

ASPECTS OF VERLAINE

By Arthur Symons

WHAT Verlaine gave to French poetry was a new capacity for singing. Of properly lyric verse there had never been any lack, but, even in Hugo, lyric verse retains something formal, some trace of rhetoric, never quite reaching that ecstasy, as of an "unbodied voice," which we find in the best English songs—in Blake, Coleridge, Shelley and the Elizabethans.

It was partly from his study of English poetry that Verlaine learned this new secret song. He often spoke to me of Tennyson, and told me that he had once thought of translating "In Memoriam" into French. I do not know how much he had read the greater lyric poets whom I have named, but there is enough in Tennyson for a foreigner, acutely sensitive to the forms and cadences of another language, to learn perhaps all that those greater poets could have taught him. Tennyson formulates, almost into principles, what had been more or less of an accidental, indeed, a scarcely realized, discovery with all the others except Coleridge; and even Coleridge, though he knew his magic by heart, could not repeat his evocations at will. And a poet of genius learns more, I think, from models which are not the very greatest than from those which are. Swinburne, for instance, who has studied everything to his purpose in all literature, could have done without Shakespeare and Shelley better than without some half-dozen passages in Crashaw and in Donne. All that is needed to set one's own fire ablaze is a single spark from a hearth, not the whole blast of a furnace.

And I can well imagine that the verse of Poe may have had its influence on Verlaine, though I do not remember hearing him speak of it in the original, but in Mallarmé's marvelous translation in prose. He must almost certainly have read it in English, but, even in that translation, with its cunning transportation of cadences and refrains, there might have been found some of the suggestion of a new technique in verse. Poe had been one of the main influences upon the great poet who came immediately before Verlaine, Baudelaire, but it was in his prose chiefly, that prose which gained, I really think, in passing into the French of Baudelaire.

I remember that on my saying this once to Walter Pater, he told me that he had read Poe's stories first in the French translation, and that, on coming later to read them in English, he had been disappointed. This sort of finish Baudelaire could well put upon the prose of Poe, but in his verse there was some incalculable element which never enters into Baudelaire's own verse, and so it was left for Mallarmé to translate the poems, and for Verlaine, as I think, to profit by them. I think it must have been from Poe that he learned the trick of some of those repetitions of words in a line, or of the same word at the end of two lines, which he came to use with less apparent artifice, and thus, I think, with a more satisfying effect on the ear. The other of the two great American poets, Walt Whitman, may also have shown him—for he knew and admired Whitman—the degree to which it was possible to follow his own counsel, "*L'Art, mes*

enfants, c'est d'être absolument soi-même!" For it was the combination in him of two qualities, each of which existed separately, and supremely, in those two American poets, the quality of almost inarticulate music in song and the quality of childlike straightforwardness in speech, that made Verlaine the new, vital and exquisite poet that he was.

I think that in Verlaine's soul there was never any conscious distinction between reality and imagination, between what to most people is the prose and the poetry of actual existence. His whole nature, otherwise perhaps useless enough, was always waiting to turn into poetry. No such temperament has been seen since Villon, and not in the least because, both in Villon and in Verlaine there were picturesque vices to attract attention, and because both fell in with the scum and lees of society. What in Verlaine became soiled with evil might, under other chances and influences, have made part of the beauty of a Saint Francis. He had an inconceivable simplicity of nature, and those profound instincts which are really the instincts of the gentleman. When he stayed with me in London he was the most delightful of guests, and, in Paris, whenever he was not actually under the influence of those drinks which were offered to him all day long by the people who called themselves his friends, he was the most delightful of companions. His queer, rambling, confidential talk, full of wonder, trouble and gaiety, was always on the verge of poetry, which in him was hardly more than the choice and condensation of a mood or a moment. All his verse is a confession of what was beautiful and dreadful and merely troublesome to him in life, at first under courtly disguises, and then, gradually, with more and more sincerity to fact as well as to emotion or sensation, and, at the end, in a pitiful enough way, a sort of nakedness in rags.

In his first period he is Watteau, and sings "*Fêtes Galantes*," as the other painted them: with an exquisite art of surfaces, always about to sink

through into melancholy, but never quite doing so, or never beyond the bounds of pleasantness. He is Louis-Quinze, but with a personal trouble somewhere, as a last delicacy. He sets his puppets sighing in a Versailles of dreams, writes letters for them full of sensibility, notes their attitudes with a sympathetic mockery, and gives us the whole gallant delirium of Marquis, Abbé, Shepherdess and the Sentimentalists. He revives for us the whole masquerade of the Italian Comedy of Masks, Pierrot, Columbine and Scaramouche; and, through the sound of violins and the network of the dancing,

Columbine dreams, and starts to find
A sad heart sighing in the wind,
And in her heart a voice that sighs.

He shows us, with an ironical gesture like Watteau's, the faun, Coleridge's "sly satyr peeping through the leaves" at the end of the alley.

THE FAUN

An aged faun of old red clay
Laughs from the grassy bowling-green,
Foretelling doubtless some decay
Of mortal moments so serene

That lead us lightly on our way
(Love's piteous pilgrims have we been!)
To this last hour that runs away
Dancing to the tambourine.

And it is a Fragonard, perhaps, rather than a Watteau, which we find in this babble of tongues and bubble as of the froth on champagne.

ON THE GRASS

The Abbé wanders. —Marquis, now
Set straight your periwig, and speak!
—This Cyprus wine is heavenly, how
Much less, Camargo, than your cheek!

—My goddess. . . . —Do, mi, sol, la, si.
—Abbé, such treason who'll forgive you?
—May I die, ladies, if there be
A star in heaven I will not give you!

—I'd be my lady's lapdog; then . . .
—Shepherdess, kiss your shepherd soon,
Shepherd, come kiss. . . . —Well,
gentlemen?
—Do, mi, sol. —Hey, good night, good
Moon!

Then we return to Watteau, and in this "Promenade" there are all Wat-

teau's silken colors and spring air, with his pathetic half-smile, which seems to add pity to his sympathy with the world of pleasure, so unconscious in its gaiety, so passionately in love with the moment as it flies.

The sky so pale, and the trees, such frail things,
Seem as if smiling on our bright array
That flits so light and gay upon the way
With indolent airs and fluttering as of wings.

The fountain wrinkles under a faint wind,
And all the sifted sunlight falling through
The lime-trees of the shadowy avenue
Comes to us blue and shadowy-pale and thinned.

Faultlessly fickle, and yet fond enough,
With fond hearts not too tender to be free,
We wander whispering deliciously,
And every lover leads a lady-love,

Whose imperceptible and roguish hand
Darts now and then a dainty tap, the lip
Revenge on an extreme finger-tip,
The tip of the left little finger, and,

The deed being so excessive and uncouth,
A duly freezing look deals punishment,
That in the instant of the act is blent
With a shy pity pouting in the mouth.

Then we hear music, "the food of love," playing "*en sourdine*," and to the deceiving calmness of this measure:

ON MUTED STRINGS

Calm where twilight leaves have stilled
With their shadow light and sound,
Let our silent love be filled
With a silence as profound.

Let our ravished senses blend,
Heart and spirit, thine and mine,
With vague languors that descend
From the branches of the pine.

Close thine eyes against the day,
Fold thine arms across thy breast,
And for ever turn away
All desire of all but rest.

Let the lulling breaths that pass
In soft wrinkles at thy feet,
Tossing all the tawny grass,
This and only this repeat.

And when solemn evening
Dims the forest's dusky air,
Then the nightingale shall sing
The delight of our despair.

The whole pageant ends with a "*Colloque Sentimental*," whispered be-

tween sighs in an old park by two lovers who are no more than two ghosts of themselves:

In the old park, solitary and vast,
Over the frozen ground two forms once passed.

Their lips were languid and their eyes were dead,
And hardly could be heard the words they said.

In the old park, solitary and vast,
Two ghosts once met to summon up the past.

—Do you remember our old ecstasy?
—Why would you bring it back again to me?

—Do you still dream as you dreamed long ago?
Does your heart beat to my heart's beating?
—No.

—Ah, those old days, what joys have those days seen
When your lips met my lips! —It may have been.

—How blue the sky was, and our hope how light!
—Hope has flown helpless back into the night.

They walked through weeds withered and grasses dead,
And only the night heard the words they said.

This chill ending leads us naturally to the "*Romances sans Paroles*," which are acutely personal and have lost no magic. They are summed up, I think, in that perfect song, "*Il pleure dans mon cœur*," which I have tried to translate, but which I will not repeat here, as it is to be found at the end of the first volume of my collected poems, together with eight translations from the "*Fêtes Galantes*." In this song Verlaine has found words and a tune for the whole modern disillusionment, which is not a weariness of the world, like Senancourt's, nor a philosophical pessimism, like Leopardi's, nor a revolt against anything human or divine, but mere meaningless discontent, the incurable discontent of those who do not know why they are discontented.

Not so very long after the poems of this book come the poems written in

prison, one of which, "False Impression," I translated in *Harper's Magazine*. Here, words go as far as words can go to become the symbols of color and of atmosphere and of sensation. It is such poems as these which are really almost scientific in their accuracy to what they attempt to render that have led critics not only like Nordau, a journalist with a thesis, but like Tolstoi, a man of genius with a theory, to set down Verlaine among "mattoids" and among "decadents."

Then comes what is perhaps the great period, the period of "Sagesse," when prison and solitude and reflection have done their work and Verlaine has become a voice for the soul's confession to God of the humility of its helplessness, and a voice for the praise of the divine beauty. No one has ever spoken for the body with more simplicity or with a more penetrating humanity than Verlaine in this sonnet:

The body's sadness and the languor thereof
Melt and bow me with pity till I could weep.
Ah! when the dark hours break it down in
sleep

And the bedclothes score the skin and the
hot hands move;

Alert for a little with the fever of day,
Damp still with the heavy sweat of the night
that has thinned,

Like a bird that trembles on a roof in the
wind;

And the feet that are sorrowful because
of the way,

And the breast that a hand has scarred with
a double blow,

And the mouth that as an open wound is red,
And the flesh that shivers and is a painted
show,

And the eyes, poor eyes so lovely with tears
unshed

For the sorrow of seeing this also over and
done:

Sad body, how weak and how punished
under the sun!

In another poem of "Sagesse" we have a more feverish, a more fantastic transposition of sensation and the mind's coloring of it:

The little hands that once were mine,
The hands I loved, the lovely hands,
After the roadways and the strands,
And realms and kingdoms once divine,

And mortal loss of all that seems
Lost with the old sad pagan things,
Royal as in the days of kings,
The dear hands open to me dreams.

Hands of dream, hands of holy flame
Upon my soul in blessing laid,
What is it that these hands have said
That my soul hears and swoons to them?

Is it a phantom, this pure sight
Of mother's love made tenderer,
Of spirit with spirit linked to share
The mutual kinship of delight?

Good sorrow, dear remorse, and ye,
Blest dreams, O hands ordained of
heaven

To tell me if I am forgiven,
Make but the sign that pardons me!

And here is that first child's simplicity, which is now half a prayer as well as all a song:

Fairer is the sea
Than the minster high,
Faithful nurse is she,
And last lullaby,
And the Virgin prays
Over the sea's ways.

Gifts of grief and guerdons
From her bounty come,
And I hear her pardons
Chide her angers home;
Nothing in her is
Unforgivingness.

She is piteous,
She the perilous!
Friendly things to us
The wave sings to us:
"You whose hope is past,
Here is peace at last."

And beneath the skies,
Brighter hued than they,
She has azure dyes,
Rose and green and gray.
Better is the sea
Than all fair things or we.

After "Sagesse" come many books, in which we see, as in a drama acted before us, a kind of frank miracle-play of the Middle Ages, the whole conflict of the flesh and the spirit, in which a losing battle seems never to be quite lost. In one of the latest books, the "Epigrammes" of 1894, we find, among much work of another sort, this beautiful poem, which I should like to take as the last word of that conflict:

When we go together, if I may see her again,
Into the dark wood and the rain;

When we are drunken with air and the sun's delight At the brink of the river of light;	And, if the slow good-will of the world still seem To cradle us in a dream;
When we are homeless at last, for a moment's space, Without city or abiding-place;	Then, let us sleep the last sleep with no leave-taking, And God will see to the waking.



FORGIVEN

AS I strayed through the wood in the withering day
 And the moon wore a veil of gray,
 I listened to the song that the twilight weaves—
 The dim, low strain of the quivering leaves
 That only the wind can repeat;
 And in the half-night, with its weird, weird light,
 I felt my heart a-beat.
 For it seemed, in that lone place,
 That my fair first Love was nigh;
 In the shivering dusk, with its breath of musk,
 I could almost hear her sigh.

As I strayed through the wood in the blossoming night
 And the moon waxed shyly bright,
 By her wan, sweet luster it seemed to me
 That my old Love's face I could verily see;
 And I longed—how I longed—to be shriven!
 "O Sweetheart, speak! But a word I seek—
 To know that the dead hath forgiven!"
 Then it seemed, in that lone place,
 While mine eyes with tears were blurred,
 Down the woodland aisle I saw her smile;
 And I knew that my prayer was heard.

SAMUEL MINTURN PECK.



FROM THE COZY CORNER

SHE—Am I the first girl you ever kissed?
 HE—Why, do I go about it like an amateur?



"Is he a friend of yours?"
 "No; I'm a friend of his."