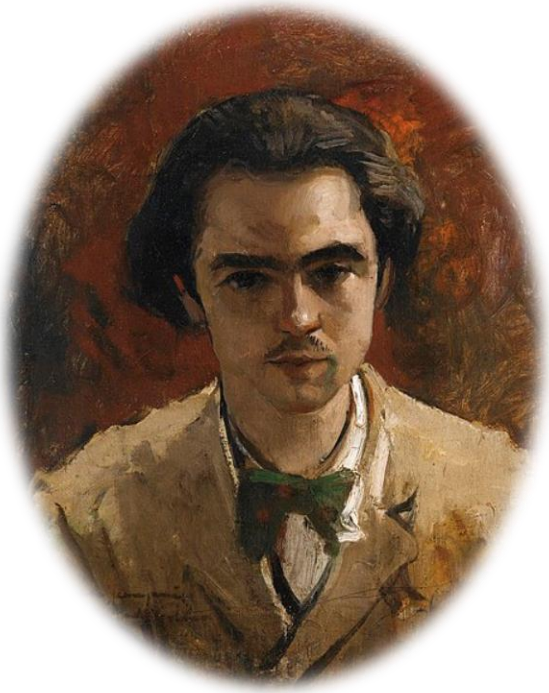
Rother Baron:

Paul Verlaine in the Mirror of His Poems

A Look at the Life and Work of the Poet

With Adaptations by Ilona Lay



The life of the French poet Paul Verlaine (1844 – 1896) was marked by inner conflicts and the futile search for a place in life. This is also reflected in his poems. Their special musicality, however, radiates the very harmony that was denied the poet in his everyday life.

About Ilona Lay: As the title of her first poetry collection (Versunken/Immersed), published in 2008, suggests, Ilona Lay lives a secluded life. After orienting herself towards classical forms in the early phase of her work, she has switched more to free-rhythm poetry forms in her recent works. This was already evident in her "Meditations on Happiness" (published in 2020 under the title *October in the Mountains*). The texts of her "Meditations on the Dark Side of Life" (*Faces of Death*), published in 2022, are also characterised by this.

Rother Baron is the blogger name of Dieter Hoffmann. Information on the author can be found on his website (rotherbaron.com) and on Wikipedia.

Cover picture: Frédéric Bazille (1841 – 1870): Portrait of Paul Verlaine (1867); Zurich, Gallery Chichio Haller (Wikimedia Commons)

Table of Contents

Preface

About this Booklet

Based on selected poems by Paul Verlaine, this booklet gives an overview of important aspects of the poet's life and work. Each chapter begins with an adaptation of a poem by Ilona Lay. On this basis, central elements of Verlaine's poetology and stages of his life reflected in his poetry are discussed.

About the English Adaptations of the Poems

The fact that poems are basically untranslatable has often been pointed out. After all, in this case it is not a matter of transferring the concrete meaning of the words into another language – which also proves problematic often enough.

Through the juggling of word meanings and the interplay of words, rhythm and rhyme, a lyrical work often unfolds a whole web of associations that can hardly be adequately reproduced in a foreign language. This is especially true of poetry like that of Paul Verlaine, which explicitly abstracts from the concrete level of meaning of the words in order to open up a new space of meaning through their interplay.

The decisive factor in this case is therefore not the literal translation of the verses, nor even the exact reproduction of the images, but rather an approximation to the mood evoked by the respective poem. In any case, the aim is not to create a

classical translation, but to find an equivalent for the mood of a foreign self, expressed in another language.

Literature about Paul Verlaine

Baudot, Alain: Poésie et musique chez Verlaine. In: Études françaises 4 (1968), no. 1, pp. 31 – 54.

Delahaye, Ernest: Verlaine. Paris 1923: Messein.

Gobry, Ivan: Verlaine et son destin. Paris 1997: Éditions Téqui.

Huret, Jules: Enquête sur l'evolution littéraire: [Conversation with] Paul Verlaine, pp. 65 – 71. Paris 1891: Bibliothèque-Charpentier.

Lepelletier, Edmond: Paul Verlaine: Sa vie – son Œuvre. Paris 1907: Société de Mercure de France.

Petitfils, Pierre: Verlaine. Biographie. Paris 1994. Julliard.

Richter, Jean: Paul Verlaine. Porträt und Poesie. Darmstadt 1968: Luchterhand.

Troyat, Henri: Verlaine. Paris 1993: Flammarion.

Literature on individual aspects of Verlaine research is listed on the website of the University of Wuppertal on lyric theory: Verlaine-Rezeption.

A chronology of Paul Verlaine's life (in French) can be found at wikipoemes.com: Chronologie de Paul Verlaine.

The Strangeness of the World.
Paul Verlaine's Kaspar Hauser Poetry

In his Kaspar Hauser poem, Verlaine reflects his own inner conflicts and the feeling of having no place in this world in the fate of the famous foundling.

Władysław Ślewiński (1856 – 1918): Orphan
Warsaw, National Museum (Wikimedia Commons)

Kaspar Hauser Sings

A speechless orphan, gifted
only with the richness of my tranquil eyes,
that's how I came into the noisy city world.
Its inhabitants did not find me clever.

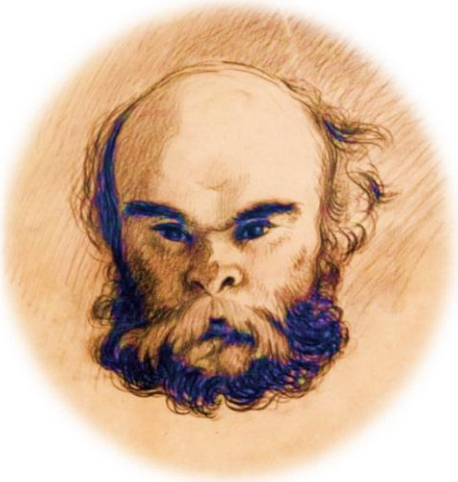
Matured into a man, the heart inflamed
by an uncertain longing for love,
I sought admittance to the world of women.
But they did not find me beautiful.

Without a home, without a king and without courage,
I felt the wish to sacrifice my life
and jumped into the world of war.
But death rejected me as well.

Was I born too early or too late?
In which world am I at home?
Please pray, pray for this mute,
wounded and orphaned heart!

Paul Verlaine: Gaspard Hauser chante
from: Sagesse (Wisdom; 1880)
Oeuvres complètes (Complete Works), Vol. 1, p. 269 f. Paris 1902: Vanier

Paul Verlaine: A Violent Aesthete



Getting to know Paul Verlaine (1844 – 1896) personally would probably not have been very appealing. According to what we know about him, he was an extremely moody, impulsive person who repeatedly drank to excess and even became violent under the influence of alcohol.

His poems, however, speak a different language. They draw the picture of a sensitive, fragile soul, of a person who longs for nothing more than to live in harmony with himself and his environment.

A life full of contradictions ... Perhaps the rift that ran through Verlaine's life, this disconnected juxtaposition of raw everyday life and sensitive poetry, can best be explained with the help of psychoanalysis.

A Psychoanalytical View of Verlaine

In his childhood, Verlaine suffered from an authoritarian father who, as an army officer, did everything in his power to force his son into the corset of a bourgeois life. Probably as a kind of

protective reflex against this, Verlaine developed a very close relationship with his mother.

As a result, he later had difficulties in turning his libido to other women: Verlaine obviously had homosexual tendencies. Evidence of this is not only provided by his passionate poetic friendship with Arthur Rimbaud, but also by his later relationship with Lucien Létinois, a pupil whom Verlaine had met as a teacher at a British school.

Nowadays, such a homoerotic inclination would not be problematic. In Verlaine's time, however, it was hardly possible to openly admit to it – especially with the internalised superego of a father obsessed with duty. Thus, Verlaine did not succeed in accepting himself as the person he was.

Unsettled Attitude towards Homosexuality

Instead of seeking support in a stable homoerotic relationship, Verlaine therefore strove to maintain the appearance of a bourgeois life. He even entered into a marriage – tellingly, with a woman who was still a child when he met her, thus presumably arousing more sibling-like feelings in him (which did not prevent him from begetting a son with her, though).

Because he denied his homosexuality – and probably could not even consciously admit to preferring same-sex love –, Verlaine perceived what he rejected in himself as a projection onto others. Instead of coming to terms with himself, he aggressed against all those in whom his inner conflict was reflected: he

beat his wife, shot at Rimbaud during a quarrel and physically attacked his mother.

For the shots at Rimbaud, Verlaine was even sentenced to two years in prison. The poems written in this context were collected by Verlaine in the volume *Sagesse* (Wisdom; 1880). Among them are the verses put into the mouth of Kaspar Hauser.

Kaspar Hauser as a Counterpart of Verlaine

For Verlaine, the story of the young man who, after a life in the darkness of a cellar dungeon, was thrown out into civilisation at the age of 16, was like a mirror image of his own life. It served him to poetically portray the inner conflict underlying his existence - the conflict of a person who, in his inner turmoil, does not know where his place is in the world.

On the other hand, Verlaine could also have seen in the boy, untouched by all civilisation and culture, an image of the spiritual new beginning he dreamed of during his time in prison. Just as the "riches" of the orphan boy consist of nothing but the pure, unspoilt amazement of his "silent eyes", he too probably longed to see himself and the world once again through different eyes.

Inward Dissonance, Outward Harmony

Thus, Verlaine's Kaspar Hauser poem exemplifies his feeling of wandering through his own life like a stranger. The dissonance between his own imperfect life and the utopia of a life in complete harmony with itself is also reflected at the level of the poem – namely in the discrepancy between the content and the formal composition of the verses, which aims for euphony and formal perfection.

This is also taken up in Georges Moustaki's setting of the poem. The "melodic melancholy" that underpins the chanson has, like the sonority of Verlaine's verses, a comforting effect. It is almost reminiscent of the magic of lullabies, which, with their evenly hypnotic sound, carry the restless child away into another, dreamlike world where all discord disappears.

Georges Moustaki (1934 – 2013): Gaspard
from the album *Le voyageur* (The Traveller, 1969)

Studio recording

Live performance (1969)

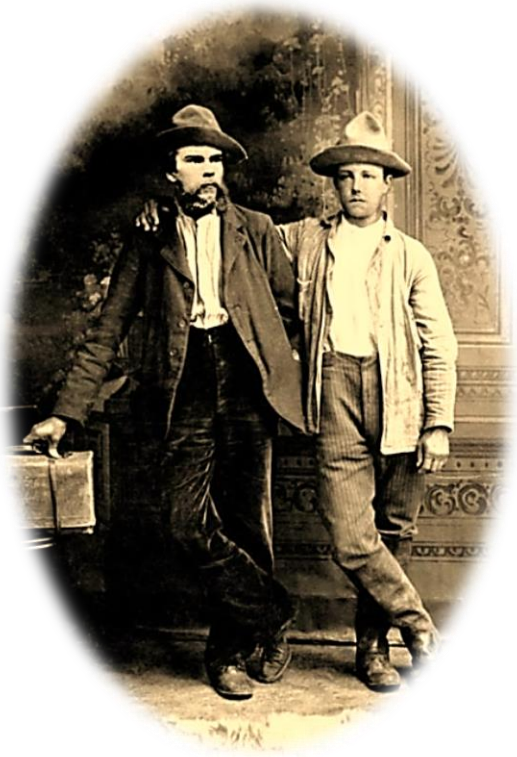
Pictures:

1. Louis Anquetin (1861 – 1932): Portrait of Paul Verlaine (1867); Albi/Southern France, Musée Toulouse-Lautrec (Wikimedia Commons)
2. Frédéric Bazille (1841 – 1870): Portrait of Paul Verlaine (1867); Zurich, Gallery Chichio Haller (Wikimedia Commons)
3. Johann Georg Laminit (1775 – 1884): Portrait of Kaspar Hauser; pen-and-ink drawing after an etching by Friedrich Fleischmann (1791 – 1834), created in August 1828. The picture alludes to the letter Kaspar Hauser had with him when he suddenly appeared in Nuremberg/Bavaria at Pentecost 1828. In it, the anonymous author of the letter announced that he had raised Kaspar Hauser as a foundling and was now releasing him into the world to fulfil his dream of becoming a horseman. The picture is included in: Mayer, Johannes / Tradowsky, Peter: Kaspar Hauser, p. 306. Stuttgart 1984: Urachhaus.

   More about Kaspar Hauser: The Unlikely Techie: The unsolved mystery of the lost prince. Historyofyesterday.com, January 14, 2021.

The Freedom of the Vagabond.
Verlaine's Brussels Graffiti Poems

In 1872, Paul Verlaine left Paris with Arthur Rimbaud, ten years his junior, and led a vagabond life with him for one year. The liberating effect of this escape from bourgeois society is also reflected in Verlaine's poems.



Photomontage with portraits of Verlaine and Rimbaud
cf. Hugfon: Images de Verlaine et Rimbaud; rimbaudphotographe.eu, September 22, 2020

Brussels: Simple Murals

I

Moistened with the breath of roses,
the slopes and hills fade away,
while in the twilight of the lamps
the unifying wings of darkness blossom.

Devoutly, the gold of the autumnal valleys
turns to blood, while in the spectre of a tree
the song of a blackbird quivers
on the abyss of the night.

So fast the autumn's wave broke on the beach,
too fast for sorrow's arrow.
If only my longing could dream itself home,
drifting in the cradle of the winds!

II

Crystal blue sky arcades
arch above two nomads –
above us, who in proud pallor
dream in the foliage wetness
under the overhanging branches
in front of the magnificent palaces.

How I wish I could accompany them,
those noblemen who stride
so gallantly towards the castle!
Is it really too bold
to hope that these venerable lords
accept me into their circle?

Ah, the snow-white wall
in the purple mourning of the evening,
and endlessly at its edges
the fields in their summer robes –
if only our love could take root
in those dream-embroidered realms!

Paul Verlaine: Bruxelles 1: Simples fresques (August 1872)
from: *Romances sans paroles* (Wordless Romances; 1874)
Oeuvres complètes, Vol. 1, pp. 170 – 172. Paris 1902: Vanier.
Musical Setting of the first poem by Guy Sacre (born 1948); from: *Trois Poèmes de Verlaine* (voice: Jean-Francois Gardeil; piano: Billy Eidi)

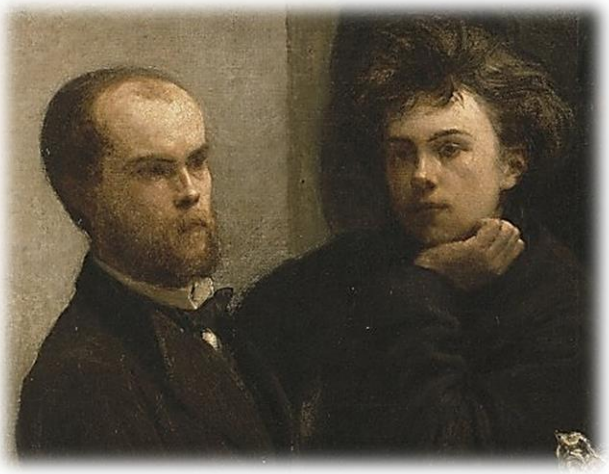
Between Bohemia and Bureaucracy

Even before 1871, Paul Verlaine was certainly not a person who could be considered at peace with himself. A poet at heart, he was forced by his father to take up a clerical career at the Paris city administration.

Thus Verlaine was compelled to maintain the appearance of a bourgeois existence, while at the same time using every free minute to write poetry and frequent the circles of literary bohemia. The resulting inner conflicts he repeatedly drowned in alcohol.

However, the compulsion to maintain at least an outward connection to bourgeois society gave him a certain stability. This was lost for him when he joined the revolutionaries of the Paris Commune in 1871 and after their failure forfeited his employment with the city administration.

Verlaine and Rimbaud



In this situation, Verlaine received mail from a young poet: Arthur Rimbaud, only 16 years old at the time, sent him a selection of his poems. In response, Verlaine invited the precocious fellow poet to his home in Paris and engaged in what was probably one of the most breathless liaisons in literary history.

Between July 1872 and July 1873, the poet friends travelled through northern France, Belgium and England. Their relationship was extremely dynamic. Several times they had heated discussions, quarrelled with each other, separated and reconciled. This emotional turmoil was both a sign and a motor of the creative process stimulated by the friendship, reflected in increased literary productivity for both poets.

In the summer of 1873, however, they finally broke up in London, and Verlaine left for Brussels. The loss of his friendship with Rimbaud burdened him so much that he even had suicidal thoughts. Yet he delayed the execution of his plans long enough to give Rimbaud and his mother the opportunity to travel to him after receiving the farewell letters sent to them.

The reunion with Rimbaud, though, did not lead to the reconciliation Verlaine had secretly hoped for. Instead, another heated argument ensued, in the course of which Verlaine shot at his friend. Although Rimbaud was only slightly injured, he still felt threatened by Verlaine. So he reported his friend's assault to the police, who subsequently arrested Verlaine.

Soothed Pain

Verlaine's Brussels poems reproduced above date from August 1872, i.e. from the early days of his itinerant life with Rimbaud. The euphoria of departure is indeed clearly evident in the verses.

The title alone of the pair of poems hints at the vagabond's high spirits. "Simple murals" – that sounds almost like a precursor of the later graffiti, of images that are far more attached to the moment than a painting created in a studio – which can lend them a particular liveliness.

In a similar way, Verlaine's poetic murals also seem to celebrate the moment. It is true that the first poem exudes an elegiac mood typical of Verlaine. However, this is not – as is often the case in Verlaine's poems – a reflection of hopeless despair or inner conflict. Rather, it is linked to the vision of an evening lullaby that reconciles the lyrical I with itself. This gives the sorrow a sublime quality that lifts the soul out of the earthly vale of tears.

Mischievous Irony

Even more strongly than in the first poem, the second one expresses the liberating feeling of a life "on the road", of setting out for new shores. Admittedly, Verlaine's precarious life situation is also hinted at here, namely the fact that as a poet he is condemned to live on the fringes of society.

However, Verlaine addresses this crucial dilemma of his existence in this case with a device that is rather untypical of his poetry: with irony. The idea that the distinguished noblemen who walk through the stately park towards the castle could accept him, the eternal nomad, into their midst, or even swap places with him, reveals a mischievous humour.

This shows the healing effect that the months of rambling with Rimbaud had on Verlaine. They showed him the way to an inner happiness that is not dependent on material wealth.

This is also what the conclusion of the poem refers to: the palaces of the rich, the saturated life of the established, their gardens where the poetic outlaws are tolerated at best as fleeting guests or jesters – all this would be a beautiful place to live for two souls who have discovered their intimate bond. But they are not dependent on it, because their dreams can paint a thousand times more beautiful palaces in the sky.

Pictures:

1. William Turner (1775 – 1851): Lowther Castle – Evening (1810); Wikimedia Commons
2. Jobard Frères: The Royal Palace in Brussels (1830); Wikimedia Commons
3. Paul Verlaine (left) and Arthur Rimbaud; detail from: Henri Fantin-Latour (1836 – 1904): A Table Corner (1872); Paris, Musée d'Orsay (Wikimedia Commons)

Arthur Rimbaud, drawn by Verlaine in June 1872 (published in 1895 in the ***Dessins de Verlaine pour l'édition Vanier des Poésies****)*

The Cage of One's Own Life.
Inner and Outer Imprisonment in Verlaine's Poetry

The imprisonment imposed on Verlaine for an assault on his fellow poet Arthur Rimbaud is also reflected in his poetry. Here, the outer imprisonment is associated with an inner imprisonment.

Hendrik Frans Schaefels (1827 – 1904): Young prisoner in his cell
Wikimedia Commons

Le ciel est, par-dessus le toit …

The sky above the house –
how tranquil it is, how pure!
The tree, how gracefully it sways
its branches in the immaculate azure!

The ringing of the church bells
floats comfortingly through the air.
And in the bushes a bird
weaves a song full of memories.

Ah, life, life – how gentle it can be!
Dreaming, the ears of corn bask in the sun,
while the air strokes soothingly
through the murmur of the town.

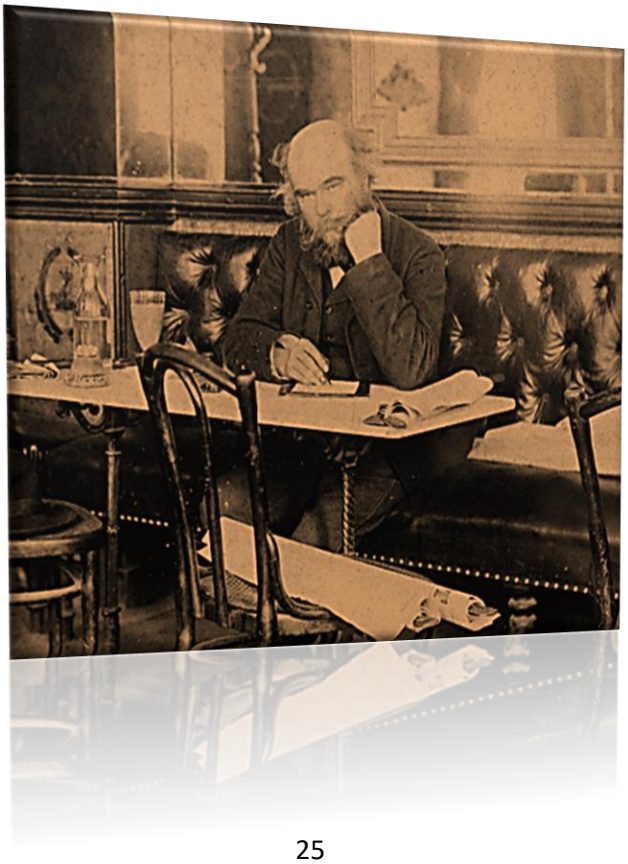
But you hear in the laughing day
the gloomy echo of another laughter,
you see another land, long since a prey to oblivion:
your youth's unwritten poem.

Paul Verlaine: Le ciel est, par-dessus le toit, …
from: *Sagesse* (Wisdom; 1880)
Oeuvres complètes, Vol. 1, p. 272. Paris 1902: Vanier

The Gaze of the Prisoner

Verlaine's poetry collection *Sagesse*, published in 1880, can be seen as a poetic reflection of his months in prison. A echo of this can also be found in the verses reproduced above.

The gaze of the lyrical I is clearly directed outwards here. We can well imagine someone looking through the bars of his cell into the world and dreaming of the unbound life he is deprived of in prison. In addition, the prominent position of the sky and the church tower in the poem refers to the support of Christian faith that Verlaine experienced during his time in prison.



The World Beyond the Bars of One's Own Ego

Apart from the external imprisonment, however, the poem also refers to an internal imprisonment – an imprisonment that is not imposed on the respective person by a court, but results from the circumstances of life and the way this person deals with them.

Accordingly, the final verses of the poem suggest that one's own life could also have developed in a completely different way; that a completely different choice could have been made among the germs that sprouted in youth; that other germs could have been nurtured, giving the entire inner and outer development a completely different direction.

The verses thus paint the portrait of a person who is locked in the cage of his own life: outside, beyond the bars of his ego, he sees the beauty of life, the effortlessness with which others rejoice in it, the anchor of the steeple – which, apart from the Christian faith, can also be generally associated with the "lighthouse" of firm inner convictions.

The person daydreaming of this life, however, remains imprisoned within himself. The world beyond the cage of his ego is inaccessible to him.

The Existential Level: The Prison of the "Condition Humaine"

Like the poem *Gaspard Hauser chante* (Kaspar Hauser sings), the verses discussed here are also noticeably coloured by the Kaspar Hauser topic. Consequently, they are placed in immediate vicinity of this poem in Verlaine's poetry collection *Sagesse*.

Like Verlaine's Kaspar Hauser poem, the verses point to the feeling of a fundamental strangeness in the world. While this can of course be related to Verlaine's biography, it also has a more general meaning. The same applies to the feeling of having taken a wrong turn at some point in one's life, which is probably also familiar to quite a few people.

In this context, however, we must not forget that the gap between a life perceived as dissonant and the utopia of a life in perfect harmony is by no means necessarily rooted in ourselves. Rather, we can also be cut off from a fulfilled life for objective reasons.

This applies first of all to human existence itself, which in its condemnation to death remains excluded from absolute perfection. In addition, however, material hardship, social exclusion or forms of cultural homelessness can make a fulfilled life an unattainable dream for those concerned.

It is therefore perhaps no coincidence that a particularly congenial setting of the poem was composed by a Jewish artist (Catherine Stora). This is all the more remarkable because the poem *Gaspard Hauser chante* was also set to music by a singer with Jewish roots (Georges Moustaki). The reason for this might

be that hardly any other people has experienced its own foreignness in the world as strongly as the Jewish people in the course of its long history.

Catherine Stora: Le ciel est, par dessus le toit …; Live recording from Jerusalem's Khan Theatre, June 16, 2016; violincello: Hannah Blachmann

*For the poem **Gaspard Hauser chante** (Kaspar Hauser sings), see the chapter **The Strangeness of the World**.*

Picture of Verlaine:
Paul Marsan Dornac (1858 – 1941): Photo of Verlaine in the Café François 1er, May 1892 (Wikimedia Commons)

Turning away from Olympus. Verlaine's Commitment to the Subjective Element in Poetry

In contrast to the Parnasse poetry that predominated in France in the second half of the nineteenth century, Verlaine's poetry places greater emphasis on the subjective element: the self-expression of the lyrical I and the poetic shaping of its mood.

Claude Lorrain (um 1600 – 1682 Apollo and the Muses on Mount Helion (Parnassus); *Boston, Museum of Fine Arts (Wikimedia commons)*

Le son du cor s'afflige vers les bois …

Orphaned in pain, the waves of the bugle tremble
through the woods and break where around the hills
the wings of the wind are wailing,
fluttering like a distant barking.

The wolf's soul howls in them and rises
into the sun that sinks dying
into the lonely heart, which comforted
enters the garden of peace, smiling in sorrow.

And through this hushed lament
veils of snow are floating on wings
that blessingly embrace the gentle dying.

Like the sighing of autumn
breezes stroke the land that weaves
a fragrant dream in the arms of the dark.

Paul Verlaine: Le son du cor s'afflige vers les bois ...
from: *Sagesse* (1880)
Oeuvres complètes, Vol. 1, p. 276. Paris 1902: Vanier.
Musical setting by Claude Debussy (1862 – 1918); from: *Trois Mélodies de Verlaine* (1891); Gérard Souzay (Voice) and Dalton Baldwin (piano)

The Parnassian Poetry

In 1866, Alphonse Lemerre published an anthology of contemporary French poetry. Following the title chosen for it – *Le Parnasse contemporain* – the term "Parnassiens" became the name for one of the most influential groups of poets that emerged in France in the second half of the 19th century **[1]**.

The name chosen in reference to the home of the Muses in Greek mythology - Mount Parnassus – was programmatic in Parnassian poetry. Unlike Romantic poetry, which consciously took up elements of folk art – such as fairy tales and traditional songs – the Parnassians followed the ideal of a poetry strictly separated from everyday life. Art was to exist only for and out of itself.

The realisation of this ideal of "l'art pour l'art" in Parnassian poetry was guided by two ideas in particular. Firstly, the Parnassians strove for a formal rigour inspired by antique models. Secondly, the principle of "impersonnalité" was established. It aimed at a poetry in which feelings were to be expressed only in the medium of "objective", often ancient subjects, but not through the immediate self-expression of a lyrical I **[2]**.

Verlaine and Parnassian Poetry

Paul Verlaine was himself influenced by Parnassian poetry in his early days as a poet. This is evident not least from the fact that seven poems by Verlaine were included in the anthology mentioned above.

If we look at Verlaine's poem reproduced above from a Parnassian perspective, both similarities and differences to their poetic ideals catch the eye. The former include in particular the sonnet form, combined with a sophisticated rhyming technique that links the enclosing rhyme of the two quartets with a couplet rhyme in the tercets.

What is lacking in the poem, however, is the impersonal character of poetic expression that the Parnassians were aiming for. Instead of describing events only objectively, they are interpreted from the perspective of the lyrical I and linked to subjective feelings. Thus, the sound of the bugle is associated with the pain of abandonment and the sunset is described as both comforting and mournful.

In addition, there are elements that have no objective equivalent at all, but exist only in the imagination of the lyrical self. These include, for example, the lamenting soul of the wolf or the associative linking of one's own suffering with the twilight mood in the image of the "autumn sigh".

It is true that Verlaine shares the Parnassian ideal of an autonomous art that follows its own laws. However, he sees it less guaranteed by an Olympic attitude of poetry than by a special musicality of the poem, through which the verses create an independent space of sound and reality **[3]**.

Verlaine's Poetic Ideals: "impair" instead of "impersonnalité"

The deviations from Parnassian poetics in Verlaine's poetry are no coincidence. Rather, they correspond entirely to Verlaine's own poetic ideals as expressed in his programmatic poem *Art poétique* (The Art of Poetry).

In deliberate distinction from the Parnassian ideal of "impersonnalité", the sovereign impersonality of poetry, Verlaine demands here that the poet should prefer "l'Impair". On the one hand, this word denotes the "odd", the "uneven", and thus the intentional deviation from Parnassian poetics. On the other hand, it also contains – as a noun – the conscious commitment to "awkwardness" – and thus to the "unseemly" (according to the Parnassian understanding of poetry) involvement and expression of the subject, which in its uniqueness defies every norm **[4]**.

As an expression of subjective feeling, the mood created in the poem is, according to Verlaine, always something fleeting ("chose envolée"), something that eludes clear determination. This applies equally to the lyrical I, which presents itself in the poem as "une âme en allée / vers d'autres cieux" – as a soul that, at the moment of its appearance, is already on its way to "other skies". Precisely because the lyrical I and the mood it creates remain in limbo, the poem opens itself up to the readers, who can thus connect its emotional world with their own **[5]**.

The Adventure of "Fortune Telling"

Finally, Verlaine demands in his *Art poétique* that each verse should be "une bonne aventure" **[6]**. This expression sums up well what he strives for with his poetry.

In Verlaine's work, "aventure" not only refers to the "adventure" or the "risk" of repeatedly engaging with new moods and their poetic shaping. The term also includes the awareness of putting oneself in danger ("s'aventurer"), in the sense of possible personal failure in the poetic task, but also in the sense of risking not to be understood or to find the chosen form of poetic expression rejected by others.

Above all, however, "[dire] la bonne aventure" also includes the classical concept of the poet as a fortune teller. Verlaine alludes to this topos here, but shapes it according to his understanding of poetry.

In Verlaine's case, "fortune-telling" no longer means that the poet has a prophetic gift of some kind, that he can foresee the future or reveal a hidden truth. Rather, "telling the truth" here means the authentic reproduction of subjective moods that is not distorted by metrical or content-related conventions.

References

[1] Cf. Le Parnasse contemporain. Recueil de vers nouveaux. Paris 1866: Lemerre. The first anthology was followed by two more collections of poems under the same title in 1871 and 1876.

[2] An overview of the motives, development and the most important poeotological principles of Parnassian poetry can be found on *es-pacefrançais.com*: Courants littéraires: Le Parnasse.

[3] This will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

[4] Paul Verlaine: Art poétique (1874); first published in *Paris Moderne* (1882); in a poetry collection by Verlaine first in *Jadis et naguère*, (1884); here quoted after *Oeuvres complètes*, Vol. 1, p. 311 f. (here p. 311). Paris 1902: Vanier.

[5]/[6] Ibid., p. 312.

Paterne Berrichon (1855 – 1922): Paul Verlaine
*(1896 in the journal **La Plume** / The Quill)*

Poetry as an Autonomous Sound Space.
The Significance of Music for Verlaine's Poetry

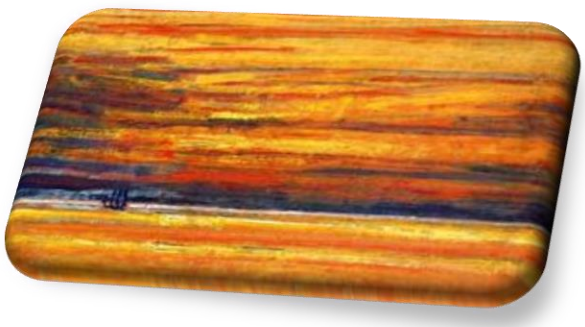
Paul Verlaine saw poetry as a world of its own that generates its meaning from itself. In this context, the musicality of poetry was crucial to him.

Apollo with lyre, fresco fragment from the vicinity of Augustus house; Rome, Palatine Museum; photo taken by Carole Raddato (Wikimedia Commons)

Sunsets

A faint twilight glow pours
over the mist robe of the field
the sorrow that flows as a purple wave
over the world in the evening.
With gentle lullabies, the ship of melancholy
carries away my heart
that loses itself dreaming
in the weightless dances of sunsets.
And strange visions, far away
like the melting embers
over the ocean's infinity,
spectres of crimson blood,
pass by, an endless procession,
pass by, like the glowing embers,
like the drowning embers
in the ocean's infinity.

Paul Verlaine: Soleils couchants
from: *Poèmes saturniens* (1866)
Oeuvres complètes, Vol. 1, p. 26 f. Paris 1902: Vanier.
Musical setting by Léo Ferré (1916 – 1993): Soleils couchants
from: *Léo Ferré chante Verlaine et Rimbaud* (1964)



A Musical Poem

"De la musique avant toute chose" – above all, it must be musical. This is the guiding principle of Paul Verlaine's poetry, which he consequently placed at the beginning of his programmatic poem *Art poétique* (The Art of Poetry) **[1]**.

This special musicality of poetry is also reflected in his poem *Sunsets*. The musical effect here results mainly from the alternation between light and dark vowels in the rhymes. In this way, the verses create a kind of in-between world in which major and minor tones flow together to form a new sound space.

The independence of the sound world corresponds to Verlaine's conviction that poetry constitutes a world of its own. The musicality of poetry is thus not an end in itself. Rather, it serves to reproduce poetic moods independently of linguistically predetermined patterns of meaning and experience.

Restricted Commitment to Rhyme

Verlaine's attitude to rhyme is ambivalent. At first glance, the compulsion to rhyme seems to contradict the idea of a poetry that wants to break free from predetermined linguistic patterns and the corset of rigid poetic forms. From this perspective, rhyme appears as an unnecessary fetter that stands in the way of new kinds of poetic sounds. Consequently, Verlaine also derides rhyme in his *Art poétique* as the invention of a "deaf child" **[2]**.

Nevertheless, Verlaine considers rhyme indispensable in a poetry that strives for musicality in the sense described above. However, he pleads for a "Rime assagie", i.e. a "wiser", more conscious use of rhyme. For "where do you think it will lead us if we do not keep it under control?" **[3]**

A similar view was expressed by Verlaine in 1888 in the essay *Un mot sur la rime* (A Note on the Rhyme). In it, he stresses that it is not rhyme itself that is "condemnable", but only its misuse. However, Verlaine doesn't recommend abandoning rhyme because of this altogether, since "our poorly accentuated language" would make it difficult to create poetry without it **[4]**.

Il pleure dans mon cœur …

Finally, the poem that is often cited as a typical example of Verlaine's musical poetic ideal should be mentioned here. In this poem, the author links the monotony of the rushing rain with the melancholy mood of the lyrical self.

In keeping with the postulated musical poetry, the concrete meaning of the individual words takes a back seat to the special harmony created by rhythm, assonances and rhymes. The world of language is thus transcended by a special poetic sound space, through which poetry asserts its autonomy over that world:

Il pleure dans mon coeur
comme il pleut sur la ville,
quelle est cette langueur
qui pénètre mon coeur?

O bruit doux de la pluie
par terre et sur les toits!
Pour un coeur qui s'ennuie,
o le chant de la pluie!

Il pleure sans raison
dans ce coeur qui s'écoeure.
Quoi! nulle trahison?
Ce deuil est sans raison.

C'est bien la pire peine*
de ne savoir pourquoi,
sans amour et sans haine,
mon coeur a tant de peine!

My heart, my heart is weeping
like the weeping, weeping sky –
what kind of wistfulness is this
that penetrates my heart?

The gentle whisper of the rain
on the earth and on the roofs –
my broken heart finds comfort
in the murmur of the rain.

My heart, my broken heart
is weeping without reason.
What! No one has hurt it?
This is a grief without a cause.

This is the worst pain of all,
to suffer without knowing why,
without love and without hate,
my heart is steeped in pain!

from: *Romances sans paroles* (1874)
Oeuvres complètes, Vol. 1, p. 155 f. Paris 1902: Vanier.
Musical setting by Gabriel Fauré (1845 – 1924); Gérard Souzay (voice)
and Jaqueline Bonneau (piano): Spleen (1888)

* "Peine" can also mean punishment/sentence in French.

References

[1] Paul Verlaine: Art poétique (1874); first published in *Paris Moderne* (1882); in a poetry collection by Verlaine first in *Jadis et naguère*, (1884); here quoted after *Oeuvres complètes*, Vol. 1, p. 311 f. (here p. 311). Paris 1902: Vanier.

[2] Ibid., p. 312.

[3] "Si l'on n'y veille, elle ira jusqu'où?" (ebd.)

[4] Paul Verlaine: Un mot sur la rime [A Note on the Rhyme]; first published in *Le Décadent* (1888); here quoted after *Oeuvres posthumes*, Vol. 2, p. 281 – 288 (here p. 281). Paris 1913: Messein.

Frédéric Bazille (1841 – 1870): Portrait of Paul Verlaine as a troubadour (1868); Dallas/Texas, Museum of Art (Wikimedia Commons)

Sunset picture: Frederick Childe Hassam (1859 – 1935): Sailing boat on the sea at sunset (Wikimedia Commons)

The World Behind the Mist of Appearances. Paul Verlaine as a Symbolist Poet

In a literary manifesto published in 1886, Jean Moréas lists Paul Verlaine as one of the most important precursors of Symbolism. In fact, Verlaine's poetry contains some Symbolist elements.

Lev Kamenev (1834 – 1886): Mist. The Red Pond near Moscow in Autumn; Moscow, Tretyakov Gallery (Wikimedia Commons)

Sentimental Walk

The evening sent its last, shivering light,
and water lilies quivered in the breeze,
shining brightly among the reeds,
shining sadly over the silent pond.
I wandered through the labyrinth of willows,
orphaned in hopeless pain, lost in the mist
that rose from the pond, a ghost,
wailing as shrilly as the flock of ducks
that gathered in frantic clamor,
fluttering fearfully through the thicket
of willows and hopeless pain.
Engulfed by the gloomy ice of twilight,
I was wrapped in the shroud that fell
weightlessly on the reeds and the water lilies,
which, like the dying day,
sadly faded away over the silent pond.

Paul Verlaine: Promenade sentimentale
from: *Poèmes saturniens* (1866)
Oeuvres complètes, Vol. 1, p. 29. Paris 1902: Vanier

Paul Verlaine as a Precursor of Symbolism

In his "Literary Manifesto" on Symbolism, published in 1886, Jean Moréas explicitly emphasises the importance of Paul Verlaine for the emergence of this literary movement. According to Moréas, Verlaine deserves credit for having freed poetry from the fetters imposed on it by the Parnasse poets around Théodore de Banville **[1]**.

Moréas' characterisation of Symbolist literature also fits in with Verlaine's poetic ideals in other respects – even if the latter refuses to classify his poetry as symbolist literature **[2]**. Thus, instead of the Parnassian "impersonnalité" (impersonality), Verlaine explicitly advocates "l'impair" (the odd/uneven), i.e. the always imperfect but authentic self-expression of the lyrical subject **[3]**.

Jean Moréas' Description of Symbolist Poetry

Similarly, Moréas characterises Symbolist poetry as the "enemy" of "instruction, declamation, false feeling and objective description" **[4]**.

This does not mean, as Moréas points out, that Symbolist literature refrains from depicting nature and human activities. However, this is never done for the sake of the external appearances themselves. Rather, it is always a matter of making the "original ideas" behind them perceptible through the way they are presented **[5]**.

Conversely, however, Moréas also underlines that these ideas are never expressed without the "splendid garments of external analogies" in Symbolist art. Unlike in the Platonic allegory of the cave, the aim here is not to bring the idea itself to light. Rather, Symbolist poetry strives to clothe the idea in a "sensually perceptible form". The outer shell, as Moréas emphasises, therefore does not have its "purpose in itself", but merely serves to make the idea tangible **[6]**.

Symbolist Elements in *Promenade sentimentale*

Verlaine's poem Promenade sentimentale corresponds to the Symbolist ideal of poetry insofar as it is indeed not about "instruction" or "objective description". It does not seek to sketch as realistically as possible the pond path along which the lyrical I is apparently strolling. Rather, the aim is to reproduce the mood of the misty evening with poetic means. This is also expressed in the title of the poem: "Sentimental Walk" means that the focus is on the sentiments of the lyrical I and not on objective reality.

To this end, the elements that create the mood are interwoven through the rhyme into a dense network of associations and images that mutually refer to each other. In addition, the individual elements always point beyond their concrete meaning.

Thus the cry of the ducks alludes to the silent cry of despair of the lyrical self. The night does not simply descend on the pond, but covers it like a shroud. And the water lilies do not just

disappear into the darkness, but sink into the twilight like capsizing boats.

The "fantôme" that is at the centre of the poem thus acquires a double meaning, which at the same time constitutes the Symbolist core of the verses. On the one hand, seen from the outside, it can be interpreted as an image for the lyrical I and his despair. On the other hand, the metaphor of the ghost also conclusively sums up the fleetingness of appearances and ultimately of life as a whole, thus pointing to the deeper reason for the despair.

Setting of the poem by Charles Bordes (1863 – 1909); from: *Paysages tristes* (Sad Landscapes; 1886); Vocal: Philippe Jaroussky; Piano: Jérôme Ducros

References

[1] Jean Moréas: Le symbolisme. Un manifeste littéraire (1886); with edition report and bibliography by Rudolf Brandmeyer.

[2] Cf. Huret, Jules: Enquête sur l'evolution littéraire: [Conversation with] Paul Verlaine, pp. 65 – 71 (here p. 68). Paris 1891: Bibliothèque-Charpentier.

[3] Paul Verlaine: Art poétique (1874); first published in *Paris Moderne* (1882); in a poetry collection by Verlaine first in *Jadis et naguère*, (1884); here quoted after *Oeuvres complètes*, Vol. 1, p. 311 f. (here p. 311). Paris 1902: Vanier; Cf. the chapter on Verlaine's attitude to Parnasse poetry: *Turning away from Olympus*.

[4] – [6] Moréas, Le symbolisme, see above.

Water lily picture: Claude Monet (1840 – 1926): Blooming Water lilies (1914/17); Wikimedia Commons

The Seagull Spirit.
Paul Verlaine's Popular Symbolism

While Verlaine's poetry contains symbolist elements, it also often has a sound reminiscent of folk songs. This distinguishes it from the tendency towards the hermetic and elitist that can be observed in other Symbolist poetry.

Octave Penguilly L'Haridon (1811 – 1872): Seagulls in the storm (1857)
Wikimedia commons

Je ne sais pourquoi …

Why does my spirit fly so restlessly,
rushing like an autumn storm
on frantic, unsteady wings across the sea?
Why does my tireless spirit hope
to find what he is longing for
among the billowing manes of the waves?

Like a seagull's unstoppable flight,
my spirit floats in the dance of the waves,
flotsam in the ocean of the skies,
caught in the rhythm of the tides
like a seagull's unstoppable flight.

Drunk with blazing, surging sunlight,
he often races in overflowing delight,
drenched in immeasurable freedom.
In the evening, the wings of the wind
sway him over crimson floods,
until a fleeting half-sleep embraces him.

And sometimes he drifts with a sorrowful scream
homeless in the tempest's jungle
and dives, gets hurt and can only soothe
the pain with another sorrowful scream
that sadly flows around the lighthouse's gleam.

Why does my spirit fly so restlessly,
rushing like an autumn storm
on frantic, unsteady wings over the sea?
Why does my tireless spirit hope
to find what he is longing for
among the billowing manes of the waves?

Why, tell me – why?

Paul Verlaine: Je ne sais pourquoi ...
from: *Sagesse* (1880)
Oeuvres complètes, Vol. 1, p. 273 f. Paris 1902: Vanier

Verlaine's Poetry: Symbolist, but not Hermetic

With his ideal of a poetry that exists for and out of itself, Verlaine anticipated a central element of Symbolism. Accordingly, he himself pointed to important Symbolist poets – in particular Stéphane Mallarmé and Arthur Rimbaud – in a collection of essays on the "poètes maudits" (ostracised poets; **1**).

The inclination towards the hermetic and elitist that can sometimes be found in Symbolist poetry is, however, alien to Verlaine. Corresponding tendencies can be observed in the life and work of Stéphane Mallarmé, for example. He invited like-minded people to his literary salon, where he was addressed as "Maître" (Master). His later poetry is characterised by a hermeticism that deliberately eludes straightforward understanding **[2]**.

In Germany, Stefan George – who himself frequented Mallarmé's literary salon – expanded the master's gesture to the concept of a spiritual leader. As such, he not only gathered young writers around him and had them venerate him as the prince of poets. With his leader's pose, he also appealed to the National Socialists, who tried – albeit in vain – to win him over to their side by awarding him the State Prize.

Verlaine and Baudelaire

All this is alien to Verlaine. On the biographical level, he has far more in common with Charles Baudelaire – whom Jean Moréas

in his literary manifesto on symbolism also cites as a precursor of this literary movement **[3]** – than with Mallarmé or George.

Like Baudelaire, Verlaine had a relationship with his mother that was as close as it was ambivalent. Like Baudelaire, he regularly indulged in alcohol, like Baudelaire he contracted syphilis as a result of his frequent contact with prostitutes, like Baudelaire he led an unsteady life and suffered an early death – Baudelaire died at the age of 46, Verlaine at the age of 52.

Against this background, the striving for a "poésie pure", a pure poetry, takes on a completely different meaning than with the later Symbolists. Here, it serves less to keep a distance from the misused and abused everyday language than to create a counter-world to the dreary everyday life, a mental retreat that offers protection from the hostilities of life.

Popular Symbolism

This is also reflected in the works of the two poets. In both cases, the poems do not resist quick, intuitive understanding. On the contrary: the musicality of the verses even invites it. This is evidenced not least by the countless and – especially in Baudelaire's case – partly also modern settings to music **[4]**.

In terms of intellectual history, Baudelaire's and Verlaine's "popular" Symbolism can perhaps be traced back to the rootedness of both poets in the Romantic perception of the world. After all, the combination of world-weariness ("Welt-schmerz") and folksong-like poetry, combined with a special musicality, was also characteristic of Romantic literature.

At the same time, Baudelaire's and Verlaine's work also reflects their distance from Romanticism. Even if the tone is romantic at times, the awareness of the radical rupture brought about by industrialisation and secularisation is much more pronounced than in Romantic works. In this respect, Verlaine and Baudelaire are thoroughly modern authors.

A Poem between Romanticism and Modernity

In the verses reproduced above, Verlaine captures his own feeling of restlessness in the image of seagulls circling over the sea. Just as the seagulls seem to plunge aimlessly from one wave to the next, the lyrical I describes his mind and his feelings as unsteady and as if driven by the storm. Although this repeatedly results in an exhilarating feeling of freedom and unboundedness, it has to be paid for with the lack of clear orientation.

As in many other poems by Verlaine, the description of external events serves to illustrate inner psychological states. Another typical feature of Verlaine's poetry is the poem's particular musicality, the harmony intended to soothe the lyrical self's

world-weariness. This effect is reinforced by the refrain-like repetition of individual verses and the first stanza.

While these elements of the poem are reminiscent of Symbolism, its underlying tone is closer to the folksong-like sound of Romantic poetry than to the hermeticism of later Symbolist poetry. The poem thus conveys an impression of the mental hinge that separates Romantic and modern perceptions of the world as much as it connects them.

References

[1] Paul Verlaine: Les poètes maudits (1884; extended version 1888). In: Oeuvres complètes, Vol. 4, pp. 3 - 84. Paris 1904: Vanier (Messein).

[2] Cf. Rother Baron: Revolt against Life. Stéphane Mallarmé's Hermetic Symbolism. Literaturplanet, June 2022 (PDF).

[3] Jean Moréas: Le symbolisme. Un manifeste littéraire (1886); with edition report and bibliography by Rudolf Brandmeyer; cf. the previous chapter: *The World Behind the Mist of Appearances*.

[4] Baudelairesong.org lists over 1,600 settings of Baudelaire's poems. Some poems have been interpreted musically up to 70 times. An overview of the almost as many settings of Paul Verlaine's poems can be found on paul-verlaine.pagesperso-orange.fr (Paul Verlaine en musique: sorted by composers), mediamus.blogspot com (Paul Verlaine: poètes en musique) and on fr.wikipédia.org (Mise en musique des poèmes de Paul Verlaine). In addition, this web portal also offers another list of settings of works by Charles Baudelaire: Mise en musique des poèmes de Charles Baudelaire.

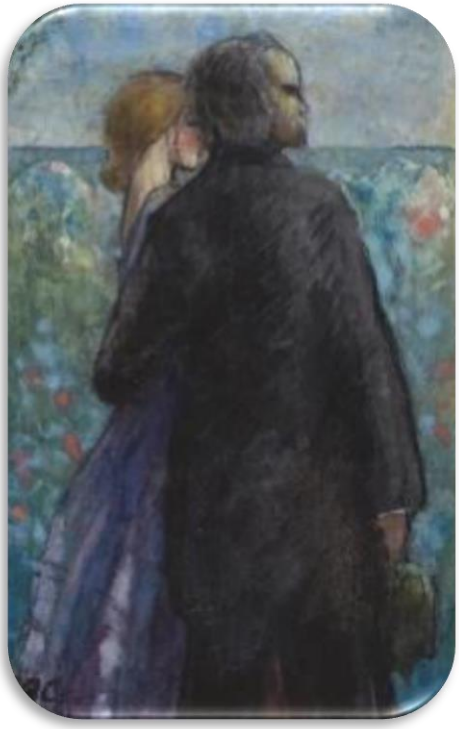
Pictures:

1. Watanabe Shōtei (1851 – 1918): Seagulls over the waves

2. Félix Nadar (1820 – 1910): Photo of Charles Baudelaire (1855) (Wikimedia commons)

Transfigured Past, Desolate Present. Romantic World-weariness in the Work of Paul Verlaine

With the title of his poem *Nevermore*, Verlaine alludes to Edgar Allan Poe's poem *The Raven*. The verses are thus also linked to the Romantic perception of the world.



Frédéric-Auguste Cazals (1865 – 1941): Paul Verlaine and his wife Mathilde Mauté (Wikimedia Commons)

Nevermore

Why do you, careless heart, conjure up her face?
I remember the gold dust of leaves,
scattering in the raging winds,
and autumn stifling the blackbird's song.

I can still recall our lonely walk,
curls and longings gently fluttering in the wind.
With her angelic gaze, still a treasure in my heart,
she asked me in a soulful voice:

"What was your most beautiful day?"
And in reply a smile, a timid bow,
a hint of a kiss on the marble hand.

Oh, how it pervades the air, the first "yes",
and carries from the lips the scent
of drunken flowers through the enchanted land.

Paul Verlaine: Nevermore
from: *Poèmes saturniens* (1866)
Oeuvres complètes, Vol. 1, p. 11. Paris 1902: Vanier

Allusion to Edgar Allan Poe's Poem *The Raven*

Nevermore – with the title of his poem, Paul Verlaine alludes, of course, to Edgar Allan Poe's famous ballad of the raven that haunts a man mourning the death of his beloved at night **[1]**.

With his mercilessly croaked "Nevermore", the raven not only emphasises that the grieving man will neither see his beloved again nor ever forget her. The sinister bird also rules out a reunion of their two souls after the unfortunate man's death.

At the same time, the raven hints at staying with the unfortunate forever. In this way, he himself becomes a bird "Nevermore", the incarnation of a hopeless, life-long mourning. His appearance therefore points beyond the concrete individual case and becomes a general allegory of human existence doomed to death.

Biographical Aspects of the Poem

On a biographical level, Verlaine's poem can probably best be related to the poet's cousin Élisa. Verlaine's hopes of marrying her were shattered when Élisa entered into a marriage with a wealthy industrialist in 1861.

On the other hand, it was precisely this "good match" that opened up the possibility for his cousin to support Verlaine in the publication of his first volume of poetry – the very *Poémes saturniens* that include the poem *Nevermore*. When Élisa died of childbed fever in 1867, this threw Verlaine into a deep crisis.

Parallels to the Romantic Perception of the World

More important than the biographical background, however, is the fact that Verlaine's poem takes up the Romantic perception of the world. It is true that the poem revolves around the magic of the first love. The crucial point, though, is that this luck lies in the unattainable distance: in a nostalgically transfigured past. This is also a central aspect of the melancholic Romantic perception of the world.

A particularly striking expression of this Romantic world-weariness ("Weltschmerz") can be found in the poem *Des Fremdlings Abendlied* (The Stranger's Evening Song) by Georg Philipp Schmidt von Lübeck. In the song setting by Franz Schubert (entitled Der Wanderer), the concluding verse reads: "There, where you are not, there is happiness!" **[2]**

This is also the basic mood of Wilhelm Müller's cycle of poems, *Die Winterreise* (The Winter Journey), again set to music by Franz Schubert. Its emotional tension arises from the fact that it revolves around the two poles of the frozen present on the one hand and the past, blissful love on the other. At the same time, being on the road in the hostile winter is also an image for the existential "unhousedness" of man.

Romantic world-weariness is thus based on a feeling of wistful longing that is aware of the inaccessibility of its goal. The deeper reason for this dilemma is that the concrete goal of the longing – like a past love – is always only an image for the utopia of an indestructible harmony that is incompatible with human life.

The core of Romantic world-weariness is therefore – as in Poe's ballad *The Raven*, to which Verlaine alludes with the title of his poem – the grief for a life condemned to death from birth.

References

[1] Edgar Allan Poe: The Raven; from: The Raven and Other Poems by Edgar Allan Poe. New York 1845: Wiley and Putnam.

[2] The poem, originally comprising five stanzas, was first published in 1808. The first musical settings were by Carl Friedrich Zelter and Friedrich Kuhlau, with partial changes to the text in each case. In 1813, the poet revised his work and added three stanzas.

Franz Schubert's setting of the poem dates from 1816 and was published in 1821. The composer based this on another printed version, again with only five stanzas, and made further changes to the text. Due to the popularity of the song, the version of the text used in it is the most familiar today.

The various versions of the poem and song text can be found with information on the genesis and publishing history as well as a song version by Peter Schöne (voice) and Boris Cepeda (piano) in: Schöne, Peter: Der Wanderer – Dritte Fassung (Third Version). D 489 - Opus 4 / 1; schubertlied.de.

An English translation of the poem with annotations is available on *The LiederNet*, here with reference to the first verse: Ich komme vom Gebirge her (I come down from the mountains).

[3] Wilhelm Müller: Die Winterreise. In: Sieben und siebzig Gedichte aus den hinterlassenen Papieren eines reisenden Waldhornisten [Seven and Seventy Poems from the Bequeathed Papers of a Travelling French Horn Player], Vol. 2, pp. 75 – 108. Dessau 1824: Heckmann. Franz Schubert's setting of the poem cycle dates from 1827 and is available on the Internet, among others, in a congenial version by Alfred Brendel (piano) and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau (voice): Die Winterreise. Berlin 1979: Sender Freies Berlin.

Pictures: 1. Edouard Manet (1832 - 1883): The Raven; third picture from a five-part series with illustrations to Edgar Allan Poe's poem *The Raven*; **2.** Caspar David Friedrich (1774 – 1840): Winter Landscape; Schwerin (North-East Germany), State Museum (both pictures from Wikimedia Commons)

The Landscape as a Mirror of the Soul. Verlaine's Soulful Images of Nature

Many of Verlaine's poems revolve around descriptions of nature. The images of nature also serve him as a mirror of his inner landscapes.

Ivan Fyodorovich Shultse (Ivan Fedorovich Choultsé, 1874 – 1939): Sunset in Winter; Wikimedia Commons

Dans l'interminable ennui de la plaine …

Boundless melancholy and longing
envelop the languishing land,
on which the snow's crystalline robe
sparkles like a lake caressed by the sun.

The copper sky is streaked
by the silent plumage of the clouds,
in which the moon is caught,
rising and dying, dying and reviving.

Like garments of fog
the oak trees flutter in the wind
that whispers wistfully around the forest
like around a weeping woman.

The copper sky is streaked
by the silent plumage of the clouds,
in which the moon is caught,
rising and dying, dying and reviving.

Crow, how ominous sounds your call!
And you, scrawny prowling wolves,
do you sense in the tempest's hunting hoofs
the icy judgement of winter?

Boundless melancholy and longing
envelop the languishing land

on which the snow's crystalline robe
sparkles like a lake caressed by the sun.

Paul Verlaine: Dans l'interminable ennui de la plaine ...
from: *Romances sans paroles* (1874)
Oeuvres complètes, Vol. 1, p. 163 f. Paris 1902: Vanier.
Musical setting by Hélène Triomphe and Marc Robine
from: *Poètes et Chansons: Paul Verlaine* (2006)

Adolf Kaufmann (1848 – 1916): Sunse in a Winter Landscap
(Wikimedia commons)

A Look into the Mirror of the Landscape

Verlaine's poem can at first simply be read as a description of a wintry landscape: It is night, apparently there is a rather stormy wind that blows the clouds in front of the moon and away from it again at short intervals. The moon has apparently just risen and makes the snow glow coppery red.

The trees, only dimly discernible in the dark, are also shaken by the wind. From time to time, animal noises can be heard.

All this can be seen in the poem. What is decisive, however, is not the description of the landscape itself, but the function it has as a mirror of the inner mood of the lyrical self. The plaintive cries of the animals, the moon that disappears as soon as it rises – all this points to the state of mind of the person from whose perspective the events are described.

Boundless Landscape, Boundless "Ennui"

The core of this state of mind is mentioned right at the beginning of the poem. The seemingly boundless plain on which the gaze falls is linked with the equally boundless "ennui" of the lyrical I in an image that encompasses both.

As for Charles Baudelaire's poetry, "ennui" is also a key concept for Verlaine's poems **[1]**. In its associative linking of weariness of life, melancholy and undefined longing, it refers to the poet's characteristic state of mind in the rational, purpose-oriented industrial world, in which there is no longer any room for poets.

The Poet in Inner Exile

A similar sentiment is expressed in the poem that precedes the verses quoted above in the poetry collection *Romances sans paroles*. Starting from a woman who stole his heart, the lyrical I asks himself here how it is possible to be "present and exiled simultaneously, / to be here and far away at the same time" **[2]**. It is precisely this feeling of moving through the world as if in an inner exile that is characteristic of Verlaine's perception of the world.

The poem that follows the verses reproduced above in *Romances sans paroles* also addresses the feeling of existential forlornness, of a life journey doomed to failure. At the same time, it illustrates even more clearly Verlaine's poetic practice of describing the landscape as a mirror of the soul:

"The turtledoves weave their wistful songs
in the antlers of the trees,
whose crimson evening dreams
fade in the hovering haze.

Alas, traveller, the pallid land
reflects your own fate!
Your happiness, your hopes
are capsized on the shores of life." **[3]**

References

[1] Baudelaire illustrates the special significance of Ennui for his work in the poem *Au lecteur* (To the Reader), which serves as a sort of preface to his poetry collection *Les Fleurs du Mal* (The Flowers of Evil), published in 1857. The poem begins by listing all kinds of vices, sins, aberrations and debaucheries, before concluding by describing "Ennui" (written in capital letters in the original!) as the most hideous monster that man can fall prey to:

"Among all the sinister monsters
that shriek and howl, growl and screech
in the dreadful zoo of vices,
there is one that is especially ugly and mean!

It does not frighten you with frantic flailing –
and yet it would like to reduce
the world into a field of rubble
and swallow it up in a great yawn.

This monster is: the Ennui!
With a silent tear in his eye,
he dreams, chewing on a hookah,
of the deathly sparkle of the scaffold."

(Charles Baudelaire: Au lecteur; from: *Les Fleurs du Mal*, p. 5 – 7. Paris 1857: Poulet-Malassis et de Broise).

[2] Paul Verlaine: Ô triste, triste était mon âme … from: *Romances sans paroles* (1874); Oeuvres complètes, Vol. 1, p. 161 f. Paris 1902: Vanier.

[3] Paul Verlaine: L'ombre des arbres dans la rivière embrumée … (May/June 1872) ; from: *Romances sans paroles* (1874). Oeuvres complètes, Vol. 1, p. 165. Paris 1902: Vanier.

Longing for Divine Blessing.
Religiosity in the Poetry of Paul Verlaine

Verlaine's poetry collection *Sagesse* (Wisdom) reflects the poet's turn to faith. However, this was apparently more due to his general need for comfort in religion than to genuine Christian convictions.

Vincent van Gogh (1853 – 1890): The old church tower [of Nuenen/Netherlands} in the fields; Wikimedia Commons

L'échelonnement des haies …

The wave of hedges ripples endlessly
towards the horizon, bathed
in the splendour of a shining haze,
in which the blinking berries hide.

In the fragrant plain, mills and willows
nestle in the blooming day,
and horses leap exuberantly
across the buzzing meadows.

Flatteringly the Sunday sorceress
weaves dreams into the web of sheep
and clouds that streak the sea
of fields at the threshold of heaven.

And over fields and buzzing meadows,
like an animating rain,
church bells pour exultantly
their blessing into the milky azure.

L'échelonnement des haies ...
from: *Sagesse* (1880)
Oeuvres complètes, Vol. 1, p. 281. Paris 1902: Vanier.
Musical setting by Claude Debussy (1862 – 1918); from: *Trois Mélodies de Verlaine* (1891); Gérard Souzay (voice) and Dalton Baldwin (piano)

Divine Harmony

During his stay in prison, to which he had been sentenced for assaulting his friend Rimbaud, Verlaine sought consolation in the Christian faith. In this he was stimulated and encouraged by intensive conversations with the prison priest.

Hints of Verlaine's religiosity can also be found in the verses reproduced above. In connection with the heavenly ringing of bells mentioned at the end of the poem, the evoked Sunday harmony takes on a transcendental quality.

The peaceful Sunday mood thus conveys an inkling of the all-encompassing divine harmony. This is also reflected in the poem by the fact that the "wave" of the hedges flows into the sky, so that earthly and supernatural sea are directly connected.

Religiosity in Verlaine's Poetry Collection *Sagesse*

However, the references to the Christian faith in the poem are rather allusive. If the reader does not know that many of the poems collected in the book *Sagesse* (Wisdom) reflect Verlaine's turn to the Christian faith, the verses will probably not necessarily be associated with it.

This is not the case with some other poems in *Sagesse*. For example, the book contains a rejection of earthly love, which should be replaced by the sole love of "Mother Mary" **[1]**. In addition, there is also a long dialogue between a lost soul and

God, which is reminiscent of Dostoevsky in the fervour of its striving for faith.

The title of this poetic dialogue hints at the motivation for Verlaine's turn to faith: "Mon Dieu m'a dit: Il faut m'aimer" (My God told me: My son, I must be loved; **2**). It is precisely this sensation of being forced to worship that calls into question the veracity of the faith that Verlaine celebrates in some of the poems from his book *Sagesse*.

From this perspective, God appears like a revenant of Verlaine's father, who died at an early age. The obedience he often refused to his father he now promises to the Father in heaven. Turning to faith would thus be an attempt to subordinate himself to the norms and commandments of society as if by an oath of allegiance witnessed before God.

Verlaine's "Unchristian" Life after his Release from Prison

Verlaine's life after his prison stay suggests that this religiously shaped gesture of submission was more a temporary effect of the prison conditions than the result of a genuine inner change.

Thus, a meeting with Rimbaud immediately after his release from prison again ended in a heated argument. And instead of turning his love solely to "Mother Mary", Verlaine fell in love with a pupil during a brief stint as a teacher, which cost him his job. Furthermore, he indulged in alcoholic excesses again and attacked his mother while drunk.

Since his mother did not appoint Verlaine, but his son from his early failed marriage as her heir, Verlaine literally ended up on

the street after her death. He had to sleep in night shelters and depended on friends to slip him a little money now and then. When he gradually gained more recognition as a poet in the 1890s and also earned a modest income from lectures and prizes, it was too late to prevent his early death in January 1896.

Between Sublimation and Ecstatic Overcoming of Despair

Against this background, the answer to the question about the significance of faith for Verlaine must probably be: The question is wrongly posed. Verlaine was less concerned with faith than with religiosity, i.e. not with Christian convictions, but with the inner peace that a deeply felt religiosity can convey.

However, for Verlaine, religiosity was only one remedy among others against his inner brokenness. Another remedy was the world of poetry, in which the special musicality of his verses helped him create a harmony that defied the disharmony of his everyday life. And last but not least, there was the bond of friendship with Rimbaud.

In addition, though, Verlaine repeatedly took refuge in various forms of inebriation when his wounded soul could not be soothed in any other way – in the frenzy of love with prostitutes as well as in alcoholic excess. In a sense, he vacillated between merely numbing the suffering of his existence and sublimating it. The fact that he used the Christian faith as a means of sublimation during his imprisonment was probably simply due to the circumstances.

References

[1] Paul Verlaine: Je ne veux plus aimer que ma mère Marie; from: *Sagesse* (1880); Oeuvres complètes, Vol. 1, p. 247 f. Paris 1902: Vanier.

[2] Paul Verlaine: Mon Dieu m'a dit: Il faut m'aimer; from: *Sagesse* (1880); Oeuvres complètes, Vol. 1, pp. 251 – 258. Paris 1902: Vanier.

Henry Bainbridge McCarter: Illustration for a book with poems by Paul Verlaine (p. 81). New York 1906: Duffield & Co.

A Dreamer in the Labyrinth of Life.
Verlaine's Adaptation of the Pierrot Character

In his poem *Pierrot*, Verlaine takes up the 19th-century pantomimic development of the character. Pierrot's speechlessness serves him as a cipher for the "unspeakable" abysses of human existence.

Arsène Trouvé: Jean-Gaspard Deburau (1796 – 1846) as Pierrot (1832)
Paris, Musée Carnavalet (Wikimedia Commons)

Pierrot

Only the spectre of the dreaming tightrope walker
who once laughed into faces pale with horror
haunts us today. Joylessly the lights
dance around his moon-pale face.

In the mercilessly flickering flashes
his dress already billows like a shroud.
His mouth, an abyss, howls silently in suffering,
as if the worms were already gnawing at his skin.

Like a flock of birds that flit through the night
his sleeves are helplessly tangled
to signs that fade away unheard.

The rays of light wind lambently into his eyes,
while beneath the layer of make-up
his bloodless lip lines slur as if in agony.

Paul Verlaine: Pierrot
from: *Jadis et Naguère* (Once and Recently, 1884)
Oeuvres completes, Vol. 1, p. 269 f. Paris 1902: Vanier

The Pierrot of the Commedia dell'arte

The character of Pierrot originally comes from the Commedia dell'arte. In it, Pierrot was a counterpart of Arlecchino (Harlequin), who had evolved over time into a folksy prankster. As such, he asserts his claim to a happy life with mischievous means that sometimes creatively reinterpret moral norms.

Pierrot opposes this behaviour, which he sees as antisocial, by putting obstacles in Arlecchino's path and constantly telling him how to behave. As a character whose self-righteousness implicitly puts the sense of rigid norms into question, Pierrot still lives on in the circus world today. There he has merged into the figure of the white clown, who tries to educate his fellow player, the red clown or "Dummer August" (Stupid Auguste) – in vain, of course.

Further Development of the Character by Jean-Gaspard Deburau

The Pierrot as we know the character today owes its origins, ironically, to an arbitrary bureaucratic act. The *Théâtre des Fumnambules* ("Tightrope Walkers' Theatre") in Paris, where the figure was developed in its present form, did not have official permission for performances using language. It therefore had to limit itself to acrobatic and other non-verbal forms of presentation.

This is also how Philippe Germain Deburau came to the theatre in 1816. He had emigrated with his family from Bohemia to

Paris in 1811 and performed at the *Théâtre des Fumnambules* as a tightrope walker.

Deburau's son, Jean-Gaspard Deburau, born in 1796, came up with the idea of circumventing the ban on language for the performances by using pantomime. To do this, he resorted to the character of Pierrot, which he modified to suit his needs.

Appearance and Personality of Deburau's Pierrot

On the outer level, the decisive changes Deburau made to the figure are the white made-up face, the long white robe and the puffy sleeves. All these elements serve to bring out facial expressions and gestures more strongly. The facial features stand out more in a face with white make-up – especially with red lips – and a puffy robe allows the shadow play to be used in a more purposeful way for non-verbal expression.

The nature of Deburau's Pierrot also has little in common with his predecessor in the Commedia dell'arte. The new Pierrot is no longer a moralistic know-it-all, but a dreamer who is usually haplessly in love. His ineffectual attempts to turn his dreams into reality result in tragic and comic effects at the same time.

As a tragicomic figure necessarily doomed to failure because of his being at home in a dream world, Deburau's Pierrot – later further developed by his son Jean-Charles – is still a counter-image to Arlecchino. But the difference between the two characters no longer arises from Pierrot's claim to moral superiority. Rather, it is based on the contrast between the carefree, mischievous assertion of a small piece of happiness by Arlecchino and the tragic insistence on the whole, indivisible happiness by Pierrot.

The Tragicomic of the Speechless: Paul Verlaine's *Pierrot*

In his poem *Pierrot*, Paul Verlaine recognisably refers to the character developed by Deburau. Thus, he takes up the puffy sleeves of Pierrot's robe and the thick white make-up. At the same time, however, he gives the character a meaning that partially detaches it from its original context.

Verlaine reinterprets the tragicomedy typical of Pierrot into an existential tragedy as it is generally inherent in human life. On the one hand, this concerns the contrast between the vibrant shell and the worms of death that decompose the body underneath for a lifetime. On the other hand, the existential tragedy in Verlaine's poem also involves the level of verbal expression.

The peculiarity of pantomime not to be able to provide unambiguous messages is interpreted by Verlaine in terms of the impossibility of adequately expressing the tragedy of life or the suffering of it in words. The tragicomedy of Pierrot is thus based

here on a tragic misinterpretation of his gestures by the spectators – who laugh when the figure on stage confronts them with the truth of their own tragic existence.

Colourised photo of Paul Verlaine, around 1870 (Wikimedia Commons)

Pierrot picture: Jean Pezous (1815 – 1885): Portrait of the mime [Jean-]Charles Deburau; Paris, Musée Carnavalet (Wikimedia Commons)