

EMILE VERHAEREN



THE frontiers of literature, independent of political dissension or civil authority, are fixed by language alone. Indeed, it will often happen that those most divided by conditions of race, place, and government, but possessed of a common tongue, can boast a more richly-stored treasure-house of letters than their homogeneous neighbours. How continually is our broad Anglo-Saxon river nourished by widely-severed tributaries! Now it is a Celtic current, now an Anglo-Indian, now an American, which brings new wealth of observed experience to the mother-stream. France, too, may well be consoled for the loss of Alsace and Lorraine by the annexation of Belgium, since no three men among the younger writers of Paris can be named as the equals of Maeterlinck, Rodenbach, and Verhaeren. Not that Paris has shown any disposition to slight her step-children; on the contrary, it was M. Octave Mirabeau, who happily discovered (and unhappily labelled) the author of "L'Intruse" and "Tintagiles," while George Rodenbach's mystical "béguine" made her *début* in "Le Voile" at the "Comédie Française." If Emile Verhaeren is not yet as familiarly known, it is because the playbill advertises more rapidly than the catalogue, and because a poet, whose taste is fastidious and whose themes are difficult, must wait for recognition, until the public standard has approximated to his own. Portents of recognition are at hand: brilliant and weighty appreciations by Mallarmé, de Régnier, Albert Mockel, and Vielé-Griffin, the widely-promoted banquet at Brussels and the decoration of the Order of Leopold (not to speak of simultaneous publication in the "Revue des deux Mondes" and "The Fortnightly Review") will set people reading him, and asking themselves, whether a worthy successor has not been found to Hugo, Leconte de Lisle, and Verlaine.

In seeking to define this poet's genius the comparative method is peculiarly futile. One critic, with a weakness for epigram, was pleased to hail "l'enfant sauvage de Hugo," and another was reminded of Henry de Groux, by the tumultuous and epic largeness of particular poems, but, in truth, if parallels must be sought, they are best found in the work of certain Flemish and Spanish

painters, for, like these, M. Verhaeren invests monstrous or mean subjects with tragic grandeur, and appals or allures the eye with sombre magnificence. Unparalleled is his faculty of expressing intense, obscure emotion; his way of presenting a landscape or a passion is paroxysmal; the words cease to be words, that is, to veil their meaning; an almost direct appeal is made to the senses, to the nerves, even, without the intervention of intelligence. For instance, what actual glimpse of storm-tortured trees, silhouetted by a lightning-flash, could be more vivid than this?

“ Un supplice d'arbres écorchés vifs
Se tord, bras convulsifs,
En façade, sur le bois proche.”

And cannot you feel a gnashing of teeth in this counsel of an obstinate sufferer agonized to frenzy?

“ Exaspère sinistrement ta toute exsangue
Carcasse, et pousse au vent en des sols noirs, rougis
De sang, ta course, et flaire et léche avec ta langue
Ta plaie et lutte et butte et tombe—et ressurgis !”

It is impossible, however, to convey by excerpt any idea of those poems, and they form the majority, which hammer, hammer, hammer, or drip, drip, drip, through a hundred lines or more of a metre, elaborately yet inevitably adapted to the repercussion of a single note, the representation of a single scene. One would suppose that an effect, based so largely on metrical artifice and protracted by however masterly skill, must repel and tire. And, in fact, to read through “*Les Débâcles*” or “*Les Villes Tentaculaires*” is like sitting out the “*Meistersinger*” or “*Götterdämmerung*.” But the reward is great for those who have the patience to follow and the intelligence to apprehend. Each poem is so enriched with gorgeous colouring, the mind is stimulated by such fine and pregnant images, that one is carried at a rush from start to finish without having occasion or desire to elude its overmastering spell.

The potency and complexity of this rather cryptic art has passed through three stages of marked development both in chosen subject and means employed. When a political and forensic disciple of the eminent Brussels barrister, M. Edmond Picard, published “*Les Flamandes*” in 1883, and “*Les Moines*” in 1886, the critics were forced to ransack the vocabulary of the studio to appraise those pictorial revelations of Flemish peasant and monastic life. A painter with as avid an eye for colour and shape as Gautier, a realist

with as keen a sense of the dismal and horrific as Zola, had co-operated, it would seem, to depict the bestialities of the kermesse, the beatitudes of the cloister. But sonnet succeeded alexandrine and four-lined stanza succeeded sonnet with academic regularity. Nor was docility of form atoned for by depth of vision. The figures were painted in with extraordinary vigour and truth; not a pose was omitted, not a possible light or shade wanting; but one felt that it was all superficial, external. It was the work of a strong and haughty colourist, whose heart and brain were all in his task, absorbed by and concentrated on execution, more concerned with efficient workmanship than moved by that intimate, humane sympathy, from which the most living art springs. More particularly was this the case with the second volume, in which the exterior aspects of the trappist life—its labour, its legend, its ceremonial—were celebrated without a pang or throb of spiritual sympathy. Neither the brutal vigour of the labourer's struggle for life nor the ascetic rigour of a life withdrawn from struggle, struck deep enough root in the seed-plot of a soul, destined to bring forth more rare and splendid flowers in due season. The eye had been caught and the fancy fired, but that was all. Perhaps at this time "La Jeune Belgique" and "l'Art Moderne" gained what the poems lacked, the whole-hearted enthusiasm which championed and expounded with lucid force the art of Manet, Moreau, Fernand Khnopff, Odilon Redon, Van Rysselberghe. In the midst of ardent battle for his ideals, the young poet was prostrated by a shattering illness, which seems to have torn away the veils, concealing his inmost "ego" from himself. The pains were birth-pains, setting free a psychologist of relentless daring and patience, a seer of unexampled gravity and grandeur. If the psychology stopped at self-analysis, if the visions came through a gate of ebony, they are none the less authentic. Of the sombre trilogy, which appeared between 1887 and 1891, the author has been anxious to describe "Les Soirs" as "les decors du cri," "Les Débâcles" as "le cri," and "Les Flambeaux Noirs," as the echoes of the cry in the thinking-chamber of his brain. What is more important for us—since the terse distinction compresses with Procrustean violence the quivering bodies of live poems—is that now Emile Verhaeren had found himself, had found the necessity and the faculty of declaring his bitterest and bravest thoughts; had found, above all, a novel instrument of surprising delicacy and strength in the warmly-abused and warmly-defended *vers libre*.

The quarrels which rend foreign coteries on questions of technique must always seem a little wasteful to English spectators. Instinct prompts the skilled craftsman in selecting his tool; if he so wield it as to satisfy his

judgment and accomplish his design, no amount of theoretic disputation will arrest or affect him. Baudelaire had appropriated the sonnet, Hugo had exhausted the thousand and one variations of the alexandrine, Banville had reduced rhyming to a juggler's trick of deftly manipulated balls: it was felt that the time-honoured stricture of regular sound-recurrence and equivalent feet fettered the writer and reminded the reader too persistently of an art which lacked art to hide itself. More difficult, perhaps, but more supple, more free to catch and render the actual rhythms of life, would be the "free verse" in a master's hand, for only a master could supply the balance, the lilt, that gratification of the ear, associated with old metres. In a letter of congratulation on the appearance of "Les Soirs," M. Mallarmé wrote in praise of its metrical innovations, "l'ouvrier disparaît, le vers agit;" and it is not too much to say that, at its best, the verse moves with apt, active spontaneity, leaps or sinks, exalts or moans, rushes or drags, in accordance with its theme. An excellent object-lesson, consisting of two poems from the same pen on the same subject, "Les Plaines," enables one to compare the two methods and gauge their relative value. The first poem begins thus:

en

"Partout, d'herbes en Mai, d'orges in Juillet pleines,
De lieue et lieue, au loin, depuis le sable ardent
Et les marais sur la Campine s'étendant,
Des plaines, jusqu' aux mers du Nord, partout des plaines !
* * * * *

Partout, soit champ d'avoine, où sont les marjolaines,
Coins de seigle, carrés de lins, arpents de prés,
Partout, bien au-delà des horizons pourprés,
La verte immensité des plaines et des plaines !"

The second, written ten years later, thus:

"Sous la tristesse et l'angoisse des cieux
Les lieues
S'en vont autour des plaines ;
Sous les cieux bas
Dont les nuages traînent,
Immensement les lieues
Marchent, là-bas.
* * * * *

C'est la plaine, la plaine blême,
Interminablement toujours la même."

The intrinsic importance, however, of the poet's "cry," for those who had ears to hear, outweighed its extrinsic variety of modulation. It was the cry of a violent fighter, of an iron will, grappling with Death. The sick bed, which

generally silences or softens the voice of a singer, braced and inspired its prisoner with an obstinate, victorious song, half dirge and half pæan, recording every incident of the long fight, every change of mood through the whole gamut of suffering, doubt, defiance, ennui, pride, dizziness, and delirium. The only other instance that occurs to me of malady so successfully transmuted to melody is furnished by James Thomson's "In the Room," and "To our Ladies of Death," apart from exercises in hymnology, which seldom rise to the level of literature. The resultant emotion, in one reader, at least, of this melancholy and sometimes maniacal verse, is not compassion with the racked body, though the flesh ache and the nerves tingle to read, but rather exultant sympathy with a valorous spirit, which, scorning the cheap virtues of humility and faith, meets and beats the leagued mysteries of dissolution and eternity, as though conscious of an immortality, equal to theirs. It must be noted, too, that not only had proximity to destruction evoked its utmost ounce of energy from an adamant will, but the conditions and the field of battle were exactly suited to the peculiar bent of racial imagination. The greatest art of the Netherlands has ever been haunted by the sombre, the saturnine, the macabre; if we cannot read Van Vondel's "Lucifer" we have all observed this trait in certain pictures of Rubens, Jordaens, Gerard David, Jan Bosch, Jan Luijken, and Wiertz. Small wonder, then, that a black-wanded Prospero, in temporary servitude to powers of darkness, turned their very terrors to artistic account and twisted their sharpest thorns into a crown. To characterize concisely the three phases of disorder, the three facets of a gem, bearing the carver's portrait, which diversify and justify the triune design of the whole, one might hazard the assertion, that in "Les Soirs" a sick poet draws from nature the evening-coloured pictures which are in keeping with his state, desolate country, decadent town, the fall of the year; that, in "Les Debâcles," a sick hero draws from disease its sting; that, in "Flambeaux Noirs," a sick thinker draws from pitifully naked premisses his negative conclusions about the universe. It is always a sick man who speaks, a *détraqué*; but this *détraqué* has a strange power of clothing general ideas, abstractions, with vivid, plausible words, so that his ebbing philosophy wakes in us as much concern as his ebbing life. And this brings me to the last stage of development in the writer, whose line of work I am endeavouring to trace.

The highest quality, perceptible in "Les Flamandes," and brought to greater perfection in each subsequent volume, is the result of inner, not outer, vision, betokening less the painter's eye for difference than the seer's eye for analogy; indeed, for as keen a sense of the applicability of symbol, for such

striking co-ordination of pictorial and psychical terms one must go back to Shelley, perhaps to Plato. Not that Verhaeren ever uses verse as a vehicle for philosophic or political doctrine; he tries to translate the sacred works, which we call by the names of Nature, Mind, Society, without editorial interpolation. Above all, when striking the stars, he is careful not to lose his head in the clouds. To quote his own wise words: "You can never dispense entirely with the real for the same reason that you can never escape entirely from what lies beyond. Art is a two-faced unity; as the catholic divinity consists of three persons, art consists of two. You must feel your footing from time to time, and use the ground as a spring-board. The vague is as dangerous as the *terre-à-terre* is lugubrious." Disregard of this danger has swamped many a French poet's fragile barque in floods of incomprehensible metaphor, and brought discredit on the Symbolist movement.

This is not the place to assign respective measures of merit to the first Symbolists, to Mallarmé, to Arthur Rimbaud, or to Gustave Kahn; but I cannot refrain from quoting at some length the clear statement of what Symbolism seeks to achieve, on the testimony of its most gifted exponent. Speaking of the Naturalism, which preceded it, M. Verhaeren writes: "This was descriptive decomposition, a microscopic and minute analysis, without *résumé*, without an attempt to concentrate or generalize. You studied a corner, an anecdote, an individual, and the whole school was based on the science of the day, and, consequently, on positive philosophy. Symbolism will do the opposite. It follows the German philosophy of Kant and Fichte, as Naturalism followed the French philosophy of Comte and Littré. And this is perfectly logical. With us, the fact and the world serve simply as pretext for the idea; they are treated as phenomena, condemned to perpetual variation, and they appear to be, in fine, merely the figments of our brain. It is the idea which determines them by adaptation or evocation. If Naturalism accorded so much space to objectivity in art, Symbolism will restore as much and more to subjectivity. We enthrone the idea in absolute sovereignty. Our art, then, is one of thought, reflection, combination, will. In it is no place for improvisation, for that sort of literary fever, which carried the pen across enormous and inextricable subjects. Every word, every sound must be weighed, examined, willed. Every phrase must be regarded as a thing, endowed with life of its own, independent, owing its existence to the words, its movement to their subtle, artful, sensitive juxtaposition." Elsewhere he contrasts modern with Greek Symbolism. The Greek sought to materialize the abstract, to incarnate force in Zeus, love in Aphrodite, wisdom in Athene;

the modern aims at abstracting the idea from matter, at evoking the soul and suggesting the whole by electric, quintessential phrase. Here there is a warning of what we shall find in the poet's mature work: not "a substitute for a glass of wine and a cigarette," not an excuse for sentimental reverie, not empty rhetoric or "sensual caterwauling," but a strenuous attempt to make the empire of poetry conterminous with the empire of modern thought, to turn the lyric muse from a mistress to a priestess.

Ambitious as it is, this scheme of establishing platonic friendship between platonic foes, mimicry and philosophy, has enriched French literature with at least three noteworthy books, "Les Campagnes Hallucinées," "Les Villes Tentaculaires," and "Les Villages Illusoires." I might describe the first two as the obverse and reverse sides of a gold coin, that being the fittest token of a money-making age, of the capitalistic era. In no country has the crushing pressure of industrial competition been felt so severely as in Belgium, whose manufacturing centres absorb the densest population in Europe to the detriment and ruin of agriculture. On the one side, then, the tumultuous, teeming town, and on the other, desolate, spell-stricken country offered congenial matter to the insurgent idealist, burning to reinstate other than commercial ideals, to depict and defeat the insidious strangulation by commerce of beauty, nobility, happiness. "The absolute sovereignty of the idea" is patent in every line, but not at the expense of verisimilitude: if anything, the real is made to seem more real, the tyranny of matter more heavy and more obvious. The "Campagnes Hallucinées" are as realistically painted as a panorama by M. Philippotaux: between the stagnant marshes and waste heaths, past fireless hearths, neglected Madonnas, and mouldering mill, tramp beggars, thieves, and migratory families of homeless poor. But more ghostly and ghastly habitants than these infest the sterile acres; Fever, in gauze woven of swampy mists, the Giver of Bad Counsel, who comes at sunset in his green cart and whispers of suicide to the sullen yokel, of prostitution to the despairing wench, and Mother Death, a tipsy crone on a spavined white horse, whom neither the Blessed Virgin nor Jesus himself can propitiate. Insanity, which waits on famished body and mind, and is rendered more familiar by the Belgian custom of boarding out lunatics in cottage-homes, inspires six *Chansons de Fou*, almost worthy of Shakespeare. That this is not exaggerated praise, the reader may judge from the following specimen:

"Le crapaud noir sur le sol blanc
Me fixe indubitablement
Avec des yeux plus grands que n'est grande sa tête ;

THE SAVOY

Ce sont les yeux qu'on m'a volés,
Quand mes regards s'en sont allés
Un soir, que je tournai la tête.

" Mon frère il est quelqu'un qui ment,
Avec de la farine entre ses dents ;
C'est lui, jambes et bras en croix,
Qui tourne au loin, là-bas,
Qui tourne au vent
Sur ce moulin de bois.

" Et celui-ci, c'est mon cousin,
Qui fut curé et but si fort du vin
Qui le soleil en devient rouge,
J'ai su qu'il habitait un bouge
Avec des morts dans ses armoires.

" Car nous avons pour génitoires
Deux Cailloux
Et pour monnaie un sac de poux,
Nous, les trois fous,
Qui épousons, au clair de lune,
Trois folles dames sur la dune."

It is in the "Villes Tentaculaires," however, that the Symbolist poet may most directly challenge comparison with the Naturalistic novelist, for Zola alone among great writers has caught and wielded the spell of great modern institutions, of the factory, the exchange, the mine. Or take, for instance, the crowd of business men in a city street. Seven pages of Rougon-Macquart enumeration would not convey more than these seven lines :

" La rue—et ses remous comme des câbles
Noués autour des monuments—
Fuit et revient en longs enlacements ;
Et ses foules inextricables,
Les mains folles, les pas fiévreux,
La haine aux yeux,
Happent des dents le temps qui les devance."

But the power of the verse lies not so much in large delineation of movement as in perpetual suggestion of the unseen forces which sway human puppets and mould their environment. The town itself, like a giant octopus, gathers in youth, ambition, strength, with resistless tentacle. At a hundred points the individual is seen to be helpless in the coils of the corporate

monster. The artisan becomes a cog in the wheel of a Juggernaut car; the investor is a counter for rogues to gamble with, the clerk and shopman mere items in bureau and bazaar. Cathedral and barrack recall the religious and military currents of tradition, persisting along with the industrial. And against the background of general reflection the particular subject of each poem stands out in sharp, vivid relief: the frenzied fighters of "La Révolte," the debauched dancers and pleasure-seekers of "Les Spectacles," the daring speculators of "La Bourse," rehearse an animated *rôle* in the eternal "problem-play," which is fraught with Homeric significance, for with and against the gesticulating combatants are allied invisible deities,

("On les rêve parmi les brumes, accoudées
En des lointaines, là-haut, près du soleil,")

whom for want of better names we call Force, Justice, Pity, Beauty. You must not leave this symbolic capital without regarding its "Statues" of dead heroes. Here by a Gothic gateway the meek founder-monk clasps his cross; surrounded by civic palaces, the opportunist demagogue thunders in bronze; the soldier-autocrat dominates a square "of barracks and of abattoirs :"

"Un élan fou, un bond brutal
Jette en avant son geste et son cheval
Vers la Victoire."

"Les Aubes," the author's first essay in dramatic form, is to complete the trilogy and will set forth the brighter side of his social and political creed. Its import may be guessed from the lines, which terminate the poem entitled "l'Âme de la Ville :"

"Et qu'important les maux et les heures démentes,
Et les cuves de vices, où la cité fermente,
Si quelque jour, du fond des brouillards et des voiles,
Surgit un nouveau Christ, en lumière sculpté,
Qui soulève vers lui l'humanité
Et la baptise au feu de nouvelles étoiles ?"

In spite of similarity of title, the "Villages Illusoires" stands by itself. The most popular and the most composite of all M. Verhaeren's works, it is a triptych, of which the leaves might be labelled spiritual, elemental, macabre. The largest section presents familiar moral or spiritual types under the guise of humble village trades, with which for Symbolist ends they are identified. Thus we have the Idealist, a ferryman, who, hailed by a receding figure on

the bank, pulls sturdily on, though oars break, rudder fail, and the current drive him ashore. Then the Rationalist carpenter, busily at work on little squares and circles, soon puts together the puzzle of existence with wooden syllogisms, from which the doctor and parson easily deduce opposite conclusions. And the grave-digger? You or I, or any man, who tries to heap oblivion on his own "multiple and fragmentary death," on crippled pride, cowed courage, smirched purity. Space forbids a long enough citation to show how deftly æsthetic and ethical strands are interwoven, but the happiest imagery and loftiest outlook are found, perhaps, in "Les Cordiers." While the mystic ropemakers ply their calling, they draw into their souls the utmost horizons of humanity. They look far back to man the nomad :

" Jadis, c'était la vie énorme, exaspérée,
Sauvagement pendue aux crins des étalons,
Soudaine, avec de grands éclairs à ses talons,
Et vers l'espace immense immensément cabrée."

They look far forward to the reconciliation of knowledge and faith :

" Là-haut parmi les loins sereins et harmoniques
Un double escalier d'or suspend ses degrés bleus,
Le rêve et le savoir le gravissent tous deux
Séparément partis vers un palier unique."

Turning from man to nature and from seer to singer, the author devotes four long poems to snow, rain, wind, silence : they are masterpieces of form and rhythm, though necessarily owing much of their success to these onomatopœia effects, which are the easiest triumphs of a consummate metricist. The finest example of the macabre manner recalls Cyril Tourneur, for the theme is the adoration of a skeleton-mistress by a mad lover.

Without forfeiting the crown of fantastic horror, which enables him, as it enabled Coleridge, Poe, and Maeterlinck to raise the abject and the abnormal to the sublime, M. Verhaeren has given his admirers the satisfaction of noting that his later work is more sane and various than they might have apprehended. The most accomplished Paganini could not continue playing on one string without tiring his audience. But if from "Les Soirs" to "Les Villes Tentaculaires" the atmosphere be most often thick with "inspissated gloom," yet the interludes of happy light have grown in frequency and radiance. The turning-point coincides with the publication in 1891 of "Les apparus dans mes chemins" (midway between "Les Flambeaux Noirs" and "Les Campagnes

Hallucinées”), a veiled record of spiritual convalescence. The dreary landscape of the *détraqué*, described as :

“ Mon pays sans un seul pli, un seul,
C'est mon pays de grand linceul,”

changes to a garden, where :

“ Des fleurs droites comme l'ardeur
Extatique des âmes blanches
Fusent en un élan de branches
Vers leur splendeur.”

The troop of spectres (“celui de l'Horizon, celui de la Fatigue, celui du Rien”), who had immolated the broken, ridiculous thinker on the altar of his “grand moi futile,” are expelled by “le Saint-Georges du haut devoir,” giving place to four angels.

“ L'une est le bleu pardon, l'autre la bonté blanche,
La troisième l'amour pensif, la dernière le don
D'être, même pour les méchants, le sacrifice ;
Chacune a bu dans le chrétien calice
Tout l'infini.”

There is nothing of mysticism nor any whining of religious remorse in the poet's return on himself, but as the exquisite concluding poem, “Très Simplement,” implies, it was a woman's gentleness and devotion, which turned the current of his life and of his art. Henceforward, between the peaks and chasms of his vertiginous or abysmal verse, blow many tender blossoms of delicate humanity. The “Almanach,” published last year (and beautifully “ornamented” by M. Théo van Rysselberghe) exhibits attractively the sunnier qualities of his later work : vigorous sympathy, rippling fancy, and loving scrutiny of Nature.

It is unfortunate that so many of M. Verhaeren's earlier writings are now inaccessible. The “Mercure de France” has indeed reprinted “Les Flamandes,” “Les Moines,” and other verse in one volume, but the “Soirs,” “Débâcles,” and “Flambeaux Noir,” enhanced by a superb frontispiece of Odilon Redon, are entombed in collectors' libraries and the British Museum. English readers are bound to regret this, for the grandeur and squalor of London, which deeply impressed the Flemish poet, are reflected in several poems, worthy to be set beside those of Wordsworth for beauty, though Verhaeren's convulsive vision is in violent contrast with Wordsworth's classic

calm. The sight of heaped-up lion skins in a Thames warehouse moves him to cry :

“O cet orgueil des vieux déserts, vendus par blocs ! . . .
 Hurlleurs du Sahara, hurleurs du Labrador,
 Rois de la force errante, au clair des nuits australes !
 Hélas, voici pour vous, voici les pavés noirs, . . .
 Voici Londres, cuvant en des brouillards de bière
 Enormément son rêve d'or et son sommeil
 Suragité de fièvre et de cauchemars rouges.”

This is his usual note, a cry ; but it is a seer, who cries, and a thinker, not a rhetorician ; he is careful so to fuse emotion and thought as to win the suffrages of truth-lovers and beauty-lovers. His pictorial minuteness tempers his passion for grandiose effect ; such fertile fancy has not often been yoked with such omnipresent, architectonic reason. Discarding the facile lures of legend and romance he evokes the essential majesty of common things, with magic far from common. Studiously impersonal, he cannot hide a personality of ardent sympathy, of profound earnestness. Like Landor, he may be destined to “dine late ;” but, assuredly, “the dining-room will be well-lighted, the guests few and select.”

OSMAN EDWARDS.