Matthew Arnold

Matthew Arnold (1822-1888), English poet, whose work is representative of Victorian intellectual concerns and who was the foremost literary critic of his age.

Arnold was born in Laleham, Middlesex, the son of Thomas Arnold, famous headmaster of Rugby School. Matthew Arnold was educated at Rugby and at Balliol College, University of Oxford, where, in 1843, his poem “Cromwell” won the Newdigate prize.

After a period teaching the classics at Rugby, Arnold served as an inspector of schools from 1851 to 1886. From 1857 to 1867, he was also professor of poetry at Oxford. Arnold visited the Continent repeatedly in the interests of education and journeyed twice to the United States as a lecturer, in 1883 and 1886.

A meditative, elegiac tone is characteristic of Arnold's poetry, notably “Empedocles on Etna” (1852), “The Scholar-Gipsy” (1853), “Sohrab and Rustum” (1853), “Thyrsis” (1866), “Rugby Chapel” (1867), “Dover Beach” (1867), and “Westminster Abbey” (1882). Arnold's philosophical despair and sense of isolation are best expressed in the following lines from “Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse” (1855):

Wandering between two worlds, one dead,
The other powerless to be born,
With nowhere yet to rest my head,
Like these, on earth I wait forlorn.
Despite his religious doubts, Arnold wrote several pieces seeking to establish the essential truth of Christianity against conventional dogmatism. He also defended culture against scientific materialism in his collection of essays *Culture and Anarchy* (1867-1868). Arnold believed that literature shaped culture, and he argued for England to become sensitized to art and to accept high standards of literary judgment.

**ASSOCIATION OF NIGERIAN CHRISTIAN AUTHORS AND PUBLISHERS**

**WRITERS WHO DEFENDED CHRISTIANITY**

**Caedmon**

Caedmon (650?-680?), considered the earliest of the Anglo-Saxon Christian poets. The only information concerning Caedmon is in the *Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation* (731), by the English theologian Saint Bede the Venerable. According to Bede, Caedmon was an illiterate herdsmen who had a vision one night and heard a voice commanding him to sing of “the beginning of created things.” Later Caedmon supposedly wrote the poem about the creation known as *Caedmon's Hymn*, which Bede recorded in prose. Bede further states that Saint Hilda, the abbess of a nearby monastery (now called Whitby), recognized Caedmon's poetic ability and invited him to enter the monastery as a lay brother. Caedmon spent the rest of his life at the monastery writing poetry on biblical themes. In the Bodleian Library at the University of Oxford is a manuscript containing the so-called Caedmon poems. It is now agreed that many of the poems in the Bodleian collection were probably written later than Caedmon's poetry. The only work that can be attributed to Caedmon is “Hymn of Creation,” which Saint Bede quoted. It survives in several manuscripts of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* and contains several dialects.
François René de Chateaubriand

François René de Chateaubriand (1768-1848), French writer and statesman, a pioneer of the romantic movement, most famous for his brilliant autobiography.

François Auguste René, Vicomte de Chateaubriand, was born on September 4, 1768, in Saint-Malo, Brittany. He entered the French army in 1786, and was in Paris during the early years of the French Revolution. Refusing to join the Royalists or the radical revolutionaries, he went to the United States in 1791 supposedly to search for the Northwest Passage. He traveled, however, only on the eastern coast. Chateaubriand returned to France in 1792 and fought with the Royalist army. Several months later, wounded and ill, he escaped to England (1793).

Returning to France (1800) under a false name, Chateaubriand found favor with Napoleon, who gave him a diplomatic post. He resigned and turned against Napoleon in 1804 upon the execution of Louis, duc d'Enghien. After the Bourbon restoration he was made a peer of France in 1815, ambassador to Britain in 1822, and minister of foreign affairs in 1823-24. He died on July 4, 1848, in Paris.

Chateaubriand was one of the most important French writers of the first half of the 19th century. He introduced new and exotic types of character and background, principally the Native Americans and scenery of North America, and emphasized introspection, generally of a pessimistic nature, as exemplified in his novels Atala (1801) and René (1802). These new literary elements mark him as a forerunner of the romantic period. In addition, in The Genius of Christianity (1802; trans. 1856) he asserted that Christianity was morally and aesthetically superior to other religions. This assertion profoundly influenced the religious and literary life of his time. Among his other important works are other defenses of Christianity, literary accounts of his travels in America, and his posthumously published autobiography, Memoires d'outre-tombe (Memoirs from Beyond the Tomb, 1849-50).
Cynewulf

Cynewulf (flourished AD750), Anglo-Saxon poet, possibly a Northumbrian minstrel. In his poetry, he is revealed as a man of learning familiar with the religious literature of his day. Of the works attributed to him, scholars generally agree that four are unquestionably his. These are religious works in Old English entitled *Ascension*, *The Fates of the Apostles*, *Juliana*, and *Elene*; the latter two are legends about saints. Other works attributed to Cynewulf include *Christ*, a three-part work of which *Ascension* forms the second part, and *The Dream of the Rood*. With Caedmon, he was one of the earliest English Christian poets.
T. S. Eliot

T. S. Eliot (1888-1965), American-born writer, regarded as one of the greatest poets of the 20th century. His best-known poem, *The Waste Land* (1922), is a devastating analysis of the society of his time. Eliot also wrote drama and literary criticism. In his plays, which use unrhymed verse, he attempted to revive poetic drama for the contemporary audience. His most influential criticism looked at the way the poet should approach the act of writing. Eliot won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1948.

*The Waste Land* appeared in the aftermath of World War I (1914-1918), which was the most destructive war in human history to that point. Many people saw the poem as an indictment of postwar European culture and as an expression of disillusionment with contemporary society, which Eliot believed was culturally barren. His work *The Hollow Men* (1925), based partly on unedited portions of *The Waste Land* manuscript, takes a similar view.

Following Eliot’s conversion to the Church of England in 1927, qualities of serenity and religious humility became important in his poetry. *Ash Wednesday* (1930) shows his sense of how emotionally destructive life can be, but also suggests that everyday suffering may have a purifying effect.
Kierkegaard

Kierkegaard, generally regarded as the founder of modern existentialism, reacted against the systematic absolute idealism of the 19th-century German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, who claimed to have worked out a total rational understanding of humanity and history. Kierkegaard, on the contrary, stressed the ambiguity and absurdity of the human situation. The individual's response to this situation must be to live a totally committed life, and this commitment can only be understood by the individual who has made it. The individual therefore must always be prepared to defy the norms of society for the sake of the higher authority of a personally valid way of life. Kierkegaard ultimately advocated a “leap of faith” into a Christian way of life, which, although incomprehensible and full of risk, was the only commitment he believed could save the individual from despair.
C. S. Lewis

C. S. Lewis (1898-1963), English critic, scholar, and novelist, best known for his books dealing factually or imaginatively with religion. Lewis was one of the most popular and influential modern defenders of the Christian faith. His series of “Narnia” books for children retells the Christian story in fairy-tale form.

Born in Belfast, Ireland, on November 29, 1898, Clive Staples Lewis was the son of a lawyer. He was educated privately and at the University of Oxford. During World War I (1914-1918) he served as a second lieutenant in the British army and was wounded, hospitalized, and finally demobilized in 1918, when he returned to Oxford to complete his degree. He received his bachelor’s degree in 1923 and his master’s degree a few years later. A fellow and tutor at Oxford from 1925 to 1954, he was subsequently professor of medieval and Renaissance English literature at the University of Cambridge.

Lewis’s career as a writer began with two volumes of verse published under the pseudonym of Clive Hamilton: *Spirits in Bondage* (1919) and *Dymer* (1926). His first major critical work was *Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (1936), which examines the connections between medieval literature and courtly love and established his scholarly reputation. His other major works in literary history are *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (1942) and *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* (a volume in the *Oxford History of English Literature*, 1955).

Lewis was better known to the general public, however, for books in which he examined and explained moral and religious problems. Reared as an Anglican, he became an atheist in his teens for personal and philosophical reasons and did not return to Christianity until his early 30s. His books and radio broadcasts appealed particularly to people who experienced religious uncertainties or who wished to see familiar beliefs stated in a fresh way. Works examining the beliefs of traditional Christianity, based in part on radio lectures he did for the British Broadcasting Corporation during World War II, included *Beyond Personality* (1940), *Miracles* (1947), and *Mere Christianity* (1952).
Thomas Traherne

Thomas Traherne (1637-1674), English poet and clergymen. Traherne was the son of a shoemaker. He was educated at the University of Oxford and ordained in 1660. *Roman Forgeries* (1673) was the only one of his works to be published in Traherne's lifetime. Traherne's verse style is characterized by a musical quality and strikingly original imagery. His most important prose works are *Christian Ethicks* (published posthumously, 1675) and the visionary *Centuries of Meditations* (first published 1908). A number of his manuscripts were discovered by chance in a London bookstall in 1896 and were published for the first time in 1903. Traherne's poetry is marked by a sense of rejoicing and it celebrates childlike wonder, which he valued.
Joost van den Vondel

Joost van den Vondel (1587-1679), Dutch poet and playwright, born in Cologne, Germany; for most of his life he lived in Amsterdam. Although largely self-taught, Vondel became the outstanding poet of Holland's golden age. As a humanist, he rebelled against the strict Calvinism of his day; later he converted to Roman Catholicism.

Vondel's first successful play, Het Pascha (The Passover, 1621), and his early poems were the result of his study of classical drama and poetic theory. Lyrics from his subsequent plays are considered the finest poetry in the Dutch language. His adaptations of classical Greek tragedies, masterpieces of the high baroque style, are actually concerned with the search for Christian faith. They were accompanied by a parallel series of original tragedies—among them Hierusalem verwoest (Jerusalem Laid Waste, 1620); Jeptha (1659); and a trilogy: Lucifer (1654; trans. 1917), which is considered to have influenced the English poet John Milton, Adam in Exile (1664; trans. 1952), and Noah (1667). Medieval Dutch traditions shaped one of his most famous plays, Gijsbrecht van Aemstel (1637).
Anne Bradstreet

Anne Bradstreet (1612?-1672), American poet, born in Northampton, England. She was a daughter of Thomas Dudley, governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, and in 1628 she married Simon Bradstreet, who later became governor of the colony. A housewife with eight children, she was also the first important poet in the American colonies. Her poems were published in 1650 as *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America*, which is generally considered the first book of original poetry written in colonial America. Through it she asserted the right of women to learning and expression of thought. Although some of Bradstreet's verse is conventional, much of it is direct and shows sensitivity to beauty.

Bradstreet’s most deeply felt poetry concerns the arduous life of the early settlers, and her work provides an excellent view of the difficulties she and her fellow colonists encountered. She wrote several poems in response to the early deaths of her grandchildren, and her “Contemplations” (1678) explores her place in the natural world. Bradstreet also used her poetry to examine her religious struggles; she was unable to embrace Calvinism completely. “The Flesh and the Spirit” (1678) describes the conflict she felt between living a pleasant life and living a Christian life, and “Meditations Divine and Moral” (written 1664; published 1867) recounts to her children her doubts about Puritanism. Although Bradstreet addressed broad and universal themes, she is remembered best for her body of evocative poems that provide intimate glimpses into the home life of inhabitants of colonial New England.
Leo Tolstoy

Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910), Russian writer and moral philosopher, one of the world’s greatest novelists. His writings profoundly influenced much of 20th-century literature, and his moral teachings helped shape the thinking of several important spiritual and political leaders.

Leo Nikolayevich Tolstoy was born into a family of aristocratic landowners at Yasnaya Polyana, the family estate south of Moscow. His early education came from tutors at home, but after the deaths of his parents in the 1830s he was raised by relatives. Tolstoy entered Kazan’ State University when he was 16 but preferred to educate himself independently, and in 1847 he gave up his studies without finishing his degree.

Tolstoy’s next 15 years were very unsettled. He returned to manage the family estate, with the determination to improve himself intellectually, morally, and physically and to better the lot of his peasant serfs. After less than two years, however, he abandoned rural life for the pleasures of Moscow. In 1851 Tolstoy traveled to the Caucasus, a region then part of southern Russia, where his brother was serving in the army. He enlisted as a volunteer, serving with distinction in the Crimean War (1853-1856).

Tolstoy began his literary career during his army service, and his first work, the semi-autobiographical short novel Detstvo (1852; translated as Childhood, 1886), brought him acclaim. A series of other stories followed, and when he left the army in 1856 he was acknowledged as a rising new talent in literature. Tolstoy was never comfortable in the literary world, however, and in 1859 he returned to Yasnaya Polyana to manage the estate, set up a school for peasant children, and write about his progressive theories of education.
Irving Layton

Irving Layton (1912-2006), prolific and outspoken Canadian poet, noted for his exuberant and unconventional poetry, which was designed to challenge the conservative temperament of mid-20th-century Canada.

Israel Lazarovitch was born in Târgu Neamț, Romania. A year later he immigrated with his family to Montréal, Québec. Layton was raised and educated in the same thriving Jewish community that produced literary talents such as A. M. Klein, Mordecai Richler, and Leonard Cohen. He earned a bachelor’s degree in agriculture in 1939 from Macdonald College (part of McGill University) in Sainte-Anne-de-Bellevue, Québec. He served in the military from 1942 to 1943, and in 1946 he received a master’s degree in economics and political science from McGill. Layton then taught high school and college in Montréal and was a writer-in-residence at various Canadian colleges and universities. From 1969 to 1978 he was a professor at York University in Toronto. He later returned to live in Montréal.

In the 1940s Layton became a central figure in Montréal’s literary circles, and in 1945 he published his first collection of poems, Here and Now. During that period, he was closely associated with the literary magazine First Statement and First Statement Press, both edited by John Sutherland. Layton broke with Sutherland in the early 1950s. Soon after, he cofounded Contact Press with fellow poets Raymond Souster and Louis Dudek. The press lasted from 1952 to 1967. He contributed both creatively and editorially to these presses, and he often appeared in the Canadian media. These factors helped to cement Layton’s literary standing. His popular acceptance was capped by the success of his poetry collection A Red Carpet for the Sun (1959), which received the Governor General's Literary Award.

In his early work and public appearances, Layton often spoke out against those he designated 'philistines,' namely those establishment figures who sought to limit free expression. His poetry broke social and literary taboos by celebrating the physical, the irrational, and the sexual. It was collected in volumes such as The Cold Green Element (1955) and The Improved Binoculars (1956).

In the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s Layton aggressively reevaluated his Jewish heritage. His collections from that period, including For My Brother Jesus (1976) and The Covenant (1977), generated controversy for their uncompromising attacks on organized Christianity. Later works, such as Europe and Other Bad News (1981) and The Gucci Bag (1983), returned to more personal, but no less socially charged, themes. From the 1950s through the early 1980s Layton published an average of a book of poetry per year. In addition to this massive poetic output he also wrote essays, gathered in collections such as Engagements: The Prose of Irving Layton (1972), and a memoir, Waiting for the Messiah (1985). He was made an Officer of the Order of Canada in 1976. See also Canadian Literature.
Voltaire

Voltaire quickly chose literature as a career. He began moving in aristocratic circles and soon became known in Paris salons as a brilliant and sarcastic wit. A number of his writings, particularly a lampoon accusing the French regent Philippe II, duc d'Orléans of heinous crimes, resulted in his imprisonment in the Bastille. During his 11-month detention, Voltaire completed his first tragedy, Øedipe, which was based upon the Øedipus tyrannus of the ancient Greek dramatist Sophocles, and commenced an epic poem on Henry IV of France. Øedipe was given its initial performance at the Théâtre-Français in 1718 and received with great enthusiasm. The work on Henry IV was printed anonymously in Geneva under the title of Poème de la ligue (Poem of the League, 1723). In his first philosophical poem, Le pour et le contre (For and Against), Voltaire gave eloquent expression to both his anti-Christian views and his rationalist, deist creed.

A quarrel with a member of an illustrious French family, the chevalier de Rohan, resulted in Voltaire's second incarceration in the Bastille, from which he was released within two weeks on his promise to quit France and proceed to England. Accordingly he spent about two years in London. Voltaire soon mastered the English language, and in order to prepare the British public for an enlarged edition of his Poème de la ligue, he wrote in English two remarkable essays, one on epic poetry and the other on the history of civil wars in France. For a few years the Catholic, autocratic French government prevented the publication of the enlarged edition of Poème de la ligue, which was retitled La Henriade (The Henriad). The government finally allowed the poem to be published in 1728. This work, an eloquent defense of religious toleration, achieved an almost unprecedented success, not only in Voltaire's native France but throughout all of the continent of Europe as well.