Poems. *By* Maurice Maeterlinck ☙ *Done into English Verse by* Bernard Miall

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Translator's Preface

I

ONCE in a generation an author surpasses the bounds of nationality. Of such cosmopolitan artists Maurice Maeterlinck is perhaps the most shining example. Twenty years ago I was vainly endeavouring to interest English publishers in his plays. To-day I am asked to produce a version of one of his earlier and less familiar works, because the time is approaching for that monument to his fame which so few writers enjoy in their lifetime—namely, the complete edition. He is not a Belgian writer merely or chiefly; above all he is an English, an American author. His readers in England and the United States far outnumber those who read the original French. His books are published in England and America almost as soon as they appear

in France and Belgium, and in at least one case the English publication was the earlier. More and more do his lovers demand every word that his pen has formed. Sooner or later, therefore, it was inevitable that these "Poems" should appear in translation.

II

The poems contained in this volume form part of a movement long defunct—the Belgian Symbolist movement, an offshoot of that Belgian renascence which produced so remarkable a body of great and noble poetry. I cannot say, however, that perusal of the other poets of the period will assist the reader to appreciate the volume in hand. Eekhoud, Elskamp, Gilkin, Rodenbach, Verhaeren—none of these wrote verse which could possibly be confounded with that of Maeterlinck; twenty years ago the latter was no less original than he is to-day.

Many poets of the late nineteenth century

were, without being symbolists, affected by the Symbolist movement—a movement very loosely named, since the actual symbolists connected with it could be counted on the fingers of one hand. More particularly were they influenced by the tendency to put music before matter, beauty before sense, which is expressed by the so familiar lines of Verlaine:

De la musique avant toute chose,
Et pour cela préfere l'Impair,
Plus vague et plus soluble dans l'air,
Sans rien en lui qui pèse ou pose . . .

De la musique encor et toujours!

But musical as Maeterlinck's verses are, and rich in sheer beauty, we are very seldom in doubt as to what the poet says, however little we may in some cases understand what he means. His statements are concrete and lucid; it is the inner meaning, the soul of his verse, that sometimes threatens to elude us. Had this volume been cast upon the late Victorian

world this preface would perhaps have been longer. But I cannot believe that these poems will present any difficulties to a generation which has degustated such phenomena as Cubism and its kindred manifestations.

III

It is safe to assert that the writer of these poems had read his Verlaine, his Rimbaud, his Mallarmé, and his Baudelaire, and of English-speaking poets Emerson, Poe, perhaps Rossetti, and above all Whitman. But he is no disciple; and his essential originality, and the keynote of his æsthetics, is a system of symbolism.

Now here at once we are on dangerous ground. When a poet makes use of a symbol it is because that symbol enables him to say something that he cannot say so well, or so beautifully, or perhaps at all, in plain language. He is a rash man, therefore, who will attempt to elucidate another's symbolism. However, I

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have already been rash, in venturing to translate, not a few selected lyrics, but an entire volume of verse from cover to cover, than which there is no more appalling task in literature. But I am not, therefore, disposed to court disaster by attempting any detailed or positive explanation. I could indeed have asked M. Maeterlinck for such; but at the moment of writing his country is being crucified by the powers of darkness, and he has other and sterner matters to think of.

This machinery of hot-houses, bell-glasses, hospitals, and what not—what are we to make of it? I do not think we shall go far wrong in supposing the hot-house, the bell-glass, the diving-bell, the hospital, to typify the isolation and insulation caused by a false civilization and an unreal religion, so productive of hypocrisy, fear, and confusion that each man is a prisoner within himself, unable to reach his fellow. And the inmates of the hot-house—the strange growths, the fantastic

visions, the violent antitheses and incongruities —these, we may take it, are the morbidities fostered by a life which protects us and them from the agencies by which Nature makes her own children perfect in strength and beauty and service. That is my reading of it; the reader is perfectly free to differ from me, and will lose little by so doing if I have succeeded in preserving a tithe of the original beauty of the verse.

If here and there—more particularly in the unrhymed pieces—the violent and intentional incongruities and antitheses seem startling and incomprehensible, and a little apt to tickle the risibility of the frivolous Anglo-Saxon, let us remember that to read a symbolic poem literally is as foolish as to seek for a cipher in Shakespeare, or to set about interpreting a melody in terms of its notation, in the hope of spelling out a message.

One peculiarity of Maeterlinck's which may at first confuse the English reader is only

a simple convention. All poetry is full of similes; the simile confuses no one. If a poet tells us that his heart is like a singing-bird we do not seriously suppose him to mean that his heart has feathers and two legs; but merely that it possesses some other essential quality of a singing-bird. Now Maeterlinck constantly, in his verse, uses what is merely a modification of the simile, which has precisely the same significance, but which takes the form of a positive assertion of identity. He would say: My heart *is* a singing-bird or a plant in a green-house, or anything else that seemed to be illuminating; and this apparent literalness of statement, which is carried very far, is, and must always be understood as, a mere variant of the familiar simile.

IV

A word as to the work of translation. Most of the lyrics in *Serres Chaudes* are written in the metre familiar to English

readers as that of "In Memoriam." It is, in English, rather a dull metre, the stanza being in reality no stanza at all, but merely a line of thirty-two syllables with interior rhymes. It is greatly improved and enlivened by the omission of four syllables, or rather by their replacement by pauses of one syllable's value. This change I have sometimes made; and in one case I have, in order to avoid a verbal obscurity, extended the line to ten syllables. Apart from these exceptions all the poems in this volume are translated into their original metres, and it has always been my first object to produce a literal, almost a word for word, translation. Whatever the faults of my version, it is strictly faithful. If I am deemed to have also preserved something of the beauty of the original I shall feel more than rewarded for a task that has presented many difficulties.

BERNARD MIALL

ILFRACOMBE,
September 1914

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The right to reproduce these poems or to set them to music is reserved by the translator, and application must be made to him or to Mr J. B. Pinker of Talbot House, Arundel Street, W.C.

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Hot-Houses

The Hot-House

O HOT-HOUSE deep in the forest's heart!
O doors forever sealed!
Lo, all that lives beneath thy dome,
And in my soul, and the likeness of these things!

The thoughts of a princess who is sick with hunger,
The listless mood of a mariner in the desert,
And brazen music at the windows
Of men who are sick to death!

Seek out the coolest corners—
And you think of a woman who has swooned on a day of harvest.

The Hot-House

Postilions have entered the courtyard of the hospital,
And there passes yonder an Uhlan, who has turned sick-nurse.

Behold it all by moonlight!
(Nothing, nothing is in its rightful place!)
And you think of a madwoman haled before the judges,
A warship in full sail on the waters of a canal,
Birds of the night perched among lilies,
And the knell of a passing-bell at the mid-day hour of Angelus.
And yonder—beneath those domes of glass—
A group of sick folk halted amid the meadows,
An odour of ether abroad on the sunny air!

My God, my God, when shall we feel the rain,
And the snow, and the wind, in this close house of glass?

Prayer

O PITY me that wander hence
To haunt the threshold of intent;
My soul is pale with impotence,
Colourless and indolent.

A soul for action all too weak,
Pallid with tears, it vainly heeds
The weary hands that idly seek
To grapple with abortive deeds.

Forth from my slumbering heart exhale
The purple bubbles of its dream;
My soul, with waxen hands and frail,
Pours forth a drowsy lunar gleam,

Prayer

A listless light that dimly shows
  The faded lilies of days unborn;
A languid light that only throws
  The shadows of those hands forlorn.

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