

2005 MLA Convention: Division on Nineteenth-Century French Literature
Poetry Matters, Then and Now

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“White Mythology and Gender Typology in the 19th-Century French Lyric”

The 19th century corresponds with the high point, in the Western lyric, of the tendency to hypostatize Nature. Anthropomorphic figurations range from catachresis (the foot, flank, or shoulder of a hill; the whispering or sighing of the trees; the lamentations of the wind, etc.) through a role in a communicative process (Nature as *destinatrice* in prosopopoeia, and as *destinataire* in apostrophe) to personification as a mother, sister, lover, muse, or confidante. The forms that such *mythologie blanche* assumes in practice are rarely conventional, automatic, or “innocent” of ulterior and variable meanings beneath superficially similar appearances. A comparison between the lyrics of Louise Ackermann, Marceline Desbordes-Valmore, and Delphine de Girardin on the one hand, and Alphonse de Lamartine, Alfred de Vigny, and Victor Hugo on the other will seek to discover and illustrate the differences in figuration that may depend on whether the gender of the lyric poet is the same as, or different from, the gendered representations of Nature. Do women poets confront, evade, or transform the gendered conventions of the personification of our environment? Is the character of their ecological sensibility different from that of male authors? To what extent, and in what ways, does Nature function for them as a medium or as a topic, or both? Are the differences among women poets in this regard greater than those among male poets, and if so, why and how?

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“Engendering Poetic Vision”

Ever since Helene Cixous proposed the existence of an "écriture féminine" almost 30 years ago in "Le Rire de la Méduse" there have been numerous attempts to define and describe this type of writing. The problem, of course, is that in her original formulation Cixous was attempting to advance a notion which, theoretically speaking, lay outside of language as it is most commonly understood, making any concrete linguistic articulation of female writing's specificity problematic at best. To attempt to delineate a so-called female writing essentializes, moreover, something that is by definition pluralistic, thus denying individual women writers in the process their existential right and intellectual or creative capacity to be as different or "original" as they want to be, in the world or simply on paper.

Yet, as both men and woman literary critics have been anxious to show in recent times, women writers do seem to approach their subject matter in slightly different, and perhaps subtly characteristic or identifiable, ways from men, highlighting fragmentary details over comprehensive generalities, for instance, as Naomi

Schor's "Reading in Detail" sets out to demonstrate in regard to French realist fiction. Following the lead of Schor, as well as that of rhetoricians and linguists like le groupe MU in Europe and Deborah Tannen in the US, my proposed paper compares and contrasts the specific ways that 19th-century French men and women poets, like Hugo, Gautier, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Desbordes-Valmore, Krysinska et al., see and hence describe similar things. Working from the assumption that what is first perceived is in fact the "same" thing, I shall briefly examine some of the lexical, syntactical, rhythmical, phonemic, iconic and other prosodic particularities of certain common images advanced by these writers in order to distill some preliminary, gender-based, stylistic proclivities in poetic vision. The more or less canonical idea that "la voyance" is a primarily masculine phenomenon in 19th-century French poetry (as observed in the works of Hugo, Baudelaire and Rimbaud) may eventually have to undergo an important critical re-vision, for example, once one takes into account the results of this and further formalistic analyses of this type. After all, "la voyante" or female fortune-teller had a significant historical presence and role already in the French imagination before "le voyant" gained greater ascendancy. The full richness of the term/concept "La voyante" may therefore have simply been occulted by more powerful male voices and institutions seeking to maintain their traditional hold on poetry's production and reception, thereby limiting the vision(s) afforded by poems for us all.

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“Dear Mssrs Miller, Fowlie, and Faurisson (cc: Rimbaud)’: Twenty-First Century Responses to the 1960’s”

In a letter to Wallace Fowlie in 1965, Henry Miller wrote: “Am amazed too that you are translating [Rimbaud’s] ‘complete works’! What a task! And how we need this!”¹ Four years earlier, Robert Faurisson published a booklet with the playfully antagonistic title “A-t-on lu Rimbaud?”, quickly putting himself at the forefront of intense debate regarding the numerous liberties he took in his interpretations of Rimbaud’s often hermetic poems.

As unlikely as it would seem to echo Miller’s sentiments about a translation of French poetry today, so the numbers of people who could reply to Faurisson in the affirmative seem to diminish every year, if book sales and enrollments on college campuses are any measure. Indeed, while recently reviewing Fowlie’s important 1966 edition of Rimbaud’s *Complete Works*, I saw quite clearly that, in the 1960’s, such a book was not just useful, or important, but *needed*. How times have changed; in his prefatory remarks of 1966, Fowlie stated, “our age is one of revolt.” Such is, it seems, no longer the case; today social and political injustice is met more often with apathy than with revolt, just as new media threaten literature’s survival. In addition, the recent curricular trend of favoring cultural studies over more “traditional” literature surveys has resulted in even fewer people reading Rimbaud; or, worse, people read him but at nothing more than the most cursory of levels, considering a poem here or a poem there within its important historical and cultural context but lacking the literary context – its place within a group of poems, a collection, its response to predecessors and its setting the foundation for successors – that is no less important.

Perhaps we could say, in response to Arthur Miller, that it is precisely in order to remember the importance of revolt that a new generation of readers should read Rimbaud, why they *must* read Rimbaud. To Robert Faurisson, let us emphasize the verb in that last clause: they must *read* Rimbaud. At the dawn of our current millennium, in a world that sometimes seems as far removed from the 1960’s as it is from the 1860’s, Henry Miller’s words still ring true; we all need Rimbaud, now more than ever.

¹ Miller, Henry, and Wallace Fowlie. *Letters of Henry Miller and Wallace Fowlie (1943-1972)*. New York: Grove P, 1975. p. 155.

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Slippery Ground: At the Borders of Symbolist Poetry

My paper attempts to respond simultaneously to several of the areas of inquiry suggested by the description of “Poetry Matters, Then and Now.” I argue that the time has come for a re-evaluation of attempts to define the symbolist movement in French poetry, both in the symbolist period itself and throughout the twentieth century. My paper calls upon two seldom-considered symbolist theorists and poets, René Ghil (1862-1925) and Jean Royère (1871-1955), and their approach to defining symbolist poetic practice (whether ultimately to embrace or reject it) obliquely through a simultaneous theoretical interest in music. Working, then, at the borders between disciplines and between the literary and critical past and present, I argue that music functions as a crucial site of dialogue between “major” and “minor” figures of symbolism.

Music is often said to enjoy a privileged place for symbolists because it serves as gateway to the Ideal. My reading of symbolism reveals just the opposite. In fact, a closer look at symbolist critical practice reveals a self-conscious hesitation, doubt, or instability that resonates with much twentieth-century critical practice. René Ghil’s *Traité du Verbe*, an attempt to develop an “instrumentalist” school of poetic practice, claims to provide a theory of synesthesia that scientifically correlates vowels, consonants, orchestral instruments, colors, and emotions, but I will show how doubts about the validity of that project, in anything but a metaphorical sense, undermine the confident tone in which the theory is announced.

Jean Royère is another poet whose attempts to situate symbolist poetry within broader contexts both of the history of poetics and of the role that music and the visual arts play in shaping symbolist practice. Royère completes the death of the dream of ideal with his theory of “musicism.” While claiming to perpetuate symbolism, Royère’s theory and poetry perform its death. The ultimate failure of Ghil’s “instrumentism” and Royère’s “musicism” proves instructive because these theories provide an occasion to reexamine the borders—thematic, formal, disciplinary, national, and ideological—that constitute symbolism. Poet-critics of the late nineteenth century have bequeathed to the twenty-first century an elusive, performative, and transformative approach to poetic production, and as such, a bridge may profitably be constructed between their theorizing and our own. As present-day critics revisit the unstable category of “symbolism,” they participate in the very same sort of intertextual transformation performed and theorized by the symbolists themselves.