

JETHRO BITHELL

LIFE AND WRITINGS OF
MAURICE MAETERLINCK

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Life and Writings of Maurice Maeterlinck

TO

ALBERT MOCKEL,

THE PENETRATING
CRITIC, THE SUBTLE POET

"Maurice Maeterlinck. – Il débuta ... dans *La Pléiade* par un chef-d'œuvre: *Le Massacre des Innocents*. Albert Mockel devint plus tard son patient et infatigable apôtre à Paris. C'est lui qui nous fit connaître *Les Serres Chaudes* et surtout cette *Princesse Maleine* qui formula définitivement l'idéal des Symbolistes au théâtre."

STUART MERRILL,

Le Masque, Série ii, No. 9 and 10.

PREFACE

It is not an easy task to write the life of a man who is still living. If the biographer is hostile to his subject, the slaughtering may be an exciting spectacle; if he wishes, not to lay a victim out, but to pay a tribute of admiration tempered by criticism, he has to run the risk of offending the man he admires, and all those whose admiration is in the nature of blind hero-worship. If he is conscientious, the only thing he can do is to give an honest expression of his own views, or a mosaic of the views of others which seem to him correct, knowing that he may be wrong, and that his authorities may be wrong, but challenging contradiction, and caring only for the truth as it appears to him.

So much for the tone of the book; there are difficulties, too, when the lion is alive, in setting up a true record of his movements. If the lion is a raging lion, how easy it is to write a tale of adventure; but if the lion is a tame specimen of his kind, you have either to *imagine* exploits, making mountains out of molehills, or you have to give a page or so of facts, and for the rest occupy yourself with what is really essential.

When the lion is as tame as Maeterlinck is (or rather as Maeterlinck chooses to appear), the case is peculiarly difficult. The events in Maeterlinck's life are his books; and these are not, like Strindberg's books, for instance, so inspired by personality that they in themselves form a fascinating biography. They reveal

little of the sound man of business Maeterlinck is; they do not show us what faults or passions he may have; they tell us little of his personal relations – in short, Maeterlinck's books are practically impersonal.

The biographer cannot take handfuls of life out of Maeterlinck's own books; and it is not much he can get out of what has been written about him, very little of which is based on personal knowledge. Maeterlinck has always been hostile to collectors of "copy," those great purveyors of the stuff that books are made of. Huret made him talk, or says he did, when Maeterlinck took him into the beer-shop; and a few words of that interview will pass into every biography. That was at a time when he hated interviews. He wrote to a friend on the 4th of October, 1890:

"I beg you *in all sincerity, in all sincerity*, if you can stop the interviews you tell me of, for the love of God stop them. I am beginning to get frightfully tired of all this. Yesterday, while I was at dinner, two reporters from ... fell into my soup. I am going to leave for London, I am sick of all that is happening to me. So if you can't stop the interviews they will interview my servant."¹

This is not a man who would chatter himself away,² not even to Mr Frank Harris, who found him aggressive (and no wonder

¹ Gérard Harry, *Maeterlinck*, p. 18.

² "Monsieur Maeterlinck being as all the world knows, hermetically mute." – (Grégoire Le Roy), *Le Masque* (Brussels), Série ii, No. 5 (1912).

either if the Englishman said by word of mouth what he says in print, namely that *The Treasure of the Humble* was written "at length" after *The Life of the Bee, Monna Vanna*, and the translation of *Macbeth*!³). The fact is, there is very little printed matter easily available on the biography proper of Maeterlinck. It is true we have several accounts of him by his wife in a style singularly like his own; we have gossip; we have delightful portraits of the houses he lives in – but we have no bricks for building with.

A future biographer may have at his hands what the present lacks; but I for my part have no other ambition for this book than that it should be a running account of Maeterlinck's works, with some suggestions as to their interpretation and value.

JETHRO BITHELL.

Hammerfield,

Nr. Hemel Hempstead,

31st January, 1913.

³ "*La Vie des Abeilles* brought us from the tiptoe of expectance to a more reasonable attitude, and *Monna Vanna* and the translation of *Macbeth* keyed our hopes still lower; but at length in *Le Trésor des Humbles* Maeterlinck returned to his early inspiration." —*Academy*, 15th June, 1912.

MAURICE MAETERLINCK

CHAPTER I

Maurice Polydore Marie Bernard Maeterlinck⁴ was born at Ghent on the 29th of August, 1862. It is known that his family was settled at Renaix in East Flanders as early as the fourteenth century; and the Maeterlincks are mentioned as burghers of Ghent in the annals of Flanders. The name is said to be derived from the Flemish word "maet" (Dutch "maat"), "measure," and is interpreted as "the man who measures out: distributor." In harmony with this interpretation the story goes that one of the poet's ancestors was mayor of his village during a year of famine, and that he in that capacity distributed corn among the poor. Maeterlinck's father was a notary by profession; being in comfortable circumstances, however, he did not practise, but lived in a country villa at Oostacker, near Ghent, on the banks of the broad canal which joins Ghent to the Scheldt at the Dutch town of Terneuzen.⁵ Here through the paternal garden the sea-going ships seemed to glide, "spreading their majestic shadows over the avenues filled with roses and bees."⁶

Those bees and flowers in his father's garden stand for much

⁴ The Flemish pronunciation is Mäh-ter-lee-nk; but Frenchmen pronounce it as though it were a French name.

⁵ It was by this canal, no doubt, that Maeterlinck as a young man would skate "into Holland." See Huret's *Enquête*. And it inspired the scenery of *The Seven Princesses*.

⁶ Mme Georgette Leblanc, *Morceaux choisis*, Introduction.

in the healthy work of his second period. Over the fatalistic work of his first period lies, it may be, the shadow of the town he was born in. Maeterlinck was never absorbed by Ghent, as Rodenbach was by Bruges; but he was, as a young man, oppressed by some of its moods. Casual visitors to Ghent and Bruges may see nothing of the melancholy that poets and painters have woven into them; they may see in them thriving commercial towns; but poets and painters have loved their legendary gloom. "Black, suspicious watch-towers," this is Ghent seen by an artist's eyes, "dark canals on whose weary waters swans are swimming, mediaeval gateways, convents hidden by walls, churches in whose dusk women in wide, dark cloaks and ruche caps cower on the floor like a flight of frightened winter birds. Little streets as narrow as your hand, with bowed-down ancient houses all awry, roofs with three-cornered windows which look like sleepy eyes. Hospitals, gloomy old castles. And over all a dull, septentrional heaven."⁷ That hospital on the canal bank which starts a poem in *Serres Chaudes*⁸ may be one he knew from childhood; the old citadel of Ghent with its dungeons may be the prototype of the castles of his dramas.

One part of his life in Ghent is still a bitter memory to our poet. "Maeterlinck will never forgive the Jesuit fathers of the Collège de Sainte-Barbe⁹ their narrow tyranny... I have often

⁷ Anselma Heine, *Maeterlinck*, pp. 7-8.

⁸ *Serres Chaudes*, "Hôpital."

⁹ "The literary history of modern Belgium, by the freaks of chance, was born in

heard him say that he would not begin life again if he had to pay for it by his seven years at school. There is, he is accustomed to say, only one crime which is beyond pardon, the crime which poisons the pleasures and kills the smile of a child."¹⁰

Out of twenty pupils in the highest class at Sainte-Barbe fourteen were intended to be Jesuits or priests. Such a school was not likely to be a good training-place for poets. Indeed, though Latin verses were allowed, it forbade the practice of vernacular poetry.¹¹ And yet this very school has turned out not less than five poets of international reputation. Emile Verhaeren (who may be called the national poet of Flanders, the most international of French poets after Victor Hugo) and Georges Rodenbach had been schoolboys together at Sainte-Barbe; and on its benches three other poets, Maeterlinck, Grégoire Le Roy, and Charles van Lerberghe, formed friendships for life. These three boys put their small cash together and subscribed to *La Jeune Belgique*, the clarion journal which, under the editorship of Max Waller, was calling Belgian literature into life; they devoured its pages

one single house. In Ghent, the favourite city of the Emperor Charles V., in the old Flemish city heavy with fortifications, rises remote, far from noisy streets, Sainte-Barbe, the grey-walled Jesuit monastery. Its thick, defensive walls, its silent corridors and refectories, remind one somewhat of Oxford's beautiful colleges; here, however, there is no ivy softening the walls, there are no flowers to lay their variegated carpet over the green courts." – Stefan Zweig, *Emile Verhaeren (Mercure de France, 1910)*, pp. 39-40.

¹⁰ Mme Georgette Leblanc, *Morceaux choisis*, Introduction.

¹¹ Anselma Heine, *Maeterlinck*, p. 9. But cf. Léon Bazalgette, *Emile Verhaeren*, p. 14.

clandestinely, as other schoolboys smoke their first cigarettes;¹² and Maeterlinck even sent in a poem which was accepted and printed. This was in 1883.

The fact that Maeterlinck was reading *La Jeune Belgique* shows that he was already spoilt for a priest. But he was essentially religious; and his career has proved that he was one of those poets Verhaeren sings of, who have arrived too late in history to be priests, but who are constrained by the force of their convictions to preach a new gospel. It was the religion inborn in him, as well as his monastic training, which made him a reader and interpreter of such mystics as Ruysbroeck, Jakob Boehme, and Swedenborg. As a schoolboy he did not feel attracted to poetry alone; he had a great liking for science, and his great wish was to study medicine.¹³ Some time ago he wrote to a French medical journal as follows:

"I never commenced the study of medicine. I did my duty in conforming with the family tradition, which ordains that the eldest son shall be an *avocat*. I shall regret to my last day that I obeyed that tradition, and consecrated my most precious years to the vainest of the sciences. All my instincts, all my inclinations, attached me to the study of medicine, which I am more than convinced is the most beautiful of the keys that give access to the great realities of life."

¹² Gérard Harry, *Maeterlinck*, p. 9, note.

¹³ Gérard Harry, *Maeterlinck*, p. 26; Heine, *Maeterlinck*, p. 9.

It was in 1885 that he entered the University of Ghent as a student of law. Like Lessing and Goethe, he had no respect for his professors. He was again a fellow-student of van Lerberghe and Le Roy; they also were students of jurisprudence. He was twenty-four when, according to his parents' wish, he settled in Ghent as an *avocat*; to lose, as Gérard Harry puts it, "with triumphant facility the first and last causes which were confided to him." His shyness and the thin, squeaking voice in his robust peasant's frame were against him in a profession which in any case he hated. He practised for a year or so, and then – "il a jeté la toque et la robe aux orties."

In 1886 he set out for Paris, ostensibly with the object of completing his legal education there. Grégoire Le Roy accompanied him; and each stayed about seven months. They had lodgings at 22 Rue de Seine. Grégoire Le Roy scamped painting at the Ecole St Luc and the Atelier Gervex et Humbert; and the pair of them spent a great deal of time in the museums. But the important thing in their stay in Paris was that they came into contact with men of letters. In the Brasserie Pousset at the heart of the Quartier Latin they heard Villiers de L'Isle-Adam, "that evangelist of dream and irony," reciting his short stories before writing them down. "I saw Villiers de L'Isle-Adam very often during the seven months I spent at Paris," Maeterlinck told Huret. "All I have done I owe to Villiers, to his conversation more than to his works, though I admire the latter exceedingly." Villiers was twenty-two years older than Maeterlinck, having

been born in 1840; but his masterpieces had not long been published, and it was only in the later 'eighties that the young poets who were to be known as symbolists began to gather round him, as they gathered round Mallarmé and Verlaine.

Villiers de L'Isle-Adam died in Paris in 1889. In the same year died, also in Paris, another writer who might be proved to have influenced Maeterlinck,¹⁴ even if the latter had not placed on record his high admiration of him. This was Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly (born 1808). Maeterlinck, after the banquet offered to him by the city of Brussels on the occasion of his receiving the Nobel prize, wrote despondently, expressing the good omen, seeing that men of real genius like Villiers de L'Isle-Adam and Barbey d'Aurevilly had died in obscurity and poverty. Both men, indeed, had been hostile to cheap popularity. Barbey lived, to quote Paul Bourget, "in a state of permanent revolt and continued protest." He had written scathing attacks on the Parnassians. Both poets were idealists among the naturalists; their idealism is a bridge spanning naturalism and joining the romanticists with the symbolists or neo-romanticists.

Villiers was a king in exile on whom the young squires attended. But they themselves had their spurs to win; and it was the greatest good fortune for Maeterlinck that he was able to join their company and take part in their campaign. Several of them, Jean Ajalbert, Ephraïm Mikhaël, Pierre Quillard, had

¹⁴ Cf., for instance, Barbey's "Réfléchir sur son bonheur n'est-ce pas le doubler?" with the opening chapters of *Sagesse et Destinée*.

already been contributing to *La Basoche*, a review published at Brussels. There was Rodolphe Darzens, who, two years later, was to anticipate Maeterlinck in writing a play on Mary Magdalene. There was Paul Roux, who, as time went on, blossomed into "Saint-Pol-Roux le Magnifique" – he who founded "le Magnificisme," the school of poetry which had for its programme "a mystical *magnificat* to eternal nature." It was in Pierre Quillard's rooms one evening that Grégoire Le Roy read to this circle of friends a short story by Maeterlinck: *Le Massacre des Innocents*. On the day following he introduced the author of the tale. On the 1st March, 1886, these young writers founded *La Pléiade*,¹⁵ a short-lived review – six numbers appeared – which nevertheless played an important part. Beside the authors mentioned, it published contributions from René Ghil. It had the glory of printing the first verses of Charles van Lerberghe, and, in addition to several poems which were to appear in *Serres Chaudes*, Maeterlinck's *Massacre des Innocents* (May, 1886).

Le Massacre des Innocents was signed "Mooris Maeterlinck." The author discarded it; but it was reprinted in Gérard Harry's monograph (1909). A translation by Edith Wingate Rinder appeared at Chicago in 1895.¹⁶

It is a story which reproduces the delightful quaintness of early

¹⁵ The review of the same name which was published at Brussels, by Lacomblez, beginning three years later, and in which Maeterlinck's criticism of Iwan Gilkin's *Damnation de l'Artiste* appeared, was a third-rate periodical.

¹⁶ *The Massacre of the Innocents and other Tales by Belgian Writers.*

Dutch and Flemish painting:

"There were thirty horsemen or thereabouts, covered with armour, round an old man with a white beard. On the croup of their horses rode red or yellow lansquenets, who dismounted and ran across the snow to stretch their limbs, while several soldiers clad in iron dismounted also, and pissed against the trees they had tied their horses to.

"Then they made for the Golden Sun Inn, and knocked at the door, which was opened reluctantly, and they went and warmed themselves by the fire while beer was served to them.

"Then they went out of the inn, with pots and pitchers and loaves of wheaten bread for their companions who had stayed round the man with the white beard, he who was waiting amid the lances.

"The street being still deserted, the captain sent horsemen behind the houses, in order to keep a hold on the hamlet from the side of the fields, and ordered the lansquenets to bring before him all infants of two years old or over, that they might be massacred, even as it is written in the Gospel of Saint Matthew."

Maeterlinck in this story has simply turned an old picture, or perhaps several pictures, into words. The cruelty of the massacre does not affect us in the least; the style is such that anyone who has seen the Breughels' paintings understands at once that a series of fantastic pictures, which have no relation whatever to fact, or logic, or history, are being drawn; not dream-pictures, but scenes

drawn with the greatest clearness, and figures standing out boldly in flesh and blood:

"But he replied in terror that the Spaniards had arrived, that they had set fire to the farm, hanged his mother in the willow-trees, and tied his nine little sisters to the trunk of a great tree."

(You are to *see* the woman hanging in the willow-trees, the deep green and any other colours you like... Never mind about the pain the little girls must be suffering.)

"They came near a mill, on the skirts of the forest, and saw the farm burning in the midst of the stars." (This is a flat canvas, remember.) "Here they took their station, before a pond covered with ice, under enormous oaks..."

"There was a great massacre on the pond, in the midst of huddling sheep, and cows that looked on the battle and the moon."

This transposition of the mood (*Stimming*) of old paintings (not by any means word-painting or descriptive writing) is the secret of much of the verse of two other Flemings – Elskamp and Verhaeren. It is an immense pity that Maeterlinck did not write more in this fashion; many of us would have given some of his essays for this pure artistry. Not that he threw his gift of seeing pictures away; he made good use of it even when he had given up the direct painting of moods for the indirect suggestion of them (or, in other words, when from a realist he had become a symbolist).

Maeterlinck, at the time he wrote *The Massacre of the Innocents*, must have been trying his hand at various forms of literature. Adolphe van Bever in his little book publishes a letter from Charles van Lerberghe to himself which shows that the two young poets corrected each other's efforts. The letter, too, draws a portrait of Maeterlinck as he appeared at this time:

"Maeterlinck sent me verses, sonnets principally in Heredia's manner, but Flemish in colour, short stories something like Maupassant's, a comedy full of humour and ironical observation, and other attempts. It is characteristic that he never sent me any tragedy or epic poem, never anything bombastic or declamatory, never anything languorous or sentimental either. Neither the rhetorical nor the elegiac had any hold on him. He was a fine handsome young fellow, always riding his bicycle or rowing, the kind of student you would expect to see at Yale or Harvard. But he was a poet besides being an athlete, and his robust exterior concealed a temperament of extreme sensitiveness..."

It was certainly van Lerberghe's own idea that it was he who had trained Maeterlinck; and Maeterlinck would certainly admit it. It was van Lerberghe, too, more than any other, who won Maeterlinck over to symbolism. But Maeterlinck met Mallarmé personally during his stay in Paris; in short, various influences worked upon him to turn him from Heredia's and Maupassant's manner to that of Mallarmé's disciples.

The tide was flowing in that direction. Verhaeren was soon

to desert the Parnassian camp.¹⁷ Henri de Régnier was on the point of doing so.¹⁸ Two years before Jean Moréas had published his first book: *Les Syrtes* (December 1884). In 1885 René Ghil's *Légendes d'âmes et de sangs* and Jules Laforgue's *Les Complaintes* came out; in 1886, René Ghil's *Le Traité du Verbe*, Jean Moréas's *Les Cantilènes*, Rimbaud's *Les Illuminations*, Vielé-Griffin's *Cueille d'Avril*. In the pages of *La Vogue*, launched on the 11th of April, 1886, were appearing some of the poems which Gustave Kahn was to publish in 1887, as *Les Palais Nomades*. All these books are landmarks in the onward path of symbolism;¹⁹ not because they are all, technically, symbolic, but because each is in a new manner.

Closely associated with the birth and growth of symbolism is the question of the origin of *vers libres*. French authorities differ: some credit Jules Laforgue with its invention; others a Polish Jewess, Marie Kryzinska, who seems to have attempted to write French poetry; and two of the French poets who were the first to use the medium, Francis Vielé-Griffin and Gustave Kahn, might dispute the glory of being its originators. As to Francis

¹⁷ Verhaeren's first *vers libres* appeared in book form in January, 1891 (printed in December, 1890) in *Les Flambeaux noirs*. But in May, 1890, he had published, in *La Wallonie*, a poem in *vers libres*; and this is dated 1889.

¹⁸ *Poèmes anciens et romanesques*, his first book of acknowledged symbolism, did not appear till 1890, but the poems which compose it were written between 1887 and 1888.

¹⁹ It was in 1886, too, that Gustave Kahn with the collaboration of Jean Moréas and Paul Adam, founded the review *Le Symboliste*.

Vielé-Griffin, he is said to have introduced it by translations of Walt Whitman;²⁰ or, in other words, the French *vers libre* is an imitation of Whitman's lawless line. Now this is a matter which, as we shall see, directly concerns Maeterlinck; so it will not be extraneous to our subject to discuss here the question of the origin of *vers libres*.

Marie Kryzinska may be ruled out to begin with. Her poetry was laughed at; nobody took her seriously – at the most she served as an engine of war against Gustave Kahn, who was then anything but popular. As to Jules Laforgue, he was very much admired, and his influence is beyond question; but what he attempted in his verses was something quite different to what the *verslibristes* proper attempted: it was rather a manner of compressing his ideas than of expressing them musically. As for Walt Whitman and Vielé-Griffin, it is true that translations had appeared, but they had not attracted the least notice, and no one betrayed the slightest interest for the technique of the American poet. As a matter of fact, few people knew anything about Whitman, beside the two poets of American birth, Francis Vielé-Griffin and Stuart Merrill; and both at that time, although of course their manner was new, were writing, as far as *form* is

²⁰ A translation of Whitman's *Enfants d'Adam*, by Jules Laforgue, appeared in *La Vogue* in 1886. Stuart Merrill personally handed this translation to Whitman, who was delighted. (See *Le Masque*, Série ii, Nos. 9 and 10, 1912). Vielé-Griffin's first translation of Whitman appeared in November, 1888, in *La Revue indépendante*; another translation of his appeared afterwards in *La Cravache*. A translation of Whitman had appeared in the *Revue des deux Mondes* in the reign of Napoleon III.

concerned, *regular* verses. Another of the first poets to write free verses, the Walloon poet, Albert Mockel, was not unacquainted with Whitman; he had read *American Poems selected by William M. Rossetti*. Now Mockel, as editor of *La Wallonie*, which he had founded to defend the new style, was connected with the whole group of symbolists and *verslibristes*, all of whom, practically, were regular contributors to the review. And *La Wallonie* was hardy: it lasted seven years; a great rallying ground of the young fighters before the advent of the *Mercur de France*, the second series of *La Vogue*, and *La Plume*. But, as it happened, Mockel was not in the least inspired by the selections from Whitman in Rossetti's collection; they made the impression on him of being Bible verses rather than real verses. One poet Whitman's lawless line did directly influence; and this was Maeterlinck, whose rhymeless verse in *Serres Chaudes* was written under the inspiration of *Leaves of Grass*. But *Serres Chaudes* did not appear till 1889, and even then the majority of the poems in the volume were rhymed and regular; so that it could hardly be claimed that Maeterlinck was the originator of the *vers libre*.²¹

It would seem that Gustave Kahn has the greatest claim to priority. But it was Vielé-Griffin who popularised the new medium. Albert Mockel, too, must be mentioned. Kahn's *Palais Nomades* appeared in April, 1887; Mockel's first *vers libres* appeared in *La Wallonie* in July, 1887. But these poems of

²¹ He himself told Huret that *La Princesse Maleine* was written in *vers libres* concealed typographically as prose.

Mockel had been written earlier, tentative verse by a young man not so confident in himself as Kahn, and who was only induced to publish by Kahn's audacious book.

Mallarmé's attitude should be decisive. He studied the question, and reflected for a long time when he was invited to preside at a banquet offered to Gustave Kahn, in honour of the latter's book, *La Pluie et le beau Temps*. But, having weighed the arguments for and against, Mallarmé not only agreed to preside at the banquet, but actually to bear witness in favour of Kahn as the innovator of the *vers libre*—which he did in a toast reproduced in *La Revue blanche*.

Catulle Mendès, in his half-serious manner, suggested that the first advocacy of the *vers libre* was to be found in a book called *Poésie nouvelle*, which Lemerre brought out in 1880. The author, a certain Della Rocca de Vergalo, was a Peruvian exile living in Paris; his ideas were that lines of poetry should begin with small letters, and that the alternance of masculine and feminine rhymes should be discarded. But the founders of the *vers libre*, I am told, had never heard of this book. Mallarmé, it is true, had been interested in finding a publisher for it; but merely because he wished to help the author to earn money enough to take him back to Peru.

These questions of symbolism and free verse must have been discussed in the *cénacle* which Maeterlinck joined. Not one of the group adopted the *vers libre* at this time; more than one, though all had the greatest regard for Mallarmé, may be said

to have remained tolerably faithful to the Parnassian prosody in after years. The symbolist element among them was represented really by Saint-Pol-Roux and Maeterlinck.

CHAPTER II

On his return to Belgium, Maeterlinck spent his winters in Ghent, in the house of his parents; his summers in the family villa at the village of Oostacker.

He now (1887) became, acquainted with Georges Rodenbach, who introduced him to the directors of *La Jeune Belgique*. He was in no hurry to write, however; in three years the magazine only published three poems, still in regular verse, from his pen. These were included later in *Serres Chaudes*, as also were the few poems in regular verse which appeared in the anthology of Belgian verse, *Le Parnasse de la Jeune Belgique*, published in 1887 under the auspices of *La Jeune Belgique*.

The fact that by 1887 it was possible to compile such an anthology is remarkable; for before 1880 Belgium, from the point of view of literature, was a desert. But in 1879 certain noisy students at the University of Louvain (Verhaeren, Gilkin, Giraud, Ernest van Dyck,²² Edmond Deman,²³ and others) put their heads together and founded a bantam magazine, *La Semaine des Etudiants*.²⁴ This magazine was the beginning of the modern movement in Belgian literature. In October of the "following

²² The famous Wagner tenor.

²³ The Brussels publisher.

²⁴ The first number is dated Saturday, the 18th October, 1879, and begins with "rimes d'avant poste" by "Rodolphe" (=Verhaeren).

year, another student, who, when his identity was disclosed, turned out to be Max Waller, brought out a hostile magazine, *Le Type*; and the fight between the rivals became so merciless that the University authorities suppressed them both. Max Waller, however, nothing daunted, went to Brussels, and acquired *La Jeune Belgique*, a review that had been founded by students of Brussels University, made friends with his antagonists of *La Semaine*, and associated them with himself in the editing of his review. Georges Eekhoud, Georges Rodenbach, and other writers joined them; and *La Jeune Belgique* went on with its task of fighting the Philistine. Max Waller died in 1889; and when Gilkin became editor in 1891, it became the organ of the Parnassians in Belgium, while the symbolists (French as well as Belgian) enriched the pages of *La Wallonie*, which Albert Mockel had founded in Liège in 1886.

We have seen, from Charles van Lerberghe's letter to Adolphe van Bever, that Maeterlinck began by writing "short stories something like Maupassant's." *The Massacre of the Innocents* is realistic. Verhaeren, too, had discovered himself when, a student at Louvain, he read Maupassant's poems. His first book, *Les Flamandes*, made a critic say that the poet had burst on the world like an abscess. And the Belgians had in Camille Lemonnier a realist whose novels are as uncompromising as those of Zola. At the time when Maeterlinck began to write Lemonnier was, as they called him, the field-marshal of Belgian literature. In the spring of 1883, the jury whose duty it was to award a prize for

the best work published during the last five years decided that no book had been published which was sufficiently meritorious. It was felt that this was an official insult to Belgian letters, and particularly to Camille Lemonnier, who had published various works of striking merit in the five years concerned. A *banquet de guerre* to Lemonnier was arranged by *La Jeune Belgique*, and there were two hundred and twelve subscribers. The banquet took place on the 27th May, 1883, and this event may be said to mark, not only the triumph of naturalism in Belgium, but also the fact that the élite of the Belgians were now conscious of the renaissance of their literature.²⁵ It will be Maeterlinck's task, after his return to Belgium, to react against this naturalism, and to write works which precipitate the decay of naturalism, not in Belgium only, but in the whole world; he and other Belgians, until Belgian literature becomes, as it was in the time of chivalry, "when the muse was the august sister of the sword, and stanzas were like bright staircases climbed, in pomp and epic fires, by verses casqued with silver like knights,"²⁶ the most discussed, the most suggestive literature in Europe.²⁷

In this reaction against naturalism in Belgium, Maeterlinck's work was hardly more effective than the dreamy poetry of

²⁵ Iwan Gilkin, *Quinze années de littérature*.

²⁶ Albert Giraud, *Hors du Siècle*.

²⁷ In the thirteenth century in Germany, "Fleming" was synonymous with "verray parfit, gentil knight." The Bavarian Sir Neidhart von Reuental, for instance, refers to himself as a "Fleming."

Georges Rodenbach. It was not till 1887 that Rodenbach definitely left Belgium for Paris, and by that time he was a force in Belgian literature. No doubt he influenced Maeterlinck;²⁸ he too was a mystic and a poet of silence. Rodenbach compares his soul with half-transparent water, with the water shut up in an aquarium: "he stands in silent fear before the riddle of this 'âme sous-marine,' surmising a deep and mysterious abyss, at the bottom of which a priceless treasure of dreams is lying buried, under the shimmering surface that quietly reflects images of the world. He complains that the poor immensurable soul knows itself so little, knows no more of its life than the water-lily knows of the surface it floats on:

"Ah! ce que l'âme sait d'elle-même est si peu
Devant l'immensité de sa vie inconnue!"

"Then he would fain descend into this unknown world, seek through the dark deeps, dive for the treasures which slumber there perhaps... But it remains a longing, a wish, a dream:

"Je rêve de plonger jusqu'au fond de mon âme
Où des rêves sombres ont perdu leur trésor."

"And so Rodenbach remains standing on the surface, staring

²⁸ Cf. Rodenbach's: "Je vis comme si mon âme avait été De la lune et de l'eau qu'on aurait mis sous verre" with Maeterlinck's: "On en a mis plusieurs sur d'anciens clairs de lune."— *Serres Chaudes*, "Cloches de verre."

at the deeps, but without seeing anything in them other than the trembling reflection of the things around him."²⁹

Maeterlinck, as we shall see, is also the poet of the soul; he sees it under a bell-jar as Rodenbach saw it in an aquarium; but Maeterlinck does not stand gazing at the unknown waters: he dives into the deeps, and brings back the treasures which Rodenbach surmised.

²⁹ G. van Hamel, *Het Letterkundige Leven van Frankrijk*, pp. 127-8.

CHAPTER III

In 1889 Maeterlinck published his first book: *Serres Chaudes* (Hot-houses). We have seen that several of the poems which compose it had already appeared in *La Pléiade* and in *Le Parnasse de la Jeune Belgique*.

The subject of this collection of verse, as, indeed, of the dramas and the essays which were to follow, is *the soul*. Rodenbach, we remember, saw the soul prisoned in an aquarium, "at the bottom of the ponds of dream," reflected in the glass of mirrors; Maeterlinck sees it languid, and moist, and oppressed, and helplessly inactive³⁰ in a hot-house whose doors are closed for ever. The tropical atmosphere is created by pictures (seen through the deep green windows of the hot-house) as of lions drowned in sunshine, or of mighty forests lying with not a leaf stirring over the roses of passion by night. But of a sudden (for it is all a dream) we may find ourselves in the reek of the "strange exhalations" of fever-patients in some dark hospital glooming a clogged canal in Ghent... Evidently not a book for the normal Philistine. In Ghent it made people look askance at Maeterlinck. It branded him as a decadent.

And that was a dreadful thing in Belgium. Nay, in that country,

³⁰ Cf. Rodenbach, *Le Règne du Silence*, p. 1: "Mais les choses pourtant entre le cadre d'or Ont un air de souffrir de leur vie inactive; Le miroir qui les aime a borné leur essor En un recul de vie exigüe et captive..."

at that time, and for long after, even to be a poet was a disgrace. It is only by remembering this fact that one can understand the brutality of the fight waged by the reviews, and by the poets in their books; and it is perhaps owing to the hostility of the public that such a great mass of good poetry was written. Year after year Charles van Lerberghe renewed his futile application to the Government for a poor post as secondary teacher, and on account of his first writings³¹ Maeterlinck was refused some modest public office for which he applied.

The contempt of the Belgians for young poets may be condoned to a certain extent when one appreciates the absurdities in which some of them indulged. It was not the *gaminerie* of such poets as Théodore Hannon and Max Waller which shocked the honest burghers; they were rather horrified at the absurdities of the new style. Rodenbach, who was a real poet, wrote crazy things; as, for instance, when he compared a muslin curtain to a communicant partaking of the moon.³² Even when the absurdity is an application of the theories of the symbolists it is often apt

³¹ Gérard Harry, p. 19. *Le Masque*, Série ii, No. 5: "jeune encore, il avait sollicité les fonctions de juge de paix, mais le gouvernement belge, prévoyant son destin de poète, les lui avait généreusement refusées, et pour reconnaître ce service, Maeterlinck ne lui rend que mépris et dédain et refuse même les distinctions honorifiques les plus hautes, celles qu'on n'accorde généralement qu'aux très grands industriels ou aux très vieux militaires ou politiciens."

³² "Chambres pleines de songe! Elles vivent vraimentEn des rêves plus beaux que la vie ambiante,Grandissant toute chose au Symbole, voyantDans chaque rideau pâle une CommunianteAux falbalas de mousseline s'éployantQui communique au bord des vitres, de la Lune!"— *Le Règne du Silence*, p. 4.

to raise a laugh, e.g., when Théodore Hannon, extending the doctrine that perfumes sing, makes a perfume blare:

"Opoponax! nom très bizarre
Et parfum plus bizarre encor!
Opoponax, le son du cor
Est pâle auprès de ta fanfare!"

A goodly list of absurdities could be collected from *Serres Chaudes* also, if the collector detached odd passages from their context:

"Perhaps there is a tramp on a throne,
You have the idea that corsars are waiting on a pond,
And that antediluvian beings are going to invade towns."

And a scientist of Lombroso's type could easily, by culling choice quotations, draw an appalling picture of a degenerate:

"Pity my absence on
The threshold of my will!
My soul is helpless, wan,
With white inaction ill."

So incoherent and strange have these poems³³ appeared to

³³ They make one think of what Novalis wrote: "poems unconnected, yet with associations, like dreams; poems, melodious merely and full of beautiful words, but absolutely without sense or connection – at most individual sentences intelligible –

some people who are ardent Maeterlinckians that they assume he may, for a period, have been mentally ill.³⁴ If he had been, it would have been historically significant. Verhaeren went through such a period of mental illness. It might be asserted that the modern man must be mad. The life of to-day, especially in cities, with its whipped hurry, its dust and noises, is too complex to be lived with the nerves of a Victorian. But the human organism is capable of infinite assimilation; and the period we live in is busy creating a new type of man.³⁵ It is the glory of Verhaeren to have sung the advent of this new man; it is the glory of Maeterlinck, as we shall see, to have proved that a species forcibly adjusts itself to existing conditions.

To a Victorian the poems in *Serres Chaudes* must of necessity seem diseased; just as the greater part of Tennyson's poetry must of necessity seem ordinary to us. How many "Dickhäuter" have called Hoffmansthal's poetry diseased? If it is, so is Yeats's. Turn from Robert Bridges's poems of outdoor life – the noble old English style – to Yeats's dim visions, or to Arthur Symons's harpsichord dreaming through the room, and you have the

nothing but fragments, so to speak, of the most varied things."

³⁴ See Schlaf's *Maeterlinck*, p. 12; *ibid.*, p. 30; and Monty Jacobs' *Maeterlinck*, p. 39. But Maeterlinck's brain was always as healthy as his body. At the time he wrote *Serres Chaudes* disease was fashionable, that is all; and, beside the main influence of Baudelaire, there was the fear of death instilled by the Jesuits.

³⁵ Verhaeren, in his monograph on Rembrandt (1905), has suggested that the man of genius may, "in specially favourable conditions, create a new race, thanks to the happy deformation of his brain fixing itself first, by a propitious crossing, in his direct descendants, to be transmitted afterwards to a whole posterity."

difference between yesterday and to-day.

At all events *Serres Chaudes*, whether mad or not, is bathed in the same atmosphere as the dramas soon to follow. As to the relative value of the book from the point of view of art, opinion differs. Some good critics who are not prone to praise think highly of it; but the general impression seems to be that these poems are chiefly of interest as marking a stage in the author's development. If Maeterlinck had written nothing more he would have been quite forgotten, or only remembered because, for instance, Charles van Lerberghe wrote some poetry in the form of a criticism of the book. Compared with other Belgian lyric verse, Verhaeren's, or Charles van Lerberghe's, or Max Elskamp's, it is inferior work. Not that there are no good poems; some of them, indeed, are excellent, and not seldom the poet is on the track of something fine:

"Attention! the shadow of great sailing-ships passes
over the dahlias of submarine forests;
And I am for a moment in the shadow of whales
going to the pole!"

Whatever value the book may have as poetry, the rhymeless poems in it have, as we have seen, considerable importance as being attempts to reproduce Walt Whitman's manner. They are interesting, too, because they attempt to create a mood by the use

of successive images.³⁶ Perhaps, elsewhere (Tancredi de Visan suggests the Song of Solomon) this method has been applied successfully. The poems in *Serres Chaudes* are experiments.

³⁶ See Tancredi de Visan's interpretation in *L'Attitude du Lyrisme contemporain*, pp. 119 ff.

CHAPTER IV

Some of the most eminent symbolists were strongly influenced by the pessimistic philosophy of Schopenhauer³⁷ and Eduard von Hartmann. Their outlook on the world is not a whit more rosy than that of the naturalists. Vielé-Griffin did, it is true, preach the doctrine that the principle of all things is activity; and that, since every "function in exercise" implies a pleasure, there cannot be activity without joy, even grief being good, for grief, too, is a spending of energy. Albert Mockel's doctrine of aspiration, moreover – his theory that the soul, constantly changing like a river, runs like a river to some far ocean of the future – is elevating and consoling; and is a step onward to the complete victory won over pessimism by Verhaeren and Maeterlinck. But when we read the first plays of Maeterlinck we must not forget that he is still a prisoner in the dark cave, with his back to the full light of the real which he was to turn round to later.

The first of these plays out of the darkness, *La Princesse Maleine* (The Princess Maleine), a drama in five acts, came out in 1889 in a first edition of thirty copies which Maeterlinck himself, with the help of a friend, had printed for private circulation on a small hand-press.

³⁷ Maeterlinck told Huret that he had been influenced by Schopenhauer "qui arrive jusqu'à vous consoler de la mort."

Iwan Gilkin, to whose *Damnation de l'Artiste*, published in 1890, Maeterlinck was to dedicate his first critique, was the first to analyse it in *La Jeune Belgique*; and he was not wrong when he called it "an important work which marks a date in the history of the contemporary theatre." But it was Octave Mirbeau's famous article in *Figaro* which made Maeterlinck. Literally, he awoke and found himself famous. The trumpet-blast that awoke the world and frightened Maeterlinck into deeper shyness, was this:

"I know nothing of M. Maurice Maeterlinck. I know not whence he is nor how he is. Whether he is old or young, rich or poor, I know not. I only know that no man is more unknown than he; and I know also that he has created a masterpiece, not a masterpiece labelled masterpiece in advance, such as our young masters publish every day, sung to all the notes of the squeaking lyre – or rather of the squeaking flute of our day; but an admirable and a pure eternal masterpiece, a masterpiece which is sufficient to immortalise a name, and to make all those who are an-hungered for the beautiful and the great rise up and call this name blessed; a masterpiece such as honest and tormented artists have, sometimes, in their hours of enthusiasm, dreamed of writing, and such as up to the present not one of them has written. In short, M. Maurice Maeterlinck has given us the greatest work of genius of our time, and the most extraordinary and the most simple also, comparable, and – shall I dare to say it – superior in beauty to whatever is most beautiful in Shakespeare. This work is called *La Princesse Maleine*. Are there in all the world

twenty persons who know it? I doubt it."³⁸

The Pre-Raphaelite atmosphere of the play will escape no one. At the time he wrote it Maeterlinck had covered the walls of his study with pictures taken from Walter Crane's books for children; and he had enhanced their effect by framing them under green-tinted glass. He found his source in the English translation of one of Grimm's fairy-tales, that which tells of the fair maid Maleen.³⁹ He has changed the Low German atmosphere of the tale to one suggested vaguely by Dutch, Scandinavian, and English names. He has imported, as the instigator of all the evil, a copy of Queen Gertrude in Hamlet. This is Anne, the dethroned Queen of Jutland, who has taken refuge at the Court of King Hjalmar at Ysselmonde. She soon has the old king in her power; and at the same time she lays traps for his son, Prince Hjalmar. The latter is betrothed to Princess Maleine, the daughter of King Marcellus; but at the banquet to celebrate the betrothal a fierce quarrel between the two kings breaks out, the consequence of which is a war in which King Hjalmar kills Marcellus and lays his realm waste. Before the outbreak of the war, however, Marcellus had immured Maleine, because she would not forget Prince Hjalmar, together with her nurse, in an old tower from which the two women, loosening the stones with their finger-nails, escape. They go wandering until they arrive at the Castle of Ysselmonde; and here Maleine becomes serving-woman to Princess Uglyane, the

³⁸ Figaro, 24th August, 1890.

³⁹ Pronounced in German like the French *Maleine*.

daughter of Queen Anne. Uglyane is about to be married to Prince Hjalmar; but Maleine makes herself known to him, and he is so happy that he believes he is "up to the heart in Heaven." At a Court festival a door opens and Princess Maleine is seen in white bridal garments; the queen pretends to be kind to her, makes an attempt to poison her which is only half successful, and finally strangles her. Prince Hjalmar finds the corpse, and stabs the queen and himself; and the old king asks whether there will be salad for breakfast.

It is not astonishing that Octave Mirbeau thought the play was in the Shakespearian style. The resemblance is striking. Hjalmar is clearly modelled on Hamlet. The nurse is a mere copy of the nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*. There is a clown. There is the same changing of scenes as in Shakespeare. Dire portents accompany the action: there is a comet shedding blood over the castle, there is a rain of stars; there is the same eclipse of the moon as heralded the fall of Cæsar; and if the graves are not tenantless, as they were in Rome, someone says they are going to be. It would be easy to draw up a list of apparent reminiscences. Notwithstanding this René Doumic is quite wrong when he talks of the drama being made with rags of Shakespeare. Maeterlinck has simply taken his requisites from Shakespeare. There are two things in which Maeterlinck is quite original: the dialogue, and the æsthetic intention.

Shakespeare flows along in lyrical and rhetorical sentences. Maeterlinck's sentences are short, often unfinished, leaving

much to be guessed at; and they are the common speech of everyday life, containing no archaic or poetic diction. It is no doubt quite true that French people do not talk in this style; but, as van Hamel points out, it is the language of the taciturn Flemish peasants among whom the poet was living when he wrote the play. Maeterlinck has himself⁴⁰ criticised "the astonished repeating of words which gives the personages the appearance of rather deaf somnambulists for ever being shocked out of a painful dream." ...

"However," he continues, "this want of promptitude in hearing and replying is intimately connected with their psychology and the somewhat haggard idea they have of the universe." It is already that *interior dialogue* of which he showed such a mastery in his next plays: the characters grope for words and stammer fragments, but we know by what they do not say what is happening in their souls. "It is closely connected with what Maeterlinck has written about Silence."⁴¹ This second, unspoken dialogue, which, as a matter of fact, for our poet is the real one, is made possible by various expedients: by pauses, gestures, and by other indirect means of this nature. Most of all, however, by the

⁴⁰ Preface to *Théâtre*, p. 2.

⁴¹ In Swedenborg's mysticism, the literal meanings of words are only protecting veils which hide their inner meanings. See "Le Tragique Quotidien" (in *Le Trésor des Humbles*) pp. 173-4. That Maeterlinck was meditating the famous chapter on "Silence" in *The Treasure of the Humble* when he wrote *Princess Maleine* may be inferred from Act ii. sc. 6: "I want to see her at last in presence of the evening... I want to see if the night will make her think. May it not be that there is a little silence in her heart?"

spoken word itself, and by a dialogue which in the whole course of dramatic development hitherto has been employed for the first time by Maeterlinck and, beside him, by Ibsen. It is a dialogue marked by an unheard-of triviality and banality of the flattest everyday speech, which, however, in the midst of this second, inner dialogue, is invested with an indefinable magic."⁴²

If the dialogue points forward to the theories propounded in *The Treasure of the Humble*, the melodrama of some of the scenes and the bloody catastrophe to which they tend is directly opposed to these theories. Too transparently throughout the play the intention of the poet is to horrify. Apart from the comets and other phenomena which portend ruin, he is constantly heightening the mystery by something eerie, all of it, no doubt, on close inspection, attributable to natural causes, but, if the truth must be told, perilously near the ridiculous. The weeping willows, and the owls, and the bats, and the fearsome swans, and the croaking ravens, and the seven *béguines*, and the cemetery, and the sheep among the tombs, and the peacocks in the cypresses, and the marshes, and the will-o'-the-wisps are an excessive agglomeration. But the atmosphere is finely suggested:

MALEINE: I am afraid!..

HJALMAR: But we are in the park...

MALEINE: Are there walls round the park?

HJALMAR: Of course; there are walls and moats round the park.

⁴² Schlaf's *Maeterlinck*, p. 31.

MALEINE: And nobody can get in?

HJALMAR: No; – but there are plenty of unknown things that get in all the same.

In the murder scene⁴³ the falling of the lily in the vase, the scratching of the dog at the door, are some of the things that are effective. And if Webster's manner is worth all the praise it has had, surely the murder in this play is tense tragedy.

This scene is only by its bourgeois language different from the accepted Shakespearian conception of tragedy. But, as we have said, Maeterlinck's intention differs from that of Shakespeare, from whom he has borrowed most: Shakespeare's intention, in his tragedies, was to move his audience by the spectacle of human beings acting under the mastery of various passions; Maeterlinck's intention is to suggest the helplessness of human beings, and the impossibility of their resistance in the hands of Fate. Maleine – who is no heavier than a bird – who cannot hold a flower in her hand – is the poor human soul, the prey of Fate. The King and Hjalmar also are the prey of Fate; Queen Anne not less so, for crime, like love, is one of the strings by which Fate works her puppets. Each is helpless; they feel, dimly, that something which they do not understand is moving them: hence their groping speech.

And the essential tragedy is this: the perverse and the wicked and the good and the pure alike are moved to disaster, as though they were dreaming and wished to awaken but could not, by

⁴³ Suggested, perhaps, by the strangling of Little Snow-white in Grimm's story.

unseen powers. Life is a nightmare. In Grimm's tale the wicked princess had her head chopped off; but the fairy-tale was a dream dreamt in the infancy of the soul; now the soul is awakening to the consciousness of its destiny; and we are beginning to feel that there is no retribution and no reward, that there is only Fate. And it is the young and the happy and the good and pure that Fate takes first, simply because they are not so passive as the unhappy and the wicked.⁴⁴

Given the intentions of the dramatist, one should not ask for characterisation in the accepted sense. Characters! – Maeterlinck himself told Huret that his intention was to write "a play in Shakespeare's manner for a marionette theatre." That is to say, the real actors are behind the scenes, the forces that move the marionettes. In a Punch and Judy show, of course, you can guess at the character of the showman by the voice he imputes to the dolls; but when the showman is Death, or Fate, or God, or something for which we have no name, there is no possibility of characterisation – we can only judge by what the showman makes the dolls do whether he is a good or an evil being. The fact that Hjalmar is modelled on Hamlet, and Queen Anne on Queen Gertrude only proves that the dramatist is not yet full master of his own powers; and, if we look closely, we shall find that the unconscious puppets resemble their living patterns only as shadows resemble the shapes that cast them. We need not expect from characters that shadow forth states of mind – feelings of

⁴⁴ Preface to *Théâtre*, pp. 4-5.

helplessness, terror, uneasiness, "blank misgivings..." sadness – the deliberate or headlong action we are accustomed to in beings of flesh and blood. What action there seems to be is illusory – if Maleine escapes from the tower, it is only to fall deeper into the power of her evil destiny; if, by a move as though a hand were put forth in the dark, a faint stirring of her passivity, she wins back her lover, it is only to lose him and herself the more. We shall see that Maeterlinck in some of his next dramas dispenses with seen action altogether: in *The Intruder*, for instance, the only action, the death of the mother, takes place behind the scenes; in *The Interior* the action, the daughter's suicide, has taken place when the play opens.

There is, however, some rudimentary characterisation in *Princess Maleine*. The doting old king is not an original creation; but the drivelling of his terror-stricken conscience should be effective (as melodrama) on the stage. "Look at their eyes!" he says, pointing to the corpses which strew the stage, "they are going to leap on me like frogs." And his longing for salad is probably immortal...

CHAPTER V

According to the accepted dramatic canons, a play is a tragedy when death allays the excitement aroused in us by the action, the whole course of which moves onward to this inevitable end. In such tragedies death is a relief from the stormy happenings which bring it; it is not in itself represented as profoundly interesting – it is not an aim, but a result, "it is our death that guides our life," says Maeterlinck, "and life has no other aim than our death."⁴⁵ Not only the careers, crowded with events, of the great, but also the simple, quiet lives of lowly people are raised into high significance by this common bourne. Death is not so much a catastrophe as a mystery. It casts its shadow over the whole of our finite existence; and beyond it lies infinity.

Death, however, is only one of the mighty mysteries, the unknown powers, "the presences which are not to be put by," which rule our destinies. Love is another. To these two cosmic forces are devoted a series of dramas which were in 1901-2 collected by Maeterlinck in three volumes under the title of *Théâtre*. In the preface⁴⁶ to the collection Maeterlinck has himself interpreted the plays with a clearness and fullness which leaves the reader in no doubt as to his aims.

⁴⁵ "Les Avertis" (in *Le Trésor des Humbles*), p. 53.

⁴⁶ Cf. also "L'Evolution du Mystère" (in *Le Temple Enseveli*) Chapters V., XXI., and XXII.

"In these plays," he says, "faith is held in enormous powers, invisible and fatal. No one knows their intentions, but the spirit of the drama assumes they are malevolent, attentive to all our actions, hostile to smiles, to life, to peace, to happiness. Destinies which are innocent but involuntarily hostile are here joined, and parted to the ruin of all, under the saddened eyes of the wisest, who foresee the future but can change nothing in the cruel and inflexible games which Love and Death practise among the living. And Love and Death and the other powers here exercise a sort of sly injustice, the penalties of which – for this injustice awards no compensation – are perhaps nothing but the whims of fate...

"This Unknown takes on, most frequently, the form of Death. The infinite presence of death, gloomy, hypocritically active, fills all the interstices of the poem. To the problem of existence no reply is made except by the riddle of its annihilation."

There is another thing to be remembered (this is a repetition, but it is necessary) in reading Maeterlinck's early plays. Behind the scene which he chooses with varying degrees of clearness, lies Plato's famous image – the image of a cavern on whose walls enigmatic shadows are reflected.⁴⁷ In this cavern man gropes about in exile, with his back to the light he is seeking.

The mysterious coming of death is the theme of *The Intruder*, a play by Maeterlinck which was published in 1890. It appeared

⁴⁷ See Chapter XXVIII. of *L'Intelligence des Fleurs*.

as the first of two plays in a volume called *Les Aveugles* (The Sightless). This is the name of the second play in the book; but the grandfather in *The Intruder* too is blind, and through both plays runs the idea that we are blind beings groping in the dark (in Plato's cavern), and that those who see least see most.

The subject of *The Intruder* can be told in a few words. In a dark room in an old castle are sitting the blind grandfather, the father, the uncle, and the three daughters. In the adjoining room lies the mother who has recently been confined. She has been at death's door; but at last the doctors say the danger is over, and all but the grandfather are confident. He thinks she is not doing well... he has heard her voice. They think he is querulous. The uncle is more anxious about the child: he has scarcely stirred since he was born, he has not cried once, he is like a wax baby. The sister is expected to arrive at any minute. The eldest daughter watches for her from the window. It is moonlight, and she can see the avenue as far as the grove of cypresses. She hears the nightingales. A gentle breeze stirs in the avenue; the trees tremble a little. The grandfather remarks that he can no longer hear the nightingales, and the daughter is afraid someone has entered the garden. She sees no one, but somebody must be passing near the pond, for the swans are afraid, and all the fish dive suddenly. The dogs do not bark; she can see the house-dog crouching at the back of his kennel. The nightingales continue silent – there is a silence of death – it must be a stranger frightening them, says the grandfather. The roses shed their leaves. The grandfather

feels cold; but the glass door on to the terrace will not shut – the joiner is to come to-morrow, he will put it right. Suddenly the sharpening of a scythe is heard outside – it must be the gardener preparing to mow the grass. The lamp does not burn well. A noise is heard as of someone entering the house, but no one comes up the stairs. They ring for the servant. They hear her steps, and the grandfather thinks she is not alone. The father opens the door; she remains on the landing. She is alone. She says no one has entered the house, but she has closed the door below, which she had found open. The father tells her not to push the door to; she denies that she is doing so. The grandfather, who, though he is blind, is conscious of light, thinks they are putting the lamp out. He asks whether the servant, who has gone downstairs, is in the room: it had seemed to him that she was sitting at the table. He cannot believe that no one has entered. He asks why they have put the light out. He is filled with an unendurable desire to see his daughter, but they will not let him – she is sleeping. The lamp goes out. They sit in the darkness. Midnight strikes, and at the last stroke of the clock they seem to hear a noise as of someone rising hastily. The grandfather maintains that someone has risen from his chair. Suddenly the child is heard crying, crying in terror. Hurried steps are heard in the sick woman's chamber. The door of it is opened, the light from it pours into the room, and on the threshold appears a Sister of Charity, who makes the sign of the Cross to announce the mother's death.

Already in *The Princess Maleine* the miraculous happenings

could all be explained by natural causes. Still more so in *The Intruder*. It was not the reaper Death who was sharpening his scythe, but the gardener. If the lamp goes out, it is because there is no oil in it. Accompanying the naturalness of the atmosphere (the atmosphere that is natural when a patient is in danger of dying), there is the naturalness of the dialogue. The family is worn out with anxious watching: how natural then is the sleepy tone of the talking, which is only quickened somewhat by the apparent irritability of the grandfather:

THE FATHER: He is nearly eighty.

THE UNCLE: No wonder he's eccentric.

THE FATHER: He's like all blind people.

THE UNCLE: They think too much.

THE FATHER: They've too much time on their hands.

THE UNCLE: They've nothing else to do.

THE FATHER: It's their only way of passing the time.

THE UNCLE: It must be terrible.

THE FATHER: I suppose you get used to it.

THE UNCLE: I dare say.

THE FATHER: They are certainly to be pitied.

In this play, as also in *The Sightless*, and later on in *The Life of the Bees*, Maeterlinck shows himself a master of irony. The passage just quoted is an example.

To Maeterlinck, with reference to *The Intruder*, has been applied what Victor Hugo said to Baudelaire after he had read *The Flowers of Evil*: "You have created a new shudder." Certainly, the new *frisson* is there; but was it Maeterlinck

who created it? It will be well to go into this question; for Maeterlinck, in connection with *The Intruder*, has been charged with plagiarism.

The *Intruder* first appeared in *La Wallonie* for January, 1890. In the same periodical for January, 1889, that is, exactly a year before, had appeared *Les Flaireurs*, a drama in three acts by Maeterlinck's friend, Charles van Lerberghe. It is dedicated "to the poet Maurice Maeterlinck." The title is annotated: "Légende originale et drame en 3 actes pour le théâtre des fantoches." Here, to begin with, we have a "drama for marionettes." Maeterlinck seems to have first used the word "marionette" in connection with his plays when undergoing cross-examination by Jules Huret, whose *Enquête* was published in 1891: when writing *Princess Maleine*, he said, he had wanted to write "a play in Shakespeare's manner for marionettes." Maeterlinck and van Lerberghe were seeing each other nearly every day at the time *Les Flaireurs* was being written; and there is nothing to show that they did not discuss their theories of the drama; it is only certain that with regard to the idea, superb irony, of a theatre for marionettes, the *published* priority rests with van Lerberghe. Van Lerberghe, however, was charged with having imitated Maeterlinck; and it was only when Maeterlinck himself proclaimed the priority of *Les Flaireurs*⁴⁸ that the charge of plagiarism was turned against

⁴⁸ In a letter inserted in the programme when *Les Flaireurs* was staged by Paul Fort at the Théâtre d'Art (after *The Intruder* had gone over the same boards). This statement of Maeterlinck's is a noble defence of his friend, and, as such, not to be trusted.

him. Now the fact is that Maeterlinck, to a certain extent, collaborated in *Les Flaireurs*.

The subject of the two plays is identical; both symbolise the coming of death to a woman. But each is entirely independent. In *Les Flaireurs* death is expected; in *The Intruder* it is not expected. In van Lerberghe's play resistance is offered to visible personifications of death; in Maeterlinck's play resistance is impossible, because death is invisible. The first play is full of brawling noise, and peasant slang, and the action is violent: the second is only a succession of whispers tearing the web of silence;⁴⁹ nothing visible happens, there is only expectancy. In short, one play is for the senses; the other is for the soul. The charge of plagiarism is absolutely unfounded: it is only a case of friendly rivalry in the working out of an idea – the tale indeed goes that the idea occurred to the two friends simultaneously. If it really was a game of skill, it would be hard to say who was victor: each play is a masterpiece.

The scene of *Les Flaireurs* is laid in a very poor cottage. It is a stormy night; the rain whips the windows, the wind howls, and a dog is barking in the distance. The room is lit by two candles. Loud knocking at the door. A girl jumps out of the bed with gestures of terror. She is in her night-shirt; her fair hair is unbound. She asks: "Who is there?" and "The Voice," after some beating about the bush, answers: "I'm the man with the water."

⁴⁹ But Death, in *The Intruder*, is understood to have made some noise while coming upstairs.

The voice of the mother, who thinks it is Jesus Christ, is heard from the bed urging the daughter to let Him in. She refuses, and the man answers that he will wait. Ten o'clock sounds, and the daughter puts the two candles out. ACT II. Knocking at the door again. The two candles are relit, and the daughter is seen standing against the bed, at watch, with her face turned towards the door. A voice is heard demanding admittance. "You said you would wait," says the girl. "Why, I've only just come!" answers the voice. She asks who he is, and he replies, "The man with the linen." The mother again urges her to open the door – she thinks it is the Virgin Mary. The daughter is obstinate, and the voice cries, "All right, I'll wait." ACT III. Louder knocks, and a voice again. This time it is "The man with the ... thingumbob." The mother still thinks it is the Virgin Mary. She bids her daughter raise the curtain: and the shadow of the hearse is projected on the wall. The mother asks what the shadow is; the daughter drops the curtain. The voice now answers brutally: "I'm the man with the coffin, that's what *I* am." The neighing of horses is heard. The girl dashes herself against the door, but it is beaten in. An arm is seen putting a bucket into the room. Midnight strikes. The old woman utters a hoarse cry; the daughter, who had been holding the door back, rushes to the bed; the door falls with a mighty din, and extinguishes the two candles.

It will be seen that whereas in *The Intruder* there is nothing which cannot be explained by natural causes, the symbolism of *Les Fleurs* is untrue – death does *not* come with bucket, linen,

and coffin. Death does *not* break the door in. This only amounts to saying that Maeterlinck's method is less romantic than that of his friend. Maeterlinck's close realism, however, does give him certain advantages – the helplessness of the grandfather, for instance, is far more pathetic than the spectacle of the girl dashing herself against the door, though it does not move us so directly.

The Intruder was first acted in French at Paul Fort's Théâtre d'Art in Paris, on the 20th May, 1891, at a historic performance of this and other playlets for the benefit of Paul Verlaine and the painter, Paul Gauguin.

In the second play of the 1890 volume, *The Sightless*, which was first acted on the 7th December, 1891, at the Théâtre d'Art, we have again the mystery of death; but the main theme would seem to be the mystery of human life – "this earthly existence is conceived as a deep, impenetrable night of ignorance and uncertainty."⁵⁰ The fable is this:

In a very ancient forest in the north, under a sky profoundly starred, is sitting a very aged priest, wrapped in an ample black cloak. He is leaning his head and the upper part of his body against the bole of a huge, cavernous oak. His motionless face has the lividity of wax; his lips are violet and half open. His eyes seem bleeding under a multitude of immemorial griefs and tears. His white hair falls in rigid and scanty locks over a face more illumined and more weary than all that surrounds him in

⁵⁰ Is. van Dijk, *Maurice Maeterlinck*, pp. 81-82.

the attentive silence of the desolate forest. His emaciated hands are rigidly joined on his thighs. To the right of him six blind old men are sitting on stones, stumps of trees, and dead leaves. To the left, separated from them by an unrooted tree and split boulders, six women who are likewise blind sit facing the old men. Three of these women are praying and moaning uninterruptedly. A fourth is extremely old; the fifth, in an attitude of speechless madness, holds a sleeping baby on her knees. The sixth is young and radiantly beautiful, and her hair floods her whole being. Most of them sit waiting, with their elbows on their knees, and their faces in their hands. Great funereal trees, yews, weeping willows, cypresses, cover them with faithful shadows. A cluster of tall and sickly asphodel are in blossom near the priest. The darkness is extraordinary, in spite of the moonlight which, here and there, glints through the darkness of the foliage.

The blind people are waiting for their priest to return. He is getting too old, the men murmur; they suspect that he has not been blest with the Best of sight himself of late. They are sure he has lost his way and is looking for it. They have walked a long time; they must be far from the asylum. He only talks to the women now; they ask them where he has gone to. The women do not know. He had told them he wanted to see the island for the last time before the sunless winter. He was uneasy because the storms had flooded the river, and because all the dikes seemed ready to burst. He has gone in the direction of the sea, which is so near that when they are silent they can hear it thudding on

the rocks. Where are they? None of them know. When did they come to the island? They do not know, they were all blind when they came. They were not born here, they came from beyond the sea. They hear the asylum clock strike twelve; they do not know whether it is noon or midnight. They are frightened at noises which they cannot understand. Suddenly the wind rises in the forest, and the sea is heard bellowing against the cliffs. The sea seems very near; they are afraid it will reach them. They are about to rise and try to go away when they hear a noise of hasty feet in the dead leaves. It is the dog of the asylum. It puts its muzzle on the knees of one of the blind men. Feeling it pull, he rises, and it leads him to the motionless priest. He touches the priest's cold face ... and they know that their guide is dead. The dog will not move away from the corpse. A squall whirls the dead leaves round. It begins to snow. They think they hear footsteps ... The footsteps seem to stop in their midst...

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