

Casel and the Benedictines of Maria Laach). For the effect of the mysteries of Christ is the mystery of grace, and grace in its turn is the seed of the mystery of eternal life.



## PAUL VERLAINE, MYSTIC AND SINNER

1844 — 1896

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THE poetry of Paul Verlaine is a challenge to the conventional reader of religious literature. It is neither decreed nor supposed that every author of meditations or guides to the spiritual life be a saint, either in glory or, by reputation, in the flesh, but it is disconcerting if he is, publicly and, so to say, extravagantly, a sinner. It can hardly affect the reputation of Verlaine to say now, fifty years after his death, that he is best remembered as a poet who sinned. Such a reputation alone might have effectively excluded him from the catalogue of religious writers. Verlaine enjoyed, however, the distinction of having published, in what appeared subsequently as little more than an interruption in his wayward career, poetic witness to a state of conversion and intimate conversation with God. He failed to win much sympathy from contemporary French Catholics, and it is difficult now to accord his religious poetry the esteem which, on its own merits exclusively, it deserves. In fact, he poses a problem.

Honesty demands that the boldness of his offence be not concealed. Born in 1844, the young Verlaine was of that type, increasingly familiar, whose sensitive perception of human values is so refined, yet so estranged from grace, that a psychological impasse is inevitably reached. The least offensive form it takes is a rebellion against conventions in manners or in mind, the worst, a repudiation of moral codes. A fundamental denial of spiritual values need not be read into this attitude—the subject is often too intelligent to deny so explicitly his spiritual perceptions, except when passion, fostered by his pet perversions, drives both mind and heart to hibernation over a prolonged winter of discontent.

The enjoyment of such characteristics, even a few wild oats, need not have stigmatized Verlaine a sinner, in the sense that word enjoys when its mute but understood qualification is 'public'. Within a year of his marriage, however, in 1871, he submitted to the evil influence of Arthur Rimbaud. Never unconscious of the shame of their association, the attraction was so strong, and Paul's emotional frailty so pathetic, that he elected to abandon his wife and child and accompany this vicious partner into circumstances of poverty and degradation which must have revolted his own sensibilities. If the first poem of the collection *Sagesse* were an examination of conscience, it would seem a heartrending and dramatic repudiation of responsibility. Verlaine attributes his repeated falls not to himself, whom, on the contrary, he depicts as struggling with the endurance of a mythical hero, but to 'a part of his heart', trapped and seduced by an external agent. The sin he does not examine, of course, is that of persevering in the dangerous occasion of his alliance with Rimbaud. However, it seems that the frank, violent attachment to evil on positive lines, which quite distinguished Rimbaud from Verlaine, had the effect of driving the latter, though long ineffectually, towards God, and even as far as the confessional.

This sordid liaison ended in an incident with a revolver at Brussels. The result was not serious for Rimbaud, whilst for Verlaine it secured a salutary term of imprisonment at Mons. Providence could not have prescribed a better remedy for the emotional and spiritual distemper of the sinner and poet. There, in solitude, and it appears, in contemplation of an image of the Sacred Heart which adorned his cell, he passed from a temperamental inclination towards religion to the election of God as the formal object of his life, as the true focus and very explanation of those tendencies which, falsely interpreted and sinfully employed, had conducted him to the visible gates of hell. This state of conversion befell in 1874, when Verlaine was thirty years old. From then till 1877 he prepared for publication a collection of poems under the title *Sagesse*, which he intended as a confession, simple, devoted and sincere, of his sin, conversion and repentance, a confession of the glory and love of God revealed to him not only through the darkness he had penetrated, but through a certain lyrical illumination in which the Divine Lover disclosed his ultimate challenge of abandonment and unitive life, a vision of mystical experience

which, in the poetry of Verlaine, compares flatteringly with the revelations of mystics and saints whose ultimate credentials have never had to stand criticism.

I distinguish three possible verdicts on Verlaine's religious poetry: (a) that its mysticism is false, in the sense that it interprets nothing more than a poet's perception of a possible religious experience; his personal experience is therefore objectively quite false, (b) that it is genuine, and portrays authentically all that it implies in the history of Verlaine's conversion; this seems to me to encounter grave but not insuperable difficulties in the light of his subsequent defection, and (c) that it is genuine, but does not in fact represent a complete and final submission to the way of Christian perfection, to the way of union and the influence of mystical graces.

This latter view is, I think, not only the true one, but is clearly perceptible to a closer reading of those poems in *Sagesse* which represent the climax of Verlaine's spiritual pilgrimage. Excluding such exceptional combinations of the poetic and mystical genius as, for example, St John of the Cross, most mystics will make less poetry of their experience the deeper they penetrate the mystery. Poets, on the other hand, glimpse those 'hid battlements of eternity' long before they arrive at the point where, practically, any choice of final election is open to them. Poets, Romantic poets anyway, could barely escape at least some grasp of that ultimate Romance where every ideal of their 'philosophy' dissolved into light; it is a lurking nostalgia for the most profane, but few pursue those icy paths that traverse the mountains of peace. To have received such rare graces as precede the very moment of election, to have beheld and understood the choice and to have feared and refused it, I believe to have been the position with Verlaine. In more conventional terms we may say that he experienced a genuine conversion from sin and entered into the purgative and illuminative ways, but at the very entrance to the unitive where, after all, man's very merit is the freedom of his choice, his weakness, which creeps into his poems of greatest confidence, prompted him to turn away, competent through his talents to report the vision vouchsafed, still competent, through free will, to abandon the life of grace. By renewed falls he discredited himself, and understandably discredited his poems in Catholic eyes, but I cannot see how he could possibly discredit

the grace of God which illumines the poetry of his experience as brilliantly as if he had followed it to a life of heroic sanctity. For that matter, I see neither justice nor charity in any implied judgement on his end, or on the application to the economy of his soul standing before God of those graces gained during the hour of light.

Conversion, to Verlaine, was a discovery, like Augustine's, 'too late, too late', of the valid object of the heart's desire. Without, I am confident, any conscious reminiscence of St Teresa, he describes his experience as a renewal of heart; the appropriate agent of that operation, *Malheur, Souffrance*, represented by a masked horseman who pierces his heart with a lance, like that of the crucified Lord. The chevalier places his mailed hand in the poet's side, and at his touch a new heart springs to life. In this state of conversion Verlaine is directed by a visionary mistress whose patronage enables him, temporarily at least, to overcome his ungratified desires. Her name is 'Prayer', but she is curiously reminiscent of scriptural Wisdom. Although an advance in spiritual life is clearly indicated throughout *Sagesse*, which is not, however, chronological, the persistence of temptation and hints at recurring falls are frequent, but so too is perseverance and resort to grace and sacraments and cultivation of the theological virtue of hope.

Verlaine's descriptions of his advance in the way of purification are poignant. He suffered indeed like a desert father, with few of the external helps of organized Catholic life or association. It seems to me that his struggles to persevere at this period were not far from heroic. Irrespective of his religious choice, his poetic refinement must have loathed the life of degradation on which he had turned his back, even while he hankered after its satisfactions. On the other hand, his new experience left much of his personality unsatisfied; he left behind 'un doux vide, un grand renoncement'. He heard in pursuit the melodious baying of Francis Thompson's hound, but he was dismayed by the harsh voices of Pride, Hate, the Flesh, of 'Autrui'; he experienced the demon of *Ennui*; he depicts himself as twisting hands, biting lips, opaque-eyed in the ordeals of temptation, and foresaw, perhaps prophetically, that those

*'hiers allaient manger nos beaux demains'.*

To all this he opposed hope. There is a short series of poems

on that virtue, and the sisters he found it: poverty of spirit, humility, and faith. As for the discouraging apparatus of life—'*elle est laide*', he admits—'*encore, c'est ta soeur*'.

I do not suggest that Verlaine was aware of the traditional distinctions of purgative, illuminative and unitive ways, or if he were that he made any conscious attempt to relate his writings to them. But *Sagesse* does readily divide into those poems which belong to the period of conversion and early struggles, the great fourth poem of section two, which is a colloquy with God at the threshold of complete surrender, and certain intermediate poems which may be conveniently allotted to a period of spiritual intensification or illumination. Here we must allude to his image of the Mountain, for I suspect that he never really regarded its summits as open to his attainment. If he knew all the answers, as he duly reports them and as, perhaps, too many of us know them, this knowledge remained external. His perception of the goodness of God never equalled his internal conviction of his own sin, and the former without the latter does not make true humility, but has a suspicion of despair. The Mountain represents first only the unattainable, a desirable contrast to the revulsion of irresistible sin, a reminiscence of childhood's innocence, something abiding above the harshness and ugliness of life and humanity. Later he discerns the Mountain again in a poem which records victory over temptation. He arms himself with poverty and hope and presses on towards the 'couch of joy' which death prepares ahead. He sings, and laughs, and takes on childish ways, to deceive 'le vieux séducteur' who spies on his progress and besets his path with traps, but his object is

*'Paix—sur la hauteur,  
Qui luit parmi des fanfares de gloire.  
Monte, ravi, dans la nuit blanche et noire.'*

The poems of this group are redolent of the spirit of renunciation; he embraces '*Devoir, et sa forme bourrûe*', the treasury of goods invisible, he bids an '*adieu léger*' to all things changeable, with happiness, and on the wings of the Cross flies off to find '*la vertu qui s'ignore*'.

To balance such ardent resolution we have some bargaining with the past and a consciousness of the insufficiency of his efforts—'*tous ces coins autour de ces pauvres vertus*'. Two poems, on the seventeenth century and the middle ages as religious ideals,

represent abortive efforts to find a milieu where his new, *gauche* spiritual life might feel less isolated. His poems on contemporary religious affairs, the expulsion of the Jesuits, against the rationalists, etc., show him quite out of depth and artificial in style. He by no means shared the advantages which helped his friend J.-K. Huysmans in his spiritual adventure. He seemed to foresee that an outpouring of grace might precede his readiness to accept. The Divine hand, he wrote, was *'toujours prête a la chute du fruit, patiente avec l'arbre et s'abstient de pousser'*.

The day came when the Lord did push and the fruit fell, not, however, without his explicit challenge throwing the soul to its knees, amazed, incoherent, staggered at the Divine generosity, the revelation of a Love that could assume sinners to the bosom of the Trinity. The poems which relate this colloquy with God attain a lyrical quality beside which most of the rest pall. Whatever happened in the soul of Paul Verlaine, the inspiration of the poet at least reached its apogee. This is recorded in the middle section of *Sagesse*. The final collection represents no conclusion or advance, but rather a conscious abandonment of an opportunity, a resignation to a natural mysticism tinged with religion which is the more normal preserve of the poet.

The central poem is divided into nine sections, of which the first seven are sonnets, the eighth comprises three sonnets, and the ninth one line. The whole is a conversation between God and Verlaine. God invites the poet to abandon himself wholly to the Divine Love and the reply is a veiled refusal. The conclusion is couched in five pathetic words, the epitaph of the shipwreck of a soul:

*'Pauvre âme, c'est cela'.*

However understandable may be the reticence with which the orthodox mind treats this masterpiece of Verlaine the sinner, no prejudice can violate the grandeur of that literary and spiritual tour de force, the 'sanctuary' of *Sagesse*, a disclosure bearing every testimony to the sincerity and humility of a man's discourse with God. To what extent does it truly represent an invitation to enter the life of mystical union? To this I hesitate to reply, but I am confident that here at least Verlaine describes an experience which penetrated his entire personality, heart and soul, and in which the spiritual dominated and transformed the poetic.

God the Son, with theological exactitude, opens his address to

the soul from the unity of the Trinity: 'O mon frère en mon Père, O mon fils en l'Esprit', and at once discloses himself not only as a presence already mystically manifested in the soul by suffering,

'N'ai-je pas sangloté ton angoisse suprême,  
Et n'ai-je pas sué la sueur de tes nuits?'

but as the hitherto unrevealed object of his perverse and embittered quest.

Verlaine replies by tracing the tale of his shame, retreating before the waves of grace that wait to sweep his shores, instead of submerging the past beneath them. Of all regrets none was more painful than the Betrayal which characterised his sin:

'un lourd baiser (qui) tient la paupière'

The reply is profound and immortal, rich beyond centuries of poetry in insight and understanding:

'Je suis l'universal Baiser.

Je suis cette paupière et je suis cette lèvre

Dont tu parles, o cher malade, et cette fièvre

Qui t'agit, c'est Moi toujours.'

In the next stanza the poet almost abandons poetry for an incoherence of spiritual intoxication. Half-broken remonstrances and lyrical ejaculations culminate in a daring accusation: *Etes-vous fous?*—plural because addressed to the Trinity, which replies, 'Je suis ces Fous que tu nommais—'

From this almost unrivalled altitude the inspiration of the poetry and the confidence of the soul decline, overcome by fear, seduced by that introspective glance at his own weakness and defect which is the root of despair.

'J'ai l'extase et j'ai la terreur d'être choisi.

. . . un trouble immense

Brouille l'espoir que votre voix me révéla.'

If that Challenge were authentic, the acceptance, were it ever so meant, failed lamentably. But as I see it, there was none. Verlaine recognised his failure, and dared to record it as frankly as his exaltation. To this end he assembled in the final section of *Sagesse* poems of a quieter tone, of a simpler piety, a poetic or natural mysticism, or of trivial matters. The arrangement is all the more significant in that it is by no means chronological.

'Un grand sommeil noir tombe sur ma vie.'

I do not know whether opportunities of this sort come twice. Certainly Verlaine had now tasted experience to the full, save

that last, which he refused. At least he had found some intuition, however limited, of a great, unique and ultimate love. One poem in the final group appears to summarize his conclusions: all earthly loves, he asserts, are vain, void, treacherous—yet, at the behest of Jesus, for what in them participates of the Divine Spark, they are bidden form a choir, marshal into a procession, to sing in dolorous unison, and to the glory of the Divine Sufferings, '*L'hymne qui te sied à présent*'.



## SELECTIONS FROM PERE LALLEMANT:

### II. PERFECTION

*Translated by Hugh Farmer, O.S.B.*

#### A. Seeking God

**T**RULY to seek God implies that we consider him above all as the first principle of both nature and grace, then as the conserver of all being, and thirdly as the sovereign master who governs every creature and arranges everything by his providence. Hence we should consider all events, even the smallest, as manifestations of God's will and pleasure.

Seeking God means willing nothing and desiring nothing except what he wills and arranges by his providence. We should consider as it were two acts in God in our regard: one by which he wills to give us certain graces to lead us to a certain degree of glory if we are faithful to him, and the other by which he does not will to give us more grace or raise us to a higher degree of glory than this. Few people have enough courage and fidelity to fulfil God's purpose, and reach by their co-operation that degree of grace and glory which God desires. We should have so much esteem, submission and love for the manifestations of God's will, judgement and providence that we desire neither more grace nor more glory than he is pleased to give us, even if we could have as much as we liked; we should confine ourselves to these limits of his through the infinite respect we owe to the dispositions of divine providence.