

**THE POETS OF
MODERN
FRANCE. PP.1-198**

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by

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PREFACE

It is time that the art of translation, of which we have many beautiful examples in English, should be strictly distinguished from the trade. Like acting or the playing of music, it is an art of interpretation, more difficult than either in this respect: that you must interpret your original in a medium never contemplated by its author. It requires, at its best, an exacting and imaginative scholarship, for you must understand your text in its fullest and most living sense; it requires a power over the instrument of your own language no less complete than the virtuoso's over the pianoforte, than the actor's over the expression of his voice or the gestures of his body. Its aim, too, is identical with the aims of those sister arts of interpretation: to give a clear voice to beauty that would else be dumb or quite muffled. For even to intelligent lovers of the arts a subtle or intricate poem

in a language not their own is as lifeless as a page of Beethoven which they have not heard played.

What now should be the aim of the translator of poetry? For it is with poetry that I am here concerned. It should be clearly, first of all, to produce a beautiful poem. If he has not done that he may have served the cause of information, of language study. In art he has committed a plain ineptitude. If he has produced a beautiful poem, much should be forgiven him, although a beautiful poem may not, necessarily, be a beautiful translation. To be that it must sustain certain relations to its original. It must, to begin with, be faithful—not pedantically, but essentially, not only to the general content of the original poem but to its specific means of embodying that content. There should be as little definite alteration, addition or omission as possible. In the translations in this volume there will not be found, I think, more than a dozen words that were not in the texts, or more than half a dozen actual verbal substitutions. The associative values of two different linguistic media should,

of course, be sensitively borne in mind. One idiom must be made not only to copy but rightly to interpret the other. It is better, however, to risk a slight obscurity which time and the growth of new artistic insights may remove than to substitute an easy meaning for your author's troublesome one.

The second relation which the translated poem must sustain to its original concerns the far more difficult and exacting matter of form. The language involved will, of course, modify the character of the translator's problem. If he is dealing with languages that have practically the same prosodic system, any two Germanic languages for instance, he must scrupulously preserve the music, the exact cadences of his original. If he is translating from a language that has a quite different prosody, such as the French, he must interpret the original forms by analogous forms. Thus I have rendered all poems written wholly in alexandrines into English heroic verse, but I have sought to make that verse as fluid and as various in movement as the types of alexandrine in my originals. When the prosodic contour of a poem,

however, depended definitely upon the contrast of alexandrines with longer or shorter verses, I have preserved the exact syllabic lengths. In lyrical measures the aim must be, of course, to hear the characteristic music, to transfer this and to follow its modulations from line to line and stanza to stanza.

But these are only the external properties of form. What characterises a poet, above all else, is the way he uses his medium, his precise and unique method of moulding his language—in respect both of diction and rhythm—for the expression of his personal sense of life. It is here that the translator comes upon his hardest task. For he should try, hopeless as that may seem, to use his medium of speech in a given translation even as the original poet used his own. The translated poem, in brief, should be such as the original poet would have written if the translator's language had been his native one.

I am quite aware that, in the sixty translated poems in this volume, I have not always even approached my own ideal of what a translation of

poetry should be. But to have attempted the task upon such principles may, of itself, not be without service to the practice of the art.

For my critical introduction on the poets of modern France I have no such apology to make. Critics of power and place have told me repeatedly how wrong-headed my critical method is. Let me remind them, who know it so much better than I, of the history of literature and of criticism. For if that history makes but one thing admirably and indisputably clear it is this: In every age the New Poetry and the New Criticism have prevailed in so far as they produced excellent work according to their own intentions and in harmony with their own aims. In every age the critical conservatives have protested in the name of eternal principles which, alas, are not eternal at all. And generally, for such is human nature, the innovators in art and thought of one generation, of one decade at times, have become the conservatives of the next. In another ten or fifteen years I may myself be frowning upon a still newer criticism, a still newer art. . . . But today I am in the right,

not of my own desert, but through the ways of
the World Spirit. . . .

LUDWIG LEWISOHN.

New York City,
January, 1918.