

Geoffrey Brereton
An Introduction to the
FRENCH
POETS
Villon to the present day



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THE FRENCH POETS

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Preface to the Revised Edition

THIS book was originally conceived as a series of introductory studies on the major French poets from Villon's time until today. It was not designed as a consecutive history of French poetry over five centuries, though in the event something of the sort also emerged and will be perceptible in outline. My main concern, however, was to attempt to characterize certain poets as individual writers, to establish for each some kind of literary identity before fitting them into a more general pattern, with all the theories and classifications which that must involve. In that form the book met with a very kind reception from its reviewers and seems to have interested a considerable number of readers since. This revised edition is the same in essentials, with some comparatively minor changes and the addition of some new material described below.

The best and only really valuable approach to literature is through the individual writer, and more particularly if he is a poet. A man who has read only three or four poets with attention, understanding, and some sort of 'enjoyment' may have vast areas of ignorance in the field of poetry as a whole. But if he ever wishes to explore those areas he will be in a better position to do so than one who has a wide knowledge of the history and theory of poetry but is not deeply read in any one poet. The first will at least have a definite starting-point from which he can go on to draw the comparisons and contrasts which are the basis of all true literary studies. From one poet one can proceed to another, either forward or backward in time, but one cannot do this satisfactorily by following a blueprint. The process only becomes illuminating if one moves from one known phenomenon to another, in this way discovering the relationship – or lack of relationship – between them.

How can the individual qualities of a writer be determined? Primarily and basically through a study on his work. This is what matters and is the form in which his 'personality' reaches us. But his biography, when it is recoverable, is not irrelevant. It would be an excess of purism

to eliminate every known reference to his social and personal life, his correspondence, the comments of his friends and other contemporaries, and present the naked 'work' as though it were one more chicken taken from some academic deep-freeze. On the contrary, poetry cannot be preserved from contamination by 'life', because that is what it is about.

Of course one can go too far in this direction. To read actual lived experience into every apparent allusion in a poet's work is to misunderstand the creative imagination or, quite often, the poetic conventions of the period. With many poets, particularly before the Romantics, no personal experience is being communicated in any literal way, though a psychological analysis at a much deeper level would never seem unjustified. With certain later poets, such as Nerval, Musset, Rimbaud, some biographical knowledge seems indispensable. Without it the reader is at sea and at the mercy of the opposite excess of computerism.

Poetry, if it is worth reading at all, ought to awaken some personal response. No doubt it can do so, like music, quite anonymously. In music, however, the composer speaks to us through a formidable apparatus of interpretation, in which conductor, musicians and acoustics all play a part. The impact of poetry is more immediate. 'I loathe Baudelaire,' a woman student once said to me, after reading some of his more sadistic poems, 'he must have been a beastly man.' This possible beginning of a hate-relationship struck me as an excellent sign. At least it seemed more likely to bear fruit than a rigorous linguistic analysis.

In short, living poetry is written by living people. The first object of this book is to portray those people, partly as they existed in their time and place, but much more as they present themselves in their work. They have names, just as painters have names, with which this work is signed. It should be possible to go beyond the name and define what it represents, not merely in aesthetic and technical qualities, but in terms of the poetic identity which they themselves were usually engaged in building up.

In doing this it is neither desirable nor possible to ignore the general terminology used in literary history and criticism. Here poets are classed in schools and movements whose titles have become so familiar that to discard them would be a wanton act. They usefully indicate features common to several poets and sometimes the conscious aims of a self-named group such as the Symbolists and the Surrealists. Usually they have historical connotations. They provide undeniably convenient guidelines.

It is when these classifications are overemphasized that they become pernicious. Then they obscure not only important differences but significant resemblances between poets who happen to have been placed in certain categories. Much critical ingenuity has been devoted in the past to tabulating the distinctions between classic and romantic literature, and more recently between classic and baroque. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries offer the apparent sequence of Romanticism, Parnassianism, Symbolism, Surrealism, each of which it becomes imperative to define and, as critical attitudes change, to redefine constantly. It is indisputable that these terms, besides forming a necessary framework to the study of poetry, do correspond to certain broad realities. But broad they are and they should never be taken as absolute. The reasoned classification of such poets as Chénier, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Claudel under one or other of the well-known headings is no doubt a good critical exercise which can often lead to a better understanding of their work. Undertaken in that spirit, it is not misdirected. It is only when the category is allowed to swallow the poet that it becomes misleading.

These are the guiding principles of the present book. In revising it for a new edition I have added a short chapter on three seventeenth-century poets (Théophile de Viau, Saint-Amant and Tristan L'Hermite) and have recast the last chapter and expanded it into two in order to give a rather fuller picture of modern poetry. The bibliography has also been brought up to date and considerably expanded; it should now point the way towards 'advanced' studies. The original chapters have been retouched in the light of recent research and a few personal second thoughts, but are otherwise unaltered. My response to Victor Hugo might appear as subjective as the woman student's response to Baudelaire, though it has a critical motivation. I have been reading Hugo on and off for many years, always beginning with admiration and even delight and ending each time in disappointment and exasperation. No other major poet in four languages has ever had this effect on me. Musset and Leconte de Lisle are, if anything, even less in favour than when this book first appeared some fifteen years ago. I can still enjoy reading them, though not perhaps as first priorities, and I do not see how it is possible to understand the nature of French Romanticism and its aftermath without some acquaintance with their contrasted work. As for Apollinaire, I still cannot see him as a major poet, for the reasons given in the chapter concerning him. But, like the first aeroplanes, it is undeniable that he started something.

This book has always been intended as an Introduction – that is,

a point from which its readers will willingly go on to a further stage. I wrote in the first edition that 'a feeling for English poetry, as diversely based as possible, is the best original equipment for reading poetry in French or any other language'. The more brutal converse of this is: 'If you don't read English poetry, why on earth read French?' Too often the answer will come back: 'For examination purposes.' I never meant to help students to satisfy examiners, whose ways are so often mysterious. But if this book does so, even as a by-product, it will continue to fulfil a certain function, though that is not its main one.

G.B.

January 1972

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Chapter 1

François Villon

VILLON was the last of the great French poets of the Middle Ages and one of the few who can now be read without a considerable background knowledge of medieval culture. He loses, of course, something in the process. One may fail to recognize the traditional nature of the themes he is treating, one may miss catching in his comments on life and death echoes going back two hundred years before his lifetime and so not appreciate the interesting twists he gives them. One may, in particular, remain unaware of his masterly use of verse-forms which had been developing during more than three centuries, since the time of the Provençal troubadours. But though he belonged to his age and reflected its cynicism, its innocent obscenity, its piety, its learning (on a lowish level), and some of its literary conventions, he is more than a merely representative poet. He is both universal and personal enough to carry beyond his age – or, if one prefers it, to carry his age to ours.

If, as modern scholarship tends to show, he is not quite the remarkable special case he was once considered to be, he is none the less the only poet to have expressed the spirit of his time with what *seems* to be a completely personal voice. This, which distinguishes him from all his major contemporaries, is the quality which has ensured his survival and it matters very little whether he was experiencing for the first time the states of mind he communicates. The point is that he communicates them effectively and, to the extent that he does so, makes them his own. Behind the work there is undoubtedly a man. While it would be a mistake to try to visualize the man too clearly apart from the work, yet something is known of his life from external sources. Scanty though these are, they fit the rest of the picture.

He was born in Paris in 1431, the year when Joan of Arc was burnt at Rouen. His mother, according to his poems, was poor and illiterate. From his father, of whom no mention remains, he presumably took one of his two original names of Montcorbier and Des Loges. In later life he discarded them to adopt the name of a priest who befriended and educated him, Guillaume de Villon. Studying at Paris University,

François Villon took the degrees of Bachelor, *Licencié*, and finally Master of Arts. Even after this, he continued to regard himself as a student, though of an unacademic kind. His first recorded conflict with the law occurred at the age of twenty-four, when he killed a priest called Philippe Chermoye in a brawl and fled from Paris. He returned with a pardon six months later, took part in a successful robbery at the Collège de Navarre and again left the capital, this time for five years. Just before going, he composed his first considerable poem, *Les Lais* (Christmas 1456).

During his wandering in the provinces he visited Orleans, Blois, and probably roved much further afield. He found a temporary patron in Charles, Duke of Orleans – himself a fine poet in the old courtly tradition – who included some of Villon's verses in his own album of poems. He had relations with a gang of malefactors known as *les compagnons de la Coquille* and he continued to fall foul of the law. One of his own compositions suggests that he lay at one time in the Duke of Orleans's prisons under sentence of death but was saved by an amnesty granted to celebrate the birth of the Duke's daughter. He spent the summer of 1461 in prison at Meung-sur-Loire. This time his captor was the Bishop of Orleans. He was released in the autumn of that year to return once more to Paris and write his principal poem, *Le Testament*.

There is no record of the crimes for which Villon suffered these punishments. He may even – though it seems unlikely – have been innocent. But, innocent or guilty, he was by now a marked man in the eyes of the authorities. In November 1462 he was arrested on suspicion of a new robbery. He was about to be released for lack of evidence when his share in the six-year-old affair of the Collège de Navarre was recalled. He was obliged to sign a promise to repay 120 gold crowns before they let him go. When, a few weeks later, he was concerned in a street brawl outside the office of a papal official, his evil reputation nearly destroyed him. He was sentenced to be hanged and it was no doubt while waiting to be executed that he composed the famous *Építaphe Villon* or *Ballade des pendus*. Meanwhile, he had chanced the desperate throw of an appeal. To his joy, it was granted. He was set free, but under penalty of ten years' banishment from the city and viscounty of Paris. This judgment, rendered on 5 January 1463, is the last authentic mention of François Villon.

Two picturesque anecdotes of his later life were recounted by Rabelais writing some ninety years after. One describes him in banishment in England, chatting with Rabelaisian familiarity to Edward IV. The other depicts him living in his boisterous old age at Saint-Maixant-

de-Poitou. The interest of the anecdotes, which are certainly inventions, is that already by Rabelais's time Villon had become a legendary figure, famed for his ingenious pranks and his coarse wit. The legend has continued to grow, fed by the abundant material, rich in contrasting pathos and squalor, provided by Villon's own writings. As would be expected, few precise statements of fact can be obtained from such a source. What does emerge is the revelation of a character, drawn with great frankness.

The self-portrayed Villon was a man of some education who drifted into a life of crime and vagabondage through his incurable love of independence. In spite of his obscure parentage, he was not inevitably marked out as a social outcast, for with his benefactor Guillaume Villon and his studies behind him he should have found at least a humble security in some ecclesiastical charge – had he wanted it. On the other hand, he was not a heroic rebel. He became a criminal less from design than from lethargy. He needed money to keep himself alive and to spend on 'taverns and women', and crime appeared the easiest way of obtaining it. Even here, he was not very successful, as his various imprisonments show.

Imprisonment soured him, but brought no repentance. His occasional flashes of regret were for his carefree youth and for the material comforts which had eluded him through his own folly, not for any moral standard from which he had fallen short. He could indulge in self-pity and at the same time cock verbal snooks at the rich and prosperous. Here in fact is the only kind of pride discernible in him; he had kept himself free from the taint of conformism. This was his essential freedom, worth preserving at the cost of many grovellings to the powerful, of many months of captivity in dungeons.

So far we have the makings of a picaresque poet – as handy, because of his peculiar position, with his stabs of satire as he is with his knife – irreverent, racy, slangy, no more respectful of words than of persons so long as they serve his purpose – a highly flavoured 'character', but, on the long view, a minor poet. What raises him to a higher level is his partly traditional preoccupation with two themes which, fundamentally, are one: the shortness of youth, the horror of old age and death. These haunt him, less as poetic commonplaces than as almost tangible realities, to be handled as concretely as Hamlet did Yorick's skull. Over all is his religious seriousness, colouring much that he wrote and giving to some of his verses a solemn tone, though to others – judged by modern standards – a grotesque one. On the whole, however, it would be mistaken to include religion among the motive-forces

of Villon's art. He was soaked in the beliefs of his century and he echoed them as unquestioningly as a modern poet might echo, woven into his thought, the main tenets of Freudian psychology.

II

Villon has left some three thousand lines of verse which fall into three main divisions: *Les Lais*, *Le Testament*, and a small number of miscellaneous pieces. He used two different but related verse-forms which he handled with such ease and mastery that they seem to belong to him as his personal language. The first is an eight-line stanza on three rhymes. The lines are octosyllabic and are used for what might be called the narrative part of *Les Lais* and *Le Testament*. These are the two opening stanzas of *Les Lais*:

L'an quatre cens cinquante six,
Je, François Villon, escollier,
Considerant, de sens rassis,
Le frain aux dens, franc au collier,
Qu'on doit ses oeuvres conseillier,
Comme Vegece le raconte,
Sage Rommain, grant conseillier,
Ou autrement on se mesconte -

En ce temps que j'ay dit devant,
Sur le Noel, morte saison,
Que les loups se vivent de vent
Et qu'on se tient en sa maison,
Pour le frimas, pres du tison,
Me vint ung vouloir de brisier
La tres amoureuse prison
Qui soulait mon cuer debrisier.¹

Villon's second verse-form is the *ballade*, a more stylized version of the first, with a similar rhyme-pattern. It had been a favourite with medieval French poets ever since it was established in the fourteenth century by Guillaume de Machaut and it was used in English by Machaut's contemporary, Chaucer. Villon writes it in several variations. At its simplest, it consists of three eight-line stanzas and a

¹ In the year 1456, I, François Villon, student, considering with deliberate mind - the bit between my teeth, the collar loose - that one ought to examine one's actions - as Vegetius, that wise Roman and shrewd counsellor, remarks - or otherwise one may go wrong - At the time I have said, at Christmas, in the dead season, when the wolves live on wind and people stay in their houses near the fire because of the hoar-frost, there came to me a desire to break the very amorous yoke which had been tormenting my heart.

four-line *envoi*, as in the well-known *Ballade des dames du temps jadis*, with its refrain 'Mais où sont les neiges d'antan?' – or in the *Ballade des menus propos*, which ends thus:

Je congnaiss cheval et mulet,
 Je congnaiss leur charge et leur somme,
 Je congnaiss Bietris et Belet,
 Je congnaiss get qui nombre et somme,
 Je congnaiss vision et somme,
 Je congnaiss la faulte des Boesmes,
 Je congnaiss le pover de Romme,
 Je congnaiss tout, fors que moy mesmes.

Prince, je congnaiss tout en somme,
 Je congnaiss coulourez et blesmes,
 Je congnaiss Mort qui tout consomme,
 Je congnaiss tout, fors que moy mesmes.¹

The same rhymes recur throughout and the last line of each stanza and of the *envoi* is always the same, making up the refrain. The *envoi* often begins with the word *Prince*, originally addressed to the presiding judge at the medieval literary festivals known as *puy*s. More elaborate kinds of *ballade* could be built by increasing the number of stanzas, or the number of lines within the stanza.

In Villon's hands the *ballade* acquires much greater flexibility than its stereotyped form suggests. He uses it for his most impressive pieces – the peaks which suddenly rise above the chirpy running verse of *Le Testament* – but also for poems where dignity would be as incongruous as a horse in the House of Commons. With this limited and traditional technical equipment he wrote almost the whole known body of his poetry.

Les Lais, as he says in the opening stanzas, already quoted, was written at Christmas 1456. He had just taken part in the robbery at the Collège de Navarre and was apparently contemplating a similar coup in the provinces, at Angers. Naturally he does not refer to this, but says that an unhappy love-affair is driving him from Paris. Knowing that he may be gone for some time and that life is uncertain, he makes a number of comic bequests to his friends and enemies. This explains the title of the poem, which is the same as the modern French *legs*,

¹ I know horse and mule, I know their load and their pack, I know Beatrice and Betty, I know counter which numbers and adds, I know vision and dream, I know the Bohemians' heresy, I know the power of Rome: I know all, except myself.

Prince, I know all in short, I know coloured and pale, I know death which finishes everything, I know all except myself.

or legacy. It is sometimes called, less correctly, *Le Petit Testament*. The poem, a relatively short one of some three hundred lines, is a not entirely truthful balance-sheet of Villon's state of mind at the time and a half-mocking, half-serious farewell to his Parisian acquaintances. To his benefactor Guillaume Villon he leaves his reputation, to the woman who has treated him so harshly he leaves his heart, 'pâle, piteux, mort et transi', to his barber he leaves his hair-clippings and to his cobbler his old shoes. Many of his other jokes are topical and local and do not travel well to the reader of today. A few remain surprisingly fresh.

Villon at this point was clearly pleased with himself and life in general. In spite of his protestation that the torments of love have left him 'as dry and black as a sweep's brush', he is still perky, full of an impudent, street-boy wit. He has enjoyed making his mock legacies and is looking forward with some pleasure to the new adventures which await him outside the capital.

Le Testament is a two-thousand-line poem of a more impressive and bitter nature. Five years older than when he wrote *Les Lais*, Villon has just been released, a broken man, from the prison of the Bishop of Orleans. He may have felt that it was literally time to make his will. In any case, while still following very loosely the plan of *Les Lais*, he seems intent on bequeathing in his new poem all the fruits of his painfully-acquired experience. Moreover, by encrusting in *Le Testament* poems which he had written earlier, he seeks to give them a more permanent setting and so preserve them. Villon's 'last will and testament' thus has a triple sense. It contains a few mock bequests which ostensibly justify its name; it is his latest word on life; and it represents the body of poetry which he wishes to leave to future generations. The show-pieces in it are certain of the *ballades*, but, although these can be taken out and appreciated in isolation, most of them gain when read in their ingeniously woven context.

Thus the famous *Ballade des dames du temps jadis* is part of a sequence of reflections on the brevity of youth and the inevitable coming of Death the Leveller. Villon leads up to it by a terrifyingly realistic description of the physical changes which death brings – an obsession of the medieval mind which occurs again in the late Renaissance, then virtually disappears until Baudelaire. He follows it with the deservedly less-known *Ballade des seigneurs du temps jadis*, of which little but the refrain is worth remembering ('Mais où est le preux Charlemagne?'), and then, his pen having become stuck in this groove, with a *ballade* of similar import in pastiched 'Old French'. After this, he works back into the realistic vein of which he was a master and

rhymes the regrets of *la belle Heaulmière* for her lost youth. Once beautiful, she is now a hideous old crone, and Villon omits no detail of her decay. And the moral, as she gives it to the younger women who still possess the beauty she has lost, is: Love while you are able, spare no man, take all the profit you can get.

Prenez a destre et a senestre;
N'espargnez homme, je vous prie;
Car vieilles n'ont ne cours ne estre,
Ne que monnoye qu'on descrie.¹

It should be obvious that there was not a particle of romanticism in Villon's nature. But since many English readers will first have met him in translations of the great *ballades*, they must be warned that some of these translations deform the original by glamourizing it. There is no glamour in Villon. Sex, illness, hunger, cold, poverty, vice, are all described by him in the same flat and precise detail. His only escape from the concrete reality is, not into romanticism, but into humour, which sometimes resembles the cynical, snivelling laugh of the down-and-out. Any translation which makes him express fine sentiments is completely foreign to the original, and represents nothing but its form. There is, however, emotion in Villon, achieved in the hardest way of all: not by rhetoric which is a flourish from above, but by properly rooted pathos, rising from the lowest and grimmest feelings of humanity. His sense of the fundamental brotherhood of mankind, cutting right across distinctions of rank and wealth, is Villon's most positive quality. It saves him from total cynicism and every now and then exalts him above his material and enables him to write some tremendous poem such as the *Epitaphe Villon*, in which he imagines himself to be dangling from the gallows among other hanged criminals:

Freres humains qui après nous vivez,
N'ayez les cuers contre nous endurcis,
Car, se pitié de nous povres avez,
Dieu en aura plus tost de vous mercis.
Vous nous voiez cy attachez cinq, six:
Quant de la chair, que trop avons nourrie,
Elle est pieça devorée et pourrie,
Et nous, les os, devenons cendre et pouldre.
De nostre mal personne ne s'en rie;
Mais priez Dieu que tous nous vueille absouldre.

¹ Take with right hand and with left. Spare no man, I tell you. For old women have no more currency or existence than debased coinage.

Se freres vous clamons, pas n'en devez
 Avoir desdaing, quoy que fusmes occis
 Par justice. Toutefois, vous sçavez
 Que tous les hommes n'ont pas bon sens rassis;
 Excusez nous, puis que sommes transsis,
 Envers le fils de la Vierge Marie,
 Que sa grace ne soit pour nous tarie,
 Nous preservant de l'infernale fouldre.
 Nous sommes mors, ame ne nous harie;
 Mais priez Dieu que tous nous vueille absouldre.

La pluye nous a debuez et lavez,
 Et le soleil dessechiez et noircis;
 Pies, corbeaulx, nous ont les yeux cavez,
 Et arrachié la barbe et les sourcis.
 Jamais nul temps nous ne sommes assis;
 Puis ça, puis la, comme le vent varie,
 A son plaisir sans cesser nous charie,
 Plus becquenez d'oiseaulx que dez a couldre.
 Ne soiez donc de notre confrairie;
 Mais priez Dieu que tous nous vueille absouldre.

Prince Jhesus, qui sur tous a maistrerie,
 Garde qu'Enfer n'ait de nous seigneurie:
 A luy n'ayons que faire ne que souldre.
 Hommes, icy n'a point de mocquerie;
 Mais priez Dieu que tous nous vueille absouldre.¹

With this poem, we are outside *Le Testament*. It is one of a score of pieces written on various occasions which do not fit into the frame-

¹ Brother men who live after us, do not harden your hearts against us, for if you have pity on us poor sinners, God will sooner have mercy on you. You see us hanging here, five, six; as for the flesh, which we fed too well, it has long ago been eaten and rotted, and we, the bones, are becoming powder and dust. Let no one laugh at our affliction, but pray to God that he should absolve us all.

If we call you brothers, you should not be scornful, although we were put to death by the law. Yet you know that not all men are sane and sensible. Pray for us, since we are stiff and dead, to the Son of the Virgin Mary, that his grace should not run dry for us, preserving us from the flames of Hell. We are dead, let no man trouble us; but pray to God that he should absolve us all.

The rain has scoured and washed us, and the sun dried and blackened us, magpies and crows have pecked out our eyes and torn off the beards and the eyebrows. Never a moment are we at rest; this way and that, as the wind changes, it swings us ceaselessly at its will, more riddled by birds than thimbles (are with holes). Do not be of our brotherhood, but pray to God that he should absolve us all.

Prince Jesus, who are lord of all men, grant that Hell should not have power over us: let us have no truck nor dealing with it. Men, there is no place for mockery here; but pray to God that he should absolve us all.

work of the longer poem. To show how these pieces came to be composed, it is interesting to recall that the *Epitaphe*, written when he expected to be hanged, was followed by a *ballade* of ecstatic gratitude to the judges who reprieved him (ending, typically, with a further request for three days' grace before the sentence of banishment should take effect); and then by a cheerful little *ballade* addressed to his gaoler, who had evidently taken a gloomy view of Villon's chances. 'What do you think now of my appeal?' he asks him. 'Was I wise or mad to try to save my skin?' And with that perky question François Villon disappears from the scene.

III

Because of his archaic though direct language and his remote period, Villon might appear to be isolated from the other poets with whom this book is concerned. His work, as it reads today, has a strongly individualized flavour and nothing quite like it could be expected to occur again. He himself and his immediate material world were the centre of his poetry. His best writing seems to spring straight from experience, for his book-learning was undigested and always remained a surface feature. The main trend of the fifteenth century was still that of courtly poetry, renewed by Alain Chartier (who died at about the time when Villon was born) and continued by Charles d'Orléans and by the 'rhetorical' poets who flourished at the court of Burgundy. When these write of their personal experience, they do so in a discreet and generalized way, subordinating the individual note to an art ruled by elaborate and sometimes exquisite conventions. Moreover, up to Charles d'Orléans, they are often writing for music, in the old troubadour tradition. Villon's verse, on the contrary, was not intended to be sung. Artistic considerations, in the narrower sense, do not influence him. He writes for the broad or knowing laugh, for the gasp of surprise or emotion, rather than for the more subtle reactions of the educated connoisseur. This leads him to put down everything, however trivial, however unflattering to himself, and to put it down raw. The only concealment which he attempted was of facts which might involve him with the law – a practical rather than an aesthetic consideration.

It has already been observed that Villon was no Romantic. If he is sometimes represented as one in popular works, the ultimate blame lies with Sir Walter Scott who *was* a Romantic and whose reconstructions of the Middle Ages have much to answer for. The real Romantic poet,