

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

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.