

Verhaeren

Emile Verhaeren, by Stefan Zweig. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. \$2.00 net.

IN one of the poems in "Les Blés mouvants" Verhaeren shows us two Virgilian shepherds lost with their flutes on the misty plains of Flanders. How sing of fruit, and honey, and sensuous love in this chill gray land, they complain? And they commiserate the peasants they see through the smoky cottage windows, nursing their pipes over the hearth. But an old Flemish shepherd stops them at last, and slowly explains the spirit of his people:

Les gens qui sont d'ici
Aiment la peine et le souci,
Et leur ciel inclément et leur terre indocile
Ils acceptent leur sort et n'en veulent changer
Et conquièrent dans le danger
Leur bonheur difficile.

Les muscles de leur corps
Ne sont joyeux que par l'effort
Qu'ils ménagent avec calme afin qu'il perdure;
Leur volonté tenace est un métal rugueux
Qu'ils ont coulé dans un bon creux
Sans paille ni soudure.

Verhaeren is first and last the combative son of this tough, composite people whom catastrophe cannot break, and I always see him against the wide horizons of his native plains. Though the French language and poetic forms are his medium, and he is called by those Gallic critics who accept him at all the greatest living French poet, he is scarcely more French in the narrow sense than Burns was English. His fine, bristling, gray-blond head and his clear blue eyes mark him out from his Parisian confrères as does his raucous, emphatic speech in any assembly of *verslibrists*; and the "freedom" of his verse is less a matter of technique than of something rude, unmalleable, elemental in his spirit. His meter is akin to the wild northern winds and rains he loves to celebrate; it is heavily accented like the cloud-piled skies we know in landscapes of the Flemish school. Maeterlinck, with his delicate mediaeval shades, his silences, his nerveless fatalism, has so long been the only Belgian writer familiar to Americans that we are amazed to discover this tremendous, affirmative countryman of his, whose greatest gift is an almost cyclonic eloquence.

Herr Zweig, Verhaeren's first interpreter for the American public, insists quite rightly on this lyric eloquence, and the multitudinous vision of our age of which it is the expression. Himself a poet, and an apostle of the great Belgian in Teutonic lands, he writes "with enthusiasm, with gratitude ever renewed and with joyful admiration," rather than as an objective critic. The result is a prose paraphrase of Verhaeren's poetic content that runs turbidly in English translation, and might well mislead the reader unfamiliar with the poet's own works. Now Herr Zweig is not the least bit disingenuous in claiming his master for German culture. He has a sympathetic understanding of the mixed quality of Verhaeren's genius, but he is frankly enchanted to emphasize the guttural notes and measures that outrage French traditionalist ears, and to praise supremely the later "cosmic" and abstract and rhetorical versions of Verhaeren's social lyricism which have had least success in either Belgium or France.

follow the regular French verse form, and are in subject concretely and abundantly Flemish. Look at the Frans Hals "Merry Company" of the Altman Collection, in which a laughing, blonde, exuberant beauty holds the middle of the canvas among a jovial, leering band of toppers and roysterers, and you will have the essence of the first. The second is best typified by one of Memling's monkish profiles. Both are almost pictorial representations, very close in feeling to the two types of old Flemish masters of the opposing aspects of the Flemish temperament: the brutally sensual in which Rubens delighted, with its violent appetites, color and zest of life; the pale Catholic asceticism that a few months ago still lived—hidden away in the lovely Gothic cloisters of towns like Termonde and Dixmude. Verhaeren, educated by the Jesuit fathers, had mysticism as well as much red blood in his composition, and the conflict of the two strains doubtless helped plunge him in the sombre pathological crisis of which we have a record in "Les Soirs," "Les Débâcles," "Les Flambeaux noirs." His fine "St. George" gives lyric expression to the spiritual second birth that brought him back into a more vigorous life, where his individual passions became merged in the vast activity of the modern world.

His verse now breaks traditional bonds, his outlook becomes European, and we get "Les Campagnes hallucinées," and "Les Villes tentaculaires," violent impressions, full of corrosive images and metaphors that crash upon the sensibility as breakers dash on the rocks of the conflict of agrarianism and industrialism. The *campagne* that is "hallucinated," drained of its vitality and its population by the black suckers of the grim, mechanical city is almost any rural peasant countryside; the *ville* might be Birmingham or Lyons as well as Liège. Yet—and this, in my opinion is two-thirds of the vigor of the poems—how realistically Belgian the scene remains,

C'est la ville tentaculaire,
Debout,
Au bout des plaines et des domaines.

And could anything more poignantly recall this winter's illustrated Sunday Supplements than the following, written more than twenty years ago?

Avec leur chat, avec leur chien,
Avec l'oiseau dans une cage,
Avec, pour vivre, un seul moyen
Boire son mal, taire sa rage;
Les pieds usés, le cœur moisi,
Les gens d'ici,
Quittant leur gîte et leur pays,
S'en vont, ce soir, par les routes, à l'infini. . . .

Les gens des champs, les gens d'ici
Ont du malheur à l'infin.

Verhaeren's effects are cumulative. It would take a long series of passages to give the force of his synthetic projection of Europe in the pangs of social rebirth. No poet not inalienably attached to the tradition of fertility and beauty and religion hitherto associated with the land and the past could have written anything so virulent. Walt Whitman, for instance, to whom Verhaeren is often compared—and the similarity of their form, their discovery of a new aesthetic value, and a new poetic vocabulary in the harsh subject matter of industrialism and democracy are striking enough—came by his triumphant democratic creed much more easily than Verhaeren by his scientific and unanimist

generations, (Zweig is a typical Austrian example; in France one thinks first of Jules Romaine and his group) became more positive, and more ecstatically dithyrambic. Comparisons with Wordsworth and Shelley and Victor Hugo suggest themselves, and one wonders how much Verhaeren owes to his own Flemish mystics. "Admirez-vous les uns les autres," he commands, admire everything on the teeming earth. Do not criticise, expand—"la vie est à monter et non pas à descendre."

Multiple et livre-toi. Défais
Ton être dans des millions d'êtres
Et sens l'immensité filtrer et transparaître.

To me the rhetorical and generalizing philosopher of "La Multiple Splendeur" and "Les Rhymes souverains" seems much less likely to survive than any of the other Verhaerens. Herr Zweig cuts the ground from under my feet by asserting that he can only be truly appreciated in Germany and Russia, "nations hungry for God." One readily concedes his affirmative value for jaded Europe. But I commend American readers to the stupendous yet localized seer of the early days; to the author of "Tout la Flandre," lover of sun, and sea, and windy plain, and *ville à pignon*; to the tender and harmonious Verhaeren of "Les Heures Claires," "Les Heures d'Après-Midi" and "Les Heures du Soir," whose storm-tossed soul has discovered the blessedness of the domestic fireside; to the Verhaeren of "Les Blés mouvants" who, in his robust old age, after his years of wandering and convulsive feeling, has returned with a ripened and tranquilized national understanding to look out again upon the Belgian plain. The almost classic flavor of "Les Blés mouvants," its combination of ardor and sobriety, its blending of the secret spirit and outward aspect of the land, its human generalization, recall Mistral's best poems, and betray the clarifying influence of Verhaeren's long contact with the traditions, and the subtle unemphasized outlines of the "pleasant land of France." Here, and in "Les Heures" one gets at least a hint of the spell that drew this elemental northerner to identify the greater part of literary life with a country not his own; a country where, because of the foreign sound of his improvisations, he has never been wholly accepted.

Every nation is entitled to find its own message in the works of a great poet. England has been discovering Verhaeren of late, and his drama, "The Cloister," was performed in London by a Belgian company not long ago. Has his generous cosmopolitan faith foundered in the vast European ship-wreck? That were pity indeed, for, as Zweig says, he was the first poet to do for socialist and international Europe what Whitman did for America. Yet it seems inevitable, ardent Belgian that he is, that he should now be writing "The Men of Liège," and "Aero-planes over Brussels."

Ils vont, passent et rodent
Et promènent partout le danger suspendu
De leur brusque maraude.

ELIZABETH SHEPLEY SERGEANT.

Making Agriculture Interesting

The Lure of the Land, by Harvey W. Wiley. New York: The Century Co. \$1.40 net.

A HUNDRED and fifty years ago a distinguished French physician, François Quesnay, in spiritual

try. He bought a farm in the Nivernaise, which refused to pay, and thereby he learned much that was of use to himself and also to mankind at large. Before Quesnay, men knew indeed that a thriving agriculture is the essential basis of national prosperity; but they had never addressed themselves seriously to the task of discovering the secret of rural thrift. Little by little Quesnay's interests were stolen away from his researches in fevers and humors, to concentrate themselves upon agricultural prices and forms of land tenure, upon seed selection and stock-breeding, upon fertilizers and rotation of crops. He gradually drew about him a circle of writers and statesmen, with whose aid he transformed agriculture into a favorite topic of polite conversation. Eventually ladies-in-waiting about the Queen were expected to make sage remarks upon guano and *la grande agriculture*, and august princes in more lands than one had themselves portrayed, in serene agricultural demeanor, with hand on mattock or plow.

What the political doctor Quesnay achieved was really something of prime importance. He gave the thought of his day a new cast, and his school very markedly influenced the Revolution and the institutions arising out of it. It would be easy to draw a parallel between France under the Ancien Régime and the United States of our own time, in so far as the relations between urban and rural life are concerned. We need political doctors and lawyers and littérateurs to re-create the values of rural life, that the streaming of natural ability to the cities may be abated. Hence we are justified in assigning a high value to our own Dr. Harvey W. Wiley's "The Lure of the Land." Like Quesnay, Dr. Wiley has possessed himself of a farm, which, the reader suspects, doesn't pay. And in consequence no end of problems—farm labor, the cost of farm mortgages, the exactions of the middleman, as well as the technical problems of scientific agriculture—have acquired for him a vivid interest.

This interest is conveyed to the reader with remarkable effectiveness. To read the book is to enjoy the luxury of a sojourn in a fertile valley, with the good brown soil concreting itself under the soles of your shoes, and the spirit of the growing grain soothing your city-worn nerves. True, the book devotes due space to wholesome warnings. Don't be in a hurry to give up your salaried position in order to immerse yourself in the rural quiet. Agriculture means real work, and plenty of it; it also means real anxieties, and you can't expect it to be very profitable. Land sharks are eyeing you as fat prey, the organized middlemen take toll of you when you sell your products, and the trusts plunder you when you buy supplies. Finally, your wife and daughters are likely to grow dreadfully bored on the farm; be sure that they share your initial enthusiasm, at least. Through all Dr. Wiley's warnings, however, you hear the undertone of the spirit of the land, luring you down the road to the open country.

Dr. Wiley has written this book as many of us would write if we had the moral courage to do it. He has been at no pains to run down the literature of the subject. Many of his questionings on the profitableness of various agricultural practices could be answered from the existing manuals of farm management. The problem of marketing would not seem to him so difficult if he were familiar with the operations of rural cooperation in European countries. He has glanced over an official report on farm credit, and judges that there are excellent ideas in it—the reader had better look it up. Dr. Wiley needs a foil for his optimism, and so he sets forth facts.