

THE
FORTNIGHTLY
REVIEW.

EDITED BY J59.353

W. L. COURTNEY.

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| | PAGE |
|---|---------------------------------|
| I. OUR MILITARY REQUIREMENTS. | |
| By Lieut.-Col. Sir G. S. Clarke, K.C.M.G., R.E. | 637 |
| II. SOME NOTES ON RECENT POETRY IN FRANCE. | |
| By Gabriel Mourey | 650 |
| III. THE SPIRIT OF TORYSISM | By Walter Sichel 666 |
| IV. A NOTE ON GEORGE MEREDITH | By Arthur Symonds 673 |
| V. THE BERING SEA DISPUTE. (With Map) | By H. W. Wilson 679 |
| VI. THE MODERN FRENCH DRAMA.—(IV.) | By A. Filon 692 |
| VII. THE CASE FOR "THE BECHUANA REBELS" | By H. R. Fox Bourne 708 |
| VIII. A NEW STUDY OF NATURAL RELIGION | By W. H. Mallock 718 |
| IX. THE FUTURE OF BRITISH TRADE | By J. B. C. Kershaw, F.I.C. 732 |
| X. LORD ROBERTS AND INDIAN FRONTIER POLICY | |
| By Lieut.-Gen. J. M'Leod Innes, R.E. | 750 |
| XI. THE CHOICE FOR THE SUGAR CONSUMER | By Hugh Chisholm 760 |
| XII. TENNYSON: A STUDY IN POETIC WORKMANSHIP. | |
| By Harold Spender | 778 |
| XIII. LORD SALISBURY'S DEALINGS WITH FRANCE. | By Diplomaticus 784 |
| XIV. CORRESPONDENCE:— | |
| Sporting Literature and its Critic. | By Hedley Peck 797 |

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SOME NOTES ON RECENT POETRY IN FRANCE.

"No, you will never convince me. I tell you there are no more poets in France; or rather, there are too many. I repeat it—I have the courage of my opinions—there are too many. It is just the same with the painters. There are, unfortunately, still more of them than of the poets. The incomprehensible, irritating thing is that they all have talent or something of the sort, some more, some less. But a painter, or a poet, a true poet—that is a very rare bird indeed; you may say the species is extinct."

"You are simply unjust," I replied in mild, almost deprecating tones. "You are quite unjust. Why, you have only to look at the poetic movement going on in France at this hour to be of a totally opposite opinion. You have taken up a preconceived idea and you are determined to stick to it; that's what it is. You are passing sweeping condemnation on a whole generation of poets merely because the form of their works eludes you, the idea seems to you obscure. In doing so you condemn everyone who can find comfort and pleasure in these works; and what is your defence? Your temperament, your private preferences, your personal taste?"

"Are these not a sufficient criterion, then?"

"In practice, perhaps, yes. Nobody can contradict you if, for instance, your palate relishes the more or less curious cookery which some *gourmets* delight in. But though I am far from wishing to subject criticism to strictly scientific laws, I am sorry to think that in questions of art it so often happens that even cultivated people cannot consent to forego their personality, and to give a more rational account of their sympathies and antipathies."

My interlocutor became excited again. "I don't believe in criticism," he exclaimed; "it is nearly always wrong, and in the rare cases in which it is right it is only half right. I believe in nothing but enthusiasm, admiration, love. All the reasoning in the world will never force me to feel an emotion against which everything in my nature revolts. I say there is a state of exaltation into which I require to be wrought by the sight of painting or sculpture, the hearing of music, or by the reading of a poem. And you know as well as I do that this state of exaltation depends on something very different from any analysis however close and precise it may be!"

"We will admit all that, if you like, and come back to our poets. You are not at all satisfied with them any more than with contemporary poetry. They have lost, you say, the great traditions of the masters. You cannot pardon them their anxiety for subtlety, their refinements of feeling and idea, their complexities of technique. No doubt you

regard the epoch of romanticism as the final epoch in poetry, and agree with the Academicians who think that an age of decadence dates from the publication of *Les Fleurs du Mal*. Baudelaire is nothing better than a *mystificateur*. You need not look far for the author of the phrase; it is M. Ferdinand Brunetière. Hugo, Lamartine, Musset, Alfred de Vigny—these are the men with whom, according to you, the glory of French poetry has perished. Would you include Leconte de Lisle? I doubt it. Confess that you regard Sully Prudhomme as an ultra-sentimentalist, and that his mild pessimism enrages you. And what do you say to Richepin and Heredia? I'll be bound that you put them in the same category. You will forgive my mentioning in your presence the name of Paul Verlaine. Come, be frank; where does your era of decadence begin? With what author? With what work? Do you not know that in sociology as in art there is no such thing as an isolated fact? Make as many categories as you please, label them as chemists do their bottles, draw up systematic catalogues—it is all labour lost."

As a matter of fact we have the romanticists, the neo-romanticists, the Parnassians, the symbolists, to say nothing of many other sects, *cénacles*, schools big and little; we have the *Impassibles*, the sentimentalist; but what does all this prove? That poetry lives and always will live in the heart of man. What matter schools and theories? Temperament, sensibility is the only real fact. The rest is nothing but the squabbling of casuists. And yet how many men of genius have been sacrificed in their lifetime by having been made the head of some school, even against their will, or by enrolling themselves under some banner. Once the label of *impassible, marmoréen*, was attached to the work of Leconte de Lisle, it was all up with him; and for years none, none save the chosen few whom you ridiculed just now, have so much as heard the sound of that torrent of suffering, of disenchantment, of lofty doubt which sweeps across the *Poèmes Tragiques*, the *Poèmes Antiques*, the *Poèmes barbares*.

Was it an *impassible* who uttered this cry of anguish: *Les Oiseaux de proie?*

"Je m'étais assis sur la cime antique,
Et la vierge neige, en face des Dieux.
Je voyais monter dans l'air pacifique
La procession des morts glorieux.
La terre exhalait le divin cantique
Que n'écoute plus le siècle oublieux
Et la chaîne d'or du Zeus homérique
D'anneaux en anneaux l'unissait aux cieux,
Mais, ô passions, noirs oiseaux de proie,
Vous avez troublé mon rêve et ma joie:
Je tombe du ciel et n'en puis mourir!
Vos ongles sanglants ont dans mes chairs vives
Enfoncé l'angoisse avec le désir
Et vous m'avez dit: Il faut que tu vives!"

In Baudelaire, too, the world has been unwilling to see anything beyond an attitude. How many people to this day persist in suspecting his sincerity? *Mystificateur!* What more could he do than offer himself all palpitating to the gaze of the crowd, tear open his heart in its presence, a true human heart, consumed with love and the anguish of life, and the most intense longing for the Beyond with which a human breast ever heaved? What could he do more to touch the imbecile crowd with pity, admiration, and respect?

No, let us not be too exacting with the poets of to-day. They give us all that they can give. Is the age so favourable to their efforts? And as regards themselves, do you not think that we owe them gratitude for still practising the religion of the Muses? After all, in any art, is it such an easy thing to fix one's ideal?

“Pour incarner son rêve il faudrait être un Dieu,”

has been very truly said by Louis Ménard, the poet of the *Réveries d'un païen mystique*; and you are well aware that the gods are no longer with us.

And yet no effort is ever wholly lost; for what is all effort but the manifestation of a force? After the unbridled lyricism of the romanticists; after that storm of inspiration which shakes the work of Hugo, it seems as though there were nothing left to say. But in the calm after the hurricane of romanticism the Parnassians were born. Out of the imperial purple of Victor Hugo they cut themselves a flag, this glorious phalanx, Leconte de Lisle, Léon Dierx, Sully Prudhomme, Théodore de Banville, José Maria de Heredia, Albert Glatigny, Albert Mérat, Léon Valade, Catulle Mendès, to cite only a few. Catulle Mendès, in his *Légende du Parnasse Contemporain*, has drawn with a lively pen the history of the little group which was destined to fill so great and noble a place in French literature. In what state was French poetry at the moment when this group was formed? M. Henri Laujot will tell us. (M. Laujot is no other than M. Henry Roujon, who has since been made Directeur des Beaux Arts, without on that account ceasing to be faithful to literature.) The passage is cited by Catulle Mendès.

“At that period,” writes the future author of *Miremonde*, “it was considered the correct thing for a ‘bard’ to weep without the slightest fatigue through at least two hundred pages, at the same time dispensing largely with any explanation as to why he wept. The number of pocket-handkerchiefs which must have been drenched by that generation is incalculable. Poor things, how unutterably sad they were! But, on the other hand, think how many ladies swooned voluptuously away at the recital of *Le Poète malade*, or *Les Jeunes filles mourantes*, which one used to hear in the evening in those sepulchral salons, where *eau sucrée* was poured out like the tears. . . .

Nobody took the trouble to find out whether what they had just heard was expressed even in tolerable language. What did that matter, provided that people were moved, and that they felt their bowels yearning under their flannels? The essential thing in poetry was that it should excite true emotion; and what finer eulogy can a poet have than this—he drew tears from all the ladies of his time. The saddest thing about it was that those unfortunate people had defiled Nature by making her the accomplice of their sobs. They invoked the moon; the stars were largely responsible for their gushes of sensibility, they brought disgrace upon the very birds.” Again, there were “the utilitarian poets,” with their “poems on the direction of balloons, the submarine telegraph, and the boring of new canals, with a threatening dedication to the sovereign: ‘Cesse de vaincre ou je cesse d’écrire!’” Also the tasteful pieces in which it was quite enough to exclaim at intervals, ‘The soul is immortal,’ or ‘The dog is the friend of man,’ in order to be considered a thinker.” Yet again there were “the poets *bon fils* who thought it necessary to inform their contemporaries of the love they bore to their mothers.” And there were also “the last of those Bohemians who remained faithful to the traditions of the *cénacle* of Henri Murger. They were the apostles of disorder. These gentlemen were persuaded that a dirty shirt or a red waistcoat with metal buttons was a valuable substitute for genius.”

Was this then the end and aim of the Parnassians—the suppression in poetry of all passion, all sentiment, all ideas? Yes; that is, the suppression of every passion, sentiment, or idea that was factitious, conventional, or banal. Their aim was to raise the level of poetry, fallen into the very worst weaknesses of form and subject. In order to be a poet it is not enough merely to mention “the suffering you have felt on a page drenched with your tears. It is a miserable confusion between the things of the heart which belong to all, and the rare faculty of expressing them as idealized by imagination. To be able to feel, and that more profoundly than anyone else, but to have in addition the innate gift—further developed by exercise—of communicating what you have felt *in a perfect form*, that is what is indispensable if you would be a poet, and that is why true poets are so rare. In a word, since you are human, love, hope, suffer (which may be otherwise fatal), but think also and dream; know how to make use of *all the means of your art*, from the noblest to the humblest, from rhythm to punctuation.”

This excessive care for perfection of form is nothing new in French poetry. With the poets of the *Pleiade*, with Ronsard, with Joachim du Bellay, with Clément Marot, the art of fine expression had already flourished. To go further back, even the mannerism of the troubadours, the anxiety never to say anything that was not delicate and refined (their intentions, it must be said, were better than their

achievements), the love for imagery and colour—all this has never been discredited with us. But it was left for the Parnassians to create what may be called "artistic poetry." The formal precision of these little old-world poems proved seductive to this young generation. The lai, the virelai, the rondel, the ballade, the triquet, the sextine flourished once more. In their desire for perfection they bound themselves by the strictest rules of their art; and it was with good reason that one of their seniors, Théodore de Banville, inscribed on the forefront of his treatise on versification, over the chapter "On Poetic License," the categorical phrase, "There is none."

And, in fact, there was no more of it. Rhyme, often so rich in Hugo's work, became still richer. Certain poems of de Banville and of M. Catulle Mendès strike one as being test pieces. It is impossible to imagine more accomplished art, more exquisite virtuosity. The instrument of verse becomes under their fingers magnificent in enchantments. They draw from it harmonies the deepest, sweetest, strongest, most exquisite, most sonorous, most eloquent, most rich in colouring that have ever been expressed in verse.

They were prodigious colourists, almost invariably faultless workers in words and rhythm. Loving Beauty as they loved it, and judging it as they judged it justly, they were outlaws, alas! from our modern world; they were magic evokers of dead epochs, of the heroic ages, of all the religious and legendary past; they gave fixity to the colours and the splendid forms of dreams in poems of a most finished purity of execution; verse vibrates under their breath in a tumult of victorious trumpet blasts; words—they were learned connoisseurs of all the resources of language—gained in their hands a value perhaps hitherto unknown. In their poems they were, by turns and often all at once, painters, sculptors, jewellers, gravers of precious stones. They have chiselled charming jewels of verse; they have cast the ideal forms of their dreams into the rarest metals. In order to represent them fairly in the anthologies of the future it would be necessary to include countless poems with their signature.

Do you remember those adorable verses of Léon Dierx, the author of *Les Amants* and *Les Lèvres closes*, whom someone has finely called "that spirit magnificent and sweet"?

"AU JARDIN.

"Le soir fait palpiter plus mollement les plantes
Autour d'un groupe assis de femmes indolentes
Dont les robes, ainsi que d'amples floraisons,
D'une blanche harmonie argentent les gazons.
Une ombre par degrés baigne ces formes vagues;
Et sur les bracelets, les colliers et les bagues
Qui chargent les poignets, les poitrines, les doigts,
Avec le luxe lourd des femmes d'autrefois,

Du haut d'un ciel profond d'azur pâle et sans voiles,
L'étoile qui s'allume, allume mille étoiles.
Le jet d'eau dans la vasque au murmure discret
Retombe en brouillard fin sur les bords; l'on dirait
Qu'arrêtant les rumeurs de la ville au passage
Les arbres agrandis rapprochent leur feuillage,
Pour recueillir l'écho d'une mer qui s'endort
Très loin, au fond d'un golfe où jadis fut un port.
Elles ont alanguï leurs regards et leurs poses
Au silence divin qui les unit aux choses,
Et qui fait, sur leur sein qu'il gonfle, par moments
Passer un fraternel et doux frémissement.
Chacune dans son cœur laisse en un rêve tendre
La candeur et la nuit par souffles lents descendre,
Et toutes respirant ensemble dans l'air bleu
La jeune âme des fleurs dont il leur reste un peu,
Exhalent en retour leurs âmes confondues
Dans des parfums où vit l'âme des fleurs perdues."

And Sully Prudhomme, that irresistible enchanter with the wise and ardent heart of a poet, the profound and generous brain of a philosopher, and the nerves of a woman, so delicate, so tremulous that they seem ever on the point of breaking in their straining towards the Beyond!

"LA PRIÈRE.

"Je voudrais bien prier, je suis plein de soupirs!
Ma cruelle raison veut que je les contienne.
Ni les vœux suppliants d'une mère chrétienne,
Ni l'exemple des saints, ni le sang des martyrs,

"Ni mon besoin d'aimer, ni mes grands repentirs,
Ni mes pleurs, n'obtiendront que la foi me revienne.
C'est une angoisse impie et sainte que la mienne:
Mon doute insulte en moi le Dieu de mes désirs.

"Pourtant je veux prier, je suis trop solitaire.
Voici que j'ai posé mes deux genoux à terre:
Je vous attends, Seigneur; Seigneur, êtes-vous là?

"J'ai beau joindre les mains, et le front sur la Bible,
Redire le Credo que ma bouche épela,
Je ne sens rien du tout devant moi. C'est horrible!"

Again, what melancholy and what infinite sweetness in this short poem, *Corps et Âmes*. How intensely it expresses all the anguish of the ideal entangled in the dross of matter:—

"Heureuses les lèvres de chair!
Leurs baisers se peuvent répondre . . ."

and so on. Happy the hearts, happy the arms, the fingers; they can touch each other.

“ . . . Heureux les corps !
Ils ont la paix quand ils se couchent,
Et le néant quand ils sont morts ! ”

But souls, unhappy souls, they can never mingle with each other.

“ On dit qu'elles sont immortelles :
Ah ! mieux leur vaudrait vivre un jour
Mais s'unir enfin ! . . . dussent-elles
S'éteindre en épuisant l'amour ? ”

But with none of these poets has splendour of form flowered so perfectly as with José-Maria de Heredia. Like his master, Leconte de Lisle, M. de Heredia inherits a certain exotic strain. It is a strange coincidence, is it not? The author of the *Poèmes barbares* was born at St. Paul, Ile de La Réunion, M. Léon Dierx was also born in the same latitudes, and M. de Heredia is a Cuban. In his veins flows the blood of those Conquistadors whom he has sung so magnificently. A sparkling as of jewels is in the strophes of those admirable sonnets which will wait long before they find their equal both in purity and richness of form. From an artist of his peculiar range, who finds an intoxicating joy in perpetually resolving new difficulties, technical *tours de force*, each more incomprehensible than the last, we must not expect any of those cries which go up from *Les Fleurs du mal*: any of those deep thoughts which breathe like heavy and languid perfumes from the poems of a Sully Prudhomme, any of those sustained lyrical flights characteristic of Leconte de Lisle. If ever Parnassian poet deserved the epithet of *impassible* it is José-Maria de Heredia. But what a painter, what a chiseller, what a marvellous worker in enamel! Whether he evokes *Une Ville morte* (*Cartagena de Indias*)—

“ Entre le ciel qui brûle et la mer qui moutonne,
Au somnolent soleil d'un midi monotone . . . ”

or whether, in a Sicilian landscape, he pours out with the daily dawn, on the tomb of a grasshopper—

“ Une libation de gouttes de rosée . . . ”

whether he paraphrases in his three sonnets, *Antoine et Cléopâtre*, the sublime and tragic fate of those heroes of the “Inimitable Life,” by whom stand—

“ . . . effeuillant sur l'eau sombre des roses,
Les deux Enfants divins, le Désir et la Mort . . . ”

or whether, inspired by Joachim du Bellay's exquisite song of “Un Vanneur de blé aux vents,” he revives before our charmed eyes this pure picture of the French Renaissance:—

“ LA BELLE VIOLE.

“ Accoudée au balcon d'où l'on voit le chemin
Qui va des bords de Loire aux rives d'Italie,
Sous un pâle rameau d'olive son front plie.
La violette en fleur se fanera demain.

“ La viole que frôle encor sa frêle main :
Charme sa solitude et sa mélancolie,
Et son rêve s'envole à celui qui l'oublie
En foulant la poussière où gît l'orgueil Romain.

“ De celle qu'il nommait sa douceur Angevine,
Sur la corde vibrante erre l'âme divine,
Quand l'angoisse d'amour étroit son cœur troublé ;

“ Et sa voix livre aux vents qui l'emportent loin d'elle,
Et le caresseront peut-être, l'infidèle,
Cette chanson qu'il fit pour un vanneur de blé.”

Whether he sings the *Romancero* or the *Conquérants de l'or*, it is always the same power of vivid presentment, the same sumptuousness of rhythm and rhyme. Such is the poet of *Les Trophées*.

M. Jean Lahor, who is less known to the great reading public, though he just as much deserves to be, has more sensibility and emotion, greater nervous vibration, and a wider range of philosophic ideas. The titles of the different parts of *L'Illusion* suffice to show of what religions M. Jean Lahor is the priest; *Chants de l'Amour et de la Mort*, *Chants panthéistes*, *La gloire du Néant*, and so on. He has sung songs that are sweet and touching, intense, sorrowful, voluptuously intoxicating, and that remain in the memory like certain stanzas of *L'Intermezzo*. Thus:

“ LES REGARDS DES AMANTS.

“ Les regards des amants ressemblent aux abeilles,
Qui ne peuvent quitter le visage des fleurs ;
Et leurs yeux, en goûtant ces douceurs nonpareilles,
En sont ivres parfois jusqu'à verser des pleurs.

“ Mais leur volage amour est tout à la surface ;
De votre corps, plus doux que la lune qui luit,
O femmes, si l'éclat se ternit et s'efface,
Vous voyez de leurs yeux la caresse qui fuit.

“ Et j'ai pitié de vous, les pauvres bien-aimées ;
A l'appel du désir que vous croyez divin,
Que ne gardez-vous pas vos lèvres mieux fermées,
Puisque ce grand amour des hommes est si vain ? ”

Listen again to these three stanzas, and tell me if they are not the verses of a poet, and of a true poet.

" AIR Tsigane.

" Pour me guérir d'un ancien songe,
O Tsiganes, jouez un air,
Sombre et large, où se noie et plonge
Mon âme, comme dans la mer !

" Faites vibrer, comme une corde,
Mon âme triste, à la briser ;
Je veux une chanson qui morde
Avec la douceur d'un baiser ;

" Et nie rappelant ses paroles,
Et les caresses de sa voix,
Qui m'arrache des larmes folles,
Comme nos serments d'autrefois !"

M. François Coppée, the poet of *Les Intimités* and *Le Reliquaire*, has for some time abandoned poetry ; and judging by the few poems which he has recently published this must be a matter for unmitigated rejoicing to those of us who remember the delicate pleasure his earlier inspirations gave us.

Parnassian or not, no matter the label, M. Jean Richepin is a poet as certainly as any of those singers of whom I have just spoken, but in another way ; if there is a way of being a poet, I should say it was enough to be it, and no more. Who would dare to deny the wealth of imagination, the lyric power of the author of *La Chanson des Gueux*, *Les Caresses*, *Les Blasphèmes*, *La Mer*, *Mes Paradis* ? He has breath in him at least, a vigorous breath ; and if, without seeming to pause over trifling details of technique, he frequently, not to say invariably, produces the impression of a striking technical virtuosity, this in itself is a most valuable gift, and something altogether personal.

He is sometimes violent, sometimes almost brutal ; he runs of his own accord into extremes, but with a passion, with an almost savage fury. On the appearance of *La Chanson des Gueux*, Barbey d'Aurevilly, that great sincere soul, exclaimed : " The man who can sing like this is a poet. He has the passion, the utterance, the beating heart of a poet ! " and after the publication of *Les Blasphèmes* : " The age of Schopenhauer and Nihilism has at last found its poet. Hitherto it has had none. " The author of *Les Œuvres et les hommes* was right. *La Chanson des Gueux* and *Les Blasphèmes* will without doubt remain works characteristic of an epoch in poetry. They were a return to pure poetry, if I may say so, to poetry more living, more full of sap and blood. Certain poems of *Les Caresses*, *La Mer*, *Les Blasphèmes*, the shorter ones especially, are shaken as by a deep human breath, and this is true also of the longer poems which often attain a breadth of inspiration that literally carries you away. Above all, in spite of the occasional grossness which disfigures them, it is impossible not to

love those songs written in popular form, those refrains of beggars and sailors, those ballads in swift rhythm which the poet uses as the vehicle of some fantastic or sorrowful story.

" Chantons aussi la vieille terre !
Elle a du bon.
De son ventre noir en charbon
Sort le cidre qui désaltère.
Elle a du bon.
Chantons la terre !

" Chantons aussi la vieille terre !
Nos chers petits
Auprès de l'âtre y sont blottis.
Quand ils pleurent, son feu fait taire
Nos chers petits.
Chantons la terre !

" Chantons aussi la vieille terre !
C'est le grand lit
Où, mort, on vous ensevelit.
Qui dort là n'est pas solitaire,
C'est le grand lit.
Chantons la terre !"

The work of Jean Richepin is too diverse, too varied ; it stirs too many ideas, rhythms, transports, feelings, and passions, for me to give any impression of it in so short a notice. But having spoken of the lyric poet, I cannot refrain from mentioning the dramatic poet in him who, in *Le Flibustier*, *Nana-Sahib*, *Le Chemineau*, *Fers la Joie*, has given to the poetic drama such solidity and life, and who has so much imagination and passionate force.

I should not be justified in overlooking the two who stand beside him, forming with him a faithful trio whose friendship is founded on mutual esteem and generous community of aspirations—M. Maurice Bouchor and M. Raoul Ponchon. Maurice Bouchor is a poet who has vigour in his sweetness, sanity in his thrilling tenderness ; his grave and thoughtful soul is roused to passion by the beauty of life ; he sets himself to understand the meaning of it in his large-hearted efforts to reach a higher ideal of humanity. In *L'Aurore* and *Les Symboles* many verses are stamped with a noble poetic individuality. But this virile yet delicate lyrical poetry is only one side of his talent ; the other is apparent in those dramatic poems written for the *Théâtre des Marionnettes*, where they were played and recited with great success : *Noël*, *Tobie*, *Les Mystères d'Eleusis*. Charming in idea, and exquisite in their setting, these little plays were genuine poems ; they had the large human touch that conjures up the splendid or naive forms of legend or of myth. Poets themselves gave voice from the side-scenes to these puppets of wood and enamel. These, too, were

delightful, the delicate little figures, solemn or jovial, which the fancy of these artists had created; no one who saw this original spectacle can forget the impression it gave. Since then M. Maurice Bouchor has devoted himself to a still more noble task. He has sacrificed his personal ambition as an artist, and given his services to the schools of France, where, by means of his own attractive adaptations, he has spread the knowledge of those old popular songs and *naïve* legends that convey so many fruitful lessons and wholesome morals.

As for M. Raoul Ponchon, many people know his poems by heart, without suspecting that under their light-hearted exterior these verses are those of a poet of pure French nationality, dear to men of letters and artists and admired by his literary peers. M. Raoul Ponchon has never collected his poems together in a book; and nothing will induce him to do so. For upwards of twenty years, during which time he has lavished the products of his inexhaustible imagination on the journals, or rather on one journal, *Le Courrier français*, his verve has remained as spontaneous and alert as ever. *A propos* of anything or nothing he breaks forth into all sorts of unforeseen fancies, delicate combinations of ideas and words, seductive or ridiculous; and under all his irony and fantasy he is a man of subtle and tender emotions, loving nature in her simplicity, believing in a thousand things that so many people despise as out of date. Ponchon is a mighty drinker before the Lord, a drinker of wine after the French fashion; *In vino veritas* might be his motto. "Pooh, a mere Bacchanalian poet!" you will say contemptuously? Not at all—a poet pure and simple, whose language has a beautiful purity, who knows how to conjure with the gold of rhyme, who tips every verse with a shimmering plume of light and wit, and who loves life and sings it—a thing which requires some moral courage in these days of funereal pessimism. He has in him a little of that *joie de vivre* which made him say to Baudelaire in speaking of De Banville: "Théodore de Banville is not precisely a materialist; he is luminous. His poems reflect the happy hours of life." A charming phrase which characterises far better than long pages of criticism the art of the great enchanter who wrote the *Odes tinambulesques*, and scattered the jewels of his fancy over so many delicate and transparent works. In his style Raoul Ponchon is akin to those French or rather *gaulois* masters who hide under a certain frankness of manner, by which some people are unjustly shocked, a refined sensibility and a philosophy which, for all its tinge of sybaritism, is none the less generous and profound.

And Edmond Harancourt, the author of those fine verses *L'Amour nue* and *Seul*, is he not a poet too? And Auguste Dorchain in *La Jeunesse pensive*? And these are only a few among many.

And what of Paul Bourget? With him the novelist has stifled the poet, but only in the mind of the public; for the poet in him is

never dead. *La Vie Inquiète, Les Aveux, Edel*—one of the rarest essays in the longer poem which has been attempted within the last twenty-five years—their melancholy music has cradled the dreams of a generation. And because works which are the genuine expression of feeling will always find an echo in the human heart, to this day it is impossible to read again without emotion those pages which give utterance in so exquisite a form to the suffering of the intellect, the torment of introspective thought, the sadness of a heart in quest of happiness. Who can doubt the depth and sincerity of this cry? Who has not felt its truth?

"SPLEEN.

"Les livres que j'ai lus quand j'étais tout enfant
M'ont trop fait espérer. Ils m'ont gâté la Vie.
Et ma pensée en eux exaltée et ravie
En vain d'un grand dégoût du réel se défend.

"Le plaisir n'est pour moi qu'un charme décevant.
Je ne me suis assis que l'âme inassouvie
Au beau festin où la jeunesse nous convie
Et je m'en suis levé plus affamé qu'avant.

"Je me sens inutile aux autres comme à moi,
Je travaille, je lis, et, sans savoir pourquoi,
J'écris comme en rêvant des vers que je méprise.

"Je sais pourtant qu'il est de beaux yeux ici-bas,
Qui rendraient de la force à ce cœur qui se brise;
Mais ces yeux, ces beaux yeux ne me regardent pas."

Is not that a marvellous translation of the anguish of studious twenty, of youth grown pale through much reading, frightened and betrayed by the first contact with life? Its timidity, its delicacy are rubbed off little by little under the friction of passion; it desires passion and yet fears it, draws back even in holding out its arms; all moral problems, and the eternal problems of life and of death, are attractive to this young intelligence, but the day will come when it will throw far from it all these deceitful hopes.

"Tu ne trouveras pas, pauvre chair harassée;
Ni toi, cœur lamentable un plus terrible mal,
Plus lancinant et plus cuisant que la Pensée."

But Verlaine had come. A Parnassian to begin with, in his *Poèmes Saturniens* and in *Jadis et naguère*, with his excessive sensibility, his need of utterance, he soon felt himself ill at ease in the close and iron bonds of French poetry. A temperament like his required more freedom of manner; as he became more and more conscious of his personality he soon felt that the things he had to say could never be said in that somewhat dry and hard, cold, and it must be confessed a little too faultless form which the sumptuous poems of a Leconte de Lisle had made binding on French poetry. Most certainly

the aim of the Parnassians was worthy of all praise, and the future will owe much to them; but in literature there is ever renewal and transformation. Each age, if not each generation, very naturally desires to express itself differently from its predecessors, and that age of which Verlaine with his *Sagesse*, *Amour*, and *Bonheur*, will remain the undisputed master, had the desire, most noble in itself, to find a new form, for a way of thinking, which rightly or wrongly—rightly, I believe—it judged to be equally new. No doubt it kept its respect for form (that was henceforth a thing assured), but it introduced more independence into the technique of verse. It required that rhythm, hitherto avowedly the slave of idea and feeling, should, on the contrary, be ruled by the poet's inspiration, should become supple, elastic, should be more subtly plastic to all the shades of expression. Their poems may perhaps appear careless, less deliberately, less obviously studious of formal perfection; but it would be a mistake to judge them by appearances, worse still according to a preconceived idea.

No doubt the ear must be accustomed to this new music, these unforeseen combinations of rhythm, in order to perceive and feel their charm. The long use of the alexandrine in French poetry has made hereditary the habit against which we must strive if we would understand and sympathise with these new poets as they would be understood.

One of their theorists and masters, M. Stéphane Mallarmé, who was elected *Prince des Poètes* by a majority of a sort of ideal congress of lyrists, speaks of "the wise dissonances" which the poet can introduce into his verse. As for the use of the alexandrine, that "national cadence," as he happily calls it, it ought to be "an exceptional thing like that of the national standard." What, then, will be the rules of the new poetry? It will have none. Banville had said: "There is no such thing as poetic license." The new school proclaims: "There shall be nothing but poetic license." "Polymorphic" verse—that is the adjective they give to it—rests, according to M. Mallarmé, "on the dissolution of official rhythms, to be carried according to individual taste and fancy *ad infinitum*, provided that the effect be that of reiterated pleasure." As to traditional versification many poets still persist in using it, but it is becoming modified every day. It is losing its solemnity, its regularity; it is broken up, sundered by interruptions of rhythm, by unforeseen pauses of thought. "Those who are still faithful to the alexandrine," says the same writer, "are relaxing within the limits of the measure its rigid and puerile mechanism; the ear, released from an artificial rhythm, finds pleasure in discerning singly all the possible combinations which can be made from twelve notes. I regard this taste as essentially modern."

Other theorists have discoursed lengthily and learnedly on the

subtleties of this kind of poetic technique. But we will not go into that; we will consider only the works that have been produced according to these new canons. Among the numerous, perhaps too numerous, poets who have accepted them there are some who certainly, both by the nobility of their aim and by their talent, deserve to be cited, and, better still, to be admired.

M. Georges Rodenbach, who for his part has remained faithful to tradition, has published several collections of his poems, which are admirable because of their rare refinement of thought and imagery, together with emotional qualities which are very exquisite. Born at Bruges, he has preserved his love for chimes, for belfries, for religious things, for misty skies, and for those dead waters in which realities are best reflected. He often lets himself forget these realities in his exclusive care for the reflection. He has the soul and the nerves of a poet, apt to seize the vague shades, the blurred music, the indefinite outlines of feelings and of things. The titles of some of his books suffice to show what subjects he prefers: *La Jeunesse blanche*, *Le règne du Silence*, *Les Vies encloses*, *Le Voyage dans les yeux*. Listen to this short poem, chosen from among many others no less delicate and expressive.

"Les miroirs par les jours abrégés des décembres
Songent—telles des eaux captives—dans les chambres,
Et leur mélancolie a pour causes lointaines
Tant de visages doux fanés dans ces fontaines
Qui s'y voyaient naguère, embellis du sourire!
Et voilà maintenant, quand soi-même on s'y mire,
Qu'on croit y retrouver l'une après l'autre et seules
Ces figures de sœurs défuntes et d'aieules,
Et qu'on croit, se penchant sur la claire surface,
Y baiser leurs fronts morts, demeurés dans la glace!"

Compare these verses to those of a Parnassian pure and simple like M. Jean Lahor for instance, and you will feel the difference which divides these two schools of poetry.

With M. Henri de Regnier and M. Francis Vielé-Griffin, who are justly considered by everybody most entitled to the admiration of the younger generation, this difference is still more striking. *Les Poèmes anciens et romanesques*, *Tel qu'en Songe*, and the *Jour rustiques et divins* witness to an incontestable literary and poetic personality in M. Henri de Regnier. A little of the brilliant colouring of Parnassus seems to survive in his style, but it becomes gradually softer and thinner. Like his master, José-Maria de Heredia, he has preserved the cult of legend and antiquity; like him he loves to evoke the fabulous lands of glory and of victory, but it is all veiled in mist, and lives with a sort of twilight life, projected, so to speak, by the magic of a pale vague dream.

The following poem is taken from *La Corbeille des Heures* in the

Jeux rustiques et divins, and it strikes me as fairly characteristic of M. de Regnier's delicate style:—

“ La Vie
Avec ses mains de feuilles et ses bras de branches,
Avec ses lèvres de fleurs et de fruits,
Sa peau qui change,
De nuée et de ciel, de moires et d'écorce,
Avec ses yeux d'eau qui dort ou luit,
Sournoise ou morte,
Avec sa voix de vent, ses oreilles d'échos,
Sa voix de pluie,
Et ses rires d'Avril et ses sommeils d'Août,
Assise dans l'ombre ou debout
Dans l'aube claire,
La Vie est nue.”

“ Et j'ai fermé les yeux et je l'ai entendue
Chanter son chant de jours, de saisons et d'années
Auprès de moi, et je sentais l'averse claire
Ruisseler sur ma joue, et, sous mes pas,
Craquer le chaume sec et les feuilles fanées,
Et là-bas,
Les fruits mûrir et les fleurs éclore
Dans les parfums de soir ou l'odeur des aurores,
Et je l'ai entendue ainsi pleurer ou rire,
Lasse ou sonore,
Triste ou ravie,
Et j'ai fermé les yeux pour écouter la Vie.”

An exquisite image, with the most delicate colouring, the subtlest form. Is not that something surely not less valuable though different from the sonorous and stately alexandrines of yesterday—something more penetrating even regarded as pure rhythm? The music is more fugitive, the idea, perhaps, less definite, but what a delightful rocking movement in its harmony.

I would like to have shown also the plasticity, the charming versatility with which M. de Regnier can handle the hexameter. In *Les Roseaux de la Flûte* and *Aréthuse* there are some little poems which are perfect gems of wizard grace, in which the soul of antiquity lives again.

As for M. Francis Vielé-Griffin, he is nearer to nature and to life. His emotions, his ideas, are projected less in decorative images, but he is just as penetrating. He loves the refrains of the ballads of the people, of those songs which the reapers sing in the clear dusk, of those rhythms in which the very soul of nature seems to be hidden.

I have taken from *Joies* this delicate and fresh little poem:—

“ Des oiseaux sont venus te dire
Que je te guettais sous les lilas mauves,
Car tu rougis en un sourire
Et cachas tes yeux en tes boucles fauves
Et te pris à rire.”

Des fleurs t'ont promis quelque chose
Car tu leur parlais comme on admoneste,
Puis voici que tu devins rose
En les effeuillant d'un si joli geste
Qu'il en disait la cause.

“ La mer où s'en vont tes regards en nacelles
Te dit-elle aussi: 'Ton heur te coudoie!'
Que, te retournant, tu t'épeures et chancelles
A me voir, là, tout près, sous les lilas frêles
—La mer ou les fleurs ou les hirondelles
Ou ton âme à toi, subtile en sa joie?’”

I have only cited a few among many which deserved as much, after these few.

Yes. There is still some poetry and there are still some poets in France, and there always will be. Whatever people may say, and whatever they may think, science has not yet killed poetry. Poetry will live as long as there is suffering in the world—and there is no sign of its speedy abolition—as long as love, as long as life is there. The heart of man will always feel the need of detaching itself by a dream from the pressure of realities; the more painful, the more hideous, the more brutal these realities become—thanks to that science which builds the iron, smoke-grimed cities of the future—the more pleasure there will be in flying from them. And is not poetry the refuge to which we come for rest and shelter? The oasis where the waters murmur under the shadow of the great palms, and where it is good to lie drowsily for a while, forgetful alike of the anguish and adventure under the burning sun of reality? Is it not the cloister, cool and fresh, where everyone who has a lofty mind and soul can come to serve the religion of thought, the religion of the Ideal? In a democratic age like ours, does it not remain the one sanctuary where we can take refuge? And the poet has some right to be proud if it has been given to him alone to build for his brothers in weakness and distress this magnificent and hospitable asylum, if he alone has the right to say with Shelley—

“ And I have fitted up some chambers there
Looking towards the golden Eastern air,”

and if he has known how to teach others to turn always towards the Light and towards Hope.

GABRIEL MOUREY.