brilliance and won the highly competitive Latin Prize. At the age of seventeen he was invited to join the prestigious literary salon of the poet Charles Nodier, but he was surrounded by voices telling him it was time to 'get a job.' In search of a congenial job, Alfred de Musset tried medicine, law, drawing, tutoring English, giving piano lessons. None of these professions caught his commitment, but fortunately he was about to score a public success with a piece of writing that was engaging him, the *Contes d'Espagne et d'Italie* (1829), *Tales of Spain and Italy*. By the age of twenty he was a popular literary figure in Paris and a dandy around town. Soon afterwards he, like Lord Byron in England, began to poke fun at some of the absurdities of the foppish or spaced out Romantics. Nor was Alfred de Musset living off the air all this time, for like many of the supposedly dreamy Romantics he was involved in political social affairs. He was appointed Librarian of the Ministry of the Interior during the July Monarchy, and played a substantive role in the Rhine crisis which developed between France and Germany in 1840. The burning drama of de Musset's life, his two year love affair with the writer Georges Sand, was just in the offing (1833-35), and was to form the substance of much of de Musset's best poetry. The later years of de Musset's life were to open him to welcome honors—in 1853 he was made Minister of Public Instruction, in 1845 he was awarded the Legion d'honneur, and in 1852, on the third try, he was inducted into the *Académie française*.

**Alfred de Musset works.** All of de Musset's poems are contained in two volumes: *Premieres poésies* (1829-1835) and *Poesies nouvelles* (1836-1852). *The Tales of Spain and Italy* are youthful effusions full of Byronic swagger and cynicism. The affair with Georges Sand sobered and matured de Musset, and transformed his swagger into despair. The four "Night poems," perhaps his best efforts, reflect that despair. In "Memory," 1841, de Musset finds consolation in the thought that beautiful memories can live on even after love is dead. With the possible exception of Vigny, he is the most introspective of the French romantic poets, and he is about the only one who gives us genuine and intimate descriptions of the joys and pains of love.

### **Reading**

#### **Primary source reading**

*The Confession of a child of the Century*, Alfred de Musset, tr. David Coward, 2014.

#### **Secondary source reading**

Levin, Susan, *The Romantic Art of Confession*, 1998.

#### **Further reading**

Alfred de Musset, *Historical Dramas*, tr. Sices, 1987.

#### **Original language reading**

Barnell, Rex, *Etude analytique de l'influence de Shakespeare sur le theatre d'Alfred de Musset*, 1988.

#### **Suggested paper topics**

What do you think of the public prominence of Alfred de Musset? Does it play a similar role in his life, to that played in the life of Lamartine, who also served in high office while writing passionate poetry?

Look closely into some of de Musset's love poetry. What kind of passions does he express there? Is there 'sensuous material,' as we might expect it today, or is the level of discourse somewhat formulaic and idealistic?

**Excerpt [http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/224009.Alfred\\_de\\_Musset](http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/224009.Alfred_de_Musset)**

"How glorious it is – and also how painful – to be an exception. "

"You're like a lighthouse shining beside the sea of humanity, motionless: all you can see is your own reflection in the water. You're alone, so you think it's a vast, magnificent panorama. You haven't sounded the depths. You simply believe in the beauty of God's creation. But I have spent all this time in the water, diving deep into the howling ocean of life, deeper than anyone. While you were admiring the surface, I saw the shipwrecks, the drowned bodies, the monsters of the deep"

"Romanticism is the abuse of adjectives."

"Man is a pupil, pain is his teacher."

"Alas, everything that men say to one another is alike; the ideas they exchange are almost always the same, in their conversation. But inside all those isolated machines, what hidden recesses, what secret compartments! It is an entire world that each one carries within him, an unknown world that is born and dies in silence! What solitudes all these human bodies are!"

"Life is a deep sleep of which love is the dream"

"What I need is a woman who is something, anything: either very beautiful or very kind or in the last resort very wicked; very witty or very stupid, but something."

## Hugo, Victor

**Victor Hugo, the general profile.** Victor Hugo (1802-1885) was a French poet, novelist, dramatist, and political activist, who lived through and responded to the tumultuous passages from Empire to Monarchy to Republicanism back to Regency, passages which marked the 19th century in France. He was two years old when Napoleon declared himself Emperor, and only eighteen when Napoleon fell.

**Victor Hugo the life.** Victor Hugo was born in Besancon to a father who held a high position in the French army, and was a freethinking Republican, and to a mother who was a Catholic Royalist; a blend of ideologies which could have been invigorating but in the end drove the two partners apart. While living with his father, as a youngster, Victor Hugo was taken on a six month trip to Spain, the Alps, and Italy, and kept a vivid memory of that experience, which was one of many travel exposures he was to enjoy in his earlier years. For some time afterwards he stayed with his father in Spain, but after Waterloo Victor returned to Paris. His formal education was neglected by both his parents, but during this time he read a great deal (especially the works of Rousseau and Chateaubriand, who was to be Victor Hugo's lifelong idol) and while in his early teens became devoted to the idea of being a writer. He wrote a tragedy when he was fourteen, and three years later edited a newspaper, the *Literary Conservator*. In 1822, the year in which he married Adele Foucher, he published his first volume of poetry. In the early twenties he was a conservative and royalist, but by 1830 he had become an ardent liberal and democrat. His numerous novels, plays, and volumes of poetry, published between 1822 and 1840, his self-confidence and his vociferous advocacy, of the romantic theories of life and literature, made him the recognized leader of the French romantics during the fourth decade of the century. In 1841 he was elected to membership in the *Académie française*. Between 1843 and 1848 he forsook literature for politics; he soon became one of the leaders of the democratic party. His opposition to Napoleon III and the Second Empire led to his being exiled. He remained abroad from 1852 til 1870—at Brussels, in Jersey, and mainly in Guernsey. His last fifteen years were spent in Paris, where he enjoyed the role of grand old man of French letters.

**Victor Hugo the poet and novelist.** He believed that the poet sees truth more intuitively and more clearly than other men, and feeling that the poet's mission is to lead those other men to the light. Two of Hugo's greatest poetic gifts are imagination and rhetorical dexterity. He also wrote romantic novels of adventure and social novels, and for both of those achievements he is best known outside of France. (While his *Odes et Ballades*, 1824, are perhaps the most known achievements of his vast poetic oeuvre, his best known prose eminences are *Notre Dame de Paris*, 1831—in English *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*—and *Les Misérables*, 1862, which celebrates and commiserates with the life of the truly poor of Paris.

**Evaluation of Hugo's work.** As a classic monument of French literature, Hugo has engendered praises of every kind. Perhaps the flip side of the case is more instructive. He was immensely egotistical, believing that the city of Paris should be named for him. His novels are misshapen and extravagant. His poetry is often empty and rhetorical. Yet for all that flip side, the immensity of this man's achievement, and the breadth of his spirit, continue to lead and inspire world wide readers.

### Reading

#### Primary source reading

*Les Misérables*, tr. Fahnenstock, 2013.

#### Secondary source reading

Barnett, Marva, *Victor Hugo on Things that Matter: A Reader*, 2009.

#### Further reading

Halsall, A.W., et. al. *Victor Hugo and the Romantic Drama*, 1998.

#### Original language reading

Viala, Alain, et al, *Le Theatre en France des origines à nos jours*, 1997.

### Suggested paper topics

The musical, *Les Miserables*, has scored a tremendous success in North America, and elsewhere. Check into that musical, if you don't know it, and see what magic of Hugo it captures? Is there in Hugo a powerful sympathy for humanity and its tumultuous history?

Investigate the writing practices of Victor Hugo, who was an immensely prolific writer—like Voltaire before him, and Balzac later—but who at the same time as writing played a vigorous role in the politics of his time and country. How was this achievement possible? What was his secret?

**Excerpt** [http://journals.lww.com/academicmedicine/fulltext/2006/04000/les\\_miserables\\_\\_\\_excerpt\\_.11.aspx](http://journals.lww.com/academicmedicine/fulltext/2006/04000/les_miserables___excerpt_.11.aspx)

Come in," said the Bishop.

The door opened. A singular and violent group made its appearance on the threshold. Three men were holding a fourth man by the collar. The three men were gendarmes; the other was Jean Valjean.

A brigadier of gendarmes, who seemed to be in command of the group, was standing near the door. He entered and advanced to the Bishop, making a military salute.

"Monseigneur—" he said.

At this word, Jean Valjean, who was dejected and seemed overwhelmed, raised his head with an air of stupefaction.

"Monseigneur," he murmured. "So he is not the curé?"

"Silence!" said the gendarme. "He is Monseigneur the Bishop."

In the meantime, Monseigneur Bienvenu had advanced as quickly as his great age permitted.

"Ah! here you are!" he exclaimed, looking at Jean Valjean. "I am glad to see you. Well, but how is this? I gave you the candlesticks too, which are of silver like the rest, and for which you can certainly get two hundred francs. Why did you not carry them away with your forks and spoons?"

Jean Valjean opened his eyes wide, and stared at the venerable Bishop with an expression which no human tongue can render any account of.

"Monseigneur," said the brigadier of gendarmes, "so what this man said is true, then? We came across him. He was walking like a man who is running away. We stopped him to look into the matter. He had this silver—"

"And he told you," interposed the Bishop with a smile, "that it had been given to him by a kind old fellow of a priest with whom he had passed the night? I see how the matter stands. And you have brought him back here? It is a mistake."

"In that case," replied the brigadier, "we can let him go?"

"Certainly," replied the Bishop.

The gendarmes released Jean Valjean, who recoiled.

"Is it true that I am to be released?" he said, in an almost inarticulate voice, and as if speaking in his sleep.

"Yes, thou art released; dost thou not understand?" said one of the gendarmes.

"My friend," resumed the Bishop, "before you go, here are your candlesticks. Take them."

He stepped to the chimney-piece, took the two silver candlesticks, and brought them to Jean Valjean. The two women looked on without uttering a word, without a gesture, without a look which could disconcert the Bishop.

Jean Valjean was trembling in every limb. He took the two candlesticks mechanically, and with a bewildered air.

"Now," said the Bishop, "go in peace. By the way, when you return, my friend, it is not necessary to pass through the garden. You can always enter and depart through the street door. It is never fastened with anything but a latch, either by day or by night."

## Vigny, Alfred de

**Vigny, Alfred de: Life and Letters.** Alfred de Vigny (1797-1865) was born at Loches, in Touraine—a city to which he never returned. He was of an aristocratic family, which suffered considerable loss of prominence and assets during the Napoleonic Revolution. His father was an aged veteran of the Seven Years War, who died before Alfred's twentieth birthday; his mother was a devout follower of the philosophy of Rousseau, and the primary supervisor of her son's education. After serving about fourteen years in the army, and rising only from the rank of lieutenant to that of captain, de Vigny resigned (1827), married an Englishwoman, enrolled in an aristocratic club which conferred on him membership in the *Maison du Roi (The King's House)*, and decided to devote himself entirely to literature. (Already active as a writer, de Vigny had published two of his finest works before his marriage: *Poemes antiques et modernes*, 1826, and a fine historical novel, *Cinq-Mars*, 1826.) Thereafter he wrote volumes of poems, two plays, some journals, and stories. (Marcel Proust considered de Vigny the best French poet of the nineteenth century.) As life wore on, and his marriage declined in joy—his wife was not well, nor did she wish to adapt to French culture—he fell violently in love with an actress, Marie Dorval, whose infidelity and lack of honor embittered him. In 1845 he was received into the French Academy. Twice he tried to win an election to the National Assembly. In 1848 he retired to his chateau in Angouleme, where, after a protracted and stoical battle with stomach cancer, he died.

**The thought of Alfred de Vigny.** De Vigny, unlike most of the other French Romantic poets, was a deep and original thinker. He was a pessimist, a solitary, and a stoic. He said that he was born “serious to the point of sadness,” and his disappointments in the army, in love, and in politics did nothing toward improving this mindset. He was a disillusioned idealist who had decided that in a world composed of good and evil the evil had far the upper hand, that all was for the worst in the worst of all possible worlds. He decided that no person or thing is trustworthy or benevolent. The human throng is either stupid or dishonest; women are always more or less unreliable. Nature is more like a tomb than a mothering womb. Even God is ill intentioned, or deaf, dumb, and blind. The poet, the man of genius, is therefore condemned to silence, loneliness, and suffering. De Vigny is, however, anything but a whiner. He believed that it is the obligation of each man to “suffer and die without speaking.” This is a resignation made up of pride plus an awareness of the futility of resisting. There is one ray of hope breaking through the dark sky of his pessimism. There is a true God, the God of the eternal realm of ideas, where noble souls may find impalpable and immortal treasures.

**An evaluation of de Vigny's life and work.** As a novelist, storyteller, and dramatist, de Vigny is barely remembered; and his poetry has never been widely popular. But he will never be forgotten by the few who refuse to be repelled by his austerity and his pessimism, and who value classical restraint, vivid imagery, original thought, and intellectual honesty.

### Reading

#### Primary source reading

*The Servitude and Grandeur of Arms*, tr. Roger Gard, 1997.

#### Secondary source reading

Broome and Chesters, *The appreciation of Modern French Poetry (1850-1950)*, 1976.

#### Further reading

Duncan, Phillip, ‘Alfred de Vigny's “La Colere de Samson” and Solar Myth,’ *Nineteenth Century French Studies*, XX, 1992, 478-481.

#### Original language reading

Gouvard, Jean-Michel, ed. *De la langue au style*, 2005.

#### Suggested paper topics

Alfred de Vigny was a pessimist, but also a Romantic. That is, he believed strongly in human ideals, but found himself in a world where, as he saw it, mankind was a victimized puppet, never able to realize the ideal. Were other Romantic poets in France 'optimists,' in contrast to this view point of de Vigny?

One of de Vigny's finest poems is 'La Mort du Loup,' the 'Death of the Wolf.' Read and master this poem, and evaluate it as an expression of the ancient Roman Stoicism Vigny admired. Do you see the presence of the classical tradition in other poems of de Vigny?

**Excerpt** [http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Alfred\\_de\\_Vigny](http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Alfred_de_Vigny)

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*L'existence du Soldat est (après la peine de mort) la trace la plus douloureuse de barbarie qui subsiste parmi les hommes.*

The soldier's lot is the most melancholy relic of barbarism (next to capital punishment) that lingers on among mankind.

*Tout homme a vu le mur qui borne son esprit.*

Every man has seen the wall that limits his mind.

*L'histoire est un roman dont le peuple est l'auteur.*

History is a novel whose author is the people.

*On étouffe les clameurs, mais comment se venger du silence?*

Clamour can be stifled, but how avenge oneself on silence?

*Un désespoir paisible, sans convulsions de colère et sans reproches au ciel est la sagesse même.*

A calm despair, without angry convulsions or reproaches directed at heaven, is the essence of wisdom.

*Les acteurs sont bien heureux, ils ont une gloire sans responsabilité.*

Actors are lucky, they have glory without responsibility.

*La presse est une bouche forcée d'être toujours ouverte et de parler toujours. De là vient qu'elle dit mille fois qu'elle n'a rien à dire.*

The press is a mouth forced to be forever open and forever talking. Consequently it says a thousand times that it has nothing to say.

*Un livre est une bouteille jetée en pleine mer sur laquelle il faut coller cette étiquette: attrape qui peut.*

A book is a bottle thrown into the sea on which this label should be attached: Catch as catch can.

*Le théâtre n'a jamais été en Angleterre qu'une mode des hautes classes ou une débauche du bas peuple.*

In England the theatre has never been anything but a fashion for the upper classes or a debauch for the common people.

## **Baudelaire, Charles**

**Charles Baudelaire's achievement.** Charles Baudelaire (1821-1868) was a French Romantic poet, critic, and translator (especially of Edgar Allan Poe) who assimilated the spirit of early Romantic poetry—de Vigny, de Musset, Victor Hugo--and who carried it into more innovative directions which would eventually prove formative for the whole of twentieth century poetry.

**Baudelaire, life and works.** Charles Baudelaire, whom some have called the father of all subsequent modern poetry in France, was born in Paris in 1821. His father, a senior civil servant, was thirty four years older than his mother, and died when Charles was a youngster, leaving the mother to remarry—to the lifelong displeasure of Charles, who adored his mother. Charles was given a conventional education, and eventually sent to the Lycée Louis le Grand, where he proved to be a restless and inconstant student, with a taste for rebellion. While at school he ran after prostitutes—contracting syphilis and gonorrhea-- and ran through a small fortune, coming out on the other side into heavy debt. He was even sent on a trip to Calcutta at this time, 1841; an effort by Charles' stepfather to 'bring him down to earth.' But in fact the sights and scenes of India only served as raw material for the sights and scenes that Baudelaire was to make of them in poetry. (The strains and abuses of this period, added to what was going to be a life filled with laudanum and excess alcohol, contributed to his early death, and to the massive stroke which ultimately left him aphasic for the last year of his life.) A fellow writer to the Parnassians, he was during his early years vigorously engaged with the writing of lyric, and with the formulating of the 'modernist' aesthetic, for which he is deeply remembered today. His greatest poetic work, which goes to the heart of his lifetime of writing, is *Les Fleurs du Mal, The Flowers of Evil* (1857), in which Baudelaire fully develops his basic themes—the essential power of symbols to move the soul, the richness of combined sense impressions as we take them in from nature, and ultimately the boredom, or 'ennui' resident in the human condition, which links to our susceptibility to evil. addictions, and a taste for the darkness of the occult. All of these basic themes echo out in other works: *L'Art romantique* (1868), *Petits Poèmes en prose* (1868) in which Baudelaire creates the new genre of the prose poem, and a brilliant translation of Poe's short stories; and, indirectly, in the writing and engagement of Baudelaire with his own cultural moment, defending the art of the painter Delacroix and the opera creator Wagner, and figuring prominently in the Parisian art scene, most notably in the reviews published in his *Salon* of 1845.

**Evaluation of Baudelaire's work.** It is hard to overstate the breakthrough of Baudelaire into a new poetic atmosphere. In addition to the 'modernist' traits mentioned above, he excelled at a sense of the meaning of the city, that new expanding, polluting, thrilling sensibility-shaper that was looming over the citizens of Paris as the nineteenth century took shape. It was in this matrix that Baudelaire saw the interesting evil of mankind, the ways in which nature is less interesting than human society, and the complexities of the moral compass. His chaste but sensuous formal verse, and his highly original prose poems, openly totally new vistas into the creation of the aesthetic.

### **Reading**

#### **Primary source reading**

Baudelaire, *Selected Writings on Art and Artists*, tr. Charvet, 1981.

#### **Secondary source reading**

Wilson, Edmund, *Azel's Castle*, 1962.

#### **Further reading**

Hyslop, Lois, *Baudelaire, Man of his Time*, 1980.

#### **Original language reading**

Kristeva, Julia, *La révolution du langage poétique*, 1974.

### **Suggested paper topics**

Review what we know of Baudelaire's youth. What kind of a rebel was he? Was the imagination, from the start, the site of his true inner life? Does Baudelaire's taste for evil seem to you imaginative evil or 'real evil'? What drives him to his kind of concern with the 'diabolic'?

What is the meaning of the city, for Baudelaire? Was the city itself, the real living city, a new phenomenon in Western society? How old and big was a city like Paris, when Balzac walked its streets? What parts of Paris were dear and meaningful to Baudelaire, the flaneur?

**Excerpt** <http://www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/039250.html>

To the Reader

Folly, depravity, greed, mortal sin  
Invade our souls and rack our flesh; we feed  
Our gentle guilt, gracious regrets, that breed  
Like vermin glutting on foul beggars' skin.  
Our sins are stubborn; our repentance, faint.  
We take a handsome price for our confession,  
Happy once more to wallow in transgression,  
Thinking vile tears will cleanse us of all taint.  
On evil's cushion poised, His Majesty,  
Satan Thrice-Great, lulls our charmed soul, until  
He turns to vapor what was once our will:  
Rich ore, transmuted by his alchemy.  
He holds the strings that move us, limb by limb!  
We yield, enthralled, to things repugnant, base;  
Each day, towards Hell, with slow, unhurried pace,  
We sink, uncowed, through shadows, stinking, grim.  
Like some lewd rake with his old worn-out whore,  
Nibbling her suffering teats, we seize our sly  
delight, that, like an orange—withered, dry—  
We squeeze and press for juice that is no more.  
Our brains teem with a race of Fiends, who frolic  
thick as a million gut-worms; with each breath,  
Our lungs drink deep, suck down a stream of Death—  
Dim-lit—to low-moaned whimpers melancholic.  
If poison, fire, blade, rape do not succeed  
In sewing on that dull embroidery  
Of our pathetic lives their artistry,  
It's that our soul, alas, shrinks from the deed.  
And yet, among the beasts and creatures all—  
Panther, snake, scorpion, jackal, ape, hound, hawk—  
Monsters that crawl, and shriek, and grunt, and squawk,  
In our vice-filled menagerie's caterwaul,  
One worse is there, fit to heap scorn upon—  
More ugly, rank! Though noiseless, calm and still,  
yet would he turn the earth to scraps and swill,  
swallow it whole in one great, gaping yawn:  
Ennui! That monster frail!—With eye wherein  
A chance tear gleams, he dreams of gibbets, while  
Smoking his hookah, with a dainty smile. . .  
—You know him, reader,—hypocrite,—my twin!

## **Mallarmé, Stéphane**

**Stéphane Mallarmé and his importance.** Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898) was a French Symbolist poet, deeply influenced by Charles Baudelaire, who carried the abstract and futurist possibilities of lyric poetry to a new level, where they anticipate many currents of thought and art which will dominate French literature in the twentieth century.

**Mallarmé, Life and Works.** Mallarmé was born in Paris, son of a civil servant. He was an excellent student, excelling in languages and writing, and showing from childhood remarkable promise. He got his baccalaureat degree in 1860, and had his first poem published two years later. From that point on we would say that he led a relatively quiet life. In 1883, when he was forty one, he married a German governess, with whom he had one daughter. The career element of Mallarmé's life consisted of teaching English—or rather teaching French in England, which he had visited and where he had studied, and English in France, which was his primary bread winning activity. He began his teaching in Tournon, to which he ultimately returned, after spending the bulk of his work life in Paris. It was in Paris that he became known for his remarkable literary salon, which met on Tuesdays—hence acquiring for its members the name 'les Mardistes', those who 'Meet on Tuesday.' That gathering point became an attractive venue for many of the finest writers of the time—Andre Gide, W. B. Yeats, Rainer Maria Rilke, Paul Valéry—and it was in this setting, as well as in his writings, that Mallarmé began to impose himself as the leader of the Symbolist Movement.

**The Work of Mallarmé.** Mallarmé was deeply influenced by the works of the Pre-Raphaelites in England, of Baudelaire, of Verlaine, and of Edgar Allen Poe, some of whose works he (like Baudelaire) translated into French. (The power of sonority, in Poe's mesmerizing poetry, attracted both of these Frenchmen, and led, through them, into 20th century adventures in verse which could not have been imagined fifty years earlier, among the first generation of Romantics.) But Mallarmé had an elliptical mind which placed him in a category of his own; he deliberately encouraged obscurity in his writing, and he virtually ignored expected patterns of syntax. He wrote that "a poem must be an enigma for the vulgar, chamber music for the initiated." (These same sentiments had been formulated in spades by Baudelaire, for whom, as he said, 'copulation is the poetry of the masses.') Mallarmé's desire to "free poetry from matter and to suggest, by means of sounds and images, our subconscious thoughts and feelings," accounts for the obscurity of his prose and verse." Almost every one of his poems is built around a single image or metaphor, around which is grouped a cluster of subordinate images which help to develop the central idea. Mallarmé's most important volumes are *The Afternoon of a Faun* (1876), *Verse and Prose* (1893), a collection of some of his earlier pieces, and *Divagations* (1897), a book of prose containing many of his aesthetic theories. In *The Afternoon of a Faun* (to accompany which Debussy composed his tone poem of the same name) a faun gives voice to his amorous longings—"a dream of desire told at length"; and in "The Swan" Mallarmé symbolizes the "cold and sterile poet." We are very far, now, from the softness, passion, and romance of the poetry of the early Romantics like de Musset and Alphonse de Lamartine.

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### **Reading**

#### **Primary source reading**

*Collected Poems*, tr. Weinfield, 1996.

#### **Secondary source reading**

Lloyd, R., *Mallarmé: The Poet and his Circle*, 1999.

#### **Further reading**

Johnson, Barbara, *A World of Difference*, 1982.

#### **Original language reading**

Richard, Jean-Pierre, *L'univers imaginaire de Mallarmé*, 1961.

## Suggested paper topics

What seems to drive Mallarmé's poetry toward the absolutely pure? When you review the poetry of Lamartine, Hugo, or de Musset you find much repetition, much rhetoric. Was Mallarmé pressing to free poetry of such verbal baggage?

Does Mallarmé's poetry provide a natural cross over point into music? Listen to Debussy. Can you hear some search for the kind of purity that haunts Mallarmé? Is it more than a metaphor, to speak of the music of poetry?

**Excerpt** <http://www.qotd.org/search/search.html?aid=6410>

A throw of the dice will never abolish chance.

Dreams have as much influence as actions

Every soul is a melody which needs renewing.

In a museum in London there is an exhibit called "The Value of Man": a long coffinlike box with lots of compartments where they've put starch — phosphorus — flour — bottles of water and alcohol — and big pieces of gelatin. I am a man like that.

In reading, a lonely quiet concert is given to our minds; all our mental faculties will be present in this symphonic exaltation

It is in front of the paper that the artist creates himself.

That virgin, vital, beautiful day: today.

The flesh is sorrowful, alas! And I've read all the books

The poetic act consists in suddenly seeing that an idea splits into a number of motives of equal value and in grouping them; they rhyme.

The work of pure poetry implies the elocutionary disappearance of the poet, who yields the initiative to words.

The world was made in order to result in a beautiful book.

We do not write poems with ideas, but with words.

Yes, I know, we are merely empty forms of matter, but we are indeed sublime in having invented God and our soul. So sublime, my friend, that I want to gaze upon matter, fully conscious that it exists, and yet launching itself madly into Dream, despite its knowledge that Dream has no existence, extolling the Soul and all the divine impressions of that kind which have collected within us from the beginning of time and proclaiming, in the face of the Void which is truth, these glorious lies!

## Rimbaud, Arthur

**Arthur Rimbaud, life.** Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891) was a precocious French poet, whose visionary work, completed before he was 21, made an indelible mark on the development of later French poetry, and whose personal destiny has haunted the imaginations of subsequent generations of writers worldwide.

**Arthur Rimbaud; a portrait of his career.** Rimbaud was born in Charleville, in the province of the Ardennes. His father, a military captain cited for bravery in the Conquest of Algeria, was almost never at home—postings, then disinclination, kept him away, until he had no presence at all in the family. Rimbaud's mother dominated the family—there were five children—and won from her precocious Arthur, who already as a pre schooler was writing poems, the sobriquet 'bouche d'ombre,' 'mouth of darkness,' for her sullen and stern ways and her omnipresent control over her children. Nothing stopped Rimbaud's youthful activity as a poet, and, given his generally rebellious style, his Mother's brooding insistence on education was probably beneficial; she oversaw young Arthur's intense memorization of Latin poetry, and gave him youthful freedom only to continue his schooling at the Collège de Charleville. At that school, and with the tutelage of a couple of understanding intellectuals, Arthur became a stunning academic success, top of his class except in math and science. He was, however, not destined to an academic career, nor was this teen ager patient after graduation from Charleville. With the advent of the Franco-Prussian War, in 1870, Rimbaud began a series of attempts to run away and seek his freedom. In the course of these efforts at liberation he took the liberty of writing to the poet Paul Verlaine, who invited Rimbaud to stay with him in Paris in 1871; the two rebels became lovers, traveled together to and lived in England, and eventually—after stormy times, during which the teen age Rimbaud wrote constantly—broke up, but not before Verlaine, drunken and wild, had shot and seriously wounded Rimbaud. In the midst of such scenes Rimbaud truly decided upon escape from all that he had known, and in 1876 enlisted with the Dutch Colonial Army—only to desert not long after, and to make his way exhaustedly back to Paris. By this stage Rimbaud is just over twenty, and has virtually finished his writing career. The remaining years of his life—as a businessman in Harar, Ethiopia, and the first major coffee trader in that country, as well as jack of all trades working his way from port to port along the East African coast—remain outside our scope in this entry, except as living materials of an improbably brilliant poetic career. Rimbaud died of cancer at the age of thirty seven.

**Arthur Rimbaud, works.** Rimbaud's best known works are *A Season in Hell*, *Une Saison en Enfer*, and the *Illuminations*, 1874. These works of visionary poetry and prose poetry take their springboard in Baudelaire's own addled eye for contemporary society, but move far out toward the kinds of acid-inspired envisionings we may find among the American Beats of the mid-twentieth century. Rimbaud's own formulation of his quest is the last word on the matter:

*I say that one must be a seer, make oneself a seer. The poet makes himself a seer by a long, prodigious, and rational disordering of all the senses. Every form of love, of suffering, of madness; he searches himself, he consumes all the poisons in him, and keeps only their quintessences. This is an unspeakable torture during which he needs all his faith and superhuman strength, and during which he becomes the great patient, the great criminal, the great accursed – and the great learned one! – among men. – For he arrives at the unknown!*

### Reading

#### Primary source reading

Arthur Rimbaud, *Complete Works*, tr. ed. Wallace Fowlie, Jean Nicolas, 2005.

#### Secondary source reading

Wilson, Edmund, *Rimbaud: the Double Life of a Rebel*, 2000.

#### Further reading

Nicholl, Charles, *Somebody Else: Arthur Rimbaud in Africa (1882-91)*, 1999.

#### Original language reading

Jeancolas, Claude, *Passion Rimbaud: L'Album d'une vie*, 1998.

### **Suggested paper topics**

Rethink the scandalous relation between Rimbaud and Paul Verlaine. Would we not still today, after we have 'seen everything,' be startled by such a public relationship? (Or would we?) What kind of contempt for settled social norms was driving these writers? Did it lie in 'hatred of the bourgeoisie'?

Look into Rimbaud's career as a coffee trader, after he stopped writing at the age of twenty. Was Rimbaud successful as a businessman? What kind of trading operations did he supervise in Harar? Was the poet-visionary still at work in him there?

**Excerpt** <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/childhood-70/>

That idol, black eyes and yellow mop, without parents or court,  
nobler than Mexican and Flemish fables;  
his domain, insolent azure and verdure,  
runs over beaches called by the shipless waves,  
names ferociously Greek, Slav, Celt.

At the border of the forest-- dream flowers tinkle, flash, and flare,--  
the girl with orange lips, knees  
crossed in the clear flood that gushes from the fields,  
nakedness shaded, traversed, dressed by rainbow, flora, sea.

Ladies who stroll on terraces adjacent to the sea;  
baby girls and giantesses,  
superb blacks in the verdigris moss,  
jewels upright on the rich ground  
of groves and little thawed gardens,--  
young mothers and big sisters with eyes full of pilgrimages,  
sultanas, princesses tyrannical of costume and carriage,  
little foreign misses and young ladies gently unhappy.  
What boredom, the hour of the 'dear body' and 'dear heart.'

### II.

It is she, the little girl, dead behind the rosebushes. --  
The young mamma, deceased, comes down the stoop.--  
The cousin's carriage creaks on the sand.--  
The little brother (he is in India!) there,  
before the western sky in the meadow of pinks.

The old men who have been buried upright  
in the rampart overgrown with gillyflowers.  
Swarms of golden leaves surround the general's house.  
They are in the south.--

You follow the red road to reach the empty inn.  
The chateau is for sale; the shutters are coming off.  
The priest must have taken away the key of the church.  
Around the park the keepers' cottages are uninhabited.

The enclosures are so high that nothing  
can be seen but the rustling tree tops.  
Besides, there is nothing to be seen within.

The meadows go up to the hamlets without anvils or cocks.

The sluice gate is open.

O the Calvaries and the windmills of the desert,  
the islands and the haystacks!

Magic flowers droned.

The slopes cradled him.

Beasts of a fabulous elegance moved about.

The clouds gathered over the high sea,  
formed of an eternity of hot tears.

## 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

**Overview** A new idealism and positive faith, which permeated French thinking toward the end of the 19th century—powered by faith in science, economic progress, exuberant forms of nationalism—found expression in the vitalist philosophies of such pan European thinkers as Bergson and Nietzsche. However intimations of upcoming political strife, of ominous force, were on the horizon.

The boiling conflicts within Germany came to the surface as early as 1905, when the Kaiser insulted France at Tangiers; there was more friction at Agadir in 1911. Then in 1914, came the First World War, and with it the destruction not only of the German Empire but virtually of France along with it. The era between the first and second world wars was one of disillusionment, frustration, and cynicism. Conflicting economic and political beliefs made for instability in governments, and pacifism met opposition from those who feared the resurgence of German militarism, especially after Hitler's rise to power in 1933. The pragmatic philosophy of William James and the psychology of Sigmund Freud had deep effect on French thought during this interim period.

Like the period following World War I, the years since the end of the last conflict, were filled with insecurity, disillusionment and fear—especially, in the United States, the fear of Russia and communism.

In literature, many of the fin de siècle writers continued to produce into the twentieth century. Naturalism and symbolism were already on the decline, but no new school of significance took their place. Many minor schools had brief vogues—neoromanticism, vitalism, Dynamism, Paroxysm, Futurism, and others. Several general tendencies, however, can be noted. First, during the early years of the century, the optimism, nationalism, patriotism, and activism of the era determined the course of much of the literature. At the same time some writers were turning to mysticism and religion. During each world war some good war literature was written, and after each conflict the literature reflected the pessimism and frustration of the nation. During the twentieth century there have been other persistent trends, all of them inflected by the ominous Cold War which separated the Soviet Union from the rest of Europe and the United States, and which remained a reality almost to the end of the century. One of the trends is an increasing interest in the inner workings of the mind—a trend opened widely by the researches of Sigmund Freud. Another trend might be considered the exacerbation of social and racial tension—as new nations are formed in Africa, as civil rights movements manifest in powerful societies, and as the classical threats of World War between nations are replaced by civil and ideological conflicts. A third trend should be the widening of global communications through the internet, which was an operative force by the late eighties, and the resultant changes, still hard to explore, in the relationships among individuals and the operations of entertainment and world news itself.

### Discussion questions

What do you see as the roots of the Surrealism sponsored by Aragon and Breton? What needs of the time were being met by the development of this ideology and poetic?

How do you interpret the lengthy period of silence in which Paul Valery found himself unable to write poetry, and then the outburst of fine lyric that later came from him? Was he, this mathematician of the imagination, moving through a mystical period?

## Poetry

**Aragon, Louis: importance for French literature.** Louis Aragon (1897-1982) was born and died in Paris. He left a noteworthy mark on French literature. He, along with Andre Breton, was at the foundation of the literary movement of Surrealism. In addition he was a devoted member of the French Communist party, during the dramatic Cold War Years in which intellectuals in the West were defining themselves in terms of extraordinary new political ideologies.

**Louis Aragon; Life and Works.** Louis Aragon was born and died in Paris. The story of his upbringing is unparalleled in its complexity, and surely has a bearing on his work. Louis was raised by his mother and by his maternal grandmother. However—thanks to the manipulations of his mother and grandmother—he was convinced that these two women were, respectively, his sister and foster mother. His biological father, the senator Louis Andrieux, was thirty years older than his wife, and essentially refused to recognize Louis as his son. As a result, Louis was fobbed off as Louis's godfather. The truth of this entire ruse was revealed to Louis at age nineteen, but by then his father's refusal to recognize him had cut a deep wound, and Aragon lived his with this absence of an active father. Who can doubt that the backstory to his family tree played a role in the upside down syntax of poetry within Surrealism? From 1919 on, at the end of one all-enveloping war, but at the start—as we would be forced to know—of a far worse, Aragon plunged into the center of his society, writing his poetry, joining fellow writers in the Dadaist movement (1919-1924), and from the early 20's on joining the Communist Party as a fellow-traveler. (It is for this wholehearted engagement with his time, that Aragon continues to fascinate us.) In 1924 Louis Aragon became a founding member of the Surrealist Movement, along with his colleagues Andre Breton and Phillipe Soupault. By the same year, 1924, he became a full member of the Communist Party, and began to work for the Communist newspaper, *L'Humanite*. In other words, Communism and Surrealism—two very different versions of status quo rebellion—coincided in the developing Aragon. From this point on, as he configured his world view, Aragon wrote fervently about the beliefs and styles he admired.

*I demand that my books be judged with utmost severity, by knowledgeable people who know the rules of grammar and of logic, and who will seek beneath the footsteps of my commas the lice of my thought in the head of my style.*

In other words, the refusal of bourgeois language went hand in hand, in Aragon, with his refusal of the bourgeois structure of society. His poetry on war, love, nature, and confidence in the future is memorable and assumes many forms, not simply the extreme surrealist form: his poems from the war years are collected in the volume *Aragon, Poet of the French Resistance* (1945). Even before that, though, he was known for his novels, among which the later attempt to portray the whole of French society. In other words Aragon is a flexible writer, deeply involved with own time and, like many writers, skilled at assuming contradictory guides in his expression.

## Reading

### Primary source reading

*Paris Peasant*, tr. Taylor, 2004.

### Secondary source reading

*Aragon: Poet of the Resistance*, ed. Josephson and Cowley, 1945.

### Further reading

Adereth, Max, *Elsa Triolet and Louis Aragon: An Introduction to their Interwoven Lives and Works*, 1994

### Foreign language reading

Sanouillet, M. *Dada a Paris*, 1993.

### Suggested paper topics

What relation do you see, between Aragon's complex and insecure childhood, and the kinds of surreal verbal projects from which he made his literature? Would you like to generalize about the psychological origins of surrealism in general?

As you reflect on Aragon's life and work, consider the relation between literary surrealism and communism. Can you see how they can coexist? Do they share certain common values and perspectives?

**Excerpt [http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/l/louis\\_aragon.html](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/l/louis_aragon.html)**

We know that the nature of genius is to provide idiots with ideas twenty years later.

Light is meaningful only in relation to darkness, and truth presupposes error. It is these mingled opposites which people our life, which make it pungent, intoxicating. We only exist in terms of this conflict, in the zone where black and white clash.

I demand that my books be judged with utmost severity, by knowledgeable people who know the rules of grammar and of logic, and who will seek beneath the footsteps of my commas the lice of my thought in the head of my style.

Love is made by two people, in different kinds of solitude. It can be in a crowd, but in an oblivious crowd.

Fear of error which everything recalls to me at every moment of the flight of my ideas, this mania for control, makes men prefer reason's imagination to the imagination of the senses. And yet it is always the imagination alone which is at work.

O reason, reason, abstract phantom of the waking state, I had already expelled you from my dreams, now I have reached a point where those dreams are about to become fused with apparent realities: now there is only room here for myself.

There are strange flowers of reason to match each error of the senses.

## Valéry, Paul

**Paul Valéry: Life and Works, first half.** Paul Valéry (1871-1945) was born in Sete, on the Mediterranean, and throughout his lifetime he would fixate on seascapes which derive from his early experience of the Mediterranean. Valéry's father was Corsican, and his mother Italian, and the young man was raised in Montpellier. In 1900 he married, and had three children, and settled into what, for nineteenth century French writers, was a stable married life. His academic route was through the University of Montpellier, where he also wrote extensively. After graduation he was working for over a decade as a private secretary, and writing for an appreciative public, for by this time, 1920 and after, he had begun to publish widely. His *Album des vers anciens* (1920), *Album of ancient verses*, revealed him as a poet of exquisite finesse in orthodox prosody; his *Charmes* (1922), which included one of his greatest poems, 'Le Cimetière Marin,' 'The Seaside Cemetery,' in which the hard frost of light on the ocean mirrors the hard deaths at sea which bedaub the rough Mediterranean coast. And then there was the *Soirée avec M. Teste* (1897), *The Evening with Mr. Teste*, which though prose had the hard intellectual abstractness of the poetry of Valéry, or of Valéry's master, Stéphane Mallarmé, and had already before Valéry's volumes of poetry drawn attention to his extraordinary imaginative intellect. In the course of these high profile engagements with the public, Valéry found himself becoming a popular and honored public figure. In 1925 he was inducted into the *Académie française*, and in that capacity began to contribute to public causes, to lecture widely throughout France, and in effect to serve as an unofficial voice of the government on public matters. Inspired by the support of the public, Valéry went on to become a tireless speaker and presence in higher French culture. Valéry founded a noteworthy College in Cannes, in 1932, a meeting place for the study and appreciation of French culture and values. The same Valéry gave the memorial lecture for the one hundredth anniversary of the birth of Goethe. By this time, although he had published only some one hundred lyrics, he was widely viewed as the leader of the Symbolist movement, and as a worthy successor to his master, Stéphane Mallarmé.

**Life and Works, Second Half.** Oddly enough, there is a second half to all this. It is a half which begins before the first half, the public figure stage, ended. In 1892, in the aftermath of a violent thunderstorm, Valéry had an existential awareness which broke his will to write. (One might think of Jakob Boehme's vision of the inner meaning of the sunshine on a pewter bowl, in seventeenth century Germany.) As we have seen, Valéry had already written fine work by that time, but in the wake of this 'moment' he wrote nothing more for twenty years. (We have just seen how much else he accomplished, in public, but he could create no more 'literature.')

Encouraged by André Gide, and by now interested primarily in the sciences, he began writing afresh in 1916. This poetry is austere, mathematical, and pure, eliminating life in favor of an intellectualized geometry. (One can feel the constant presence of Mallarmé's poetry here.) This new poetry, with its conventions and mannerisms, leads to obscurity, but to a purity which has led some of his followers to consider his the best poetic work of the twentieth century. He was in this later period also prolific with brilliant aesthetic essays, and with notes on his time.

## Reading

### Primary source reading

*Paul Valery's Cahiers/Notebooks*, ed. Gifford, Stimpson, Pickering, 2000.

### Secondary source reading

Baudry, Phillippe, *Valery Finder: Metaphysics and Literature*, 2011,

### Further reading

Kristeva, J., *La Revolution du langage poétique*, 1974.

### Original language reading

Cioran, Emile, *Valery face à ses idoles*, 2007.

### Suggested paper topics

What practical interrelation do you see between Valery's scientific thought and his poetry? Does one enrich the other? What other writers do you know, for whom scientific study is important? Goethe? Zola?

How do you understand the moving experience which led to Valery's prolonged and silent absence from poetry? Was it a 'mystical experience'? Did he ever try to explain this experience?

**Excerpt** <http://www.historyguide.org/europe/valery.html>

We later civilizations . . . we too know that we are mortal.

We had long heard tell of whole worlds that had vanished, of empires sunk without a trace, gone down with all their men and all their machines into the unexplorable depths of the centuries, with their gods and their laws, their academies and their sciences pure and applied, their grammars and their dictionaries, their Classics, their Romantics, and their Symbolists, their critics and the critics of their critics. . . . We were aware that the visible earth is made of ashes, and that ashes signify something. Through the obscure depths of history we could make out the phantoms of great ships laden with riches and intellect; we could not count them. But the disasters that had sent them down were, after all, none of our affair.

Elam, Ninevah, Babylon were but beautiful vague names, and the total ruin of those worlds had as little significance for us as their very existence. But France, England, Russia...these too would be beautiful names. *Lusitania* too, is a beautiful name. And we see now that the abyss of history is deep enough to hold us all. We are aware that a civilization has the same fragility as a life. The circumstances that could send the works of Keats and Baudelaire to join the works of Menander are no longer inconceivable; they are in the newspapers. That is not all. The searing lesson is more complete still. It was not enough for our generation to learn from its own experience how the most beautiful things and the most ancient, the most formidable and the best ordered, can perish *by accident*; in the realm of thought, feeling, and common sense, we witnessed extraordinary phenomena: paradox suddenly become fact, and obvious fact brutally believed.

I shall cite but one example: the great virtues of the German peoples have begotten more evils, than idleness ever bred vices. With our own eyes, we have seen conscientious labor, the most solid learning, the most serious discipline and application adapted to appalling ends.

So many horrors could not have been possible without so many virtues. Doubtless, much science was needed to kill so many, to waste so much property, annihilate so many cities in so short a time; but *moral qualities* in like number were also needed. Are Knowledge and Duty, then, suspect?

So the Persepolis of the spirit is no less ravaged than the Susa of material fact. Everything has not been lost, but everything has sensed that it might perish.

## Breton, André

**André Breton, Early Life.** Andre Breton (1896-1966) was born in Normandy, of a working class family, a fact of importance for his subsequent solidarity with the working class through the mediation of the Communist party. As a young man he studied medicine and psychiatry, and took particular interest in mental illness and its symptoms. In WW I Breton worked in a neurological ward in Nantes. (It seems of note that while there Breton met a young man named Jacques Vache, whose natural rebelliousness and anarchism fascinated Andre, and helped accentuate what was to become Breton's mature life of resistance to middle class values. He took due note of the fact that Vache committed suicide at age twenty four.)

**Breton, mature life and works.** In 1921, Breton moved back to Paris, and set up his apartment on the rue Fontaine. He began there the assembling of a collection of artifacts, photographs, books, painting, objets d'art, which was to grow to 53,000 in number, and to grow into a vast resource for such as cultural anthropologists. (There was a strong emphasis, throughout the collection, on materials relating to the Native Indians of Northwest America.) At the same time, Breton was immersing himself in the drama of the current literary world in Paris. In 1919 Breton—along with two fellow writers, Philippe Soupault and Louis Aragon—founded the journal *Littérature*, in which the group devoted much attention to the phenomenon of automatic writing, and its ways of letting the subconscious out into expression. (Breton was to make the acquaintance of Sigmund Freud, in 1920, and to remain true, throughout his writing life, to his desire to discover and display the meeting points between dream and ordinary language.) In 1924 Breton served as editor of a widely distributed Parisian journal, *Les recherches surréalistes (Surrealist investigations)*, as well as of the prominent *Manifesto of Surrealism*, to which many of the outstanding 'liberated poets of the day' contributed. In the *Manifesto* Breton makes evident what he foresees as the achievement of a new kind of person, through surrealism; one to whom the egalitarian social perspectives of Marxism are very congenial, who believes in the simple oneness of humanity, and who at the same time is devoted to the personal transformation of the individual, as it can be roadmapped in the work of a brilliant forbear like Rimbaud. It should be noted that Breton joined and remained in the Communist Party from 1927-33; maintaining to the Party the same kind of complex fidelity that shows in his colleague Louis Aragon and in many contemporary French intellectuals. (In 1938 Breton met Trotsky in Mexico, and was inspired by some social prospects from within a revised Communism.) For these thinkers, as for many throughout Western Europe and the United States in the 1930's and 40's, Communism seemed to offer a practical platform for a new organization of human society.

**Breton in later life.** In 1940 Breton once again served in the Medical Corps of the French Army, but as he came under pursuit by the Vichy government—his Communism sufficed for that—he staged (with two American friends) a necessary escape from Europe. He located both in the United States, and in the Caribbean, where he made the acquaintance of Aime Césaire. In New York City he met his third wife; he also shared his valuable personal art collection in an extraordinary exhibit at Yale University in 1942. In 1948 he returned to Paris, where he committed himself to new movements of Anarchism, and denounced French colonial occupation in Algeria. True to himself, he remained outside the system, right to his death.

## Reading

### Primary source reading

*Nadja*, tr. Richard Howard, 1994.

### Secondary source reading

Raymond, Marcel, *From Baudelaire to Surrealism*, 1957.

### Further reading

Broome and Chesters, *Anthology of Modern French Poetry, 1850-1950*, 1976.

### Original language reading

Cauvin, Caws, *Poems of Andre Breton: A Bilingual Anthology*, 2006.

## Suggested paper topics

How do you relate Breton's poetry to his extensive career collecting primitive works of art? Was he an anthropologist/collector in his writing?

Does Andre Breton's experience in mental wards, and his knowledge of neurology, play a role in his finding of his poetic powers? How does Communism belong to this mix of poetry and science? Is Breton a lover of the people?

**Excerpt** <http://www.tcf.ua.edu/Classes/Jbutler/T340/SurManifesto/ManifestoOfSurrealism.htm>

So strong is the belief in life, in what is most fragile in life – *real* life, I mean – that in the end this belief is lost. Man, that inveterate dreamer, daily more discontent with his destiny, has trouble assessing the objects he has been led to use, objects that his nonchalance has brought his way, or that he has earned through his own efforts, almost always through his own efforts, for he has agreed to work, at least he has not refused to try his luck (or what he calls his luck!). At this point he feels extremely modest: he knows what women he has had, what silly affairs he has been involved in; he is unimpressed by his wealth or his poverty, in this respect he is still a newborn babe and, as for the approval of his conscience, I confess that he does very nicely without it. If he still retains a certain lucidity, all he can do is turn back toward his childhood which, however his guides and mentors may have botched it, still strikes him as somehow charming. There, the absence of any known restrictions allows him the perspective of several lives lived at once; this illusion becomes firmly rooted within him; now he is only interested in the fleeting, the extreme facility of everything. Children set off each day without a worry in the world. Everything is near at hand, the worst material conditions are fine. The woods are white or black, one will never sleep.

But it is true that we would not dare venture so far, it is not merely a question of distance. Threat is piled upon threat, one yields, abandons a portion of the terrain to be conquered. This imagination which knows no bounds is henceforth allowed to be exercised only in strict accordance with the laws of an arbitrary utility; it is incapable of assuming this inferior role for very long and, in the vicinity of the twentieth year, generally prefers to abandon man to his lusterless fate.

Though he may later try to pull himself together on occasion, having felt that he is losing by slow degrees all reason for living, incapable as he has become of being able to rise to some exceptional situation such as love, he will hardly succeed. This is because he henceforth belongs body and soul to an imperative practical necessity which demands his constant attention. None of his gestures will be expansive, none of his ideas generous or far-reaching. In his mind's eye, events real or imagined will be seen only as they relate to a welter of similar events, events in which he has not participated, *abortive* events. What am I saying: he will judge them in relationship to one of these events whose consequences are more reassuring than the others. On no account will he view them as his salvation.

Beloved imagination, what I most like in you is your unsparing quality.

There remains madness, "the madness that one locks up," as it has aptly been described. That madness or another.... We all know, in fact, that the insane owe their incarceration to a tiny number of legally reprehensible acts and that, were it not for these acts their freedom (or what we see as their freedom) would not be threatened. I am willing to admit that they are, to some degree, victims of their imagination, in that it induces them not to pay attention to certain rules – outside of which the species feels threatened – which we are all supposed to know and respect.