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978-1-107-45074-5 - A Book of French Verse From Marot to Mallarmé

L. E. Kastner

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

THE first eminent French poet, chronologically, who can readily be appreciated nowadays without any special knowledge of the older language is Clément Marot (1496 or 1497–1544): “Marot par son tour et par son style”, as La Bruyère pointed out long ago, “semble avoir écrit depuis Ronsard; il n’y a guère entre Marot et nous que la différence de quelques mots”; and what La Bruyère said in the seventeenth century, at a time when the French language was constituted in its essential elements, remains true to-day. For that reason, Marot is made the starting-point of this selection, of which the purpose is to trace in outline, by means of characteristic pieces, the growth and development of modern French poetry, excluding the drama, from his day till the close of the nineteenth century. On the other hand, I have not thought it wise, with one or two necessary exceptions, to go beyond Mallarmé, because the passage of time alone will make it possible to view the work of the poets of the present day and of those who have died but recently in the proper perspective, and to assess their value with anything approaching finality.

Marot’s work taken as a whole can best be summarised as a transition from the old to the new. At the beginning of his career, when he had not yet found his way, he adheres to the traditional forms of his predecessors and cultivates the *ballade* and the *rondeau*, albeit with far greater talent. In his later work, however, on which his reputation mainly rests, the influence of the new spirit is clearly discernible. But though Marot had dipped into Virgil, Ovid and Martial, his poetry was little touched by that enthusiasm for antiquity which was a characteristic feature of the literature and art of the Renaissance. Marot remains essentially a national and popular poet whose qualities are typically French, which explains why he has never ceased to be read by his country-

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men to this day. His “*élégant badinage*”, for which he was praised by Boileau, together with his sly humour and certain touch, combine to give him special excellence in the less ambitious and more informal style of verse, such as the epistle, in which he is unsurpassed, and the epigram, for which the Marotic style remained a tradition during more than two centuries. Charming a poet as Marot is, he cannot be ranked among the great; without a peer in his own restricted domain, inspiration fails him as soon as he attempts to soar, which is not often. This limitation must be borne in mind in order to understand the reform of poetic art advocated by his immediate successors, the poets of the *Pléiade*. Nevertheless Marot, without any fuss or blowing of his own trumpet, rendered a great service to French poetry by substituting native delicacy and directness for the effete allegory and metrical puerilities of the *Rhétoriciens*, in which he was bred.

A man of volatile and rather frivolous nature, Marot was not sufficiently purposeful to leave any disciples, properly so called. Of the poets associated with his name the only noteworthy figure is Mellin de Saint-Gelais (1481–1558), the perfect type of the court poet, who shares with Marot the honour of having introduced the sonnet into France. Educated partly in Italy, Saint-Gelais may be described as the first of the French Petrarchists. But to Petrarch he preferred Petrarch’s degenerate disciples and their extravagant conceits and hyperboles, with which he tricked out the madrigals and other trifles he addressed to the ladies of the court. Very different is the spirit which animates the verse of Maurice Scève (1510?–1564) and the literary circle which gathered about him in the city of Lyons, which, on account of its position and its large Italian colony, formed then a natural link between Italian and French culture. His only work that counts is *Délie, objet de plus haute vertu* (1544), a collection of 449 *dizains* in praise of his lady, in which is expounded the Platonic theory of spiritual love. Scève’s abuse of hyperbole and the intricacy of the symbols in which

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he clothes his thought make him a difficult author; but though his contemporaries blamed him for his obscurity, they gave him full credit for being the first to seek inspiration in higher themes and to break with court and occasional poetry. To Lyons belongs also Louise Labé (1526–1566), the only distinguished French poetess of the Renaissance. She is commonly included in the Lyons group, but there is no evidence that she was a pupil of Scève and nothing could be further removed from his metaphysical subtleties than the passionate sonnets in which she lays bare her heart, in strains anything but Platonic. She is an independent, and no mean elegiac poet, with a restricted range.

About this time, soon after Marot's death, a group of young men, impelled by a common enthusiasm for the study of the classics, were gathering round Jean Daurat, the famous Hellenist, at the Collège Coqueret in Paris, and sharing his lessons. A few years later, with some additions, they were to become the *Pléiade*, in allusion to the seven stars of the Pleiads, the name by which is known the new poetic school of the second half of the sixteenth century, at the head of which stands Pierre de Ronsard (1524–1585) and which included ultimately, besides Ronsard and their master Daurat, Joachim du Bellay, the most important member after Ronsard, Belleau, Baïf, Pontus de Tiard and Jodelle.

Dissatisfied, after a careful study of Greek and Latin models, with the state of French poetry, of which so far the greatest figure had been Clément Marot, they conceived for French poetry an ideal of literary beauty which should rival that of antiquity; and they held that this ideal could only be attained by the imitation, or rather the assimilation, of the Greek and Latin poets, and also of the poets of modern Italy, which they regarded as a kind of second antiquity so to speak, because of the great writers that country had already produced. In other words, the ambition of Ronsard and his followers was to substitute for the light,

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and what they considered trivial, verse of Marot and his likes, a loftier and more artistic poetry, in heightened and imaginative language, based on classical models. At length, in 1549, taken by surprise and incensed by the appearance, the year before, of the *Art Poétique* of Thomas Sébillet, in which Marot and his followers were extolled and some of the *Pléiade's* ideas forestalled, they flung out their manifesto, the *Défense et Illustration de la langue française*. It was signed with Du Bellay's initials, but breathed the spirit of Ronsard. As its title indicates, the manifesto had a twofold object. In the first place, Ronsard and Du Bellay asserted that the French language was potentially as good as Greek or Latin, or any other language, for literary purposes, but that it wanted cultivating. In the second place, they proposed to show by what means it could be "illustrated", by which they meant enriched, in such a way as to become a worthy vehicle for the loftiest themes. Stripped of unnecessary detail, the literary doctrine of the *Pléiade*, as contained in the *Défense et Illustration* and supplemented by information found in the writings of Ronsard, can be summarised as follows. First, the creation, by various means too long to enumerate here, of a poetic style and diction distinct from those of prose—richer, more expressive and more sustained than those of prose—which implied that rhyme should no longer as hitherto be regarded as the principal ornament of poetry. To this end they did not borrow, wholesale, words from Latin and Greek, as Boileau asserted, although in their eagerness to lend lustre to the language they showed too little discrimination, so that much of their poetry has an exotic flavour and leaves an impression of somewhat chaotic luxuriance. Secondly, the substitution of classical genres for the older forms of French poetry which for so long had exercised a kind of tyranny over free poetic expression. The *rondeau*, the *ballade*, the *chant royal*, the *virelai*, and the rest of such trifles, must be cast aside and replaced by epigrams in imitation of Martial; tender elegies after the fashion of Ovid, Tibullus and Propertius; epics like the *Iliad* and the

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Aeneid; eclogues recalling those of Theocritus, Virgil and Sannazaro; odes, attuned to the sound of the Greek and Latin lyre; epistles and satires modelled on those of Horace, and in addition sonnets in the manner of Petrarch. Moralities and farces, too, must yield to tragedies and comedies modelled on those of antiquity. The adoption of classical genres and the *Pléiade*'s lofty conception of the poetic art naturally entailed a reform of metre and versification, about which the manifesto says very little of moment. This part of the reform is the personal work of Ronsard, who carried it out more by example than by precept. To him is due the rehabilitation of the Alexandrine, especially in lyric poetry, and the honour of having imposed it as the French verse *par excellence*. He is also the inventor of endless strophic forms, unknown before him, which entitle him to rank as one of the greatest metrical artists in French literature.

If one considers the poetic achievement of the *Pléiade* as a whole, it will be seen that they fell far short of their lofty ambitions; with the exception of Ronsard and Du Bellay, they were only minor poets who imitated the Italian poets (particularly the Italian sonneteers) rather than those of antiquity. Gifted as Du Bellay was in many ways, his range and output is too limited for him to occupy any but a secondary position. Ronsard, incomparably the greatest of the poetic brotherhood, is the only member of the *Pléiade* who made any attempt to carry out the programme of the school and who tried his hand at all the genres advocated in the *Défense et Illustration de la langue française*. Yet in spite of his versatility and the excellence of some of his more ambitious compositions, Ronsard's real qualities as a poet must be sought in his minor writings: his informal odes and lyrics, some of his sonnets and elegies, remarkable for their tenderness of feeling and reflective emotion, as well as for their love of nature. By virtue of these he will always occupy a high rank among the great elegiac poets of France. The elegiac is also the prevailing note in the best pieces of Joachim du Bellay (1522–1560), though in him the satirical

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note is more pronounced than in Ronsard. With less power and imagination than Ronsard, his complete sincerity in rendering his personal emotions and his romantic melancholy make a stronger appeal to the modern reader. He excels chiefly as a sonneteer, not only because of the artistic finish of many of his sonnets, but because he extended the scope of that form in his *Antiquités de Rome*, and in his *Regrets*, his masterpiece.

Towards the end of the century, in the hands of Ronsard's successors, lyrical poetry languishes for want of an inspiring theme. The imitation of the ancients recedes and is replaced by servile imitation of Petrarch's degenerate disciples in the various sonnet-sequences of Philippe Desportes (1546–1606), whose chief merit lies in his fluent style and more restrained diction. The same sense of style and composition characterises the poems of Jean Bertaut (1552–1611), who is far more original than Desportes. A few of his pieces have a true lyric ring reminiscent of Lamartine. Epic poetry is represented by the two Protestant poets Guillaume Salluste du Bartas (1544–1590) and Théodore Agrippa d'Aubigné (1552–1630), both of whom sought inspiration in their faith and wrote in protest against the half-pagan poetry of the *Pléiade*, while adhering to the more mechanical part of their literary doctrine. Du Bartas's chief work is *La Semaine* (1578), a long poem on the creation of the world, which, in spite of its enormous success in its day both in France and abroad, can only be read now in a few fine passages interspersed among dreary wastes of dull and wearisome verse. Du Bartas is absolutely devoid of any artistic sense. His abuse of the compound epithets recommended by the *Pléiade* and other stylistic devices, such as the reduplication, for the sake of increased effect, of the initial syllable of words (*flo-flotter*, *bra-branler*, etc.), will always be quoted against him as glaring examples of his total want of taste. D'Aubigné, though far superior to Du Bartas, is also a very unequal writer in his *Tragiques* (1577–1594, but not published as a whole till 1616), of which the theme is the

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persecutions of his co-religionists and the horrors of civil war. The poem, in seven cantos or rather tableaux, is ill composed, and its unrelieved violence is apt to pall; but for all that it contains not a few fine outbursts of lyrical invective, recalling the *Châtiments* of Victor Hugo.

Ronsard and the *Pléiade*, by basing literature on the imitation of the ancients, inaugurated the French classical school. It was left to François de Malherbe (1555–1628) to complete their work, by a process of elimination of what he thought was excessive in their doctrine, rather than by any fundamental change. In this he was aided by the general desire for order and discipline which was making itself felt throughout France at the beginning of the seventeenth century, as opposed to the individualistic tendencies of the sixteenth century. Devoid of any imagination or vision, Malherbe was well fitted to “reduce the French Muse to the rules of duty”. By repressing sedulously the personal factor in poetry, by rejecting the specialised poetic diction of the *Pléiade*, and by tightening up the rules of versification, he set up a new and more narrowly classical ideal, of which the watchwords were lucidity, correctness, propriety, and formal perfection. This new conception of poetry, tending to transform poetry into eloquence and rhetoric, as in Malherbe’s own verse, reflected exactly the taste of the time, but was naturally the death knell of lyric poetry, the poetry which expresses the writer’s own sentiments. From now on Ronsard and his associates fell into utter oblivion and Malherbe’s precepts were universally accepted, despite the protests of a few independent writers who raised their voice in the interests of the older poetic spirit or of personal freedom. Of these insurgents against Malherbe’s rules and regulations, who often appeal to us moderns far more than his classical followers, the most gifted is undoubtedly Mathurin Régnier (1573–1613), a belated disciple of Ronsard, whose satires easily rank among the finest things of the kind in French literature. His essential greatness lies not in the matter of his satires, for he copied wholesale from

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Ronsard and the Italians, but in the picturesqueness of his language and in the breadth and vigour of his characterisation. Here also may be mentioned Théophile de Viau (1590–1626), a few of whose pieces show genuine appreciation, rare in his day, of inanimate nature.

Malherbe's endeavour to prune and clarify the language of poetry was at first reinforced by the efforts of the ladies and gentlemen who congregated in the fashionable literary salons of the time—the so-called *précieuses* and *précieux*. In their search for refinement, however, they too often fell into a sort of jargon intelligible to the initiated only. Their direct influence in poetry seems to have been confined to the lighter kinds, the *vers de société*, of which the chief purveyor was Vincent Voiture (1598–1648), whose wit and alertness show up best in the *rondeau* which, banned by the *Pléiade*, had found a new lease of life in *précieux* circles. The extravagances of the *précieuses* and *précieux* are responsible for the production, by reaction, of a body of realistic and burlesque verse of which Saint-Amant (1594–1661), also no mean nature poet, and Scarron (1610–1660) have left good examples.

Meanwhile Malherbe's influence was increasing steadily, and some fifty years after his death his work was continued with yet greater strictness and expanded by Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux (1636–1711), the authoritative and final exponent of the French classical creed, whose word was law till the end of the eighteenth century. This creed Boileau expounded and formulated in the famous *L'Art Poétique* (1674), a sort of manual in verse for the instruction of the would-be poet. Boileau's central doctrine is that the poet should follow nature, by which he means human nature only and not inanimate nature as well. But the poet must not imitate all that is found in human nature, only what conforms to the strict rules of reason and good sense, which is tantamount to saying that he must keep steadily to what belongs to the normal and general course of experience and avoid the cultivation of idiosyncrasies of all kinds. This

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conception of literature, it will be seen, precludes what we call originality, to which Boileau would probably have answered that we cannot be expected to discover things absolutely new and that what matters is to give perfect expression to what is abidingly true, for what is permanent and universal lives by the aid of no fashion of the day but by virtue of its truth to human nature. Hence we should follow the ancient classics as guides, not because they are the ancients, but because no one since, as the test of time has proved, has depicted human nature with the same fidelity. Boileau's doctrine at first sight seems reasonable enough and well argued, but from the moment that larger interpretations of truth opened up new vistas to the poet its one-sidedness became apparent. Under Boileau's rule poetry lost all freedom and spontaneity, and became stereotyped, formal and colourless. Even in the drama, where it was sustained by the genius of men like Corneille, Racine and Molière, we can trace the cramping effect of Boileau's influence. Of the great French poets of the seventeenth century La Fontaine (1621–1695) alone, by the constant though discreet intervention in all his work of his own personality, by the homely flavour of his language and the suppleness and variety of his verse, showed that he was not prepared to accept all the implications of Boileau's rigorous teaching.

Though the spirit of free enquiry, which led ultimately to the Revolution, was undermining all the old beliefs, Boileau's repressive doctrine remained unchallenged during the whole of the eighteenth century, the period of what may be called pseudo-classicism. In the unfavourable atmosphere of a rationalistic age poetry in the true sense almost ceased to exist. True, there is no lack of poets, but for the most part their work is uninspired and mechanical, except in those forms, such as the epistle, and especially the epigram, for which wit, ingenuity of fancy and raciness are the main requisites. In the higher realms of poetry, on the other hand, the frigid and pompous odes of Jean-Baptiste Rousseau

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(1671–1741) and of Écouchard-Lebrun (1729–1807), Voltaire's epic *La Henriade* (1628), and the long tedious descriptive poems of Delille and others, testify to the utter insensibility of the age to all the higher qualities of poetry. One writer only, André Chénier (1762–1794), stands out from the ruck and might have become a really great poet had politics not brought him to the guillotine before his powers had matured. Born in Constantinople of a Greek mother, a scholar with an exquisite sense of art, for Chénier the spirit of Greece was a reality and enabled him to breathe new life into the worn-out classical themes, in his idylls, by which he will live.

At the end of the eighteenth and at the beginning of the nineteenth century, with the exception of Chénier, the inspiring forces of a new poetry are to be looked for, not in utterances of the poets, but in the pages of two great prose writers, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) and Chateaubriand (1768–1848), both of whom are recognised as forerunners of the great Romantic revival which was about to break out. Their passionate love of inanimate nature, their high-pitched emotionalism, and their melancholy found a ready response in the hearts of men who had witnessed the glory and the downfall of Republican France and were looking for consolation outside the realms of reason. Their vague spiritual aspirations found an admirable interpreter in Alphonse de Lamartine (1790–1869), whose *Premières Méditations poétiques* appeared in 1820 and were universally hailed as the beginning of a new era. Lamartine's tender and pensive melancholy blending with surrounding nature, his love, expressed in language divested of all material circumstance, for an ethereal figure, and his deep though dim religious feeling, came as a revelation to his contemporaries. They felt that he had brought back the soul to poetry. At one blow the commonplaces of effete classicism were swept away and gave way to the vital elements of personal sincerity and communion with nature which became the watchwords of the Romantic revival, of