

📖 Topic Page: [Éluard, Paul \(1895 - 1952\)](#)

Definition: **éluard, Paul** from *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

(pōl ālüär'), 1895–1952, French poet. He was a leading exponent of surrealism. Among his volumes of verse are *Mourir de ne pas mourir* [to die of not dying] (1924) and *L'Immaculée Conception* (with André Breton, 1930). A member of the French resistance in World War II, éluard is revealed as poet and man of action in the verse of *Poésie et vérité* (1942) and *Au rendez-vous allemand* (1945).

Summary Article: **ELUARD, PAUL**

From *Encyclopedia of Erotic Literature*

1895–1952

French poet

Like Charles Baudelaire before him (truly the first French poet to mirror modernity, to struggle with the crisis inherent in portraying its always ready obsolescence), then Rimbaud and Lautréamont among the more prominent to follow in his footsteps, Paul Eluard was committed to the pursuit of freedom. Whether as a soldier witnessing firsthand the absurdity of World War I at the beginning of the twentieth century, as a Dadaist and Surrealist poet of the 1920s breaking or (re)making prosodic vessels to escape the tired constraints of convention, as a political activist flirting with and eventually embracing Communism in 1942 as a way to overcome the tyranny and terror of social injustice, or finally, as the lover of three of the more important companions in his life (Gala, Nusch, and Dominique, seeking to reposition woman at the center of an erotic cosmogony), he sang his song of liberty. Indeed, if Paul Eluard were to be remembered for no other reason, it would have to be for his lifelong commitment to *liberte*.

But early on he found that to liberate—to find a language to say something new in poetry not bound by tradition or rational thought, or by the smug rhetoric and *idées reçues* of the bourgeoisie—was a particularly difficult road to travel in the modern era. When, not long after the publication of his *Poèmes pour la paix* [*Poems For Peace*] (1918) and his discharge from the military, Eluard became a member of the Parisian literati (a Dadaist, a colleague of Tristan Tzara, Louis Aragon, André Breton, and Philippe Soupault, among others), he willingly and knowingly joined the ranks of an artistic cabal bent upon repudiating everything, even at the risk of denying or destroying itself. All too quickly Dadaism became a conformity of nonconformity and ran amok of its own derisive, contradictory logic. Spearheaded on the whole by a small contingent who discerned this impasse, Surrealism emerged from the confusion with Breton reconfiguring it in *Le premier manifeste du surréalisme* [*The First Manifesto of Surrealism*] (1924), promoting, in the words of Wallace Fowle, “total liberty in all human activities, including the activity of love” (*Age of Surrealism*, 144). It would seem, then, that Surrealism sought to sanction all forms of sexual experimentation, including perversion—not only as behaviors within the grasp of every human being but as generative sources of art. While this hardly proved to be the case for Eluard either literally (his relationships throughout his life tended to be traditional) or aesthetically (throughout his career, he treated love and its thematic congeners discreetly or indirectly, often associating them with “nature”), the possibility of creating a rift in timeworn taboos in order to access a superior reality—to liberate a *surreality* in which contradictions would cease to exist, in which lovers would exist as one— was more than enough to compel him to cast his lot with the Surrealist cause. He

became one of its tireless workers, contributing extensively to the movement's flagship review, *La révolution sur-réaliste*, as well as *Une vague de rêves*, its first collected publication. Likewise, he was a coauthor with Benjamin Péret of *152 Proverbes mis au goût du jour* [*152 Proverbs Adapted to the Taste of the Day*] (1925); with Breton and René Char of *Ralentir, travaux* [*Slow, Under Construction*] (1930); and with Breton again of *L'Immaculée conception* [*The Immaculate Conception*] (1930).

Paul Eluard found his true poetic voice in *Au défaut du silence* [*For Lack of Silence*] (1925), the collection *Capitale de la douleur* [*Capital of Pain*] (1919-1926), *Les dessous d'une vie, ou la pyramide humaine* [*The Underpinnings of a Life, or The Human Pyramid*] (1926), and *L'Amour et la poésie* [*Love and Poetry*] (1929). While drawing upon the subversive energy at the heart of Surrealism to craft what Fowlie has deemed “a new erotology” (146), an unwavering belief in the regenerative, destructively creative capacity of love, he began a slow, almost imperceptible stepping away from Breton and his poetics. (The final break occurred in 1938, when Breton insisted upon separating political activism, that is, an alignment with the French Communist Party and its hope for advancing humanitarian goals, from the revolutionary but isolationist nature of his concept of Surrealism.)

Through a series of short, prose-poem pieces devoid of any traditional prosody, *Capitale de la Douleur* conveys a general angst with respect to inhabiting a poorly made world besieged by perpetual war and degradation—a new form of what the Romantics in the nineteenth century called the *mal du siècle*. But in the long run, *Capitale* extols our fundamental need to love as well as be loved, to celebrate “the mystery wherein love creates and delivers” (“Celle de toujours, toute” [She of all times, all]).

Love in its largest meaning, in its emergence and immediacy, in its disruptively creative potential for opening out to the new, free, and unfettered, would be more than enough to convince Paul Eluard to pursue it in his literary and political endeavors until the very day he died— with an oeuvre exemplified by *La vie immédiate* [*Immediate Life*] (1932), *Facile* [*Easy*] (1935), *Les yeux fertiles* [*Fertile Eyes*] (1936, illustrated by Pablo Picasso), *Chanson complète* [*Complete Song*] (1939), *Donner à voir* [*Offering up Something to See*] (1939), *Poésie ininterrompue* [*Uninterrupted Poetry*] (1946), *Corps mémorable* [*Memorable Body*] (1947), and *Le Phénix* [*The Phoenix*] (1951).

In *Derniers poèmes d'amour* [*Last Love Poems*] (published posthumously in 1962), he has left us the following extraordinarily simple yet utterly profound summation of his lifelong voyage toward love and freedom: “Tu es venue la solitude était vaincue /... / J'allais vers toi j'allais sans fin vers la lumière / La vie avait un corps l'espoir tendait sa voile” [You came, the solitude was vanquished / . . . / I went toward you, ceaselessly toward the light / Life was palpable, hope unfurled its sail].

Biography

Born Paul-Eugène Grindel, in Saint-Denis, north of Paris on December 14, 1895. Only child of an accountant and a seamstress. After four years of study in Paris, entered a Swiss sanatorium in 1912 to treat a tubercular condition that would plague him for the rest of his life; at the same time met Helena Diakonova (Gala), whom he would marry in 1917 despite his mother's misgivings. Served in the army during World War I as a corpsman and an infantryman. Was gassed. After publishing *Poèmes pour la paix* in 1918 under the name of Eluard, surname of his maternal grandmother, he attracted positive critical attention from various members of the Parisian literati. Discharged in 1919, he became one of them, associating more often than not on a daily basis with Breton, Tzara, Aragon, Soupault, Picasso, Man Ray, Paul Klee, and Salvador Dalí, among others. In the next several years, he was an active

contributor to Dadaism and Surrealism, with individual poems as well as collaborations. Of particular note is *Répétitions* (1922) with Max Ernst.

After publishing *Mourir de ne pas mourir* [*Dying from Not Dying*] in 1924, which he felt would be his last work, Eluard began a ménage à trois with his wife and Ernst. This arrangement brought on the wrath of his father, who was still supporting him at that stage in his life. Eluard ran away and traveled the world, only to meet up with Gala in Singapore seven months later.

He published *Capitale de la douleur* in 1926, considered a major contribution to his commitment to poetry and the role that love was to play in it. Joined the French Communist Party. When his father died in 1927, Eluard enjoyed a brief inheritance that was squandered in slightly less than four years. Divorced Gala in 1930, after which she quickly became Dalí's muse and companion until her death in 1982. In that same year in which his divorce was finalized, he met a young and beautiful Maria Benz (Nusch) and fell head over heels in love, as detailed in *La Vie immédiate* [*Immediate Life*] (1932) and *Comme deux gouttes d'eau* [*Like Two Drops of Water*] (1933). Married her in 1934, but not before being expelled from the French Communist Party in 1933. Even though excluded from this movement, he continued to support what he felt was its potential for furthering the common good. At the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936, he tried to reconnect with the Communists through support for the Loyalists as the only viable means of countering the spread of fascism. With similar concern and activism, he joined the underground forces in Vichy France, resisting the Nazis at every opportunity through his poetry, pamphlets, and leaflets. He renewed his Communist ties finally in 1942. Then, after the liberation of France, he traveled extensively from 1944 on as its postwar cultural ambassador. Devastated by the sudden death of his beloved Nusch in 1946, he published in her memory *Le temps déborde* [*Time Overflows*], then *Corps mémorable* [*Memorable Body*] in 1947. At a conference for the World Peace Council held in Mexico in 1949, Eluard happened to meet Dominique Laure, who would become his third wife some two years later. He celebrated their love, its emergence and renewal, in one of the last books published during his lifetime, *Le phénix*. Struck down by a heart attack in September 1952, Paul Eluard died of heart failure two months later on November 18.

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