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VERGIL (70–19 B.C.)

Greatest Latin poet. Descended from an equestrian family from Mantua, Publius Vergilius Maro was a propagandist in the employ of the Emperor Augustus' pederastic and possibly pathic minister of culture Maecenas, to whose circle he introduced the bisexual lyric poet **Horace**. Vergil created the *Aeneid* as a Latin epic to correspond, the first half to the *Odyssey*, the second half to the *Iliad* of **Homer**, tracing the descent of the Romans from the Trojan hero Aeneas and the fusion of Trojans and Latins into a single commonwealth. The epic, which embodied the high ideals and heroic destiny of the Romans, became the basic text for the education of their upper-class boys. His poem avoided homoeroticism—except for the heroic lovers Nisus and Euryalus.

Influenced by **Catullus** and the Hellenistic poets, Vergil studied Epicurean philosophy at Naples. As a young man he composed *Eclogues* partly taken from the *Pastorals* by **Theocritus**. His *Georgics* were in some ways inspired by **Hesiod**, but actually more by **Callimachus** and other Alexandrians. Under the first **Roman emperors** the rush to imitate the cosmopolitanism of **Alexandria** and the **Hellenistic monarchies** helped make pederasty less unacceptable. Of weak constitution, unlike most Roman aristocrats who while teenagers married girls of 12 or 13 as arranged by their respective *patresfamilias*, Vergil was one of the few distinguished Romans never to marry. A biography composed in late antiquity described him unambiguously as a boy-lover. He sang of pederasty in the *Second Eclogue*, which treats the unrequited love

of the slave Corydon for their master's favorite, the shepherd Alexis. The old claim that he was merely parroting Hellenistic pederastic themes, which he did, sometimes closely, sometimes freely, to court favor with his patron Maecenas, is no longer believed to "explain away" his subject matter. Though all his bucolic verses have Greek characters and are often set in Sicily, Vergil infused Italian elements and personal touches into them.

Christians, who claimed with the Emperor Constantine at Nicaea in 325 that Vergil's fourth and sixth *Eclogues*, celebrating the birth of a son for Augustus, really was divinely inspired to foretell the birth of Jesus, have long striven to deny that he actually praised, much less practiced pederasty, hence the concoction of the literary convention that he only followed Greek models or the tale that he so wrote to please Maecenas. His description of the love of Corydon for Alexis furnished the title of **André Gide's** defense of homosexuality (1924). So if the pederastic theme occupied a minor place in his writing, Vergil remains one of the great homosexual figures of world literature, whose epic poem commemorated the historical destiny of Rome.

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VERLAINE, PAUL (1844–1896)

French symbolist poet. Born in Metz, he published his first book of verse, *Poèmes saturniens*, in 1866. It belonged to the Parnassian reaction to Romanticism, embodying the virtues of classical order and clarity. A few of the poems, however, revealed that he was more suited to a

suggestive style than one with the classical rules and the 12-syllable alexandrine. He also employed *vers impair*, with an odd number of syllables, together with unusual verse forms. His subsequent volumes of verse continued this trend toward a distinctive style, transposing into verbal music the make-believe atmosphere and moonlit settings of the eighteenth-century painters popularized by the brothers Goncourt.

In the fall of 1871, although he had been married for some eighteen months, he fell under the spell of the personality of the 17-year-old Arthur Rimbaud. The two of them tried to live as lovers in accordance with a new moral code, or rather amoral code, in which a different world was to be created through a different kind of poetry. But the relationship between the two poets was a tortured one and ended in a violent quarrel in Brussels in July 1873 when Verlaine shot Rimbaud in the wrist. Sentenced to two years' imprisonment during which he found the hoped-for reconciliation with his wife impossible, he returned to the Catholic faith in which he had been raised, still trying for years afterward to lead a new life. However, caught between the aspirations of religious faith and the temptations of the flesh, he yielded to the latter.

At one of his teaching posts, the Collège de Notre-Dame at Bethel, he formed a deep homosexual attachment for one of his pupils, Lucien Létoinois, who accompanied him when he returned to Paris in July; the two lived near each other for a time until the youth died of typhoid in April 1883. The loss caused Verlaine an emotional shock even more intense than is suggested by the poignancy of the poems in *Amour* composed in his memory. His mother bought the Létoinois' farm at Coulomnes, and here he lived for two years, drinking at local taverns, and carrying on questionable affairs with vagabonds and boys imported from Paris, so that his scandalous way of life caused the local people to despise him. The death of his mother in

January 1886 left him penniless, and the last years of his life were spent half in the hospital, half as a destitute man of letters on the street. He died in January 1896 at the age of fifty-one.

Explicit homosexuality is a minor theme in Verlaine's work, notably in two collections of verse, *Les Amies* and *Hombres*. The first was a slender volume of six lesbian sonnets entirely in feminine rimes (violating the classical rule that masculine and feminine rimes must alternate), published by Poulet-Malassis in Brussels, where erotic literature had taken refuge to escape the repressive regime of the Second Empire. In it Verlaine veiled his own homoerotic impulses behind scenes of lesbian love. For the modern reader, the tender and playful "girl-friends" radiate a lascivious charm but can scarcely be called obscene. For these sonnets the poet borrowed the vocabulary of Baudelaire, especially the "femmes damnées" of *Les Fleurs du mal*. Evident also is the influence of the Parnassian poets with their chiseled verses on classical themes, particularly in "Sappho." But in his candid portrayal of supple, young, passionate female bodies bathed in a delicate atmosphere, Verlaine was in his day striking out into new territory.

Two of the poems in *Hombres* ("Men") were written by Verlaine and Rimbaud in 1871-72 as contributions to the *Album Zutique*, a kind of guest book kept by the physician Antoine Cros, who invited a group of poets to meet and recite their facetious verses. Two more were composed in 1887 and 1889, the remainder in 1891 when Verlaine was a patient at the Hôpital Broussais. The collection appeared only after the poet's death, published clandestinely in Paris by Messein in late 1903 or early 1904.

Together with a set of poems on heterosexual themes entitled *Femmes*, the verses form a *Trilogie érotique* that has circulated since 1910 for the most part in expensive, quite rare editions often illustrated by well-known artists, but has

been excluded from official editions of the complete works. The poems reflect Verlaine's long history of homosexual attachments and casual encounters, beginning in his teens and reaching its high points in the love affairs with Rimbaud and Lucien Létyinois. The rural lads of "Mille e Tre" may have been inspired by his sexual escapades at Coulomnes, while "In This Café" harkens back to the two bohemian lovers masturbating in public in symbolic defiance of one of society's most stringent taboos. The pieces have their flaws: the sonnets of *Les Amies* are slightly cloying, and a certain repetitiousness (the bane of pornographic literature) afflicts *Hombres*. Nevertheless, in his poems Verlaine created a strange and compulsive beauty by embracing the whole range of sexuality with a hearty candor that is all the more exceptional since it belongs to a time when the morbid and the effete were deliberately cultivated. The homoerotic poems, though sexually explicit and sometimes obscene in language, transcend pornography and achieve true literary status.

In another poem, "Ces passions," first published in *La Cravache* of February 2, 1889, and then included in *Parallèlement*, is Verlaine's boldest exaltation of homosexual love, whose daring contrasts all the more with the regularity of the versification and the faultless composition. At the same time, in the third line of certain stanzas the poet inserts ponderous verses with long words meant to suggest the solemnity of the rites of male bonding which they celebrate, while heterosexual unions are dismissed as trifles, "erotic needs," diversions of couples who dare not go beyond the norm.

Verlaine's 1883 sonnet "Langueur," on the fall of the Roman Empire, was credited with launching the Decadent movement. However this may be, his name remains unalterably linked with fin-de-siècle aestheticism. The musical quality that characterizes his best pieces largely disappeared from his poetry and

other writings in the last decade of his life, but the totality of his work, so imbued with the unique phonic quality of the French language as to be untranslatable, ranks him with the great masters of French poetry.

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Warren Johansson

VIAU, THÉOPHILE DE (1590-1626)

French poet and libertine thinker.

Théophile de Viau was the most talented poet of his generation, which belonged to the first half of the reign of Louis XIII. His militant atheism and stormy, unconventional existence made him the idol of the youth, but his own passion was for Jacques Vallée des Barreaux, nine years his junior, strikingly handsome and intelligent, and gifted with a poetic talent all his own. The master and the disciple went everywhere together, and when they were separated, they exchanged letters that bear witness to a genuine love.

Allowed to return to Paris in March 1620 after less than a year of exile, Théophile was associated with a scandalous publication, a particularly obscene collection of poems entitled *Le Parnasse satyrique*, that appeared in November 1622 and was followed by a decree of Parlement in July 1623 ordering his arrest. The poet fled Paris, but a month later was in absentia sentenced to death by burning at the stake. On the frontier of Picardy Théophile was arrested and brought in captivity to Paris, where an undercover agent of the Jesuits named Louis Sageot denounced him for divine lèse-majesté and sodomy—which in those days were one and the same crime. There followed two years of imprisonment under conditions of suffering and outright torture that nearly broke his spirit, but worst of all was the infidelity of