Divagations

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The Author's 1897 Arrangement

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A MINUTE ago, dropping my hand, with the lassitude that is caused by one afternoon after another of bad weather, I let fall—without curiosity, though it felt as though I had read everything twenty years ago—the string of multicolored pearls left by the rain, reflected in the glass of a case full of books. Many a work, under the beaded curtain, will align its own illumination: I enjoy following their light, as under a saturated cloud, against the window, one follows storm lights across the sky.

Our recent phase, if not achieving closure, takes a break or perhaps takes stock: close attention uncovers the creative and relatively confident intention.

Even the press, whose information is usually twenty years old, is writing about the subject, suddenly, when it happens.

Literature is here undergoing an exquisite and fundamental crisis.

Whoever grants this function a place, or even the primary place, will recognize in this the current event: we are witnessing, in this fin-de-siècle, not—as it was during the last one—a revolution, but, far from the public square: a trembling of the veil in the temple, with significant folds, and, a little, its rending.

A French reader, his habits interrupted by the death of Victor Hugo, cannot fail to be disconcerted. Hugo, in his mysterious task, brought all prose—philosophy, eloquence, history—down to verse, and, since he was verse personified, he confiscated, from whoever tried to think, or discourse, or narrate, almost the right to speak. A monument in the desert, surrounded by silence; in a crypt, the divinity of a majestic unconscious idea—that is, that the form we call verse is simply itself literature; that there is verse as soon as diction calls attention to itself, rhyme as soon as there is style. Verse, I think, respectfully waited until the giant who identified it with his tenacious and firm blacksmith's hand came to be missing, in order to, itself, break. All of language, measured by meter, recovering therein its vitality, escapes, broken down into thousands of simple elements; and, I add, not without similarity to the multiplicity of notes in an orchestral score, but this one remains verbal.

The change dates from that, although Verlaine's underground and untimely experiments prepared the way, so fluid, going back to primitive names.

As a witness to this adventure, where others want to see me as more effective than it would be suitable for anyone to be, I at least directed my fervent attention to it; and it is time to speak about it, preferably from a distance and, as it were, anonymously.

Grant that French poetry, because of the primacy accorded to rhyme, in its evolution up to us, is intermittent: it shines a while, exhausts its inspiration, and waits. Extinction, or rather a refusal to expose worn-down threads, repetition. The need to poetize, as opposed to many accidental circumstances, leads, now, after one of those periodic orgies that lasted almost a century, comparable only to the Renaissance, when shadow and chill should have followed, not at all! the brilliance changes, continues: the rethinking, ordinarily hidden, fills the public eye, through recourse to delicious approximations.

I think I can break down, in its triple aspect, the treatment that the hieratic canon of verse has undergone, in sequence.

This prosody, with its brief rules, is nevertheless uncompromising. With its hemistich, an act of prudence, a statue to the smallest effort needed to simulate versification, rather like those codes that tell us that refraining from stealing is proof of honesty. Just what I didn't need to know; not having guessed it myself establishes the uselessness of constraining myself to it subsequently.

Those who remain faithful to the alexandrine, our hexameter, loosen internally the rigid and childish mechanism of its meter; the ear, freed from a gratuitous inner counter, feels pleasure in discerning all the possible combinations and permutations of twelve beats.

Consider that taste very modern.

One intermediate case, in no way the least curious, follows:

The poet with acute tact who considers the alexandrine the definitive jewel, but not to bring out, sword, flower, very often and according to some premeditated end, touches it shyly or plays around it—he gives us neighboring chords before releasing it, superb and naked: letting his fingers drag against the eleventh syllable or go on to a thirteenth, many times. Monsieur Henri de Regnier excels at this kind of play, of his own invention, discreet and proud like the genius he has instated, and revealing of the transitory trouble poets have with the hereditary instrument. Another thing, or simply the opposite, can be detected in a voluntary mutiny against the old

tired mold, as when Jules Laforgue, in the beginning, initiated us into the certain charms of lines that were slightly off.

Up to now, or in the two cases we've just cited, there has been nothing but reserve and abandon, because of lassitude at the frequent use of the national cadence, whose appearance, like that of the flag, should remain exceptional. With this proviso, however: that voluntary infractions or knowing dissonances call only on our sensitivity, whereas, barely fifteen years ago, the pedant we have remained used to rail against departures from the rules as against some ignorant sacrilege! I would say that the recollection of strict verses haunts these approximations, and that they benefit from it.

What is new about free verse, not as the expression was understood in the seventeenth century when people spoke of fables or operas (which was only an arrangement of known meters), but let's call it "polymorphous": and let's imagine the dissolution of the official verse form, the form now becoming whatever one wants, so long as a pleasure repeats in it. Sometimes it's a euphony broken up with the assent of the intuitive reader, ingenuously and preciously right—that was once the work of Monsieur Moréas; or else a gesture languid with dreaminess, suddenly jumping awake, through passion, which provides meter—that's Monsieur Vielé-Griffin; before that, Monsieur Kahn invented a very learned notation of the tonal value of words. I'm giving only these names, and there are other typical cases, as proof of what I say: Messieurs Charles Morice, Verhaeren, Dujardin, Mockel, and all of them: I send my reader to their publications.

What is remarkable is that, for the first time in the literary history of any people, concurrently with the grand general and historic organs, where, according to a latent scale, orthodoxy exults, anyone with his individual game and ear can compose an instrument, as soon as he breathes, touches, or taps scientifically; he can play it on the side and also dedicate it to the Language.

This is quite a bit of liberty to count on, the newest: but I don't see—and this remains my intense opinion—an erasure of anything that was beautiful in the past. I remain convinced that on grand occasions, poets will obey solemn tradition, of which the preponderance comes from the classic genius: it's just that, when there's no reason, because of a sentimental breeze or for a story, to disturb those venerable echoes, a poet will think carefully before doing so. Each soul is a melody that needs to be renewed; and for that, each becomes his own flute or viola.

According to me, there arises quite late a true condition or the possibility not just of expressing oneself, but of modulating oneself, as one likes.

Languages imperfect insofar as they are many; the absolute one is lacking: thought considered as writing without accessories, not even whispers, still *stills* immortal speech; the diversity, on earth, of idioms prevents anyone from proffering words that would otherwise be, when made uniquely, the material truth. This prohibition is explicitly devastating, in Nature (one bumps up against it with a smile), where nothing leads one to take oneself for God; but, at times, turned toward aesthetics, my own sense regrets that discourse fails to express objects by touches corresponding to them in shading or bearing, since they do exist among the many languages, and sometimes in one. Beside *ombre* [shade], which is opaque, *ténèbres* [shadows] is not very dark; what a disappointment, in front of the perversity that makes *jour* [day] and *nuit* [night], contradictorily, sound dark in the former and light in the latter. Hope for a resplendent word glowing, or being snuffed out, inversely, so far as simple light-dark alternatives are concerned.—*Only,* be aware that *verse would not exist:* it, philo-

sophically, makes up for language's deficiencies, as a superior supplement.

What a strange mystery: and, from no lesser intentions, metrics appeared, during incubatory times.

What caused a medium extent of words, under the gaze's comprehension, to take on definitive traits, surrounded by silence?

If, in the case of French, no private invention can surpass the prosodic heritage, displeasure would nevertheless break out if a singer couldn't—to the side and as he liked, not in the infinite, wherever his voice encountered a rule—gather blossoms nevertheless. . . . The experiment, a while ago, took place, and, aside from erudite research into accentuation etc., ongoing or forecast, I know that a seductive game is being played with recognizable fragments of classic verse, to be eluded or to be discovered, rather than involving a sudden discovery, totally new. It will take time to loosen the constraints and relax the zeal that got official schools into trouble. All very preciously: but from this liberation, to hope for something else, or to believe, seriously, that every individual possesses a new prosody in his very breath—and also, of course, some new spelling—is a joke, or inspires the platforms of many prefaces. It's not arbitrary that there should be similarities between poetry and ancient proportions; some kind of regularity will last because the poetic act consists of seeing that an idea can be broken up into a certain number of motifs that are equal in some way, and of grouping them; they rhyme; as an external seal, the final words are proof of their common measure.

It is in what has happened to verse, so interesting, during this period of rest and interregnum, less than in some virginal mental circumstance, that the crisis lies.

To hear the indisputable ray—as particular features gild and tear a wandering melody; or Music joins Verse to form, since Wagner, Poetry.

It's not that one or the other can't still, in its integrity, separate triumphantly from the other (Music without articulation gives a mute concert, and Poetry alone can only enounce): from their combination and mutual influence, instrumentation is illuminated until it becomes obvious beneath the veil, just as elocution descends into *the* twilight of sonorities. The modern meteor, the symphony, according to the intention or unbeknownst to the musician, approaches thought; which no longer claims descent only from common speech.

Some explosion of Mystery to the skies in its impersonal magnificence occurs, where the orchestra couldn't *not* influence the ancient effort that long claimed to translate it uniquely through the voice of the ancestor.

Consequently, a double indication—

Decadent, Mystic, the Schools naming themselves, or being labeled in haste by the press, have adopted, as what they have in common, the viewpoint of an Idealism that (as in fugues or sonatas) rejects natural materials as too crude, even when thought organizes them; to retain from them only a suggestion. To institute an exact relation between images, and let detach there a third, blendable, clear aspect, presented for divination. . . . Abolished is the claim, aesthetically an error, even though it produced some real masterpieces, of including in the subtle paper of a volume something other than, for example, the horror of deep woods, or the scattered mute thunder of foliage: not the intrinsic and dense wood of the trees. A few spurts of intimate pride truly trumpeted evoke the architecture of a palace, the only one habitable: outside of any stone, on which the pages couldn't close.

"Monuments, the sea, the human face, in their natural fullness, conserve a property differently attractive than the veiling any description can offer; say evocation, or, I know, *allusion* or *suggestion:* this somewhat haphazard terminology testifies to a tendency, perhaps the most decisive tendency that literary art has undergone; it limits it, but also exempts it. The literary charm, if it's not to liberate, outside of a fistful of dust or reality without enclosing it, in the book, even as a text, the volatile dispersal of the spirit, which has to do with nothing but the musicality of everything."†

Speaking has to do with the reality of things only commercially: in literature, one contents oneself with alluding to it or disturbing it slightly, so that it yields up the idea it incorporates.

Under those conditions arises song, which is joy made even less heavy.

This aim, I call Transposition; Structure, another.

The pure work implies the disappearance of the poet speaking, who yields the initiative to words, through the clash of their ordered inequalities; they light each other up through reciprocal reflections like a virtual swooping of fire across precious stones, replacing the primacy of the perceptible rhythm of respiration or the classic lyric breath, or the personal feeling driving the sentences.

An order innate to the book of verse exists inherently or everywhere, eliminating chance; it's also necessary, to eliminate the author: now, any subject is fated to imply, among the fragments brought together, a strange certainty about its appropriate place in the volume. It is susceptible to this because any cry possesses an echo—motifs of the same type balance

†Extract from "Music and Letters." [—*Author*]

each other, stabilizing each other at a distance, and neither the sublime incoherence of a romantic page, nor that artificial unity that adds up to a block-book, can provide it. Everything is suspended, an arrangement of fragments with alternations and confrontations, adding up to a total rhythm, which would be the poem stilled, in the blanks; only translated, in a way, by each pendant. I find traces of such an instinct in many publications and, given the type, it doesn't long remain without companions; young people, for once, when poetry seems to be thundering and harmonious with plenitude, have stuttered out the magic concept of the Work. A certain symmetry, in parallel fashion, which, to the place of the verse in the piece links the authenticity of the piece in the volume, steals, in addition to the volume, written by diverse hands, inscribed on spiritual space, the amplified signature of genius, anonymous and perfect, giving art existence and being.

It may be only a chimera, but merely to have thought of it attests, reflecting off its scales, how much the present cycle, or the final quarter-century, has been struck by some absolute illumination—of which the unceasing stream of water against the panes of my windows washes away the streaming trouble, until it lights up this thought—that, more or less, all books contain the fusion of a few repeated sayings, few enough to count, or even only one—in the world, its law—bible as the nations simulate it. The difference between one book and another constitutes its entry into an immense contest, offering its proposed reading of the one true text, sought in vain by all civilized—or literate—ages.

Certainly, I never sit on the terrace of a concert without perceiving, within its obscure sublimity, an outline of one of the poems immanent to humanity, all the more comprehensible for being stilled, in its original form, and that, if asked to trace the line of its vast progeny, the composer felt this facility of suspending even the temptation to explain himself. I imag-

ine, following an unextractable and no doubt writerly prejudice, that nothing will remain without being proffered, that we are stuck at precisely the point of searching, faced with the breaking up of classic literary rhythms (I've spoken about this above) and their dispersion into articulated shivers close to instrumentation, for an art of achieving the transposition into the Book of the symphony, or merely to take back what is ours: for it is not through the elementary sounds of brasses, strings, or woods, but undeniably through the intellectual word at its height that there should result, with plenitude and obviousness, as the totality of relations existing in everything, the system otherwise known as Music.

An undeniable desire of my time is to distinguish two kinds of language according to their different attributes: taking the double state of speech—brute and immediate here, there essential.

To tell, to teach, and even to describe have their place, and suffice, perhaps, in order to exchange human thought, to take or to put into someone else's hand in silence a coin, this elementary use of discourse serving the universal *reporting* in which, except for literature, all genres of contemporary writing participate.

What good is the marvel of transposing a fact of nature into its vibratory near-disappearance according to the play of language, however: if it is not, in the absence of the cumbersomeness of a near or concrete reminder, the pure notion.

I say: a flower! And, out of the oblivion where my voice casts every contour, insofar as it is something other than the known bloom, there arises, musically, the very idea in its mellowness; in other words, what is absent from every bouquet.

As opposed to a denominative and representative function, as the crowd first treats it, speech, which is primarily dream and song, recovers, in the Poet's hands, of necessity in an art devoted to fictions, its virtuality.

Verse, which, out of several vocables, makes a total word, entirely new, foreign to the language, and almost incantatory, achieves that isolation of speech; negating, with a sovereign blow, despite their repeated reformulations between sound and sense, the arbitrariness that remains in the terms, and gives you the surprise of never having heard that fragment of ordinary eloquence before, while the object named is bathed in a brand new atmosphere.