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| **Corbière, Tristan** |
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| Dead at thirty, author of a barely-noticed book of verses printed for hire by a firm specializing in erotica, the small-town eccentric and invalid Tristan Corbière (1845-1875) was destined for oblivion. But Paul Verlaine’s short book *Les Poètes maudits* (1878) put him in the company of Rimbaud, Mallarmé and Villiers de l’Isle-Adam and ensured that he would continue to be read. |
| Dead at thirty, author of a barely-noticed book of verses printed for hire by a firm specializing in erotica, the small-town eccentric and invalid Tristan Corbière (1845-1875) was destined for oblivion. But Paul Verlaine’s short book *Les Poètes maudits* (1878) put him in the company of Rimbaud, Mallarmé and Villiers de l’Isle-Adam and ensured that he would continue to be read.  Corbière is unthinkable without the ruptures in French verse created by Baudelaire, but in him there is no longing for “the eternal and cosmopolitan style” Baudelaire dreamt of. Verlaine noted in Corbière’s poetry “hiccups, an attack of vomiting, ferocious and dazzling irony, bile and fever tormenting themselves to the point of genius, and culminating in what gaiety!” Randall Jarrell similarly praised the poems’ dissonant, anarchical, self-undercutting progress: “Puns, mocking half-dead metaphors, parodied clichés, antitheses and paradoxes, idioms exploited on every level are the seven-league crutches on which the poems bound wildly forward.” Obtrusively self-conscious gags in chain reaction build up into a lyricism like that of Shakespeare’s helpless Richard II:  C’est à toi que je fis mes adieux à la vie,  À toi qui me pleuras, jusqu’à me faire envie  De rester me pleurer avec toi. Maintenant  C’est joué, je ne suis qu’un gâteux revenant  En os et (j’allais dire en chair). La chose est sûre,  C’est bien moi, je suis là, - mais comme une rature. (“Le Poète contumace”)  This modernity, like Baudelaire’s, is a refusal of the classical hierarchy of genres, styles and diction. Baudelaire resisted the Romantics by outdoing them in both seriousness and prosaic content; Corbière attacks them from below, with sarcasm and bathos. Lamartine, “inventor of the printed tear,” is a frequent target. Corbière’s advice to the would-be poet smacks of the tough guy and the self-admitted failure:    Laisse  Ta bourse—dernière maîtresse—  Ton revolver—dernier ami—  Drôle de pistolet fini!  Ou reste, et bois ton fond de vie  Sur une nappe desservie… (“Paris”)  *Les Amours jaunes*, Corbière’s one collection, includes parodies, monologues, narratives, and auto-eulogies (the astonishing “Rondels pour après”). His Paris is a Bohème on the make: “Bazar où rien n’est en pierre, / Où le soleil manque de ton.” “Va: tréteaux, lupanars, églises, / Cour des miracles, cour d’assises: / - Quarts d’heure d’immortalité!” (“Paris”). Hardly less sardonic but without the sneer, Corbière’s poems set in Brittany give him the chance to write about people “d’un seul bloc de bois”: sailors, beggars, soldiers, shrine visitors begging for a miracle. “Ces anges mal léchés, ces durs enfants perdus! / Leur tête a du requin et du petit-Jésus” (“Matelots”).  Though he sowed with salt the furrows of Romanticism, Corbière would have descendants. Jules Laforgue, who devised a manner of digressive poetic irony that would become the pattern for Eliot’s “Prufrock,” complained about “this Corbière that everyone is throwing in my face”; Corbière’s sequence “Paris” is one of the obvious models for Pound’s “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley.” Corbière’s readiness to throw every kind of language—slang, dialect, loan word, calque, hapax, mispronunciation—into a poem anticipates Céline, and his lines and stanzas structured around puns set a pattern for Roussel, Breton, Leiris and the Ou.Li.Po. Verlaine was right: a poet under a curse, but his curse has become the usual condition of a great part of our poetic language. |
| Further reading:  (Corbière)  (Steinmetz)  (Thomas)  (Verlaine) |