DIANA FESTA-McCORMICK

Verlaine’s formula for the poètes maudits, if such we may call it, was not accompanied by any cogent definition. Yet when the work was first published in 1883, its striking title aroused a far-reaching resonance. The unfortunate poets who appeared in that original selection have had a long lineage of descendants in several countries, down to this very day, almost one hundred years after the phrase was coined. The concept was not new, however, even if only then it claimed a halo of respectability and an assertive power in the world of letters. There have at all times been poets who were, or thought themselves, unhappy—in their passions, in their ambition and their desire for affluence or power, in their isolation from the society in which they lived. Happiness seems in fact to have been a rare blessing for the “genus irritabile vatum,” as Horace called it,¹ and was probably spurned by most of them. The poet is supposedly ill-adapted to his environment. His vocation, it is often assumed, only comes to the fore through a feeling of alienation and, possibly, little interest in happiness. Sorrow, at least in the romantic tradition, lurks at the fountainhead of creative impulse. An anthology of Epicurean poetry in the ancient and modern languages would very probably pall on modern readers. We tolerate only a moderate amount of drinking songs, of odes or hymns to blissfully rewarded love. Horace’s praises of wine, Propertius’s celebration of a quiet country retreat fulfilling all of the poet’s wishes, Ronsard’s admonitions to his ladies to surrender to beauty’s fleeting instants—even Goethe’s felicitous renderings of Hafiz—are likely to strike most of us, heirs to romantic pessimism, as limited in their strained oblivion of the Johnsonian “vanity of human wishes.”

The idea that a curse weighs upon the poet appeared immediately plausible with Verlaine’s manifesto. Artists have always been considered a group apart from all mortals, in pursuit of their own creative demons, removed from life’s more pedestrian endeavors. The concept went through various evolutions, with a few variations, seeming in turn less pessimistic or utterly dispirited. But doom appears, on the whole, as the faithful companion of the artist, the shadow thrust upon him by a chastising bourgeois force and a greedy society, or the scourge born from within the poet himself. Artists are prey to their own fears, to

¹ Horace, "Epistles," I.1.10.
the menace of sterility, or to mysterious, hostile, satanic forces, to inner torments that push them to drink, drugs, suicide. The myth thus took shape. It was given impetus by Baudelaire’s presentation of Poe as the unhappy American poet only grudgingly recognized by his compatriots—and it was accorded full life by Verlaine’s *Les Poètes maudits*.

The early nineteenth century in France had rediscovered François Villon, the first authentic “accursed poet” in French. The romantics of Italy, England, and Germany made much in their verse of the unfortunate Tasso (1544–95) who, a precocious genius, idolized at first, had turned into the lamentable victim of his own mental delusions and insane fears. Byron sang the “Lament” (in 1817) of the incarcerated poet:

```
I have been patient, let me be so yet;
I had forgotten half I would forget,
But it revives—Oh! would it were my lot
To be forgetful as I am forgot!
Feel I not wroth with those who bade me dwell
In this vast lazar-house of many woes?
Where laughter is not mirth, nor thought the mind,
Nor words a language, or ev’n men mankind;
Where cries reply to curses, shrieks to blows,
And each is tortured in his separate hell—
For we are crowded in our solitudes—
Many, but each divided by the wall,
Which echoes Madness in her babbling moods.2
```

“To sleep, perchance to dream,” was Hamlet’s anguished cry. “To be forgetful,” echoes Tasso in Byron’s verse, “as I am forgot.” The haunting presence of deceived hopes, of loves forfeited in neglect, pursues the wretched poet. Lost in his own labyrinthine hell, he heeds the vast echo of man’s madness, of its helpless “shrieks” and forlorn hopes. The “wall” that casts a shadow upon his life is the same that stands implacable between man and all cherished dreams.

In an exhibition of 1844, Delacroix had shown a powerful portrait of “Le Tasse en prison.” The painting inspired one of Baudelaire’s less successful sonnets, perhaps, but one that is nevertheless suggestive of the poet’s plight in an insensitive world:

```
Le poète au cachot, débraillé, maladif,
Roulant un manuscrit sous son pied convulsif,
Mesure d’un regard que la terreur enflamme
L’escalier de vertige où s’abîme son âme.3
```

The “cachot” of the verses evokes the poet’s double prison, that which arises from his inner tumult and the one imposed by society’s indifference to beauty. Tasso, we know, had been confined for seven years to St. Anna, an asylum closely resembling a criminal prison. There he struggled against his intimate horrors, the ridicule and neglect of the world of men, and the nightmarish
oscillations of his poetic imagination. His numerous flights on foot across Italy’s countryside made him the true precursor of that other famous *maudit*, the Rimbaud “with the soles of wind,” as Verlaine was to call him. Goethe’s drama *Torquato Tasso*, composed as early as 1788–89, was published later and pictured the Italian poet as a Wertherian character tortured by a wretched and impossible love.

A compatriot of Tasso, Giacomo Leopardi, composed, a little earlier in the nineteenth century, a dialogue between Tasso and his familiar genie. The poet appears in his hospital prison, rationally arguing with his muse to prove the ubiquity of “la noia” and the radical impossibility of happiness in love: “Know that between the real and the dreamt, there is no other difference, if not that the latter can be much more beautiful and sweeter, than ever the other can be.”

Dream is the only valid truth in life. The poet cherishes an impossible vision, and beauty lives over the horrors of reality. “Between dream and imagination, you will wear out your life,” the genie admonishes. Exhausted, reviled, alone—but with an image of candor to sustain him—the poet will sing his verses. From the darkest of nights, “without moon nor stars,” a crepuscular shadow will emerge, with a hint of light. “Tell me,” implores the poet to his genie, “when despair overtakes me, where can I find you?” “In qualche liquore generoso” is the answer—in some generous liquor—in drunkenness and oblivion, we must conclude, in madness and the denial of man’s wisdom.

A precocious scholar and voracious reader, Leopardi had been afflicted with poor health and physical deformity. He was in love with a dream of love and was condemned forever to be thwarted. He felt certain that he was doomed by fate to live a short existence, steeped in “infelicità.” In March 1818 he wrote to another writer, Pietro Giordani, “Fate meted out to me the condition of poor health . . . with the intellectual and sentimental ability to acknowledge that joy is not for me and that, dressed as it were in mourning garb, I welcome melancholy as my eternal and inseparable companion. . . . It is prudent to leave me to my melancholy and to myself, who am my own pitiless executioner.” For nearly twenty years Leopardi was to sing in austere verse the same anthem to the ubiquitousness of “infelicità,” persuaded that the curse that doomed him to pain was preordained and unavoidable. In 1835, two years before his brief life was to come to an end, he wrote his own desolate and concise testament in a sixteen-line poem, “A se stesso” (“To himself”):

```
Posa per sempre. Assai
Palpitasti. Non val cosa nessuna
I moti tuoi, né di sospiri è degna
La terra. Amaro e noia
La vita, altro mai nulla . . .
```
The beats of your heart, nor of your sighs is
The earth worthy. Bitterness and boredom
Is life, nothing ever else . . . ]

Doom hangs heavy upon the young poet's life, his faithful companion, accomp­lice of the waiting grave. His verses are the epitaph to the bleakness that filled his days, to his anguish and desperate cries. "Dans ta tombe précoce à peine refroidi," was to write Musset, "Sombre amant de la Mort, pauvre Léopardi."

The middle of the nineteenth century was a period that gave rise to the phenomenon of the poètes maudits, driven to Bohemia and to starvation by the creed of a materialistic society. It constituted the disillusioned answer of authors to the boastful or prophetic claims of romantic poets to be "the unacknowledged legislators of the world." Many of those poets who had asked for the privilege of leading mankind to higher and better destinies, in France at any rate, attempted to enter the political arena: Lamartine, Vigny, Hugo. Their hopes were blighted with the reaction that, in Western Europe, followed upon the revolutions of 1848. Poets then took refuge in their solitude, martyrs of an industrial civilization that ignored and scorned them, or in the creed of "art for art's sake." They would fondly imagine that the fate of their predecessors had been more fortunate, in the Athens or Rome of old, where a cultured elite had been capable of understanding them.

The mythical Sisyphus, bent under the weight of a malediction from the gods, has many spiritual heirs among the romantics. Alfred de Musset saw in his life the presence of an obstinate curse that dragged him into an oppressive vacuum. He meant to write on his own decline as a poet—we are told by his brother—on le poète déchu that he had become, a prey to drunkenness, debauchery, and weariness. Vigny was the recognized spokesman for all oppressed poets. His Stello (1832) is a semifictional essay on the theme of poets reduced to misery and starvation by a complacent and inimical society. The poet's life, wrought in sorrow and solitude, will find a lasting echo only in the grace of his verse: "le poète a une malédiction sur sa vie et une bénédiction sur son nom." Vigny calls upon those martyrs of beauty whose very names hold a lasting resonance by the altar of poetry: "Avoir toujours présentes à la pensée les images, choisies entre mille, de Gilbert, de Chatterton et d'André Chénier."

Nicolas Gilbert (1751–80), mentioned among those exemplifying the creed of the poet's evil fate, is by now practically forgotten. Yet he wrote some touching poems, lamenting the anathema of a life and all desultory hopes:

Malheur à ceux dont je suis né!
Père aveugle et barbare, impitoyable mère!
Pauvres, vous fallait-il mettre au monde un enfant
Qui n'héritât de vous qu'une affreuse indigence?
Poverty, the social curse for those who vow their breath to poetry's ethereal appeal, has thrust him amidst the shadows of the forgotten ones:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Au banquet de la vie infortuné convive} \\
\text{J'apparus un jour, et je meurs.} \\
\text{Je meurs, et sur la tombe où lentement j'arrive,} \\
\text{Nul ne viendra verser des pleurs.}^{11}
\end{align*}
\]

Life is a brief parenthesis for the miserable poet, straddling fear over the abyss of death.

André Chénier, also included in Vigny's work, died on the scaffold during the Terror. He appears, however, as the victim of society rather than of a political revolution. Chatterton himself was treated by Vigny and his French audiences with far more respect than he is today by historians. Vigny portrays him as the woeful prey to materialism and British society, jostled by antagonistic currents and only half consoled by the tender Kitty Bell. The lively interest aroused by that drama (Chatterton, 1835) turned Vigny into the arch defender for all poets threatened or maligned by a society of greedy philistines.

Madness, we now recognize, is the last refuge against anguish and the feeling of oppression. There was no dearth of poets threatened or afflicted by insanity among the French romantics. Victor Hugo himself was at the brink of utter mental derangement when he passionately consulted the "turning tables" at Jersey in 1853. Only with great effort and the hypertrophy of his self-confined ego was he able to keep the demons of madness at bay. His answer to society's threat was to proclaim the superiority of the poet as Magus and to indulge his own proclivity as a prophet in verse: "Allez, prêtres! Allez, génies! / Cherchez la note humaine, allez."\textsuperscript{12} Under the Third Republic Hugo was indeed to assume the part of a venerated oracle. But his eloquent cries could not dispel the fate that others felt as a crushing weight. Charles Lassailly, one of the most promising talents among the romantics, died insane in 1843. Antoni Deschamps, a theorist of the young romantic school and translator of Dante's \textit{Inferno}, spent most of his life at a mental clinic—the same in which Gérard de Nerval repeatedly crossed "the Acheron" of madness. Antoine Fontaney, also a member of the romantic "cénacles," author of ballads and elegies in the sentimental vein, died of gloom and consumption in 1837, at thirty-four.

The fate that dooms so many poets to a life of dejection, to an early death, or to flight into the illusory refuge of insanity was particularly harsh on the romantics of Germany and of Britain. Kleist, Lenau, Hölderlin—the first a suicide, the others surviving for years in a deranged state—are, along with Novalis (dead at twenty-eight), among the most pathetic and most genial poets of their country. In England the tragic and visionary force of the Elizabethan dramatists seemed to live again with Thomas Lowell Beddoes—a poet pursued
by an unbalanced temperament and in love with the macabre: he eventually committed suicide. Thomas Hood, whose famous line was to be rescued by Poe and then by Baudelaire ("anywhere out of the world"), lived on until the age of fifty-five, in destitution and pain. Shelley, who influenced both of them, depicted Keats, dying in Rome at twenty-five, as the victim of "envy and calumny and hate and pain." His long Adonais (1821) is not only an apotheosis of the dead poet, but an indictment against the callousness of a society unattuned to gentleness and beauty. "It may be well said that these wretched men know not what they do. They scatter their insults and their slanders without heed as to whether the poisoned shaft lights on a heart made callous by many blows or one like Keats's composed of more penetrable stuff," he explains in his introduction to the elegy mourning Keats. His lyrical tribute to that young poet is replete with bitterness against society:

The Priest, the slave and the liberticide,
Trampled and mocked with many a loathed rite
Of lust and blood; he went, unterrified,
Into the gulf of death.14

Earlier, in 1818, Shelley had movingly related his visit with Byron to a madhouse in Venice. Julian and Maddalo lets a madman speak, a poet "cradled into poetry by wrong." The disconnected lines lent to that deranged man upon the island stand as one of the most touching treatments of insanity in the poetry of the last century. "I refrain / From that sweet sleep which medicines all pain," cries the man to the phantoms he yearns to embrace. "Let oblivion hide this grief. . . . Let death upon despair!" he begs.15

Then, when thou speakest of me, never say
"He could forgive not." Here I cast away
All human passions, all revenge, all pride;
I think, speak, act no ill; I do but hide.16

Shadows envelop the poet, victim of unassuaged love and the pitiless vengeance of man's baser instincts. He stands forlorn under the curse that rejects him from society. The hero of Tennyson's Maud is yet another victim of love and life and the ravings of madness. The Victorian Tennyson recoiled from dwelling too long on despair; his dejected lover is cured at the end, but only after he has pitifully mourned the wretchedness of fate:

Dead, long dead,
Long dead!
And my heart is a handful of dust,
And the wheels go over my head,
And my bones are shaken with pain.17

The gloom that enveloped those English romantics—and from which they sought escape into opium, like Coleridge, or in praying, like De Quincey, who
addressed his fervent poetical prayers to the Ladies of Sorrow and of Death—
was not dispelled with the advent of the Victorian era. The complacency and
the prosperity that characterized the upper strata of society after the middle of
the nineteenth century did not extend to the working classes. There existed a
number of outcasts among the artists. Their lot was poverty, solitude, silent and
vain revolt. The melancholy tone of their romantic predecessors, who found at
times a kind of bitter comfort in the lyrical strains of their dirges, now became
less personal. It was not only the conspiracy of materialism and of cant that they
indicted. Their grief was broadened into a condemnation of life itself: they
denounced the Creator for his work. Swinburne, in one of the sonorous
choruses of *Atalanta*, spurned the fallacious solace of religious faith and of
conventional optimism:

    Before the beginning of years,
    There came to the making of man
    Time, with a gift of tears;
    Grief, with a glass that ran;
    Pleasure, with pain for leaven;
    Summer, with flowers that fell;
    Remembrance fallen from heaven,
    And madness risen from hell.  

All hope seemingly granted to man with his first breath of life is a cruel
mockery. Chaos alone issued from nothingness. Man remains caught in a
“madness risen from hell,” and his cup brimful of grief and tears.

The most implacably accursed of those poets was the admirer and translator
of Leopardi, James Thomson, author of a Dantesque epic of despair, *The City
of Dreadful Night* (1874). That Scot, who had rejected his Calvinistic upbring­ing,
destroys, one by one, all delusions through which man consents to life:
love, nature, friendship, the fallacious reasoning of philosophers, and the
empty words of preachers. More tragic yet than desultory hope is the despairing
knowledge of those who perceive the world’s void:

    The sense that every struggle brings defeat
    Because Fate holds no prize to crown success;
    That all the oracles are dumb or cheat
    Because they have no secret to express;
    That none can pierce the vast black veil uncertain
    Because there is no light beyond the curtain;
    That all is vanity and nothingness.  

All romantic struggle has vanished. Even tears have been dried by the futile
wait. Man is caught within the paradox of life and “the city of dreadful night.”
The long poem closes on the word “despair”—“And confirmation of the old
despair”—a symbol of the inescapable reality that condemns all quest for hope.
James Thomson grants no room to vituperation against society in his verses.
But the "nothingness" that emerges assumes the magnitude of a curse—indefinite, ubiquitous, sodden with bleakness and despair. More personal but equally pervasive, the same sense of loss appears in "Insomnia," one of the rare poems by Thomson written in the first person singular. The stark verses graphically relate the endless hours of sleepless nights:

When hideous agonies, unheard, unseen,
In overwhelming floods of torture roll,
And horrors of great darkness drown the soul,
To be is not to be
In memory save as ghastliest impression,
And chaos of demoniacal possession.  

No Hamletian doubt keeps hope alive. Nothing but the hallucinating presence of an intimate hell fills the interminable hours of suspense. Life is not a dream but merely the awesome certainty of naught and emptiness, "to be is not to be." Sternly and implacably Thomson argues his philosophy of utter and universal pessimism. Man is a desolate wanderer in the city of death. His only imploration can be for oblivion "To our Ladies of Death," to be forever "lulled into perfect sleep," while the years go on murmuring, "A dim vast monotone, that shall enhance / The restful rapture of the inviolate grave."  

Among the French "accursed" poets, one name is surprisingly missing from Verlaine's quite arbitrary choice of six poets to exemplify the poètes maudits (three more poets—Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Marceline Desbordes-Valmore, and Verlaine himself—were added to the Vanier edition of 1884). Baudelaire, the very predecessor to whom he was most heavily indebted, is not mentioned. Yet the overwhelming sense of despondency that emerges from his poetry is at the core of all that is "maudit," or crushed under the weight of inevitable doom. Baudelaire had published, in the Revue de Paris in 1852, a highly influential article entitled "Edgar Poe, sa vie, ses œuvres." Alluding to Vigny's campaign for the rescue of poets exiled or reviled by modern society, he announced that he was adding a name to that list of martyrs. He pursued, "There are in the history of literatures . . . cases of genuine damnation, men who bear the word 'ill-luck' [the French guignon is much more suggestive] written in mysterious types on the sinuous folds of their brows. The blind Angel of expiation has taken hold of them and lashes them madly so as to teach others a lesson. . . . Society launches a special anathema upon them; it indicts in them the very weaknesses that its persecution gave them."  

The "sacred souls" are, by a diabolical providence, doomed to act the part of martyrs in the Roman circus, to march, through their wreckage, toward their death. Society, especially that of America, bore the brunt of Baudelaire's accusation. Industry, progress even more, and the most preposterous of modern heresies, the childishness of a young nation, are held accountable for persecuting those who hold an ephemeral dream in their hearts, the poets in their midst. But are they to blame?
Baudelaire, never in awe of contradiction, remarks that the tragic plight of the poet is due to the machinations of the devil. The crime of modern society, he intimates, lies in the refusal of the notion of hell. Man's "natural wickedness," as Poe had put it, is called by him "natural perverseness," for, he asserts peremptorily, "nature makes nothing but monsters."23

Divine providence was absent from Vigny's or James Thomson's universe. The metaphysical and social conditions imposed upon man were thus weighted with especial harshness upon the chosen few—the martyrs of beauty. But Baudelaire is more Manichean. He prefers to detect and indict, but also pay tribute to, the adversary who challenges God and often appears more powerful than the Creator. In the opening poem of the first section of Les Fleurs du mal, derisively entitled "Bénédiction," the mother who brought the future poet into the world revolts against the Creator. She swears to wreak her revenge upon the wretched child. Still, the plight of the poet is past pointing an accusing finger against society. He is his own victim, prisoner of the haunting visions conjured by his febrile imagination, oppressed not so much by man as by the futility of man's world: "Le poète apparaît en ce monde ennuyé," bored and detached, more than ostracized, a loose link in the chain of the universe, contemplating an impossible dream of light and beauty. Pain is his lot, as well as solitude and despair:

—O douleur! ô douleur! Le Temps mange la vie
Et l'obscur Ennemi qui nous ronge le cœur
Du sang que nous perdons croît et se fortifie!24

A dichotomy lives here, a scission between man and his genius, tyrannized one by the other, unreconciled both to the pangs of humanity and to art's exacting solitude. Baudelaire pictured himself as reaching "the autumn of ideas," with scant hope of nurturing new flowers endowed with mystical vigor in his garden of decrepitude. Ridiculed, paralyzed, frozen in his captivity amidst men, the poet is, in effect, immobilized: "Exilé sur le sol au milieu des huées / Ses ailes de géant l'empêchent de marcher."25 The poet's nightmare is his obsession with sterility or, as Mallarmé was to lament, the inability to bridge the gulf between too pure and lofty an ideal and the language and rhythm of the poem written "sur le vide papier que la blancheur défend."26 Revolt itself is delusive. If, still in the romantic tradition, Baudelaire sees the poet as a noble "Prince des nuées," he recognizes that he is caught in a vise that is neither social nor political, but metaphysical. Gradually, he became convinced that "from all eternity" he himself had been chosen to be one of the damned.

In 1846, at a time when Baudelaire still felt confident that willpower was not a mirage for him, that it was indeed within reach, he denied—in "Conseils aux jeunes littérateurs"—the poet's inescapable fatality. Only six years later, however, he was to compose "Le Guignon," one of the least original sonnets in
Les Fleurs du mal but indicative nevertheless of the poet's tragic acceptance of his fate. The tercets were literally translated from the famous churchyard elegy of Thomas Gray, and the quatrains are indiscreetly close to a stanza from Longfellow's "Psalms of Life." Yet the unabashed borrowing seems to emphasize, rather than diminish, the artist's age-old plight—the madness, the futile rebellion and feverish pursuit of the unattainable that were, from time immemorial, his only inheritance in life. The "accursed poet" is, after all, a far-removed progeny of Sisyphus, even where he may have lost, through the ages, some of the vigor, of the unquenchable and desperate thirst for the absolute of his great ancestor:

Pour soulever un poids si lourd,
Sisyphe, il faudrait ton courage!
Bien qu'on ait du cœur à l'ouvrage,
L'Art est long et le Temps est court.  

The very act of creating is here imbued with despair, with the apprehension that the task is beyond the frailty of man. The measure of art is infinite, and the poet's allotted time is limited to a mere life's span. The name "guignon" of the title stems from the verb guigner, which suggests casting an envious eye—thereby bringing ill-luck—on the person envied. With Baudelaire that ill-luck turns into a destructive force, relentlessly bent upon undermining and deriding all velleities for beauty.

The forces that overwhelm the accursed poet are often incarnated in the demon. "Sans cesse à mes côtés s'agit le Démon" is Baudelaire's first verse ("La Destruction") in his section devoted to evil. The devil may at times be alluring and assume the shape of "la plus séduisante des femmes," only to wage greater injury to the defenseless lover of beauty and thrust him within a destructive vortex. Cherished fancies, enchanting visions of love and grace, the enticing smile of an ideal woman—all vanish in cruel mockery within a landscape of horror and desolation. A swarm of wicked demons pounces upon the poet (in "La Béatrice") and derides, in grotesque gestures and sneers, "cette ombre d'Hamlet imitant sa posture." The pride of creative inspiration, it is intimated, could be far greater than the hurt elicited by taunting words. The poet could dismiss the insults that plunge him among historians and fools. He could avert his gaze and seek the shape of his dream beyond the horizon of both men and devils. Such was indeed the protective mechanism of Hugo and Lamartine, of all the romantics oppressed by a reviling social order: to cherish their own visions, in spite of and beyond all scorn of man. But the dream has itself become a mockery, and the poet's muse and venerated idol now stands among the jeering devils. I could have looked elsewhere, he admits,

Si je n'eusse pas vu parmi leur troupe obscène,
Crime qui n'a pas fait chanceler le soleil!
La reine de mon cœur au regard nonpareil,
Woman is no longer the vampire of decadent romanticism nor the Messalina of old. Her image is here hauntingly overcome by the poet’s own barrenness, by his despair and insufficiency in the universe of creation. Later, in “Epigrapher pour un livre condamné,” Baudelaire bids his readers desist from trying to understand his book, unless they have been schooled by Satan himself. For Satan, we now surmise, is none other than the poet’s own malediction.

The concept of the poètes maudits—certainly not a new one by the time Verlaine’s essays were published initially in 1883—was immediately recognized as one that had long existed. The notion of accursed poets was now applied retrospectively to artists of earlier times. Verlaine thus happens to have originated one of the most widespread critical myths of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Outside France, across the Channel, this myth aroused the most lasting, and often the most heartrending, echoes. Verlaine and Villon were long the favorite French poets of the British (the two names were often put together), perhaps because they seemed free from the eloquence associated with French poetry. Articles and poems by Verlaine appeared in England. In 1899 Arthur Symons devoted to Verlaine the fourth chapter of his volume The Symbolist Movement. This proved influential as a disseminator of the creed of the French symbolists. It also introduced the concept of the poètes maudits. The first maudit to be recognized as such was perhaps Ernest Dowson. Only two years younger than Symons, he died at thirty-three. A drug addict, an insatiable drinker, a poor and sick man, perhaps a homosexual, fascinated by sordidness and prostitutes, he lived a life of malediction. Thoroughly familiar with the poetry of Baudelaire and Verlaine (he translated the latter’s verses into English), he survives mostly through one poem of his own, “Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae,” with the haunting refrain, “I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.” Reminiscent of Baudelaire’s “Une nuit que j’étais près d’une affreuse Juive,” his verse is even closer to Verlaine’s in imagery and rhythm. A victim of his own weakness, Dowson did not parade his malediction but bowed to it, without cynicism or remorse, knowing that there was no place for him in the world.

If Verlaine’s felicitous phrase of the “poètes maudits” was able to claim so many past and present poets among the disciples of gloom and neglect, that is because the phenomenon had been for some time a widespread one. He himself was neither a theoretician nor the “prosateur étonnant” he recognized in Rimbaud. His essays offer only superficial analyses of the six poets he chose to exemplify as those victimized by a curse: Corbière, Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Villiers de l’Isle-Adam, Desbordes-Valmore, and “Pauvre Lélian” (the anagram for Paul Verlaine himself). The most important element to emerge from the volume is the emphasis given to the poet no longer as an Olympian force among
men but as a discordant note within a scornful society. Three years after the publication of *Les Poètes maudits*, Verlaine wrote *Mémoires d’un veuf*, a collection of sketches that echo the poet’s alienation from the world about him. Clearly inspired by the great Baudelairean “Spleens,” he evokes, in “Corbillard au galop,” the vision of a hearse and an increasing sense of doom: “Dans ce corbillard, il y avait un cercueil recouvert d’un drap noir, sans broderies, ni croix, ni couronnes, ni rien; un cercueil avec un drap noir dessus et derrière, personne. Personne derrière.”

The swift passage of the hearse galloping toward its destination elicits a moment of pause. Who is there in that coffin, poor and already forgotten, with not a tear to accompany him to his last abode? All answers seem uncertain, until a name, more like a sob, surges from within and rings true: “Un poète!” he exclaims. He sees himself in the place of the other, rigid and silent at last, his fists tight and powerless and his mouth gaping in a soundless cry: “moi, vieilli, poings crispés,—crispés?—entortillé à la diable d’un linceul trop étroit.” Where the Baudelairean anguish had appeared as a private domain, the helplessness of the individual caught in his own hell, Verlaine stresses the plight of the artist rejected by society, misunderstood and languishing in solitude. The physical and spiritual agony of Baudelaire’s “de long corbillards, sans tambours ni musique, / Défilent lentement dans mon âme” becomes exteriorized in the vision of the actual coffin speeding by in “Corbillard au galop.” The mood is less forceful and suggestive than that of the older master. Baudelaire’s tormented vision is replaced by meditative considerations on those despotic forces that crush and humiliate all hope in the poet.

Replete with an overwhelming sense of despair are some of the poems from *Sagesse*, written at the time of Verlaine’s imprisonment in Brussels, when his own tragic perplexity made him measure all ephemeral reality against metaphysical needs. Muted cries of anguish now emerge from his verses:

```
Un grand sommeil noir
Pèse sur ma vie:
Dormez tout espoir,
Dormez toute envie. 30
```

The very first line evokes an abyss of nothingness: one thinks of Hugo’s hell (“Une chute sans fin, dans une nuit sans fond”). The bottomless fall is divested of all intimation of a distant paradise shrouded behind dark clouds. Not a flicker of hope relieves this endless present. The bleak days ahead resemble heavy, dreamless sleep. The short five-syllable verses with alternate rhymes are halting, terse, lulling:

```
Je ne vois plus rien
Je perds la mémoire
Du mal et du bien...
Ô la triste histoire. 31
```
The syncopated rhythm of the first three lines, each falling heavily on the last word, becomes distended in the fourth. The initial “Ô” is arresting here and balanced at the end by the lengthening sound of “histoire.” The association dictated by the rhyme “mémoire”-“histoire” is one of almost cynical gloom, which plunges all recollection into an impersonal and lifeless chronicle of time past. The concluding stanza conveys to despair the shape of a crib suspended upon a chasm:

Je suis un berceau  
Qu’une main balance  
Au creux d’un caveau:  
Silence, silence!

Ageless, in this image of infancy rocked by the hand of fate, the poet stares at the immense squalor around him. Half-imploringly he reaches toward the implacable stillness and bids that the wordless void be echoed only by “silence.”

With that half-naïve, half-malicious cunning that was his, Verlaine pictured himself as “that accursed one who will have had the most melancholy fate . . . due to his innate candor and to his incurable indolence.” He delighted in displaying his own contradictions, which served him as a pretext for addressing himself “parallèlement,” to both pious readers and salacious ones. Several of his most moving, and most artistically successful, poems are those in which he carefully cultivates his naïveté and appeals to his readers as a victim of fate. Character itself becomes part of the poet’s inescapable fatality, just as it had been with the Greeks of classical time. Flesh is the symbol of his own tragic dimension, the temptation that drives him away from celestial visions: “la tristesse, la langueur du corps humain.” It is, indeed, inescapable fatality that holds him prisoner of its yearnings and reduces him to a doubting, languorous prey of the demons of desire. Unashamed of tears, lamenting a curse that condemns him from within, Verlaine was able to give grief the dimensions of beauty and fallibility the mournful echo of man’s condition:

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

One of the poets whom Verlaine attempted to vindicate was a woman, Marceline Desbordes-Valmore. Baudelaire had presented her, not without a few reservations, in an article of La Revue fantaisiste of 1 July 1861. He, who had been so harsh on George Sand, praised Marceline for having been a woman poet, and a touchingly sentimental one at that. Her merit was to be found, according to Baudelaire, in her having elicited “hysterical tears” from her admirers without resorting to feminine or social poses. Marceline, we know,
never took pity on herself, nor did she lay her heart bare with complaints of society's indifference, in the way that Musset, Baudelaire, and Verlaine indulged. She evoked sorrow as a lover might a lost mistress, nostalgically, in doleful and unrecriminating verses:

Que mon nom ne soit rien qu'une ombre douce et vaine,
Qu'il ne cause jamais ni l'effroi ni la peine,
Qu'un indigent l'emporte après m'avoir parlé
Et le garde longtemps dans son cœur consolé.\(^{37}\)

Feminine indeed, in the tradition of sacrificial candor and “renouncement.” Yet Verlaine’s sketch of this sad poet, and of the lyrical desolation of her verses, did not quite succeed in spreading her fame. Corbière fared somewhat better; we know him, in fact, in great part thanks to Verlaine.\(^{38}\) But the one poet with whom Verlaine was able to score a critical success remains Mallarmé.

Mallarmé was only twenty when, under the sway of Baudelaire, he published his own “Le Guignon.” Here too, ill-luck appears as a powerful and venomous tyrant, “un Ange très puissant / Qui rougit l'horizon des éclairs de son glaive.”\(^{39}\) The diabolical angel whips and mocks the helpless poet who “nurses upon pain as he had on his dream.”\(^{40}\) Fourteen years later, when Mallarmé composed his “Tombeau d'Edgar Poe,” the sword (“le glaive”) no longer appeared as a threatening weapon brandished by the tormenting angel. In a less pessimistic view, it now became the attribute of the poet himself, emerging victorious and almost sanctified after the common man’s vain attempts at persecuting him.

To what degree Mallarmé can truly be considered a *maudit* remains open to question. His life was not desperate or oppressed, either by dire poverty or by total neglect. Verlaine’s choice of names for his volume—and the inclusion of Mallarmé’s—was, possibly, more an effort at bringing recognition to a few poets than at pointing to them as singular victims of an ineluctable fatality. Verlaine never gave us a clear definition of what constitutes a *poète maudit*, and his lack of precision may result from both the fluidity of the concept and its longevity. We are free to classify among them not only those poets who lived in torment and at the mercy of fiendish forces, but also the artist who struggled in the effort of giving life to his creation—as in the case of Mallarmé—or the restless youth pursuing his own chimera, with pride more than with anguish—as did Rimbaud. We should perhaps distinguish between the poet and the poem of the accursed. But such restrictive canons might deprive the concept of its suggestiveness and mysterious beauty. They might also remove, from the opaque periphery of the *poètes maudits*, the artist’s vaguely delineated anguish that reaches above and beyond personal interest, wisdom, or glory and craves for an absolute.

Not many poets in this second half of the twentieth century read Verlaine’s
articles on the poètes maudits. A growing number of them, and of scholars and students, have been increasingly appreciative of his best verse. But, above all, the myth that he bequeathed to us when he coined the phrase has not perished. Poetry was intermittently honored and rewarded in the Soviet Union, for instance. Alexander Block and Maiakovsky hailed the 1917 revolution as the coming of a new era. We then heard of the suicides of several Russian poets, of the martyrdom of the greatest woman poet among them, Anna Akhmatova. Poets in America have been assisted by foundations, welcomed as bards-in-residence at many universities, published in a number of magazines, and granted prizes. Still, some of them, from Hart Crane to Sylvia Plath, chose exile from society and from life. The post–World War II years in France were a period of renascent optimism, of economic growth, and of generalized social and financial help to the underprivileged and to the struggling youth. Yet no poetical anthology makes gloomier reading than the Poètes maudits d’aujourd’hui, compiled and published in 1972 by an editor-poet, Pierre Seghers. Of twelve poets represented, seven committed suicide, three at the age of twenty-nine (Jean-Pierre Duprey, Gerald Neveu, Roger Rivière), one at thirty (J. P. Salabreuil), one at forty-one, jumping from a bridge into the Seine (Roger Milliot), and two in their early forties, fleeing “the scandal of being,” as Seghers put it (André Frédérique and Ilarie Voronca). They were all desperate seekers of the absolute. The wretched existence of one of their elders, Antonin Artaud, dead in 1948 at fifty-two after wrestling with drugs and derangement, is well known. Haunted by other maudits, he had written of Poe, Nerval, Rimbaud: “I want their poems to become true, and life to be freed from the books and the theater and the religious mass which hold it captive and crucify it.”

Between Verlaine’s maudits and their unfortunate descendants of 1946–70 there had been the surrealists. They too had their martyrs, unconverted to the creed of love and faith in the “lendemains qui chantent.” Michel Leiris attempted suicide twice. René Crevel succeeded, in 1935, as had Jacques Vaché in 1919 and Jacques Rigaut in 1929. Paul Eluard, who survived them, declared in his “Poetic Evidence”: “Sombre are the truths which appear in the work of true poets; but truths they are and almost everything else is lies.” The creed, repeatedly asserted by André Breton, implied refusal of the social, political, and even metaphysical conditions stringently imposed upon man’s life. They glorified themselves on the malédiction that struck all poets.

A tradition has by now been established. The poet’s self-pitying attitude is accepted as standard and even unavoidable. Few are the poets who proudly disclaim any right to compassion for their sublime sorrows. Most recently one of them, the Nobel prize laureate of 1977, Vicente Aleixandre, spurned all commiseration that might be lavished on him with the warning, “above all do not consider me a ‘poète maudit.’” The curse of the poet, whether accepted as
a patrimony or haughtily rejected, remains a form of identification and a springboard for all artists.

1. Horace Epistles 2. 2. To Julius Florus, line 103.
5. Alfred de Musset, from the collection Poésies nouvelles, dated 1850. The poem itself, "Après une lecture," dates from 1842 (stanza 19, line 3).
10. Stéphane Mallarmé, "Brise marine." First published in the Parnasse contemporain on 12 May 1866, the poem was most likely written a year earlier, as a letter from Eugène Lefèbvre dated May 1865 seems to attest. See the 1945 Pléiade edition of Mallarmé's Œuvres complètes, p. 1430.
The Myth of the Poètes Maudits

32. Ibid., lines 9–12.


34. Sagesse, part 3, poem 5, line 1.

35. Ibid., poem 6, last strophe.

36. I shall not discuss here the merits of Desbordes-Valmore as a poet. Undoubtedly she belongs to the group of the maudits. Yet Verlaine was not sufficiently discriminating, perhaps, and made too much of her by placing her in context with the other poets included in his study.


38. See Robert L. Mitchell’s Tristan Corbière (Boston: Twayne, 1979), which places that poet in the proper light. (An entire chapter is devoted to “Malediction and Poetry” in nineteenth-century France.) My essay deals only with the general concept of the maudits, both in France and abroad. Only a few poets have been given significant attention, chosen mostly from among those less recognized in the framework of the accursed. I shall not discuss Villiers, whose originality resides mostly in prose works—plays, novels, and tales. Verlaine’s treatment of Mallarmé and Rimbaud was, moreover, wholly inadequate, but that was probably unavoidable at the time, when no one could yet evaluate the true nature of those poets. Discussing them further might crush them under the weight of our present view and appraisal.


40. Ibid., line 16 (my translation).


43. Vicente Aleixandre, interview reported in Le Monde, 10 December 1977 (my translation).