

**FRENCH PORTRAITS;  
BEING APPRECIATION OF  
THE WRITERS OF YOUNG  
FRANCE**

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French portraits; being appreciation of the writers of young France by Vance Thompson

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Catulle Mendès

# FRENCH PORTRAITS

*Being* Appreciations of the  
Writers of Young France *by*

VANCE THOMPSON

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1900

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TO MY FRIEND  
JAMES GIBBONS HUNEKER

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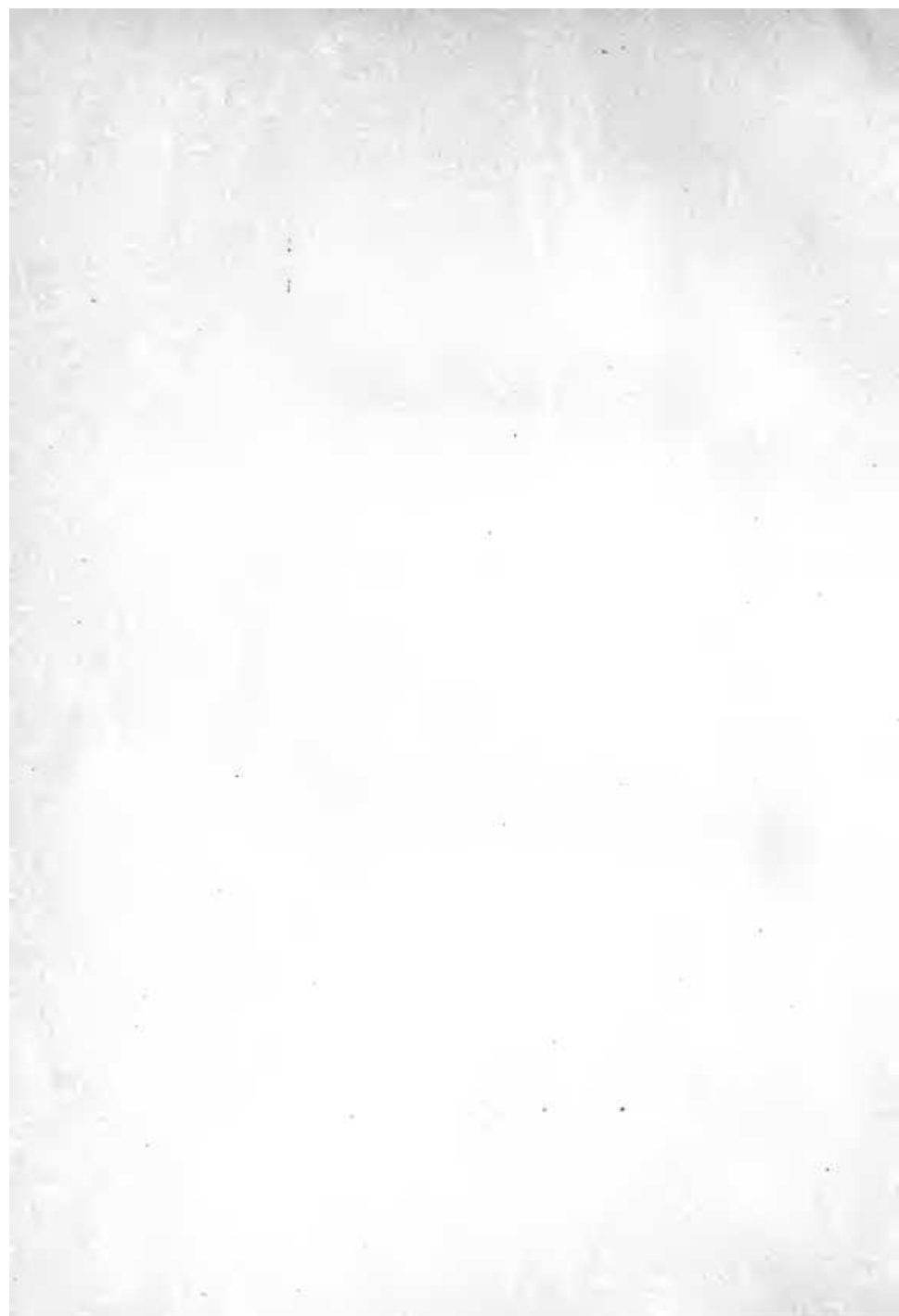
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## By Way of Preface

**I**T was Friday, June the 21st, 1872. Goncourt dined with Flaubert at the Café Riche, "in a private room, because Flaubert cannot endure noise, tolerates no one near him, and, when dining, likes to take off his coat and shoes."

A detail of this sort is worth pages of biography and exegesis. Not even the philosopher can be indifferent to the fact that Socrates sat rubbing his leg in prison, or that Aristotle wore a stomach-pad filled with hot oil. The ideas of great men, the fulhams of poetic fiction, the theories for which we fight, are the common patrimony of mankind: what the great man possesses is, in reality, only his eccentricities. That Milton trilled the letter "R" and that Shelley wore wool next to his skin, these are the true glosses on their poems. In these appreciations of the writers of young France I have not, I trust, laid undue stress upon what they have done, slighting what they are. I should like you to see—across these pages—Verlaine hobbling to his café in the Boul' Mich', Mallarme jogging by in his donkey-cart, Eekhoud fondling his rabbit, or, it may be, Signoret, impossibly young, promenading his pale soul in the autumnal alleys of Versailles.

For many years, now, the dear Lord has preserved me from the sin of inutile reading. Always, I hope, he will keep me from the dull mania of assigning ranks and distributing prizes—with that assured and peremptory

air of the village schoolmaster — to men of letters. Only this: During the last few years French literature has conquered a new territory, extending the frontiers of prose and verse. Certain men there were who marched in the van, beating the heady drums; and it is of them I have written. Two of them are dead, many are famous, a few are not yet condemned to public admiration. I have selected those who fought well or failed well, those who had some individual trick of sword-play. Now and then (for consistency is not a necessary evil), I have paused to gossip with Pym and Pistol, trailing raggedly in the rear.

*It is an army that passes.*

I can point out the leaders, indicate the plan of campaign, repeat the jests and songs heard at the bivouac-fire. Always the army passes; and, even as I write, on the far horizon is the smoke of a new battle. To-day is but the vestibule of to-morrow. In a few years the writers of young France will be dozing in the green fauteuils of the Academy; already the books that seemed so strenuous in revolt are in the way of becoming classic. Verlaine, who was once as improbable a man as Walt Whitman, is now an accomplice in the bright glory of France; and for Retté and many another the hour will come.

Here and there I have larded my book with the fat of others. To Marcel Schwob, to Rémy de Gourmont, to Ernest La Jeunesse, I owe a debt which they will recognize, but which I cannot repay.

VANCE THOMPSON.

Paris, October, 1899.