

Selected French Poems
Of the 19th Century

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Victor Hugo (1802-1885)

Clair de Lune

The moon was serene and played on the waves –
The window still open, free to the breeze,
The Sultana gazes, and the sea that heaves
Down there dark isles with silver laves.

The lute escapes from her vibrant fingers.
She listens...A soft sound strikes soft echoes.
A Turkish trader from Cos's waters,
Up from the isles of Greece on Tartar oars?

Or cormorants plunging one by one, cutting
The flood, pearls flying from their wings?
Or a Djinn above in a thin voice piping,
Hurling high towers in the sea as he spins?

Who stirs the waves by the women's seraglio?
Not the cormorant, cradled there on the sea,
Not stones from the walls, or the rhythmic beat
Of a trader's oars thrashing the waves below.

But heaving sacks, from which sobs break free.
See them, sounding the flood that floats them on,
Moving their sides like human forms...
The moon was serene and played on the sea.

Since I have touched my lips...

Since I have touched my lips to your brimming cup,
Since I have bowed my pale brow in your hands,
Since I have sometime breathed the sweet breath
Of your soul, a perfume buried in shadow lands;

Since it was granted to me to hear you utter
Words in which the mysterious heart sighs,
Since I have seen smiles, since I have seen tears
Your mouth on my mouth, your eyes on my eyes;

Since I have seen over my enraptured head
A light from your star shine, ah, ever veiled!
Since I have seen falling to my life's flood
The leaf of a rose snatched from out your days,

Now at last I can say to the fleeting years:
– Pass by! Pass by, forever! No more age!
Away with you and all your withered flowers,
I have a flower in my soul no one can take!

Your wings, brushing it, spill never a drop
From the glass I fill, from which my thirst I quench.
My soul possesses more fire than you have ashes!
My heart more love than your forgetfulness!

My Two Daughters

In pleasant evening's fresh-clear darkness,
One seems a swan, the other a dove,
Both joyous, both lovely, O sweetness!
See, the elder and younger move
At the garden's edge, and beside them
White carnations with long frail stems,
Stirred by the wind, in a marble urn,
Lean, watching them, live and motionless,
And, trembling with shade there, seem to be
Butterflies caught in flight, frozen ecstasy.

Her feet were bare...

Her feet were bare she'd undone her hair,
Sitting, fair, by the bowing reeds;
I who went by, thought a fairy was there,
And I said: Will you walk in the meads?

She looked at me with a haughty look
That beauty retains when we conquer,
And I said: Will you? It's the month of love,
Will a walk in the woods be your answer?

She dried her feet on the riverside grass;
She looked at me once again,
And the playful beauty then took thought.
Oh the birds that sang deep in the day!

The water caressed the shore so gently!
That joyous sweet girl, fearful and wild,
Among the green rushes she came to me,
Her hair in her eyes, and through it a smile.

Tomorrow, at Dawn

Tomorrow, at dawn, when the fields whiten
I'll set out. I know you are waiting for me.
I'll travel the forest; I'll travel the mountain,
I can't stay away any longer, you see.

I'll stride out with only my thought in sight,
Seeing nothing beyond, without hearing a sound,
Alone and unknown, back bowed, folded hands,
Sad, since daylight to me will seem night.

I'll not witness evening's golden cascade,
Nor the distant sails sinking down to Harfleur,
And when I arrive, I shall place on your grave,
A sprig of green holly, and heather in flower.

Ave, Dea; moriturus te salutat

(Hail, Goddess; he who is about to die salutes you)

To Judith Gautier

Death and beauty are two things profound,
So of dark and azure, that one might say that
They were two sisters terrible and fecund
Possessing the one enigma, the one secret.

O women, voices, gazes, black hair, blonde tresses,
Blaze out, I die! Own to light, love, attraction,
O pearls the sea mingles with its great masses,
O gleaming birds of the forest's sombre ocean!

Judith, our fates are closer to one another's
Than one might think, seeing my face and yours:
The whole divine abyss is present in your eyes,

And I feel the starry gulf within my soul;
We are both neighbours of the silent skies.
Madame, since you're beautiful, and I'm old.

June Nights

In summer, when day has fled, when covered with flowers
The distant plain sheds sweet intoxication;
Eyes closed, and ears half-open to muted hours,
We lie only half-asleep in transparent slumber.

The stars seem purer the shade is more delightful;
A hazy half-light colours the dome on high;
And dawn, pale and tender, awaiting her moment,
Seems to wander about all night in the deeps of the sky.

To Théophile Gautier

Friend, poet spirit, you have fled our night,
You left our noise, to penetrate the light;
Now your name will shine on pure summits.
I who knew you young and beautiful, I
Who loved you, I who in our great flights,
Distraught, took comfort from your loyal spirit.
I, white with the years that snow down on my head,
Remembering times past, I dream, instead,
Of those young days that saw our dawn,
The struggle, the loud arena, the storm,
The new art offered to the mob's screaming,
And hear, yes, that vast sublime blast fading.

Son of ancient Greece and the new France,
Fierce your respect for the dead, full of hope;
You never shut your eyes to the future.
Theban mage, druid by the dark menhir,
Flamen by Tiber, Brahmin by the Ganges,
Fitting angelic arrow to godlike bow,
Viewing the haunts of Roland, Achilles,
Powerful mysterious smith, you'd know
How to twine sun-rays to a single flame;
In your soul the sunset met the day;
Yesterday tomorrow in your fertile brain;
You crowned the old art father of the new;
You understood that when an unknown soul
Speaks to a nation, lightning in the clouds,
We must open our hearts, accept, love aloud;
Calm you scorned the vile attempts of those
Who dribbled Shakespeare, drooled Aeschylus;
You knew this age had its own air to breathe,
That art progresses by self-transformation,
Beauty's adorned by melding with greatness.
And you were heard to utter cries of joy,
When Drama gripped Paris in its teeth,
When spring chased ancient winter away,
When the wondrous star of new ideals,
Suddenly glittered in the burning sky,
And the Hippogriff stole Pegasus' place.

On the tomb's severe sill I greet you,
You knew the beautiful, go find the true.
Climb the harsh stair. From the black steps' height,
The arches of the dark bridge loom in sight;
Go! Die! The last step's the final hour.
Fly, Eagle, see the gulfs that you desired;
You'll view the absolute, real, sublime.
You'll feel the ominous wind on high
Know the vertigo of eternal wonder.
From heaven's top you'll see your Olympus,
From truth's tall summit Man's unreality,
Even Job's, and Homer's, and you'll view,
Soul, from God's height, Jehovah too.
Spirit, soar! Hover higher on open wings!

When the living leave us, moved, I gaze,
For to enter death, is entering the temple;
And when a man dies, and goes his way,
I see my own ascent, clear, like crystal.
Friend, I feel fate's dark plenitude;
I have begun my death with solitude,
I see my own deep vaguely starlit night.
This is the hour when I too take flight.
My long thread trembles almost at the knife;
The breeze, that takes you, lifts me up alive,
And I'll follow those I loved, I the exile.
Their gaze draws me into infinite space.
I hasten there. Don't close the sombre gate.

Pass on; for it's the law; none can deny;
All leans; and this great age with all its light
Slides to the vast shadow where, pale, we flee.
Oh! The oaks they fell for Hercules' pyre,
What a harsh roar they make this night of fire!
Death's steeds neigh joyfully: the bright day flies;
Our great century that tamed the hostile winds
Expires....their brother and their peer, O Gautier,
You join Dumas, Lamartine, Musset.
The ancient sea that made men young is dry,
Youth has no fountain, now there's no more Styx,
And the grim reaper with his pointed scythe
Steps forward, thoughtfully, to clear the field;
My turn arrives; night fills my troubled eye,
That from doves' flights, alas, reads coming days,
Weeps over cradles, smiles to see new graves.

Gérard de Nerval (1808-1855)

Gothic Song

Beautiful spouse
I love your tears!
They're the dew
Befitting flowers.

Beautiful things
Have but one spring
With roses let's sow
Time's footprints!

Blonde or brunette
Must we select?
Pleasure is
The god of this world.

El Desdichado (The Disinherited)

I am the darkness – the widower – the un-consoled,
The prince of Aquitaine in the ruined tower;
My sole *star* is dead – and my constellated lute
Bears the black *sun* of *Melancholy*.

You who consoled me in funereal night,
Bring me Posilipo, the sea of Italy,
The flower that pleased my grieving heart,
And the trellis where the vine entwines the rose.

Am I Phoebus or Love?...Biron or Lusignan?
My brow's still red from the queen's kiss;
I dreamed in the grotto where Sirens swim...

And twice victorious crossed Acheron:
Plucking from Orpheus' lyre one by one
The saintly sighs and the faerie cries.

Note: The Spanish title was the motto adopted by the disinherited Ivanhoe in Scott's novel. The Hill of Posilipo is situated to the west of the city of Naples, and is the site of Virgil's tomb. Biron was a friend of Henri IV, Lusignan a famous family, both associated with the Valois. A number of personal references are best pursued by reading a biography of Nerval, of his early meeting with 'Adrienne' and later relationship with the actress Jenny Colon.

Myrtho

Myrtho, I think of you divine enchantress,
And of proud Posilipo, lit with a thousand fires,
Of your brow flooded with Eastern light,
And the black grapes twined in your golden hair.

It was in your cup I drank intoxication,
When they saw me praying at Iacchus' feet,
And from your laughing eyes' secret lightening,
For the Muses made me one of the sons of Greece.

I know why the volcano erupts once more...
You stirred it with agile foot, but yesterday,
And suddenly ash drowned the horizon's circle.

Since a Norman duke broke your gods of clay,
Eternally, beneath Virgil's laurel spray,
The pale hydrangea is wed to the green myrtle.

Note: Myrtho a shining mask of Venus Murcia to whom myrtle was sacred, is the counterpart to the dark prince of El Desdichado. Alchemically she is De Nerval's feminine principle to be fused with the masculine. Iacchus was an epithet of the god Dionysus (Bacchus) and the name of the torch-bearer at the Eleusinian mysteries, herald of the child born of the underworld.

Horus

Trembling Kneph, the god, shook the starry ways:
Isis, the mother, then raised herself from her bed,
Made, to her savage spouse, a sign of hatred,
In her green eyes shone the passion of elder days.

‘Do you see him, she cried, the old lecher dies;
Through his mouth the frosts of earth take flight;
Bind his lame feet, destroy his squinting sight,
He’s the god of craters, king of the winter’s ice!

The new spirit summons, the eagle is done,
Cybele’s robe for him do I now put on...
The beloved son of Hermes and Osiris!’

The goddess fled away on her golden shell,
Her adored image returning to us on the swell,
And the sky shone beneath the scarf of Iris.

Note: This poem is a consequence of the two previous poems. Kneph, is Amon-Ra the great god of Egypt. Isis was the Egyptian mother goddess (Cybele was her equivalent in Asia Minor): consort of Osiris she bore the child Horus-Harpocrates, the new sun (De Nerval’s image here for the Christ-Child). This is the alchemical fusion of male and female principles which produces gold, a process sacred to Hermes Trismegistos. Iris’ scarf is the rainbow, she being sky-messenger for Hera (the Greek great-goddess). Isis returns as Venus from the waves but fused with Mary, the Stella Maris.

Delfica

Do you know it, Daphne, that ballad of old,
At the sycamore-foot, or beneath the white laurels,
Under myrtle or olive or trembling willows,
That song of love that resounds forever?...

Do you know it, the Temple with vast peristyle,
And the lemons, bitter, marked by your teeth,
And the grotto fatal to imprudent guests,
Where the vanquished dragon's ancient seed sleeps?...

Those gods you endlessly weep will return!
Time bring back the order of classic days;
Earth has shuddered with prophetic breath...

Yet the sibyl with Latinate face still sleeps
Under the arch of Constantine
- And the austere portico nothing disturbs.

Note: There are references to a visit to the Temple of Isis at Pompeii with an English girl, Octavia (who tasted a lemon), and to the Temple of the Sibyl at Tivoli. Constantine's Arch is in Rome. Condensed mythological references abound.

Artemis

The thirteenth returns...She's forever the first;
And always the sole one – or the sole instant;
For are you queen, O you, the first or the last?
Are you king, you the sole or the last lover?...

Love him who loved you from cradle to bier;
She I alone loved still loves me tenderly:
She is death – or the dead one...O joy! O torment!
The rose she holds is the *Rose trémiere*.

Neapolitan saint with your hands full of fire,
Rose with violet heart, Saint Gudula's flower:
Have you found your cross in the desert of heaven?

White roses: fall! You insult our gods,
Fall, white wraiths, from your burning skies:
- She, saint of the abyss, holier to my eyes!

Note: The *Rose trémiere* is the hollyhock. St Gudula was a Brabant saint (late 7th-early 8th century), patroness of Brussels. A demon wishing to interrupt her prayers extinguished the light she carried, but divine power rekindled it. The flower-like fungus once called 'tremella deliquescens' (*Dacrymyces deliquescens*), is known as 'Sinte Goulds lampken' (St. Gudula's lantern).

Golden Lines

Well, then! All is sentient!

Pythagoras

Free-thinker, Man, do you think you alone
Think, while life explodes everywhere?
Your freedom employs the powers you own,
But world is absent from all your affairs.

Respect an active spirit in the creature:
Each flower is a soul open to Nature;
In metal a mystery of love is sleeping;
'All is sentient!' Has power over your being.

Fear the gaze in the blind wall that watches:
There is a verb attached to matter itself...
Do not let it serve some impious purpose!

Often a hidden god inhabits obscure being;
And like an eye, born, covered by its eyelids,
Pure spirit grows beneath the surface of stones!

Alfred de Musset (1810-1857)

Song

I said to my heart, my feeble heart:
It's enough surely to love one's mistress?
And don't you see that changeableness,
Is to lose time's joy in heart's yearning?

My heart replied: It's never enough,
It's never enough to love one's mistress;
And don't you see that changeableness
Makes past delights dearer and sweeter?

I said to my heart, my feeble heart;
Haven't we had enough of sadness?
And don't you see that changeableness
Is to find new grief with every footstep?

My heart replied: It's never enough
We'll never have had enough of sadness:
And don't you see that changeableness
Makes past pain dearer to us, and sweeter?

Barbarina's Song

Going to the wars, Knight, so fair
What will you there
So far from home?
Don't you see that night is deep,
The world brings care
To those who roam?

You who believe love left behind
Flees the mind,
Alas, alas!
Seekers of fame, your living name,
Your smoke and flame
Will swiftly pass.

Going to the wars, Knight, so fair,
What will you there,
So far from home?
For this I'll weep, who was beguiled
And told my smile
Was sweeter so.

On a Dead Lady

She was beautiful, if Night
Who sleeps in the darkened chapel
Where Michelangelo made light,
Unmoving, can be beautiful.

She was good, if it suffice
For hand to open, give in passing,
Without God seeing anything,
If coins are alms: as cold as ice.

She thought, if the empty noise
Of a sweet harmonious voice
Like a murmuring stream, untaught,
Could make one believe in thought.

She prayed, if two lovely eyes,
Now fixed on earth
Now on the skies
Can claim a prayer's birth.

She would have smiled, if the flower
That never bloomed, to please,
Could open to the coolest hour
Of passing and forgetful breeze.

She might have wept if that hand
Coldly placed against her heart,
Had ever felt dew's heavenly wand
Touch human clay with subtle art.

She might have loved, if pride
Like the light that uselessly
Is lit beside the one who died,
Lit not her heart's sterility.

She is dead who never lived,
She who made pretence of being:
From her hands the book has slipped
In which her eyes read nothing.

Sonnet

To see each other truly, to love each other only,
Without deceit, diversion, without shame or lies,
With no desire eluding us, never remorsefully,
To live as one, give the heart to every moment's flight;

To respect all thought as deeply as one plunges in,
To make of love the light of day and not a dream,
And in that clarity breathe freely forever –
So Laure sighed and sang to her lover.

You whose every step touches grace supreme,
It's you, among the flowers who seem carefree:
That is how one should love, you said to me.

And it is I, old child of doubt and blasphemy,
Who listening, and thinking, make you this reply:
Yes, it's thus one loves, though one lives otherwise.

Théophile Gautier (1811-1872)

Sonnet

To vein her brow's pallor, delicate,
Japan has granted its clearest blue;
The white porcelain is of white less true
Than her lucent neck, her temples of agate;

In her moist eye gleams a gentle light;
The nightingale's voice is harsher yet,
And, when she rises in our dark night,
We praise the moon in a cloudy dress;

Her silver eyes, burnished, move fluidly;
Caprice has pointed her pert little nose;
Her mouth has the red of raspberry, peach;

Her movements flow with a Chinese flow,
And beside her one breathes from her beauty
Something sweet, like the fragrance of tea.

The Hippopotamus

The big-bellied hippopotamus
Inhabits the jungles of Java,
Where in the depths of each lair, cuss
More monsters than haunt the dreamer.

The boa uncoils and hisses,
The tiger gives out its roars,
The angry buffalo whistles;
He grazes at peace or snores.

He fears nor kris nor assegai,
He gazes at man, with no cares at all,
And smiles at the sepoy's musket-ball,
That merely rebounds from his hide.

I'm like the hippopotamus;
Clothed with my convictions' weight,
Strong armour none can penetrate,
I tread, secure, the wilderness.

Carmen

Carmen is lean – a trace of yellow
Shadows her gipsy eye.
Her hair is a sinister black,
Her skin, tanned by the devil.

Women claim she's ugly,
But for her the men go mad:
The Archbishop of Toledo
Kneels at her feet to say Mass;

For above her amber nape
Is coiled a large chignon
That, in her room, undone
Yields her body a cape.

And gleams, through the pallor,
A mouth with a conquering smile;
Red chilli, a scarlet flower,
Hearts'-blood gives it fire.

So formed, the swarthy one
Outdoes nobler beauty,
And with her eyes that burn
Revives satiety.

She has, in her hot ugliness,
A salt-grain of that sea
From whose bitter gulf acrid Venus
Rose naked, provocatively.

Art

Yes, finer work emerges
From form that resists,
 Our urges,
Marble, verse, onyx.

Not falsely to constrain!
But to walk straight, Muse,
 Maintain,
Tight-fitting tragic shoes.

Shame on the idle rhythm,
A size or more too large,
 All don
Sliding it off and on!

Sculptor, forever shun
Clay moulded there
 By the thumb
When the mind's elsewhere;

Wrestle with Carrara,
With Parian marble rare
 And hard,
Keep the outline clear;

From Syracuse borrow
Bronze which the proud
 Furrow
Has charmingly endowed;

With a delicate hand,
The vein of agate, follow
 Command
The profile of Apollo.

Fix the water-colour,
Too fragile tints that run,
Painter
In enameller's oven;

Make Sirens blue
Tails writhing free
For you,
Monsters of heraldry;

And with triple halo
The Virgin and her Jesus
the globe
With the Cross above.

All dies. – Only robust
Art shares eternity:
The bust
Shall outlive the city;

And the austere medal
Found by a labourer
Recall
From earth, an Emperor.

Even the gods pass.
But stronger again
Than brass
Sovereign lines remain.

Chisel, file, and ream
That you may lock
Vague dream
In the resistant block!

Leconte de Lisle (1818-1894)

The Jaguar's Dream

Beneath the dark mahoganies, creepers in flower
Hang in the heavy, motionless, fly-filled air,
Twining among the tree-stumps, falling where,
They cradle the brilliant parrot, the quarreller,
The wild monkeys, spiders with yellow hair.
There the wearied, ominous horse-killer,
The ox-slayer, returns with a steady tread,
Over the dead mossy trunks of old timber.
Stretching, arching his muscular loins, a breath
From his gaping muzzle heavy with thirst
Issues with a sudden shock, quick and harsh,
And great lizards warm from the noon heat stir,
Then vanish gleaming through the tawny grass.
Veiled from the sun in a hollow of the forest,
He sinks down; stretched out on a level stone,
Cleans his paw with a broad lick of his tongue
Blinks golden eyes dull with sleepiness;
And, as his inert forces, in imagination
Make his tail flicker and his flanks quiver,
Dreams himself deep in some green plantation,
Leaping, and plunging dripping claws forever
Into bullocks' flesh as they bellow and shiver.

Stéphane Mallarmé (1844-1896)

Sigh

My soul towards your brow, where, O calm sister,
An autumn dreams blotched by reddish smudges,
And towards the errant sky of your angelic eye
Climbs: as in a melancholy garden the true sigh
Of a white jet of water towards the Azure!
– To the Azure that October stirred, pale, pure,
That in the vast pools mirrors infinite languor,
And over dead water where the leaves wander
The wind, in russet throes dig their cold furrow,
Allows a long ray of yellow light to flow.

O so dear

O so dear from far and near and white all
So deliciously you, Méry, that I dream
Of what impossibly flows, of some rare balm
Over some flower-vase of darkened crystal.

Do you know it, yes! For me, for years, here,
Forever, your dazzling smile prolongs
The one rose with its perfect summer gone
Into times past, yet then on into the future.

My heart that sometimes at night tries to know itself,
Or with which last word to name you the most tender
Exults in that which merely whispered sister

Were it not, such short tresses so great a treasure,
That you teach me quite another sweetness,
Soft through the kiss murmured only in your hair.

Note: Dated 1895. The French text reads 'Mary',
this being one of a series of poems written for Méry
Laurent, a friend also of Manet and others.

Sonnet

(Méry, sans trop d'aurore...)

Méry,

Without dawn too grossly now inflaming
The rose, that splendid, natural and weary
Sheds even her heavy veil of perfumes to hear
Underneath the flesh the diamond weeping,

Yes, without those dewy crises! And gently,
Unbroken when the sky fills with storm,
Jealous to add who knows what spaces
To simple day the day so true in feeling,

Does it not seem, Méry, that each year,
Where spontaneous grace relights your brow,
Suffices, given so much wonder and for me,

Like a lone fan with which a room's surprised,
To refresh with as little pain as is needed here
All our inborn and unvarying friendship.

Paul Verlaine (1844-1896)

The piano kissed...

Joyous notes, a sounding harpsichord's intrusion.

Pétrus Borel

The piano kissed by a delicate hand
Gleams distantly in rose-grey evening
While with a wingtips' weightless sound

A fine old tune, so fragile, charming
Roams discreetly, almost trembling,
Through the chamber She's long perfumed.

What is this sudden cradle song
That gradually lulls my poor being?
What do you want of me, playful one?

What do you wish, slight vague refrain
Drifting now, dying, towards the window
Opening a little on a patch of garden?

In the Endless

In the endless ennui
Of this empty land,
The blurred snow
Gleams like sand.

The sky is of copper
Without true light
As if the moon there
Had lived and died.

The grey crowns
Of nearby trees
Float like clouds
On the misty breeze.

The sky is of copper
Without true light
As if the moon there
Had lived and died.

Wheezing crow
And you, lean wolves,
In these sharp gusts
What will you do?

In the endless ennui
Of this empty land,
The blurred snow
Gleams like sand.

Parsifal

For Jules Tellier

Parsifal has conquered the girls, their sweet
Chatter, amusing lust – and his inclination,
A virgin boy's, towards the Flesh, tempted
To love the little tits and gentle babble;

He's conquered lovely Woman, of subtle
Heart, showing her cool arms, provoking breast;
He's conquered Hell, returned to his tent,
With a weighty trophy on his boyish arm,

With the lance that pierced the sacred Side!
He's cured the king, here he's king, abides,
And priest of the quintessential holy Treasure.

Worships in golden robes, a symbol, glory's home,
Vessel where the true Blood shines, the pure,
– And, O those children's voices singing in the dome!

Note: The last line is quoted by Eliot, in French, in *The Wasteland* (with reference to the Fisher King) as is the second line of De Nerval's *El Desdichado*.

The sky's above the roof....

The sky's above the roof
So blue, so calm!
A tree above the roof
Waves its palm.

The bell in the sky you see
Gently rings.
A bird on the tree you see
Sadly sings.

My God, my God, life's there,
Simple and sweet.
A peaceful rumbling there,
The town's at our feet.

- What have you done, O you there
Who endlessly cry,
Say: what have you done, there
With youth gone by?

A Poor Young Shepherd

I'm afraid of a kiss
Like the kiss of a bee.
I suffer like this
And wake endlessly.
I'm afraid of a kiss!

Yet I love Kate
And her sweet gaze.
She's delicate
With a long pale face.
Oh! How I love Kate!

It's Saint Valentine's Day!
I must, I don't dare
Tomorrow, they say...
It's a dreadful affair
Is Saint Valentine's Day!

She's promised to me,
Fortuitously!
But the difficulty
For a lover, poor he,
With his darling to be!

Poetic Art

For Charles Morice

Music above everything,
The Imbalanced preferred
Vaguer more soluble in air
Nothing weighty, fixed therein.

And don't go choosing your words
Without some confusion of vision:
Nothing's dearer than shadowy verse
Where precision weds indecision.

It's beautiful eyes hidden by veils,
It's broad day quivering at noon,
It's the blue disorder of clear stars
In an autumn, cool, with no moon!

For we always desire Nuance,
Not Colour, nuance evermore!
Oh, nuance alone can wed
Dream with dream, and flute to horn!

From murderous Epigrams flee,
Cruel Wit and Laughter impure
That brings tears to the high Azure,
And all that base garlic cuisine!

Take eloquence, wring its neck!
You'd do well, while you're in flow,
To make Rhyme a fraction wiser.
If we don't watch out, where will it go?

Oh who'll tell of the wrongs of Rhyme?
What mad Negro, or tone-deaf child,
Created this penny jewel, this crime,
That rings hollow, false under the file?

Music once more and forever!
Let your line be a thing so light,
It feels like a soul that soars in flight
To new skies and fresh lovers.

Let your line be the finest adventure
Afloat on the tense dawn wind
That goes wakening thyme and mint...
All the rest – is literature.

Jules Laforgue (1860-1887)

Pierrots

Emerges, on a taut neck,
From a starched ruff *idem*
A beardless face, cold-creamed,
A beanpole: hydrocephalic.

The eyes are drowned in opium
In universal licence
The clownish mouth bewitched
A singular geranium.

A mouth, now bottomless pit
Glacially screeching laughter,
Now a transcendental opening,
Vain smile of La Gioconda.

Planting their floury cones
On a black silk cut-throat's scarf,
They'll make their crow's-feet laugh
And wrinkle their trefoil noses.

For gem-stoned rings, on hand,
They've Egyptian scarabs,
In well-cut buttonholes,
Dandelions from the wasteland.

They go, eating the azure,
Sometimes vegetables too,
Hard-boiled eggs, and mandarins,
And rice as white as their costume.

They're of the Pallid sect,
They've nothing to do with God at all.
And whistle: All's for the best
In this best of Carnivals!

Pierrot's Speech

A lunar reveller simply
Making circles in ponds,
I've no designs beyond
Becoming legendary.

Gathering up with defiance
My pale-mandarin's sleeves
I puff out my mouth – and breathe
Gentle Christian advice.

Ah, yes, to become legendary, too,
On the brink of a charlatan age!
But where are last year's Moons?
And why can't God be re-made?

Pierrot's Melancholy

On the first day, I drink their bored eyes complete...
And I would kiss their feet
To death. Oh, if they'd deign
To take my heart, blood-stained!
Then we talk... – it becomes Tenderness,
And finally I offer them friendliness.

Out of tenderness, I offer myself, as brother, guide;
They believe I'm shy,
Wink a soft eye of course:
'One word and I'm yours!'
(I believe it.) Then the wrinkles I express,
Of the heart, smile into emptiness...

And suddenly I surrender the garrison,
Feigning treason!
(A narrow escape!)
At least, she'll write?
No, and I mourn her all that season...
– Oh! I've schemes beyond reason!

Who'll tame my heart! Sweet cure...
I'm true by nature!
Gentle as a nun!
Come! I'm no Don Juan,
Would it be such a wild adventure
Under the sun? Midst all this verdure...

Apotheosis

In every sense, forever, Silence swarms
With knots of golden stars mixed swirling.
They speak of gardens sanded with diamonds,
But each one's solitary, sadly, sparkling.

Now, down here, in this unknown angle,
A glimmering furrow of melancholy ruby,
A sweetly twinkling sun-spark trembles:
A patriarchal guide leads his family.

His family: a mass of dense coloured globes.
And on one, that's Earth, a yellow dot, Paris,
Where hangs, a light, a poor ageing fool:

In the frail universal order, unique miracle.
He's the mirror of a day, and knows it.
He dreams a while then makes a sonnet.

Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918)

Annie

On the coast of Texas
Twixt Mobile and Galveston there was a
Great garden full of roses
That also contained a villa
Like a giant rose.

A woman often walked
In the garden all alone
And when I passed along the linden-bordered road
We almost talked.

As she was a Mennonite
Her rose-trees and her clothes lacked buttons
Two were missing from my coat-front
Both of us followed almost the same rite.

Rhenish Night

My glass is full of wine trembling like a flame
Listen to the boatman's languid sound
He sings of having seen seven women 'neath the moon
Twining their long green hair along the ground

Stand up and sing aloud and dance a round
So I'll no longer hear the boatman singing
And seat beside me all the pretty blondes
The ones with neat plaits and quiet-looking

The Rhine the Rhine is drunk where vineyards gleam
All the gold of night falls there reflected in the stream
The voice sings on forever a death-rattle
Of the green haired faeries chanting summer's dream

My glass like a burst of laughter shatters

