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LES
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par
JOSÉ-MARIA DE HEREDIA

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INTRODUCTION

“...*L'art pour l'art*, trois mots absolument vides de sens”: thus the younger Dumas contemptuously dismisses the famous slogan of Gautier and his *Parnassien* disciples. The phrase was perhaps not so much devoid of meaning as excessively elastic. The rallying-cry of two generations of poets, it stood for doctrines widely diverse, from a rather ignoble Epicureanism to a stoical Idealism. But whatever the interpretation adopted, for most of its votaries “Art for Art’s sake” implied a divorce between art and life. The worshippers of Beauty must raise its temples in places remote from the common ways of men, fastnesses to be approached by narrow and difficult paths, accessible to the initiate only. The Goddess was exacting; none might account himself her priest unless he were perfect in the ritual of Impeccable Form. José-Maria de Heredia, though a late-comer to the shrine, served the Idol with a sacerdotal aptitude, a zeal, a singleness of heart, surpassed by none; not even by his Master, Leconte de Lisle, who, dedicate as he was to this service, never tore from his heart other loyalties; and we feel in his poems the torture of this divided allegiance. Heredia’s was a simpler and happier nature. He was an artist for whom form, and colour, and splendid gesture, and the goldsmith’s task of making the stubborn metal plastic to his creative purpose, were all-sufficient. Patiently he shaped his sonnets, approaching perfection, the balance and concord of every part and of the whole, with deliberate care; sensitive to the least defect of material or craftsmanship, never satisfied until the resources of his art were expended, and the masterpiece in being. Heredia descended from a stock that had played its part in Spain’s epic of conquest; and it is perhaps not fanciful to discover in his work something of the pride, the

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gallantry, and the fire of the Conquistador. His imagination is at once sumptuous and heroic; the pageantry of life kindles it; recorded in history or symbolised in legend, this pageantry furnishes him with many of his themes. The glory that was Greece, the grandeur that was Rome; gods, heroes, triumphant Consuls and Caesars; the artist of the Renaissance, the fantastic gorgeous warrior of Old Japan—these are not his only subjects, but it is with such as these that we most readily associate his name. One aspect of his art may strike us at a first glance through the earlier sections of his book, those relating to Greece and Rome. The titles of the poems often suggest sweeping frescoes or ample friezes: *Centaures et Lapithes*, *La Naissance d'Aphrodité*, *Le Ravisement d'Andromède*, *Antoine et Cléopâtre*; yet the spread of each picture must be confined within the strict frame of the sonnet. Whatever the cunning of a miniaturist, we feel that he is at a grave disadvantage when set to cope with figures and groups in free and vigorous action. But Heredia makes the sonnet serve his purpose without sacrificing any requisite of his subject; the freedom is unrestrained, the vigour abounding; figures loom heroic or monstrous; groups mingle and scatter in play or strife; beyond them, the horizon opens out, wide and deep; the tides flow on; stars pierce an immeasurable night. The brawniest Hercules of sculpture may seem puny beside the colossal figure at which stares, terror-stricken, the shepherd who

“ a vu la terreur de Némée . . .
 Car l'ombre grandissant avec le crépuscule
 Fait, sous l'horrible peau qui flotte autour
 d'Hercule,
 Mélant l'homme à la bête, un monstrueux héros.”

Perseus and Andromeda, rapt in the vertiginous flight of the winged horse, see unfurl below them the continents and seas of half the globe; but the vision expands suddenly, without limit:

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“Et le vent gonfle ainsi que deux immenses voiles
 Les ailes qui, volant d'étoiles en étoiles,
 Aux amants enlacés font un tiède berceau;
 Tandis que, l'œil au ciel où palpète leur ombre,
 Ils voient, irradiant du Bélier au Verseau,
 Leurs Constellations poindre dans l'azur sombre.”

In the two instances quoted, it is the last line of the sonnet that, instead of closing upon us with its finality, is flung open to new spaces and magnitudes. This, no doubt, is not accidental; it is part of a technique thanks to which Heredia, though bounded in his nutshell, yet may count himself, more fortunate than Hamlet, a king of infinite space. The most subtle and startling, as perhaps the most Shakespearian, instance of this expansion of his theme at the point where the reader's imagination yields in the silence to the creative impulsion it has received, is to be found in the sonnet *Antoine et Cléopâtre*, when, bending closer to the lips of Cleopatra,

“l'ardent Impérator
 Vit dans ses larges yeux étoilés de points d'or
 Toute une mer immense où fuyaient des galères.”

In these instances we pass insensibly from the craftsman to the poet; the pageantry is, after all, not there for its own sake alone; it has become the symbol of another splendour.

We have not space to discuss here, even briefly, the variety of theme and treatment to be found in *Les Trophées*. Two further notes on the book must suffice. Beside the great prospect of Heroic Antiquity are scenes rather bucolic and familiar, peopled with the lesser deities of wood and stream, nymphs and satyrs and the demi-god who watches over gardens; the goatherd and the shepherd chat, while keeping an eye upon their flocks. The simple life of a beautifully stylised *eld* passes before our eyes. The homely or elegiac vein of idyll is congenial to the French Muse. Chénier imitated the Classical eclogue and the poets

of the Anthology with unsurpassed suavity. Vigny follows his lead in some early poems. But most of the Romantics are attuned to melodrama rather than idyll. It was after 1850 that the renewed study of the literature and art of Antiquity reinforced the influence of Chénier's *Bucoliques*. Heredia, Régnier and Samain are notable among many who cultivated this *genre*. Heredia excels in it; like Chénier, he does not allow the sweetness peculiar to this kind of poetry to degenerate into lusciousness, nor its *naïveté* into silliness. There is, even here, a certain dramatic tension, a stir of life; and the significance of the form is completed by gesture. While the goatherd is offering his frugal hospitality to the shepherd, overtaken on his way by nightfall, suddenly he warns him to speak low:

“Mais parle bas. Les Dieux sont partout, ô Mnasyte! . . .
 Ce trou d'ombre là-bas est l'antre où se retire
 Le démon familier des hauts lieux, le Satyre.”

And a moment later the Capriped appears: “Look! Listen!”

“Entends-tu le pipeau qui chante sur ses lèvres?
 C'est lui! Sa double corne accroche les rayons,
 Et, vois, au clair de lune il fait danser mes chèvres!”

Heredia is at home in many climes and ages, wherever his imagination pictures intense and colourful life, graceful movement or splendid effort. In his own age, in his own person, a modern wanderer over the Breton heaths and by the sea, he writes sonnets not sharply distinguishable from those of a dozen other French poets of his day (*La Mer de Bretagne*). Only once is the picture focussed to a poetic intensity comparable and equal to that of his greater sonnets; in *Le Bain* (p. 62), where the scene has the untamed energy of the Heroic Age. The naked peasant, astride his horse, urging it against the Atlantic billows, not only recalls the Centaurs to the poet's mind: Heredia sees in the group, and makes us see, a portion of

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timeless reality, the soil in which flowers the beauty of legend. For this poet of a sophisticated age and a sophisticated art escaped the curse of aestheticism; he loved beauty with a rare simplicity of fervour. And if *Les Trophées* holds an assured place of honour in European literature it is not chiefly on account of its flawless craftsmanship, but of the freshness, the sincerity, and the dignity of its inspiration.

F. W. STOKOE