Symbolists & Décadents
Revolutionary French Poets of La Belle Époque

Mallarmé, Verlaine et Rimbaud

(The following is the text with illustrations presented by Bob Hay to a class conducted by Theresa Rogers in French Literature at University of the Third Age, Canberra 2005 — word count =6125).
More than 50 years ago, as a disillusioned 17-year-old Uni student, I walked out of my French class and took up philosophy instead. The only thing I remember from those unhappy weeks was the first two lines of one of the poems we studied in that final class. Those lines go something like this — if you will pardon my French…

*Le ciel est, par-dessus le toit*
*Si bleu, si calm!*

“Le ciel est par-dessus le toit….” is a prison poem and the patch of blue is the only bit of the “outside” which the poet, Paul Verlaine could see from his cell window. In the past half-century, this “patch of blue” has become a symbol for me too, but not so much of freedom from physical confinement, but more from the psychological constraints we place upon ourselves in our daily lives. Over the years I also have used this “patch of blue” in my own writing, a couple of times when talking about “coming out” in the Gay Liberation context and most recently, not long after my mother died, in another essay where I examined the strange double-edged sword the death of a loved-one can sometimes be.

Decadence & Symbolism

Two groups of poets flourished in the mid-Nineteenth century, the Romantics and the Realists. In the Romantics’ corner were, among others, Victor Hugo, Alphonse de Lamartine, and Alfred de Vigny. In the opposite, Realist corner were, *inter alia*, Gustave Flaubert, Honoré de Balzac, and Émile Zola. At that time, poetry was not
fashionable among the French who preferred plays, the novel and short stories.

Then, in the 1860s a new generation of poets emerged who called themselves Le Parnasse (after Mont Parnasse, the home of the muses in Greek mythology). Compared to the Romantics, the Parnassians preferred a more impersonal kind of poetry (that is, the poet did not insert himself into the poem), and a more objective description of their subjects. Compared to the Realists, the Parnassians elevated formal beauty above realism, advocating art for art’s sake. Because there were few opportunities for publication, the Parnassians started their own magazine, Le Parnasse Contemporain. In the three volumes which appeared between 1866-1876, ninety-nine authors all-told were published, among them, Théophile Gautier, Leconte de Lisle, and Charles Baudelaire, and the as-yet unknown Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Verlaine and the teen-age Arthur Rimbaud.

However, it soon became clear that although published in Le Parnasse Contemporain, some of the poets were inspired by a different Muse. So, in the mid-60s several younger poets was already using sound and rhythm much more experimentally than their older colleagues. Inevitably, by the 1880s, much of this younger generation had broken away, forming a rather loose coalition which became known as “Les Décadents”, the Decadents.

In its wider sense, Decadence has its origins in ancient and Medieval notions that societies inevitably weaken and decay. In its narrowest sense, “The Decadents” was a term applied to the group of French poets whose leaders were Mallarmé, Verlaine and Rimbaud. The term was originally coined by hostile critics, probably quoting from Verlaine’s “Je suis l'Empire à la fin de la décadence,” published in 1883 but
which was taken up in 1886 and used defiantly as the title of a review, *Le Décadent*. The group became known for their interest in things morbid, perverse and bizarre, for their hyper-aesthetic temperaments and, at least in some cases, for their freedom of morals and often sensational, even scandalous behavior. In their writings, they placed emphasis upon creative self-expression while at the same time, still proudly carrying the Parnassian banner of “art for Art's sake”.

The Decadents formed themselves into various informal literary clubs which met in cafes and other establishments. Of these, the best-known was probably the Zutistes who met at a cabaret called “*Le Chat Noir*”, over on the Right Bank, and who, in time even published their own magazine of the same name. The Hydropathes, the most enduring of the many clubs, met on the Left Bank. Not surprisingly, two factions gradually formed within the Decadence movement which were identified by their place of meeting. Most of the people attending these clubs were middle-class men and a few women ¹ whose humdrum daily lives were spiced up by their evenings discussing poetry and drinking absinthe.

In the mid-80s after he had moved back to Paris, Mallarmé began to hold meetings at his home in the Rue de Rome and these proved so popular that what had been the Right Bank mob moved up-market, promoted as it were from Bohemian cafe to fashionable Salon.

¹ Sarah Bernhardt, the actress, attended the Hydropathes.
Then, on 11 August 1885, a Greek-born poet writing in French under the name of Jean Moréas (1856 – 1910) but who had been born Iannis Papadiamontopolos, proposed that this group of poets should be called “symbolists” rather than “decadents” because — as he thought — these poets were universally seeking the “eternal Symbol”. On 18 September 1886 Moréas published ‘Le Symbolisme’ which was immediately seized upon as the definitive “Symbolist manifesto”. He announced that Symbolism was hostile to “plain meanings, declamations, false sentimentality and matter-of-fact description,” and that its goal instead was to “clothe the Ideal in a perceptible form”.

It was at this time too that another character made her appearance centre-stage. This was La Fée Vert, the Green Fairy or the 168% proof Absinthe. Born in the previous century in Switzerland, she flourished throughout the Nineteenth and into the early Twentieth Centuries. Absinthe is flavoured with wormwood and so contains a substance called Thujone which is similar in action to THC, the active ingredient of cannabis. The Green Fairy inspired many but helped to destroy some of her most ardent devotees, Verlaine among them.

This “Decadent” movement now re-born as the Symbolists had its roots in Les Fleurs du Mal (The Flowers of Evil) by Charles Baudelaire but it was developed and given its most precise expression by Stéphane Mallarmé and Paul Verlaine. A third, the teen-ager Arthur Rimbaud, expanded upon their work and gave poetry directions which are still pertinent today, but he himself had long since given up writing and was living abroad when Symbolism was born.
Stéphan Mallarmé

The scholar George Steiner \(^2\) said of Mallarmé that he

“…..stretched the power of verbal expression beyond normal usage so far that he instituted a quantum leap, a whole new universe of modern literary reality.”

Stéphan Mallarmé was born in Paris in 1842. From the age of 22 until his retirement in 1893, he taught English, first in Tournon, Besançon and Avignon before finally returning to Paris in the mid-1880s where, every Tuesday night in his apartment on the rue de Rome, he held court as the most prominent guru of the contemporary art scene. The courtiers in attendance, many drawn from the Right Bank cafés, were collectively known as Les Mardists (from Mardi, naturally), and included the cream of Parisian intellectual life, among them W.B. Yeats, Rainer Maria Rilke, Paul Valéry, André Gide, Stefan George, Paul Verlaine, and a host of painters and musicians.

Like both Verlaine and Rimbaud, Mallarmé began writing poetry at an early age and fully acknowledge that he had been powerfully influenced by Charles Baudelaire. His first poems appeared in magazines in the 1860s with his most famous poem, L’Après Midi D’un Faun (The Afternoon of a Faun), published in 1865. The influence of what is generally regarded as his masterwork, the highly innovative Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard (‘A roll of the dice will never abolish chance’), published almost at the end of his life, 1897, has rippled down the years, affecting even the Beat Generation of our youth.

In an introduction to the 1951 edition of Roger Fry’s translations of Mallarmé’s poems, the publishers (“New Directions”) wrote that:

According to his (Mallarmé) theories, nothing lies beyond reality, but within this nothingness lies the essence of perfect forms and it is the task of the poet to reveal and crystallize these essences. Each poem is built around a central symbol, idea, or metaphor and consists in subordinate images that illustrate and help to develop the idea.

Mallarmé believed that the point of a poem was the beauty of the language and to this end, he spent years writing and polishing each poem and searching dictionaries for archaic words he himself found beautiful but which, for many readers, rendered much of his work so obscure that his poetry did not win popular acclaim during his lifetime — he died in Paris on September 9, 1898.

Many consider Mallarmé’s work the most difficult of French poems to translate. This is not so much because what he says is vague but because it is often the sound of the words rather than their meaning which is most important. So, taken into another language, the music is lost and with it, the better part of the poem. Perhaps the best, if extreme, illustration of this is the so-called “ix poem” which Steiner credits with creating a cultural revolution, — viz. “Sonnet allégorique de lui-même” (Sonnet 3).

3 John Simon, in his lengthy and most readable article called “Squaring the circle: Stéphane Mallarmé” (in New Criterion On-Line) summed up thus:

Though he never saw it that way, Mallarmé was the most mandarin, most abstruse of poets. Not because of any recondite references, but because of the complex imagery, complicated syntax, and expressly cultivated ambiguity. And also because of his compression. Writing poetry for him was like translating the baroque into telegraphese. Yet at the same time—and this makes an enormous difference—there was the verbal music, equaled perhaps by a few, but never surpassed. For Mallarmé—and this was a first—sound could become tantamount to meaning.
allegorical of itself) first published in 1868 but here I will use the definitive version, published in 1887 under the title of “Ses purs ongles”.

Ses purs ongles

Ses purs ongles très haut dédiant leur onyx,
L’Angoisse, ce minuit, soutient lampadophore,
Maint rêve vespéral brûlé par le Phénix
Que ne recueille pas de cinéraire amphore.
Sur les créinces, au salon vide: nul ptyx,
Aboli bibelot d’inanité sonore,
(Car le Maître est allé puiser des pleurs au Styx
Avec ce seul objet dont le Néant s’honore).
Mais proche la croisée au nord vacante, un or
AGONISSE selon peut-être le décor
Des licornes ruant du feu contre une nixe,
Elle, défunte nue en le miroir, encor
Que, dans l’oubli fermé par le cadre, se fixe
De scintillations stôt le septuor.

Frankly, this sonnet is beyond me — I cannot pronounce, let alone understand many of the words. However, we should note here the use of “homophony”, the repeated use of what seems to have been Mallarmé favourite sound, “or”, which he sometimes used to mean “gold” and sometimes “now”, but often as not, simply for its sound alone, as here in “lampadophore”, “amphore”, “sonore”, “nord”.

And noteworthy too is the crucial use of Personification and the sustained use of Synechdoche, the figure of speech in which a part is used to represent the whole, in this case, nails for fingers for hands for the lamp-bearer etc. 4

The sonnet takes on a kind of subliminal meaning if one accepts Charles Chadwick’s argument

.... that the title should be understood as "Sonnet allegorical of himself" rather than "itself" and that the poem refers to the process of poetic death and rebirth that Mallarmé went through in the years 1864 to 1868.5

4 in "Mallarme's 'Sonnet Allegorique de Lui-Mem'" - Allegorical of Itself or of Himself?”. Nineteenth Century French Studies - Volume 31, Number 1&2, Fall-Winter 2002-2003, pp. 104-110 University of Nebraska Press.

5 And it helps too to use the following pointers

- The “lampadophore” or “lamp-bearer” is the personification of “Anguish”, presumably the anguish the poet is feeling about his poetic directions.
- Ongle = Onyx. The word “onyx” comes from the Greek “onux”, a fingernail, so it means the same thing. Here it suggest the nail=the hand=the lamp-bearer, “Anguish” herself, is giving a faint light in the midnight darkness — perhaps a glimmer of hope?
- The Phoenix was, of course, the mythical bird of Egypt which was consumed in a pyre of its own making and rose anew from the ashes but the ptyx is not a real word in any language. Mallarmé himself acknowledged he used it only for “the magic of the rhyme”. The septuor here is the Big Dipper in the constellation Ursa Major
- The mirror is the key image and represents imagining but there is nothing in the mirror: it is like looking into two mirrors facing each other and seeing an infinite number of reflections, but of nothingness! Remember, in that nothingness are the pure forms it is the job of the poet “to reveal and crystallize.”
Much more enjoyable and intelligible is the sonnet he wrote for his close friend (who was also probably his mistress), Méry Laurant, “O Si Chère De Loin Et Proche Et Blanche”.6

Perhaps because in his work, meaning was so often subordinated to sound, Mallarmé’s poetry has inspired several major composers.7 The best-known is Debussy’s tone poem of 1894, “Prélude à l’après-midi d’un Faun” (“Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun”) which Nijinsky choreographed in 1912 for Diaghalev’s Ballet Russes and which earlier was illustrated by Manet.

L’après-midi d’un faune.

Ces nymphes, je les veux perpétuer.
Si clair,
Leur incarnat léger, qu’il voltige dans l’air
Assoupi de sommeils touffus.
Aimai-je un rêve?

6 This grew from a note Mallarmé sent her in 1890 which read: “Delicious you, I have only enough time to send you your habitual kiss, on leaving: and I would have things to say, but will do so here from there. How Méry you were and ideally perfect, your shells of ears must have been burning, all the evening as we went home.”

7 Debussy also set other Mallarmé poems to music in Trois poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé (1913), as did Maurice Ravel (Trois poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé, 1913), Darius Milhaud (Chansons bas de Stéphane Mallarmé, 1917), and Pierre Boulez’ long atonal work “Pli selon pli” (1957-62).
Mallarmé fully approved Debussy’s version of his poem. On his copy of the published music, Mallarmé wrote:

“When the flute music is well played, you hear all the light that Debussy’s first breath blows through the forest!”

And truly, the most memorable part of this great work is the half-step descents through the tri-notes and subsequent ascents of the flute in the opening bars…..
Paul Verlaine

Mallarmé’s work was not well-known publicly until long after his death, and then mostly through the efforts to publicize them by Verlaine and Valéry. Verlaine, on the other hand, was probably the best-known and most loved poet of his generation despite his prolonged scandalous behaviour. While we might look at Mallarmé’s life and see a bourgeois gentleman, a respectable teacher who had dedicated his life to poetry, scholarly, socially shy but not reclusive, in his contemporary Verlaine we see someone who shocked the world by his habitual drunkenness, his sexual confrontations, violence and for most of his adult life, his poverty.

Paul Verlaine was born in Metz, northeast France in 1844 where his father, an infantry captain, was stationed at the time. Paul was an only child and, by all accounts, rather spoiled by a doting mother. In 1851 the family moved to Paris where he attended the Lycée Bonaparte. When he was 14, he read Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du Mal*, which so impressed him that he seems to have decided to become poet and even sent his own work to the great Victor Hugo.
Verlaine accounted himself one of the Parnassians and some of his early poems were published in “Le Parnassien contemporain”. His first book, “Poèmes Saturniens” was published in 1866, followed by “Fêtes Galantes” in 1869. In 1870 he married Mathilde Mauté de Fleurville, and moved in with her into her parents’ house. For Mathilde, Verlaine wrote La Bonne Chanson in 1870 in which he reveals his anxieties and hopes for future happiness.

However, at this stage the plot thickens.... Receiving some poems from the young Arthur Rimbaud, Verlaine invited the 17 year-old to visit and even to stay with his family. When Verlaine and Rimbaud fell in love with each other and started a sexual relationship, Verlaine’s marriage was shattered and the two men left France to live a Bohemian life in London.

Arthur Rimbaud

Jean Nicholas Arthur Rimbaud was born on October 20, 1854 at Charleville. Like Verlaine, he was also the son of an army officer but his childhood was very different from the affluent early years of the man who was to become his lover. The father abandoned the family when Arthur was only 6 years old and left them in poverty. Afraid he would pick up the “bad habits” of the lower classes, Rimbaud’s mother forbade him to play with the local children, and even though unable to afford it, she later moved house to a “better” neighbourhood.

As a child, Rimbaud was an excellent student at school and started writing poems at the age of 8. His first published poem “Les Étrennes des orphelins” (The Orphans' Gifts) appeared in 1869 when he was just 15. He was greatly encouraged in his poetry
by a young teacher, Georges Izambard, so much so that in the next twelve months he had written twenty-two poems, several of which were published in *Le Parnasse Contemporain.*

This came to an abrupt end when, in 1870 Izambard joined the army to fight in the Franco-Prussian War and in reaction, Rimbaud ran away from home and set out for Paris. However, almost there, he was arrested for fare evasion and put in prison. After several more “escapes” from home, in February 1871 Rimbaud finally reached Paris where throughout most of March he lived on the streets, penniless and often starving. This was a dangerous time to be in Paris: the city was surrounded by the victorious German troops, the French government had withdrawn to Versailles, and on 18th March, the Paris Commune rose up in arms and installed its own revolutionary government which lasted until 27 May.

Perhaps fortunately for him (at least he was out of Paris before *La Semaine Sanglante*, the bloody reprisals, started), this time he was arrested by the police as a vagabond and jailed for two
weeks and then ordered to return home. However, Rimbaud chose to walk the 240km to Charleville! This took him most of April, finally arriving in at his mother’s house on 8th May. During this long walk (he refers to this in “Au cabaret vert”) he spent some time with Communard soldiers in their barracks where he was gang raped. His poem “Le Coeur Volé” (The Stolen Heart), was written not long after and reflects what was probably his first sexual experience.

In his “Lettre du voyant” written to Paul de Derneny, he asked the other poet to burn all the poems he had previously sent him because he now believed “the poet makes himself into a seer, through a long systematic deregulation of the senses”. There can be little doubt the experiences of the past few weeks, the hardship and chaos of the Commune and the trauma of the rape, had ‘deregulated the senses’ and brought about this change in Rimbaud’s thoughts and feelings about poetry.

Then, in August, Rimbaud sent some of his poems, including “Le Coeur Volé” to Verlaine who — the history books all claim — was shocked by the brilliance of the work and promptly invited the 17-year-old lad to visit him and even to live with him and his wife. Rimbaud arrived in Paris in September — Verlaine had sent him his train fare — and thus began a relationship which Rimbaud later labelled “A season in Hell” and for which posterity has remembered them ever since.

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8 The “volé” in title is usually translated as “stolen” but voler can also mean “to fly” or “to cheat”. This, the original version, was written in May 1871 but the following month, Rimbaud made minor revisions and sent one to his former teacher, Izambard under the title “le Coeur supplicié” (“The tortured heart”) and the other called “Le Coeur de Pitre” (lit. “The clown’s heart” but it makes one think of the song “Send in the clowns”), to Paul de Derneny, the young poet whom he had met on one of his previous “escapes” from his mother’s home. The changes are not many but clarify the meaning in the mix of horrendous metaphors.

9 “Le Poète se fait voyant par un long, immense et raisonné dérèglement de tous les sens” See also A. Gargett: Rimbaud: “The Impossible Flame” (Poetic Annihilation)
The Season in Hell

During the next two years, the lovers lived in poverty in some of the worst parts of London, Brussels, and in rural France, driven there perhaps as much by their desire to avoid “polite society” as by poverty. It is always difficult, even impossible, to understand past events — and other people’s love affairs — without imposing our own viewpoint upon them, even by the words we use. So, when trying to understand the relationship between the young poets and the world in which they were living, we have to remember that the word “homosexual” was not invented until 1868 and was not in common usage until well into the next century. The word “gay” came into use in the late 1960s and, even though it came to us from the Troubadours writing in Old Provençal 10, it too is anachronistic. However, when we try to use the words of the period — such as “sodomite” or “pederast” 11 — we can mislead ourselves because we simply can’t know the nuances of meaning as they were then understood.

In France, the two men had nothing to fear from the law: sodomy between consenting adults in private had been decriminalised in 1791 12 and this was confirmed in the Code Napoleon. However, sexual activities of any kind in public constituted an offence against public decency and in 1817 a vice-squad was set up and for the next 160 years patrolled parks and other public spaces. Newspapers reported at length on indecency trials and scandals, lurid books such as Paris’ Garbage (1874) and Corruption in Paris (1890) purported to “tell all” about the seamy side of the City of

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10 Probably via minority religious communities in America like the Amis. The Amish used “gay” as the opposite of “strict” which respectively meant non-Amish as opposed to those who conformed to the traditional Amish ways. This usage was well-known to many of the early American gay activists.

11 Its colloquial short form, pédé is still in use today.

12 and the penalty, death by burning abolished
Light.\textsuperscript{13} So, in short, in France at least, sex between men might have been safe in private but you had to be very discreet if you wanted to preserve any kind of reputation.\textsuperscript{14} I doubt Rimbaud would have worried much about this, but for Verlaine the social shame might well have been more keenly felt.

In England, the two poets were not safe. Although the death penalty was repealed in 1862, the “abominable crime of sodomy” was punishable by life imprisonment. There is some evidence that by the time Verlaine and Rimbaud left London for Brussels, neighbours were on the verge of complaining to the police, and not only about the noise the couple made in their lodgings. Any police investigation could have been disastrous.

Although Rimbaud was well accustomed to the kind of rootless and penurious lifestyle they lived together, Verlaine was not and turned more and more to drink. In London, the relationship seems finally to have got completely out of control, ending in a violent argument after which Verlaine ran away to Belgium, Rimbaud followed him, they fought again and Verlaine — who had a small pistol because he said he was going to kill himself — shot Rimbaud in the wrist. They went to the hospital and had the wound dressed but later that day while walking to the train station, Verlaine put his hand in his pocket and a very edgy Rimbaud thought he was going to shoot him again and so ran to the police and had Verlaine arrested.

Later, Rimbaud came to regret his action and attempted to have the charges dropped but this only succeeded in drawing attention to the sexual nature of their relationship. Verlaine was examined medically by prison doctors who concluded that he showed signs of repeated anal intercourse. Although this was irrelevant to the charge on which he was tried, it weighed heavily against him and he was sentenced to 18 months in prison.

While Verlaine was in prison in Belgium, Rimbaud returned to Roche, near his childhood home, and there wrote “\textit{Une Saison en Enfer}” (A Season in Hell), a more-or-less biographical account of his life with Verlaine. Now recognised as one of his greatest works, it was initially not well received and Rimbaud, discouraged, is said to have burned the original manuscript. For his part, Verlaine spent his time in jail writing the collection later published as “\textit{Romances sans Paroles}” (1874) which is generally regarded as the masterpiece in which he found his mature poetic voice.

When Verlaine was released from prison, the former lovers had a drunken and violent meeting at which Rimbaud is said to have beaten Verlaine with a club! Following this they parted and never saw each other again. Rimbaud left France, and learning German, Arabic, Hindi and Russian along the way, he set off on a long adventure which took him across the Alps on foot, saw him enlist and then desert from the Dutch army in Java, work for a while in a German circus touring Scandinavia before finally, in 1879, going to Egypt and thence to Aden. He settled there for a time, working for a coffee trader in whose employ he became the first European to journey

\textsuperscript{14} Just how powerful this homophobia was can be seen in the attempt to influence the verdict in the Dreyfus case by including love letters from German and Italian diplomats among the papers sent to the judge, even though they had no bearing on the case.
into the Ogaden region of Ethiopia where he ended up living with a native woman for 11 years while reputedly trading arms. When he developed a painfully sore knee, he returned to France where the swelling was diagnosed as cancerous and his leg was amputated. He never fully recovered from the surgery and died in 1891, at the age of 37. Interestingly, although he left some of his estate to his family, he left most of it to Djami Wadaï, his former African house-boy.

The Coming of Fame

Verlaine on the other hand, after their break-up moved back to London, returning to France only in 1877. Back home, he taught for a time while writing the poems for “Sagesse”\(^{15}\). In 1878 he met Lucien Létinois, who was one of his former pupils and whom he later adopted. They went back to England for a while before returning to France where Verlaine most improbably bought a farm in the Ardennes. There, Verlaine continued to write but the farm went bankrupt and in 1883, Lucien died of typhus. The following year Verlaine published the first of his critical works called *Les Poètes Maudits* which included short biographical studies of poets, short stories and sacred and profane verse. It was in these collections that Verlaine began to promote Rimbaud’s work to the reading public.

In January 1886, Verlaine’s mother died. Rather than being devastated, he seems to have settled down and later that year, published Rimbaud’s “Les Illuminations” with a preface he himself wrote in the literary review, “La Vogue”. It was this publication which finally re-established Rimbaud’s reputation and without his knowledge, made him famous among French poets.

\(^{15}\) Published in 1881, the collection in which “Le ciel est par-dessus le toit” appears. Most of the poems are said to reflect the feelings Verlaine experienced when reviewing his earlier life after converting back to Roman Catholicism, but in many of these works one gets the feeling the poet is re-visiting rather than truly repenting past exploits and certainly, by the time *Sagesse* was published, he had already returned to his old ways.
In 1888 Verlaine had the last of his known love-affairs, this time with the elegant young painter, Frédéric-Auguste Cazals but Cazals soon left Verlaine, fearing that his reputation was endangered by the association with the older man.

In that same year (1888), “Amour”, with its references to Lucien’s death, appeared in print along with an article by Lemaître stressing Verlaine’s importance to French
literature. While the book was not a great success and it seemed Verlaine’s creative years were now behind him, one more work remained but was not published during his lifetime. This was the collection of erotic poems “Parallèlement”, a collection Verlaine himself described as “waste-pipe, the night-soil deposit for all the ‘bad’ feeling which I can express.”

Verlaine spent his last years living in poverty with two middle-aged prostitutes and frequenting a homosexual man known as Bibi-la-Purée, a professional thief best known around Paris for stealing umbrellas. This life-style notwithstanding, his early collections of poems were re-discovered and in 1894, following the death of Leconte de Lisle, he was elected to the Academie and shortly afterwards, elected France’s Prince of Poets. Paul Verlaine died in Paris two years later, at the age of 52, on January 8, 1896. His funeral was a huge public event, thousands of Parisians following the casket to the Batignolles cemetery.

The Legacy of Verlaine and Rimbaud

There is no doubt that Paul Verlaine, maudit d'entre les maudits, renewed French poetry, freeing up the rules of meter and rhyme and creating therewith poems so fluid and musical, in his own words, they seem to “dissolve in the air”. Take, for example, his “Chanson d’automne”, not one of the poet’s most important works perhaps but one many composers have set to music.16

Listen to the music, not so much the words..... In the first stanza, for example, note particularly how the “dark” vowel sounds are softened by the connecting, more liquid consonants – the [L], [M] and [N] sounds. Autumn was a popular subject among 19th Century poets but in Verlaine’s vision, it is more a reminder of our impotence in the face of Fate than a harbinger of the Winter of Death.

Chanson d’automne

Les sanglots longs
Des violons
De l’automne
Blessent mon coeur
D’une langueur
Monotone.
Tout suffocant
Et blême, quand
Sonne l’heure,
Je me souviens
Des jours anciens
Et je pleure;
Et je m’en vais
Au vent mauvais

16 e.g., Benjamin Britten (1913-1976); Gustave Charpentier (1860-1956); Frederick Delius (1862-1934); and Reynaldo Hahn (1875-1947).
Of the three men whose poetry we have been considering, it was the teen-age Rimbaud — now virtually canonised in Charleville, the town he kept running away from — who laid the foundations for much of modern literature and contributed most to our modern view of the world. Among others, Rimbaud strongly influenced Joseph Conrad, Jean Cocteau, Hart Crane, Bob Dylan, Jean Genet, André Gide, Allen Ginsberg, William Faulkner, Henry James, James Joyce, Jack Kerouac, Federico García Lorca, H.P. Lovecraft, Marcel Proust, Patti Smith, Oscar Wilde, Virginia Woolf, the Surrealists and much of today's alternative music scene. One such was Jim Morrison (1943 – 1971) and his group, The Doors. Poet as well as musician, Morrison once wrote:

_I like ideas about the breaking away or overthrowing of established order. I am interested in anything about revolt, disorder, chaos - especially activity that seems to have no meaning. It seems to me to be the road toward freedom - external revolt is a way to bring about internal freedom. Rather than starting inside, I start outside - reach the mental through the physical._

An opera, “Seasons in Hell: An Opera in Two Acts” was produced in 1994 with score by Harold Blumenfeld and Libretto by Charles Kondek. This traces the life of Rimbaud, the libretto being made up largely of fragments of his poems. And a major movie, “Total Eclipse”, starring Leonardo diCaprio as Rimbaud and David Thewlis as Verlaine, was released to mixed reviews in 1995.
I find it very difficult to choose which of his work to look at more closely. However, since we will come back to some of his work, let us for the moment take a peek at portion of *Une Saison en enfer* which Rimbaud wrote in 1873 while Verlaine was in jail in Belgium. In this section he uses the parable of the Wise Virgins in which to offer his most obviously autobiographical account of his life with Verlaine. It is too long to detail here but there is much which — even in English translation — reads like direct quotation of things Verlaine might well have said. For example,

"He says: 'I don't love women. Love has to be reinvented, we know that. The only thing women can ultimately imagine is security. Once they get that, love, beauty, everything else goes out the window: all they have left is cold disdain, that's what marriages live on nowadays...."\(^8\)

The picture Rimbaud paints is one in which he adores Verlaine and is under the spell of the man he calls the *Infernal Bridegroom*, but hates the way he is often brutal and derogatory in his dealings, not only with Rimbaud (the *Foolish Virgin*) himself but with others too. Unexpectedly however, Rimbaud hints that it was he who seduced Verlaine, a claim which seems consistent with what we know of them both.

Two of the best-known of all Rimbaud’s poems are “*Le Bateau Ivre*” and “*Le chant des voyelles*”. Of the first, Gargett\(^9\) comments that:

“The magnificent "Bateau Ivre" may be described as the first great Symbolist poem. The "drunken boat" is a ship which has gone adrift down some American river when its haulers were captured and massacred by "shrieking redskins". Free and crewless it is carried about the seas, traversing storms, amid seascapes and landfalls of incredible strangeness and beauty. The underwater world and the sky display their terrors and marvels while it drifts …… The great strength of "Bateau Ivre" lies in its evocations of the violence and colours of the sea and of their concordances with human

\(^7\) “Délires I - Vierge Folle/ l’Epoux infernal”

\(^8\) "Il dit : "Je n’aime pas les femmes. L’amour est à réinventer, on le sait. Elles ne peuvent plus que vouloir une position assurée. La position gagnée, coeur et beauté sont mis de côté : il ne reste que froid dédain, l’aliment du mariage aujourd’hui. Ou bien je vois des femmes, avec les signes du bonheur, dont, moi, j’aurai pu faire de bonnes camarades dévorées tout d’abord par des brutes sensibles comme des bûchers…”

\(^9\) A. Gargett: Rimbaud: "The Impossible Flame" (Poetic Annihilation) http://sundress.net/sometimescity/v2/4/agargett.html (this contains, inter alia, a translation of “Le Bateau Ivre” and an examination of “Le Voyant…” which makes more sense than most)
experience. As his [Rimbaud’s] biographers duly note, he had not yet seen the sea, yet far more lucidly and successfully than Hugo, he is a cosmic poet…”

The second, “Le chant des voyelles” is probably the most celebrated and certainly the most commented on and glossed of all Rimbaud’s work. This poem helped popularise the notion of “synethesia” in which people “see” sounds and “hear” colours. However, Rimbaud himself admitted he just made up the colours he associated with the vowels.

Le chant des voyelles

A noir, E blanc, I rouge, U vert, O bleu : voyelles,
Je dirai quelque jour vos naissances latentes :
A, noir corset velu des mouches éclatantes
Qui bombinent autour des puanteurs cruelles,

Golfes d'ombre ; E, candeurs des vapeurs et des tentes,
Lances des glaciers fiers, rois blancs, frissons d'ombelles ;
I, pourpres, sang craché, rire des lèvres belles
Dans la colère ou les ivresses pénitentes ;
U, cycles, vibrement divins des mers virides,
Paix des pâtis semés d'animaux, paix des rides
Que l'alchimie imprime aux grands fronts studieux ;
O, suprême Clairon plein des strideurs étranges,
Silences traversés des Mondes et des Anges :
- O l'Oméga, rayon violet de Ses Yeux !

(Poésies 1870 - 1871))

Although brief, the relationship between Verlaine and Rimbaud has continued to preoccupy the curiosity of the public and scholars alike. Two frequently asked
questions are “To what extent were they ‘homosexual’ in our sense of the word?” and “How did their sexualities affect their art?”

As for the first, I think there is no doubt that Verlaine was primarily homosexual, what today we might call a “married gay” (which was pretty much par for the course for homosexuals until very recently)….. but I am not so sure about Rimbaud. However, we should not discount Rimbaud’s love — indeed, adoration — for Verlaine. As for Verlaine, he continued to love Rimbaud until the day he died.

"For me, Rimbaud is an ever-living reality," Verlaine once said to his friend, "a sun that burns inside me that does not want to be put out...

As for the second question, “How did their sexualities affect their art?”, it has to be remembered that the relationship between Rimbaud and Verlaine was not only the debauched, violent and scandalous affair for which history remembers them, but also a remarkable literary partnership which pushed French poetry to new extremes. Although they only ever collaborated on one poem together, their relationship, including its sexual component, clearly inspired them both when they were together and, in Verlaine’s case, even long after they had parted.

The one poem on which they collaborated was the Sonnet du Trou du Cul, for which Verlaine wrote the quatrains and Rimbaud the tercets….. This rather infamous piece was written in response to a book of sonnets, “L’Idole” by the Parnassian poet Albert Mérat in which each poem extolled a part of the body of his mistress. However, there was one body part without a sonnet so Verlaine and Rimbaud rectified the omission.

Gay Poetry

Some of the poems written by these lovers, while together or apart, can be classified as “gay poetry”, a genre which some might call “pornographic” but which in reality cannot be dismissed so simplistically. Gay poetry as we know it today includes poems which range from the gentle and intimate to the sexually very explicit. Much has come down to us from ages past — for example, the Epic of Gilgamish, the Ecologues of Virgil, Lord Byron’s “Don Leon” — and of course, the works of Verlaine and Rimbaud. However, the last 50 years or so has seen an exponential increase in the repertoire of gay poetry, all of it having its part to play by giving the

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20 Rimbaud, who raged against hypocrisy of all kinds, probably enjoyed writing this sonnet: anal intercourse was the second most popular form of contraception at that time.
21 Very clearly written long after the poet’s death but by someone who knew him well.
men for whom it was written a mirror in which we see reflected our own lives and not just the heterosexual lives all around us.

One of my favourite poems, and the one which is most often quoted as expressing Verlaine’s love for Rimbaud\textsuperscript{22}, is a poem he wrote in prison and which he dedicated to his distant lover....

\begin{flushright}
Il pleure dans mon coeur
\end{flushright}

\textit{Il pleut doucement sur la ville}

\hspace{1cm}(Arthur Rimbaud)

\begin{flushleft}
Il pleure dans mon coeur  
Comme il pleut sur la ville, 
Quelle est cette langueur 
Qui pénètre mon coeur?
\end{flushleft}

\textit{........... Romances sans paroles 1874)\textsuperscript{1874)}

Not all, however, are so gentle. In 1891, Verlaine completed 15 poems celebrating male-male sexuality. This work, \textit{Hombres}, was not published in his lifetime. These are often very explicit, even more descriptive than the famous poem “A day for a lay” by WH Auden which was circulated anonymously when I was still a student but which you can now buy in books, fully attributed, from Amazon.com.

Rimbaud had only a short career as a poet (he wrote all his mature poetry between the ages of 15 and 19), but in his work one can see not only the artistic influence of his lover but also that of his sexual lifestyle of the time. For example, his poem \textit{"O saisons, ô châteaux"} sings of his love for Verlaine, but be warned, if you read it in translation, it might have been “sanitized”, like many others of these poems...if you read “he” for “il” in the original text it makes it more meaningful — The Coq Gaulois, at least in my reading of it, is Verlaine and there is quite probably a double entendre intended.....\textsuperscript{23}

There has always been poetry which spoke to men in this way, and if I have any regrets about leaving French and taking up philosophy all those years ago, they are that, had I stayed, I might have discovered these poems much earlier and felt less alone in the world. But I doubt we would have studied these poems — the 1950s were

\textsuperscript{22} Verlaine wrote a number of poems most probably inspired by his relationship with Rimbaud, such as \textit{"Vers pour être calomnié"} (Verse to be slandered) and \textit{"L'espoir luit comme un brin de paille dans l'étable"} (Hope shines like a blade of straw in the stable). The inspiration of \textit{"Crimen Amoris,"} is less easy to attribute but the graceful young prince whose triumph the poem describes could not have been far away....

\textsuperscript{23} Sometimes too, it looks to me as though Verlaine and Rimbaud deliberately left things a little indefinite. Many homosexual poets and song-writers have written in code or in some way hidden all but the \textit{cognoscenti} from their real meaning. The American song-writer Jerome Kearne, for example, wrote a song “Can’t help lovin’ that man of mine”, a big hit in its day, which was sung by a woman on stage but everyone who was anybody knew “that man of mine” was Jerome’s own partner.
the most homophobic era in Australian history when we could only yearn for freedom but not express it. So I like to think I took with me the one gem the class had to offer:

**Le ciel est par dessus….**\(^{24}\)

*Le ciel est, par-dessus le toit,*  
*Si bleu, si calme!*  
*Un arbre, par-dessus le toit,*  
*Berce sa palme.*

*La cloche, dans le ciel qu'on voit,*  
*Doucement tinte,*  
*Un oiseau sur l'arbre qu'on voit,*  
*Chante sa plainte.*

*Mon Dieu, mon Dieu, la vie est là,*  
*Simple et tranquille.*  
*Cette paisible rumeur-là,*  
*Vient de la ville.*

—*Qu'as-tu fait, ô toi que voilà*  
*Pleurant sans cesse,*  
*Dis, qu'as-tu fait, toi que voilà,*  
*De ta jeunesse?*

*(Sagesse, 1881)*

\(^{24}\)This poem was set to music by many composers including Benjamin Britten (1913-1976), “Sagesse”, from Quatre chansons françaises, no. 2.; Frederick Delius (1862-1934), “Le ciel est, par-dessus le toit”, 1895, from Songs to poems by Paul Verlaine, no. 2.; Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924), “Prison”, op. 83 no. 1 (1894), published 1896.; Reynaldo Hahn (1875-1947), “D'une prison”