

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

French Language and Literature Papers

Modern Languages and Literatures, Department  
of

---

October 1999

## Foreword to Gayle A. Levy, *Refiguring the Muse*

Marshall C. Olds

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, molds2@unl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/modlangfrench>



Part of the [Modern Languages Commons](#)

---

Olds, Marshall C., "Foreword to Gayle A. Levy, *Refiguring the Muse*" (1999). *French Language and Literature Papers*. 37.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/modlangfrench/37>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Modern Languages and Literatures, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in French Language and Literature Papers by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

## Foreword

Marshall C. Olds

In the study that follows, Professor Levy explores the historically grounded topos of the Muse figure as it was developed by poets in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is a movement of renewal, and one that could occur in large part because of a revolution in thinking—both poetic and social—about issues related to gender and representation. She has asked that I write a brief foreword, which I am happy to do with an observation prompted by reading her book.

The blind Phaeacian bard, Demodocus, brought Odysseus to tears with his songs of the Greeks' struggles in Troy. Of him, Odysseus remarked to his host, and then to the poet himself:

From all who walk the earth our bards deserve  
esteem and awe, for the Muse herself has taught them  
paths of song. She loves the breed of harpers."

[...]

"I respect you, Demodocus, more than any man alive—  
surely the Muse has taught you, Zeus's daughter,  
or god Apollo himself. How true to life,  
all too true... you sing the Achaeans' fate,  
all they did and suffered, all they soldiered through,  
as if you were there yourself or heard from one who was.  
(Fagles trans., VIII, 538–551)

So, for blind Homer, who himself must follow the story of "the man of twists and turns," the Muse provides sight and insight and teaches "the paths of song," that is, she opens the poet to the poetic nature of his language. Such are requisites not only for unflinchingly precise representation but also for the treatment of high subject matter. In Homer's day, this meant telling of the immortal gods and of exemplary human destinies.

In the early modern world, the Muse was already a convention that spoke of earlier times and of higher purpose. For Du Bellay, that earlier time was often expressed through images of lost youth, as when he wrote:

Oy sont ces doux plaisirs, qu'au soir sous la nuit brune  
 Les Muses me donnaient, alors qu'en liberté  
 Dessus le vert tapis d'un rivage écarté  
 Je les menais danser aux rayons de la lune?

But that now that is no more: "Et les Muses de moi, comme étranges, s'enfuient."

Being "all too true" is still possible (the shift to lyric subjectivity made this inevitable), as is knowing the poetic capacity of one's language. What is lost is high subject matter. In its stead is the subject matter of lamentation, of that loss and the meditation on how to recuperate it through the medium of poetry. Such is the drama of Mallarmé's "sterility," which was not a paralysis in front of the blank page, but an inability to regain a poetic past, that "ciel antérieur" where Beauty flourished. This past is not only that of the platonic ideal; it is also an historical past as yet uninfluenced by modern consciousness.

In his discussions of the contemporary poetic scene, Mallarmé was always careful to lay its beginnings at the feet of Verlaine, that master of rhythmic variation and of capturing the sense of the most ephemeral of passing phenomena. The semantic uses of language were depreciated in favor of the material aspects of words themselves, and poetry had no resource other than this weakened vocabulary that could only evoke faded notions from earlier days when, even then, these same notions were already worn thin. Literature had imploded upon itself and had nowhere to turn except to itself. This is perhaps one way of understanding the anger of the young Arthur Rimbaud, sick with the ancient parapets of Europe, a vantage point offering more of an imprisoned view than a liberated one. His Orphic descent of *Une saison en enfer* would not lead him to "la vierge folle" (Verlaine); his Eurydice would be found in a new understanding of the self. In the *Illuminations*, it would be the *Génie* who gallops ahead and yet with whom the Prince must merge. Rimbaud sensed, perhaps with more urgency than his predecessors, that the key to recapturing the high subject matter of myth lay in retrieving that past, out of reach for Du Bellay, where the Muse was not a faded convention and where the paths of song again led to men, and women, "of twists and turns."

Lincoln, Nebraska  
 May 1998