

Théophile Gautier

Selected Poems



*Portrait of Théophile Gautier (1811-1872), poet, novelist, and critic (1839)
Auguste de Châtillon (French, 1808 - 1881) - Artvee*

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Translator's Introduction

Théophile Gautier (1811-1872) was born in Tarbes, in the Hautes-Pyrénées region of south-west France, his family moving to Paris in 1814. He was a friend, at school, of the poet Gérard de Nerval, who introduced him to Victor Hugo. Gautier contributed to various journals, including *La Presse*, throughout his life, which offered opportunities for travel in Spain (1840), Algeria (1845, 1862), Italy (1850), Russia (1858-59, 1861), and Egypt (1869). He was a devotee of the ballet, writing a number of scenarios including that of *Giselle*. At the time of the 1848 Revolution, he expressed strong support for the ideals of the second Republic, a support which he maintained for the rest of his life.

A successor to the first wave of Romantic writers, including Chateaubriand and Lamartine, he directed the *Revue de Paris* from 1851 to 1856, worked as a journalist for *La Presse* and *Le Moniteur universel*, and in 1856 became editor of *L'Artiste*, in which he published numerous editorials asserting his doctrine of 'Art for art's sake'. Saint-Beuve secured him critical acclaim, he became chairman of the *Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts* in 1862, and in 1868 was granted the sinecure of librarian to Princess Mathilde Bonaparte, a cousin of Napoleon III, having been introduced to her salon.

Gautier remained in Paris during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71, and the aftermath of the Commune of 1871, dying of heart disease at the age of sixty-one in 1872.

Though ostensibly a Romantic poet, Gautier may be seen as a forerunner to, or point of reference for, a number of divergent poetic movements including symbolism and modernism.

To Two Lovely Eyes (*À deux beaux yeux*)

Your aspect is singular, full of charm,
Like the moon in a lake that reflects her.
Each eyelid, shining with damp glitter,
Furls languidly; your expression calm.

From diamond their fire derives, it seems,
Of finer water than a pearl's perfection,
On unquiet wings, the eyelashes' motion,
Only half-veils your eyes' radiant gleams.

Thousands of agents of love flock to view
Themselves, in those dual mirrors of flame,
And find they are lovelier, I would claim.

Their transparency shows your soul anew,
That, through crystal, its form may reveal,
A celestial flower, its calyx ideal.

Sonnet

To vein her brow's pallor, so delicate,
Japan has granted its clearest blue,
The white porcelain to white less true
Than her lucent neck, temples of agate;

In her moist eye gleams a gentle light;
The nightingale's voice is harsher yet,
And, when she rises in our dark night,
We praise the moon in a cloudy dress;

Her silver eyes, burnished, move fluidly,
Caprice has pointed her pert little nose,
Her mouth has the red of raspberry, peach,

Her movements flow with a Chinese flow,
And, near her, one breathes from her beauty
Something sweet, like the fragrance of tea.

In My Heart... (*J'ai dans mon Coeur*)

In my heart, with never a veil in sight,
There stand two ivory seats, a crystal table,
Where, holding their cards, at left and right,
Sit your false love and my love ever-faithful.

Find in my heart, my diaphanous heart,
Your name enclosed in a chest of gold;
Take the key, so no hand profane, no art
May open its lid, none should be so bold.

Search my heart, the heart that you disdain,
That holds beside yourself no other thing,
And you will see, my love, that there you reign,
In that country of which no man is king.

The Blackbird (*Le merle*)

A bird on the branch whistles, madly;
On the icy grass, sounding his note,
Full of hope, he hops about, gladly,
In his bright yellow boots, and black coat.

He's a blackbird, that credulous singer,
Knowing naught of the calendar, so,
He sings loudly, to make the sun linger,
April's anthem, in February's snow.

In the wind, and the pouring rain,
Arve yellows the Rhône's clear blue.
Behind many a Persian curtain,
Guests cling to the hearth's red hue.

The mountains have ermine shoulders
Like magistrates trying, on high,
Winter's case, that icier of boulders,
In their whitened court, in the sky.

Polishing, and preening, his wing,
The blackbird, his song in full flow;
Believes in the coming of Spring,
Despite all the rain, fog, and snow.

He bemoans idle dawn for hours,
That seeks to stay longer in bed,
And, feeding, midst chilly flowers,
Summons Spring, temporarily fled.

He anticipates daylight in darkness,
A believer at prayer, though the nave
Seems deserted, the altar no less;
Full of faith, this side of the grave,

It's in Nature he places his trust,
It's his instinct that life will renew.
Who mocks your philosophy, must
Have less wisdom, blackbird, than you!

The Attic (*La mansard*)

Beyond the tiles which are facing me,
Where a cat is watching a pigeon preen,
Between two pipes, from my balcony,
An attic can be quite readily seen.

To portray it with false well-seeming,
If I chose to lie, like many an author,
I could describe its window, gleaming,
One framed by sweet peas, moreover.

I could give you Verdi's Rigoletto
Gazing into a mirror there, smilingly,
One whose glittering glass would show
Only half of a shadowy eye to me;

Or Turina's Margot, with her dress
Still unclasped, the breeze in her hair,
Watering, with loving address,
Her sweet little garden-pots, there;

Or some young poet, with fiery will,
Rehearsing his Sybilline verse,
To the silhouettes, on Montmartre's hill,
Of the windmills the clouds traverse.

But my garret is real, unfortunately,
There's no bindweed climbing the frame,
And beneath an old rafter's verdigris
Sits the bed that adorns that same.

For the seamstress, the artist, it seems,
For the widower, and the street-lad,
Attics are only pleasant in dreams,
Such garrets are, eternally, sad.

Once, under roofs whose gables bent
Forehead to forehead, to kiss, as one,
Love, with a mere camp-bed content,
Came to speak with Delibes' Suzon.

But to wrap in cotton-wool our joy,
We must pad our walls, it appears,

And waves of silk and lace employ,
Beds by Monbro, much like biers.

One evening, choosing not to return,
Margot lingered about Mont Breda,
And a well-dressed Rigoletto, in turn,
Left his mignonette without water.

And it's many a day since the poet,
Tired of weaving his rhymes unseen,
Became a reporter on the Gazette,
Left the sky, for the mezzanine.

In that window one sees only
An old woman's meagre figure,
Reproaching her cat severely,
Who pulls at her thread, as ever.

The Cloud (La nue)



The Cloud
Adrien-Louis Demont (French, 1851-1928) - Artvee

A cloud shows on the horizon,
Shaping its form in the blue,
It appears like a naked virgin,
Born of lake-water, and dew.

Upright on her nacrous shell,
She sails through the azure sky,
Like an Aphrodite, ethereal,
Arisen from sea-foam, on high.

She varies her graceful pose,
Her torso's contour uncertain,
As dawn spreads its tint of rose,
On shoulders of blanched satin.

The hues of whiteness and snow,
Highlight her languorous beauty,
As Correggio's chiaroscuro
Does Antiope's sleeping body.

Than Alpine crests, in the light,
Or Apennine hills, she'll hover,
Primal Grace caught in flight,
The Eternal Feminine's sister.

My soul desires, once again,
Lifted high, on wings of passion,
To clasp her form, though in vain,
In the manner displayed by Ixion.

Reason says: 'Smoke and vapour
Imitate what we see in dream,
Things of which wind's the shaper,
Bubbles that burst on the stream.'

Feeling replies: 'What matter?
What is beauty of form or scene,
But a lovely, vanishing spectre,
Nothing more, once it has been!

Let the heavens above fill your heart,
To the Ideal, now, open your soul;
Love a cloud, a person, a work of art,
But love! That alone's the true goal!

Contralto

In the Museum, there on view,
On a marble bed, we may see,
A truly enigmatic statue,
A work of disturbing beauty.

Is it a girl, or a youth maybe?
Is it a god or a goddess?
Love, fearful of notoriety,
Clearly hesitates to confess.

In its mischievous pose,
It lies, its back turned away,
On the slab where it froze,
As, by it, we make our way.

To create its infamous beauty,
Each sex has brought its store.
Men say: 'Aphrodite!'
Women say: 'Cupid, for sure!'

Of certain grace, and doubtful gender,
As, enjoying Salmacis' kiss,
You melt in her fountain's water,
Attaining equivocal bliss,

Ardent chimera, effort supreme,
Of art and voluptuousness,
Charming monster, subtle dream,
How I love your ambiguousness!

Though approach to you is denied,
I've oft sought, my glance discrete,
To see beneath those folds applied,
Whose borders reach to your feet.

The artist's, that poet's, reverie,
Has troubled me many a night;
The persistence, alone, of my fancy,
Convincing me that it's right;

Except, it's transposed, in alloy
Passing from form into sound,
Both the young girl and the boy,
In that metamorphosis, found.

How you please me, strange timbre!
A contralto, strange and choice,
Is its double, as regards gender,
A hermaphrodite of the voice!

It's Romeo, and it's Juliet,
Both singing from the one throat,
The pigeon and the warbler met,
Above the rose, in one note.

It's the mistress who mocks at it all,
The handsome page speaking of love;
The admirer at the foot of the wall,
The admired, on the balcony above.

It's the butterfly, glowing white,
That flutters about, to and fro,

Pursuing its true love, in flight,
One on high, and the other low.

It's the angel who descends and ascends
The golden staircase, hovering in air,
The bell that, in its cast iron, blends
Brass and silver, twin voices, there.

It's the melody and the harmony,
The song and accompaniment,
Force united with grace, mutually,
The mistress and lover blent.

Seated midst the folds of her skirt,
It might be Cinderella, tonight,
Chattering to the cricket, alert
To the fire it's her duty to light.

Semiramide's Arsace, tomorrow,
To his great anger giving vent,
Or Tancred, breastplate all aglow,
Helm, and sword; filled with intent.

Desdemona, with her 'Willow, willow'
Verdi's Malcolm, plaid on show,
Zerlina mocking Masetto;
You I love, O contralto, so!

By nature, charming, bizarre,
And doubly attractive, moreover,
You who could, like Gulnare,
Be Kaled, to Maillart's Lara,

And whose voice, with its sweet caress,
Re-awaking the heart, will descend,
To mingle the sighs of the mistress
With the masculine tones of the friend.

Secret Affinities (*Affinités secrètes*)

(*A pantheist madrigal*)

On a temple pediment, raised on high,
Two blocks of ancient marble gleamed,
And, against the blue of an Attic sky,
Whitely juxtaposed, that pair dreamed;

Of the same frozen mother-of pearl,
As tears of the waves mourning Venus,
Two gems of nacre, hid from the world,
Uttered words unheard, as between us;

In the freshness the Generalife encloses,
Beneath a fountain that weeps forever,
In the days of King Boabdil, two roses,
Brought their petals, in speech, together;

On a dome in Venice, beside its shores,
Two white doves with rose-pink feet,
In the nest where eternal love endures
Posed in May, in a bliss complete;

Marble, and pearl, and rose, and dove,
All are dissolved, all fade in the night,
Pearls melt, marble falls from above,
Flowers wither, the birds take flight.

On leaving, each part of them is cast
Into the crucible, dark and profound,
Holding the substance of all that's past
Made of its forms once more unbound.

Through metamorphoses, sure but slow,
That white marble, as snow-white flesh,

The rose-pink flowers, as lips' warm glow,
In different bodies their selves refresh.

Those white doves coo in the hearts again
Of two young lovers; thereafter,
Those pearls pearl-like teeth maintain,
As a setting for charming laughter.

From those selves arose the sympathies,
Blessed with imperious sweetness,
By which souls, in their symmetries,
Know each other, and find completeness.

At the summons of a perfume, or
A light-ray, pure colour's power,
Atom flies to meet atom once more,
As the bee flies towards the flower.

They recall their reveries, it seems,
Brow to brow, or in depths below,
In flowery conversations, dreams,
By the fountain with its clear flow,

The cooing, the fluttering of wings,
On the dome with its golden vane;
The faithful molecules of things,
Seek each other, and love again.

Forgotten love wakes once more,
The vague past is again reborn;
The bloom on the lips we adore,
Feels a breath, no longer forlorn.

In the nacre, whence laughters flow,
The pearl sees its whiteness, bright,
The marble its freshness re-glow
In a young girl's flesh, in the light.

The dove recovers its gentle call,
Echo repeats its moan, as ever
Resistance fades, and, after all,
The stranger becomes the lover.

You, before whom I tremble and burn,
What wave, what pediment, what rose,
What dome knew us, what pearl, or urn,
Flower, marble, or dove: who knows?

Apollonia (Apollonie)

Apollonia, your name's sweet to me,
A Greek echo of Delphi's view,
Which, with its robust harmony,
Baptised, as Apollo's sister, you.

On the lyre, plucked by ivory,
Your splendid, sovereign name,
As fine as that of love, or glory,
Makes its brazen, resonant claim.

Classical, it sees nixies take flight
To the bed of their German lake.
Only the priestess, Pythia, might,
With dignity, be your namesake,

When, hoisting her ancient gear,
She sits on the tripod of gold,
Awaiting, in fateful pose, in fear,
The tardy god, as of old.

The Tea Rose (La rose-thé)

Surely, the most delicate rose
Is the tea-rose, of all we grow,

With buds, whose leaves half-close,
Barely tinged with a carmine glow.

A white rose in truth she might be,
That a butterfly has made blush,
When full of ardour, it made free,
And, against her, chose to brush.

Her diaphanous pink tissue,
From fleshy texture to velvety,
Makes every crimson hue,
Beside her, a thing of vulgarity.

As a sensitive pale complexion,
Contrasts with a sunburnt brow,
She renders rustic all the collection
Of warm colours her sisters avow;

Yet, if your hand that toys with her,
At the ball, to enhance her perfume,
To your cheek draws her closer,
Her brightness fades from the room.

For no pink is sufficiently lovely,
On the palette that Spring displays,
To pretend to match the beauty
Of seventeen years and three days.

Those lovely petals concede to you,
That the blush of your tender heart,
Which over your youth spreads its hue,
Must eclipse every rose, and my art.

The Fount (*La source*)



Stream Near Nevers (1902)
Henri-Joseph Harpignies (French, 1819-1916) - Artvee

A spring rises, close to the lake,
In a corner between two stones;
Happily choosing a path to take,
Towards far-off, unseen zones.

It murmurs: 'Oh what delight!
It was dark, there, underground!

Now my borders are green and bright,
In my mirror, the heavens are found.

The blue flowers of myosotis
Call out: "Forget-me-not!"
The wings of dragon-flies hiss
Above, as they dance on the spot.

The birds drink from my stream.
Who knows? With a few detours,
I may be a river and softly gleam
Wetting rocks, and piers, and oars.

I'll embroider with my foam,
Stone bridges, and granite quays,
And bear brave vessels, that roam,
To the Ocean's eternal seas.'

So, the fresh spring chatters away,
Dreaming its unknown future,
As all that it has to say
Overflows, like boiling water.

But the cradle touches the grave,
The harvest dies in the seed.
Scarcely-born, the fount, so brave,
Sinks to the lake it will feed.

Waking to the Charterhouse of Miraflores
(Burgos: *En allant à la Chartreuse*)

Yes, it's a long, and steep, and dusty climb.
True site for a charterhouse, a bony incline,
While the roadstones, crumbling under your feet,
Offer the unsupported nothing but sharp deceit.
Never a pleasant shade, never a blade of grass,
Only the drystone walls, between which we pass,

And illusory clumps of dull stunted olive-trees,
Their foliage tinted with ill-looking verdigris,
Slopes that no flower brightens, granite blocks,
And chalk ravines, littered with fallen rocks,
The heart's constricted there by sadness, too...
Yet at the top there's an unexpected view!
The fine cathedral, in the plain's blue deeps,
Where El Cid, by his Doña Jimena, sleeps.

The Fountain in the Cemetery (*La fontaine du cimetière*)



The Cemetery
Caspar David Friedrich (German, 1774-1840) - Artvee

By the bleak Charterhouse, between walls of stone,
Like some turfed-over moat, bare as a bone,
In those gardens, a cemetery may be found.
Oblivion hides the names, with grass overrun,
No mother would ever be able to find her son,
Lacking cross, or tombstone, or rising mound,

The cloister's sickly, straggling vegetation,
Alone can seed, and succeed, in such a station,
Midst the chilling damp, in the high walls shade.
No flower, that consoles the abandoned dead,
Would dare to raise on high, or bow, its head,
Beside the grave of the sleepers, there unmade.

In its midst, two cypress trees, twin dark jets,
Whose harsh profiles, melancholy silhouettes,
Towards the heavens yield long verdant sighs;
While over a miserly fountain's carved bowl,
A wavering curtain displays its fraying scroll
Of furtive tears, like those that border sad eyes.

Filtered through ancient monks sacred bones,
Its water flowing so brightly over its stones,
I neared the rim to drink from that clear glow...
But as I sipped from the frozen crystalline rill,
I felt my whole body seized by feverish chill,
And tasted death, there, in its diamantine flow!

The Human Caravan (*La caravane*)

In this world's Sahara, our human caravan
Goes stumbling past, burnt by the heat of day.
All here drink their own sweat, along the way,
On the trail of years that return not, nor can.

The mighty lion roars midst the wind's howl,

On the far horizon no minaret or tower,
The only shadow the vulture's, hour by hour,
Traversing the sky, seeking a prey now foul.

While ever advancing here, behold, we see,
Something green that we point to, joyfully,
A cypress grove scattered with white stones.

Like an oasis, its cemetery, meets the eye,
In Time's desert, a refuge for our bones;
Lie down, sleep here, O weary passer-by.

The Chimera (*La chimère*)

On the edge of my cup, a young chimera
Gave me the sweetest, orgiastic kiss.
She'd green eyes and, down to her posterior,
A torrent of red hair flowed, purest bliss.

At her shoulders, hawk's-wings quivered freely,
I jumped onto her back as she took to flight,
And, bending her willowy neck towards me,
I thrust my hand through her tresses bright.

Struggling, and screaming furiously, she cried
In vain, for I clapped my knees to each side.
Then she said, and with grace I'd have you know,
In a silvery voice: 'Master, where shall we go?'

'Bear me onwards,' I cried, 'far beyond the sun,
Through deepest space, godless for all eternity,
Though your wings may tire before we're done,
For I long to witness my dream become reality.'

Lament (*Lamento*)

Do you know of that white tomb
Where a yew-tree's dark shadow,
Makes plaintive sounds, below;
As the pale dove finds room,
Sad, alone, as the sun sinks low,
To utter her song of woe?

It's a morbid yet tender air,
At once fatal and full of charm
One that's certain to do you harm,
Yet you could listen to, there,
Forever, and never move,
A sigh of the angel of love.

One might think some soul in its plot,
Wept in unison, under the ground,
With that song, that heavenly sound,
At its sorrow in being forgot,
And joined its sigh, soft and faint,
To the dove's tender complaint.

One feels, on the wings of music,
A fond memory slowly returning,
There, in the shadows of evening,
As if some form, vague and angelic,
Passed, a trembling ray of light,
Its white veil presaging night.

The half-closed moonflowers yield
Their faint sweet scent; around you,
The perfume rising, midst the dew,
As phantoms rise from the field,
Stretch out their arms, and murmur,
'Will you return here, ever?'

Oh, I shall never return to the grave,
Where that evening light descends,
And heralds the darkness that lends
Its black cloak to the dove, or brave
The air that bears its plaintive call,
From that yew-tree, dark and tall!

Posthumous Coquetry (*Coquetterie posthume*)

When I'm dying, before my coffin's closed,
Add some rouge to my cheek, where I lie,
Upon my deathbed, neatly posed;
Line with black the border of my eye.

For I wish, when the lid is replaced,
To rest in eternal pink and rose,
With kohl, my eyes of azure graced,
As the eve of my confession glows.

Don't wrap me up in a linen shroud,
But drape me in folds of purest white
With my muslin robe, if that's allowed,
And its thirteen ruffles, soft and light.

It's my favourite piece of finery,
I wore it when I wept for her, then.
Her glance made it sacred to me;
And so, I've never worn it again.

Lay me down, without 'immortal' flowers,
Or a cushion, some embroidered affair,
But on my lace pillow, safe from showers,
Inundated by my long flowing hair.

That pillow, in nights of folly, saw
Our brows close together in sleep,
And, in a gondola far from shore,

A count of our kisses sought to keep.

Between my hands, waxen and pale,
That you'll find reunited in prayer,
Set the opal rosary, without fail,
The Pope blessed, in Rome's sunlit air.

I will count its beads, on the bed
From which none arise, and pray,
Her lips informing all that's said
Of each Paternoster, each Ave.

A Fine Evening (*La bonne soirée*)



The Opera Ball (1866)
Eugène Giraud (French, 1806-1881) - Artvee

What wretched weather! – It rains, it snows.
The frozen coachman sports a blue nose,
Stuck to his seat,
On this vile evening, in late December,
When it's better to glow like an ember,
And toast one's feet!

In that corner, facing the chimney breast,
The cosy fireside chair would seem best,
Offering its arms,
Saying: 'Stay!' with its warm caress,
Like a dear mistress, in sweet undress,
With all her charms.

The milky globe of the lamp, in place,
Like a white breast beneath heavy lace,
Appears half-veiled
By a rose-pink cutout, whose silhouette,
Appears on the ceiling, a shadowy net,
By slumber trailed.

In the silence nothing strikes the ear
But the clock's pendulum, far or near,
A disk of gold,
And the wind outside, its sigh or roar,
Entering through a crack in the door,
Wickedly bold.

There's a ball at the British Embassy,
My black jacket, arms hanging free,
Adorns the chair,
My white waistcoat is yawning wide,
And my wrists my shirt's ready to hide,
For that affair.

My lace-up boots with their narrow toes,
Display their varnish that gleams and glows,

Beside the fire,
And not far away from a slender cravat,
Like the palms of my hands laid out flat,
My gloves perspire.

One must leave! – What a dreadful bind!
To stand in line, and then follow behind,
While keeping pace,
With some proud beauty and all her charms,
Whose carriage displays her coat-of-arms,
Much like her face;

Resting one's back, then, against a door,
To watch the cohort who take to the floor,
The precious guests:
The old muzzles, and fresh young faces,
Tailcoats, corsages taking their places
With naked chests,

Bare backs, where blooms the odd pustule,
Rouged skin concealed by plenty of tulle
Taking the air,
Amidst many a dandy and diplomat,
Proclaiming they have, their expressions flat,
Nothing to share.

And unable to navigate the maze,
Of dowagers, with their hawk-eyed gaze,
Their vulture's stare,
So I may whisper in her perfumed hair,
And little, pearly, rose-tinted ear, there,
Words of despair.

I'll not go! No, not even to slip a note
Into her bouquet, from under my coat,
At the Opera!
Let those violets of the Duchess of Parma,

But lighten the mood of my dear charmer,
I'll receive her!

Here, I've Heine's *Lyrisches Intermezzo*,
Taine's *Thomas Graindorge*, there, below,
Les frères Goncourt;
The hours, then, till my pillow brings,
Dreamlike ideas of heavenly things,
Will seem but short.

The Flower That Makes The Spring (*La fleur qui fait le printemps*)

On the terrace the tall chestnut-trees,
In Saint-Jean, will soon be in flower,
At the villa, from which a clear eye sees
Many a blue peak's silvery tower.

The leaves, all still folded yesterday
In narrow wintry corsets, concealed,
Now, on boughs blown every way,
The first trace of green, have revealed.

But in vain the spring sun tries to rouse
The sap of their tardy branches; there,
The blooms hesitate to make their bows,
And show their white thyrses to the air.

Yet the peach tree declares its rose-pink,
Like a blush conquering modesty,
And the apple-tree, that of dew did drink,
Extends its whiteness for all to see.

Speedwell ventures to meet the eye
By the golden buttercups in the field.
Nature's caress from the azure sky,
Hastens them on, and fosters the yield.

And yet I must return, once more,
To the circle of Hell I inhabit.
Chestnut-trees hasten to bloom; be sure
To dazzle my eyes, without limit.

You can bring your candles forth
For the Easter fete, free of peril;
Blue skies shine, the wind from the north
Has dropped, and May follows April.

In your mercy, deliver a little joy
To the poet, consumed by sorrow,
And your flowery fireworks employ,
Before he must leave you, tomorrow.

From your terrace, tall chestnut-trees,
So proud of your summer splendour,
Show me those charms, if you please,
That precede your lovely surrender.

I know your rich livery displayed,
When October begins to unfold,
That in purple tunics sees you arrayed,
And endows you with crowns of gold.

I have viewed your branches, all white,
Like designs wrought out of silver,
Traced by the frost, in the night,
Stained-glass, with its little-finger.

I know every single aspect of you,
Old chestnut-trees, giants of the air,
But I must neglect your buds, in view,
And the scent of spring that you share.

Farewell, I weary of waiting to leave;
Guard well each vibrant bouquet!

Another sweet, tender flower, I believe,
Is what makes this Spring; so, let May

Gather her own fair basket of flowers!
One alone is sufficient for me,
Her sweetness at heart, in honeyed hours,
Feeds both my soul, and the bee.

Beneath skies of mist, of azure or gold,
She smiles, charms, spreads her perfume,
Whether the season is warm or cold,
The sweet violet, there, in my room.

The Little Pink Flower (*La petite fleur rose*)

When the summit you attain,
Near to Guadarrama,
You discover all of Spain
As a boundless panorama,

The horizon without end,
And the grave Escorial;
Its gloomy dome, my friend,
Its ennui black and royal.

Through a layer of white cotton,
In the foggy depths, we see,
Madrid, a bright spot on
Mists that seem illusory.

The mountain is so high
That its wall of granite,
Hears only the eagle's cry,
That nests there upon it.

In pale winter it shows
A peak glittering bright,

Silvered by the snows,
Like the aged and white.

I adore its pure crest,
Even when its warm,
With chill lace blessed,
Still bordering its form;

And the cloud sublime
Like a turban for it all,
Keeping stormy company,
With the rain's sharp fall;

And the pines that lean
Over roots that tear
At each deep ravine,
By the roadside, bare;

And the diamantine flow,
Of streams in the grass,
That name the stones below,
In a whisper, as they pass;

But I love, beneath the tower
Of granite, at its peak,
The little pink flower,
That my eye must seek!

The Oleander (*Le Laurier de Generalife*)

In the Generalife, there's an oleander
Happy as love, and bright as victory.
Its nearest neighbour, a jet of water,
Bedews with pearls its every flower,
By day its leaves smile for all to see.

It blushes like a girl against the blue.

Its living flowers possess a fleshly tone.
Seeing it beneath the spray, its hue
Is of an odalisque, naked to the view,
Wet-haired, beside a basin of stone.

I loved it with a love unparalleled,
Each evening, I rested there, in bliss,
Touched my lips to the flower that I held,
Moist and crimson, and a sigh expelled,
And felt, oh wonder, it returned my kiss!

The Pot of Flowers (*Le pot de fleurs*)

A child may find a seed that has lain
Unnoticed; charmed by its every hue,
He plants it in a pot made of porcelain,
Glazed with flowers, dragons in blue.

He leaves it there; and a snake-like root
Emerges, a stalk, shrub, flower, apace,
Each day extending its first hairy shoot
Deeper, while bursting its swollen case.

He then returns, to find, midst the debris,
Of broken pot, bright green daggers there;
Pulls the stem, resistant now to adversity,
And bloodies his fingers, in his despair.

Likewise, love surprised my soul and grew
A flower, I thought, of Spring, free of spines,
But found an aloe, whose root broke in two
My pot of porcelain, with its bright designs.

The Spectre of the Rose (*Le spectre de la rose*)

Your eyelids, now unclose,
Touched by a virginal dream.

I am the spectre of the rose,
You wore to the ball; a stream

Of water-drops bedewed me
When you culled me yesterday,
Silver tears; through the party,
Starry-eyed, we made our way.

You, who caused me to wither,
Who could not make me stay,
All night my rose-pink spectre
Will dance by your bed, till day.

No '*De Profundis*' is my goal,
Nor the Mass; fear no surprise.
That slight perfume is my soul;
For I come from Paradise.

The Doves (*Les colombes*)

There on the hillside, there, where the tombs are,
A lovely palm-tree, like a bright plume of green,
Lifts its head, where at evening, the doves from afar
Seeking shelter, return to the nests where they preen.

But at dawn they will leave the branches once more.
Like the beads on a necklace we'll see them scatter,
Dressed in all their pure whiteness, into the azure.
To land on some roof in the distance, they'll flutter.

My soul is a tree where like them, every evening,
White swarms of mad visions descend from the sky,
Beating their wings, now fluttering, now flapping,
Until those first rays of the dawn, when they'll fly.

Blue Eyes of the Mountain (*Les yeux bleus de la montagne*)

In the mountains we find lakes, a few yards wide,
Blue as turquoise, crystalline pure, side to side,
Jewels, from the hand of the Angel Ithuriel,
Where fearful chamois, that seek to drink there,
May imagine, deceived by the passage of air,
That they lap the sky's azure well.

Those limpid basins, reflecting the daylight,
Possessing an apple's gleam, moist and bright,
Are the blue eyes, both gentle and calm,
With which the mountains, lost in ecstasy,
Consider the deity, deep in his sanctuary,
The jealous maker, wielding his arm.

The Escorial (*L'Escorial*)

At the foot of a mountain, posed in defiance,
One sees, in drab countryside, at a distance,
The sombre Escorial, three hundred feet high,
Lifting a dome, all deformed, on its shoulder,
Much like to a monstrous elephant's howdah,
The Spanish Tiberius' granite gift to the sky.

No great Pharaoh e'er furnished a darker crypt,
In the side of a hill, for his mummy, in Egypt,
No Sphinx in the desert e'er felt greater ennui.
On the summits of chimneys, the storks fall asleep,
The abandoned courtyards, green silence keep.
Monks, priests, soldiers, courtiers, gone we see!

All would seem dead, were it not that from cornices,
Kings' sculpted hands, and pediments, and niches,
With their charming cries, in all their wild gaiety,
Swarms of swallows emerge, to take to the skies,
And, with blows of their wings, seek to surprise

The sleeping giant from his dreams of eternity! ...

The Egyptian Girl (*La Fellah*)



The fellah lady
Charles Landelle (French, 1821 - 1908) - Artvee

Your masked sphinx of a peasant girl,
A caprice of a whimsical painter,
To the passions proposes a riddle,
With a work of imperial leisure.

For, in the most austere fashion,
That mask, and her long robe,
She intrigues by her mystery,
Every Oedipus in the salon.

Isis bequeathed her ancient veil
To the modern daughters of Nile,
Yet, beneath that covering, two stars
Shine purely, with subtle fire.

Those eyes, a poem, wholly,
Of voluptuousness and languor,
Speak, and resolve the enigma:
'Be love, if you will, I am beauty.'

Note: Compare the painting Une Fellah (1861) by Mathilde Bonaparte.

The Hippopotamus (L'hippopotame)

The big-bellied hippopotamus
Inhabits the jungles of Java,
Where in the depths of each lair, cuss
More monsters than haunt the dreamer.

The boa uncoils and hisses,
The tiger gives out its roars,
The angry buffalo whistles;
He grazes at peace or snores.

He fears nor kris nor assegai,
He gazes at man, with no cares at all,
And smiles at the sepoy's musket-ball,
That merely rebounds from his hide.

I'm like the hippopotamus;
Clothed with my convictions' weight,

Strong armour none can penetrate,
I tread, secure, the wilderness.

Symphony in White Major (*Symphonie en blanc majeur*)

Imagining their white necks, the curving line,
In those tales of the northern lands, one reads,
Of those swan-women, floating midst the Rhine,
Singing, and swimming, amongst green reeds,

Or, towards some branch, arching higher,
So that the feathers that cover them so,
Render their elegant forms still whiter
Than the white of their down's pure snow.

Among all those women, there's one
Who sometimes descends amongst us,
White as the light of the moon, upon
Glaciers, cold as clouds, and perilous,

Inviting our gaze, caught in the mesh
Of a boreal freshness and brightness,
To regale herself amidst pearly flesh,
In debaucheries of true whiteness.

Her breast, a carved mass of snow,
Sustains an insolent battle between
The white of the satin dress below,
And, above, the white camellias' sheen.

In such contests of white with white,
Flowers and satin are bound to lose,
And unable to take revenge outright,
Turn yellow, when jealousy ensues.

Over the whiteness of her shoulder,
Parian stone with its dazzling grain,

Like a polar night, on some boulder,
An invisible coating of frost is lain.

From what virgin snowfall's mica,
From what inner pith of the reed,
From what candle or sacred wafer,
Was the white of her flesh decreed?

From a drop of milk, in that hour,
Blotting the wintry azure sky,
The silvery pulp of a lily-flower,
Or white foam rising on high?

From pale and cold white marble,
Where deities dwell it seems,
Matt silver, or milky opal,
Where a vague brightness gleams?

From ivory, where her hands take wing,
And over the fragile keys below
Like white butterflies, fluttering,
Suspend their kisses' trembling flow?

From the ermine's virgin purity
That clothes the shoulders' shivering,
And the blazons of the nobility,
With the white of its furry covering?

From fanciful flowers, quicksilvering's trace,
That stained glass-windows bear;
From the fountain bowl's white lace,
An undines' tears, frozen in air?

From May's hawthorns bending heavily
Beneath their frosty floweriness;
Alabaster in which melancholy
Delights in recovering its paleness?

From the white down of the dove,
Snowing the roof of the mansion,
Or the stalactites hanging above,
White tears of the dark cavern?

In Greenland perhaps she arose,
Or Norway with Balzac's Séraphîta?
Is she the Madonna of the Snows,
A white Sphinx sculpted by winter?

A Sphinx that the avalanche buried,
The glacier's guard on starry nights,
One who beneath her white breast hid
A secret cache of pure frozen whites?

Beneath the snow, where it rests alone,
Who can melt that heart's cold brightness!
Oh, who can add a warm rose-pink tone
To that chilled, implacable whiteness!

The Carnival at Venice (*Sur le Carnaval de Venise: III*)

Venice is dressed for the ball,
Starry with glitter, they vie,
Sparkling, pushing, babbling, all;
The Carnival passes by.

Harlequin, masked in black,
Serpente, in many a colour,
Whimsical Rosso at her back,
His scapegoat Cassandra.

His sleeve like a beating wing,
That of a penguin on shore,
White Pierrot, through that thing,
Pokes his head, and winks once more.

The Bolognese Doctor echoes
The bass with its deeper sound,
Pulcinella, a hook for a nose,
Grows angry with all around.

Striking Trivelino, his man,
Who's blowing his nose just fine,
Scaramouche renders a fan,
Or a glove, to Columbine.

A domino, slipping by,
A single sly glance now throws,
From behind his mask, where an eye,
Neath a black satin eyelid, shows.

Ah! A beard of fine lace I see,
That a pure breath raises on high,
That arpeggio told me: 'Tis she!'
Despite all that lace for the eye.

For I recognised pink and white,
Beneath that cardboard, within,
Lips, their peachy down, in sight,
And the beauty-spot on her chin.



Carnival in Venice
Lucien Simon (French, 1861 – 1945) - Artvee

Carmen

Carmen is lean – a trace of yellow
Shadows her gipsy eye.
Her hair is a sinister black,
Her skin, tanned by the devil.

Women claim she's ugly,
But for her the men go mad:
The Archbishop of Toledo
Kneels at her feet to say Mass;

For above her amber nape
Is coiled a large chignon
That, in her room, undone
Yields her body a cape.

And gleams, through the pallor,
A mouth with a conquering smile,
Red chilli, a scarlet flower
Heart's-blood endows with fire.

So formed, the swarthy one
Outdoes nobler beauty,
And with her eyes that burn
Revives satiety.

She has, in her hot ugliness,
A salt-grain of that sea
From whose bitter gulf acrid Venus
Rose naked, provocatively.

Seguidilla (Séquidille)

Petticoat tight on the haunches beneath,
A huge comb in her head of hair,
Quivering leg, a pretty foot, there,

Fiery eyes, pale face, and white teeth,
Alza! Olà!
Behold
The true manola.

Bold gestures, sharp tongue in her face,
Scattering joy and sorrow,
Without a care for the morrow,
Fantastical love and wild grace.
Alza! Olà!
Behold
The true manola.

Singing, dancing, with castanets.
Judging each pass, fast or slow,
At the bullfight, by each torero,
While smoking her cigarettes,
Alza! Olà!
Behold
The true manola.

Serenade (*Sérénade*)

I would make the climb to that balcony,
Over which you lean... but, oh, its demands!
It's far too high, and then, your white hands
My outstretched arms could scarcely attain.

To deceive that wretched duenna of yours,
Let down your necklace, a ribbon of gold,
Or the strings of your guitar, or unfold,
A ladder you've woven, or, for our cause...

Doff your flowers, and undo your comb,
Let your long tresses of hair hang down,
A jet-black torrent poured to the ground,
Drenching your legs and heels with foam.

Aided by that strange means of ascent,
Lightly I'll climb to the heavens above,
Though lacking an angel's pure intent,
Mounting, amidst the perfume of love!

The Moon (*La Lune*)

The Sun said to the Moon:
'What are you doing there?
It's too late, or too soon,
For you to rise in the air!

Honest women, who keep
This hour, count their rosaries,
Settle a crying child to sleep,
Close the shutters, by degrees,

Will-o'-the-wisps haunt the night,
Gypsies, and bats are roaming,
Until their prey comes in sight;
All cats are grey in the gloaming.

Those equivocal planets rising,
The libertine stars of the dark,
Finding your light arousing,
Follow your clandestine arc.

One catches cold at eve, it's said.
Up above the lake's chilly water,
Do you take the mist for a feather-bed,
And the surface for your mirror?

Come, say!' – 'On earth, or in the sky,
I take refuge in many a place, alone,
My dear brother, while you, on high,
Adopt that relentless enquiring tone.'

The Old Guard (*Vieux de la vieille*)

15th December

Driven from my room by ennui,
I wandered the street, once again,
The December weather wintry,
A cold mist, wind and light rain.

There I saw a curious spectacle,
Emerge from the depths of night,
In the mud, beneath the drizzle,
Spectres passed in broad daylight.

To be sure, at night, ghosts return
By the light of a German moon,
A sight not uncommon, we learn,
To ruined towers, and commune;

At night, the bold sprites emerge,
The hems of their dresses wet,
And the weary waltzer submerge,
Neath the lilies; he's there as yet.

And at night, there's that review,
In the ballad penned by Zedlitz,
Where the Emperor's shade anew
Counts the shades of Austerlitz.

But with the Gymnasium nearby,
A stone's throw from the Variétés,
Wet and muddy spectres to eye,
Without veils of mist in the way!

Their teeth yellow with tartar,
Craniums green with moss,

On the Boulevard Montmartre,
At noon, puts one at a loss!

It was well worth seeing, that sight,
Three phantoms, three Old Guards,
In ancient uniforms, medals bright,
And the shades of a pair of Hussars!

The scene, full of martial pride,
Seemed a lithograph, drawn by the sun,
Where the dead, Raffert deified,
Stepped by, shouting: 'Napoleon!'

Yet they were not ghosts, all scarred,
That nocturnal drumbeats raise,
But the oldest of the Old Guard,
Still saluting the Hundred Days.

Since that battle, at Waterloo,
They had lost, or gained in, weight,
The clothes, that fitted when new,
Too large or small for their fate.

Noble ruins, those epic remains,
Sacred tatters, starred by a cross,
Heroic, ridiculous, dark with stains,
Yet more regal than royal dross!

Plumes quivered, pinned to the bold
Busbies, still tawny and furred,
But moths, not merely bullets, had holed
Those jackets, now deemed absurd.

Leather trousers, a size too large
Hung in folds about legs too small;
Those rusty sabres, a heavy charge,
Dug the ground, or furrowed the wall;

A belly grotesquely overweight,
Buttoned up, with many a scare,
Expanded, in laughable state,
The hero of some grand affair.

Don't mock at such, my dear lad,
Hats off, in salute; there displayed
Is an Achilles, from an Iliad
That Homer could never have made.

Show respect to each hoary head!
On a brow bronzed by foreign skies,
Trace those deep furrows instead,
Dug by age, that the flesh defies,

That skin turned black by the blows
Dealt by Egypt's burning suns;
View the hair by the Russian snows
Blanched white, not fear of the guns.

If their hands are shaking, no doubt
It's from the Berezina's chill bed;
If they limp, the road winds about
From far Vilna to Cairo, it's said.

If one soldier's neck's bare, in war
The flag was his clothing; no harm
If a sleeve is pinned up, before;
A cannonball severed his arm.

Let us cease to mock, so coarsely,
At those men, the urchins' delight,
For they were the day, of which we
Are the evening, or merely the night.

What we forget, they remember! In sum,

Grenadiers in blue, lancers in red,
To the foot of his column, they come,
To their god's only altar, undead.

There, taking pride in their suffering,
Grateful, for all they had to endure,
They feel France's heart yet beating
Beneath the tattered garb we deplore.

And tears must temper our laughter,
With that sacred procession in view,
Like a masquerade of empire, after
Some morning-ball, treading the dew,

While the eagle of the Grand Army,
Soars aloft, to cloak them, on high,
From the depths of that fiery glory,
With its golden wings, ere they die!

Sunset (Soleil Couchant)



Sunset (ca. 1850)
Eugène Delacroix (French, 1798-1863) - Artvee

Crossing the Pont de la Tournelle, one evening,
I stopped, for a moment, as the sun was setting.
Behind Notre-Dame it sank to rest, that same,
A lovely cloud across the horizon all aflame,
Much like an enormous bird, now taking flight
Across the heavens, on golden wings of light,
Of a brightness that dazzles the eyes for hours.
Stonework like lace, adorning the lofty towers,
The flag the wind whips, all the spires, on high,
Ascending, like forest-firs, towards the sky,
Carved gables, the angelic forms in their places,
With stiff, elongated bodies, and strange faces,
Showed, black silhouettes on a glowing field,

All the archbishopric, below, as yet revealed,
Like an infant at its mother's feet, the shadow
Mysterious, sombre, slowly deepening below,
Distant roof-tiles illumined by a shaft of red,
Of a house on the quay – the soft air overhead,
The river murmuring about the bridge's piers,
The old city's waves cradling the passing years,
And I gazing on, silently, and not thinking
Of the starry night that was fast approaching.

A Soul (*Une âme*)

It was a new-born, a Creole, soul, unfurled,
All aflame, hidden from this frivolous world,
That made the poet: longing's restlessness,
Desire for glorious flight, pleasure's excess.
One that might love as an angel could love,
Yet found only souls of mud at every move;
Scarce understood, oft wounded to the core,
But not daring to complain, a soul unsure,
Traversing this life, yet lacking consolation,
Enslaved by the flesh, its every limitation,
An unfortunate vessel that the sun in flight
Failed to gild with its golden kiss of light,
A sad toy of wind and wave, lost to the sea,
Consigned to oblivion, by fatal necessity,
To a vague, failed existence here below,
Feeling the bitter pain of each fresh blow,
In a body wasted with grief, and ever frail,
Like an ear of corn beneath wind and hail;
If only there were faith... or hope... but no,
None, and God was merely a word, and so,
For an ulcerated soul...the graveyard at last,
A sombre, grey autumn evening, overcast,
A coffin, and one more being gone from here,
Its absence unnoticed, and none to shed a tear.

The Castle of Memory (*Le Château de Souvenir*)

Foot on the hearth, hand on brow,
I dream of returning, silently,
Beyond a past misted now,
To the ruined Castle of Memory.

A tangled veil of mist wreathes
Farm and tree, hill and plain;
Each crossroad my eye deceives,
Consulting the signposts in vain.

Through the rubble, I now advance,
Of a world that's buried entire,
In dark and mysterious distance;
Through Limbo, oblivion's mire.

Yet here, diaphanous and white,
Memory, who sits by the road,
On me, as some Ariadne might,
A clue of thread has bestowed.

From here the way is more certain,
For the shrouded sun reappears,
Lights the castle's defensive curtain;
O'er the forest, its high tower rears.

Beneath the boughs where day fades,
Where leaf upon leaf is falling;
The old path, through mossy glades,
A faint narrow ribbon, is calling.

But the thorny briars interlace,
A vine extends a long arm,
And the branches that I displace,
Return on me, seeking my harm.

At last, at the edge of the clearing
I discover the ancient domain,
Its pepper-pot turrets rearing,
With their witch's-cap roofs plain,

No smoking chimney marks a belated
Furrow of smoke on the sky,
Not a single pane is illuminated
By some candle's light passing by.

The chains of the bridge are broken,
Dense pond-weed covers the moat,
Spreading its melancholy curtain
Of verdigris; dying leaves float.

Tortuous ivies, clinging there, lour;
They penetrate cracks in the wall,
And repay the hospitable tower,
That supports them, by smothering all.

The gateway yawns at the moon,
Time sculpts it, after a fashion;
Rain plays its monotonous tune,
On my coat-of-arms, in derision.

Deeply moved, I push at the doors;
They groan on their hinges and yield.
A musty smell from the cellars pours
Their chill depths scarcely concealed.

The stinging nettles, the burdocks
With their broad-leaved contours,
Flourish, beneath the hemlocks;
In corners, ferns spread their spores.

On the twin marble chimeras
Guarding the damp green stair,

A tree's shadow now quivers,
One born, in my absence, there.

They loom, their haunches bare,
While showing their lions' claws;
They gaze with a questioning air,
But my secret word gives them pause.

The old hound, raising his head
When I pass, falls asleep once more,
As the sound of my heavy tread,
Echoes onward from floor to floor...

Art (*L'art*)

Yes, finer work emerges
From form that resists,
 Our urges,
Marble, verse, onyx.

Not falsely to constrain!
But to walk straight, Muse,
 Maintain,
Tight-fitting tragic shoes.

Shame on the idle rhythm,
A size or more too large,
 All don
Sliding it off and on!

Sculptor, forever shun
Clay moulded there
 By the thumb
When the mind's elsewhere;

Wrestle with Carrara,
With Parian marble rare,

And hard,
Keep the outline clear;

From Syracuse borrow
Bronze which the proud
Furrow
Has charmingly endowed;

With a delicate hand,
The vein of agate, follow;
Command
The profile of Apollo.

Fix the water-colour,
Too fragile tints that run,
Painter,
In the enameller's oven;

Make Sirens, blue
Tails writhing free;
For you,
Monsters of heraldry;

And with triple halo
The Virgin, her Jesus,
The globe
With the Cross above.

All dies. – Only robust
Art shares eternity:
The bust
Will outlive the city;

And the austere medal
Found by a labourer
Recall
From earth, an Emperor.

Even the gods pass.
But stronger again
 Than brass
Sovereign lines remain.

Chisel, file, and ream
That you may lock
 Vague dream
In the resistant block!

Farewell to Poetry (*Adieux à la poésie*)

Shed your white robe, your golden rays depose;
Come, fallen angel, fold your rose-pink wings.
From heavenly heights, soaring above all things,
You must, like a shooting star, descend to prose.

Your birdlike feet, now, must rest upon the ground,
And walk, not fly; it's no time for flight, your art,
Your treasures of harmony, seal within your heart,
Unstring your harp, let it rest, and cease to sound,

Oh, poor child of heaven, you would sing in vain.
It's as if your sacred language they never knew.
To your sweetest chords their ears are closed again.

But before you leave, my blue-eyed angel, now,
Go seek my pale beloved; her presence, attain;
And place a kiss of farewell, from me, on her brow.

Index of First Lines

Your aspect is singular, full of charm,
To vein her brow's pallor, so delicate,
In my heart, with never a veil in sight,
A bird on the branch whistles, madly;

Beyond the tiles which are facing me,
A cloud shows on the horizon,
In the Museum, there on view,
On a temple pediment, raised on high,
Apollonia, your name's sweet to me,
Surely, the most delicate rose
A spring rises, close to the lake,
Yes, it's a long, and steep, and dusty climb.
By the bleak Charterhouse, between walls of stone,
In this world's Sahara, our human caravan
On the edge of my cup, a young chimera
Do you know of that white tomb
When I'm dying, before my coffin's closed,
What wretched weather! – It rains, it snows.
On the terrace the tall chestnut-trees,
When the summit you attain,
In the Generalife, there's an oleander
A child may find a seed that has lain
Your eyelids, now unclose,
There on the hillside, there, where the tombs are,
In the mountains we find lakes, a few yards wide,
At the foot of a mountain, posed in defiance,
Your masked sphinx of a peasant girl,
The big-bellied hippopotamus
Imagining their white necks, the curving line,
Venice is dressed for the ball,
Carmen is lean – a trace of yellow
Petticoat tight on the haunches beneath,
I would make the climb to that balcony,
The Sun said to the Moon:
Driven from my room by ennui,
Crossing the Pont de la Tournelle, one evening,
It was a new-born, a Creole, soul, unfurled,
Foot on the hearth, hand on brow,
Yes, finer work emerges
Shed your white robe, your golden rays depose;