French Poets Hold the Torch

VESTIGA FLAMMAE (*Dying Flames*). By Henri de Regnier. Paris: Mercure de France.

LES GLAS (Passing Bells). By Jean Richpein. Paris: Flammarion.

LI DERNIERE NUIT DE DON JUAN (*Don Juan's Last Night*). By Edmond Rostand. Paris: Fasquelle.

WITHIN a year three books of verse, seemingly last words of their famous authors, have appeared in France. One is of Rostand, best and universally known, and it was all but ready when he died. The second is last proud notes of Jean Richepin at seventy-three. He has always held himself aloof with a classic sonorousness that thrills young generations, though he repudiates their new religions of form and rhythm:

Ring out, last bells, sobs slow and deep and tired,
Ring round me and within me, passing bells.

The third is Henri de Regnier, who is not much past sixty. His sensitive ear has caught up melodies of all the French ages, passing them on to the young who came trooping after, and he too prints for his own a last frank device from "unpublished poesies of Crespin de Vigneux, a gentleman of Thiérache, 1585":

That which remains of us when the flame dies down.

These three have been the most French of the poets of France at the century's turn. In the rhythmic flow of thought and words, which alone is verse or the distinctive form of poetry, and in the joyous, piercing, ringing pleasantness to the soul, which is poetry itself, these three have kept to the old French thinking and music-making. They have all been poets of that Latin Renaissance which has civilized Gothic France until now. In none of them has Northern barbarity found a singer. Even the youngest poets owe in part to these three their spiral progress turning them back when farthest afield within the charmed circle of their race and tongue.

In such books, which are far from being their authors' greatest volumes, verse is a first highway to explore. The day has passed when French versification was considered as best fitted for declamation by the golden voice of a Sara Bernhardt or for the slip and come and turn again of light words. Anatole France has insisted lately that rhyme and therefore some pairing of lines are necessary to mark cadences in a language accented like the French. Edouard Dujardin, who was in at the birth of Vers Libre, observes that this too must be "verse," that is, a closed circuit of thought and rhythm of words, or else it is no better than prose more or less rhythmical or in parallelisms.

Rostand's verse, with Coquelin declaiming it in "Cyrano de Bergerac," fell crystalline and unexpected on English ears but it has not attuned them to the caressing music of Racine's stately lines. The metallic resonance of Richepin is tempered by notes like those of the bell cast with silver which, in chimes of France, punctuate funeral tolling with their own heart-rending sweetness. Henri de Regnier has been the cheeriest, most colorful, and melodious versifier of our idle day, so that *vers-libristes* have wished to claim him as their own. In spite of regularizing age, he has still reminiscences of such strains. As with Henley in English, his freest verses are classic in rhythm and now he proudly writes "Stances Baudelairiennes" with other whole poems in the haunting measures of Baudelaire, who, rebellious in matter, was completely classical in form.

While the sound of all this verse is very French, so is the poetic thought of which it is the outer form, and yet it is not without parallel in English poetry. Such poets cannot be expected to echo the home life of our dear Queen. From Byron's cantos to Rostand's play Don Juan has become less coarse and more play-actoring, which such as he always are, and Rostand fairly spiritualizes him in his damnation to be the Burlador of a Punch and Judy show where the victims of his vaunted list flaunt before him their indifferent souls.

Thou mightiest have fulfilled great destinies—

cries the one White Shade that still remembers.

Rostand sang his own ideas and never himself. Henri de Regnier sings forever his self-conscious art and literature all the way from the Italy of Romance, which he sees with Théophile Gautier and Stendhal, to the modern antiques of love.

Dost thou remember, Romeo, remember
The blood-red splendors of the Verona eve

And green and yellow how the Adige flowed?
—And, in the Capuchin's old convent court,
The trough of stone quite overgrown with grass
—Her tomb they say,
O Romeo.

So Richepin retorts back on Shakespeare in "The Table Is Full" (a title printed in English) when Macbeth stands amazed that Banquo should be in his seat:

Oh, happy man, who has but one ghost at his table.

He also harks back to cuneiform poets and wonders if our paper—

Shall be stronger
Than the bricks of Nebuchadnezzar.

But still he sings life as he has taken it himself—in a "Prayer to My Five Senses," in "The Glory of Beasts," and in an "Ode to Our Grand-Nephews" who, at the pace they are going, he says, will end without country, heroes, martyrs, appetite, wine—or Love.

Dead to virtue as to vice,
Widowed of crime and sacrifice,
You will never do for others
That which we have done for you.

This is a review of Poets that sing and not of Life that sings through them, but the one thing suggested by these three singers of late life is an actuality of common sense and criticism. All the poetic schools—Parnassians, Symbolists, and, as with Queen Elizabeth's spirits, "whatever else there was"—have not hindered these poets singing their own way and outliving all their passing reformations. Richepin, always an Ishmaelite, alone complains:

I, poet, am last echo of past melodies
Which times to come shall sing no more.

Henri de Regnier's poetry has always been, among other things, a criticism of Life as he has known it, and he winds up these latest poems with "Medallions of Painters"—twenty in number and all of the later schools (excepting El Greco, who has entered into the modern consciousness), from Ingres and Corot to Gauguin, Maurice Denis, and Toulouse-Lautrec. These have independent value, if only as condensed but lucid formulæ of our day's Art, to the questioning reader—

Giving forevermore a living form
To the high-burning dream which haunts thy heart.

STODDARD DEWEY

Paris