

SOME  
MODERN BELGIAN WRITERS  
A CRITICAL STUDY

G. TURQUET-MILNES

ifornia  
nal  
ty



THE LIBRARY  
OF  
THE UNIVERSITY  
OF CALIFORNIA  
LOS ANGELES

GIFT OF

WILLIAM A. NITZE

A. KROCH & CO  
BOOKSELLERS  
CHICAGO





SOME  
MODERN BELGIAN WRITERS.



SOME MODERN  
BELGIAN WRITERS.

*A CRITICAL STUDY.*

BY

G. TURQUET-MILNES

AUTHOR OF "THE INFLUENCE OF BAUDELAIRE,"

WITH

A PREFATORY NOTE

BY

EDMUND GOSSE, C.B.

NEW YORK:

ROBERT M. McBRIDE & CO.

1917.



Digitized by the Internet Archive  
in 2007 with funding from  
Microsoft Corporation



PQ  
3814  
T 862  
1917

CONTENTS.

	PAGE
PREFATORY NOTE. By Edmund Gosse, C.B. ...	vii.
THE RENASCENCE OF BELGIAN LETTERS ...	I
MAURICE MAETERLINCK ... ..	25
VERHAEREN ... ..	46
RODENBACH ... ..	74
CAMILLE LEMONNIER ... ..	86
GEORGES EEKHOUD ... ..	100
MAX ELSKAMP AND CHARLES VAN LERBERGHE...	113
THE DESTREÉ BROTHERS ... ..	129
COUROUBLE ... ..	150



## PREFATORY NOTE.

---

THERE is one advantage, or so we may whimsically advance, which Belgium may fairly place in the scale against the overwhelming weight of sorrows and impoverishments that the vindictive anarchism of Germany has brought upon her in this war, and this is the impression which her literature has made upon the intellectual conscience of the world. There were some of us who for twenty years and more have been aware of the riches and the complexity of Belgian literature; there were many who recognised the value of individual Flemish writers, such as Maeterlinck, and of later years Verhaeren. But the world at large did not perceive the importance of the literary art of Belgium as a whole, until the anger and pity of civilisation concentrated its gaze upon the moral qualities of that heroic nation. Then, by a very remarkable unanimity of critical opinion, the characteristics of Belgian literature began to be studied and observed. This observation and study still continue, and the little volume to which I have been asked to contribute a few words testifies to this continuance.

It seems like yesterday, and it is really more than a quarter of a century ago that, as I unfolded my daily *Figaro*, I perceived an opening leader in which M. Octave Mirbeau announced, with a blast on his golden trumpet, "The Shakspeare Belge" (24th August, 1890). That was the first word of Belgian literature for me, and, I doubt not for hundreds of other readers. M. Mirbeau's famous article was absurd; nobody less like Shakspeare than

the author of "La Princesse Maleine" exists, but the generous blast was loud and long, and the walls of our ignorance fell down. Yet another landmark in my initiation into the spirit of Belgian poetry came in 1896, when I received the little volume of M. Max Elskamp entitled "Six Chansons de pauvre homme pour célébrer la semaine de Flandre," with its intense imagery, its symbols taken straight from daily life, its series of highly-coloured pictures. Here, one said to one's self, is something which is national, not derived from France, peculiar to the soil of Flanders; this must be looked for elsewhere, since this is evidently a Belgian product.

Immediately, it was found, in the magnificent and melancholy early volumes of Verhaeren, who had already printed "Les Villages illusoires" and "Les Villes tentaculaires"; in the ardent romances of Camille Lemonnier; in the gravity of M. André Fontainas' "Les Estuaires d'Ombre"; in the sumptuous and Rubens-like efflorescence of the young poets who wrote in the "Parnasse de la Jeune Belgique," now already a treasure for which book hunters are ready to barter their immortal souls. Branching out of this vigorous Flemish stock, there was found also a shoot of unearthly delicacy and purity, a sort of annunciation lily springing from the stem of a damask rose, the peculiarly spiritual and almost evanescent poetry of which the "Chanson d'Eve" of the lamented Charles Van Lerberghe is the transcendent example. These two strains, as it seems to me, are those which are most characteristic of modern Belgian literature, and of those the subsequent pages aim at giving a detailed account.

EDMUND GOSSE.

# SOME MODERN BELGIAN WRITERS.

---

## THE RENASCENCE OF BELGIAN LETTERS.

---

### MAX WALLER AND LA JEUNE BELGIQUE.

HITHERTO critics who have studied the Belgian literary movement have agreed in assigning to the year 1880 the revolution in Belgian letters which gave them the right to be ranked with other modern literatures. But when we ask what were the causes of this revolution, no one seems able to satisfy us fully on this point. Most writers attribute the creation of Belgian literary life to Max Waller. We will presently render full homage to the gifts and enthusiasm of this writer, who died all too soon for the glory of Belgian letters. But may we not at once declare that had he not found among his comrades minds in an extreme state of fermentation, he would not have been able to bring his audacious enterprise to such a successful head. In 1883 a banquet was organised by him in honour of Camille Lemonnier ; a banquet of which the fame spread so far that, according to critics, it marks a new era. Still Camille Lemonnier had to exist before the younger generation could fête him at a banquet and find their

own souls in the heat of the battle against the Philistines. It is constantly being said that before this time literary life was non-existent in Belgium, and M. Henri Liebrecht goes as far as to say of the new movement: "It was a revelation which the country at first regarded with a distrust which hampered all those who were working in these difficult moments: some died in want, like Waller; others, like Rodenbach, went into exile in Paris; the others struggled on courageously, without respite, and without hope of recompense."

That is relating history from too romantic a point of view. Max Waller died of typhoid fever complicated by heart disease and his consumptive tendencies. As for Rodenbach, his exile can hardly be called one, for if he was well received in Paris, he remained to the last popular in Belgium. The only unkind note comes from one of his comrades, Jules Destrée, who credits him with "la prudence d'un lapin blond."

We admit that for a long time the Belgian bourgeoisie rebelled against all intellectual culture, in that it is like many another bourgeoisie. When Camille Lemonnier writes: "I assure you that at the time when Baudelaire visited Brussels, and even a long time afterwards, these ideas would have appeared singularly paradoxical," no one imagines that it would be otherwise to-day. The idea that, say, rhythm and style are the movement of a mind in correspondence with the universe, is an idea which will never enter the head of the ordinary plain honest bourgeois who is very much taken up with his business, and whose relaxation is a game of dominoes with a glass of beer in a café.

At first Belgian literature was a tributary of the French; then fortunately for it, the Belgian bourgeoisie had the marvellous good sense to create the sons who

were to bring in the new times. The 1880 explosion can only be understood when considered in the light of an outburst of bourgeois temperament, nourished for a long time on wine and solid joints; as the ebullition of an acrid sap flowing with the too generous Burgundy which fills Flemish cellars. A race which has always well liked eating and drinking let itself go unrestrainedly in this exaggerated forced work, which might be called the *kermesse* of literature. The style of these writers is a kind of must or strong "maitrank," a bouquet of highly flavoured essences, which was calculated to set off a new way of life full of flamboyant colours. Side by side with the profound belief in themselves which is necessary to young men who are about to revolutionise the world, went a pessimism which is the more entertaining for concealing a delightful optimism, for this undergraduate society had a splendid faith in its kind, and was perfectly convinced that it would bring the whole world round to its way of thinking. Of course these sons shocked their forefathers very much: they were told they would all meet with a criminal's end on the scaffold. That is always the way in which fathers disinherit their sons: "*à père avare fils prodigue.*"\*

The first cause to alter the face of Belgian literature was the "Deux Décembre." All those ardent French republicans who fled from "la tyrannie," and dreamed only of battles for liberty; men like Victor Hugo, Quinet, Charras, Girardin, Hetzel, Bancel, Ranc, Deschanel, W. Burger, were bound to stir up the somnolent atmosphere in which the Belgian bourgeoisie was curled up like a dormouse. They brought with them

---

\* We have purposely left aside consideration of such writers as André van Hasselt, Octave Pirmez, and Charles de Coster. Too much importance has already been attached to these men, interesting though they be.

some of the restlessness which was then disturbing the whole world; and however one may be tempted to criticise them, one is bound to recognise that they had all the ardent aspirations of 1848, the longing for the ideal and the faith of every sound socialist. They were the sowers of the good seed, admitting that the Belgian republicans were the tillers of the soil and prepared the way for them. The younger minds with whom they came in contact could not but feel at their approach, that violent shaking-up, that heart-shock which determines a whole life. We have an absolutely trustworthy witness here in Camille Lemonnier, from whose *La Vie Belge* it would be well to quote many pages—

“Au lendemain du banquet Hugo, Eugène Pelletan écrivait : ‘après avoir passé la frontière de Belgique, j’aurais volontiers embrassé cette terre de liberté.’ Il ajoutait : ‘Placée au confluent et sur le passage de tous les courants de races et d’idées, la Belgique participe à la fois de la France, de l’Angleterre, de la Suisse et de l’Allemagne.’ . . . Ce fut en Belgique comme une petite France qui se mit à remuer les esprits . . . Deschanel créait la conférence au Cercle artistique. Pascal Duprat et Challemel-Lacour donnaient des cours publics. Madier-Montjau professait à la fois à Bruxelles et à Anvers. Baune, Bourzat, Duluc, Laboulaye avaient des auditeurs et des disciples. Bancel d’une voix d’or enseignait la littérature à l’Université libre.” (*La Vie Belge*, p. 77.)\*

The second cause of this literary movement lay certainly in the Belgian social impulse, and on this subject M. Louis Bertrand (the Belgian deputy) should be read, and the thousand and one pamphlets of the Belgian socialist party studied in order to get an idea of all the splendid efforts towards self-knowledge that Belgium has made since 1830. This effort on the part

---

\* It is impossible to insist too strongly upon the importance of this book, which is as interesting as any novel. The descriptions of Baudelaire, of V. Hugo, Dumas and Proudhon are unforgettable.



of the lower classes to educate themselves was aided by the great event of 1870: the Franco-German War. But not at all in the way one would probably expect. Doubtless Sedan made Lemonnier write *les Charniers*: but who can estimate all the influence which the Franco-German war, with its maxim "Might is right," had upon men like Jean Volders, the great socialist pamphleteer and orator, that mystic with fever-flushed, emaciated cheeks?

At bottom this second cause is linked up with the first. The great social revolution always goes back to the great literary revolution—to Rousseau, aided by all the "sensibility" of his age; first Richardson's, then Chateaubriand's, then Madame de Stael's, and finally that of the German Romantics. Rousseau's success was his popularisation of a new sensibility composed of charity and kindness which had been awakened for some time past in the French genius, but which only a very few artists had been able to express. Man was no longer conceived as Descartes had conceived him: as a machine endowed with reason, an automaton governed by his disciplinary intelligence, but as an instinctive being, who came the closer to the Divine in proportion as his accesses of joy or sorrow transported and disordered him, more or less. It is almost the attitude of the Arab towards the madman, the holding the "maboul" sacred.

All society, and all literature, as is well known, underwent a similar upheaval in their way of understanding life and feeling the universe. Literature and society—if they became immoral in their exaltation of passion, in their placing of virtue above all in the nobility of a heart free from all constraint, rather than in any observance of rules—became also religious and socialistic in that they praised above all the most

unrestrained pity contained in the Gospels, and claimed for the simple, the poor in spirit, the defiled, the prodigal, the courtesan the glory of being potentially pure heroes and saints. It is obvious that such a literature was bound to appeal to the deep feelings of the Belgian people. "The French blood which has flowed beyond the frontier was productive of a fraternal humanity in Belgium. France passed over like a great warm current of the world and fertilised the dull clay . . . The public spirit rose to a wider conception of a nation's part in a people's life."\*

In this way every great French writer became the most trusted authority of the younger Belgian generation. But it must also be remembered that for some time back the French genius had been influencing Belgian painters, and above all the genius of Alfred Stevens and Braekeler and Charles de Groux, before it animated the work of Félicien Rops and Constantin Meunier.

There is also a very important factor which should not be forgotten, though it is very rarely mentioned—I mean the wealth of Belgium and the abundance of remunerative work. Paradoxical as it may seem, it is nevertheless true that it is only when the bourgeois classes have plenty of money and are happy that their thoughts turn to socialism. That fact is verified by the French Revolution, and by what happened in England before 1914, and by what happened in Belgium in September, 1830. It is constantly said that the Flemish provinces had been prepared for the practice of freedom by the communal franchise. That is true, but it should be remembered that when the Brabant people rushed into their revolution, they did it as if they were getting

---

\* Lemonnier : *Vie Belge*, p. 146.

up a kermesse, "firing their guns between two games of piquet-voleur." "When the day was ended, still black with powder, men went off to the cabaret to shell eggs and swill their pints of faro. It might be said that there was a great deal of literature in this popular drama in several acts and four days." \*

If those were fine days for writers, if, above all, the Belgian bourgeoisie came out so well and in such courageous light, with men like Edouard Ducpétiaux (who later became famous for his care for the public weal, and celebrated in history for the stratagem to which he had recourse in order to avoid surrender to the Dutch army), † it is because this cunning and this heroism came from fine honest men with money in their pockets, but so jealous of their rights that they took up arms and died cheerfully to defend them.

Once King Leopold was on the throne, Belgian prosperity seemed to take a fresh start. History can never insist too much upon the plethora of life, the influx of wealth then prevailing, just as it can never tell enough how comfortable life was in Brabant before 1914.

It is in no wise intended in these short notes to describe the local customs, the kermesses which were the outcome of the Belgian need to arrange themselves in collectivities (Baudelaire said of Belgian life, "*On ne s'amuse qu'en bandes*"), any more than it is intended to speak of those Brussels and Flemish cabarets which for a long time were real political institutions. The most that we mean to imply is that Flanders was

\* Camille Lemonnier.

† He substituted a blank sheet for the act of submission which the Committee of Public Safety were sending to the Prince of Orange.

thinking, feeling and enjoying herself collectively, amply, happily, expansively, in a great wave of contentment. And it was in the midst of all these materialistic preoccupations, among these men so well content with life, that there fell the bombshell of 1880. All this ardent, joyous, rich life of their fathers was to lead up to that 1880 school of mystical poets and decadent writers.

But since "one is always somebody's son," it is clear that these young writers had to turn to some country which would give them the keynote, the tonic, and help them to modulate their song. They turned to France, because their hearts were really French.

At that moment in Paris the naturalist school was at the height of its power, and Zola was its high priest. After reading *Le Maître*, Daudet wrote to Lemonnier, "Come! At my house you will see Flaubert, Goncourt and Zola. You are one of their family." But the surprising thing is that this young school: Max Waller, Albert Giraud, Ivan Gilkin, Hannon, Rodenbach, and the rest, did not turn to these naturalistic deities. They went to the poet who had most severely criticised their country, and placed him on the high altar of their literary temple, while they built side chapels to Leconte de Lisle, Banville, François Coppée, Catulle Mendès, and burnt a few grains of incense under the image of Cladel and of a young writer Joséphin Peladan.

The influence of Baudelaire was so extraordinary that it cannot be dismissed in a few lines; truly never did an author stamp a foreign literature with such a profound and clean imprint. This is a question I have already raised elsewhere. I will now quote a passage from a new and independent witness, M. Dumont-Wilden. "All the productions of this literary generation bear the same mark. What a deal of Baudelairism

there is in Giraud's *Hors du Siècle*, in Gilkin's *Nuit*, and in Goffin's poems! Were not also those desperate *Rimes de Joie* of the ephemeral Théo Hannon baudelairism? They had all experienced the pessimism, the lassitude, the nervous atmosphere, the subtle and powerful decadent perfume which comes from extreme romanticism. Some of them since those days have returned to other laws, but their souls were none the less impregnated with the charming seductive perfume. None of them escaped it, not the pure and tender poet Fernand Séverin in the melancholy charm of his *Poèmes ingénus*, nor Georges Rodenbach, who tried to teach Paris the morbid grace of Bruges."

On every page of *La Jeune Belgique*, that anthology of young passionate poets who, according to Lemonnier, "buvaient des coups de vin comme on eût bu du sang rouge," you will find the influence of that ultra-Parisian writer, who nearly twenty years before had lectured at the Cercle Artistique of Brussels for two hours to rows of empty seats.

Albert Giraud describes in his *le Scribe* how his hero Jean comes to remember that the idea of his book is really taken from a sonnet in *les Fleurs du Mal*. "No! he was not a plagiarist. Baudelaire's temperament was like his. The poet of *les Epaves* exercised a diabolical influence over him that no exorcism could cure. It seemed as though, by some weird mystification coming from beyond the tomb, Baudelaire were guiding Jean's hand when he wrote. No, he was not a plagiarist, it was Baudelaire who was robbing him!"

And this influence of Baudelaire makes itself felt upon the painters, not only on Charles de Groux and Rops (there it is obvious), but on men like de Braekeleer. Lemonnier, speaking of this last artist, says:

“He constantly spoke of Baudelaire; he hardly knew the poet, but in his opinion nothing had been written to excel the critical pages in *l' Art Romantique*. He would quote from memory whole passages.\*

How is one to explain this mark made by one man upon a whole generation of writers? For the readers who see in these young writers a set of swashbucklers just out of college and ready for any adventure, the explanation is simple enough. The pessimism of young writers is in inverse ratio to the price at which they value life.

For those again who see in these same writers nothing but devotion to an ideal, a feverish disinterestedness, an exasperation of feeling, it is quite natural that Baudelaire, whose sensorial equipment was strained and acerbated, and whose cerebral equipment was excited to a pathological degree, should impose himself upon minds which only sought to thrill, and to reflect and repercuss every vision and every sound—from the sun's rays falling athwart the wheat, to the nameless terrifying hue of the “spell-bound country”; from the sobs of despairing humanity, to the happy buzzing of the bees.

Possible as these explanations are, there is still a third which is preferable. It is this. The genius of Baudelaire was not purely French. If he belongs to France by reason of his love of clearness and order, and all that is deductive and volitional in his æsthetics, by all that is acute in his psychology, he is Germanic, both in that kind of mystic philosophy which is found in his writings, and in his taste for the horrific, strange and mysterious. There is in him a good deal of the philosophy of Werther and Faust: of that theory that

---

\* Lemonnier: *La Vie Belge*, p. 181.

humanity is made up of victims struggling vainly against a cruel destiny. His most profound theory of correspondences is to be found also in Coleridge—

And what if all of animated Nature  
Be but organic harps diversely framed,  
Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,  
At once the God of each and breath of all . . . .

That is because both poets drew from the same pantheistic source, drank from the same misty metaphysical cup.

The *macabre* power of Khauber, of Holbein, and of Rethel is to be found in Baudelaire, as well as side by side with certain thoughts of Goethe, something of the philosophy of Schelling, Novalis and the German Romantics: these are the secret armoury of some of his finest poems.

The penetration of Baudelaire's spirit into the Belgian spirit came about then, because he had allowed himself to be filled with the atmosphere of his time, and because there was in him a fusion of two natures, just as with the Belgians, thanks to their bilingualism, there are two influences at work: the Germanic and the French. It is hardly necessary to add that a physical or intellectual mongrellism is no hindrance to originality. On the contrary, the professors of Eugenics teach us that cross-breeding is necessary to strength.

Side by side with this influence of Baudelaire must be placed that of France herself and all her great nineteenth century writers, and above all that of writers like Huysmanns and Descaves, who, being persecuted in Paris, published their first books in Brussels. Huysmanns, whose family was originally Flemish, always seems to have had a special corner in his heart for Belgium. He it was who first made known the Belgian poet Théo Hannon (a Baudelairian, if ever

there was one), for whom Rops drew a frontispiece, representing a man hanged in a garret, which would have rejoiced the heart of Aloysius Bertrand. France appeared then, to a whole generation of eager youth, like a vast ocean inviting them to embark on entrancing voyages. One might have thought that the "jeune Belgique" would have been rivetted to the shore with amazement, but nothing of that kind happened. They dived into the great French waves, let them pass over their heads, then reappeared swimming in the open sea, masters of themselves and of the element which might have been their destruction.

And they were original. Men like Verhaeren, Maeterlinck, Rodenbach, Mockel, Eekhoud and the rest, have been able to bring to light all that is obscure and inexpressible in the life of their soul: that is why it is they who have created the true symbolism. It is only the Belgian poets who have really put its principles into practice, albeit the principles are by no means new, since Saint Paul tells us that the visible must manifest the invisible. The other poets, men like Henri de Régnier or Moréas, always drew luminous pictures with all the clearness typical of French work, for French art hates the vague, the "mist that makes things wonderful." Only the Belgian poets succeeded straight off in saying much more than they directly expressed, perhaps because they had none of the fear of appearing ridiculous which dogs the Frenchman's footsteps.

Hôpital! Hôpital au bord du canal,  
Hôpital au mois de juillet!  
On y fait du feu dans la salle,  
Tandis que les transatlantiques sifflent sur le canal.

It is clear that you must be in the right mood not to smile at these lines, and your Frenchman is a terrible



mocker. That does not alter the fact that these Belgian writers have the art of leading us into the human heart by the most mysterious paths. If their art is sometimes lacking in backbone, it is sometimes also only all the more mysterious for that.

If then we are to be asked what, in the final analysis, remains the characteristic feature of these writers we should say that it is neither Lemonnier's love of opulent and truculent life, nor Eekhoud's taste for violent colouring, nor Maeterlinck's mysticism and love of mystery, nor Iwan Gilkin's predilection for more or less abnormal feelings; it is not the ardent, tumultuous, just and passionate soul of a Verhaeren, it is not the fligree work and discreet *béguinage* lacemaking of Rodenbach, nor the gloomy shudderings of Van Lerberghe, nor Albert Giraud's gift of sumptuous and highly coloured imagery; neither is it the Rabelaisian imagination of Eugène Demolder, nor the Belgian humour of Courouble. It is a love of life rather than a love of form, a love of nature rather than a love of man: it is a vast lyricism, a power of improvisation which is to be found in each and all of these writers and which prevents them from working out a train of reasoning as closely as a Frenchman would, what M. Louis Dumont-Wilden calls "that *flou* in their reasoning which to a Frenchman seems almost treason, but which does not shock the Germanic mind."\* That is a

---

\* The Belgian writer, Jules Sottiaux, in his book, "L'Originalité Wallonne," says: "It would seem that in literature we have not this gift of clearness and logic, nor, for dramatic art the precise feeling for action, for the clear conception of well-managed plot. Octave Pirmez's *Heures de la Philosophie*, that admirable speculative dream of an introspective soul, comes much nearer to the German spirit than to the didactic temperament of the French. It is an essentially Walloon work.

"A French review reproached Henri Carton de Wiart's fine

feature which is to be found in Maeterlinck's philosophy, in Lemonnier's and Verhaeren's pantheism, in Eekhoud's paganism, and in the work of all their poets.

There is no school of writers better calculated to prove Bergson's thesis that any feeling is not the analysis of that feeling, but the feeling itself so absolutely irreducible that it may be compared to a passage in music which varies in pitch but never in nature. If we have understood him aright, that is what Bergson means when he says that whatever is pure duration excludes all idea of juxtaposition. The result is that emotion takes such complete possession of these writers' souls that they feel they are living an immense and vast life, and that the gigantic pulse of all creation is beating within them. And in this state of exaltation the world of ideas becomes visible to them and haunts them with apocalyptic visions. This inward outburst, this soaring towards something immaterial, limitless, undefined, generally embodies itself in the polyphonies of music, and Belgium has not lacked masters in that supreme art.

Now, this extraordinary state of mind has important consequences.

book, *La Cité ardente*, with being dull (terne). That is to say with being weak in colour and lacking in sharpness of outline. The Walloon soul is like that. Its dreams are attuned to the soft shades of our hills. It is the contrary of the French spirit, more artistic than literary.

"The Belgian cannot create a consistent character. That is on account of our inferiority in the logic of action. We are unable to detach from the plot the sum total of instinct, nor the depth of passions—in a word the complete man in his concrete personality.

"One impressive afternoon we heard Edmond Picard's *Charles le Téméraire* read by himself. There, again, the character is incomplete, and all the talent of the promoter of the *Théâtre d'idées* was powerless to overcome our inferiority in this respect."

*Jules Sottiaux, "L'originalité Wallonne," pp. 127-128.*

In the first place the emotional writer under the influence of this inward or external excitement falls into a state of transport which sublimates his imagination and his feelings; he exaggerates all he feels, his note is forced, his pictures become illusive, fiery or fantastic, morbid or weird. Verhaeren, for example, lets himself go like a man possessed and positively howls his joy or pain; his verse gushes forth like a pæan or jars like a death-rattle. With Eekhoud, Lemonnier, Demolder, there will always be a strain of excess, an extreme partiality for such or such an one of their characters, a certain want of moderation, and taste for the abnormal.

Secondly, the man who is always on tip-toe and always lyrical, not only cannot devote time to self-knowledge, but his soul is a continual renewal of sensations or impressions, it is in a perpetual state of becoming something else, a running stream. That leads to a certain want of reflection, a disarray of confused feelings together with a tremendous wealth of impression. It is not our intention to call these temperaments into court and hand the palm to the reflective logician over the head of the man of impulse. The faculty of directing one's sensations and ordering and arraying them is French, it is the distinctive mark of the logical French mind. But the other faculty, which is probably to most people more attractive, the power of giving oneself up to one's own emotion, letting oneself go freely, seems to characterise the great contemporary Belgian writers. With them it is the indication of the predominance of the affective faculties, or rather of the affective faculties given free rein by the will of the poet, who realises that in order to arrive at a knowledge of the Cosmos, to feel it as a *totality*, you need the magnificent complexity of every emotion and

not the miserable little perceptions of the French classic poets. Life is not a little brook of clear water, but a great rushing river which carries along in its waters gravel and mud, and the trunks of uprooted trees.

In the third place all these writers, who are always subjective, always preoccupied with life, are bound to be pantheists. Their attention is always held by the vast swarming of all things, by the vision of countless millions of orbs, of countless millions of beings moving in and partaking of one and the same substance. Hence you will find in them no severe, clear-cut, Greek lines, no classical architecture, but a misty vision of the known and unknown, which leaves to the reader the task of carrying on the poet's emotion by means of his own emotion. The writers' words are to be like so many stones falling into the deep, magic waters of our hearts and creating ever widening circles.

Compare, for example, a Henri de Régnier and a Verhaeren, and you will see at once the wide difference between the French and Belgian spirit. The two poets seem to belong to two different families of minds, although it must be noted they both class themselves in the so-called Symbolist school. The charm of the French writer comes from the clearness and precision of his pictures, from the well disciplined thought, the finely sculptured sentence. The beauty of the Belgian poet's work lies in the violence, the ferocity of his transports, the chaos of his vision, the hallucination of his mind.

At bottom all this Belgian art is an art of the Unconscious, or of the Subconscious, whichever name be given to the spontaneous, rather wild, elements of human nature. All the mysticism, the sadness, the capriciousness, the exaltation in the poetry of Rodenbach, or Maeter-

linck, or Verhaeren, or Van Lerberghe, or Max Elskamp, Grégoire le Roy or Mockel, is the very boundary line between the Conscious and the Unconscious, it is that most interesting elementary power infringing upon the life of the mind. Maeterlinck's characters are beings who watch themselves with tireless attention, and who have the feeling for the unknown developed to the highest possible point. But no one has ever said that his characters are real. Yet Grégoire le Roy has escaped from one of Maeterlinck's plays and goes through life with his finger on his pulse. He acts like a real Maeterlinckian marionette, like a simple machine, to an extent that would have rejoiced the heart of Descartes. The Belgian poets will always be remembered as those who, more than any others, have seen in us the immense contradiction between "a life delivered over to the caprice of the negligent and immeasurable forces which envelop us,"\* and passionate feelings for existence, feelings which long to enjoy to the full their freedom to dream. That is why they attach such enormous importance to the spontaneous, the contingent and the irrational. That is also the explanation of the instability, the *flou* of which M. Dumont-Wilden speaks, and which is to be found in the greatest of them. It exists in the indecisive souls of Maeterlinck's characters, and in his own philosophy. Thus, after arriving at his idea of the true sage who is equally master of himself and of the universe, knowing in his soul what events will become because "nothing happens to us which is not of the same nature as ourselves," he comes to believe in chance and contradicts all that his theory of the sage had just affirmed.

This contradiction goes even further, for on the one

---

\* Maeterlinck.

hand Maeterlinck, and those among poets who think, admit the modern evolutionist or utilitarian philosophy, and declare that the present state of our mind and conscience is due to a development continued for thousands of centuries; and on the other hand, true mystics as they are, they apparently give the value of an absolute reality to everything suggested by intuition, to everything suggested by an immediate feeling—feeling which, according to them, has not always existed, since it is due to evolution.

The contradiction underlying the pantheism of Verhaeren and others is equally grave: they preach to us two contradictory practices—in the first place to be as individualistic as possible, and in the second place to emerge from our individuality in order to penetrate into the great whole.\*

One cannot read too often an essay of Maeterlinck's called "Our Social Duty." It shows exactly whither the fluidity of his thought leads him, and we choose it because it also represents perfectly Verhaeren's thought.

*N'écoutons que l'expérience qui nous pousse en avant; . . . repoussons tous les conseils du passé qui ne nous tournent pas à l'avenir. . . . En tout progrès social le grand travail et le seul difficile est la destruction du passé. . . . N'hésitons donc point à user jusqu'à l'excès de nos forces destructives. . . . Et ne redoutons pas qu' on puisse aller trop vite.*

What does that mean? This. Leaving aside the obvious retort that such a doctrine favours full-blooded anarchy and preaches a general destruction of everything, it means this—that his philosophy was bound to end in eulogy of success. It is the philosophy of

---

\* It is doubtless this which permitted Stefan Zweig to say in his biographical study of Verhaeren, "And that other Germanic land, wherein Maeterlinck found his true fatherland, has become for Verhaeren an adopted fatherland"!

Hegel and of all the partisans of the universal-becoming doctrine, of all those who believe themselves to be Divinity in the act of creating itself. "Becoming" is the law of the world. God manifests Himself in a series of appearances, and destruction of everything is a mode of worshipping Him, for in that way He is procured many avatars. For the man who does not believe in Providence, the only possible attitude is that of Sainte-Beuve, who always refused to see in humanity the sign of any general direction.

But Sainte-Beuve was French. Maeterlinck is Belgian. That is what I wanted to show.

The literary spirit then existed in Belgium, but it was under control, and above all it was in danger of being stifled by the newspaper directors. The young writers had no organ, they could not make themselves heard. The editors who wanted "feuilletons," preferred to go to the great French novelists whom they paid, according to Lemonnier, from a thousand to twelve hundred francs a year! "In such circumstances, the Belgian writers, who would willingly have given their work for nothing, do not even achieve publication. If they complain to the editors, the latter gently shrug their shoulders and say, 'Qu' y faire? Il faut bien utiliser nos traités.' The author also shrugs his shoulders and says with the editors: 'Qu' y faire.'"\*

It was in the midst of such happenings that appeared a young man of twenty, audacious and witty: Max Waller, who founded the review called *La Jeune Belgique*. Eight other bold spirits grouped themselves round him: Albert Giraud, Georges Eekhoud, Charles Mettange, Rodenbach, Charles Gros, Maubel, Hannon, Arthur James. At the end of a year Verhaeren, Iwan Gilkin,

---

\* Lemonnier.

Jules Destrée, rallied to the same standard. Then this riotous, heroic squadron was reinforced by Hector Chainaye, O. G. Destrée, André Fontainas, Valère Gille, Arnold Goffin, Grégoire le Roy, Maeterlinck, Francis Nautet, Fernand Roussel, Louis Delattre, Fernand Séverin, Charles van Lerberghe. Then other reviews were founded : *L'Art Moderne*, *la Société Nouvelle*, *la Basoche*, *la Wallonie*. And little by little the public came out of its torpor.

Young Waller was absolutely the right man in the right place. There was something of Alcibiades about him : he meant all Brussels and Paris, too, to talk about him, and there was a good deal of rowdyism about the polemics in the *Jeune Belgique*. Coquelin came to Brussels to play *Chamillac* ; Waller hissed. Result, a much discussed quarrel. M. Louis Hymans gave a lecture at the Cercle Artistique of Brussels, in the course of which he declared that Naturalism was pornographic literature. Waller immediately wrote an open letter in the *Jeune Belgique*, summing up the French novel, beginning with Balzac, whom he defends, and concluding with these words : "What gives a book its beauty is its life and warmth, the more real the heroes are the more the reader can incorporate himself in them ; the truer they are, the more readily will he understand them." And thus were launched discussions of extraordinary bitterness.

In 1883 Camille Lemonnier was refused the quinquennial Literary Prize. Waller organised a banquet of protest. The results are well known. The day after the banquet Edmond Picard started a campaign in *L'Art Moderne* in favour of *l'art social* as opposed to the art for art teaching of the *Jeune Belgique*. Fresh and still more fiery battles. Then Waller decided to publish the *Parnasse de la Jeune Belgique*. Eighteen



poets collaborated in this collection : Van Sienberg, Paul Berlier, André Fontainas, Georges Garnir, Gilkin, Valère Gille, Octave Gillion, Giraud, Théo Hannon, Paul Lamber, Van Lerberghe, Grégoire Le Roy, Maeterlinck, Léon Montenaeken, Fernand Séverin, Lucien Solway, Helène Swarth, and Max Waller.

The *Parnasse de la Jeune Belgique* was one of the last manifestations of Max Waller's combative ardour—he was by now a very sick man. “He had been sinking for months,” said Georges Eekhoud, speaking at his friend's graveside in March, 1889, “we could see the carnal envelope slowly melting, but so sensitive, so keen was the blade within the crumbling sheath, so lively his mind, so valiant his soul, that it seemed rather that a metamorphosis, a renaissance was preparing in Max, and that he would emerge from this crisis the same dear, petulant, literary dandy, firmer and more intrepid than ever.”

Max Waller died young, like the heroes of Greek tragedy. What remains of him? This, in the first place : that he was the first to unite the young writers, he was the soul of his review, the sergeant of his little squad, and what a sergeant ! with his wild gaiety, and hiding under it the anguish of a man mortally wounded. His own output was of course small, seeing that he died at the age of twenty-nine. His poems, collected in the little volume *la Flute à Siebel*, are a mixture of bruxellois caprice and French grace and irony. Some critics, Heaven knows how, can trace a German influence in them. It is true that Waller stayed two years in Bonn with Professor Mazbach, and the influence of this visit is apparent in *Greta Friedmann*, a little novel in which Waller has more or less photographed the professor and his daughter. The hero of

the book is Waller himself, to whom he gives the name of Ferrias, and whom Albert Giraud calls "Cette fleur bleue du Rhin tombée dans un verre d'absinthe." But here again Germany plays a smaller part than France, and in particular M. Peladan, whose famous novel, *le Vice Suprême*, Waller parodied in *Lysiane de Lysias*.

The things that will live in Waller's work are his poems in *la Flute à Siebel* and a symbolical poem *la Fin des Choses*, and perhaps the posthumous novel *Daisy*.

Another part of this delightful fantaisiste's work which will remain is that side often, and wrongly, neglected: the chronicler of letters. A good example of his style is the following criticism of François Coppée—

Une nouvelle édition des Contes du *Royal-Gaga* qui a nom Coppée, nous fournit l'occasion de décharger notre conscience d'une admiration qui nous a trop longtemps habité. Il faut bien le dire, cet académicien d'hier, qui de nature a toujours été académicien . . . n'a jamais cessé d'être le petit épicier de Montrouge dont la mélancolie est à la hauteur des pains de sucre. . . . Ses vers, il les traduit en prose, une prose à l'eau de son, dans laquelle on a envie de se mettre les pieds; à les lire, on croit retrouver Droz en bonnet de coton, avec de la flanelle; art de foyer non pas, art de poêle qui fume dans une loge; art de ficelles, non, tout au plus de cordon; on flaire la soupe là-dedans jamais le potage, le lubin que les cuisinières mettent dans leur mouchoir de toile écruë, jamais la violette ou le moskari qu'on devine sans les sentir dans la discrétion de la batiste armoriée.

That is Waller at his best—not that we subscribe to his judgment of François Coppée, our aim was to illustrate the critic's style. All his life Waller was an excellent frondeur, a valuable censor of Belgian letters. There is some very good fun in his *Letter-box*, in which he replied to his would-be collaborators. M. Paul André quotes the following:—

Paul G. : Votre *méditation* a le tort de ne pas être de Lamartine, Salut.

Albert C. : Reçu vos vers. Essayez la peinture ou la musique : le succès est peut être là.

X. : *Chansons d'Ecole*. Nous préférons la carpe éolienne à la harpe, parce que la carpe a la réputation d'être un poisson taciturne.

As for the poet, he is like Jules Laforgue : the same *blague*, the same whimsicality of a young man who has read Baudelaire, but who nevertheless wants to enjoy life. Max Waller is a pale little winter sun who never dazzles himself, but plays in and out of the mists of his imagination. He may have been a dandy, a poseur, but he had too much irony to be his own dupe. One of the poems that best gives the idea of his style is that where he pipes—

Un air de flûte qui serait  
Plus chaste qu'un baiser de lame,  
Dans le jour au loin qui s'enflamme,  
Un air de flûte bien discret.

A tous les engloutis des ondes  
Mangés par les petits poissons,  
Une de mes minces chansons  
Pour leur faire danser des rondes.

Il est inédit, de mon choix,  
Un air à peine d' un quart d'heure,  
Et je le dédie aux anchois,  
Afin qu'ils en fassent leur beurre !

And here is another poem which shows his manner :—

Tout à l'heure j'irai voir si  
Les poissons nagent avec grâce,  
Et je nagerai sur leur trace,  
Car je sais bien nager aussi.

Je leur chanterai des ballades  
A la mode des décadents ;  
Mais les poissons sont si prudents !  
Ils auront peur d'être malades !

Ils fuiront me laissant seulet  
Dans la vaste demeure humide,  
Avec quelque nymphe timide  
Qui pleurera dans mon gilet.

Such a poetry is more than a literary caper: it is the attitude of a young man possessed of taste and wide reading, but who detests exaggeration. This *frondeur*, it must be remembered, is a regent of Parnasse: and if he likes gaiety, he loves moderation of gesture; if he choose a striking costume, on the other hand he loathes snobbishness, he laughs at all that is not natural, and knows that it is foolish to be puffed up about anything. If he feels elegiac, he becomes ironical, so as to remain moderate. It is not that he is devoid of feelings, but he distrusts them, hides from them lest they should lead him into insipidity. He is very jealous of his emotions, and tries to combine with the joy of feeling them the still stronger charm of suppressing them. Life is short, and he knows it: let cares and worries trouble him on all sides, nothing shall force him to tears; let us eat, drink and be merry, for to-morrow we die.

Entertaining as the poet is with his extraordinary aptitude for assimilating all manners, it must be admitted that the best of him went into the *Jeune Belgique*. He was its head from 1880-1889. While he was still a student at Louvain he was busy trying to group round him the future renovators of Belgian literature. It is only fair to add that he had the good fortune to find in his own family that material aid and moral encouragement, which settled not only his own future, but that of his review. All honour then to these old and good Belgian bourgeois, for they may claim the honour of having founded *la Jeune Belgique*.

---

MAURICE MAETERLINCK (*b.* 1862).

FOR most people the words "Belgian Literature" resolve themselves naturally into "Maurice Maeterlinck," and they proceed to name him poet, philosopher, dramatist, and mystic, as if indeed a variety of labels should serve to make a man seem an epitome of his race. Such classification is idle. It suffices to call Maeterlinck poet: and a great poet he is, even though his most purple patches are cut out of the solid material sold by the old-established firm Emerson, Carlyle & Co.; and poet he remains when, after having studied the ways of the bees and the flowers, he emerges as student and disciple of Nature, and sometimes as her child.

Maeterlinck's first published work was an account in prose of the Massacre of the Innocents. One of the doctrines dear to his heart is that of *premonition*. This little prose narrative of the Massacre of the Innocents, though the scene is laid in Nazareth, reads singularly like a poignant page from Lord Bryce's *Report on the German Atrocities in Belgium*. It were painful reading at any time—almost intolerably so in 1915! Previson? Who shall say?

"The Massacre of the Innocents" was followed by a volume of verse, "Les Serres Chaudes." Here we see Maeterlinck, the full-fledged young Parisian, offering the universe as a scheme of colour—

O cet amour *bleu* dans le cœur . . . . .

O les *glauques* tentations . . . . .

Quite Baudelairian! Blue is your love and sea green your temptations.

Mon âme est malade aujourd'hui,  
 Mon âme est malade d'absences,  
 Mon âme a le mal des silences,  
 Et mes yeux l'éclairent d'ennui.

J'entrevois d'immobiles chasses,  
 Sous les fouets bleus des souvenirs,  
 Et les chiens secrets des désirs  
 Passent le long des pistes lasses.

A travers de tièdes forêts,  
 Je vois les meutes de mes songes,  
 Et vers les cerfs blancs des mensonges,  
 Les jaunes flèches des regrets.

Mon Dieu, mes désirs hors d'haleine,  
 Les tièdes désirs de mes yeux,  
 Ont voilé de souffles trop bleus,  
 La lune dont mon âme est pleine.

There you have our modern troubadour escaping from the park of Watteau into the weird forest of a Gustave Moreau, and sounding the horn of a symbolistic huntsman to recall the pack of his memories and sorrows.

You catch the symbolistic note again and again. For instance, of *Les Regards* he says—

Il y en a qui semblent visiter des pauvres un dimanche ;  
 Il y en a comme des malades sans maison ;  
 Il y en a comme des agneaux dans une prairie couverte de  
 linges . . . . .

Others, he tells us, ressemblent—

A un jardinier devenu tisserand . . . .  
 Aux idées d'une reine qui regarde un malade dans le jardin . . .  
 A une odeur de camphre dans la forêt . . . . .

There is already the gift of phrase, that gift which later enabled him to write those wonderful sentences which read like a version of the Bible translated by Edgar Allan Poe. In the volume of verse referred to,

we find constantly a great verbal felicity: that of a laconic Roman inscription, but written this time by a playful Belgian boy, inking his eyebrows in his search for far-fetched similes.

The temper of these poems is the same pessimism which we find in the early plays. After all, it is far easier for the untried craftsman to be impressive if he mix a fair amount of gloom in his work. When you are young and happy you can go smilingly into the Cave of Despair, because you know that your fairy godmother will change it into a palace of gold. So children "dress up" as ghosts or coalmen to frighten their playmates. In literature the great game is to frighten and depress your fellows. It is only when a man is mature, when he has suffered and no longer believes in belief, that he finds the will and power to utter a message of optimism.

We come now to the plays, those highly mysterious plays, where all the characters are big children.

"Toute la philosophie," says Fontenelle, "n'est fondée que sur deux choses; sur ce qu'on a l'esprit curieux, et les yeux mauvais."

Maeterlinck's drama is also founded on the same thing; on the inquisitiveness of our mind and the deficiency of our vision. We want to know more than we see, and in Maeterlinck's tragedies there is always a door, a window, or a curtain behind which some portentous event is taking place, unseen of us.

Maeterlinck will ever be remembered as having invented a new stage accessory—Silence: "for silence is an element full of surprise, danger and happiness."

There was a time when the good simple folk of the pre-Victorian period thought that action was the essence of drama, and that speech was not only the expression of our soul, but also its guide, its good or

evil genius. Even a word spoken at random was like the stone thrown into a lake making ever-widening circles. But for Maeterlinck silence is everything. Language is for him a social perversion. Yet if we cannot use words, by what means shall we express the visions that arise within us? Maeterlinck reproaches our good homely words with being too clear, too precise, perhaps even too assertive. The same thing happens to words as to our relatives—they become terribly tedious with time. In any case, Maeterlinck found that he had to compromise. Silence, the last refuge of the complex, can be the privilege only of the millionaire. The poor author who would rule the world with his work must stoop to the use of words.

The plays fall into two groups, of which the first comprises *L'Intruse*, *Les Aveugles*, *l'Intérieur*. Here the poet has interpreted Reality not as Balzac does, nor as Flaubert does, but just as a worldly Wordsworth would interpret it.

Baudelaire said of Balzac's characters, "They are crammed choke-full of *will*." Maeterlinck's characters are in the same way crammed full of human subconsciousness, in so far as they are the incarnation of certain primitive feelings common to all men.

In the "Tragique Quotidien," Maeterlinck has written—

"The true artist no longer chooses Marius triumphing over the Cimbrians, or the assassination of the Duke of Guise as fit subjects for his art, for he is well aware that the psychology of victory or murder is but elementary and exceptional, and that the solemn voice of men and things, the voice that issues forth so timidly and hesitatingly, cannot be heard amidst the idle uproar of acts of violence. And therefore he will place on his canvas an open door at the end of a passage, a face or hands at rest, and by these simple images he will add to our consciousness of life which is a possession that it is no longer possible to lose."



The play called *Intérieur* is, as it were, a synthesis of this doctrine of Maeterlinck's. It introduces us to the new actor, Silence. In *L'Intruse* this Silence becomes anguish, and in *Les Aveugles* it becomes confused with physical fear, the sheer terror of presentiment, while the invisible powers whose puppets we are, are also present on the stage and play a speaking, albeit tongueless, part.

*L'Intérieur* is a tragic pantomime commented upon by some persons in a garden who are called an Old Man, and a Stranger. We are in a garden at night, in front of a house of which the ground floor windows are lit up. The family are gathered round the lamp. We see them distinctly: there is the father sitting beside the fire, the mother with a child in her lap, and the two sisters are sewing while they wait for *one who is expected*—and who will never come. Presently the Old Man and the Stranger come into the garden. The latter has found in the river the body of a young girl—of her who is expected. But they dare not enter the house. How could they go to tell of Death in such a peaceful hour? A crowd, however, is gathering. The family must be told, cost what it may. The Old Man crosses the threshold, and we see that he has spoken, for the whole family start up in horror.

Maeterlinck and his friend, Van Lerberghe, were the first to discover the *rôle* that presentiment might play in a drama. Another modern dramatist—a greater than either had he not been cut off in all his promise—J. M. Synge, recognising the beauty of their idea, made it in *his* work natural, but no less impressive. Synge had no use for marionettes; he worked with real Irishmen, but those Irishmen who feel that they are being hunted down by the hounds of Fate. That is why Synge's characters have a tragic grandeur which

Maeterlinck's lack: yet in *The Riders to the Sea*, as in *Deirdre*, presentiment is the real *leit-motiv*.

At the outset of *The Riders to the Sea*, old Maurya says of her son, who later on is brought in drowned: "He's gone now, and when the black night is falling, I'll have no son left me in the world."

That is much too explicit for Maeterlinck. For this sentence he would have substituted a dozen short phrases, mostly incomplete, and stretched our nerves therewith, as a dinner companion who never finishes what he sets out to say. One touch of Irish humour would have set all Maeterlinck's plays alive, would have banished the pall of gloom that hangs over them like the shadow of a dogging Justice in the Greek tragedies. But it would be idle to complain that a dramatist is Belgian and not Irish.

The second group of plays comprises the two masterpieces, "*La Princesse Maleine*" and "*Pelléas et Mélisande*." They stand in the same relationship to the *Intérieur* as the "*Tentation de St. Antoine*" does to "*Madame Bovary*."

In the first group of plays we have the work of a mystic-realist. In the second, in *Princesse Maleine*, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, *Alladine et Palomides*, and *La Mort de Tintagiles*, we have the work of a romantic, a romantic who has read and taken seriously that amusing letter which Prosper Mérimée put at the beginning of *La Famille Carvagal*.

These tragedies are good specimens of 1830 melodrama. Therein Maeterlinck is not working in the true French tradition—the work of carrying on *that* was reserved for Maurice Donnay towards 1890. Maeterlinck gives us underground caves, mysterious grottoes, massive doors, thunder and lightning, dogs howling, the sound of the sea, haggard and unkempt persons carrying lamps, omens, owls, weeping willows

—in short, all the melodramatic machinery. And yet —and yet Maeterlinck does not write melodrama. Why? Simply because this imitator of Ford and Webster is at the same time a disciple of Ruysbroeck, Novalis, Emerson and Hello. That is why his characters, who are continually groaning over the state of their own souls, and chattering with studied childishness, nevertheless say things which are deep and true, and which raise tragedy to a high level.

“I have kissed you but once up till now,” says the old King Arkel to Mélisande, “and yet old men need sometimes to touch with their lips the forehead of a woman or a little child, that they may still believe in the freshness of life and put aside for a moment the threatening of Death.”

And the old king at the end of the *Princesse Maleine*, after having seen the Queen and his son killed, and after witnessing the murder of the *Princesse Maleine*, says to the Nurse—

“We are going to have lunch ; will there be a salad ? I should like some salad. I do not know why I am sad to-day. God ! how unhappy the dead look !”

If you want to get at the souls of all these little princesses you must remember the words of the Old Man in *Intérieur*—

“No one can tell. . . . What can anyone know ? She was perhaps one of those who shrink from speech, and everyone bears in his breast more than one reason for ceasing to live. You cannot see into the soul as you see into that room. They are all like that, they say nothing but trivial things and no one dreams that there is aught amiss. You live for months by the side of one who is no longer of this world and whose soul cannot stoop to it ; you answer her unthinkingly, and you see what happens. They look like lifeless puppets, and all the time so many things are passing in their souls. They do not themselves know what they are. She might have lived as others live. She might have said to the day

of her death, 'Sir, or Madam, it will rain this morning,' or 'We are going to lunch; we shall be thirteen at table,' or 'The fruit is not yet ripe.' They speak smilingly of the flowers that have fallen, and they weep in the darkness. . . . Something must come into our ordinary life before we can understand it. And yet what a strange little soul she must have had—what a poor little artless unfathomable soul she must have had, to have said what she must have said, and done what she must have done."

There you have the power that saves Maeterlinck's plays—that faculty of looking on life with the singularly discerning eye of the mystic seeker after the melody hidden in all things. That is why his gloomy *macabre* dramas produce in his audience a kind of lyrical state of mind, in which joy really has its part.

As for *The Death of Tintagiles*, said to be Maeterlinck's favourite among his own plays, I am not sure whether we are even justified in calling it a "play." At all events it is very painful. Tintagiles, the child, returns from a far country to his three sisters, only to be taken away from them by order of the terrible old Queen—Death.

Who would not be moved when Ygraine pleads for Tintagiles? "He puts his little arms round your neck, his little mouth upon your mouth, and God Himself could not say him nay." Which of us can contemplate steadily the death of a little child and the gap created by the stilling of "clambering limbs and little hearts that err"? But the fact remains that the case of Tintagiles is pathos, not tragedy. Even so, Maeterlinck reaches a high level because his mastery of his own art makes us think of all the little martyred children in the world. In this sense, too, *The Death of Tintagiles* is full of poetic truth—far more so than the much vaunted *Monna Vanna*.

It is above all in the character of Maeterlinck's heroines—these sisters in a family of fragile and pathetic

sorrow—that the dramatist's philosophy stands best revealed. In a way, he has exalted woman, (he once said, "I have never met a woman who did not bring me something great,") and he has met with the reward one would expect. For women like to be exalted—even if they find the process rather tiring in the exacting demands of keeping up the pose. What Maeterlinck loves to paint in his female characters is those states of consciousness which are really the quicksands of the Unconscious. He has the power of describing that muffled compressed life which is part of the lives of all of us, and which suffers through impotence to formulate its dream. As M. Remy de Gourmont says: "His characters only know how to suffer, smile, love; when they want to understand, the effort of their restlessness becomes anguish, and the restlessness is lost in sobs." That is very true, but M. Remy de Gourmont should have gone further and shewn that with Maeterlinck we are in the fathomless world of the Unconscious, a world where all the laws of will and intelligence are, as it were, suspended, a mobile domain wherein events move a thousand times more quickly than on a cinematograph, and aim only at vibration like the waves of the sea.

Ablamore says to Alladine: "I thought you had acted, as nearly all of us act, without anything of your soul taking part." So also Palomides says to Astolaine: "Fate has stepped out towards me, or I, it may be, have beckoned to Fate; for we never know whether we ourselves have gone forth, or Fate has come seeking us, something has happened whereby my eyes have been opened. I recognised that there must be a power more incomprehensible than the beauty of the most beautiful face, the most beautiful soul, and mightier too, since I must perforce give way to it."

And Astolaine answers : " There must indeed be laws mightier than those of the soul whereof we forever are speaking."

Hjalmar in the wood says to Princesse Maleine :

" You are strange to-night ! It is as though my heart were laid open to-night. But I think that you are in truth beautiful ! But yours is a strange beauty, Uglayne. I feel I have never looked at you till now ! But I think that yours is a strange beauty ! "

That is what Maeterlinck wishes us to say to each of his characters, " You are strange to-night." And in order to help us, to put us in a state of receptivity, he is careful to lead us into a more or less imaginary country, generally to a castle close by a dense forest, beneath whose trees flows an enchanted stream, the depth of which no man can fathom. The period, too, is generally indeterminate in order to render the action still more mysterious.

But what the poet insists on above all is the connection between the setting and the actors.

In *L'Intérieur* a carpenter is hammering wood, a peasant is mowing down the grass—they are put in to accentuate the nearness of Death. In the same way, in *Princesse Maleine*, when Maleine is going to be strangled by the Queen, everything in her room seems to warn her of the danger and increase her terror. Pluto, the black dog, trembles till all the furniture shakes, the wind blows out the hangings of the bed, the woodwork cracks, the wind howls and tempest is let loose. When she dies, the lily in her room drops, little Allan knocks at the door and cries unceasingly : " Petite mère est perdue ! " The mill burns, and the lightning strikes the castle.

In the same way, in *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Mélisande involuntarily lets her wedding ring fall into an en-

chanted well, which almost seems to drag it from her finger, because at that moment *Mélisande* is, in thought, unfaithful to her husband.

Yet, as I said before, these dramas, infinitely gloomy and desolate though they be, do give us a very real pleasure. Perhaps it is precisely into those depths of our "human, all too human," nature, that Maeterlinck wants to probe. Therein all passions are purged, not only by pity and by terror, but by the reader's or spectator's own imagination. The mind loves to ponder over Maeterlinck's themes, to follow out his thoughts, while at the same time it is soothed and rocked on the wide ocean of human feeling with its inexhaustible capacity for joy and for sorrow.

His art is akin to the art of music, because, having found that thought is incommensurable with language, he tries to supplement the poverty of words, either by their repetition or by an abundance of images. Words have indeed been used so often that they are incapable of rendering the delicate evanescent impressions of our consciousness, of our tremulous sensations, unless one choose the most unexpected figures of speech and thus create a kind of atmosphere.

Bergson, in his *Introduction to Metaphysics*, has explained himself clearly on this point: "No image can replace the intuition of duration, but many diverse images borrowed from very different orders of things, may, by the convergence of their actions, direct consciousness to the precise point where there is a certain intuition to be seized. By choosing images as dissimilar as possible, we shall prevent any one of them from usurping the place of the intuitions it is intended to call up, since it would then be driven away at once by its rivals."

Charles Peguy was another who well understood

the importance of accumulating words in order to keep from betraying his fundamental emotion. Maeterlinck, long before him, had used this device, which is after all a classic device—La Bruyère always works with little touches added one to the other. That is the explanation of *Mélisande's* famous cuckoo-cry, "Je ne suis pas heureuse!"

Maeterlinck himself attributes his repetitions to his care for truth. Like Synge again, he learnt much from the peasants he lived among as a young man; and such is the manner of peasants, they ruminate, and while they ruminate they like to repeat the same words over and over again, not because they marvel at their own vernacular, but because their vocabulary is very poor. Indeed, we have all of us duties or ideas thrust upon us for which we have no words. "All the world's a stage" . . . yes, and full of tags.

Maeterlinck's favourite method is to take a series of images and link them up together—

Mais ces mains fraîches et loyales !  
 Elles viennent offrir des fruits mûrs aux mourants !  
 Elles apportent de l'eau claire et froide en leurs paumes !  
 Elles arrosent de lait les champs de bataille !  
 Elles semblent sortir d' admirables forêts éternellement vierges !

And Palomides says—

"There was a time when sorrow weighed on me. But now the days seem lighter and more gentle than the innocent birds that come and nestle in our hand. And if by chance one of the old moments returns to me, I have but to draw nigh unto Astolaine, and a window would seem to fly open and let in the dawn. Astolaine's soul can be seen—it is there; it takes you in its arms and comforts you without saying a word, as one comforts a suffering child."

And again—

Essayez vos désirs affaiblis de sueurs ;  
 Allez d' abord à ceux qui vont s'évanouir,



Ils ont l'air de célébrer une fête nuptiale dans une cave ;  
 Ils ont l'air d'entrer à midi dans une avenue éclairée de lampes  
 au fond d'un souterrain ;  
 Ils traversent un cortège de fête, un paysage semblable à une  
 enfance d'orphelin.

*Monna Vanna* (1902) and *Marie Madeleine* (1913) stand apart in Maeterlinck's dramatic work. In the *Cornhill Magazine*, 1899, Maeterlinck had written of an enlightened human consciousness which "will bow down before infinitely fewer laws, will admit infinitely fewer duties that are doubtful or harmful. It may be said that there is scarcely a falsehood or error, a prejudice, half-truth or convention, that is not capable of assuming—that does not really assume when the occasion presents itself—the form of a duty in an incomplete consciousness." *Monna Vanna* is the dramatic commentary of this idea. But the play is far less interesting than the suggestive study in the *Cornhill Magazine*. There is nothing very new in this grouping of husband, wife and lover. To be really original Maeterlinck should have made the husband a second Maeterlinck. I suppose he could not go as far as that. If he aimed at proving that no good action is perfect, and that in *Monna Vanna's* sacrifice feminine curiosity played its part—that is good psychology but un-Maeterlinckian.

The success of *Monna Vanna* throws a sidelight on the public which applauds Maeterlinck's plays. It is a public without sense of humour, or whose sense of humour must for the moment be in abeyance. It is a public of very great sensitiveness, but of little wit—a public which believes in nothing except in the beauty of its own sensations, and is the itinerant musician of metaphysics.

In *Marie Madeleine* I think Maeterlinck set out to

explain to us his ideal of love, for whilst Verus represents the love which is a disease, the love of a libertine, the love in which hatred, too, finds a place, the love, in short, which is to be found in every play because it leads up to murders and suicides, Mary Magdalene represents love which is charity, altruism and entire abandonment of self. Mary Magdalene's love is, above and before all, a child of the brain. Maeterlinck reminds us here of Pascal, who held that "Love creates wit and cannot live without wit." Nay, Pascal (or the author of the *Discours sur les Passions de l'Amour*) boldly declares that love and reason may be sisters: "l'amour et la raison n'est que la même chose." If it be so, there is only one object worthy of human love, and that is God. One wonders if Maeterlinck said that his very modern play might be taken as a commentary on the words of the stern Cartesian philosopher. Granting the tribute of such a comparison to Maeterlinck, we are at liberty to wonder whether it be possible thus to mix truth and fiction. Maeterlinck is a man of the twentieth century, such an one cannot recapture the terrible candour and holy naïveté of the first century in Palestine. No literature is equal to such an enterprise.

## II.

The secret of the peculiar charm of Maeterlinck's Theatre comes from the fact that he alone of modern dramatists has portrayed men as weak, fragile beings delivered over to the whims and fancies of the immense forces around them, and consoling themselves by the analysis of their impressions. They seem to spend their time with one finger on their pulse and another on their lips. Then all at once their creator becomes a moralist, the poet becomes an apostle. Did the author of *Pelléas et Mélisande* tire of his forests and

enchanted streams? In any case, he is now climbing his own Mount Sinai. It seems as if, being the contemporary of Dr. Charcot and of Maurice Barrès, and above all of Bourget, he also would like to have a fair clientèle bringing him their "cruel enigmas" to solve.

For many years he had been reading the mystics, translating them and meditating upon them, publishing selections from Ruysbroeck and *Fragments of Novalis*. One can follow in his books the development of his ideas from *The Treasure of the Humble*, to *The Buried Temple*, *The Life of the Bee*, and the *Intelligence of Flowers*. He wrote *The Treasure of the Humble* in 1896. His translation of Ruysbroeck's *Ornement des Noces Spirituelles* had appeared in 1891; the *Disciples at Sais* and the *Fragments of Novalis* in 1895.

In *The Treasure of the Humble* Maeterlinck tried to probe that obscure self which is in the depths of our being behind the conscious self, which directs and leads us, and which finds expression more easily in silent awe than in flamboyant words. A map of the soul which does not include the terra incognita of our sublimate self is not worth looking at, for it leaves out the burning bush in which God appears. One sees at once to what an extent such ideas recall those of Bergson. In this way Maeterlinck was naturally led to moralise. To be merely silent is not enough, one must live, and to live is to desire and to love. Such, I imagine, is the germ of *Wisdom and Destiny* which appeared in 1898. For the first time Maeterlinck is confronted with the problem of will. Up till now the marionettes of his plays had believed themselves to be irresponsible—thence their sombre pessimism. But now the creator of the static theatre has arrived at the cult of effort—the goal which any thinking man must necessarily reach. All thinkers, all creators transform spontaneity

into will, and instinct into intelligence. The true aim of every living being is to grasp the universe. Maeterlinck was led—following Emerson and Carlyle—to write pages where he shows that we are “gods who know not themselves” by the nobility of our daily effort. We only live in and through ideas. Such is in its essence the theory of Maeterlinck, the moralist. By effort he means the life of the *conscience* which creates the events of his universe. “As soon as the conscience awakes—a destiny begins.”

Maeterlinck reads the life of Emily Brontë and immediately uses it to show that this novelist, although she lived an uneventful life, was able to write the most passionate novel in literature. “It would have been necessary to live for thirty years in the most ardent chains to come to know what she knows, to dare to show us with certitude—that infallible certitude, the delirium of the two predestined lovers in *Wuthering Heights*.” Thus Maeterlinck proves that there is an inner life as well as the outer one, and that when the soul has risen to a certain height it can direct the universe.

The peculiarly interesting thing is that *idea* and *effort* are confused together in his mind; they are for him one and the same thing with different names. Fatality steps down from her throne bringing with her Resignation. The wise man is able to organise his life by his inner discipline. “The volition of wisdom, says Maeterlinck, has the power of rectifying all which does not reach our body in mortal fashion.” The wise man is master of himself, because “nothing happens to us which is not of the same nature as ourselves.” This is a favourite idea with Maeterlinck, who aims at bringing the whole universe into his philosophy, and leaving on his page a coruscation of stars.

If I understand Maeterlinck aright, he has arrived naturally at that modern French philosophy which declares that Life is Action. Thoughts only count, because they prepare the way for action and in the end pass into Reality. Good intentions, we know, are only the paving stones of the road that leads to Hell. Thus, unconsciously perhaps, he refutes William James's early theory, that the act of volition consists merely in putting aside a pleasing representation, and maintaining a disagreeable representation.

In other words let us not live upon expectation. Poor mortals who are for ever dreaming of a paradise! But unwise, stern Maeterlinck thus, with one bold stroke of the pen, to do away with the most feminine of our amusements, the most stimulating of our pleasures! His imperious moralist's nature leaves us only one comfort, that of hearing him improvise variations upon Carlyle's themes. But Vauvenargues rightly wrote one day, "Life without passion is death": we are not like those clocks whose works are balanced with such extreme niceness that they strike correctly even in spite of the most violent earthquake. Does Maeterlinck really hold that happiness is in our own hands? What of our constitutions, of the so-called lessons of life when we are the playthings of circumstance and pains and diseases of all sorts, when we are buffeted and tossed about by praises and sneers, plaudits and sarcasms? Virtue will help us, says Maeterlinck. Yes, doubtless, if we lived in the palace of delights which he has created for us out of magic words. Would to God that we still could be children living amidst flowers, fountains, doves and rainbows! "Placez Socrate et Jésus Christ au milieu des Atrides, et l'Orestie n'aura pas lieu aussi longtemps qu'ils se trouveront dans le palais d'Agamemnon." And yet . . .

and yet among the apostles there was one Judas. But why look for logic in others, when reasons, as Stevenson says, "like fisticuffs serve impartially with all sides?"

What then is Maeterlinck's conception of happiness? "To be happy is to have freed one's soul from the unrest of happiness," it is to be able to content oneself with the little which one attains and accomplishes. Man is wise and happy from the moment he has understood that the art of happiness is to keep to Life. Such a conception is founded upon the cult of moral effort. Maeterlinck is nearer the truth when he says man *must* seek happiness albeit not selfishly, but if a man seek the highest he will be happy. This is because the soul is ever thirsting after beauty, seeking it everywhere as its only food. "The soul is insensible to all that is not happiness. It is made only for infinite joy which is the joy of knowing and understanding." Hence it follows that sacrifice for the sake of sacrifice is a mistake, the principal thing in life is to realise yourself in the fullest and highest sense; "supreme virtue consists in the knowledge of what should be done, in the power to decide for ourselves whereto we should offer our life." "Before you exist for others, it behoves you to exist for yourself; before giving you must first acquire." Behold Maeterlinck worshipping at the shrine of Nietzsche; his coat, like the garb of Life, is many-coloured.

When we come to ask ourselves about the rôle played by Maeterlinck during the last twenty years, we see that he is really the interpreter of the philosophy of Bergson and of Boutroux. At a moment when the soul was a poor wandering exile, a kind of will-o'-the-wisp running to and fro without finding a resting place, Maeterlinck took her in and shielded her from

the darts of materialism and naturalism by wrapping her in the sheltering folds of his mantle of mysticism. In other words, he is the most brilliant expounder of what he himself called "la raison mystique."

His originality lies in the fact that instead of composing a more or less obscure theory of consciousness as Bergson did, he threw himself into the study of positive facts; he went to the armoury of Science herself to get a weapon to combat her adherents, he became an entomologist and botanist. He made himself a beekeeper, and his *Life of the Bee* will live because he has mingled poetry in it with the most accurate observation. When he shews us in the hive an existence which is as well policed, as complicated, as ingenious as our own, he gives us furiously to think. He also shews us that the life of a garden while differing from our own, nevertheless resembles it in many points. He is indeed a kind of St. Francis who has read Schopenhauer or Edmond Perrier; he is very near to speaking of his brother the fire, or his sister the water, but he has read the Germans and reflects upon the genius of the species, he has read the French naturalists and directs his attention to evolution.

There is a great difference between the "agricultural" Maeterlinck and Maeterlinck the dramatist. He now knows that one is neither great nor sublime, because one thinks ceaselessly of the unknowable and the infinite. "The thought of the unknowable and the infinite becomes really salutary only when it is the unexpected reward of the mind which has given itself up loyally and unreservedly to the study of the knowable and the finite, and one soon sees that there is a notable difference between the mystery which comes from that of which we are ignorant, and the mystery which is the result of what we have learnt."

Science indeed, or reason, as we know from M. Bergson, can only *analyse* : it serves to show us the limits of our knowledge and to point the way to the entrance hall of Mystery. Then it is that the faculty which Maeterlinck calls *raison mystique*, and Bergson *intuition*, is needed. Under the guidance of this marvellous power adopted to the unknown parts of the universe, we leave the experimental world.

A great nineteenth century writer, Joseph de Maistre has written an admirable commentary on this *raison mystique* which comes to the help of science. "Genius," he says, "does not drag herself along leaning upon syllogisms. Her gait is free, her manner savours of inspiration; one sees her arrive and none saw her coming. For example, is there a man who can be compared with Kepler in astronomy? Is Newton himself anything more than the sublime commentator of this great man who alone was able to write his name in the skies. For the laws of the world are the laws of Kepler. There is above all in the third law something so extraordinary, so independent of all other preliminary knowledge that we cannot do otherwise than recognise a real inspiration: now, he reaches this immortal discovery only by following up certain mystic laws of celestial numbers and harmonies which agree well with his deeply religious nature."

Maeterlinck, who has stopped at Stoicism without going on to Christianity, animates the universe with a spirit which is spread over all. Therefore, we will not talk to him of those Darwinian laws which only favour mechanism. The lives of plants, like those of bees, prove that there is an Organising Spirit which at the same time animates man. Man believed in his sovereignty when he saw in the earth the centre of the universe. Then it seemed to him that he lost in



dignity when the earth became an atom in space, but since the mind is always deceived by pride, we see him now learning, thanks to the bees and the plants, that his spirit fits in with that of the universe. Man is not a thing of chance, nor a slave, nor a monster, "he is the being through whom pass the great wills of the universe." So Maeterlinck's garden is in reality a temple, and as we enter we must take our hats off and walk on tip-toe: we shall be received by the Genius of Life, who with finger on lip will reveal to us all the virtues of our sisters the flowers.

After all, then, mystery is the characteristic feature of Maeterlinck's thought. In his modern garden we are certainly a long way off from the *Serres-Chaudes* of 1889. The plants which were afraid to live are now changed into plants which invent systems for living. The menace of Destiny recoils before scientific research aided by the "raison mystique."

"A landscape is a state of mind," said Amiel, in much quoted and ill-understood words. With him the saying was only a metaphor; uttered by Maeterlinck it would express a reality: for him a landscape is the manifestation of harmonious forces which direct him and direct us. Maeterlinck is a happier Rousseau and a higher Bernardin de Saint Pierre—he has given us back Nature, he makes us share in her life, he has laid bare to us her mighty yet subtle existence, and in this existence he has shewn us our own, even our very highest ideas. He has made a new world of the world of bees and of the world of plants, while by his art, his constant care for moral stoic beauty, he has revealed to us the spirit that breathes in them and gives them life.

That is why he is one of the benefactors of the human race—all gardeners are.

## VERHAEREN (b. 1855).

---

AFTER reading all Verhaeren's works, we first endeavour to recollect ourselves, as we leave behind the tumultuous whirlwind of his cosmic enthusiasm, we try to rid ourselves of the hallucinations he imposes upon our dazzled eyes with his contrasts of black against white, night against day, and the waving of those red flags which excite the mad bull in us. Then we seek to define Verhaeren, in order to pack him tidily away in the right place in our brain-file, and it is then that we see that this intensely personal poet is in no sense a decadent, but a Barbarian. A lover and realiser of Life, he has discovered afresh and for himself, the things invented not only by men since Homer, but by the Anglo-Saxon poets of the nineteenth century. As you read him you are reminded, now of Shelley, now of Walt Whitman, now even of Wordsworth, and finally you perceive that classical French poetry may claim him after all as her child. He is a perfect example—in the same way as Victor Hugo—of what energy and will can make of a poetic temperament. In this way he is the living refutation of all those philosophers who deny Maine de Biran's theory of effort.

He began as a Flemish poet, deeply in love with life, and very highly gifted for expressing the brutality of life.

Seize, dix-sept et dix-huit ans !  
 O ce désir d'être avant l'âge et le vrai temps  
                   Celui  
 Dont chacun dit  
 !! boit à larges brocs et met à mal les filles,

But as the years go past, by his ceaseless effort, his travels, his wide reading, Verhaeren has, as it were, sifted his talent with infinite art, and passing through all the centuries he seems to have now come back to the Virgilian tradition.

As we follow his life, we see that the curve which begins with *Les Flamandes* and which, at the moment of writing, stops at the *Blés Mouvants*, is a very clear and very powerful trajectory, and that it is continuous from one end to the other. In spite of apparent contradictions there is a great unity in Verhaeren's life. A highly-strung and very conscious artist, he has only one love : a life of energy which conquers all difficulties. He has only one cult : that of effort.

Je ne suis point de ceux,  
 Dont le passé doux et pieux  
 Tranquillise l'âme modeste :  
 La lutte et ses périls font se tendre mon corps,  
 Vers le toujours vivant et renaissant effort,  
 Et je ne puis songer à limiter mes gestes  
 Aux seuls gestes qu' ont faits les morts.

Simple as this characteristic trait may appear, it yet must needs arrest attention, when we reflect that Verhaeren was born in that world of profound catholicism for whom life is a stranger, nay, an enemy. A certain modern school, at the head of which stands Anatole France, never ceases preaching that Christianity is but the perversion of the luminous genius of Hellenism by the sombre genius of the Hebrews. According to the writers of this school, the dread thought of the Beyond has corrupted mankind, and the semitic virus has produced the most awful of the diseases by which we perish. Exaggerated, false even, as such a doctrine may be, it is none the less certain that the idea of what may happen on

the other side of the grave has changed, if not completely upset, man's existence. Now, Verhaeren is no "epicurean with a Christian imagination," as Sainte-Beuve called Chateaubriand, and as are so many, not to say the vast majority, of our contemporaries. Nor is he a Hellenist dominated by the love of, and search for, plastic Beauty. It is a Fleming intoxicated with the Cosmos who cries—

Je ne distingue plus le monde de moi-même,  
 Je suis l'ample feuillage, et les rameaux flottants,  
 Je suis le sol dont je foule les cailloux pâles,  
 Et l'herbe des fossés ou soudain je m' affale  
 Ivre et fervent, hagard, heureux et sanglotant.\*

A man cannot cut himself off from his race, nor from his time, nor from his surroundings. When we study Verhaeren's temperament we soon come upon his secret. On the one hand, he is passionately sensitive to external nature: "J'existe en tout ce qui m'entoure et me pénètre." On the other hand, he recoils upon himself, he analyses himself; not for nothing have his forefathers wept and prayed beneath a crucifix. That is the explanation of his pantheism as a doctrine to which he clings. Man is on the march towards his future divinity—it is meet therefore, that he should worship himself. That is why the book called *La Multiple Splendeur* was in the first place to be called "*Admirez-vous les uns les autres.*"

Such is the poetry of a man who has thought as a Belgian of olden times, in all the independence of his mind; and this barbarian has found long-hidden treasures. *Barbarus has segetes!*

---

\* *La Multiple Splendeur : Autour de ma maison.*

## I.

When in 1883 *Les Flamandes* appeared, Verhaeren was still quite a young man. (He was born on May 21st, 1855, at St. Armand on Scheldt.) If he had already rid himself of the influence of those years spent in the Jesuit college of St. Barbe at Ghent, he was on the other hand under the influence of two literary movements which were still full of splendour, though their afternoon was past and their evening advancing: the Parnassian movement and the Naturalist movement. The first had still its illustrious representatives in 1880, for the great poets of that movement, François Coppée, Sully Prudhomme, Théodore de Banville, Catulle Mendès, did indeed dominate the literary stage. The second movement, which began much later, not till after the war of 1870, was itself the product of the realistic novels of Flaubert. It called itself Naturalism, but contained within itself so many of the germs of death that not all the talent of a Zola, laying on his paint with a trowel, could keep the younger writers from holding off as from a corpse. The Belgian representative of this school was Camille Lemonnier, a powerful writer who deserves to be far more widely known than he is to-day. It was to Lemonnier that Verhaeren shewed the manuscript of *Les Flamandes*. This volume, which created a scandal in Verhaeren's then Catholic and narrow world, hymns the Flemish Venus with a wholly joyous relish and brutality. But whilst the pessimism, the sensualism of French literature as written by the Zolas, the Huysmans, and the Maupassants of the day seemed a mandarin's amusement, the fad of a man of letters who wants to paint everything very ugly and very vulgar, it would seem that with Verhaeren "les

“*furieux d'estomac, de ventre et de débauche*” were rather the diversion of a young man entertaining himself with copying the masters of the moment. The poems in themselves are those of a fairly gifted pupil of the Parnassians. It would be amusing, though somewhat futile, to study the subtle ingredient which makes these poems *Flemish* in spite of French influences.

Verhaeren's second volume was called *Les Moines*. Not far from his home at Borhem there was a Bernardine monastery, where as a child he had often heard Mass with his father, and where he made his first communion. We are told that Verhaeren no longer cares for *Les Moines*, and yet it is a book to be studied by the critic. It is the outcome of a period of mysticism, produced doubtless by a return of thought towards childhood. That in itself is curious, for such a return of thought is not generally found in writers before their fiftieth year. Verhaeren retired to the monastery of Forges, near Chimay, and spent three weeks in retreat. There again he reminds us of Huysmans, but only for a moment. While Huysmans takes refuge in Catholicism as a means of escape from the ignominy of a *bourgeois* world, and purifies his naturalistic soul in the more or less pure waters of self-disgust, Verhaeren seems to have gone into the monastery, as a Flemish artist would, to seek motives for pictures; for he never passes from the romantic idea to Catholic action. Whilst Huysmans' *En Route* was a real return to the religious ideal in a man who had supped at all life's tables and found satisfaction at none, *Les Moines* is the artistic pastime of a young Flemish parnassian, who is full of the idea found in Alfred de Musset's *Rolla*. Verhaeren is unconsciously inspired by the famous passage—

Clôîtres silencieux, voûtes des monastères  
 C'est vous, sombres caveaux, vous qui savez aimer !  
 Ce sont vos froides nefs, vos pavés et vos pierres  
 Que jamais lèvres en feu n'ont baisés sans pâmer.

Verhaeren must have often read those lines, in secret, when he was at the Jesuit college; that is why he sees in the monks great dreamers, seekers after sublime truths, whose heirs are the poets born too late to be priests. This idea was popularised by the Romantics. In Victor Hugo's youth Saint-Simonism was a living idea; Hugo watered the seed that Saint-Simon had sowed. 1830 was the most Messianic moment of humanitarian and social ideas. The moment recurs in 1848, and will recur from time to time for ever, because it is founded upon the illusion which the mind holds most dear: that of progress.

## II.

*Les Moines* belongs to 1886. Then suddenly we break new ground; we enter the Land of Despair, where it sometimes even seems that the poet's thought is verging upon madness. I cannot do better than quote the words of Verhaeren's most accredited biographer, Stefan Zweig: "Every noise, every colour, every thought presses upon him as though with sharp needles; his healthy sensibility becomes hypertrophied; that fineness of hearing, of which one is conscious, say, in sea-sickness, which perceives every noise, even the slightest sound, as though it were the blow of a hammer, undermines his whole organism; every rapidly passing smell corrodes him like an acid; every ray of light pricks him like a red-hot needle. The process is aggravated by a purely physical illness, which corresponds to his psychic ailment. Just at that time Verhaeren was attacked by a nervous affection of the

stomach, one of those repercussions of the psychic on the physical system in which it is hard to say whether the ailing stomach causes the neurasthenic condition, or the weakness of the nerves the stagnation of the digestive organs."

If I have quoted this passage at length, it is only to add that our knowledge of the relations between the physical and the moral is as yet too uncertain for us to take serious account of this nervous illness, and to attribute to it the new turn of the poet's gift. The only conclusion we can draw is that of the solidity of Taine's philosophy: that our "perception intérieure" is an hallucination, and that we are only separated from madness by the finest line. *Les Soirs, les Débâcles, les Flambeaux Noirs*, are read by literary physicians in their quest of a certain hypothesis, whereby they wish to prove that genius is only hysteria. Perhaps they hope to establish the doctors as the rulers of the universe, once they have discovered the source of genius! As Chesterton says (speaking of Carlyle): "The attempt to explain his gospel in terms of his 'liver' is merely pitiful. If indigestion invariably resulted in a *Sartor Resartus*, it would be a vastly more tolerable thing than it is. Diseases do not turn into poems, even the decadent really writes with the healthy part of his organisation."

These three volumes of Verhaeren's explain themselves perfectly by reasons of a spiritual order. He must have passed through a severe sceptical crisis; probably there was some great upheaval in his life. The Catholic ideal no longer satisfied him. On the other hand, the influence of Baudelaire and that of the French Symbolist School, which was at this time making itself felt, is to be traced in a considerable number of his poems. For some years past a profound uneasi-



ness had been at work in French literature. Huysmans' *A Rebours* gives a good idea of it, and marks a date. Villiers de l'Isle Adam and Mallarmé were the young apostles of the new school, of which Baudelaire was the god. The features of the school can be reduced briefly to love of the rare, the mysterious, the strange, leading up to what the French call "*héliogabalisme*"; then to that effort of the mind to transpose everything into the plane of allusion and allegory; thirdly to that horror of all preceding schools, such as the sentimental, the naturalistic, and parnassian schools; and fourthly to contempt for the masses. The term Symbolism synthesises all these tendencies; and we now see that this symbolism was the aesthetic expression of German idealism. To prove that, it is enough to study Villiers de l'Isle Adam; and Baudelaire's famous theory of Correspondences is to be found in Coleridge. Unconsciously the two poets drew upon the same German sources.

Verhaeren's poems of this period are fresh *Fleurs du Mal*, with an added feeling of man's irremediable abasement. But, as we have said, there is no more volitional poet than Verhaeren. It is ridiculous to say, as M. Bazalgette does, that these volumes are the outcome of digestive tyranny. In reality what these volumes really prove is Verhaeren's reason and energy when on the borderland of hallucination. Difficult though it be to penetrate into the secrets of a human soul, it seems clear that Verhaeren, like all poets, like all men, plays with his imagination. He believes without believing, or, in other words, he subordinates all his thoughts to a superior mind, like a man on the top of a tower who looks down upon those struggling below in the arena.

Nothing proves this better than his poem *Les Livres*.

At first sight to the bourgeois this poem may seem absolutely mad with its refrain—

Les chats d'ébène et d'or ont traversé le soir,  
Avec des bruits stridents de vrille et de fermail,  
Et des griffes, en l'air, vers les étoiles . . . .

In reality it is extremely reasoned. Verhaeren is walking on the heels of Sully Prudhomme, and formulating with a precision in which one cannot fail to appreciate the power of his thought and his skill in overcoming difficulties, the different philosophic systems which have directed human thought. Certainly if he had been haunted by the terrible images which he discovers to us in Nature, to the point of being led to endow his representations with a character of reality, he would have fallen into madness. But he is very careful not to take *au pied de la lettre* what he says with so much force. Ill, nervous, neurasthenic (call him what the doctors please), Verhaeren shews himself what he is enduring, and by the very projecting of this spectacle outside himself, he rids himself of it. Every great artist is an actor, with an added disinterestedness, a critical faculty which judges his own ideas.

On the other hand, it is clear that Baudelaire served as his model. One sees the process in action. Baudelaire had cried out—

Ah! ne jamais sortir des nombres et des êtres!

Verhaeren composes a poem on that theme:—

Je suis l'halluciné de la forêt des nombres . . . .

which is the development in fifty lines of Baudelaire's idea.

Elsewhere I have pointed out many other examples. Again, that need Baudelaire felt of belittling himself

is also to be found in Verhaeren, but (proof that he knew perfectly well what he was doing), he describes it admirably and declares that he will have none of those "pratiques humbles de la vie qu' on mène en des couvents de simple et pauvre esprit."

Read *Si Morne*—\*

Se replier toujours sur soi-même si morne . . .

Pourrir, immensément emmailloté d'ennui . . .

which is full of profound creative Baudelairism.

Et vous aussi mes doigts, vous deviendrez des vers

is a line which seems to be taken from a new edition of the *Fleurs du Mal*, prepared in the vestibule of which the Roman poet speaks :—

Vestibulum ante ipsum primisque in faucibus Orci

Luctus et ultrices posuere cubilia curae.

But it is nothing in comparison with the poem called *Celui de rien*, beginning

Je suis celui des pourritures grandioses . . .

Love of the putrid and revolting has never been carried further.

Verhaeren's admirers are loth to admit this influence of Baudelaire. They seem to think their poet would be far greater for having no forefathers. Yet anyone who is acquainted with the mechanism of our brain must know that our mind first takes the tone and colour of the books in which it learnt to read. Taine and Renan copied before they were original. In studying a poet, one must always separate the acquired from the natural; for the nature of every poet is endowed with a suppleness, an almost feminine adaptability. Verhaeren is above and before all sincere, but he is

---

\* Les Débâcles.

also a virtuoso. "Man," says Schiller, "is only completely a man when he plays," but the playing, which is disinterested emotion, cannot thereby constitute lack of sincerity. Moreover, Verhaeren is much too full of Emersonian thought not to wish to express himself completely—he seeks only to be Verhaeren. There we come to the very bed-rock of his nature. He seems to say: "It is possible that I appear to be weird, inexplicable, mad—but I am myself. My art consists in breaking up the world's mirror into as many tiny pieces as possible which shall then reflect my personality *ad infinitum*." And he calls *Les Flambeaux Noirs* a "*projection extérieure*." That, indeed, is the real trend of his art, the search for images which shall make a projection of the world of his soul. But what is striking—for example in the midst of *Les Villages Illusoires*—is the cold lucidity of the writer who seems to be "exagéré à froid," as Stendhal said of Victor Hugo. This is the explanation of his choice of path—that of modern life with its splendour and its misery, its struggles and achievements. In this connection the poem called *Les Villes* should be read. Baudelaire, in a study of Constantin Guys, had also sung of modern life: then the de Goncourts had really, as it were, invented modernity. Verhaeren follows in their footsteps, but with what passion, what devotion to the idea of necessary and limitless progress!

### III.

This Vision of the Cities is so powerful that one understands why Verhaeren has been compared to Victor Hugo, though, as a rule, the comparison has been made only in general terms. When we come to consider the imagination of these two poets—without

going into a philosophical dissertation—we must first ask ourselves what it is that they see, before seeking to enquire how they see it.

It is incontestable that both see *red*. Mabileau, in his study of Victor Hugo, notes this trait. "Victor Hugo's eye," he says, "is only attracted by precise, definite, detached forms, which stand out by oppositions of plane and light. M. Paul Bourget assures us that the idea of relief is the last element discovered by analysis in the depth of the master's feeling and intelligence." No one can deny that Verhaeren's poems show the same peculiarity of vision. The colours he loves most are red and gold. Cheselden, in his *Anatomy of the Human Body* (1750), declares that the wonderful boy of whom he speaks saw scarlet, black, and white before his operation. That would seem to prove that these are the colours acting most powerfully upon the brain. It would also seem to prove that the eye which perceives them may be almost blind, and that therefore the brain works harder in such cases, and deforms reality the more. Let us take some examples from among innumerable ones—

Voici Londres cuvant, en des brouillars de pierre  
Enormément son *rêve d'or* et son sommeil,  
Suragité de fièvre et de *cauchemars rouges*, etc.

It seems as if Verhaeren's eye must be burnt by the brilliance around it. Opening at random *Les Vignes de ma maison*, I come upon this—

Quelques barques *vermillonnées*  
Y sillonnent le flot *couleur d'or noir*,  
Chaque matin vers l' autre rive  
Où des *miroirs de soleil* bougent . . .

The same trait persists in his later work. In *La Multiple Splendeur* (1906) you find—

Si dans la paix et la grandeur des midis clairs  
L'une de vous, soudain, s'arrête et plus ne bouge,  
Elle apparaît debout comme un thyrses de chair  
*Où flotterait le pampre en feu de ses crins rouges.*

*L'âme de flamme et d'or* qui brûle en vos cerveaux  
N'est qu'un aspect complexe et fin de la nature . . .  
Et vos *lèvres de feu* sont ses *roses* sans nombre.

Again—

Le vent est clair dans le soleil,  
Le vent incline avec ses bras *vermeils*,  
De l'un à l'autre bout des horizons,  
Les *fleurs rouges* et les *fauves moissons*.

One more example, from *Les Rêves*—

Mais tout mon être ardent . . .  
Dans *le rouge* trésor de sa valeur humaine  
Leur répondrait . . .

For many psychologists this love of red is a sign of love of action, and of effort, and indeed we find in Hugo that incessant effort of the brain which dislocates reality. In Victor Hugo there are lines which stick in one's memory—

La nuée et le vent passaient en se tordant . . .  
Un vin plein de fureurs, de cris et de jurons . . .

In Verhaeren—

Le poing morne du doute entr'ouvre enfin ses doigts ;

or

La nature paraît sculpter  
Un visage nouveau à son éternité.

In Hugo's *Sacre de la Femme*—

Jours inouïs ! le bien, le beau, le vrai, le juste  
*Coulaient* dans le torrent, *frissonnaient* dans l'arbuste,  
L'aquilon louait Dieu de sagesse vêtu ;  
L'arbre était bon, la fleur était une vertu . . .

Verhaeren emulates this passage—

Un tressaillement neuf parcourut la matière;  
 Les eaux, les bois, les monts se sentirent légers  
 Sous les souffles marins, sous les vents bocagers ;  
 Les flots semblaient danser, et s'envoler les branches,  
 Les rocs vibraient sous les baisers des sources blanches.

It would be possible to quote thousands of examples of these personifications in the work of both poets. Verhaeren's *La Foule*, one of his finest poems, is an outburst of mythological figure—

Des gens hagards échevèlent des torches . . .  
 Voici l' heure qui bout de sang et de jeunesse . . .  
 Tout bouge et l' ou dirait les horizons en marche . . .  
 Oh ! l' avenir comme on l' écoute  
 Crever le sol, casser les voûtes  
 En ces villes d' ébène et d'or.

The image is always clear, energetic and exaggerated; that is why it is right to compare the two poets.

But the differences between them are far more numerous than the points of resemblance. It is enough to compare Victor Hugo's *le Satire* with the poem from *Les Blés Mouvants* called *Les Ombres*. Leaving the poet's thought on one side and studying only the metaphors, we see at once that Verhaeren's poem bears the far greater resemblance to the primitive myths imagined by man, in its æsthetic feeling and measured taste. Victor Hugo's long poem makes us think of the colossal mythology of the sacred Hindu books, Verhaeren's of a Greek poem. It may be objected that we have chosen the last poem in our poet's last book: such an objection merely strengthens the force of our argument. Writers as they grow older become more and more mechanical. Victor Hugo possessed to an infinite degree the gift of expression, and he gave himself up to it more and more as time

went on. That is the explanation of his antithetical abuses. There is nothing of that in Verhaeren; as he approached his sixtieth year, he grew more and more classical, and a study of his poems (including those in his famous volume *Les Villages Illusoires*) will reveal the fact that with him, it is almost always the idea which evokes the image, whereas with Victor Hugo it is too often the image which commands the idea. The reason for this is partly that Verhaeren writes in *vers libres*, subjecting his thought to neither rhythm nor rime, whilst Victor Hugo who was a classical poet as regards *form*, too often composes mere bouts-rimés, marvellous in technique, but written as if for a wager. Above all, the Fleming's tendency to exaggeration was corrected by the excellent classical education he received in the Jesuit college, and by a good allowance of common sense, which was denied to Victor Hugo.

And now if we study Verhaeren's *Les Villages Illusoires*, we see still better the difference between the two writers. In this volume Verhaeren had the Wordsworthian idea of choosing as his heroes the people of his village: the miller, the bell-ringer, the blacksmith, the ferryman, the grave-digger, and making of them types of all humanity. Imagine for a moment what such a theory would have become in Victor Hugo's hands. He wrote *Les Braves Gens*, *Le Crapaud*, *Petit Paul*. But what strikes us in these poems is not that their creator has really personified abstractions, it is the part played by a certain faculty, never spoken of in connection with him, yet which nevertheless is an important factor in his life: his sympathetic sensibility. When Victor Hugo is under the sway of his emotion, he forgets all his descriptive virtuosity; his tears seem to wash all the colours off his palette.

Moreover, Victor Hugo's poetry is based on a purely



Cartesian conception of the universe. There is the poet, that is to say, "thought," then the universe, that is "extension." With Verhaeren there is no reality other than his own vision. He is the sun, moon and stars of the world in which he lives, so that these people of the village in which Verhaeren lives are in reality all different Verhaerens.

The ferryman is the symbol of the poet who strives to attain a dream which always eludes him.

The grave-digger is the symbol of the poet who buries the white coffins of his memories, his former heroism, his shattered courage, with the red coffins of his crimes.

The miller is the poet who has spent his life in listening to what "les bouches d'ombre et d'or" make clear to those who look only for eternal things.

The carpenter is the bad priest or bad philosopher (or Verhaeren in his youth) with his syllogistic explanations and dry-as-dust commentaries.

The blacksmith is the poet who fashions the future in his forge.

The ropemaker is the poet wrestling with the infinite in space and time, which he draws towards him.

The fishermen are the symbols of the poet who gathers in his net all the pettiness of his misery, the wreck of his remorse.

The seeker of adventure is the Baudelairian poet—neither more nor less.

All that is very beautiful. It is also very reasoned. It is true that the poet has placed all his characters in terrible settings, in the midst of ruins, and of ruins gutted by fire (had he, too, a presentiment of the horrors of German invasion?), truly fearful landscapes. But we must not be deceived. The correctness of the figures, the wise ordering of the design, foreshadow the classic

poet he was to become. A study of the poem *Le Silence* will reveal the fact that never did more *conscious* poet speak in *vers libres*. It is a descriptive, decorative, suggestive poetry with nothing sentimental about it. Verhaeren has none of those facile and already worn-out Hugolian metaphors, such as seeing in darkness a hydra, or a pale nymph wringing her hands. When Verhaeren wants to talk to us about the wind, he does not give it a physiognomy. That would be to destroy the sense of mystery which he wishes to convey. He has recourse instead to the music of his *vers libres* to capture the emotion which he feels ; and to symbolise it he chooses the newest words, the most uncommon and the most forceful he can find.

Often in a poet's output there is found to be a volume which is not considered as important as the others, but which nevertheless is of the highest significance because it comes between the more tentative writings of his youth and the books of his maturity—a kind of last will and testament for the past and programme for the future. With Verhaeren *Les Villages Illusoires* is such a book. It is a transition-book, because the poet has discovered that the most interesting study is Life. It is because he has made of his bell-ringer, his ferryman, his fishermen, just so many different Verhaerens that he feels the depth of Emerson's thought : " There is a mind common to all men." He exorcises his bad thoughts and burns them with his bell-ringer ; he exalts his good thoughts with the blacksmith and the ropemaker, and in so doing he associates himself with all mankind.

#### IV.

That moment marks a new point of departure in Verhaeren's life. Very little has been said here of his

actual life, for the simple reason that his life is sacrificed to his work. From his enchanting *Tendresses premières*, we gather that as a child he lived among the humbler inhabitants of the earth, and as we have seen, when he writes of them, it is of himself that he speaks. There is nothing of a François Coppée about Verhaeren. After the years spent in the college of St. Barbe, we are told that he and his friends, Théo van Rysselberghe, Dorio de Regoyos, lived for some years the life of true bohemian artists. He also studied for the bar, but that career was entirely uncongenial to him.

Another characteristic feature of his life is his frequent travels. He often visited London, and one can readily understand the attraction of this city for him. London is one of the magic cities of this earth. Of course Paris has more grace, Paris has the glory of her history, her clear sky, and the Seine, which as it glides past the poplars on the quays invites the artist to follow up his hopes, amidst the dust of all the ages. Everything in Paris has a hidden beauty which will only by degrees consent to reveal its hidden harmony, thereby she pleases the Reason.

London, on the contrary, is like a country quack doctor, who hires a band to drown the cries of his victims: its symphonies of mist and fog, its huge buildings, the dismal architecture of its suburbs, the swarming life of its streets, the forest of masts in the docks, the opulent, barge-laden, fuliginous Thames—all this dazzles our common sense, muffles the voice of Reason, and carries off the imagination to distant and enchanted lands. No one better than Verhaeren has understood the poetry of London, which naturally would appeal to a mind haunted by the idea of the great, the gigantic. The city of movement *par excellence* was bound to appeal to the mind of movement.

The love of life, which had first manifested itself in students' drinking parties and then in travel, was therefore reinforced by his ever-growing imagination, which magnified everything, aimed at magnifying, and was to finish by idealising his vision. One might say that Verhaeren was predestined to celebrate Strength as the cosmic power, and there is nothing astonishing in the fact that from 1895 he devoted himself to extolling the joy experienced in the contemplation of Life.

Solitude was never this poet's dearest friend. Verhaeren plunges into all the problems of life, and the way he looks at them is shown in his *Villes Tentaculaires*—

L' esprit des campagnes était l' esprit de Dieu ;  
 Il eut la peur de la recherche et des révoltes,  
 Il chut, et le voici qui meurt, sous les essieux  
 Et sous les chars en feu des récoltes.\*

There is in these lines an echo of the voice of Vandervelde. The poet is not cast down, because the villages are deserted, and the *campagnes hallucinées* full of empty houses, the fields fallow and the roads overgrown with vegetation. In a corner he sees a spade, symbol of forgotten toil, driven straight down into the earth by the man who has followed his comrades to the city, that octopus whose tentacles, pleasure, drink, money, grip the agricultural labourer. It is the great problem of the depopulation of the land which René Bazin has treated in *La Terre qui Meurt*. But Verhaeren is a socialistic visionary in love with life, and far from complaining of the country's desolation, he declares that the cities will create, after having destroyed.

---

\* Vers le Futur.

Le Rêve ancien est mort et le nouveau se forge,  
 Il est fumant dans la pensée et la sueur  
 Des bras fiers du travail, des fronts fiers de lueurs,  
 Et la ville l'entend monter du fond des gorges  
 De ceux qui le portent en eux  
 Et le veulent crier et sangloter aux cieux.\*

The conception which supports the poet in those magnificent efforts where he describes *Les Spectacles, la Bourse, L'Étal*, etc., seems to be this : the law of love is the supreme law and, in spite of appearances, society is governed by it. This law becomes confused with Science, which is one of the forces of the universal deity, and in this way we have no right to blaspheme the destiny of human beings.

O race humaine aux astres d'or nouée,  
 As-tu senti de quel travail formidable et battant  
 Soudainement, depuis cent ans,  
 Ta force immense est secouée ?

According to Verhaeren, Science is eminently fitted for uniting men in a feeling of universal brotherhood. Henceforth his thought is the opposite of that of Rousseau, who condemned civilisation. He is the prophet of that obscure gospel felt by the masses : Nature, or Life, or the "Tentaculated Town" is not evil, is not sin ; on the contrary, it is the product of that activity which aims at bettering and beautifying our earthly lot, it assists that mysterious force which directs worlds, and whose primordial law is the law of aspiration. In Verhaeren we see the growth of the formula, "Tout pour le peuple et par le peuple," which you find in Victor Hugo, and about which Hugo is sometimes lacking in sincerity. In Verhaeren it rises up out of the Vision Beautiful he sees in machinery and in crowds. True, there had been attempts before

---

\* *Les Villes Tentaculaires* : L'Âme de la ville.

him at rendering the poetry of the locomotive, but no man is so moved as he, so carried away, by the new miracles of universal science.

Comme une vague en des fleuves perdue,  
 Comme une aile effacée au fond de l'étendue,  
 Engouffre-toi,  
 Mon cœur, en ces foules battant les capitales !  
 Réunis tous ces courants  
 Et prends  
 Si large part à ces brusques métamorphoses  
 D'hommes et de choses  
 Que tu sentes l'obscur et formidable loi  
 Qui les domine et les opprime  
 Soudainement, à coups d'éclairs, s'inscrire en toi.\*

That is the voice of the visionary speaking. You will hear it again in his drama *Les Aubes*, written two years later. This drama is really a lyric poem; it recalls the ecstatic enthusiasm of a Shelley in the *Kingdom of Love*. Here he shows again the desertion of the country for the city by the agricultural classes. The city itself is filled with revolt and savage destruction, everything seems tottering—

But that the city itself should have an end,  
 Being the soul of future things,  
 That these should sink under the waves of flame;  
 That the tied bundle of our fates  
 She in her hands yet holds,  
 Break in the furious feeble hands,  
 Break now, and break in the face of death;  
 That the fair gardens of to-morrow  
 Whose gates she opened wide  
 Be wasted with the thunderbolt  
 And cumbered with dead things,  
 It is impossible.†

---

\* *Les Visages de la vie : La Foule.*

† *Les Aubes.* Trans. Arthur Symons.

He sees the dawning of the moment when the self-seeking politician shall no longer hold sway—

Your glory is all ended, it has stooped to earth ;  
 With its illustrious sword itself has slain the right ;  
 To-day another glory comes about. . . .

“ And this glory is made up of the new and profound justice, of private heroism, of ardent tenacity, of necessary and temporary violence. It is less brilliant than yours, but surer.”\*

Verhaeren is a believer in James Hinton's creed: “ Every evil, every failure or loss, becomes tributary to a greater good.”

In this way the Franco-Belgian symbolist of 1890 has become a great poet, not so much through his national side as through his universally human side. His lyricism is the overflowing of his self—trying to tell his soul to the echoes of the whole universe. He escapes from egoism, because he extols, with all the ecstasy of a lover, the triumph of justice and love.

## V.

Verhaeren's poems then are devoted, in the first place to passionate descriptions of his country, next to the monks, then to entirely Baudelairian feelings, and finally to science, to society, to the workers. Yet there was a moment in his life when, at about the age of fifty, he sang most beautifully of conjugal love—after fifteen years of married life—

*Je te regarde et tous les jours je te découvre.*

His love poems are unique in French letters, where it must be confessed it is not generally conjugal love which the poet chooses as a theme. Comparison with Coventry Patmore will occur to every reader. Perhaps

---

\* Op. cit.

Mr. Edmund Gosse will work it out one day. In any case we are here confronted with a new Verhaeren, and a Verhaeren who makes us love the more the revolutionary poet of the *Villes Tentaculaires*. Indeed, this Flemish poet dares everything—his greatest audacity was this exaltation of the beauty and sweetness of that love which is generally represented in connection with carpet slippers and an armchair by the fireside. And without the least hint of sententiousness he has added an immortal contribution to erotic literature, in those volumes *Les Heures Claires*, *Les Heures d'Après-Midi*, *Les Heures du Soir*.

## VI.

We come now to a consideration of the two ideas which are the basis of his great works, *Les Visages de la Vie*, *Les Forces Tumultueuses*, *la Multiple Splendeur*, *Les Rythmes Souverains*. The first of these ideas is that of progress, the second that of pantheism, which come, the former from France, the latter from Germany.

The dogmatic optimism of philosophy has kept too many nineteenth century writers from the paths of experience, and we should like to ask Verhaeren to what extent the desire to march with the times has thwarted the natural inclination of his spirit. In his beautiful poem, *Les Mages*, he declares that the saints—

Ne changeront rien à ce qui fut toujours,  
L'humanité n'a soif que de son propre amour.

At bottom, then, his optimism is really profound pessimism, for he asks whether man—

Admettra-t-il jamais qu' à son âme profonde  
Le règne d'un enfant fasse ployer l'orgueil. . . .

If this be so, how shall happiness be born of pride? At the present moment we see only too well the results of philosophical insolence and vainglory.



On the other hand to admit, as Verhaeren does, that the bad actions of the masses are the agents of progress, is to admit that moral evil will never be eradicated, since it creates progress. That, again, is a German idea. "I am," says Mephistopheles, "a part of that force which always wills evil and always creates good." In other words, it is only by letting loose the powers of evil that one can arrive at the triumph of good. Verhaeren cries "Il viendra"—

L'instant, où tant d'efforts savants et ingénus  
 Tant de génie et de cerveaux tendus vers l'inconnu,  
 Quand même, auront bâti sur des bases profondes  
 Et jaillissant au ciel, la synthèse du monde.

I am sure that M. Verhaeren now believes that Eden cannot be recreated by problems of  $a + b$ . Stevenson called life *an affair of cavalry*. That's well said, for the best theorising is like the best syllogism, useful only to old people who, as they sit in the ingle-nook, console themselves for the passing of the hot, hasty temper of their youth.

But, leaving aside his theory of progress, this generous illusion which has impelled Verhaeren to write some very fine poems, we come to consider that pantheism which, from the *Blés Mouvants* to *Hélène de Sparte*, seems to be the foundation of his philosophy. In *La Littérature Contemporaine* he says: "It seems to me that poetry is bound before long to be merged in a very clear Pantheism. More and more healthy, upright minds admit the unity of the world. The old divisions between soul and body, God and the universe are being effaced. Man is a fragment of the world's architecture. He understands and is conscious of the entity of which he is a part. He feels that he is encompassed and dominated, while at the same time he himself encompasses and dominates. By reason

of his own miracles he is becoming in some sort that personal God that his ancestors believed in. Now, I ask, is it possible that lyric exaltation should long remain indifferent to such an unchaining of human power, should hesitate to celebrate such a vast spectacle of grandeur? The poet of to-day has only to surrender himself to what he sees, hears, imagines, conjectures, for works to be born of his heart and brain that are young, vibrating, and new."\*

Once more we are confronted with the German idea of unity and identity. And when we think how magnificently M. Verhaeren has thundered against the Germans in *La Belgique Sanglante*, we feel sure that he cannot like his doctrine so well to-day now that it is illuminated by the reflections of German incendiarism.

For what does this doctrine teach? That the events of history, and all the successive ideas of mankind, are but the vain appearance of an immanent and infinite deity, who always chooses *success* in order to manifest himself clearly to us. The question of this pantheism which has inspired so many poets, and which, with a certain amount of effort one can even discover in Saint Paul, cannot be neglected to-day because it is the great German doctrine. The classic thought, that of Plato or Descartes, always sets itself to conquer instinct by reason, and is always careful not to identify man's ego with the universal ego, nor his thought with that of God. And yet that is what German philosophers, Kant excluded, have been doing for more than a century past. For reasons which it would be too long to enumerate here, they imagine that they possess the divine faculty of knowing the plan of all things, and of being able to assign to every

---

\* Quoted from J. Bithell's trans. of Zweig's "Verhaeren."

part, to every science, to every being, the exact place it should hold in the great Whole. In this way they are led to take their abstractions for realities, whereas such ideas are really only pieces of marquetry. The Germans are makers of chess-boards—

But mankind are not pieces, there's your fault,  
 You cannot push them, and, your first move made,  
 Lean back to study what the next should be  
 In confidence that when 'tis fixed upon  
 You'll find just where you left them blacks and whites :  
 Men go on moving when your hand's away.

The German conception of a universe in absolute harmony with human reason, gives them such an idea of order and cohesion that they believe themselves to be in the very presence of Truth. How Montaigne would have laughed to scorn those men who claim that they possess the faithful portrait, nay, the only authentic portrait, of the universe, or that God is self-conscious in their minds. As Pascal said : “ Qui veut faire l' ange, fait la bête.” Far wiser is that philosophy which admits that reality is composed of diverse principles, each bound to the other by relations which are inaccessible to our logic. It is from the foundations of that philosophy that France springs up glorious to-day. M. Verhaeren will forgive us for reminding him of that. Besides, his pantheism is on occasion resolved into a wiser polytheism. In his drama *Hélène de Sparte* the forest comes to life for Helen, the satyrs leave the woods, the naiads rise from their native streams, and the bacchante rush down the hill slopes calling her. And in his last volume, *Les Blés Mouvants*, there is a charming pagan dialogue between two peasants, Pierre and Jean, Pierre offering to Saint Cornelius a brace of pigeons and Jean two fine red cocks to Saint Amand.

*Les Blés Mouvants*, indeed, this collection of pastorals

and country scenes and mystic songs, seems to be the end of Verhaeren's literary journeying. It shows the ever-growing influence of classical France upon the poet. Verhaeren becomes less and less enamoured of poetic licence, submits more and more to poetical rule, knowing that Beauty loses nothing for being disciplined. His dialogues are composed with a marvellous perfection of technique. The shepherds of Theocritus have come back to live in Flanders.

With Verhaeren each new work is a tremendous effort, a soaring towards new heavens, to arrive finally at declaring that man is the Master of Things! Poor master! It is clear that one may pronounce the name of Nietzsche after his, but it would be merely to shew the points of resemblance between them. Comparison with Barrès on the other hand, brings to light the difference between Barrès, the sociologist, and Verhaeren, the individualist. "Tradition brings us many treasures!" says the one. "Progress brings us many more!" replies the other. "The household is the whole universe!" says the one. "The household is a mere speck in the universe!" replies the other. And you have the eternal opposition between the way of Mary and the way of Martha.

\* \* \* \* \*

In analysing a writer's popularity, we should never forget to take into account the external causes. This scarcely flattering, but very just, proceeding is based upon a very solid foundation, to wit, that we shall only read into an author what is already in our own hearts. It follows that a poet may be the delegate of the syndicate of our aspirations, or merely the poet who sings his soul. That is the explanation of the fact that for a long time Verhaeren was almost unknown in France, except to a small circle of poets and artists.

This is not the case with Maeterlinck, who is universally read. The reason is threefold. In the first place Maeterlinck writes in prose and Verhaeren in verse, and readers of poetry are rare in every country; in this utilitarian age the flute-players are not greatly heeded. Secondly, Verhaeren's style appeals solely to the lettered. Those who read him in a translation cannot realise the strangeness, the originality of his language which admits no wan, bloodless, inexpressive word. The general public is dumbfounded by his apocalyptic figures. And yet, as has been said, all Europe speaks in his voice, and his voice makes itself heard above all. In France he is beginning to be studied seriously, and in Jules Romains he has a disciple who bids fair to be as great as his teacher. Thirdly, the masters of the moment are Remy de Gourmont and Anatole France on the one side, Faguet or Paul Bourget on the other, without counting Barrès and Maurras, and the public no longer believes that a man can give the answers to all the questions asked by his fellows. The great article of belief in the creed of the contemporaries of Taine and Renan was faith in science. Yet a great proportion of the young contemporary writers profess a belief in a spiritual power which is as certain a fact as a phenomenon of physical order. For that reason they reproach Verhaeren for being haunted by vague ideas, or for returning to the ideas of 1848: this Belgian who in reality is so firm, so solid, so frank, seems to them to be tacking about in a fog; for them life is not *rouge et noir*, nor a German schema, but a spirit-kingdom, nay, a sacrament.

In any case Verhaeren is too great a poet, and at the same time too human, not to have his name engraved upon the architraves of that Pantheon of great Belgians who have had faith in humanity.

## RODENBACH (1855-1898).

---

GEORGES RODENBACH, who was born in the same year as Verhaeren, and educated at the same Jesuit College at Ghent, had his hour of fame about 1890, when Verhaeren was hardly known. He died in 1898 at the height of his promise, and one can only conjecture about the masterpieces his maturity might have brought forth. To-day it is the fashion to decry him: for the younger school of Belgian writers he is a negligible quantity. That is base ingratitude towards a poet who has not only left some very beautiful work, but who was the first Belgian to gain a hearing with the Parisian public. It took Verhaeren twenty years to do that; yet Rodenbach accomplished it quite easily. The reason is that Rodenbach was lucky in reflecting for a moment the "sensibility" of a certain part of the French public, and he was not content with merely reflecting it, but enlarged and subtilised it by the very fact that he was born under a sky other than that of the Ile-de-France. Is that then to count for nothing? And can as much be said of all the minor poets who gain notoriety or even fame?

The literary critic's task is to characterise a period, and discover among the abundant riches spread before his eyes, the jewel which will bring that period to the notice of posterity. Very often it is seeking for needles in bundles of hay. Every school has existed in every age; but in accordance with the tendency of the decade, or of a man of genius, who makes himself felt at the moment, writers have deformed in various ways

that which we are agreed to call reality. Now Rodenbach, without being the head of a school, has his claim to fame, because he so well understood the mode of feeling and expression of the early nineties that he at once took an important place in literature.

\*            \*            \*            \*            \*            \*

In 1890 the exaggerations of the naturalistic and ultra-scientific schools had produced a certain amount of fatigue in the public mind. For a time it had been amusing to look upon men as the weak slaves of a scientific law which was far more rigorous than religious dogma, but the freer-minded chafed at this manner of imprisoning thought, and sought to find a more mysterious, and at the same time more exhilarating interpretation of the universe. Zola himself said to Jules Huret, "I believe in a wider portraiture of Truth, and a broader outlook upon humanity, a sort of classicism of naturalism." At that moment it was the fashion to quote Verlaine's—

Rien ne me plaît que la chanson grise  
Où l'indécis au précis se joint,

and men began to think that the science of a Zola was after all something approaching a hoax, since there could be no relation between an experiment in a laboratory and an experiment in Life. The pessimism of a Maupassant was then beginning to lose its appeal to minds steeped in the works of Dostoievsky and worshipping in the temple of the religion of sorrow and pity, led thereto by E. Melchior de Vogüé's exposition of the Russian novel. The neat self-contradictory philosophy of Renan was giving place to that of Tolstoi,—much to M. Jules Lemaitre's annoyance. That is merely sketching in the broad outlines of this

new turn of human thought. In any case the way had been admirably paved for Rodenbach. More potent still in preparing for him was the work of Verlaine, Rollinat, Mallarmé, and Richepin (to mention only the most famous), that is to say the work of subtle artists and learned men, collectors of symbols, and with a leaning towards the splitting of hairs as a pastime.

\* \* \* \* \*

Now, Rodenbach, who had from 1877 onwards published several volumes, wrote in 1886, *la Jeunesse blanche*; in 1888, *Du Silence*; in 1889, *l' Art en Exil*, a novel; in 1891, *le Règne du Silence*, all of which brought him recognition among men of letters; and finally in 1892, *Bruges la Morte*, the novel which brought him real fame. Of all his critics it is Verhaeren who has judged him best, for not only is Verhaeren a great poet, he is also an excellent critic. Here is what he says—

Rodenbach se classe parmi les poètes du rêve, parmi les raffinés de la phrase, parmi les évocateurs, spéciaux parfois, rares toujours, dans le voisinage de deux amis et maîtres qui l'aimèrent autant qu'il les aime, Edmond de Goncourt et Stéphane Mallarmé. Il est de ceux qui constatent; il est de ceux qui se renferment à l'encontre de ceux qui se déploient. Il a mis des sourdines à ses vers et à ses pensées; il déteste les tapages de l'orchestre: c'est un reçueilli.

All that is admirably judged and said. But Rodenbach's poetry contains other qualities. There is this: the pre-established harmony between his soul and the country in which he lived so long, between his poetry and the Bruges he loved to call Bruges-the-Dead. He may have been born at Tournai, but the birth register is his only link with that city. His family were all of Flemish origin. It was in Flanders, too, that he spent his youth, those impressionable years, when the



earth fashions us in her own image. It was not till 1887 that he settled in Paris. In his study of Brizeux\* there is this significant sentence: "A poet should always escape from provincial life, for often it is this very fact of leaving his native country which makes it appear beautiful to him in the mirage of his memory." It would seem that it was in Paris that Rodenbach gained a clear and deep conception of the influence of his own country upon him. It is hardly necessary to add that the world, to which he introduces us, is not so much Bruges and Flanders, as a world corrected, reconstructed, created, by himself.

Anyone who has visited old, dead cities, such as Aigues-Mortes or Guérande, and who arrives in Bruges on a market day with Rodenbach's book fresh in his mind, will be astonished by all the life and animation he sees in the streets, and will see at once that the poet's representation of it was an imaginary one. True, there are the *béguines*, but there are also the buxom Flemish girls. True, there are the marvellous pictures by dead masters, but close by them is the market of brass glittering in the sunshine, and such lace! and such bargaining about the lace! And you can eat and drink so cheaply and so well, and the women of the people have all such fine black nodding feathers in their bonnets, while at every quarter the air is filled with the belfry's notes shaking out a pious or a popular air. When we reflect that Rodenbach saw in this city only its silence and its mystery, we have a striking revelation on the work of a man's brain. *Bruges la Morte* is in very truth *Bruges la Vivante*, but *Bruges la Morte* is the conception of a human mind, and therefore intensely interesting. It would be

---

\* L'Élite.

foolish and false to say that Bruges is never the city of silence, the city of confidences, the city of the morose poet. But when Rodenbach says that in Bruges "every day is All Saints' Day," he is simply showing us his own nature. He has really admirably defined himself, when he writes of one of his characters, in that charming volume *Le Rouet des Brumes*: "He saw mysterious analogies, marvellous corridors between ideas and things. His conversation unrolled in the air ornamental phrases which often finished in the Unknown." He is a poet living in a world of rather shy intimacy and tender gentleness, wrapped up in a cotton-wool of silence and sensitive melancholy; and of all contemporary poets it is he who best makes us realise that the life of the soul—like life itself—is a tiny flame, flickering in the least wind.

L'amour et la mort sont toujours de connivence et se rejoignent dans ce domaine mystérieux que nous ignorons tous, dans ce clair obscur de la conscience, région équivoque où trempent, pour ainsi dire, les racines de l'être. Il s'y noue des analogies étranges, des rapports volatils qui lient nos pensées et nos actes à telles impressions de la vue, de l'ouïe et de l'odorat. Pour avoir rencontré une femme dont les yeux sont gris, l'homme du Nord tout à coup nostalgique s'en retourne au pays natal. . . . Pour avoir respiré sur un trottoir en réparation, l'été, l'odeur de l'asphalte qui bout dans sa cuve, nous partons pour la mer, avides de grands ports où le goullron sent bon aux quilles brunes des vaisseaux. . . . Les réverbères ophtalmiques dans le brouillard, font rêver d'altruismes, de dévouements humanitaires, d'un legs pour un hospice ou une clinique des yeux.

*Le Rouet des Brumes : Suggestion.*

\* \* \* \* \*

All Rodenbach's mentality is contained in that passage. He would like us to believe that his soul is like the city whose inner life is only accessible to those who know its secret, those cities of the past whose

lightest word calls up far distant echoes, where the pillars in the churches seem built of the tears that fell and hardened into columns. But, over and above the question of the city's influence is the far more important one of temperament. Rodenbach reaches across the ages to clasp the hand of Memmlinc; and his work is clearly related to that of the Flemish master of whose work he has written so fine an appreciation in *Bruges la Morte*. Memmlinc's paintings and Rodenbach's poems are eminently the work of a mystic Brugeois: of the calm, quiet emotions of a mystic.

Douceur du soir ! Douceur de la chambre sans lampe !  
 Le crépuscule est doux *comme une bonne mort*,  
 Et l'ombre lentement qui s'insinue et rampe  
 Se déroule en pensée au plafond. Tout s'endort.  
*Comme une bonne mort* sourit le crépuscule . . . .

The best study in Rodenbach's book *l'Élite* is that devoted to Baudelaire. What strikes him in Baudelaire is that he was an eminently religious poet. But that is still more true of Rodenbach. His hero, Hugues, strangles a woman because she laughed at a pious procession. One seems to hear the voice of Rodenbach's ancestors who created the béguinages.

Elsewhere I have studied the influence of Baudelaire upon Rodenbach, and this is not the place to revert to it, the more so because Rodenbach, like all other original artists, was able to free himself from early influences, and had at his call an extraordinarily rich and supple imagination. We wonder how it is he manages to convey the thrill of water and of trees, the anguish of the falling night, the enigma of a look: all that magic mystery of his country with its buildings and quays mirrored in the canals on which glide such stately swans. So many have *felt* the charm of these cities of Flanders without being able to render it.

Rodenbach's originality consists, in the first place, in his consideration of the slightest impressions and faintest sensations of our existence; all those ordinary things by which we are surrounded and which we consider insignificant. Out of them he weaves an exquisite piece of work, like Flemish lace, which, after all, is made with a single thread.

There is a passage in his *Musée des Béguines* which is a great help towards the understanding of his art—

Hameau du moyen-âge! Jardin de vierges! enclos gothique qu'on dirait survécu à Memmling ou à Quentin Metzys avec ses toiles de tuiles fanées, couleur des vieilles voiles, ses pignons en forme de mitres, sa pelouse rectiligne, et ce ciel flamand par-dessus, qui a toujours l'air d'un ciel de tableau.

Ah! qu'on s'y sent loin de tout! et loin de soi-même! Un mouton pâit dans l'herbe du terre-plein. N'est ce pas l'agneau pascal? Une cornette de béguine apparaît derrière les vitres miroitantes d'un petit couvent, en allée de fenêtre en fenêtre . . . Ne sont-ce pas des ailes de linge en route pour le ciel? Et la fumée onduleuse qui s'élève des demeures placides? On y devine un texte entr'aperçu: inscriptions en fuite, bleu qui prie, banderolle qui chante, comme ces phylactères dans les tryptiques aux lèvres des saints et des saintes.

Probably Rodenbach's aim was to make us realise the poetry hidden in the religious life. But as we read these sad charming stories, we become possessed of a fresh pessimism. This béguinage, which we had believed to be the haunt of repose, is tormented by scruples which poison life. Sister Mary of the Angels becomes mad through her desire to keep herself spotless, and she now wanders through the convent endlessly dusting her immaculate person; Sister Godeliere dies of headaches, because she could not bring herself to be examined by a doctor, and so on. The "divine quietude of the Béguinage" is a perpetual martyrdom for timorous souls. Sister Ursula, the skilful lace-maker, enters into mort

combat with the Devil on the subject of a piece of lace. The best story is the one called *Crépuscule au Parloir*, and which tells of the fear of the number thirteen. That is good enough to while away any winter's evening. But side by side with these very possible stories, Rodenbach wrote of the poetry of the objects which have their part in the religious life of the *béguines*, and he describes their coifs, their candles, their flowers, their pictures, their bells, their rosaries, their alms, in order to give the idea of the church atmosphere round the *béguinage*. Here, oddly enough, he reminds us of Jules Renard. Both writers work in the same way, they take a suggestive picture which sums up the object and engraves it for ever in the memory. The *béguines'* coifs are so white, that they sometimes suggest that the Holy Ghost has descended upon each in turn in the form of a dove.

The flame of the candles curls round in the shape of a heart, and the *béguines*, who love to light intercessory candles, wonder whether God loves them, when the heart-like flame burns badly.

Their canticles are sung to a music which comes down like a heavenly net to catch their souls and carry them off across a silver sea to God.

The pictures would indeed speak to them, were it not "for the great silence, which must not be troubled."

The bell, which speeds the hours into eternity, dies on Good Friday, to come to life again on Easter Day.

Rosaries are to be found everywhere in nature—in the flowers on the lawn, or in the evening stars, which through the open window are like the rosary of night.

In this way Rodenbach leads Literature into paths which she has seldom before trod. Such an artist is not negligible, even though it be true that to enjoy him your sense of humour must be in abeyance. He brings

us into a world which is very puerile and yet very old. Charles Lamb could have described it wonderfully, though in another manner.

Rodenbach even wished to put this religious atmosphere upon the stage. But his idea of bringing a béguine on the boards and making her speak a mystico-religious language was hardly likely to find favour with the Parisian public. There is certainly the possibility of something dramatic in his conception of a nostalgic sort of hero attracted by a nun. But unfortunately the lover is a poet with a passion for mystery and preoccupied with the problem of the nun's hair hidden by her coif. Once he sees her hair, his poor love fades away with the picture he had imagined. That will not appeal to the ordinary public, who will merely consider that the hero was a donkey, since the nun with her hair all streaming down was really an attractive sight.

No, the true art of Rodenbach is contained in the collection of poems called *Les Vies Encloses*, where he notes all the "correspondences" which connect objects with human beings, and which constitute the riddle of existence. The soul is here described as a natural aquarium; the lines of the hand are so many "hidden paths coming from infinity, mute cross-roads of a race; the sick have a biblical impression of the vanity of human wishes—

Le malade ainsi songe et, dans sa vie, il erre.  
 Sa vie! Elle lui semble à lui-même étrangère,  
 Elle s'efface et se résume à du brouillard;  
 Ce qu'il s'en remémore, en tant de crépuscule,  
 Est advenu naguère à quelqu'un quelque part;  
 Peut-être est-ce à lui-même et qu'il fut somnambule?  
 Peut-être qu'il se trompe et que c'est arrivé  
 A un qui lui ressemble et dans une autre vie?  
 Passé qu'il a vécu, mais qui semble rêvé.

N'était il pas un autre avant sa maladie ?  
 Or ce pâle Autrefois si peu se prolongea,  
 Maison de l'horizon indistincte déjà  
 Qu'indique seule une fumée irrésolue. . . .

The book which will preserve Rodenbach's reputation is that slim volume published by Ollendorf in 1893, and reprinted in *Les Vies Encloses : Le voyage dans les yeux*. It is Rodenbach's farthest advance into the world of the soul. "Why should eyes which are so limpid, speak falsely?" "And yet you see in them a great love walled up as though in a tomb"; and who "shall paint the eyes of women, in which sometimes everything is troubled as when a great wind passes over the waters?" There is even a passage which recalls the famous lines in Browning's "Bishop Blougram." "Eyes weep," he tells us :

mais sous quelle influence secrète  
 Cette eau des pleurs amers est-elle toujours prête ?  
 Ce n'est pas que pour un malheur, pour un souci !  
 Même pour rien ; pour un orgue triste, une fuite  
 De nuages, des lys qui meurent sans emploi !

Though it must be admitted that the odds are with Browning.

Speaking of the eyes of the blind, Rodenbach has discovered this image : they are like

Des scellés apposés sur une tête morte.

Another poem brings Coleridge to mind—

Le sommeil met aux yeux un tain spirituel  
 Grâce auquel leurs miroirs exigus se prolongent  
 Par delà la mémoire et le temps actuel.  
 Ils voient plus loin et mieux, tandis qu' on croit qu'ils songent  
 Et tout l'univers joue en ces glaces sans fond.

The man who wrote such lines has abridged the distance between sensation and expression.

It is in this way that Rodenbach is a real Flemish

painter, one of those artists who linger lovingly over small details and make them things of beauty. There is danger for the poet in this taste—he runs the risk of falling into over-laboured miniature. Vitet, speaking of Memmlinc's Shrine of St. Ursula, says: "All this is rendered with incredible skill, but does it not seem that *finesse* of detail, the brilliance of colouring, and delicacy of touch are here the artist's principal aim? It is a marvel of its kind, but the kind is limited and is almost of the same order as the paintings which enrich certain missals of the period: masterpieces of patience, but nearer to jewellery than to true art."

\*            \*            \*            \*            \*            \*

It is evident that Rodenbach brings us into a narrow world, wherein the very air we breathe is heavy with incense and prayer. He loves a life where the light only filters in through stained-glass windows, and where the dominant idea is that in the midst of life we are in death. That shews the profound disagreement between Rodenbach and living, triumphant, or suffering society.

All his life Rodenbach had the presentiment of his early death, and doubtless he wanted to establish himself in the little world he had created, so as to fix himself in men's minds. He knew that the public only cares for specialists.

Analysing his poems, you get a good impression of this kind of fatalism. Behind the artist's arrangement, imagination, skilled expression, there is always one thing: a memory. Rodenbach is ruled by his memories. The more or less honest agitation of cities, the—as a preacher might say—emptiness of the present age, has with him reinforced the charm of the past to such a degree that he only sees one plane of existence.



And yet he was not the dupe of his past—he does sometimes rebel against it. In the little tale called *Au Collège*, he writes: “I felt as if we were ourselves a flock being driven to our death, that obscure sensation that the lamb marked with the red cross perhaps has, when led to the slaughter-house. . . . And we were driven hurriedly along the evening road by a tall, bony priest, black as a shepherd’s dog. . . . *In this way our love of Nature was for ever vitiated.* Running water, the wind rustling in the corn, the birds, the wide open spaces, the whole vault of heaven, the noble cutline of the beasts of the field, the trees whose foliage makes a noise like a crowd, nothing of that enchants me, nothing gives me the intoxication of life. In all that is around me I can see the earth only as a final resting-place.” The passage is probably sincere, albeit a little too romantic to be absolutely true. Verhaeren was at the same college as Rodenbach, yet he does not seem to look upon Mother Earth as a mere sepulchre!

The truth then seems to be, as I have said, that Rodenbach, who was a very sagacious egotist, wanted to create his own little world. He succeeded, and to-day pays the penalty for having sung to a single-stringed lyre.

---

## CAMILLE LEMONNIER (1844-1913).

---

IN 1895 M. Bernard Lazare wrote a book called *Figures Contemporaines*, in which he tried to sum up and dismiss Camille Lemonnier in five pages. Here are some of the more vitriolic passages—

“ In his own opinion M. Camille Lemonnier represents Belgian letters, at all events he spares no pains to convince us that this is so. Yet he does not succeed in making us ignore Georges Eekhoud, Emile Verhaeren, Maurice Maeterlinck and many others, not to mention Georges Rodenbach, who has been Parisian for a long time now.

“ No author is safe from his depredations, he goes to everybody, to rich men like Hugo, or to poor ones like Droz. . . . He wrote *les Charniers* for those readers who wanted some Hugo, just as at another time he obliged the admirers of *Monsieur, Madame et Bébé*. When many of us were delighting in Cladel's painting of the peasants of Quercy, we were given *Le Mâle*. When Zola held sway, we had *Le Mort* and *L'Hystérique* which took us back to *Thérèse Raquin* and *la Conquête de Plassans*, and to the early work of Céard and Hennique . . . . Then this growth of naturalism calmed down . . . .

“ Lemonnier cultivated Mallarmé, and brought all his ingenuity to bear on the creation of awkward neologisms and distorted prosopopeia. At the present moment he is busy with *des Esseintes*, and in this rôle he is a blacksmith smiting with all his might on a delicate jewel, and taxing his wit in torturing filagree and

fragile glass. . . . He piles up the gold of rare adjectives and the purple of strange words, and out of it all he fashions a mosaic which is without life, without delicacy and without charm."

These passages are a masterpiece of malevolent inaccuracy. It may be necessary to recognise that you can see in Lemonnier the influence of Chateaubriand, Gautier, Hugo, Baudelaire, Flaubert, Cladel, Zola and even Gustave Droz (Lemonnier's *Derrière le Rideau* bears some resemblance to Droz's *Monsieur, Madame et Bébé*), and doubtless there is a pedant or two living, who will be pleased to trace these successive influences. The fact remains that there is no more original Belgian artist than Camille Lemonnier. A powerful and fertile writer, he represents Belgian literary activity for more than forty years, until his death in 1913, and even if he reflect the various tendencies of the French mind, and adapt himself to his surroundings, he is Flemish to the backbone in his mystico-sensual leanings, in his pious materialism, with its tendency towards pantheism, in his Rubens-like fertility and love of colour, dash and force.

It is true that he reminds the reader of Zola, and even of Dickens; but it is above all of Rubens and Jordaens that he makes us think, because, like them, he paints his imagination in the form of ever sensitive emotions. The moment Lemonnier states a fact, he feels obliged to magnify it, falsify it, he becomes inflamed with it. In *Au Cœur Frais de la Forêt* published in 1900, just as in *Le Mâle* published in 1881, he is faithful to his exuberant nature. His soul is in a continual state of unrest. Whether he describes a *Kermesse*, or a supper party or a free fight, he puts all his heart and soul into it, and always manages to communicate his enjoyment to the reader. His gift of perpetual invention appears nowhere to such advantage as in his descriptions of

scenery ; under his brush a forest becomes a living, breathing reality.

So that Lemonnier offers us a very interesting study : that of the Flemish artist, the poet-painter endowed with a rare blending of the gifts of the realist and idealist. In the end the poet gains the day. He set out with symbol in *Le Mâle* and returns to symbol in *Au Cœur Frais de la Forêt*, the truth being that he is always true to himself, always guided by his feeling, and that, although perhaps he never wrote a line of verse, he is a lyrist and a great idealist. The contrast is piquant, when one thinks of the brutes he painted.

In his lifetime Lemonnier's critics were always calling him a "*mâle*" : sometimes he must have felt his forehead for the budding satyr's horns. Barbey d'Aurévilly set the ball rolling by saying one day that Lemonnier was "un mâle, plus mâle encore que son Mâle." The refrain was taken up and endlessly repeated, for critics, like historians, repeat one another. "Physically, Lemonnier is a *fine male*. Tall, strongly built, with powerful limbs and superb carriage, he is a splendid specimen of humanity." That is M. G. Rency in the *Revue de Belgique*, February 15th, 1903. In *l'Action* of April 7th, 1903, he is again described : "Powerful and hairy, like a god, with the neck and shoulders of a mythological bull. His hair is red and his skin ruddy with that colour of ripe corn which Rubens sought to paint." Léon Cladel calls him "a magnificent red-haired man with sea green eyes." M. Léon Balzagette : "Of imposing stature, broad and strong, with powerful neck and shoulders, his whole physical being is overflowing with strength and sensuality. Rude health emanates from his organism to which nature has been so lavish with her gifts. His hair is thick, flaming red ; his complexion reveals his rich blood ; his eyebrows are

bushy. . . .” Et patati et patata. . . . The reader shall be spared the score and more of similar passages. Yet, spite of this Herculean physique, Lemonnier shows in all his work an ever alert and almost feminine fineness of feeling, a very flexible, and thereby imitative, temperament, fed by a sensitive and sensual love of nature, and—a minimum of thought, as we shall see.

The susceptibility which enabled him to write *Le Mâle* (one of the most interesting novels of the period) was certainly harmful to his other faculties. Not that it falsified his knowledge of life, but it rendered it incomplete, led him to over-cultivate and exaggerate his power of expression, for he had a kind of voluptuous feeling for words and sometimes allowed them to encumber his work. This same feature led him into boisterous explosions, into the bursting open of already open doors, and made him a very passionate writer: first realist, then socialist (in name at least), but always unsatisfied and with a taste for experiments. It made him a member of that family of which Baudelaire speaks: “Thou shalt love the place wherein thou art not; the lover whom thou dost not know.” It made him the pilgrim of every school. A very courageous writer, yes. A great writer, if you will. But realist or scientific writer, no.

He is too overladen with emotion to see things steadily and in their scientific whole; emotion weighs him down and keeps him from rising above his own time. His characters are for the most part rustic demi-gods, or fauns pure in heart, who have strayed into our civilisation. Thence also it follows that Lemonnier must not be required to disentangle the interlaced threads which make a human soul. He will try willingly, but will fail. He is not a Marivaux, nor a Bourget, nor a Barrès.

In the same way his portraits are drawn in with broad strokes, without any very great insight. There again he is like Rubens whose portraits, as Fromentin so justly says, are all rather alike, and all rather like Rubens himself, but deficient in a life of their own and thereby lacking moral resemblance. His characters are drawn by means of vigorous acts and conversations. The dialogue is always clear, precise, and very often inimitable: that gift must be recognised, for it at once puts Lemonnier far above Zola, who always gives his peasants a townsman's loquacity.

\* \* \* \* \*

When we come to examine what it is that constitutes the dominant characteristic of Lemonnier's heroes, we see that it is the same quality which he himself possessed above all others: the faculty of seeing, and delighting in what he sees. His gallery of "Mâles" is filled with various Lemonniers, wide-eyed, and keenly alive to the appeal of nature, conscious pantheists, intoxicated with the beauty of words and of things.

Take, for example, his two most famous novels, *Le Mâle* and *Le Vent dans les Moulins*. The poacher Cachaprès is—Lemonnier. For it is quite impossible that Cachaprès should have had all those feelings with which his creator credits him, especially since we are shown him in other aspects as a perfect brute. Would you care to know how Lemonnier's hero learnt to love Nature? Your thoughts will probably go to the boy in Wordsworth's *Prelude*, in which case you are most certainly on the wrong tack. When Cachaprès was still quite small, he was a terrible birdsnester. No foliage was too thick, no tree too difficult of ascent for the tiny brood to escape his eye. Then when he had caught his prey he carried it off to his mother, who

wrung the baby birds' necks, cooked them over a wood fire, and the tender morsel quickly disappeared under Cachaprès' greedy young teeth. And it is this "mâle" (who gives several other instances of his brutality) of whom Lemonnier says, after a wonderful description of the sunrise: "He became more and more the mate of the earth—he for whom she makes the lacework of her foliage, for whom she distils the scent of thyme and mint and lavender, for whom she makes the birds sing, the insects hum, and the streams flow under the moss with a sound of rustling silk."

That would pass, were Lemonnier ironical, but here he has no humour, he takes himself with all the seriousness of a man in full revolt.

In the same way in the opening pages of *Le Vent dans les Moulins*, Dries Abel, who is a peasant, again has the eye and imagination of the author. He thinks that his pigeons look like the pictures of the Holy Ghost descending when they fly over the church, and that the roofs are as blue as the eyes of his oxen, and that a humble dwelling has aches and pains in its joints like a rheumatic farm labourer.

It would be easy to continue this enumeration. It therefore follows that in Lemonnier's novels there will be much that is artificial, much that is conventional, much that is displeasing.

Truth to tell, it could not well be otherwise, since Lemonnier was born "a man for whom the actual world exists." If we run over his tales and novels in our minds, we see that it is always a *picture* which we remember: the awakening of the forest, the death of a faun, a cottage inhabited by toil-worn peasants, the red-hot furnace in the rolling-mill, paths in Flanders, exquisite nooks of greenery in the woods.

His first works were his Salons: *Salon de Bruxelles*,

1863; *Salon de Bruxelles*, 1866; *Salon de Paris*, 1870. And his *Les Charniers* is a collection of pictures, a *Salon*, in fact, of the most fearful horrors of war. Lemonnier's reputation as an art critic will live as long as his reputation as a novelist. When his second *Salon* appeared in 1866 (he was born in 1841), Alfred Stevens went to see him, and said to him, "You are now the critic to whom we all look."

But this painter's eye, which enabled him to distinguish the characteristic detail everywhere, and which, given his profound sensibility, procured him endless and ever-fresh sensations, was bound to lead him to loving words for their own sake, because words were to enable him to render the multiplicity, the charm, the astonishment and the magic of his sensations. That is a feature which critics have been very slow to recognise in Lemonnier. But it is nevertheless true that for him, as for Victor Hugo, words were living beings. And he loved them so well that he could not bring himself to choose from among them, but welcomed them all, beggar and prince, introducing into literature the most richly picturesque terms of slang or patois. His work is like the seashore of those distant lands where the stones and shells cast up by the sea, with the traces of the waves still upon them, glint in the sun. Some are common pebbles, others shells worth polishing and carving, while here and there you may light upon a pearl, and on all you feel the great breath of the vast ocean.

On the subject of his style, Lemonnier has left us an important document in his Preface to Gustave Abel's *Le Labeur de la Prose*. Words, he tells us, were for him a revelation of the universe, and he speaks of the pleasure he gained by declaiming them in the solitude of his little room. Sometimes he would amuse himself by imagining



all the possible variations of a simple idea, such as "the moon is shining." And he makes a significant statement: "A writer is a creator of forms, and these are the product of the extent and suppleness of his vocabulary rather than of the plenitude of his ideas." He advises all would-be writers to work hard at studying their dictionary—for "le mot accouche l'idée." Then again, style is intimately connected with sensation, since he tells us that in the summer he thinks in luxuriant arabesques and happy music, the resulting words being clear, light, tender, but that he would never allow himself to express in the same way the frozen silences of winter. "Le style," he says, "est un rythme, et ce rythme est le mouvement même de mon âme en correspondance avec l'univers."

There you have the explanation of his way of writing—it is the outcome of an ardent and voluptuous curiosity—he makes his pictures out of the enumeration of an infinity of detail—as Zola did, but with much greater care and far greater delicacy, the master-mason's trowel is replaced by an extremely dexterous brush. Zola's is the descriptive novel, Lemonnier's is the picturesque novel. That comes out very well in *Le Mâle*—for instance this passage—

Des cabarets s'échappait maintenant un large courant d'ivresse. On entendait des bruits de querelles, avec des tapées de poings sur les tables. Le ronflement des jurons se mêlait à des chansons tristes psalmodiées par des langues épaisses. Dans les jardins les boules frappaient les quilles avec fureur. Il y avait des paris désordonnés. Des paysans qui n'avaient qu'un toit de chaume et crevaient de misère pariaient cent francs sur les jeux.

Une mangeaille copieuse à mesure étançonait les estomacs près de chavirer. Des femmes plongeaient leur visage dans de vastes quartiers de tartes au riz. Des enfants barbouillés de prunes aiguisaient leurs dents sur la pâtisserie sèche. Et les hommes, tenant à deux mains des saucisses de viande de cheval, en tiraillaient

à la force des mâchoires la chair filamenteuse. Ailleurs on se bourrait d'œufs durs et les pain d'épices achevaient de prédisposer les gosiers à des beuveries incessantes.

Here again we see Lemonnier's love of Force leading him into falsification and exaggeration of reality. When he talks of peasants in dire poverty laying wagers of a hundred francs, and their womenkind plunging their teeth into enormous hunches of *tarte au riz*, we feel that he is emulating Rubens, and trying to intoxicate us with the riotous strength of the earth. But, it should be observed, he is very careful not to let his heroine yield after the kermesse, as Zola would have done. That is the touch of an artist who is very sure of himself and for which much will be forgiven.

Since the epithet of "Zola of the Belgians" has been so often hurled at Lemonnier's head, it is perhaps not out of place to point out that *Les Charniers* preceded *La Débâcle* by more than twenty years, that if *Happe-Chair* came a year after *Germinal*, Lemonnier, in his ingenious style, the curiosity of his thought, his Flemish common-sense, and that indefinable touch of optimistic pride, is singularly different from the father of the Rougon-Macquart. It would be fairly easy to compare *Le Mâle* with *La Terre*, and the palm would not go to the high priest of naturalism. In all *La Terre*, full as it is of the most brutal rhetoric, you will find no scene comparable to the selling of the cow in *Le Mâle*. Zola has created nothing so true as Lemonnier's old peasant Hulotte. Lemonnier saw the beauty in the peasant's life; Zola quite overlooked it.

It would nevertheless be untrue to say that Lemonnier could not express the terror of life. He wrote *Le Mort*, which is as fine in its way as *Le Mâle*. This sinister book tells how the brothers Baraque kill a man, throw him into a ditch of liquid manure; and how, in spite of

their efforts, he always reappears on the surface. It is in this book that he reminds us of Dickens. His portraits of the three brothers—Balt and Bast, thin as nails, with enormous hands and sticks of legs, Bast with his interminable cough and furtive eyes, Nol the idiot, with body all swollen by the damp in the house, and his flaxen wig stuck on with pitch—are pure Dickens. But Lemonnier certainly never thought of imitating the English master, he merely followed the bent of his own nature just as Dickens followed the bent of his. Any accusation of plagiarism falls to the ground, unless the accuser is prepared to uphold the absurd idea that Dickens begot Zola who begot Lemonnier.

*Happe-Chair*, another of Lemonnier's more famous works, is a romance of the Black Country. In order to write it Lemonnier lived for many weeks at Marcinelle and at Couillet, in the dreary villages, observing the existence of the miner. He was accompanied by the artist, Constantin Meunier. The result of this visit was the working-class art of Constantin Meunier, and Lemonnier's novel *Happe-Chair*, with its pictures of factory life.

\* \* \* \* \*

It is impossible to undertake to analyse here Lemonnier's sixty volumes. A great literary force such as he is must be loved before being criticised. It is easy enough to pick holes in this or that novel, but what of his fertility of invention, of his incessant labour, of his love of letters, and above all of the service he rendered to Belgian literature by breaking up the fetters of stupidity and torpor? A bull in a china shop (and poor china at best!), that is how Lemonnier appears in the Belgium of his day. Critics have generally divided

his life into three periods. The first is the naturalistic period; the second the period of *l'Hystérique* and *le Possédé*, a tentative period with Lemonnier still feeling his way among the pitfalls of the new French æsthetic movement; and finally the third period, where he comes back to his true self and his rustico-poetic moods, with *l'Île Vierge*, *Adam et Eve*, *Au Cœur Frais de la Forêt*.

But the continuity of his work is never broken. It is enough to look at the date of his books to see how they are mixed up together and overlap one another.

Lemonnier was a man of extremes. Like his Cachaprès, he was a born rebel. Clearly, then, he was bound to become obsessed at a given moment by the idea of the importance of rebellion, bound to become attracted by the swarming life of the lower grades of nature and to regard it as essential to life and human activity. All those writings, which certain critics consider as running counter to his other work, are, on the contrary, the typical product of his thought. The creator of Cachaprès, given the state of contemporary thought, was bound to become the author of *l'Hystérique*, *le Possédé*, *l'Homme en Amour*, and the rest. They are books of rebellion, books written by a poacher who has a grudge against all gamekeepers. He might be called a Flemish Bakounine *in petto*, when in *La Fin des Bourgeois* he announces the downfall of the bourgeoisie and the triumph of democracy. When he shakes his fist at society he is a good representative of the Belgian thought of his day—and of to-morrow, he shows us not only man's natural need of grumbling, but the need of improving the situation which is ingrained in the Belgian. We must never forget, as Professor Ashley reminds us: "Originality of social insight is still alive in the land, for it was from Ghent that the modern State learned in

recent years to think out practicable measures of insurance against unemployment." There is nothing astonishing, then, in the apparition of Lemonnier as a disciple of Jean Jacques, and in his declaration more than a century later than the Geneva philosopher, that Society has corrupted man, and that we must throw ourselves into Nature's arms to be calmed and purified. It is always the same with these blind, passionate flights towards the ideal: they impose excessive tasks upon man, which in reality only lead him into the pitfalls of his baser instincts—"Be my brother, else will I kill thee!"

\* \* \* \* \*

The question of morality, when speaking of Lemonnier, cannot be entirely ignored. He was brought before the courts three times. In 1888 he was prosecuted in Paris on account of *l'Enfant du Crapaud*, in 1893 in Brussels for *L'Homme qui tue les Femmes*, and finally at Bruges on account of *l'Homme en Amour*. The suit at Bruges resulted in his book called *Les Deux Consciences*, where he confronts the judge Moinet with the writer Wildmann (*i.e.* Lemonnier). In this book the writer has tried to describe himself, although he says that Wildmann was absolutely incapable of reasoning with himself. He makes his Wildmann say that he really *lived* his early books, and that those books are vehement, passionate and stormy as the ancestors and the soil from which he is sprung. The desperate, sensual, grotesque, yet simple soul of his native plains swelled within him, and he then created men of his own measure, which measure was great enough for all Flanders to stand within without stooping. "But," he continues, "the wind which raises up great waves in the sea, blows more gently as it passes over the

meadow or behind the dunes. My being became balanced and my soul was transported into quieter regions. I began to see before me the paths which lead to Eden. Each one of us, according to his strength, works towards the accomplishment of the universe, but the highest force is still art, because art is the sensitive soul of humanity." Words, words, words!

When all is said, one sees that Lemonnier's system of morality, reduced to its simplest expression, is a condemnation of all that is hard in man, and of all that is hard in society. His is an ideal of generosity, a state of kindness. Lofty as such an ideal may be, it has little documentary value, except in so far as it is a reaction against Society. Man has never sought anything else than happiness, and if he has arrived at the betterment of his situation it is through certain invincible passions which he carries within him.

Again, this question of morality in art, so often put forward in the nineteenth century, has been badly put forward. A work of art cannot proclaim a system of morality, because, in so doing, it would only be expressing certain precepts imagined by man and therein fallible. The morality of a work of art is to be found, unexpressed, in the spectacles themselves which are shown.

The only reproach which can justly be made to Lemonnier, is to have written a moralising work, judging and disapproving sometimes (not always) in virtue of purely sentimental considerations. The nature of his "mâles" is emotional to the highest degree; and their ideas are accompanied by such vivid sensations that they are transformed into emotions. In that way Lemonnier came to have a conception of life which is amusing in its exaggeration, with a Flanders where there were kermesses every day, and great black puddings,

and pancakes in abundance, dancing in the arbours, endless casks of ale, and hops growing as high as the masts of ships.

An affective mind can only have a subjective knowledge of the world: that is the case with Lemonnier; but true Fleming as he is, he has clearly seen that man will never be moved by a formula, but only by a sentiment. It is therefore all the more incomprehensible that too often he has worshipped at the altar of the false idol of his time, the goddess of Science; that too often he has believed that Charcot, Lombroso and Zola, because they dominated a continental table, understood human nature better than the simple conscientious artist of former times. That is the great value of Bergson's philosophy, that he teaches us to love life in order to understand it, and that all imitation in life is stupid and wrong: so at least we interpret his hatred of the "tout fait." A comparison of Lemonnier's *Le Mâle* and *Le Mort* with his *La Fin des Bourgeois* and *Happe-Chair* is of the highest interest. We see the author lashed by himself, and the spectacle is an education. The first two novels are admirable because they are faithful studies, the last two are only theses written to prove a sordid point. Modern Charleroi may be a real *Happe-Chair*, a fearful beast roaring and devouring its children; the Belgian bourgeoisie may be an abomination in the eyes of my lord Lemonnier, dark and sordid and sensual. But unless the artist love his people, such as they are, with their sores and plagues, he cannot describe them faithfully. Granted that we be men and supermen, forces, powers, ambitions let loose, yet it should not be forgotten that if a man would be an artist he must not despise the commonplace. Anybody can write a novel, but only a very great man can love plain ordinary life as a mother loves her child.

## GEORGES EEKHOUD (*b.* 1854).

---

THERE are two men at least in Georges Eekhoud—probably more, but most certainly two. First, there is a man who has a passionate love for his country and is profoundly attached to its customs, its way of living, its local turns of speech, the very intonation of its peasants, the smell of its soil, its skies and streams. Then there is the romantic artist, who loves the poor and destitute, the unfortunate, those who have run up against the law. The first man loves the peasant as he is; the second only cares for the peasant corrupted. Eekhoud has two sensibilities: the first is the naturally developed product of a long line of ancestors: under its influence he has written many pages which are a pure delight; the second is fashioned on the artificial Paris-Brussels model, and the contrast between these two aspects of a temperament furnishes a constant source of astonishment for the reader.

Eekhoud is a writer who, after having noted down the language, gestures and actions of his peasants in the full freedom of their individuality, after filling his nostrils with a scent of living things, has turned his footsteps towards the town and has wandered about the outer boulevards. There you have a rather interesting literary "case." Indeed, Eekhoud's books are sad enough reading, though they give us not so much the tragedy of life as the tragic spectacle of man become very nearly an automaton in his desire for self-abasement. The idea that Reason plays a very small part in the lives of men, and that many human beings are



law-abiding who, with a different upbringing, would have been criminal—trite as these theories may appear to us—are not only the two main sources of Eekhoud's inspiration, but the very life breath of his nostrils. The *Cycle patibulaire*, for instance, is an infinitely pathetic book, because it is the climax of a series of works which Eekhoud has written willy nilly. An iron necessity, a modern *ἀνάγκη*, dogged his footsteps, pursuing the unhappy victim from *Kees Doorik* to the *Kermesses*, and from the *Kermesses* to *Les Milices de Saint François*, from the *Milices* to the *Nouvelles Kermesses*, and thence to all his other books, right the way down the putrid road leading to the gehenna of humanity. Unpleasant, insufferable even, spectacle of a man in search of self-degradation! Such self-abasement may lead to the question: Why did not M. Eekhoud choose the claustral life? But, indeed, the enigma of our epoch, of the House of Life in which destiny has placed us, would be solved, could we find the answer to such a riddle.

In 1865, when Eekhoud was eleven years old, if his schoolfellows are to be believed, he was already "writing poetry." His first three books are in verse: *Myrtes et Cyprès*, *Zig-Zags Poétiques*, *Les Pittoresques*. Some of the poems foreshadow the vigorous prose writer that was to come. Here and there, as in *le Semeur*, there are touches which seem to come from a Flemish Millet trying his palette. Then come his most famous books: *Kees Doorik*, *Les Kermesses* and *Nouvelles Kermesses*, *les Fusillés de Malines*, *La Nouvelle Carthage*, and *la Faneuse d'Amour*, where he gives us the poetry of his *polder* with its rather dark colours, the vast river scenery with its dream-horizons. Finally, *Mes Communions*, *l'Autre Vue*, *Escal Vigor*, take us right into the forest of sensuality, where the sickly

flowers of evil spring up from a putrid soil. A short while ago we were in the midst of real nature, with the wind blowing and the fresh air from the Scheldt, under the open sky. Now we have for companions another doleful *des Esseintes*, or another still more doleful *Phocas*; we are in the midst of the rag-tag and bobtail of a kind of Baudelairian Society.

It may be said: all these contradictions are only on the surface. What is really at the bottom of Eekhoud is his instinct for blood and lust, which on the one hand makes him stand out sharply from among his companions, and on the other has given him his taste for the lowest classes. A white-heat sensitiveness, which engraves for ever such and such a scene upon his brain, finally led him to the study of the most criminal brutality. His early novels alone reveal only his attitude towards Nature in the Campine: a perfect example of sympathetic comprehension and artistic volition. But when we come to *Les Kermesses*, or *Kees Doorik*, we see at once that this same artistic nature which can divine the mystery surrounding us and penetrate into the secret of the melancholy of things, in reality only loves the reek of slaughter. Behind Eekhoud there is a whole race of pillaging and privateering ancestors, who boast to him about the adventures of their Viking horde. The title of *Les Kermesses* makes one think of jovial scenes, of Rubens' pictures, of huge feasts and mighty drinking parties. But the book is full of battles and killing. *La Belette* is the story of a street singer who dies of galloping consumption, while her master breaks his violin over her head. In *la Pucelle d'Anvers* a workman kills himself because his fiancée, representing the Queen of the Scheldt, rides in a triumphal car in a procession. In *la Jambette de Kors Davie* the husband kills the wife,

and in another story Marcus Tybout is killed by falling into a trap laid by his mistress.

It has been said that the peasants he paints are mere brutes. Nothing could be further from the truth. They are, on the contrary, highly sensitive men and women, all created in the image of their author. They have a sense of shame in their confidences and troubles, they know what chastity is (Flup Bollander in *la Pucelle d'Anvers* for example), they are taciturn, and hide their hatred in mutism, till the moment when their pent-up feelings find vent and they become criminals. They are not Maupassant's Normans nor Balzac's men of Touraine: they are Flemish. Take, for example, little Rika, who would so fain find a lover, and who dreams in her garret. "In the attic bathed in the moonlight's silver rays the slightest thing is visible. The silence has so completely closed the mouths of space,\* that Rika could almost think she hears the sound made by the white light falling on the creaking floor."

In the same way nearly all his characters have Poesque souls. In *Marcus Tybout* the story-teller relates his last interview with the man who is going to be killed—

As the darkness fell, all the attractions of the country in its ecstasy, the shivering of the leaves and the grass, all were merged into a drowsy music. A stork cried out in the distance. . . . The night before the storm had brought down a poplar, and it now lay across the path and seemed to bar the way *to someone coming from that direction.* (The italics are Eekhoud's.)

And in the *Kermesse grise*, when the poor consumptive singer forgets her words and mixes up the verses in the song—

---

\* In one of his early poems Eekhoud had written "*Le silence avait fermé les bouches de l'espace.*"

At first these divagations amused those who heard them; then the superstitious villagers took fright at this sinister quaintness, which in the mouth of the half-witted singer seemed to have about it something foreordained by a supernatural will, something sybilline.

In *L'Ex-Voto*—

This lovely afternoon has in it that heartbreaking suggestion of things that have been, and can never, never be again.

The title of one of Barrès's books, *Du Sang, de la Volupté et de la Mort*, would be an excellent classification for these volumes of Eekhoud. They are the work of as self-conscious an artist as one could find. He pays a visit to a casualty ward, and amongst those he calls *les las d'aller*, he finds the heroes of his books, the chief actors in his tragic Kermesses, "toutes mes belles brutes" as he says.

His most famous novel, *La Nouvelle Carthage* (i.e. Antwerp), shews us what a shrewd, subtle, pessimistic artist Eekhoud is, for he transforms Antwerp into a kind of vast sulphurous inferno of famishing scoundrels. In his hyperbolic vision, his adoration of death, his love of detail, and his predilection for the ugly and the vulgar, he reminds us of Huysmans. Many a page of *La Nouvelle Carthage* might have been taken from one of the French master's novels.

I take an example at random—

Sa piété fervente s'étendait des êtres besogneux et des quartiers excentriques de la grande ville au sol gâcheux ou aride, au ciel hallucinant, aux blousiers taciturnes de la contrée, à ces steppes de la Campine que le touriste redoute comme le remords. . . . Le mépris de ce villageois pour le printemps attendri et chatouilleur, le flegme de ce fessu maroufle, à la pulpe mûre, aux cheveux flasse vaquant d'un pas appuyé à sa besogne utile mais inélégante, le violent contraste du substantiel pétaud avec la mièvrerie ambiante conquéraient d'emblée Laurent Paridael, et, du même coup, le décor avrilien, l'énervement de l'équinoxe, la langueur à laquelle Laurent

inclinaît, la présence dont il venait de jouir, lui parut insipide et frelaté comme une berquinade. Il n'avait plus de sens que pour ce jeune cultivateur. Ce même rural, accosté par Laurent, cessait un instant de triturer le compost et de stimuler la glèbe, et narrait épanoui, simplard, en se grattant l'oreille : "Oui, tel que vous me voyez, monsieur, à quatre garçons du hameau, nous fîmes notre première communion le jour même où nous tombions au sort!" Et cette coïncidence du sacrement balsamique avec la brutale conscription ne se délogea jamais du cerveau de Laurent, et lui fut inséparable d'un mélange d'encens pascal et de pouacre purée, comme de l'odeur même du jour où ce fait exceptionnel lui fut raconté.

Such a page would have delighted Huysmans, unless he were annoyed by the hint of parody. But Eekhoud is sincere and original. He has not that sense of the grotesque which the author of *les Soeurs Vatard* possessed to such a very high degree. He is much less unmoved by his characters than Huysmans: he really does love them with a physical love, and he acts upon us less by what he shows us than by the troubled state of mind in which he himself is. In any case the resemblance between these two beings who fantasticise the world, comes in the first place from that same attitude of mind which makes a man love to debase himself, as well as from the identical conception they had of their art. For them real art only exists in descriptions of the unusual and the ugly. Venus garbed as a charwoman, Adonis in guise of a butcher's boy—such is their ideal. With Eekhoud, this predilection for the lowest ranks is far more sensual than with Huysmans: if he is full of ideas about the beauty of ugliness, it is as a pagan who accepts the cult of the nude. He has a sensual love for these men, whom he looks at through their carnal, bestial foundations. He loves everything about his hooligans—the contact of their skin, their fetid breath, their guttural voices. Their ill-matched clothes are a delight to him, the rents in a

pair of trousers will lead him to compose an odyssey of the garment impossible to discover in your bourgeois suit. And this extraordinary abasement is natural with him, for his sensuality is far stronger than his pride; he is the slave of an hallucinatory vision. His characters are nearly always abnormal beings: the peasants sensual mystics, the aristocrats enigmatic, charming, equivocal, always hovering on the borders of madness and sanity. In *La Nouvelle Carthage* he shows us Antwerp: "ville superbe, ville riche, mais ville égoïste, ville de loups si âpres à la curée qu'ils se dévorent entre eux, lorsqu'il n'y a plus de moutons à tondre jusqu'aux os." And he creates out of it a city of crime and strife set in an atmosphere of phantom and mystery which fastens on the mind with a kind of unearthly terror. To a stranger there is certainly something rather alarming about these streets near the Antwerp port with the night-revels in the cabarets, in every one of which is music and dancing and orgy. Eekhoud gives us the impression of all that, only raised to the  $n^{\text{th}}$  power. There was a man who, after having read *La Nouvelle Carthage*, refused to venture into the back streets of Antwerp without a loaded revolver in his pocket.

If it were still the fashion to make galleries of portraits, as La Bruyère did, we should put Georges Eekhoud into the frame belonging to "The Curious Man." "Curiosity," says La Bruyère, "is not a taste for what is good nor for what is fine, but for what is rare, unique, the taste for something which one has and which other men have not." Curious: the word defines Eekhoud quite well. Tired of acquired literature, urged on by the atavistic impulse, "tendu et pléthorique," as he says of his hero, he is ever at the mercy of his curiosity, which is always looking for a new titillation, a new thrill,

always ready to rehabilitate vice and crime. The geniuses he most admires are Botticelli, Antonio Bozzi, Baudelaire, Gustave Moreau, Edgar Poe, Villiers de l'Isle Adam, and above all, the great Elizabethan dramatists; the former because of their love for an ardent, morose kind of beauty, the latter because of the indeterminate impression they give of themselves and of their art, and because they are capable of every diversion and every crime.

This search for distinction at any cost, this desire to destroy conventions and codes, has led Eekhoud to his love for the misunderstood among men: the unfortunates, all the outcasts and untamed recreants. M. Maurice Gauchez, like many another reader, had thought that this solicitude on Eekhoud's part came from the fact that he had grown up as one disinherited from the house of Joy—a kind of second Dickens. But there exists a document of the highest importance which confirms our first impression. Maurice Gauchez had written of Eekhoud in his *Livre des Masques Belges*: "His youth was deprived of all affection and tenderness." To which Eekhoud replied that "it would be ingratitude on his part not to proclaim on the contrary that, orphaned of both father and mother at the age of eleven, with his maternal grandmother, with his guardians, who were rich business men, and with all the members of his 'exquisite patrician family,' he had met with the tenderest and most sympathetic care." Eekhoud has written some delightful pages about his grandmother, and also about his father, if it be true that *Ex-Voto* is made up of recollections of his childhood.

When Eekhoud speaks of his "patricienne et exquise famille," he proves for us that when he indulges in a bout of low debauch, it is for pleasure, to satisfy

morbidly acute senses. One always comes back to Pascal: "Si l'on ne se connaît plein de superbe, d'ambition, de concupiscence, de misère et d'injustice, on est bien aveugle."

But M. Eekhoud is by no means blind, he knows himself very well, and deliberately gives himself up to frenzied cultivation of his malady. That is the source of his taste for strange perversions (as shewn in *Escal Vigor* for example). In his desire to depart from the common ruck of the ordinary mortal's vision, he seeks out sensual figures with a violence which almost suggests there has been a wager on the subject. He is a hard-working rake, who thinks that the great tragedy of life is to know only seven deadly sins. When he studies himself in the Comte d' Escal Vigor and in Laurent Paridael, he does it as a virtuoso playing variations upon his theme, as a man aiming at working out all the possible developments of certain unhealthy fevers. For him, to treat life artistically is to belong to the criminal classes. The virtuous know only the commonplace side of existence; it is only the guilty who have paradise on earth: a *faux pas* leads to heaven or the guillotine.

Because of this attitude of mind, as he advances in life Eekhoud gets into closer contact with the patibulary heroes of the world, and enters into immediate communion with them.

"Suddenly, like a man who is furious and desperate, the man threw his arms round Paridael's neck and laid his plebeian head on the shoulder of the déclassé." \*

The passage refers to a street porter in the *bassins* of Antwerp, to whom Paridael has just given a piece of gold as alms. Underneath the ragged clothes and the

---

\* *La Nouvelle Carthage*, p. 385.



rough manners, Eekhoud always manages to get at the secret of these poor wretches' being.

There are other novelists—Dostoiewsky, Tolstoi for example—who have lifted the curtain which covers the savage, vicious, painful things hidden in the lower aspect of man. But they are always troubled by the problem of evil, of sin and its punishment, and finally they have thrown themselves in tears before a crucifix; in an agony of sorrow as tragic as Pascal's. There is nothing of that feeling in Eekhoud. Up till now he has looked at life from the point of view of a revolté who rebels against evolutionist philosophy and against religion. "Darwin's law confirms Jehovah's," he says somewhere. He has vowed to treat both with implacable hatred. A pessimist he is bound to be, like every egotist who writes his work with his own blood. The *surgit amari aliquid* is true, not only of Don Juan, but of every writer who overworks his mind and aims at intensifying his individuality.

But before a superman arrives at that pessimistic stage, which is the result of fatigue and satiety, there is another pessimism: that of the soul which grieves to see that everything on earth is ugly. And that is the pessimism with which Eekhoud began. Pride is one of its components, the misunderstood are especially susceptible to it, it is a bruised, irascible kind of pessimism, and leads up to the second kind, which finds pleasure only in morbidity and in violence, in fired ricks and blood-stained knives. Pessimists are inconsistent, they are bankrupts who are always demanding from Life something which they declare it cannot give them.

Such then is this singular personality in all its apparent contradictions. When Eekhoud describes the sensual soul of the Campine (*Kees Doorik*), when

in *Les Kermesses* and *Les Nouvelles Kermesses* he tells us of savage beings who burn and kill, when in *Les Fusillés de Malines* he shews us those rustic boors who yet, as he says, preserve the faith of past ages, who undertake pilgrimages, respect their "pastoor," believe in the devil and in witchcraft, when he paints Antwerp with its billionaire capitalists, its shipowners, and its "runners," its business men and its bankrupts, its workmen and its prostitutes; when he studies mental aberrations (*Escal Vigor* and *Mes Communions*) and the Brussels hooligans, he is always holding the mirror up to himself. When he exalts the stupidity of the peasants, the astuteness of the rich and of the parvenu, the vice of the refractory, he does not borrow from life, but from his own soul with its myriad and ever-changing sensations. He wanted to incarnate himself in his types, and this perpetual Narcissus attitude has made us acquainted with Kees Doorik, Laurent Paridael, and the Comte d'Escal Vigor. It is hardly necessary to add that these creations are a thousandfold exaggerated. Eekhoud forges them for his literary inferno, and a very fine inferno it is, peopled with works of art, its walls hung with landscapes which are marvellous notations of a lurid atmosphere. He makes a new chart of the Land of Love, and instead of peopling it with charming coquettes and curly sheep, he decorates it with a series of vignettes of my lord the apache. It was left to Eekhoud to create a new type of Eros. In place of Cupid the student, Cupid the huntsman, Cupid the ploughboy of Greek anthology, he introduces us to Cupid-Hooligan in patched trousers, ragged cap and curled fringe. The intensity of his vision is a fine quality—but we should remember that it is in itself a limitation.

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE.

The following biographical notes are taken from a study of Eekhoud published by M. J. de Geyust in the *Journal de Gand*. They may help towards a better understanding of this artist's character—

Eekhoud was born in 1854, in the very heart of Antwerp, close by the Cathedral. His parents and paternal grandparents were pure-bred Antwerpians. His maternal grandfather was German, living in Nassau, his maternal grandmother was a Smits of Rotterdam, a patrician family which had given several burgo-masters to that city. His paternal grandfather was remarkable for his gift of tongues (gift which Georges Eekhoud seems to have inherited), and was sought after by all the merchants of Antwerp who were unable to read their correspondence. Georges Eekhoud lost his mother when he was only six years old. She was a very cultured woman and a fine musician; it is from her that he gets his artistic temperament. In his eleventh year he lost his father. His education was undertaken by his guardian, who sent him to the International Institute of Breidenstein at Greuschen, in Switzerland, where he received an essentially French education. When he came back to his own country, at the age of seventeen, Antwerp appeared to him a new land for exploration. The same phenomenon is to be observed in him as in so many other Flemish writers: the intense vision of the country from which he is exiled impelling the artist to describe it. In deference to his guardian's wishes he entered the military school of Brussels, but he spent all his time in writing, and finally left the school suddenly. While he was at the school he fought a duel with Camille Coquilhart, who ended his days as Viceroy of the Congo. The episode is recorded in *Myrtes et Cyprès*. The two combatants fought with the sabre, stripped to the waist, on a carnival Tuesday, in a clearing of the Cambre wood. Eekhoud was wounded in the arm. Coquilhart and he had been school-fellows, and when the former went to fight for France in 1870, Eekhoud was the confidant of this chivalrous action. But the rivalry of the different divisions of the army to which they belonged made them adversaries. A pellet of bread thrown into Eekhoud's plate in the refectory furnished the futile pretext for the duel.

Having quarrelled with his family on leaving the military school, Eekhoud came to Antwerp, and lived on the interest of his father's capital, eked out by fifty francs a month, which he earned as assistant corrector on the *Précurseur*. At twenty-one, like his hero Paridael, he had had many adventures and run through all his money. The prodigal was then taken in by his paternal grandmother. On her death, with the money she left him, he was able to satisfy his longing to know every corner of the country round Antwerp, which his father had taught him to love. At Capellen, Georges Eekhoud led the life of a country gentleman : break-neck rides with the hounds, receptions, improvised kermesses.

On the 1st May, 1881, he came to Brussels, and then joined the staff of the *Etoile belge*.

---

MAX ELSKAMP (*b.* 1862) AND  
 CHARLES VAN LERBERGHE  
 (1861-1906).

---

TOWARDS the year 1890 the new departure in art consisted in an elimination of all that was low and horrible in the naturalist school, a clearance of all the pinchbeck jewellery of the Parnassian school, a throwing off of the stiff fetters of science, and a return to the sources of popular song and national legend. It was the new fashion to imitate Mallarmé or Verlaine—and Gabriel Vicaire. Hence the effort in Belgium (we are not concerned with France for the moment, although the same reaction took place there also) to introduce a mystic, idealistic note which should contrast with the art of Lemonnier and his disciples, to express sincerely and directly emotions which are both collective and individual.

It was Charles van Lerberghe's idea to make death, ever present, albeit invisible, the principle of a new tragedy. It is easy to see from reading Rodenbach's recollections of his college days, that this idea came to him partly from this religious education given him by the Jesuits at Ghent. Perhaps the influence of Novalis must count for something too. . . .

It is obvious that Van Lerberghe had a certain influence upon Maeterlinck. His *les Flaireurs*, unreal and childish though it be, foreshadows the birth of the Maeterlinckian drama. Much of the effect of unreality and childishness is caused by the rubrics : funeral march : beating of muffled drums : a horn sounds in the distance :

short psalm-passage for organ: continual muffled knocking—in a word, all the romantic machinery. The three *Inconnus* who come one after the other to knock at the door, and who are the Three Angels of Death, are represented as three undertakers, and speak as such. One of them even says: “*Cré nom, est-ce qu'on se f— de moi ici?*”

Yet, in spite of all this, one feels what a man of genius might make out of this idea of death all around us, knocking at our door at every hour, and of that other idea that presentiment weighs down our souls when face to face with the inexplicable. When the Queen strangles the little Princess in the fourth act of Maeterlinck's *Princesse Maleine*, the hail patters against the windows, and the king cries out—

Aux fenêtres! On frappe aux fenêtres.

*Anne*: On frappe aux fenêtres?

*Le Roi*: Oui! Oui! avec des doigts, oh! des milliers de doigts.

And in *les Flaireurs* the dying old mother exclaims at every knock (and the knocks are frequent enough in all conscience)—

Il y a quelquechose qui frôle, comme ça, là sous la porte, sûr, il y a quelquechose qui traîne. Qu'est ce qu'il y a là, ma fille?

Maeterlinck uses the same device, but with variations. He makes his characters say, “I do not know what is the matter to-night,” or, “It is as though my hands were ill to-day,” or, “Perhaps it is the last time I shall see you,” or, “I am all alone in endless darkness.” In his early plays Maeterlinck is merely developing the idea found in *les Flaireurs*, but in *les Aveugles* he makes it his own and imbues it with true tragic beauty. One trick he certainly learned from van Lerberghe was that of introducing little simple, puerile even, sentences which create an effect of profound melancholy.

While van Lerberghe was busy tracing out the path for Maeterlinck to tread and creating a new Guignol drama, another poet was being born whose sensibility sums up all the sentimentalism of the whole of the Belgium of that time, all this disgust at reality which is to be found in all her writers who sought for grace or horror, or more preferably still, the legendary, who sought, in short, the *unseen* in all its forms. We meet with the Elskamp temper again in Charles van Lerberghe, in Maeterlinck, in Le Roy, in the brothers Destrée, in Jean Dominique, Paul Gerardy, and Georges Rency; later on it crops up again in the fluid mysticism-laden verse of the Belgian Catholics. His biographers have told us that Villiers de l'Isle Adam counts for something in Maeterlinck's orientation towards things spiritual. But there are other and far more decisive influences about which they are silent—Verlaine's and Laforgue's, and perhaps that of some of the English pre-Raphaelites, as well as that of Keats.

In any case, before embarking upon Elskamp's work the student should read Maeterlinck's *Douze Chansons*. These essentially musical compositions have been illustrated by Charles Dondelet with an intentional *gaucherie* which arises from a desire to plunge us into a mediæval atmosphere. He has really rather abused the introduction of stiff figures, hieratic attitudes and black and white chequering, but even so, he has failed to render the sense of expectation and recollection combined which makes up the unforgettable charm of these Songs, whose atmosphere of mystery entirely annihilates the irony which is always lurking within us. They are composed not only of search after the rare with a desire to surprise, but also of the joy of juggling with the past, of representing hardly perceptible sensations, which are nevertheless as old as

the hills. Baudelaire's reflection, "Superstition is the source of all Truth," is immeasurably vast, a saying out of which whole books might be made. In the same way these little songs of Maeterlinck's are quintessenced poetry. They are not like Mallarmé's, they are not nebulous nor written in disjointed sentences like his

Surgi de la croupe et du fond  
D'une verrerie éphémère,  
Sans fleurir la veillée amère  
Le col ignoré s'interrompt.

That is not Maeterlinck's way. He uses very simple words, which are not chosen on account of eminently musical or luminous qualities, but which nevertheless awaken countless mysterious echoes within us, so laden with meaning are they, so intimately connected with the universe itself—

Ma mère, n'entendez-vous rien ?  
Ma mère on vient m'avertir . . .  
Ma mère, donnez-moi vos mains,  
Ma fille, c'est un grand navire . . .  
  
Ma mère, il faut prendre garde . . .  
Ma fille, ce sont ceux qui partent . . .  
Ma mère, est-ce un grand danger ?  
Ma fille, il va s' éloigner . . .  
  
Ma mère, Elle approche encore . . .  
Ma fille, il est dans le port,  
Ma mère, Elle ouvre la porte,  
Ma fille, ce sont ceux qui sortent.  
  
Ma mère, c'est quelqu'un qui entre . . .  
Ma fille, il a levé l'ancre,  
Ma mère, Elle parle à voix basse  
Ma fille, ce sont ceux qui passent.  
  
Ma mère, Elle prend les étoiles !  
Ma fille, c'est l'ombre des voiles.  
Ma mère, Elle frappe aux fenêtres . . .  
Ma fille, elles s' ouvrent peut-être . . .



Ma mère, on n' y voit plus clair . . .

Ma fille, il va vers la mer.

Ma mère, je l'entends partout . . .

Ma fille, de qui parlez-vous ?

The idea underlying this poem is the same as that in van Lerberghe's *les Flaireurs*. That is why I choose it. But in any other of the poems the same temperament is to be found, the temperament which created Maeterlinck's dramatic work. But they are above all interesting (although we are told that Maeterlinck himself no longer cares for them), because they shew us an important aspect of that peculiarly Belgian temperament which threatened to escape us. Moreover, they enable us to understand far more readily the poetry of Max Elskamp, and bring it about that we are in no wise astonished at a poem like *Salutation*—

Je vous salue ma vie  
D'un peu d' éternité,  
Je vous salue ma vie  
D' aujourd'hui de vigie  
Si haut qu'on peut monter,

Et vous aussi, mon peuple  
De blancs enfants quittés,  
—En larmes, mon bon peuple—  
Pour un palais d'été,  
Si haut qu'on peut monter.

Car c'est mon jour aux rêves,  
Et tout mon cœur hanté  
D'un propos d'outrè-lèbres ;  
Aujourd'hui c'est en rêve  
Si haut qu'on peut monter.

Vers l'ineffable leurre  
D'une loïn royauté  
Sur l' à présent d' une heure  
Mienne de volonté  
Si haut qu'on peut monter,

Pour le départ sans doute,  
Vers cette amirauté  
De la mer une et toute,  
Où bon mousse aux écoutes,  
Si haut qu'on peut monter.

When one analyses this poem, one sees at once what is the device dear to Elskamp above all others. The poet hearkens to popular wisdom, and borrows from the songs of olden times certain words, certain phrases, certain refrains, because he knows that this language of a people of the past contains some virtue which will touch us much more certainly than a poem written in accordance with the rules of Boileau or of Victor Hugo. The poet in his search for a new thrill has found no better way of producing it than in going back to the old ballads, such as "Malbrouk s'en va-t-en guerre." In this way the traditions of France handed down from generation to generation lend a wonderful amount of support to his little poems, and that is very adroit art.

Thus Elskamp went back to the simplicity of Flemish life, and sang it in quintessenced and sometimes very childish verse.\* His poetry contains sensations which are close to primitive ancestral life, that is where its force comes from. He has a deep love of hearth and home and transforms it into poetical matter; as when

---

\* Victor Kinon, a great Belgian poet, says of Max Elskamp, and very justly, "il baragouine à la façon des chansons de terroir :

En rond les maisons  
Comme pour danser . . . .

Il me revient une vieille ronde à danser du folklore flamand,  
où dès le second vers aussi, la tour entre en danse

(Sint-Nikolas Kapelleken  
De toren danste mée)

ce qui révèle absolument la même tournure d'imagination enfantinement joyeuse."

he brings tiny boats alongside and makes the angels stop to enter ; truly does he say of himself—

J'ai aimé les petites villes, les navires et les anges,  
Et j'ai cru sage de m'en tenir là.

His is the power of rendering in verse with an altogether delightful grace the humblest and most ordinary thing—

Et la ville de mes mille âmes,  
dormez-vous, dormez-vous ;  
il fait dimanche, mes femmes  
et ma ville, dormez-vous ?

Et les juifs, honte à mes ruelles,  
dormez-vous, dormez-vous ;  
—Antiquités et Dentelles—  
même les juifs, dormez-vous ?

Et vous, mes doux marchands de cierges,  
dormez-vous, dormez-vous ;  
aux litanies de la Vierge  
immaculée, dormez-vous ?

Clochers, l'on a volé vos heures  
dormez-vous, dormez-vous ;  
Frères Jacques, aux demeures  
de quel sommeil dormez-vous ?

Bonnes gens, il fait grand dimanche  
et de gel et de verglas,  
À la ville qu' endimanchent  
les drapeaux des consulats.

There you have the impression of a peaceful Sunday morning in a melancholy frost-bitten town, and the impression is produced by no imposing phraseology, no elaborate descriptions, but by certain associations of words, mysterious resonances which create the fleeting atmosphere. His poetry is lightly sketched in with a colourless wash, angels are in the sky, and over all broods a perfect dominical peace.

A présent c'est encor Dimanche,  
 or c'en est fini des semaines  
 où, dans l'eau, mains rouges, l'on peine . . .  
 Et par la ville les enfants,  
 chanteurs de paysages blancs,  
 font les oiseaux et s'inquiètent  
 que si matin il fasse fête.

Elskamp reminds one of Rodenbach, in that he too is one of those poets who dissolve all sensation in sentiment, he clothes things in the colours of his emotions, and this imagination hovers over all nature, attenuating, alleviating, sublimating. The result is not a copy of reality, it is the creation of a mind which loves fluidity, transparency, absence of boundaries, above all things. And yet what gives him his place apart is his very clear vision, the precise, clear strokes with which he draws—

Marie, épandez vos cheveux,  
 Voici rire les Anges bleus,  
 Et dans vos bras Jésus qui bouge  
 Avec ses pieds et ses mains rouges,  
 Et puis encor les Anges blonds  
 Jouant de tous leurs violons . . .

Criticism is utterly disconcerted by this poetry, which arrives at the writing of an old popular song, owing to the fact that the poet is able to transpose an intellectual state into an emotional state. His simple words have a captivating charm, which fixes them quite naturally in our minds; we do not forget these poems, and that is an excellent criterion. Their appeal, like that of the nursery rhymes we love, comes from the words themselves, laden as they are with meaning, dipped in the shadows of the past, decorated with the embroidery of old legends and bygone ages, and where the wisdom of an ancient sage is combined with the innocence of a little child.

Elskamp is well aware of the value of such words as “*et, or, car, mais,*” for the production of the desired effect : he likes to put them at the opening of a sentence to give it a conversational turn. Like Eekhoud, he has a great fondness for word-combinations : “*les robes de laissez-toute-espérance,*” “*les vieilles gens de tout-et-misère.*” But when that is recognised and the occasional puerility of his poetry admitted, you have not explained its suggestiveness—

Et c'est matin, villes en bleu,  
Villes en blanc, villes en Dieu,  
Avec les clochers au milieu.  
C'est fête à bras nus,  
Cuisez, boulangers ;  
Et papegai chu,  
Riez, les archers !

Before Elskamp, a French poet had also realised the appeal of old refrains—I mean Jules Laforgue. It is very true that words become worn like old pieces of money which rub against one another in our pockets, but at the same time they are heavily weighted with countless associations, with the countless meanings given them by all the many imaginations which have made use of them. So that Laforgue, who always sought to parody his feelings, makes ironical use of phrases borrowed from popular speech—

Tu t'en vas et tu nous quittes,  
Tu nous quittes et tu t'en vas . . .

OR—

Je suis-t-il malheureux !—

OR—

Il pleut, il pleut bergère, etc. . . .

In the same way Max Elskamp uses—

Sonnez matines,  
Frère Jacques, en mes doctrines . . . (I. *de Joie*)

OR—

dormez-vous, dormez-vous . . . (II. *de Joie*)

or—

Et s' ébrouant  
 Rouets, rouant,  
 Les rouets au matin des vieilles,  
 Leur font s' éjouir les oreilles  
 D'un bruit rouant  
 Et s' ébrouant. (III. de Joie)

A similar example is "Ainsi soit-il" with its adaptation of the close of the *Ave Maria*—

Un dimanche est dans mon cœur,  
 Pauvre pécheur,  
 Maintenant et à l'heure  
 De ce dimanche,  
 Ainsi soit-il. (VI. de Joie)

More often Elskamp has recourse to the repetition of pleasing words, as in this charming poem—

Et Jésus en rose,  
 Et la Terre en bleu,  
 Marie des grâces, c'est en vos mains rondes  
 Ainsi que deux fruits : Jésus et le monde,  
 Et Jésus en rose,  
 Et la Terre en bleu.

Et Jésus, Marie,  
 Et Joseph, l'époux,  
 C'est depuis longtemps une bonne alliance,  
 A la mode de Bretagne et d'enfance,  
 Et Joseph l'époux  
 Jésus et Marie.

Puis l'Egypte aussi,  
 La fuite et l'Hérode,  
 C'est mon âme vieille et mes pieds qui tremblent  
 A regarder fuir vers les loins à l'amble,  
 Et l'âme et l'Hérode  
 Puis l'Egypte aussi.

Such poetry appeals above all to those who delight in words and word combinations—to the ignorant, on whom a series of words which they do not understand acts like a charm and effects a miraculous cure, and to

the learned poet, for whom words are flowers, scents and jewels.\* Where Elskamp reveals himself a great national artist is when by a few subtle strokes he rediscovers the art of the old Flemish wood-carvers—

Dans un beau château,  
La vierge, Jésus et l'âne  
Font des parties de campagne  
A l'entour des pièces d'eau  
Dans un beau château.

Dans un beau château,  
Jésus se fatigue aux rames,  
Et prend plaisir à mon âme  
Qui se rafraichit dans l'eau,  
Dans un beau château.

Dans un beau château,  
Des cormorans d'azur clament  
Et courent après mon âme,  
Dans l'herbe du bord de l'eau,  
Dans un beau château.

Dans un beau château,  
Seigneur auprès de sa dame,  
Mon cœur cause avec mon âme,  
En échangeant des anneaux,  
Dans un beau château.

The two poems just quoted, and which show Elskamp at his best, prove that ideas came to him in the same

---

\*No one has understood the value of words better than William James. Cf. "Pragmatism," p. 52. "Solomon knew the names of all the spirits, and having their names he held them subject to his will. So the universe has always appeared to the natural mind as a kind of enigma, of which the key must be sought in the shape of some illuminating or power-bringing word or name. That word names the universe's *principle*, and to possess it is, after a fashion, to possess the universe itself. 'God,' 'Matter,' 'Reason,' 'the Absolute,' 'Energy,' are so many solving names. You can rest when you have them. You are at the end of your metaphysical quest."

way as to Francis Jammes, in the form of simple childish images.

Les chèvres passent devant le bon chien  
Qui agite la queue et qui est leur gardien.

Elskamp would have gladly put his name to those lines of Francis Jammes. The difference between the two poets—who are so alike in their deliberate, almost arrogant naïveté—is due to the fact that Elskamp is Flemish above all things, and consequently writes an allegorical poetry. Allegory is the means of expression of those who are not mystics. The true mystic, who feels the real presence of God, is lost in an ecstasy of desire and love; he expresses himself, as a rule, in symbols; his visions are more real to him than the objects actually surrounding him. The realistic poet who does see the actual world will, when he describes spiritual things, personify them in a human being, will materialise the virtues and vices of men. For the mystic, the testimony of the senses is incomplete; for the amateur of allegory, the visible world, far from being an error of the senses, is the revelation of Reality under different forms. The allegorist, be he Blake or Swedenborg, will use the universe allegorically; and seeing terrestrial objects will think of the Reality of which they are the outward and visible sign, just as the Song of Songs is taken as an allegory of the love of Christ for his Church. One realises here what a gulf separates the man who affirms the falsity of our perceptions from the one who trusts them absolutely, even to the point of incarnating abstractions—

Dans un beau château,  
Seigneur auprès de sa dame,  
Mon cœur cause avec mon âme,  
En échappant des anneaux  
Dans un beau château,



All the religious imagery which is to be bought in Paris close by St. Sulpice, all the Catholic devotional books depend upon allegory for their support. As Verhaeren wrote in *les Débâcles*—

Voici : me rabaïsser à des niaiseries :

Petites croix, petits agneaux, petits Jésus ? . . .

M. Remy de Gourmont, in an all too short study of Max Elskamp, speaks of the devotional books of Flanders, such as "The Mirror of Philagia" (*Den Spieghel van Philagie*), and the "Contemplation of the World" (*Beschonwing der Wereld*), illustrated by Jan Luiken. I have had sufficient curiosity to study the work of Jan Luiken. In a book called "Jésus en de Ziel,"\* there are pictures of his which seem to have inspired Elskamp. The soul is personified in the form of a maiden, and Jesus is seen sometimes in a boat with her and sometimes with her in the Flemish fields. All religious imagery lives by means of such allegory. Far from casting doubt upon truth, allegory affirms it, while the symbol which is of necessity very vague, allows us to interpret the poet's thoughts as we will. Elskamp speaks of a waterside dialogue between his heart and his soul: in "Jésus en de Ziel" there is a picture of the child Jesus conversing with the Christian soul by the side of a lake into which the sun is sinking, with the words of Genesis i. 26 in Flemish, "And God said: Let us make man in our own image, after our likeness." Perhaps one day M. Elskamp will give us more information about the pious books which have suggested so many charming lines to him. M. Remy de Gourmont should not have omitted to add that Elskamp's poetry admirably represents the period of art

---

\* "Jésus en de Ziel," etc., t'Amsterdam. By de Weduwe Pieter Arentsz, in de Beurstraat, in de drie Raapen, 1692.

and literature between 1890 and 1895, when the classical spirit was giving way under the pressure of mediævalism or even barbarism, when it seemed to be becoming drunken with the hydromel of northern countries and the cider of Brittany. This is not the place to study the influence of Gauguin, whose art was born of "Breton calvaries, Maori idols, of all the simplest, most naïve, and thereby most didactic, of human products,"\* though it is not inept to point out that his art, like that of Van Gogh, represents "barbarism, revolution, feverishness, and finally, wisdom."\*

The meaning of Elskamp's work has been explained by Albert Arnay, who declares that *Dominical* is the true prayer as taught by Christ, the petition for our daily bread, the directing of conduct into the right lines. *Salutations* is the expression of gratitude for protection. *En Symbole vers l'Apostolat* is the creed—goodness being shewn as the aim to be reached here on earth. The *Six Chansons de pauvre homme* show us that the poet attained his end, and entered his promised land.

That is very well said. But for a very long time, and even while he was writing these religious poems, Elskamp was not a "religious" poet. His orthodoxy was so much discussed that he explains his attitude in a letter to Paul Mussche, "What do I think I am? A Christian in accordance with a faith of my own, but not an atheist; that, I think, I have never been."

It is clear that there is a class of readers who will see nothing in Elskamp's poetry, who may even agree with Valère Gille, who considered that Elskamp had merely "rajeuni le gâtisme," and wrote like a child of five years old. It is none the less true that the man who wrote

J'ai descendu jusqu' à la Bonté  
Le fleuve de ma naïveté

---

\* Maurice Denis: *Théories*, 1890-1910.

cannot be omitted from the tale of Belgian poets. He is a part of Belgium, certainly a part of Antwerp, part of that city so dear in the memory of all who have visited her, that city which, in Eekhoud's eyes, was the New Carthage, but which in the traveller's mind's eye, is a city full of children and their chatter, where a lamp burns before the statue of the Madonna at every street corner, where the imagination is stirred by reminiscences of Rubens, the ear charmed by the perpetually chiming bells, the eye diverted with watching the ships set off for far distant lands.

The same is true of the poetry of Van Lerberghe, who died in a Brussels sanatorium at the end of October, 1907. Albert Mockel, who by dint of preserving a candid soul in his Parisian milieu, has been able to be intensely lyrical, and who can conjure at will these flashes of light, these tantalising fugitive sparkles by which one catches a glimpse of the far-off horizon of a spiritual life, as when you were a child, has well called him a "poète de l'ineffable." His *Entrevisions* and, above all, his *Chanson d'Eve* (1904), dedicated to Emile Verhaeren, are poems of rare harmony in strong contrast with his drama, *Les Fleureurs*. His lyrico-satanic phantasy *Pan* falls far below his *Entrevisions*, with their opalescent subtlety suggestive of summer morning mists.

Such poetry does not really admit of analysis, it comes upon us with the pleasure of the unexpected and half-forgotten, like a rare old wine long hidden in the cellar—although the comparison is too vulgar to apply in all seriousness. At times it is of higher order than the most famous lines of Verlaine, for it leads us into a world where things corporal are subtilized till they evaporate, where the soul parts company with its hostile partner, who is only guided by the coarser instincts. Listen to this hymn to the moon—

O blanche fleur des airs,  
 Fleur de l'inexistence,  
 Aux immobiles mers  
 De radieux silence.

Comme la mort tu luis  
 Dans un ciel solitaire ;  
 De toi toute la terre  
 Est pâle cette nuit.

O lune, vers tes cimes  
 D'irrespirable paix,  
 Quels frissons unanimes  
 Montent de ces bosquets !

Vers tes calmes rivages  
 Du sein tremblant des flots,  
 Quelle plainte sauvage  
 S'exhale et quel sanglot !

O blanche fleur qui vois  
 Notre âme inassouvie,  
 Attire-nous à toi  
 Au delà de la vie !

Is that not the translation of one of those fair summer nights of translucent mist shining blue and pearl between the branches, when the whole earth seems to strive to inspire us with inexpressible thoughts ?

It is scarcely necessary to point out that both Elskamp and Van Lerberghe have failed to give expression to the audacity and fine energy of Flanders. That is the cause of their isolation. The younger generation turns instinctively to poets like Alfred de Musset or Baudelaire, who express the feelings experienced and the desires ardently pursued which underly all the great dramatic moments of life. The ordinary reader loves to recreate in his imagination the experiences which have inspired the work of his favourite poets. But the loom of these two Flemish poets' imagination has spun a gauze which is really too fine, it tears and falls to shreds at the contact of the general public's eager fingers.

## THE DESTRÉE BROTHERS: THE NEO-CATHOLIC MOVEMENT AND SOCIALIST MOVEMENT.

---

THE Destrée brothers are two of Belgium's representative men. They both began on the staff of the *Jeune Belgique*, which was so full of real talent; then the one became a Benedictine monk, and the other one of the recognised chiefs of the Socialist party. Apparently, no two lives could be more dissimilar, yet, on the contrary, there is no better proof, under contradictory aspects of the unity of the Belgian spirit, that extremist spirit which can but rarely stop at a happy mean, that impetuosity which is the characteristic of men like Lemonnier, Eekhoud, Albert Giraud, Verhaeren, Gilkin, and Demolder, which led Olivier Georges Destrée to fling himself into the cloister, and Jules Destrée to place himself at the head of the Socialist movement; that need of realising an ideal which is the sign of a race which has remained simple and without any political mortification, a race which is like a child and wants to have its toy at once, a race still in the mediæval age of fervour and great clamour, when men went from crusade to jaquerie, and from popular festival to revolt.

When anyone wants to characterise this Flemish-Walloon spirit, he generally calls it mysticism, but it is a mysticism not unmixed with plenty of common sense. M. Henri Carton de Wiart seems to have found the best formula in his *Soir d'Esseulement*\* :

---

\* *Contes Hétéroclites.*

“Dieu vomit les tièdes.” It is indeed high time to come to an understanding about this word “mystic.” Why do people always say “mystic Belgium”? They might with equal justice say “mystic France,” “mystic England,” “mystic Italy,” and so on. Mysticism is as old as humanity. It is the aspiration of the soul to be united with God, the spirit appealing to divinity against the wickedness of Nature. In our day it is customary to think that at the beginning of Time our forefathers had a kind of lamp (Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path), a special faculty very different from the wisdom of latter-day scholars. They were fresh from the Creator’s hands, and still bore the mark of his fingers, and they were thus capable of direct contemplation of the divine, and communion with the absolute. They were conscious of a thousand links binding them to all living things, and knew themselves brothers of rock and beast. Our contemporaries who dare not express themselves so poetically, declare that our subconsciousness is the *ultimum sapientiæ*, the principle of all spiritual life; they would compare it to a vast cauldron seething with mighty forces, an immense reservoir of the elements of human life.

Since the time of Schelling and Novalis, of Schopenhauer and von Hartmann, no country has been readier than Germany to see in human reason nothing more than a thin film over the glowing embers of volcanic instinct. Instead of studying the unconscious from the standpoint of acute attentive psychologists, the Germans prefer to see in it a faculty which puts us in communion with the divinity which reacts through it upon the phenomena of the world. The secret fortifying power which ferments in our inner being is therefore, for them, the same as that of the divinity. It may be a wonder-

fully efficacious mind-*tonic* to believe that we carry within us a whole universe, and the planets and the milky way, but the belief creates a dangerous intoxication which leads to strange results. We have proof of that at the present moment. In any case, Belgium underwent this German influence. The Flemish nature is far readier than the English or French to see in Nature a vast repertory of signs and symbols. The thought that our dead behold us and watch us in our most secret actions, has now deepened with them into a belief in innumerable likenesses of God surrounding us and speaking daily to us with the tongues of Nature. There is doubtless a natural tendency in Belgian writers to endow certain objects with a supernatural virtue and to vivify moral phenomena. Far from aiming at the penetration of the obscure, they add to it with their allegories and presentiments, with their distrust of logic and their preference for worship rather than comprehension. The typical Belgian is a combination of violence and gentleness; men like Verhaeren and the Destrées are created in his image. The one will thunder imprecations upon sinners, the two others on the rich. The one will believe in paradise, the two others in the socialistic golden age. But they are all convinced of the future happiness of humanity either in heaven, or upon earth; that is their faith, as Verhaeren cries—

Qu' important les maux . . . si quelque jour . . .  
 Surgit un nouveau Christ, en lumière sculpté  
 Qui soulève vers lui l'humanité  
 Et la baptise au feu de nouvelles étoiles !

When one travels in Belgium and tries to enter into the spirit of the people, the thing that strikes one most is a kind of immobility of mind in the midst of a great moral ardour: a way of living full of strength, security, and prosperity, and at the same time a very intense

religious craving which finds an outlet in processions and pilgrimages, in Catholic holidays, which are popular holidays. Religion is the very atmosphere of Flanders: one feels that virtue, when present to the Flemish mind, is always surrounded by a truly spiritual halo. Their pilgrimages give them a sense of mystery, and at the same time are excellent tonics for human activity. It is through them, too, that the Belgian soul has remained in closer contact with Nature. The idea of Providence acting only through the intermediary of the relatively fixed laws of the universe, holds no appeal for the Belgian. Belief in miracle allows them to converse daily—and how fervently!—with God and all His Saints. The calm of “le bon Belge” comes from his profound religious beliefs, from his conviction that a fervent faith is the real health of the soul. No dogma can oppress him who affirms the “Credo quia absurdum.” Even the Walloon, who seldom goes to church, has certain devotions, will go to certain venerated sanctuaries, will burn a candle to some saint in his moments of crisis.

This point is insisted upon here, because it is continually being said that Belgium owes everything to her great liberal (*i.e.* anti-clerical) ministers, and that up till 1884 Belgium was governed by liberalism with short intervals of Catholic ministry.

But no critic can afford to overlook all that Belgium owes to her religion. Maeterlinck could never have written his Hymn to the Virgin—perhaps the most perfect thing he ever wrote—if his childhood had not been bathed in the scent of incense and the harmony of canticle. Of course, it is true that later on doubt came and overturned the altar of his mind. But his soul had fastened too securely upon the cult of the infinite to be able to do without it afterwards. Further,



philosophic idealism now appears as the haven of grace to this mind which, once religious, is now sceptical, for religion and idealism go hand in hand. The Christian faith teaches us that man is the centre of things: idealism teaches nothing else, since it declares that the world in which we live is a creation of our mind. The Christian faith teaches us that we must re-create the world by means of goodness and charity: idealism teaches the same thing, adding, and by artistic beauty.

The Belgian, then, is predisposed by his education to embrace any doctrine which declares that behind the visible universe there is a world of spiritual energy which directs it, whether this energy be God Himself or some unknown First Reality. So that on the very day when, for one reason or another, the Catholic faith loses its strength in the soul of a Belgian, the doctrine of an Emerson or a Schopenhauer, a Carlyle or a Novalis will take its place, just as Catholicism will resume its sway on the day when the doctrine of Novalis appears as the doctrine of a sick man.

It is this which shews us in contemporary Belgian life two distinct mystical movements: the Neo-Catholic and the Socialist.

The Neo-Catholic movement which has shone in the world of criticism and in the world of poetry, came, then, out of the heart of Belgium.

In the first field four writers have gained a reputation beyond the frontier: Eugène Gilbert, who is much read in France and is famous for his *Roman en France pendant le dix-neuvième siècle*; Francis Nautet, who died all too young; Maurice Dullaert, author of a valuable study of Verlaine; and Firmin van den Bosch, who in his *Essais de Critique Catholique* and his *Impressions d'Art et de Littérature* shows an extreme perspicuity,

together with a combative humour which is entirely free from malice.

But it is above all in poetry that there has been a Catholic renaissance with Victor Kinon, Thomas Braun, the abbé Hector Hoornaert and Georges Ramaekers, to cite only the best known and most read. Must we see therein the influence of Verlaine and Huysmans, or of the work of le Cardonnel, Adrien Mithouard, and Albert Jhouney, or of Raymond Brücker, Hello, Villiers de l'Isle Adam or Léon Bloy? Does the tail of Baudelaire whisk round the corner? Not at all. The Belgian Catholic movement is absolutely sincere. It is its Catholic education which gave Belgium its first soul, constituted it and brought it all the symbols needed. Sooner or later this spirit, hollowed out and deepened with complications, with delicacy, with perversity and vice, as well as with scruples and virtues, seeks expression, above all after a period of feeling crushed. It must not be forgotten that the Liberal and Free Thinking party governed Belgium,\* and governed very well with men like Charles Rogier, Walthère Frère-Orban and Jules Bara, but it was being very much weakened before the war by the rapid growth of democracy. The population of the towns became Socialist, that of the country remained Catholic. The bourgeois Voltairians who steered Belgium into the channels of prosperity, where she lay before 1914, were never really able to check the powerful Catholic movement, which under all was directing the Flemish masses and had never lost all its hold upon the Walloon. It is certain that the political movement after 1884 brought into fashion Catholicism, which had never hauled down its flag before the Liberalism in Parliament. The Liberals were alarmed

---

\* Cf. the remarkable book by M. Wilmotte, *La Belgique Morale et Politique, 1830-1900*.

at the Socialist menace, and religion then appeared as the last barricade between bourgeois and barbarian. Further, when the electoral reforms admitted a wide socialist representation in Parliament, the Belgian upper classes prepared to beat the Socialists on their own ground. The result was on the one hand the birth of laws protecting the workman, on the other hand the regeneration of religion with heroic vigour. The renaissance then has political as well as literary causes, but the Neo-Catholic movement cannot be understood unless the profoundly religious education which the ordinary young provincial Belgian receives be taken into account.

## I.

In a lecture delivered at the Jeune Barreau d'Anvers, in 1906, upon *Une idée qui meurt: la Patrie*, Jules Destrée said, "I am thinking . . . of my brother with his sensitive, open mind, and who, by some freak of destiny, entered the Benedictine order." But that which appears to Jules Destrée as a malicious trick of fate, is really only the logical development of the events of life. There is in the *Poèmes sans rimes*, in the *Préréphaélites anglais et l'art décoratif contemporain*, and in the three poems *Sainte Dorothee de Cappadoce*, *Sainte Rose de Viterbe*, and *Saint Jean Gualbert*, a steady development of ideas and facts which were bound to lead to conversion a naturally Christian soul already immersed in Catholicism. Even if we had not the letter in which Dom Bruno Destrée, trying to explain to M. René Dethier, editor of *la Jeune Wallonie*, the stages of his conversion, shows that when he was producing the mystical literature in favour at the moment, he was really sincere—even without that document, we could guess what path would be trod by the man who wrote

*Consolatrix*, and *Dialogue*, and *l'Eglise de Lordship Lane* (*Poèmes sans rimes*).

Hélas ! hélas ! cette femme ne m'aime pas, aucune femme ne m'a jamais aimé, et nulle femme sans doute ne m'aimera comme j'eusse tant souhaité être aimé ; pourquoi donc, ô Dieu, avoir mis en mon cœur cet amour qui me brûle et me consume et que nulle fontaine n'est destinée à rafraîchir ? . . . . (*Consolatrix*, 1894).

The answer to these lines is to be found in the poem on *Sainte Dorothee de Cappadoce*—

O Théophile, délaisse le doute, et les vains raisonnements . . . . Réponds-moi plutôt et dis-moi quel dieu put placer en ton cœur cette claire conscience que déjà malgré toi, comme un ange gardien, tu suis et tu vénères . . . . Tout homme, ô Théophile, porte au fond de son cœur la foi salutaire et le flambeau de la lumière divine.

The author may tell us that he owes a great deal to Saint Francis of Assisi, and to Arnold Goffin's translation of the *Fioretti*, and to Tolstoi—it is nevertheless plain that at birth Dom Bruno Destrée entered the garden hymned by Saint Bonaventura—

Crux deliciarum hortus  
In quo florent omnia,

and that whether he would or no he could not escape from it. Of course the influence of his surroundings must also be considered, and the influence of that grand and mystical communication of religious waves which passed over France and a part of Belgium for several years. From this point of view his *Trois Poèmes* are significant of Belgium at the end of the nineteenth century. Had the spirit of Belgium been less pious, it is hardly probable that such works would have been read. *Au Milieu du Chemin de Notre Vie* (1908) is a devotional work which would have delighted Huysmans, he certainly could not have assailed it with the reproach of being written in "ce style oléagineux cher aux Catholiques."

But Dom Bruno Destrée is only the representative of a long line of authors who feel a new relationship between themselves and God. Cardinal Mercier in a prefatory letter for *Au Milieu du Chemin de Notre Vie*, declares that this monk's attitude of mind strongly resembles that of the Flemish poet Guido Gezelle. In truth Olivier Georges Destrée might well be the father confessor of all these young writers who set themselves the task of glorifying the eternity of the Christian dogma, not because he has more talent, but because he has gone further than they. He is the first chapter of a great Catholic book which is intensely interesting reading because these authors have attempted to infuse the ancient sap of Flanders into the literary tree of France, which grew in revolutionary soil. The other chapters in this book would be called Edmond de Bruyn, editor of the *Spectateur Catholique* and of *Samedi*, curator also, I believe, of the Antwerp Folklore Museum, which he instituted with the help of Max Elskamp, then Thomas Braun, who had that happy phrase about his country: "La Belgique sait mieux que tout autre jouer dans la paille avec l'enfant de Bethleem," who held that Rubens, Jordaens, and Teniers were as Catholic, in the true sense of the word, as the fifteenth century Gothic masters, that the flamboyant side of life was just as Catholic as a representation of a Descent from the Cross, that *la truculence est orthodoxe*. Thomas Braun is the Francis Jammes of Belgium, but a Jammes who is over fond of good living.

Side by side with these two writers must be placed Georges Ramaekers, editor of *l'Art pour Dieu*, a fighting lyricist who brandishes his lyre like a sword, and who took for task the redintegration of mediæval Christian symbolism. The author of *Les Saisons Mystiques* and of the *Chant des Trois Règnes* defines himself as a

symbolist, "moins à la façon subjective des aînés vivants que j'admire qu'à celle liturgique et traditionnelle des poètes du Moyen-âge." Which means that Ramaekers cultivates allegory above all things. His instinct for it is keener even than that of Elskamp; it leads him to unerring grasp of the mysterious relationships between the visible and spiritual world, and just as allegory plays the chiefest part in primitive Christian art, so he has set himself to find God in all things, in bird and beast and plant. Perhaps his most beautiful poem is *la Louange du blé*—

En vérité, en vérité, je vous le dis,  
Si le grain de froment qui tombe sur la terre  
Ne meurt, il restera stérile et solitaire.  
C'est hors des seuls grains morts que les blés ont grandi.

Ainsi l'a décrété ma sagesse éternelle,  
Afin que l'homme auquel j'offre à manger mon corps,  
Songe, parmi les blés doux à sa faim charnelle,  
Au blé surnaturel qui naquit de ma mort.

Moi qui jadis multipliai sur la montagne  
Les pains figuratifs, j'ai dû mourir en croix,  
Afin que de pouvoir, par le blé des campagnes,  
Multiplier ma chair pour le peuple qui croit.

Mais depuis j'ai levé ma gerbe lumineuse,  
Et ma gerbe est debout parmi les blés dorés,  
Jusqu'au jour où mon ange, aidé par les faneuses,  
Mettra dans mes greniers ceux qui m'ont adoré.

Alors prenant mon van et nettoyant mon aire,  
Je brûlerai la paille en ce brasier sans fin  
Que mon Père alluma au jour de la colère,  
Et de mon froment mûr j'apaiserai ma faim.

Hérode ! o ne dis pas que mon esprit s'égare !  
Oui, je suis le froment de la sainte cité ;  
Mais j'ai faim, car je suis aussi les deux Lazare :  
Le Pauvre aimé des chiens et le Ressuscité.

From time to time one finds in Ramaekers' work poems

which bear comparison with Crashaw, even with the wonderful close of *The Flaming Heart*. The work of a man such as he, who left on one side the enigmatic symbolism in favour at his time, to seek out mediæval allegory and put it into beautiful verse full of dignified simplicity and vivid faith, can never wholly die.

There always comes a moment in literature when writers and public alike become tired of wandering in search of miraculous flowers, unheard-of thrills, a time comes when the emptiness of the journeying suddenly appears, when lassitude and discouragement efface the memory of fleeting glimpses of wonder-landscapes, and then the traveller longs to return to the hearth and home he left. All the younger Neo-Catholic literature has benefited by this state of mind. That is the explanation of the success of Adolphe Hardy's *la Route Enchantée*, of Georges Ramaekers' *Saisons Mystiques*, of Pierre Nothomb's *l'Arc en Ciel* and *Notre Dame du Matin*, and of the vogue of the *Symphonies Voluptueuses* of Maurice Gauchez, who it is true calls himself a "païen mystique," but who nevertheless prays in the fever-haunted crypt of the Catholic Baudelaire.

It is above all in this light that we explain the fame of the novels of George Virrès, author of *En pleine Terre*, *la Bruyère ardente*, *l'Inconnu tragique*. It is interesting to compare him with Eekhoud. Both men are different aspects of that Campine they love so well, but while Eekhoud breaks into the heart of Nature, and of his peasants and unfortunates like a burglar, only to find himself therein, M. Virrès can look at his characters from the point of view of a father confessor, with an objectivity which reserves some surprises for him.

Singulier pays! Tes rustres semblent si doux. . . . Tes gens sont pieux. Je les vois, le dimanche, après la grand'messe, faire

le chemin de la croix, leurs visages transfigurés par l'onction. . . . Vienne le soir, viennent les heures où les cabarets fascinent l'ombre de leurs yeux sanglants, et les instincts re'fractaires s'allument. Les blousiers sauvages dressent leur haine, guettent l'occasion favorable aux ressentiments, retroussent leurs manches et crachent insolemment . . . .

No one has ever described the Belgian bourgeoisie and their delightful family sentimentality so well as Virrès. He reminds us sometimes of Alphonse Daudet and sometimes of Stevenson with *les Gens de Tivest*. Virrès (his real name is Briers) is one of those writers who make us realise the truth of the saying, "Literature is the expression of Society." He is the painter of lands like those we meet in fairy tales where you have a traveller killed, or a criminal carried off by the devil—a country which seems to be plunged in the mystery in which the world is submerged.

With Virrès should be read Arnold Goffin, author of the *Journal d'André*, who is occupied to-day with picking simple flowers in the garden of Saint Francis of Assisi, and with writing very interesting studies of his favourite painters, Pinturicchio and Thierry Bouts. He is a true brother of the Destrées in his artistic faith. Another member of the same family is Iwan Gilkin, who burns to-day all the books he formerly loved, and condemns his famous Baudelairian volume of poems *la Nuit*, as "pessimistic and unhealthy." He is a powerful poet and writer of vigorous prose. His *Savonarole* and *Etudiants Russes* prove that his is an essentially religious mind, which rebels against anything that is mean, tortuous and wrong in the spirit.

Finally, Victor Kinon has proved himself a fine poet with his *L'âme des Saisons*. The influence of Elskamp is to be seen from time to time in such poems as *La Chanson du petit Pèlerin de Notre Dame de Montaignu*—



Et moussiez frais, la bière blonde,  
Fumez, les pipes à la ronde,  
Et riez haut, les gars trapus,  
C'est Flandre en fête à Montaigu ! . . . .

But that does not alter the fact that he is an original and sincere poet who carries on the tradition of those Belgian writers who are great artists as well as great seers. Some of his lines cling to us as we go through life—

L'enfance est un rosier au fond de la mémoire.

Et plaignons les yeux durs qui n'ont jamais pleuré. . .

\* \* \* \* \*

Henri Carton de Wiart, though his place is really among the novelists, is a prose poet. After writing his highly original *Contes Hétéroclites*, which are a very valuable commentary upon the attitude of mind of the Belgian bourgeoisie, he went to history for the subject of his fine novel *La Cité ardente*, in which he extols the courage of the citizens of Liège at the time of the terrible struggles of the good townfolk of Perron against the blood-and-thunder Charles the Bold, who had a conception of his princely mission rather like that of the present Emperor of Germany.

Henri Carton de Wiart is, as it were, the transition between the two Destrée brothers. He has Dom Bruno's faith and love of literature, and the hatred of cynical individualism and capitalism which is characteristic of Jules Destrée, to whom he dedicates his *Une Ruine*. A pamphlet signed H. C. W., published in Brussels in 1895, called *l'Action Politique des Démocrates Chrétiens*, is striking in its practical common sense and its frank and just views. Here is an illuminating sentence on the situation of a country—

La partie intelligente et laborieuse de la classe ouvrière, préoccupée d'échapper à une situation indigne d'elle, cherche aujourd'hui dans le petit commerce une issue qu'elle trouvait jadis dans le patronat. Ce mouvement d'émigration accroît sans cesse le nombre des petits magasins et rend leur situation plus précaire.

Himself one of a good bourgeois family, Henri Carton de Wiart has studied the class to which he belonged in a very amusing little book, *la Bourgeoisie belge depuis, 1830, Essai psychologique*. He speaks of Benjamin Constant's *Mémoire sur la Belgique depuis 1789 jusqu'en 1794*, and he studies successively the traits which Benjamin Constant noted down just after the Brabantine Revolution—

Mentalité bornée au cercle étroit de ses localités propres. Moralité domestique. Penchant à l'érudition. Le labeur pour le labeur. La modération et le calcul. L'aisance, l'économie prudente. Zèle sincère pour le catholicisme. Absence de curiosité. Ignorance de l'étranger. Morcellement des territoires et des idées.

Many of these characteristics are also those of the French bourgeoisie, and one wonders whether Benjamin Constant did not study the French rather than the Belgians. In any case he could not have foreseen the birth of an industrial Belgium which was to create the Socialist Party, with men like Jean Volders, founder of the Labour Party; Anseele, founder of the Vooruit de Gand; César de Pape, Vandervelde and Jules Destrée.

## II.

Side by side, then, with the Neo-Catholic renaissance, of which we have only touched upon the literary side here, there came into being another extremely powerful movement, socialist in name but at bottom mystic, and product also of the very depths of the Belgian spirit. We have already referred to it when considering the rise of Belgian letters in 1880, but it is a subject which

needs consideration from several points of view. It might almost be said that it is impossible to understand the Belgian literary movement without knowledge of the socialist movement, and to understand the socialist movement knowing nothing of the literary movement. Verhaeren himself is a *révolté* who believes in the millenium; the socialistic faith breathes in all his work. In the same way Edmond Picard, whom many have tried to make out as a sceptic, subscribes to the same beliefs. Sailor, jurisconsult, politician, critic in turn, he will be remembered as a dramatic author, as a contributor to the *Théâtre d'idées*. His plays are all social studies. *Psukè* is a philosophical study of the soul and the future of religions; *le Juré* shows us a man's struggle against encroaching madness; *la Fatigue de Vivre* treats of the workman's failing strength; *Ambidextre*, of contemporary journalism; *Trimouillat et Meléodon*, of the frailty of human affection, etc., etc. His great hobby was propaganda for "social" (*i.e.* socialist) art. In 1883, at the Lemonnier banquet, he had told the young writers that their mission was to make art serve to destroy the abuses of a society which "seems to be falling into decadence, but in which, on the contrary, is being prepared the birth of a new world."

At bottom men like Lemonnier, Eekhoud, Jules Noël, Léon Legrave, Hubert Krains, or Franz Mahutte are rebels. One may almost say that, according to them, an idea which is not subversive is not an idea at all. Their enthusiasm is fanned by two theories, which they hold to be two marvellous specifics for human ills: Rousseau's faith in man's innate goodness, and Renan's belief in the coming of the golden age of Science. While the Frenchman of the years before 1914 no longer counted on the chemists to save the universe with their tabloids and explosives, and

refused to see any Messianic qualities in Berthelot or Currie, the Bruxellois did expect that of the union of physics and philosophy would be born an absolutely perfect society. Doubtless this feeling is explicable in violent natures by their hatred of Catholic discipline, which since it exacted the most absolute obedience ended in making them break away. The religion of their childhood had aimed at interpreting life as a mournful mystery, of which faith held the key: why not make it a joyful mystery, with science as its demonstrator? And their hatred of ecclesiastical authority is so intense, that it blinds them to the fact that their attitude is the ruin of their creed about man's innate goodness. For the fierce antagonism which exists (or which existed before the war) between the Catholics and the Free Thinkers should have led them to see that the instinct of combat, which never leaves men, will prevent us from yielding definitely to our altruistic impulses. *Homo homini lupus*. In 1902 the Socialist leaders, encouraged to revolt by their over-excited followers, were made to see that the government would not hesitate to use fire-arms for its defence. Since then they have been very much quieter, and, if M. Wilmotte is to be believed, are even growing stout.

In any case the Socialist doctrine in Belgium is illuminated with literary beauties. And then it is a faith. Doubt is impossible for these Flemish souls—it stifles them. If Truth dwell not in the Church of their childhood, then it must be elsewhere, and they must haste to build her another temple. There is nothing of Montaigne, nor Voltaire, nor Anatole France in them. Even had not the harsh and bloody religious struggles left their mark everywhere in the buildings, the history and the legends of Belgium, her struggle for independence in 1830, the

people's fight for the franchise and the right to work, were bound to develop the Socialist organisation. This is not the place to study all the initiatives of the Labour Party which have suggested to the public departments so many excellent measures for social assistance, though the subject is a fascinating one. It is only necessary to show here that in this country, where life has materialised and been turned to an immediate end,\* the forces of society were converging towards the formation of a state of mind in which love of the concrete was inclining these great eaters and drinkers towards humanitarianism.

Apart from the movement known as that of Christian democracy, the Belgian Socialist movement is irreligious—like the corresponding French movement. It is the expression of the poor man's hatred of the rich. The amazing development of Belgium with its resultant increase of riches produces an intense jealousy among the poorer classes, and an increased ardour for battle. In places where a hundred years ago peaceful peasants lived at ease on their pasture land, you will to-day find a race of miners, glass-makers, and workers in rolling-mills, toiling, moiling, suffering, agitating for wage and food. The Borinage district is now, as Lemonnier called it, "a land of fire, in the depths of which is boiling the cauldron of the witches in Macbeth." The mysticism contained in the humanitarian ideas of Fourier and Saint Simon contributed towards the same result. Needless to say, Catholicism tried to keep pace with the times. This is not the place to recount the contests of the abbé Pottier and the abbé Daens, nor to tell how Leo XIII.'s *Rerum Novarum* was the outcome of the Belgian

---

\* It was always so. Joseph II. called Belgium *le cabaret de l'Europe*.

movement. It is, however, of paramount importance to notice the union of Literature and Socialism, union due in great part to the foundation of the State Universities at Ghent and Liège, and of the Université Libre of Brussels. It is upon the scholastic question that political parties in Belgium have most often split, but in the end the struggle between the Catholic university of Louvain and the university of Brussels created a scientific *élite*, an enthusiastic band of literary youth.

In Parliament the Belgian Socialist party has never missed a single opportunity of shewing its sympathy for the arts and sciences. Célestin Demblon even recited in the house Albert Giraud's very fine sonnet to Camille Lemonnier. Emile Vandervelde obtained a grant for the Bibliothèque Royale, and urged the restoration of the Church of Notre Dame du Sablon in Brussels, and the Abbey of Aulne at Laudelies. Putting aside the powerful figure of M. Emile Vandervelde, who is more of a politician than a man of letters, we find that the representative of the forefront of Socialism is M. Jules Destrée, brother of Dom Bruno Destrée, one-time contributor to the *Jeune Belgique*—a good poet and excellent art critic.

“J'ai connu un petit garçon qui aimait à se placer près du cocher, ou sur l'impériale des omnibus ; il y était bien mieux pour cracher sur les passants.”

One wonders if it is of himself that Jules Destrée was thinking, when he wrote that in his inimitable little *Journal des Destrée* in which he parodies the *Journal des de Goncourt*.

The Destrée brothers were both born at Marcinelle, which is a part of Charleroi—that huge agglomeration of working-class suburbs: Jumet, Gilly, Lodelensart, Courcelles, Montignies, Couillet, Roux, Marchienne au Pont, Gosselies, Fontaine l'Evêque. The scene there,

in the days before the war, was lamentable. The smoke and glow from the forges filling the apocalyptic night was a presage of the sombre grandeur which Constantin Meunier has revealed to us. But the wonderful work of this great artist should not enable us to forget the profoundly saddening impression of the end of the day when the men leave work and fill the streets. Talk with whom you will on this subject, factory proprietor or foreman, go into a tavern or consult M. Dumont-Wilden's great work on Belgium, the same heartrending impression is to be gathered. You soon see that industrial life has here broken up family life, separating husband from wife, son from father, brother from sister, and setting them all to work apart; you see that, in spite of high wages, the men who have come from practically every part of Belgium spend their money at the inns or at the gaming tables. Then it is easier to understand how a man like Jules Destrée longed to bring a little education, a little art into this depressed area, and to introduce some idea of economy and forethought among a people which was poor because of its imprudence. As M. Dumont-Wilden so justly points out—"While the Ghent workman had to deal with a master who might be harsh, arrogant and mean, but who belonged to the same race as himself and understood his way of thinking, the workman in the Charleroi district was the employee of a *société anonyme*, represented by a director who was after all only a salaried and irresponsible servant of the mysterious power of capitalism."

That is the explanation of the growth of Jules Destrée's political ambition, for it is clear that, living more or less on the spot as he did, he was able to understand that the Charleroi workman, not being a native of the place, was powerless without a member of

his own. Further, having travelled as he had, he must have seen that the English workman with his numberless trades-unions, his parliamentary representatives had reached a higher position and was able to meet his master on an equal footing.

It is enough to read his book, *Semailles* (a collection of his speeches), to see that the mentality of this popular tribune is based upon reality. In a most interesting lecture on Verbal and Practical Revolution, a masterpiece of sound sense, he demands first and foremost the creation of professional syndicates, mutual and co-operative societies, then a general recasting of the laws dealing with mendicancy, charitable relief, and the treatment of deserted children. Here we meet once more with the author of the *Paradoxes professionnels*, *le Secret de Frédéric Marcial*, and the *Histoires de Miséricorde*, those three compassionate books in which Jules Destrée shows us lawyers, judges, and wrongdoers. But the little pamphlet (contained in *les Semailles*) called *Une Campagne électorale au Pays noir*, helps more than anything else towards an understanding of Charleroi and its *député*. Descriptions such as that which begins "La nuit était douce et sereine comme une nuit d'été" . . . are to be found side by side with electioneering tales and summaries of speeches. One of these is on the theme *Misereor super turbas*. One can hardly imagine an English or French candidate addressing his would-be constituents on such a subject!

So that, in the mind of Jules Destrée, together with his hatred of the lawyer who becomes a member of parliament and votes upon a thousand questions of which he knows nothing, together with his hatred of a Parliament in which "un M. Woeste traite mesquinement Camille Lemonnier," in which Maeterlinck is honoured by the sneers of M. Cooremans; side by side with his



disdain for a King Leopold, who receives a champion cyclist in his palace, but ignores the literary prize men—side by side with all that, there is yet room for a daily growing love for the people who are oppressed by a society over-fond of its comforts, and who are exposed to all the wiles of the strike-monger.

We cannot, of course, bring to light all that was hidden in the back of this Socialist member's mind. What would he have done? War broke out, and one sees at once the stuff he is made of. With another deputy, Georges Lorand, he immediately started upon a campaign in Italy to show up all the lies and monstrous felony of the German horde, and he dedicates the book, in which he relates his impressions to M. G. Lorand, Liberal member for Virton, and to M. A. Melot, Catholic member for Namur, "in memory of a time when distinction of party was forgotten in the common desire to defend the outraged fatherland."

Maeterlinck, in the Preface he wrote for this book, gives us an impression of Jules Destrée as orator; he shows us the personal magnetism of the man, his sympathy with his hearers, as he "ran his words like antennae" over the meeting.

\* \* \* \* \*

And now what were the results of this mixture of literature, religion and socialism?

They are to be found in the history of the first days of August, 1914. If little Belgium behaved so heroically, giving the lie to the Germans who used to speak with disparagement of the Belgian nation, it is because the governing classes, as well as their political enemies, never strove so much for gain as for right. Literature, "dulces, ut Virgilius ait, Musæ," had taught them not to walk by faith nor by knowledge alone, but by honour.

## COUROUBLE.

---

LÉOPOLD COUROUBLE is Belgium's "gai" writer. He can lay a better claim to the title than Maurice des Ombiaux or Eugène Demolder, being a greater, a more genuine humourist. His sensibility is the same as that of the Brussels people, skin-deep, with very fleeting emotions, and a Flemish dose of sensuality; and one might almost say that if he anticipated the humourist's mood with regard to the customs and speech of his own dear town, such a high privilege came from his long education in Paris, which gave him a purged vision of things, like that of a traveller who has seen different habits of manners and men, and who looks at his own people in the light of a reiterated comparison. And so the author of "La Famille Kaekebroeck" devotes himself to the portrayal of this Belgian bourgeoisie, and treats it with a smile on his lips and a tear in his eye, after the approved fashion of the sentimental traveller. The scenes of middle-class life, in which he makes fun of the honest merchants of his city, are so amusing and bear so clearly the mark of truth, that this rather boisterous writer becomes a real historian, under the protection of a Flemish Clio, ruddy and buxom, with bare arms and full bosom and smiling lips.

Every city, like every age, has its own mysterious physiognomy, its own type of inhabitant, its own tricks of individuality, its own kingdom of romance. In order to get a better idea of past centuries, the novelist or historian must pay attention to the external

side of their existence, to all that is imitation in their life as in their morals, in their customs, dresses and etiquette. Illuminated manuscripts are enlightening in more sense than one. Some Persian prints show us, more than many a philosophical work, the twisted mind of the Oriental. *Menus* are always in strict connexion with the civilization of their *chefs*. The cut of a beard, the knot of a cravat, the majesty of a wig illustrate the difference between the natural and the spontaneous, and convey to us the secret of the charm of a decade.

Indeed every capital has virtues and vices of its own ; and if its philosophy changes little with the passing centuries, it is none the less true that the diversity of costume, by showing up fleeting sensations, is a sort of delightful apprehension that our conscience will rebel against the mechanical side of our life. Mankind has too great a tendency to fall asleep, as all moralists know : give them a new fashion : they find their souls again !

One city is famous for works of art or dress ; another is delicate in religious matters ; a third boasts of its grenadiers and brass cymbals ; a fourth of its athletics. Brussels (happy Brussels, as it used to be) seems always to be playing a game of nine-pins in a merry and even noisy garden amidst a row of empty bottles.

The capital of a country which has so often known invasion and won the name of the cockpit of Europe, always managed to keep its own humour and individual traits. Foreigners who settled on the banks of the Senne, or under the shadows of Sainte Gudule, were swallowed up in the vast mass of the people and took to themselves the speech and manners of this land flowing with milk and honey. It would be a curious chapter in Belgian history, the development of this capital of

Brabant, on the great inland trade route between Bruges and Cologne, between Lille and Antwerp. Surrounded on one side by the Walloons, who kept their dialect, in which people and scholars can rediscover the Rabelaisian humour of Liège; on the other by the Flemish, morose, sour, and stubborn; Brussels, clever, artistic, easy-going, elastic, soon realised that Walloon and Flemings were united by common economic needs. Indeed, it would be exact to say that this town created for itself and for the nation an almost unconscious patriotism, which broke forth with the Revolution of 1830. Ghent, for instance, has not the same elasticity of temper, the same love of freedom. Ghent regretted the Dutch government in the early thirties.

During the nineteenth century the prosperity of Brussels has increased by leaps and bounds. It is only just to recognise the beneficial influence of Leopold II., whose indomitable will and commercial spirit made of the Congo a gold mine for his country, and of his country a gold mine for his subjects and for Brussels. Then Belgian morals underwent a change, as such Belgian writers as M. Wilmote, M. Carton de Wiart or M. Dumont-Wilden have shown us.

And that brings us back to Courouble, a witness all the more valuable in that he has no desire to pose as a sociologist. He is the happy portraitist of that worthy flourishing Brussels bourgeoisie of the years before 1914. He shows us great eating and drinking parties, very good, but very coarse merchants gifted with *esprit*, no longer Gaulois, but Bruxellois. What simplicity! what good humour! what exuberance! and what naïveté! All his love-stories end in happy marriages, all his quarrels in reconciliations, in the midst of a general *attendrissement*.

These Kaekebroeck, Platbrood, and van Poppel have

not perhaps the profound humanity of the characters of a Dickens or of a Balzac, but yet how alive they are! Courouble's art may lack delicacy, but he never represents personified abstractions. Indeed, the harmony between author and characters, subject and style, is so complete that the reader has no difficulty in believing anything Courouble tells him.

This is due, above all, to the extreme care which M. Courouble devotes to the pure Bruxellois dialect of his heroes and heroines. When Pauline Platbrood exclaims, at a very tragic moment of her life, "Oaie, ça jamais. J'aimerais mieux me jeter dans le canal. Tenez, je ne sais pas vous sentir," we know that she is a real character. This notation of the Brussels dialect is not only an added proof of the accuracy of the author's observations, it is the chief source of the humour of his works. One may predict that in the years to come spectacled Teutonic professors may take up his books, not for laughter-loving reasons so much as for the opportunities for research in the *marollien* dialect which they afford.

M. Bergson in his *Essay on Laughter* has perhaps not sufficiently insisted upon the fact that it is the pronunciation, or even the syntax, of words which may become comic in itself. M. Courouble makes us laugh by his use of the Belgian accent and of expressions peculiar to Belgium. Indeed, the foreigner who is unacquainted with them will see in these books nothing but a very poor puppet show. The same device is used by Molière in *les Femmes Savantes* and *Don Juan*, and by Tristan Bernard in *l'Anglais tel qu'on le parle*.

Of course, the spectacle of Bruxellois painted by themselves would very quickly tire us if we were offered nothing but local figures of speech, and it is

clear that the Belgian phraseology is given the more distinction by being put into a setting of charming genre pictures, piquant studies of character and custom. But it is nevertheless true that the chief thing the reader looks for is the "marollien" speech. That is a fact to give pause to the psychologist of laughter. A child of two will seize upon a word of which he does not know the meaning, and repeat it over and over again, chuckling all the while over his game. Evidently he fits the word with a kind of comic physiognomy because of some quality in the sound of the vocables. Later in life he will find infinite amusement in punning, or in the repetition of those catch-words which the public will work to death for a year or so, such as "How's your poor feet?" or "Merci pour la langouste!" or the one which accompanies any and every action on the French front at the present moment, "le bonjour d'Alfred!" M. Bergson, who held that the essence of the ludicrous lay in some mechanical automatism, and who has been very much attacked for his theory, would triumph here: for it is evident that the public in the first place seizes upon some very well-worn phrase and makes a comic effect of it by accentuating its marionette-like stiffness in endless repetition.

Anyone who has read Courouble's *la Maison Espagnole*, and who knows the author's tendency towards specialisation and his horror of all generalisation, can easily imagine how, when he came fresh to the Brussels world, the mocking faculty of seeing everything in its comic light which the fairies gave him at birth, would be drawn out and reinforced.

*La Maison Espagnole* is a very precious document, because it is a sincere book written in all good faith. On every page one feels the honesty of the writer,

who forces himself to describe his childhood with the conscientiousness of the artist who knows that the beautiful and the true walk hand in hand. *La Famille Kaekebroeck* is written in the same way as *la Maison Espagnole*. Courouble only sketches the finite, the individual, and never goes beyond it, but it must be admitted that he has a great painter's grasp of detail, and he never exaggerates; he is a scrupulous painter above all, which is an excellent thing in historians. There is a certain amount of analogy between him and Daudet—in his half tender, half sardonic feelings, in his vision which is both acute and limited, and in his horror of vague phraseology. Both writers might be accused of stopping at the surface of things, were it not that we owe them too much for the accuracy of their sketches and the acuity of their observations. That Daudet is the greater writer, the more profound psychologist, Courouble would be the first to admit, but the mere fact that one can speak of the *Cadets de Brabant* in the same breath as *Tartarin de Tarascon*, is a feather in the Belgian's cap.

How Daudet would have loved the description of New Year's day at the van Poppels, or the equestrian *début* of Major Platbrood, which takes us back to our childhood's John Gilpin. Courouble's gifts of observation are to be seen on every page, whether he describe the crestfallen lycée chaplain, "S'enfuyant entre les petits arbres *crinolinés* de la cour," or whether he describe the sweet-stuff seller, "Une grosse femme louchonne à bajoues barbues et à triple menton. . . . Elle avait le teint jaune, plombé de noir, et de bleu par place *comme le ventre d'une dinde truffée*."

One of the devices dearest to the heart of the humourist is the use of surprise sentences—like the comparisons of Sam Weller. In fact, the game of

unexpected phrases is part of the equipment of every self-respecting humourist. Dickens is a past master in this kind of merry gymnastic exercise. With Courouble this gift is due to the fact that he has the painter's eye. In *Ferdinand Mosselman*, while describing to us the appearance of a certain street in the early morning, he speaks of a greengrocer's window in which "s'alignaient sur des feuilles de vigne, cinq ou six fraises pâles, chlorotiques, couleur de poisson rouge mort."

That is exact, but the author is on the high road towards finding weird and extraordinary images which are unforgettable. Will you have some good Dickens in French? Here are some examples: "Il frémissait à la pensée que les coquetteries perverses d'une Messalinette avaient tué la pauvre Madame Kevterings, dont le corset pathétique remuait dans son âme toute une vase de remords!"

Or these: "Or, l'absence de Mademoiselle Thérèse, si elle défaisait la boucle de ses craintes" . . .

"Madame Thérèse! s'écria le jeune homme en devenant blême comme la lune matinale" . . .

"Le garçonnet montrait une tête pleine de crolles encore courtes et drues comme celles de *Lucius Verus*" . . . and the description of Madame Rampelbergh's chins, which opened and shut, "comme le soufflet d'un accordéon."

But Courouble does not only rely upon these artifices to raise a laugh. He puts his readers in a good humour by means of the comic situations in which he sets his characters and the words he puts in their mouths. It is impossible to analyse a book like *le Châtiment de Madame Kevterings*—it is merely the story of a very fat lady who makes herself ridiculous by tight lacing, and finally makes herself so ridiculous that she dies. "Ainsi périssent toutes les absurdes femmes qui,



dédaigneuses des formes divines, se serrent au petit cabestan de toilette et rêvent la bague pour ceinture!"

This tale is distantly related to some of Maupassant's tales, but Courouble has far too much natural gaiety ever to fall into pessimism. He reminds us again of the French master in his broad and healthy realism, or, as Schopenhauer would say, by his feeling for beauty, the sexual attraction which Nature uses to lead man to her own ends. The betrothal of Joseph Kaekebroeck, "Ce long jeune homme très élégant et très simple, mais qui marchait un peu courbé *comme sous le poids de son nom excessivement commun*," is Courouble at his best. He gives us here pictures of middle-class life, which are so funny that we cannot forget them. The astonishing renovation which takes place in Joseph Kaekebroeck in his desire to become a respectable citizen instead of a dilettante, is, after all, only a pretext for some excellent genre work: how to prepare a table for a big dinner next day, the question of extra leaves, how to arrange the guests—all questions of equal importance with that of a marriage.

Often Courouble tries to make the more modest of us laugh by the "mots nature" of his characters. Not only does he collect words which have sprung from the union of French and Flemish, words which are funny in themselves and for which he has an affection, but words which reveal the simplicity or the foible of a *bon bourgeois*. In this way he kills two birds with one stone. "Assez de vacarme! la parole est au silence!" cries M. Platbrood, and in sublime ignorance of his stupidity dwells on his words and repeats them with delight. We cannot recount here what it was that M. Platbrood condemned so violently. There is a source of a certain kind of humour which Belgian humourists have certainly tapped too often. Some of

the jokes in M. Eugène Demolder's *le Jardinier de la Pompadour* are a revelation upon the length to which a "humourist" in Belgium may be allowed to go. The shaded paths of symbolic drama, haunted by perpetual fear, seem very far away! Truly, Belgium offers us the two extremes of art.

Courouble's work will always have its value, because he is an excellent painter of manners. Men like Eekhoud and Eugène Demolder agree in granting him this gift. Behind the yellow distemper and beneath the staircase gables he was able to discern the family's way of life. The society he describes is a transition society peopled with César Birotteaus or Bourgeois-Gentilshommes.

"Quand le boutiquier enrichi," says M. Dumont-Wilden, "commence à donner à diner, il doit d'abord apprendre l'art de recevoir,\* et ce n'est pas seulement au détail minuscule et subtil que se devine la bassesse de ses origines; c'est à son langage, à son vêtement, à toutes ses façons d'être, à son encombrante cordialité, ou à ses air guindés et à sa morgue apprise." Quite so! But that is one side of the picture, another is the splendid industry and honesty of Belgium, whose good rich *bourgeoises* do not disdain to cook, and whose *parvenus* never forget their family ties nor their duty to their neighbour. The innate honesty of these Kaekbroecks and Mosselmans is a sure guarantee of the intrepidity of their soul.

---

\* That reminds one of the *Mariage de Mademoiselle Beulemans*, where Séraphim says of Beulemans, "Il sait causer, il est dévoué à la brasserie. . . . Et puis il sait recevoir"; and Mostinckx, not understanding, asks, "Est-ce qu'il sait aussi donner?" The authors of this play, Franz Fonson and Fernand Wicheler, seem to have been influenced by M. Courouble. In any case their names should always be placed near his.

## INDEX.

- Abel, Gustave, 92  
 Anseele, 142  
 Arnay, Albert, 126  
 Ashley, Professor, 96  
 Bakounine, 96  
 Balzac, Honoré de, 20, 28, 103  
 Banville, Théodore de, 8  
 Bara, Jules, 134  
 Barrès, Maurice, 39, 72, 89, 104  
 Baudelaire, Charles, 2, 7, 10, 11, 28,  
     52-5, 79, 87, 107, 116, 128  
 Bazin, René, 64  
 Bergson, Henri, 42, 44, 153, 154  
 Bernard, Tristan, 153  
 Berthelot, 144  
 Bertrand, Louis, 4  
 Blake, William, 124  
 Bloy, Léon, 134  
 Boileau, 118  
 Bosch, Fernand van der, 133  
 Botticelli, 107  
 Bourget, Paul, 4, 39, 89  
 Boutroux, Emile, 42  
 Bozzi, Anthon, 107  
 Braekeler, 6  
 Braun, Théodor, 137  
 Brontë, Emily, 40  
 Browning, Robert, 83  
 Brucker, Raymond, 134  
 Burger, W., 3  
 Carlyle, Thomas, 25, 40, 133  
 Charcot, 39, 99  
 Chateaubriand, F. R., 5, 48, 87  
 Chesterton, G. K., 52  
 Cladel, Eugène, 87  
 Coleridge, S. T., 53, 72  
 Coquilhart, Camille, 111  
 Coppée, François, 8, 22  
 Courouble, Léopold, 150-8  
 Crashaw, Richard, 144  
 Currie, 144  
 Daens, l'abbé, 145  
 Daudet, Alphonse, 8, 155  
 Demblon, Celestin, 146  
 Demolder, Eugène, 15, 150  
 Descartes, René, 70  
 Deschanel, 3  
 Destrée, Jules, 2, 19, 115, 142-9  
 Destrée, O. G., 20, 115, 135-7  
 Dickens, Charles, 95, 107, 156  
 Dominique, Jules, 115  
 Dondelet, Charles, 115  
 Donnay, Maurice, 30  
 Dostoïevsky, 75, 109  
 Droz, Gustave, 86, 87  
 Dullaert, Maurice, 133  
 Dumont-Wilden, Louis, 13, 17, 152,  
     158  
 Eekhoud, Georges, 12, 14, 19, 100-12  
 Elskamp, Max, 17, 117-28, 137  
 Emerson, R. W., 25, 40, 62, 133  
 Flaubert, Gustave, 28  
 Fonso, Franz, 158  
 Fontainas, André, 20  
 Fontenelle, 27  
 France, Anatole, 144  
 Fromentin, Eugène, 70  
 Garnier, Georges, 21  
 Gauchez, Maurice, 107, 139  
 Gautier, 126  
 Gautier, Théophile, 87  
 Gérardy, Paul, 115  
 Geyast, J. de, 111  
 Gilbert, Eugène, 133  
 Gilkin, Iwan, 9, 13, 19, 129, 140  
 Gille, Valère, 20, 126  
 Giraud, Albert, 8, 9, 19, 21, 22  
 Goffin, Arnold, 9, 20, 140  
 Gosse, Edmund, 68  
 Gourmont, Rémy de, 33, 125  
 Gros, Charles, 19  
 Groux, Charles de, 6  
 Hannon, Théodore, 11, 20, 21  
 Hardy, Adolphe, 139  
 Hartmann, von, 130  
 Hello, Ernest, 134  
 Hinton, James, 67  
 Hoornaert, Hector, 134  
 Hugo, Victor, 3, 4, 6, 59, 60, 118  
 Huysmans, J. K., 11, 50, 52, 104,  
     105, 134, 136  
 Hymans, Louis, 20  
 James, William, 123  
 Jammes, Francis, 124, 137  
 Jhouney, Albert, 134  
 Kant, Emmanuel, 70





University of California  
SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY  
305 De Neve Drive - Parking Lot 17 • Box 951388  
LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA 90095-1388

Return this material to the library from which it was borrowed.

REC'D YRL - 20  
2003  
OCT 06 2003

1.00  
+5+

College  
Library

UCLA-College Library

PQ 3814 T86s



L 005 765 631 6

PQ  
3814  
T86s

UC SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY



A 001 341 294 5

Unive  
So  
L