

PAUL VERLAINE

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Paul Verlaine by Harold George Nicolson

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HAROLD GEORGE NICOLSON

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BY HAROLD NICOLSON

Je suis venu, calme orphelin,
Riche de mes seuls yeux tranquilles,
Vers les hommes des grandes villes :
Ils ne m'ont pas trouvé malin.

A vingt ans un trouble nouveau,
Sous le nom d'amoureuses flammes,
M'a fait trouver belles les femmes :
Elles ne m'ont pas trouvé leau.

Bien que sans patrie et sans roï
Et très brave ne l'étant guere,
J'ai voulu mourir à la guerre :
La mort n'a pas voulu de moi.

Suis-je né trop tôt ou trop-tard ?
Qu'est-ce que je fais en ce monde ?
O vous tous, ma peine est profonde,
Priez pour le pauvre Gaspard !

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CONTENTS

	PAGE
I. YOUTH	1
II. MARRIAGE	37
III. ARTHUR RIMBAUD	57
IV. "SAGESSE"	109
V. MIDDLE AGE	149
VI. THE LAST PHASE	179
VII. VERLAINE'S LITERARY POSITION	223

I

YOUTH

Malheureux ! Tous les dons, la gloire du baptême,
Ton enfance chrétienne, une mère qui t'aime,
La force et la santé comme le pain et l'eau,
Cet avenir enfin, décrit dans le tableau
De ce passé plus clair que le jeu des marées,
Tu pillas tout, tu perdas en viles simagrées
Jusqu'aux derniers pouvoirs de ton esprit, hélas !
La malédiction de n'être jamais las
Suit tes pas sur le monde où l'horizon t'attire !
L'enfant prodigue avec des gestes de satyre !

It is not an easy thing to write a life of Paul Verlaine. It is not easy; and it is not quite necessary. The material is there, of course; vivid and, if you like it, sensational. The collected works are there; seven volumes of heterogeneous prose and poetry. There are the official biographies, friendly, discreet, and on the whole accurate; there are memoirs galore, kind or unkind references scattered throughout the writings of the period, and behind it all a great fund of floating memories both in France and England. But the subject has been worn threadbare. For those who care for French literature the facts of Verlaine's life are abundantly familiar. For those who do not care, the story may appear merely unpleasant or even deleterious. Although there exists no Anglo-Saxon monograph on the life and works of Paul Verlaine, it is questionable therefore whether to put down in English what has been done so adequately by Lepelletier and Delahaye may not, after all, be a gratuitous undertaking. The thing can be little else than a picture, more or less sympathetic, of a character

failing consistently to cope with the rudiments of a social conscience, of a nature despicable by all current standards, of a life-story which is apt to pall in its monochrome of vice and futility. Even from a strictly literary point of view Verlaine is somewhat of a back number, a plaintive miscellany thumbed only by the eighteen-nineties; an influence indirect rather than vital, a habit and an atmosphere rather than a directive force.

And thus, as one reads the guarded testimony of others, or the jaunty revelations of Verlaine himself, one feels that it is but a thankless task to disinter these forgotten and fugitive scandals, that it were better done, perhaps, to leave the Verlaine of most Anglo-Saxons as a vague and suffering figure, apprehended only through his few successful poems or in the facile ditties of Reynaldo Hahn.

Perhaps this is so: but, if so, there are other reasons which may justify this monograph. In the first place, Verlaine, however diffused and indefinite his present influence, stood during his lifetime in a quite unique relation to the movements of French literature. He was born during the Romantic period, his first writings were composed under the aegis of the Parnassiens, and in his later years he reflected and inspired the impulses of the Symbolists and the Decadents. There is no one 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. In the second place, Verlaine, who was so un-French by temperament, may find some honour, some fresh facet of forgiveness, among us broader and less conventional Anglo-Saxons. And finally, and perhaps predominantly, there is Rimbaud—the fierce schoolboy who stalked through Verlaine's middle youth, and passed on to Africa flinging behind him a scattered handful of indignant writings, by which French literature, even to-day, is rendered tremulous.

There is one further matter, which requires a more specific apology, or at least an explanation. I had hoped at first to give in an appendix a translation of the poems quoted in the text; but I have abandoned this project. Verlaine of all poets is too elusive to admit of translation, and above all of a literal translation into English prose. So the quotations stand as in the original: and after all it is not of much importance. Some of his best poems were christened "Songs without Words." Their charm is less a question of meaning than one of tune.

2

Paul Marie Verlaine was born at Metz on March 30, 1844. The house where this significant event took place is now marked by a commemorative tablet, and stands close to the famous esplanade, a wide terrace looking out over the lush poplars of