

“PASTELS IN PROSE.”*

Notwithstanding the fact that, as Mr. W. D. Howells has stated in the charming and too brief note which stands as preface to this volume of prose poems, modern invention has found a way of fixing the chalks so that the graceful and beautiful crayon-drawings known as pastels need no longer be perilously fragile possessions, the “pastel” will no doubt always remain the type of the most delicate form of art. It has a charm all its own. The oil-painting may have a depth and solidity far beyond it, the drawing in water-colours a lucid brilliancy which it cannot match, the etching a subtlety of tone unsurpassable; but the pastel can combine something of the special qualities of the etching, the water-colour drawing, and the painting, and has at the same time a wayward fascination, a kind of virginal beauty, all its own. No better name than “Pastels,” therefore, could be given to those short studies of poetic impression expressed in prose, which are already a new “form” in contemporary literature. One must not examine a pastel too closely, nor must one look to it for more than a swift and fortunate impressionistic portrayal; for the artist who knows his medium will not attempt to do with it what Lucas Cranach or Van Eyck, for instance, did with their medium, what in our own day the “Preraphaelites” professed to do as a matter of principle. Suggestion, not imitation, is the aim of the pastel-artist, who must, in any hazard, be what is somewhat too vaguely called an impressionist. He is not to be a novelist or an essayist in paint, but to be content to reproduce as truly as he can by suggestion a poignant artistic emotion, leaving to others to educe from it any story, lesson, or meaning they choose to find in it. The thrush flinging his music joyously upon the eddies of the spring-wind, without thought of who may

* Pastels in Prose. From the French, by Stuart Merrill. (Harpers.)

hear or how it may be judged, is a true artist-type. It is when the painter or writer, like the needy street-musician who increases or moderates the tone of his barrel-organ according to the supposed taste of his audience, produces for the sake of others, and in accordance with their and not his own standards, that he disproves himself an artist and becomes the mere manufacturer. The cant of altruism in art is at once ludicrous and mischievous. The artist must produce for himself; not for others. The others benefit—as those do who listen to the thrush's song, though the singer may be unconscious of or indifferent to their presence, his song being not the less sweet though there be none to applaud. In France, the prose-poem, which, it is perhaps necessary to say, is quite distinct from what is ordinarily known as poetical prose, is now a literary species as definable and recognisable as the sonnet, or the rondeau, or the villanelle. It existed in a haphazard, vagrant sort till Baudelaire, whose example inspired many of the writers who came after him, though it is probable that to the incomparable "Prose-Poems" of Turgenieff is due the fulness and variety of the tide of this new poetry which has advanced so rapidly of late. No doubt we may find herein the fundamental reason of the present vogue of Walt Whitman among the Parisian writers and cultured public. He is translated in part only, and what with wise selection and thoroughly artistic rendering, much of his work takes on a refined and delicate beauty which is apt to surprise even the most thorough admirers of "the good grey poet." No one has surpassed the greatest of the Russian novelists in the production of the prose-poem. The very essence of this species is, so to say, its irresponsibility. Its significance may be profound, but must not be obtruded. To "adorn" a poem-in-prose with a "moral" would be as barbaric as the act of the individual who painted gaudy hues and immense spots on the superb flawless tail of a white peacock. It must be brief: otherwise the impression is apt to be confused. It must be complete in itself: for the quoted specimen of poetic-prose is seldom a prose-poem, though examples could be culled from Ruskin, De Quincey, and other writers, of course. But the true prose-poem is not

merely a happy passage in an environment of unemotional prose: it is a consciously-conceived and definitely-executed poetic form. There may even be in it, there are often, in fact, variations and repetitions of effect, multiplications of identical lines, corresponding to the repetitive effects in the villanelle and all poems of the rondeau-kind: as, for instance, in the following "Nocturne":—

"I stood on a lonely promontory when the dusk had dreamed itself into a starless gloom: and as I gazed the moonshine stole across the sea. From under a dark cloud it wavered, and then passed stealthily away into the deeper darkness beyond the headland. The moonlight that stole out of the dark into the dark was as a smile upon the face of a beautiful daughter of Egypt asleep by the lotus-covered shallows of Nilus. And as I watched the moonshine steal across the sea, I heard the voice of the unseen tide crying faintly afar off, wave to wave, though the crests lapsed into the moving hollows with as little sound as the breathing of a dusky maid adream by the lotus-covered shallows of Nilus.

"In my dreams I see oftentimes that beautiful daughter of Egypt asleep by the lotus-covered shallows of Nilus; and the sound of her breathing is faint as when the wave-crests lapse into the moving hollows beneath them, far out on the solitary seas covered with the darkness. Sometimes a faint cry passes like a wounded bird from the shadow of her lips: is it a faint cry from her shadowy lips, or the voice of the unseen tide, thin and shrill, afar off? And sometimes she smiles. Then once more I stand on a lonely promontory when the dusk has dreamed itself into a starless gloom, and the moonshine steals dimly athwart remote gulfs of darkness. From under vast glooms it wavers slow, and then passes stealthily away, as I—as she—shall pass: Whither?"

To select a still shorter example, this time from "Pastels in Prose;" one of Mlle. Judith Gauthier's Chinese renderings:—

THE SAGES' DANCE.

(After Li-Tai-Pe.)

"On my flute, tipped with jade, I sang a song to mortals; but the mortals did not understand.

"Then I lifted my flute to the heavens, and I sang my song to the Sages. The Sages rejoiced together, they danced on the glistening clouds. And now mortals understand me, when I sing to the accompaniment of my flute tipped with jade."

But, of course, as in all poetry, the first essential is the faculty of rarified expression. The motive may or may not be romantic or picturesque in itself: the expression of it will be a poem if the author's impression be keen to poignancy, and if his faculty of utterance correspond to his sensitiveness. Thus, the life of the streets, of crowds, the common-places of our ordinary existence, afford motives as well as do Vales of Tempe or Ronces-

valles. To the artist, it is not what he sees, but how he sees, how he feels, how he expresses his sudden wayward fancy or new thought borne upward on strange spiritual or mental tides. There may even be no "picture" of any kind: all may depend upon the charm of words, surrounding, like the Doves of Venus, a beautiful thing in their midst. I may give two instances of this rare and most difficult prose-poem, though the space at my command prevents either from being quoted in full. Both are by the late Emile Hennequin:—

WORDS.

"In our crazed brains words are visions, ideals rather than images, desires rather than reminiscences. How distant these ideals, how painful these desires!

"There is no woman who gives us the radiant dream that lurks behind the word Woman; there is no wine that realises the intoxication imagined in the word Wine; there is no gold, pale gold or dusky gold, that gives out the tawny fulguration of the word Gold; there is no perfume that our deceived nostrils find equal to the word Perfume; no blue, no red that figures the tints with which our imaginations are coloured; all is too little for the word All; and no nothingness is an empty enough vacuity as to be that arch-terrorist word, Nothing.

"What is to be done, O my mind, with these diminished realities, reduced and dim images of our thoughts, sticks of which we have made thyrses, banjos of which we have made citherns, aquarelles that we have animalized, dreams opiated by us?"

From the strange and powerful poem, "The Earth," the first portion may be quoted, though the remainder is in some respects even finer:—

THE EARTH.

"Eddying through the blue or black heavens of nights and of days, full in her deep hollows of the tumultuous water of the seas, turgid and flat, the earth curves, sinuates and rises, dry under the fresh air, firm and mobile, jutting forth in mountains, falling away in plains, brown and all woven with the silver woof of rivers and lakes, green and all bristling with trees, with plants, with grass."

But, after all, perhaps these are the exceptions that prove the rule: the rule that a complete vision, a complete emotion, however momentary and even uncertain, be definitely conveyed in suggestion. As Mr. Howells says in the charming little preface already alluded to, "the poet fashions his pretty fancy on his lonely inspiration; sets it well on the ground, poises it, goes and leaves it. The thing cannot have been easy to learn, and it must always be most difficult to do; for it implies the most courageous faith in art, the finest respect for others, the wisest self-denial."

The selection in this volume is made from the writings of Louis Bertrand, Paul Leclercq, Theodore de Banville, Alphonse Daudet, Villiers de L'Isle-Adam, George Auriol, Judith Gautier, J. K. Huysmans, Ephraim Mikhael, Pierre Quillard, Rodolphe Darzens, Beauclaire, Achille Delaroche, Stephane Mallarmé, Emile Hennequin, Adrien Rémacle, Maurice de Guérin, Paul Masy, Catulle Mendès, Henri de Regnier, and one or two others. Several of the poems were written specially for this book: those of MM. Catulle Mendès and Stephane Mallarmé are versions from the final proof sheets of new volumes by the two poets: and the six by Emile Hennequin were specially selected for the translators by Madame Hennequin from among hitherto unpublished MSS. by that most brilliant and remarkable poet and critic. A word of emphatic praise must be given to the translator, Mr. Stuart Merrill—himself (he is a Franco-American) a French poet of standing, having won high regard by his first volume of poetry, "Les Gammes." Needless to say, none but a thorough artist could have rendered these prose-poems adequately. His translations are works of rare and delicate art; the work of a poet inspired by poets.

One word more from Mr. Howells. The prose-poem, as written in France, has, he says, come to stay. "It is a form which other languages must naturalise: and we can only hope that criticisms will carefully guard the process, and see that it is not vulgarised or coarsened in it. The very life of the form is its aerial delicacy: its soul is that perfume of thought, of emotion, which these masters here have never suffered to become an argument. They must be approached with sympathy by whoever would get all their lovely grace, their charm that comes and goes like the light in beautiful eyes."

S.