

Prologue: French poetry?

From France or other countries, modern or from older times, poems written in French often tell us themselves what poetry is, how it operates on language, and what status and function it should hold in cultural life. And in France, perhaps more than elsewhere, poetry has been marked by programmatic attempts to define its nature and expand its role in the world. The fate of such efforts and the corollary development of French poetry through its relations with other languages, other discourses, and other arts: these are the themes to be woven in this book.

Neither chronological nor exhaustive in its approach to poets and movements, this is not a “history” of French poetry. My aim has been, rather, to provide the reader with a synthetic appreciation of the main forms, techniques, and traditions informing great poems written in French. And yet, because poems are always composed within a particular historical, cultural, and linguistic context, they will consistently be placed here in a framework of evolving conventions and perceptions as to what poetry itself is: presentations are organized around chapters designed to highlight (rather than to artificially resolve) the struggles that have shaped French poetry from its inception.

Beginning with an examination of the world of French poems from within, the first three chapters introduce and explore the unstable distinctions defining verse and prose (chapter 1), forms and genres (chapter 2), and words and figures (chapter 3). Building on this formal foundation, the last two chapters, on poetry and politics (chapter 4) and poetry and philosophy (chapter 5), as well as an Epilogue on poetry and other arts, move toward a more panoramic view, considering crucial ways in which poetry has situated and imposed itself within the wider world of French culture.

For now, let us sample, by way of introduction, famous theoretical statements from a few poets: judgments and reflections in which we can trace, along with the contest of generations, the expression of a collective will and the binding of poetry to changing linguistic, social, and political realities.

Joachim du Bellay’s 1549 *Deffence et illustration de la langue françoise* (*Defense and Illustration of the French Language*) takes on the general cause of the

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French language and culture before calling to arms a group of young poets – whom Pierre de Ronsard (1524–1585), the most prominent of these, later named after the “Pléiade” constellation – and explaining to them just how their labors might lift the French realm to the stars. Rendered illustrious through poetry and rhetoric patterned on the great works of Antiquity, the French language could one day, Du Bellay (1522–1560) argues, equal the languages of Ancient Greece and Rome, producing supreme literary heroes, the likes of Homer, Demosthenes, Virgil, and Cicero, as France rises up and procures “the reins of monarchy” (in the sense of universal dominion).¹ Because of its “magnificence de motz” (verbal magnificence) and “divinité d’invention” (divinely inspired invention), poetry was supposed to spearhead this endeavor.²

To “defend” the French language against accusations of poverty and “barbarie,” the *Deffence* begins by accepting the charges, accusing French poets of either a lazy or a pretentious refusal to cultivate their vulgate.³ Using the image of the garden and other natural metaphors, Du Bellay advocates enriching the French vocabulary with words imported from Greek, Latin, or Italian, and urges the French to imitate, as Rome had done with Greek letters, all forms and varieties of Ancient literature, undertaking a sort of grafting that would make all this Antique wealth their own. In short, French poets needed to join in and take over the Renaissance movement that had begun in Italy two centuries before.

That a thriving humanist culture based on knowledge recovered from Antiquity could be reborn in France had already been proven by the widespread translations of Greek, Latin, and Italian texts. However, the glorification of the French language would require more, Du Bellay argued, than straight translation. It would require art: the “painter’s” hand and the poet’s inventive “genius” – which is to say, the direct expression of the French soul in works at once deliberately imitative of Antique models and true to nature itself.⁴ Thus, the Pléiade’s notion of imitation, which encourages a relation between texts – the rewriting of classical forms and genres in original French works – also implies from the beginning imitation in the sense of mimesis⁵ (the imitation of reality in art). Du Bellay’s images for the imitative project he is prescribing are very natural and mobile, evoking a physical assimilative process: for example, new poems might take their “skin and color” from previous French authors, but their “flesh, bones, nerves, and blood” should be taken from Ancient writers, just as their Roman predecessors had “devoured” Greek texts, converting them into their own “blood and nourishment.”⁶ And while Du Bellay admits that “nature,” in the sense of talent and inspiration, is equally if not more important for poets than “culture” in the sense of erudition and hard work, he takes French poets’ innate abilities for granted, just as he presents France’s

military, political, and religious superiority over Italy and other countries to be in the normal order of things.⁷

What shocks the modern reader, however, is the utter rudeness with which Du Bellay treats his poetic forefathers throughout the *Deffence*. Toward the end he goes so far as to pray to Apollo that his language, a long-sterile mother, might at last give birth to a (true) poet.⁸ This image is as false and self-deceiving as it is strategic, designed primarily to promote the Pléiade poets themselves. The most deceptive aspect consists in Du Bellay's blanket denial of the wealth of his own poetic tradition. On the one hand, by the time of the *Deffence*, the French language had been accumulating riches for five centuries, magnificent works in all genres from the epic *Chanson de Roland* (*Song of Roland*, c.1090) to the satirical lyricism of François Villon (1431–1463?), and had been propagating them throughout Europe (although it is true that since the fourteenth century Italian Renaissance authors such as Petrarch had taken to calling French literature “barbaric”). On the other hand, and more indicative still of the Pléiade's own unbridled bid for glory, Du Bellay also dismisses the innovations of his most immediate forebears, paying little respect to such noted Renaissance poets as the recently dead Clément Marot (1496–1544) and Maurice Scève (c.1501–1560), who together had already completed many of the poetic reforms he was shouting about. Finally, in calculating his own generation's prospects for success, Du Bellay acknowledges but refuses to factor in a major setback: the recent death of King Francis I (1547), the monarch who most enthusiastically supported and embodied Renaissance culture and arts in France.

Nevertheless, the Pléiade poets' break with late medieval and early sixteenth-century models did, in fact, galvanize and reshape French poetry. Their rejection of old French forms and their systematic experimentation with new ones, borrowed from Antiquity or from Italy, led to the increasing autonomy of poetry as an art in France (from such domains as music, rhetoric, and history, to which it had been variously subservient), and to the development of Classical French verse.

The Classical period itself begins with the stern rejection by François de Malherbe (1555–1628) of the “barbarismes,” foreign borrowings, and pedantic excesses typical of the Pléiade poets and their heirs of the ornate “Baroque” school (late sixteenth to early seventeenth century). The austere court poet Malherbe strove above all to purify and standardize the French language and required that poetry reflect the values of reason and order, uniformity and clarity. Thus, it hardly seems coincidental that the crowning and most rigorous imposition of the regular alexandrine, a neglected old French meter which the Pléiade poets had revived and developed as a mainstay to uplift their native culture, occurs in the seventeenth century

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with the rise of the absolute monarchy and the creation of the Académie Française, an institution charged with dictating and preserving the norms of the French language. Forcefully articulated by Nicolas Boileau (1636–1711) in his *Art poétique*, the rules and conventions of French Classical poetry reigned supreme along with the Old Regime throughout most of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Then they, too, were overthrown, succumbing in part to the foreign influence of Romanticism, a European movement that swept into France from England and Germany around 1800, promoting art as an absolute along with the exaltation of nature, the passions, personal genius, and individualism.

Whence, Stéphane Mallarmé's 1886 essay *Crise de vers* (*Crisis of Verse*) describes the Symbolist poets' "freeing" of French verse – an aesthetic liberation prepared earlier in the century by Victor Hugo (1802–1885) and other Romantic poets – as a moment of significance determined by and comparable to the (1789) French Revolution.⁹ In the broadest sense, the French Symbolist movement includes all of the major French poets of the latter half of the nineteenth century following Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867): preeminently, Paul Verlaine (1844–1896), Arthur Rimbaud (1854–1891) and Mallarmé himself (1842–1898). But it is Jules Laforgue (1860–1887) and others in a narrower "school" of young Symbolist poets that Mallarmé credits for finalizing the break with traditional French meters. And, in a manner somewhat reminiscent of Du Bellay's strategy, he describes this break on the whole more as a natural process of decadence and renewal than as an organized political rebellion. However, Mallarmé, inversely to Du Bellay, tends to present his poetic forefathers as unsurpassable in their "illustration" of French verse, so that his essay defending the poetics of his own followers is presented not as a call to arms, but rather as a reflection on inevitable events that have already transpired, beginning with the natural death of Hugo.¹⁰ Representing this national hero as the ultimate incarnation of French verse, Mallarmé attributes to his passing nearly the same gravity and consequence as Du Bellay fears might ensue from the loss of Francis I.

At the same time, the gain that Mallarmé sees coming out of his nation's poetic "crisis" is unmistakably great. He portrays the young practitioners of free verse as having insured once and for all French poets' access to individual modalities of expression – *musical* modalities free at once from authoritative linguistic conventions and metrical constraints, as well as from ordinary language's obligations to imitate or represent reality directly, in the manner of journalistic "reportage": freedoms all central to Mallarmé's own poetics of "suggestion."¹¹ Finally, and perhaps most importantly, he credits his own time for revealing the equivalence of all kinds of poetic writing, and especially of verse and prose.¹²

André Breton's 1924 *Manifeste du surréalisme* (*Manifesto of Surrealism*) is no doubt the twentieth century's most crucial theoretical statement subverting, refocusing, and centralizing French poetry. A quintessentially Parisian movement with global influence (heir to such European avant-gardes as Russian and Italian Futurism, and international nihilistic Dada), Surrealism, with its mystical elevation of poetic experimentation, its pseudo-scientific doctrine, and its revolutionary ambitions, nourishes and colors the vast majority of the last century's poems written in French. With a violence reminiscent of the *Deffence*, Breton (1896–1966) presents Surrealism as a clean break from the poetic tradition: only Isidore Ducasse (1846–1870), alias Lautréamont, the then barely known author of *Les Chants de Maldoror* (*The Lays of Maldoror*), was deemed a probable “surréaliste absolu,” an appellation otherwise reserved for the members of the anointed group – such as Louis Aragon (1897–1982), Paul Éluard (1895–1952), and Robert Desnos (1900–1945). These are said to have “performed acts of ABSOLUTE SURREALISM,” to have sworn themselves to a cause that encompasses not only poetry and other arts, but life itself.¹³ In the same breath, on the sole basis of their works, Breton exercises (not without humor) the right to evaluate the partial, intermittent Surrealism of past and present authors (including Dante, and Shakespeare “in his finer moments”): thus, “Hugo is Surrealist when he isn't stupid,” but “Rimbaud is Surrealist in the way he lived, and elsewhere”;¹⁴ Guillaume Apollinaire (1880–1918), who invented the term, only approached Surrealism in the “letter,” whereas its “spirit” had been earlier embodied by the “SUPERNATURALISM” of Gérard de Nerval (1808–1855).¹⁵

As might be expected, the influence of this fiercely polemical movement registers itself negatively as much as positively, as Surrealism itself becomes a heritage. The very force of its pull and the binding character of its community trigger opposing, decentralizing trends in French poetry, breeding from the 1930s onward a wide variety of poetic orientations, an array of strongly individualistic poets who refuse group categorization, as well as scattered offshoots or rebellions of a more collective nature. In particular, the (not always consistent) social and political positions associated with Surrealism are often dramatically altered in the hands of women poets and Francophone poets from Africa, the Caribbean, or Québec, who in recent decades have called into question the very meaning of “French” language and culture. At the same time, insofar as Surrealism has not been replaced by a movement of comparable sway, contemporary French poetry – often judged obscure and feeling socially marginalized with respect to other genres – seems to be going through another protracted “*crise de vers*,” continually experimenting with new ways to recover and expand its audience.

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A number of structural, stylistic, and interpretive issues will recur throughout these pages as leitmotifs. We shall repeatedly see, for example, the important interplay of sameness and difference in such rudimentary elements as rhythm and rhyme,* in the patterning of fixed forms, in word choices and rhetorical figures. The nature of such basic poetic devices as metaphor,* allegory,* and symbol* is taken up repeatedly, in diverse historical contexts. The reader will also find frequent discussion of the varied and powerful means by which poetry can refer to the world, be this, for example, in mimetic effects such as onomatopoeia* (the verbal imitation of natural sounds), or in the pointed commentary of satire,* engage itself with other texts through various kinds of textual imitation or intertextuality* (any mode by which one text refers to another); or conversely appear, through self-reference or autoreferentiality,* to point our attention mainly to formal or philosophical aspects of the poem's own existence, thereby insisting on its autonomy. These broad issues, relevant to literature in general and to other arts, are especially crucial in poetry, perhaps because it strikes us – whatever its predominant formal, stylistic, or ideological features might be – first and foremost as a marked, or heightened, form of artistic language.

The discussion of these matters will entail a number of technical terms, which are generally defined in context (as they appear), as well as in the glossary. Every poem quoted is given in its original language, including Old, Middle, and Renaissance French (though from the seventeenth century forward, when differences become minimal, I conform to the tradition of using standardized spelling), and is accompanied (unless otherwise indicated) by a translation of my own, which aims to remain as literal as possible and harbors no poetic pretensions.¹⁶

Chapter 1

Verse and prose

While an absolute distinction between verse and prose is difficult to make, understanding the differences between these two kinds of discourse is fundamental to appreciating poetry. Verse can be defined as sequences of language in which we perceive a marked beat and a structured relationship between more or less regular accented measures, or recurrent rhythmic groups. Prose presents itself in sequences where there are no such evident rhythmic patterns. This is not to say that prose completely lacks rhythm, or that the rhythms of verse are always decisive. Indeed, our perception of French verse rhythms often depends on extra-rhythmic factors that underscore accent, such as syntax (word order) and rhyme. To make matters more complex, certain French prose styles, such as those imitating the Classical Latin period, tend to establish their own semi-regular rhythmic patterns, while free verse aims precisely to defy our rhythmic expectations. But despite these complications, as etymology suggests (the first meaning of the Latin noun *versus* was “the act of turning,” whereas *prosa* came from *prosus*, “going straight”), it is the very practice of turning, or cutting, a line of language so as to signal its end and internal rhythmic proportions that first distinguishes verse from prose. Since prose does not separate sequences of language in this way, we experience its rhythms differently within a temporal flow.

Though verse makes up much of French poetry, it is important to avoid equating verse and poetry for a number of reasons. The most obvious is that a significant portion of modern French and Francophone poems have in fact been written in prose, the prose poem insinuating itself into lyric poetry in the middle of the nineteenth century, decades before the invention of free verse. But intersections and exchanges between verse and prose do not occur solely in modernity, nor in poetry alone. They haunt the history of all the major genres of French literature from the Middle Ages. Verse and prose are, for example, mixed in the medieval and Renaissance *prosimètres*,* texts such as *Le Chapelet des dames* (*The Garland of the Ladies*) by Jean Molinet (1435–1507), composed along the lines of Boethius’ sixth-century *Consolation of Philosophy*, where the narrative progresses through alternating segments of Latin verse and prose. And while we normally think of fiction in terms of prose, the first “novels” of French literature, the Arthurian romances of

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Chrétien de Troyes (c.1135–1185), were composed in octosyllables* of *rimes plates** (rhymed couplets), one of the earliest and longest-lasting varieties of French verse. Here, for example, are the opening lines from *Yvain*:

Artus, li boens rois de Bretaingne
 La cui proesce nos enseigne
 Que nos soiens preu et cortois,
 Tint cort si riche come rois
 A cele feste qui tant coste,
 Qu' an doit clamer la Pantecoste.¹

*Arthur, the good king of Brittany,
 Who by his prowess teaches us
 To be brave and courteous,
 Held a court as rich as royal
 At the time of that feast so costly
 That we must call it Pentecost.*

Finally, the supreme realization of the *alexandrin*,* the classic twelve-syllable French equivalent of the English iambic pentameter, is generally considered to be found not in any seventeenth-century poem, but rather in the tragedies of Jean Racine (1639–1699).

Since it is with respect to the alexandrine that the rules of French verse have been the most rigorously defined, and since this verse form dominated French poetry for over 300 years, both in terms of prestige and frequency of use, much of this presentation of French prosody* will revolve around it. But the discussion of regular verse will also treat a number of other prominent meters,* as well as generally highlight the interdependency of rhythm, rhyme, and syntax in French verse.

The French language, like every other, has an inherent rhythm (or beat), which comes from the relative emphasis it places on certain sounds, that is, its accent. This “natural” rhythm plays an important role in the development of poetic meters. The way accent falls in a given language can involve the quantity of time, or duration, given to a sound (as with long and short syllables), or be simply a matter of intensity, or stress. It can be variably built into the pronunciation of words, as in English – for example, in the word *under* the first syllable is accented, whereas the second syllable is accented in *beneath*. Or accent can be determined, as it is in French, primarily by the order in which a sound comes within a given sequence of sounds, whether this sequence be a word or a word-group. Over the course of its development from Latin, the French language’s accent weakened little by little and became associated with endings: rather than being heavily marked, and varying, as in English, with particular words and parts of speech, it is relatively light and evenly distributed, the stress always falling on the last

accentuable syllable, which is to say the last tonic (or pronounced) vowel of any word or syntactic word-group. As the *e atone* (the silent *e*, also called the “*e muet*”) became gradually muted during the Middle Ages, and is not pronounced in modern French, the many French words ending with this particular vowel have their accents on the next to last vowel. Thus, one says: “*hibou*,” “*plafond*,” “*liberté*,” but “*table*,” “*visible*,” and “*écoute*.”² Similarly, in word-groups, which are determined by grammar and syntax, it is always the last accentuable syllable of the last word that carries the strongest accent, weakening all the terminal vowel accents of all the previous words. Accordingly, in the phrase “*un bon vin*,” the words “*un*” and “*bon*” would have their stress attenuated; in turn, the word “*vin*” would lose some of its stress in the longer word-group “*un bon vin français*.” So syntax plays a much more important role in the rhythm of French than it does in English.

The relative weakness of French accent and its association with endings may explain in part why French poetry, contrary to English, has no tradition of blank (or unrhymed) regular verse. On the one hand, owing to the subtlety and terminal position of its linguistic accent, French verse has both a built-in need and a natural inclination for the kind of end-line demarcation that rhyme provides. Well-marked recurring sound patterns supplement, as it were, for elusive linguistic rhythms, the repetition of the rhyme creating the effect of a phonetic accent strengthening the final, and therefore most critical, metrical one. On the other hand, French words, like Spanish ones, owing to the frequency of certain word endings (in the form of suffixes, for example, and grammatical inflections), lend themselves more easily than English words do to the requirements of rhyme.

Differences inherent in the patterns of rhythm, grammar, and acoustics in French and English also account in part for differences between the two languages’ predominant poetic meters. French meters are isosyllabic:* that is, comprised of equal numbers of syllables, as opposed to rhythmic measures or “feet.” As students of English poetry know, the foot is a pre-set rhythmic measure containing at least one accented syllable and one or more unaccented syllables depending upon its variety: the iambic, trochaic, anapestic, dactylic, etc . . . English meters are generally counted by these measures loosely based on Latin and Greek models (which originally structured verse according to certain fixed patterns of long and short syllables). Though the aspect of duration central to accent in Classical meters is not generally relevant to English-language poetry, English words, contrary to French ones, do carry variable built-in accents of intensity and must therefore be arranged in verse in such a way as to fit a given meter, the pre-set sequence of accented and unaccented syllables chosen for the poem. The words ‘*under*’ and ‘*beneath*’ are, for example, synonymous and have an equal number of syllables. But they are not metrically interchangeable, since their accentuation

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is inherently different. In and of itself the word *under* would make up a “trochee” (a foot comprized of one accented syllable and one unaccented syllable), while the word “*beneath*” would make up an iamb (a foot comprized of one unaccented syllable followed by one accented one). It has often been argued that spoken English naturally follows the iambic pattern. And iambic pentameter, the most traditional meter of English poetry, is defined as verse generally composed of five iambic feet. Paul Fussell offers the following stanza* from Edward Fitzgerald’s 1859 rendering of Omar Khayyám’s *Rubáiyát* (translated from the Persian) as a simple example of this particular meter, and more generally of English poetry’s accentual-syllabic verse:

Ī sómetĭmes think thăt névĕr blóws sŏ réd
 Thĕ Róse äs whére sóme búried Cáesär bléd;
 Thăt évery Hýácĭnth thĕ Gárdĕn wéars
 Drópt ĩn hĕr láp frŏm sóme ónce lóvelý héad.³

We note from the scansion of the verse that only the first line of the stanza is composed strictly of iambs; the regular pattern of one unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one is already broken in the second line, since the word *some* bears an accent. In the third line, the word *every* is also counted as having only two syllables, while it might arguably be counted as having three. These variations in accentuation and syllable count do not constitute a problem with respect to the poem’s meter. Since accent is strong in English and the iambic pattern is generally maintained, the occasional use of other, substituted feet is a positive thing to be expected, and the precise number of syllables articulated in each line is inconsequential. The meter will be easily heard so long as the iamb dominates.

The conditions within which rhythmic regularity, or meter, can be created in French are very different. The fact that French words tend to lose their individual accents within the context of a word-group and that the terminal accent is syntactically determined, means that all syllables are inherently equal in French verse (with the crucial exception of those formed by the *e atone*): they may or may not be accented depending upon where they fall. Owing to the effect of syllable linking, or *enchaînement*, created by the grammatical rules of *élision* (the eliding of a word’s final *e* in front of a word beginning with a vowel) and *liaison* (the linking of final consonants with beginning vowels), boundaries between words tend, moreover, to be inaudible in French. Accordingly, as Clive Scott has argued, we should think of a French verse-line not as “a string of words, but of syllables” and recognize that much of the beauty of French prosody stems from “its shifting accentuation and its phrasal nature.”⁴ French verse’s requirement for rhyme,