

WHAT VERLAINE HAS DONE FOR FRENCH POETRY



HE TURNED HIS WEAKNESS INTO
IMPERISHABLE SONG

Paul Verlaine, twice imprisoned and ever the slave of his own appetites, somehow contrived to redeem himself by the miracle of art.

FROM Plato's Republic the poet was excluded. We may understand why if we read a new biography, "Paul Verlaine" (Houghton Mifflin), written by an Englishman and hailed as one of the best critical monographs of our time. The author of the book, Harold Nicholson, tells the story of Verlaine better than it has ever before been told. He treats it as an illustration of the poetic nature, and makes of it a great human drama. We can follow here, if we choose, the rise from obscurity into international fame of a man who, from his youth on, was tormented by the demon of alcoholism; who was weak rather than wicked; and who alternated between periods of debauch and of repentance. The moral conflict mirrored in the poetry of Verlaine is universal. We may resent the fact that a man who was conspicuous by his weakness should have achieved anything worthy of remembrance. We cannot deny that, by an odd miracle of art, Verlaine managed to transform his weakness into poetry and to give it enduring significance.

Mr. Nicholson does not enter into any review of the French literature of to-day. He thinks that, with the exception of Claudel, Gide and perhaps Marcel Proust, it is not as yet of very great importance; "but," he remarks, "it is comparatively liberated, excessively vital, and pregnant with what at any moment may become a serious literary development." This freedom and vitality he attributes almost wholly to the influence of Verlaine and the Symbolist movement.

Let us glance at some of the bare biographical facts of this extraordinary man. His father was a captain in the French army. His mother was even weaker than himself, and he sponged on her his life long. He married, when he was 26 years old, a young girl whom he soon deserted and who bore him a child after he had left her. The dominating influence in his life following the desertion was the gifted but irresponsible young poet, Arthur Rimbaud, "a devil of egotism." There was something sinister in the spell that Rimbaud cast over Verlaine. The two quar-

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reled in Brussels, and Verlaine, under the influence of drink, shot his friend. As a result of this episode and of his record as a participant in the Paris Commune of 1871, Verlaine was imprisoned for two years. He turned Roman Catholic while in prison and celebrated his conversion in "Sagesse," one of the greatest religious poems ever written. On his release he sought Rimbaud at Stuttgart and, failing to convert his friend to what he was now convinced was the true faith, became involved in a new and bloody quarrel. A little later he was charged with leveling a pistol at his mother and was imprisoned again. His subsequent life was divided between hospitals and cafés. He associated with loose women. His money gave out. His drunkenness developed into dipsomania.

"Of all men of genius I have ever met," says George Moore, "Verlaine was the least fitted to defend himself in the battle of life." And yet, despite his failings and in part because of them, he stood in a unique relation to the movements of French literature. He was born during the Romantic period, his first writings were composed under Parnassian influence, and in his later years he reflected and inspired the impulses of the Symbolists and Decadents. "There is no one," Mr. Nicholson says, "who illustrates more vividly the currents and cross-currents which swayed French poetry between the sixties and the nineties; there is no biography which can equal his as an introduction to the French literature of to-day."

Verlaine sent his first book, "Poèmes saturniens," to Victor Hugo. The latter responded from Guernsey that his "sunset" saluted Verlaine's "dawn." The image was apt. Romanticism was passing. In its place the Parnassien movement offered a new platform and new imagery. The central idea (enunciated by Théophile Gautier) was "art for art's sake." Emphasis was laid on meditation and form, as against passion and excitement. The old stage properties were to give way to new paraphernalia, which included the Far East, Egyptian mythology, Buddhism, jade, the South American republics and the condor. Stephan Mallarmé, Catulle Mendès, François Coppée, Sully-Prudhomme, Anatole France, Heredia and Villiers de l'Isle Adam were all, no less than Verlaine, Parnassiens.

The Parnassiens had their hour of glory and were superseded by the Symbolists and Decadents. This movement, even more than the two which preceded it, was to be a genuine emancipation. Mr. Nicholson notes as a curious phenomenon the fact that "both the Romanticists and the Parnassiens, with all that wealth at their disposal, should have failed to secure the complete enfranchisement of the French language," and that "this liberation should have been achieved by such comparatively minor figures as Verlaine, Mallarmé and Rimbaud, or, more definitely, by Jean Mo-

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réas, Vielé Griffin and G. Kahn." The explanation, for him, resides in the inherent conventionality of the French character and in its congenital disaptitudes. It is significant indeed, he finds, that the Symbolist movement, when it came, was conducted to a surprizing degree by people who had not inherited these disaptitudes, who were not, that is, of French nationality, or in whom, at least, there was a strong admixture of foreign blood. Thus both Verlaine and Rimbaud came from the Ardennes and were temperamentally more Belgian than they were French; Moréas was of Greek origin; Vielé Griffin had been born in America; René Ghil was a Belgian; Stuart Merrill was English; Louis Dumur and Rod were Swiss; G. Kahn was a Jew; Laforgue, tho of French blood, was born in Montevideo, and even Corbière, Villiers de l'Isle Adam and Mallarmé came from the north; the two former from Brittany, the latter from Sens.

Symbolism, influenced largely by Wagner and Poe, and influencing sculpture, painting and music as well as literature, aimed at the vague and mystical. Its two main characteristics, as Mr. Nicholson defines it, were intimacy and suggestion. There were other elements, it is true, but these were fundamental; and both may be found in fullest measure in Verlaine's poetry.

The methods by which Verlaine conveyed a sense of intimacy are thus described:

"The troubles and pleasures of his daily experience, the rain and the sunshine, some trees shivering in a January wind, the warm feel of a south wall, the rattle of a train at night-time, the flare of gas-jets at street corners, the music of a merry-go-round, the silence of white walls, the drip of raindrops upon the tiles—all these are set to plaintive music, are made to become an emotional reality. With the frankness of a child, babbling to some stranger of its toys and its relations, Verlaine is convinced that the most trivial events of his experience are tremendously interesting, are of almost cosmic significance."

The methods by which Verlaine enriched the element of suggestion and rendered it the main weapon of the Symbolist movement are equally recognizable:

"His power of suggestion . . . is to be found, for instance, in his somewhat rare moments of reserve, in the way in which he will indicate suffering, not by tears and lamentations, but by some wistful understatement of his pain. When he says:

Je me souviens
Des jours anciens
Et je pleure,

he says it with an economy of material that is more poignant than all the jeremiads of De Musset. The agony of imprisonment is better indicated by—

Cette paisible rumeur-là
Vient de la ville!

than it is in the whole of 'De Profundis.'

There is one field in which Verlaine was quite consciously to innovate, and there is one direction in which his place in literary history will be permanently assured. "He was the first to restore to French poetry that wide gamut of melody

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which it had so unfortunately relinquished." Mr. Nicholson concludes:

"The quality of Paul Verlaine is not a noble quality, it is not, perhaps, very inspiring. Affable always, courageous sometimes, and so feebly human, he reflects little that is not transitory, he represents much that will always be condemned. The new generation which is now arising in France, a generation dumb as yet, hard and mysterious, but undeniably different, may render little honor to Paul Verlaine. They are less intellectual than their predecessors. It may be that they will be more intelligent. It is quite possible that they will give no thought to poetry.

"But for those who have lived before the war the spirit of Paul Verlaine will for long be merged with that of the fair city which he loved so fatally. For them his spirit will still limp and linger in boulevard and alley, in bookshop and in tavern: or along those quays whose jumbled outlines glitter in the gay and gentle river as it slides with garbaged waters past church, past prison and past charnel-house; and so, through soft French meadows, to the sea."

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