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978-1-107-48702-4 - Sagesse
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PAUL VERLAINE
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CAMBRIDGE
AT THE UNIVERSITY PRESS
1942

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107487024

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First published 1942

First paperback edition 2015

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-107-48702-4 Paperback

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INTRODUCTION

The poetry of Verlaine occupies a unique position in the lyrical movement of nineteenth-century France. His verse is an incantation, and no other French poet has won from his instrument a music so variously seductive. But it is not this magic of his art alone that singles him out from the rest: the underlying themes, the very nature and substance of his poetry, set him apart. Verlaine is a master of the lyric of Mood. Passion and sentiment are rarely the inspiration of his verse, as rarely as in his life virile intensity of emotion and constancy of feeling determined his conduct. He was impulsive and irresponsible, without continuity of direction, drifting before the winds of chance,

Deçà, delà,
 Pareil à la
 Feuille morte.

The image is imperfect, for this plaything of the gale was quiveringly alive; and wherever it drove him—whether to places of serene beauty or to ignoble quagmires—the surroundings provoked the swift tremulous response of his precise sensibility. No poet, perhaps, has conjured up such a throng of finely distinct shades of feeling—feeling almost detached from any practical context, as it is in dreams:

Car nous voulons la Nuance encor,
 Pas la Couleur, rien que la nuance !
 Oh ! la nuance seule fiancée
 Le rêve au rêve et la flûte au cor !

His acute sensibility converts even the fleeting physical impression into a significant personal moment; his poems are full of such *correspondances*, as Baudelaire called them; the transposition of colours, shapes and sounds into mood—moods of tenderness, longing, gaiety, aspiration, despondency, and a

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thousand more less easily defined and named. In his earliest volume, *Poèmes Saturniens*, by the side of creditable imitations of the *Parnassien* manner, his super-Romantic individualism breaks through (*Après trois ans, Mon rêve familial, Chanson d'automne, Nuit de Walpurgis classique*) and already the new technique of the liberated alexandrine makes its appearance. In the *Fêtes Galantes* of the following year (1867) he is frankly impressionist, though the stylised eighteenth-century setting here restricts the free play of a personality “ondoyant et divers” almost beyond precedent. A different restriction hampers his expression in *La Bonne Chanson* (1870). *Fêtes Galantes* had revealed clearly enough the faunesque side of his nature; but another mood prevailed for a time after he had met Mathilde Mauté, virginal, unsophisticated, a mysterious “jeune fille” to be respected and adored; buttressed, moreover, by a family of bourgeois respectability. They became engaged; and Verlaine, the chameleon, took on something of the colour of his new circumstances. There is charm, sincerity, even candour in *La Bonne Chanson*, where the poet appears to us, and to himself, as the ardent but respectful lover. It is a gracious role, and Verlaine plays it well—“*aber, ach, ein Schauspiel nur!*” When Life applied the acid test to his love for Mathilde, it became clear that the reality did not correspond to his picture of it. Very soon after their marriage, the dream of a life of tranquil joys, of true companionship, of rectitude, of duty, was shattered. And into the ruins stalked Arthur Rimbaud, prodigiously gifted, a poet before he was a man, with a concentration of misdirected purpose which caught up the Pauvre Lélian as a tornado snatches a straw. Rimbaud had elaborated strange theories about this art of poetry, this Alchemy of the Word: mastered, it might transmute the dross of reality into pure gold. He persuaded Verlaine to accompany him on a crazy quest of the Great Secret. Verlaine flung aside all trammels of the social life and of kindly affection; and they wandered away into the curious world of nightmare of which we are given glimpses in reminiscent poems of his own and in Rimbaud’s *Saison en Enfer*. The characters of the two poets were utterly discrepant, and a hideous affray brought their imperfect comradeship to

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an end. It was during a visit to Brussels that Verlaine, mad drunk, shot at Rimbaud, wounding him in the arm. Rimbaud appealed to the police for protection, and Verlaine was sentenced to a term of imprisonment. It was in the prison at Mons that he wrote most of *Sagesse*. His poetic faculty had matured during his association with Rimbaud. In the volume he published during his imprisonment, *Romances sans paroles*, written for the most part during the months of vagabondage, the music of the verse fulfils the promise of the strange title; the logical structure seems to dissolve, and nothing remains but a fluid and diaphanous tissue of song. The news that the suit in divorce brought against him by his deserted wife had been granted came to him in his prison-cell, and struck deep at the emotional roots of his being. Like Chateaubriand, under the impact of bereavement, he wept and believed. *La Bonne Chanson* had marked a merely superficial conversion to respectability; the conversion of which *Sagesse* is a record, the conversion to a lively faith in salvation through Christ and the Church, was incomplete, perhaps, but not superficial. He embraced with fervour and delight the Image of a purity, humility, and grace which promised consolation and forgiveness. In the end, we know, he slid back, it may be deeper than ever, into the slough. But for a time—to note only the results that fall within our province here—his imagination is transfigured. A new gamut of moods is evoked in *Sagesse*, humbly joyful, and tender, and fervent, and young. He is the neophyte, aspiring to the Vision of the Altar gleaming through the Temple gates ajar. The sonnet sequence (IV, pp. 27 ff.), the dialogue of the soul and its Saviour, marks the extreme reach of this mystical aspiration in *Sagesse*. The poet has used all the resources of his technique to compel the stubborn alexandrine to his purposes. His *vers libéré* is here pliable beyond belief, adapted to all the exigences of his religious exaltation, from the grave serenity, the consoling balm of the answering Voice, to the prostrate devotion, to the access of stammering incredulous joy, of the sinner whose prayer is answered. The earthly scene, too, is renewed; earthly concerns and affections have a heightened and purified significance. The lyrical note in *Sagesse* has a heart-searching

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quality not found, I think, in such perfection in any other poems of his. And one lyric beyond all others takes us to the verge, and, as it seems, past the confines of poetry, into the solitude and secret of a living soul:

Le ciel est, par-dessus le toit,
Si bleu, si calme !
Un arbre, par-dessus le toit,
Berce sa palme . . . (VI, p. 39.)

F. W. STOKOE