UNDERSTANDING FRENCH POETRY

Essays for a New Millennium

edited by

Stamos Metzidakis

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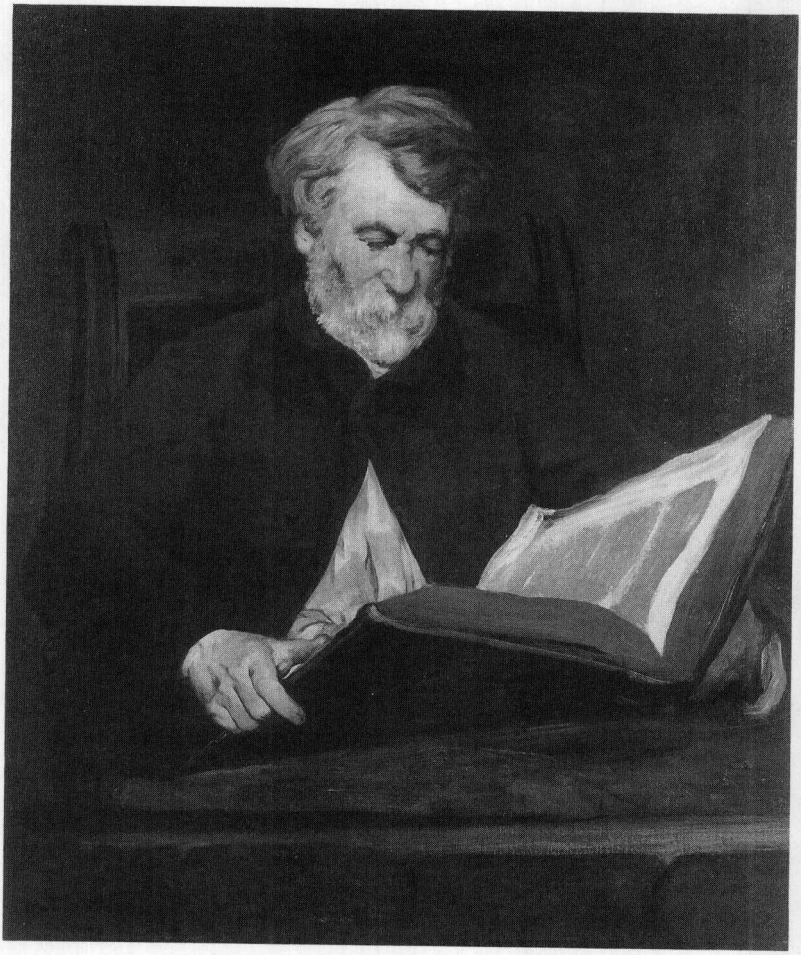

***The Reader* by Edouard Manet.**
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INTRODUCTION

French Poetry and Its Discontents; or, "I really don't care that much for poetry"

Stamos Metzidakis

Anyone involved in the teaching of French poetry (or any other type of poetry, for that matter) will recognize in my subtitle's quotation an all-too-common statement made by students and critics alike as we approach the end of this millennium. When making this remark, I could, of course, choose to say "end of this century" instead of "this millennium," to speak of our own historical situation. But the notion of *fin-de-siècle* is so often associated with the nineteenth century alone that, ultimately, it seems much less poetic and far less epic in dimension than the phrase "end of a millennium." The quasi-epic tone of this introductory essay is thus intentional, for it aims to express precisely what William Calin in his *In Defense of French Poetry* calls the "crisis of poetry," which we find today in many intellectual circles throughout the Western world.[1]

To be sure, variations on this theme of not caring much for poetry have been heard as long as poetry has been taught and read. Its articulation has nonetheless become even more frequent nowadays. This sorry state of affairs results at least partially from the fact, suggested by Calin, that:

> most readers of poetry . . . hold an insufficient concept as to the nature of poetry and . . . , at the same time, are not acquainted with the history of . . . verse. In other words, they do not have the background to conceive poetry

> synchronically and diachronically, both as theory and as textual practice (1).

Besides Calin, others, too, have become aware of the need to rehabilitate both the study and appreciation of poetic forms.[2] One has only to consider in this regard a story I recently heard that concerns a student who successfully passed a Ph.D. oral exam in French Literature at a prestigious American university. The student in question insisted that the paradigmatic French Romantic poet Alphonse de Lamartine was, in fact, not one of the initiators of that school of poetry, but rather a member—among many others—of the second group of Romantics. Apparently, the spectacular overnight success of *Les Méditations poétiques* (published in 1820, in other words, some ten or fifteen years before several of the major writings of the "petit cénacle") were somehow lost on this novel-obsessed student. As if this error were not already serious enough in and of itself, she then confessed that she really only cared for prose. In her eyes, this admission was perfectly sufficient to justify her ignorance.[3]

Some might scoff at this anecdote as representing a mere trifle that hardly merits serious appraisal. To such individuals it signifies nothing more than an isolated example of a certain person's ignorance that in no way affects the whole of academia or reflects anything in particular about our society at large. After all, one could say that it does not really matter where Lamartine should be placed within the fundamentally arbitrary concept of literary history anyway. If one believed in the universal need to deconstruct certain critical labels that have helped us to "explain" poetic history, then this objection on the grounds of ideological bias or even pedantry could perhaps be granted. But what this anecdote should make clearer than anything else is that, lately, the number of such incidents is growing. We are no longer talking about an isolated case of ignorance of literary history. Instead, we are witnessing a widespread phenomenon, the phenomenon of poetry's becoming something of a poor cousin to the far more appealing domain of prose. That is, the timeless discursive form known as verse-art is gradually being overshadowed by more prevalent forms of critical and artistic prose.[4]

The disturbing contemporary situation of poetry should, therefore, no longer be ignored. Whereas the student mentioned above felt her "error" in literary history represented little more than a lack of real interest in poetry, the far more serious matter implied by her response has to do with what it indicates about the respective place of poetic texts within contemporary canons of French, and by extension, Western, literature. It should be taken as an index of the gradual decline of poetry, not in terms of its quantity or quality, but rather in terms of what Calin calls "its centrality within [various] tradition[s]" (167). Furthermore, it corroborates what Calin suggests when he writes that in the areas of literary production, analysis, and canonization "the center of gravity has shifted [over the centuries] from epic to lyric and from poetry to prose" (167).

This does not mean, of course, that no one reads epic or lyric poetry anymore. But the idea of a shift in an evaluative "center of gravity" does revive various debates raging in many universities today. These debates concern the relevance, or lack thereof, of certain literary texts. In this respect, it is no coincidence that a good number of texts increasingly deemed "irrelevant" are, for the most part, not just authored by European males, but are simply *older* texts; that is, they are texts that often imitate earlier discursive and generic models.

Given this state of literary affairs, the critical issues the present volume will address could thus be summarized in the form of two questions: 1) Why do so many English-speaking readers today assume that what Alfred de Vigny's epic poems from *Les Destinées*, for instance, say in an older versified form is somehow less moving, significant, or thought-provoking to them than what they find in modern prosaic counterparts, in, say, Monique Wittig's *Les Guerrières*, or even non-French texts like James Joyce's *Ulysses* or Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*? and 2) For what reasons do so many readers dismiss the assonant decasyllables of *La Chanson de Roland* or the trimetric alexandrines of Victor Hugo's poetry as mere anachronistic "details" that somehow hinder them from getting to the "bottom" of the poem's "story," to the "meat of the matter," as one might commonly say. The underlying contention of the following essays is precisely that these and other related myths

about (French) poetry need to be debunked. The present book thereby aims to provide the theoretical and methodological groundwork for an improvement of any future understanding of French poems. By first sketching out in this introduction three major causes of poetry's disquieting present situation, its "discontents," and by then illustrating these causes (and effects) through appropriate essays in the volume's three sections, I and the other contributors will furnish the reader with several answers to the question of why a crisis of French poetry exists today. In the process, we shall show that today's readers too often dismiss poetic discourse on grounds that are, for the most part, specious.

It will be remarked that, whenever possible, other languages and poetic traditions beyond those of France will be brought to bear on the critical commentaries and analyses presented here. The simple reason for this is that, theoretically speaking, our conclusions about French poetry need not be limited to the French language alone. Insofar as French literature is the specialty of most of the contributors to this volume, however, one can expect the vast majority of examples and models to derive from the French tradition. Moreover, because of the particular crisis in French poetry (especially with respect to its *study* among Anglophones), the reader should hardly be surprised to discover that this type of literary text is in need of so thorough a re-examination as the present work offers.

The first reason or cause for poetry's contemporary marginalization is one we can call *technical*. This cause involves all those formal aspects of poetry, like rhyme and meter, considered to be communicative impediments rather than intrinsically rewarding stylistic and semantic challenges that a poetic text provides for a reader. Often, modern readers seem reluctant to deal with language that does not have the same linguistic and discursive traits to which they have grown accustomed in their everyday lives. They complain that poetry is obscure because it does not just *say* what it means, as one supposes a piece of prose does. Why, for instance, did Baudelaire bother to write the versified poems of *Les Fleurs du Mal* when, in

certain cases, he was composing at the same time prose "versions" of them that would eventually appear in his collection of prose poems called *Le Spleen de Paris*? Why, in other words, choose to write something in a roundabout manner when a straightforward one accomplishes the same thing even more "efficiently"?

Reasoning this way, some readers think notions of prosody are nothing more than boring "details" that are better left unknown. At best, such details function primarily as "fillers" for, say, a student majoring in French, or even a scholar writing a paper who needs something to say in the descriptive part of an oral or written presentation. From this perspective, technical features become useful only insofar as they allow us to present astonishing facts like:

> "This is a regular French sonnet: it has fourteen lines (. . . I mean, *verses*); it is divided into two quatrains of four verses and two tercets of three verses" (quoted from an undergraduate Introduction to French Literature class).

What happens in the minds of such readers is something like this: Just as they are content to *understand*, supposedly, the meaning of a sentence within the context of a normal conversation, without necessarily first "diagramming" it into its integral linguistic elements, so, too, they believe they can understand the meaning of a poem without worrying much about the particular concatenation of the words on the page. After all, continues this line of thought, the difference between *rejet* and *enjambement*, or between *rime riche* and *rime pauvre* should not really matter to anyone engaged in the simple act of understanding a piece of discourse. On some level, this kind of reader has real doubts about whether this type of formal distinction actually matters any more than does the distinction between an *adjective* and *adverb*.

In the case of poetic discourse, one could certainly argue that important differences do indeed exist between such details. This argument would be relatively easy to defend, although, in most cases, some semblance of meaning can be obtained from even the least sophisticated of readings, a reading that might not bother to take into account such "details." Provided one has a more or less native command of a given language, that is, one

can and usually does derive some sense of what a poem is *trying* to say, even if the poem seems to the recalcitrant reader to be going about it in too convoluted a manner. Therefore, one need not be an expert in critical terminology in order to understand *something* about what most poems express. Yet, what experiences in the classroom often indicate is how much more students seem to enjoy their own experience of poetry when they learn in a systematic, albeit succinct, way about the fundamental *technical* aspects of poetry. By reducing the number and definitions of key concepts of versification, one can reasonably hope to re-kindle the interest of readers who complain of having had, previously, only vague unconnected notions of poetic practice.[5]

This latter fact suggests that the recent demise of formal language learning and decline of poetry studies are, in reality, closely linked. Indeed, the purported "details" of both areas turn out to be the sine qua non of a fuller appreciation of them both. Thus, when, in the not so distant past, students studied grammar, and even rhetoric, *formally*, it was natural to assume that moving one step further in this direction would lead them to a greater appreciation of the technical aspects of poetry. For them (or should I say "us," i.e. we who were at least partially exposed to such subject matter before the end of the sixties), poetry was simply a more technical language, one more conscious of, and concerned with, all of language's innate *technicality*. For most of us and our teachers, the proper methodological progression which allowed us to appreciate poetry was composed of two steps. First, one needed to learn and understand fully the complexities of the "normal circumstances" of our everyday language.[6] Then, and only then, one moved on to the formal study of poetry's specificity, to an examination of its peculiar linguistic power to signify in ways beyond those in which mere "ordinary" language, i.e. prose, signified.

As simplistic as this schema may now appear to post-structuralist readers like us, the fact remains that for quite a while now, and for quite a few new readers, the first step described above has been practically eliminated. In its wake, one finds a heuristic, as well as horrific, abyss between "normal"

language and the language of poetry. As a result, we should hardly be astounded to hear the opinion that poetry (a foreign because *inaccessible* language) must perforce be of secondary interest to "serious" thinkers concerned more with content than with form. By the same rationale once used to justify ignorance of foreign languages and cultures—that one does not need them in order to function perfectly well within one's own limited world—modern lovers of prose thereby proclaim their right to ignore poetry. Without taking the first *technical* step in the language learning progression, it is, after all, easy for readers to assume that the language of poetry does not concern them in any immediate way, just as not crossing barriers like oceans often leads to an entire nation's unconcern for, and ignorance of, human lives other than their own.

But it is remarkable to note how much more intellectual satisfaction readers feel when discovering for the first time that something as "pedantic" as the grammatical function of a poem's words can, in fact, add new significance to the mere denotations of these same words. Let us take, for example, the case in which they come to see how an abundance of substantives and an absence of verbs in a key passage supplements semantically the general theme of a *fixed vision* that underlies Théophile Gautier's quasi-pictorial poem "Etude de Mains." By dint of what we might call their substantive "density," the poem's words succeed in painting, as it were, the very hands that form this particular word-study from the collection *Emaux et Camées*:

> Impériales fantaisies,
> Amour des somptuosités;
> Voluptueuses frénésies,
> Rêves d'impossibilité,
>
> Romans extravagants, poèmes
> De haschisch et de vin de Rhin,
> Courses folles dans les bohèmes
> Sur le dos des coursiers sans frein;
>
> On voit tout cela dans les lignes
> De cette paume, livre blanc . . . [7]

This "hand painting" derives much of its substance from the sheer accumulation of nouns presented in these stanzas by a poet looking into the "white book" of someone's palm.

Or, let us consider the additional aesthetic worth readers find in a poem like one of André Breton's "automatic" prose poems from *Poisson Soluble* when they note how something as technical as even punctuation points can shed light on the writing process itself. Because the French names for "period" and "comma" are *point* and *virgule* respectively, one can see how important it might be to have readers understand the way these technical details relate phonemically to much more "important" details within this same text.[8] For, after encountering a strange large crate at the start of the poem—a crate on which one might normally expect to find the words "Fragile," or possibly even "Up" and "Down"—the reader instead learns that:

> sur la paroi de la caisse Haut et Bas n'existent pas et l'on . . . a affirmé qu'un berger, où l'on se serait attendu à lire Fragile, a lu Paul et Virginie. Oui, Paul et Virginie, point et virgule.[9]

In other words, while on a thematic level of the prose poem this allusion to two famous literary characters might be justifiable[10], there can be little doubt that their sudden appearance here must also be attributed to some extent to the periods and commas located in the immediate linguistic environment. As if to drive home this point, Breton even repeats their names so as to re-invoke, phonemically, the highly idiosyncratic relationship just established between these characters and the particular graphemic signs surrounding them:

> . . . Paul et Virginie. Oui, Paul et Virginie, point et virgule.

By multiplying experiences of this type, one can hope that fewer readers will come away unsatisfied with their exposure to poetry because of some arcane notion of its purported *technicality*.

For the sake of comparison, I will now switch briefly to American poetry, where one finds a similar phenomenon in Walt Whitman's poem "When I heard the learn'd astronomer."[11] Here, too, one discovers a technical question, which, this time, concerns the grammar used in a poem. As with the above text by

Breton, this example illustrates something fundamental about poetry's specificity, something that readers can learn to appreciate rather than to dismiss. The poem is composed of a series of anaphoric phrases whose repetitiveness suggests syntactically the monotonous tone of a distinguished astronomer's discourse:

> When I heard the learn'd astronomer,
> When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before
> [me,
> When I was shown the charts and the diagrams, to add,
> divide, and measure them
> When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured
> with much applause in the lecture-room,
> How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,
> Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself . . .

The significant detail to note here is the choice Whitman makes between the adjective "unaccountable" and the otherwise more appropriate adverb "unaccountably" in the line "How soon *unaccountable* I became tired and sick." The reader unaware or unappreciative of such technicality will not realize how telling this choice is. In this instance, the poet can be shown to have written the "wrong" word in order to express how much his personal musings, precisely because they are *un-accountable*, run counter to the celestial numbers, columns, figures, charts, and other scientific *accounts* presented by such a truly boring, if learned, astronomer. So the adjective "unaccountable" actually modifies the poet, "I," not his action. Thus, we understand why Whitman decided not to select the adverb "unaccountably" to describe his suddenly having become "tired and sick" in the midst of all this erudition. His knowledge of the innate technicality of poetry (and, more generally, of language itself) has allowed him to suggest two things rather than just one—his sudden change of mood *and* the personal reason for it—through his unexpected use of a so-called wrong word.

These and innumerable other examples one can cite in other languages make clear that verse, possibly even more than prose, is, in Clive Scott's words, "an intricate exercise in [semantic and thematic] priority-giving."[12] The reader who prefers to dismiss such discourse because of its purported

technicality has simply not understood, nor appreciated, how "each prosodic location is charged with various kinds of motive and prejudice and tendentiousness, which interact with locations in the syntactic chain."[13] In other words, to recall one of the main tenets of Jakobsonian poetics, such readers have not fully realized how the specific location within a poetic text of a given linguistic element frequently generates, in and of itself, richer and more multiple meanings than those normally associated with that element in a prosaic context. This, in turn, naturally contradicts the ill-founded belief in poetry's inherent incapacity to *speak* to particular readers.

The second reason or cause for poetry's marginalization is one I will dub *substantive*. This cause derives from the general sense that poems, as a result of their minimal or obscure subject-matter, do not contain enough intellectually stimulating substance to warrant anything other than mere cursory, and for the most part, pedantic "historico-literary" interest. Sometimes this sense of a substantive lack comes simply from the (short) length of the text. In this case, readers complain that the minute description of a woman's hands, such as one finds in certain Renaissance *blasons* or Parnassian poems like that of Gautier examined earlier, hardly merits the attention of anybody involved with ostensibly "larger" issues like race, religion, and gender. The uninterested poetry-reader might very well wonder what the big deal is with the idiosyncrasies of this particular woman's hands.

Another question that might be asked is: What difference does it make in, say, the poem *Néférou-Ra* from Leconte de Lisle's *Poèmes Barbares* whether the princess of the same name was really related to the god Amon-Ra? One could no doubt try to defend the universal need to know these facts on the grounds that both dermatology and Egyptian mythology have their own intrinsic cultural worth that deserves to be passed on to later generations. But, one might find such an argument difficult to make in certain quarters today, especially at a time when notions like this, smacking of the politically incorrect doctrine of cultural literacy, are suspect, and often downright inadmissible.

What might be used instead to dismiss this supposed weakness of poetry is the idea that such small "details" in no

way constitute all, perhaps not even the greatest part, of what a poem actually expresses. Many of us realize, of course, that certain poems do not really seem to *express* much of anything at all, much less, in any case, than more "accessible" kinds of texts appear to do. We readers and critics are the ones who, in fact, do most of the "expressing" for the poem. Having said this, however, anyone who cares about the future of poetry must understand that part of his or her responsibility is precisely to make such substantive details express *something or other.* From this perspective, it is clear then that the exact mythico-historic identity of Néférou-Ra pales by comparison to her poetic value as a pure signifier within De Lisle's text. Instead of functioning as the obscure signifier for a specific historical signified, her name functions as a sign without any necessary exterior referent. Thus, the sonority of her name and its grapho-phonemic relation to the other character/signifiers in the poem make it immediately possible to dispense with the *substantive* problem her name would otherwise pose to the reader. In other words, the potential critique of this poem on a substantive basis is eliminated once one sees how easy it is simply to *replace* one kind of substantive cultural information (the queen's "identity") by another kind, the incantatory value of the sound of her name. In the process, a French, or otherwise non-Egyptian reader understands, indirectly perhaps, the general message the poet is trying to get across in his *Poèmes barbares* by evoking the memory of so foreign and mystical a character in this particular poem. The sound and spelling of her name by themselves connote this foreignness.

In a variation on this cause, there might also be a feeling among readers that the personal sentiments expressed by lyric poets hardly speak volumes to anyone other than the poets themselves. One could insist that the heart-wrenching cries of an Alfred de Musset, for instance, have little place in what is today considered serious or worthwhile literature. It might be useful to remind this type of reader of what T.S. Eliot said in reference to all great poets and to their respective times:

> A poet may believe that he [sic] is expressing only his private experience; his lines may be for him only a means of talking about himself without giving himself away; yet

> for his readers what he has written may come to be the expression both of their own secret feelings and of the exultation or despair of a generation. He need not know what his poetry will come to mean to others; and a prophet need not understand the meaning of his prophetic utterance.[14]

Thus, if the substance of a given poem is deemed insignificant by a reader, this should not be taken to mean that it is incapable of signifying something of value to someone else, nor that another poem could not speak with equal impact to him or to her. Poems most often have the textual shape they have because their creators, for whatever reasons, feel that this shape is the only one possible for them to have. All poetry must not be condemned, therefore, on the basis of certain missed communications between certain textual productions and the unfortunate readers who could not make the poem signify anything to them. There is always hope that a particular poetic utterance, a particular poetic substance, if one prefers, will one day strike the necessary emotional and/or intellectual chord in the unsuspecting reader.

This is why one cannot afford, on the basis of substance, to turn one's back on poetry, one of the oldest of forms of human communication. Even when words first seem unimportant, obscure, or nonsensical, to the reader as well as to the poet, there is always the chance that specific linguistic and musical sequence will come to bear what Henry Gifford, alluding to the works of Octavio Paz and Constantine Cavafy, calls "poetic witness." And, frequently, such poetic witness is borne to someone who least expects it. One such reader was T. S. Eliot himself, who surely had his own case in mind when writing the lines just quoted. Gifford indicates how, retrospectively, Eliot had

> described *The Waste Land* as 'only the relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life; it is just a piece of rhythmical grumbling'. Nonetheless, it spoke for the 'despair of a generation' throughout most of Europe.[15]

It could be argued that some of the better-known verses from the works of Rimbaud and Artaud in France, or from a poem like Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" in the United States, functioned similarly for that entire generation which caused the