

JEAN MORÉAS

This is not meant as an introduction to Moréas, a most disagreeable task actually, but it is supposed to clear up a controversy with Mr. Singevin, which is something really fascinating. Therefore, these lines are addressed to him.

Mr. Singevin has grieved us the other day, in calling Moréas “a great, second-hand poet”. Or, we consider the Moréas in the *Stanzas*, as the Rimbaud in the *Illuminations*, a really great poet. Here are the reasons:

We admire Rimbaud's "heuristic" genius, a new world and a new way of feeling, that are attached to the poetic field. He evokes the even more daring adventures taking place at the edge of spirit: Galois's or Niels Abel's great achievements.

With Moréas (again the Moréas in the *Stanzas*) this is not a matter of invention, but of purification and reduction. We pray you to forgive our innocent obsession – a real *déformation professionnelle* – of resorting, for a better comparison and understanding, to mathematician so-and-so. Moréas permanently evokes Felix Klein's formalism, or rather Hilbert's logic pluralism.

Indeed, *Die Grundlagen der Geometrie*¹ – which some call "the new Euclid" – this booklet of Hilbert's, issued in 1899, in the very year of the first *Stanzas*, will always be connected in our spirit with Moréas's everlasting work. For aren't *The Stanzas* and *The Foundations* illustrations of the most pure poetry?

A good judgement on a poetic reform should start from the degree of fatality it implies. There have been totally arbitrary reforms, like the "instrumentalism" of poor René Ghil or the graphic innovation from *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*². They had no participation in the momentary or general tendencies of the spirit: this is why they never outlived the fuss around them.

Or, in a certain epoch, the orientation of the spirit is reflected with a maximum of clarity in the simultaneous development of mathematics. It is here, in this field, that the spirit approaches a homogenous substance and it is also here that the direction of its impetus is most clearly manifested.

It is therefore acceptable to use, as a possible means of approaching a prosodic reform, the modifications undergone at the same time by mathematical ideal.

Moreas's poetic reform is based on a previous one: that of Poe's.

But here we will take the risk of a personal judgement, which is contrary to the generally acknowledged opinion. Poe's manifestoes have nothing to do with pure poetry: the autonomous poetic operation is not even defined. For the workshop procedures which they betray – however interesting they may be – refer mostly to versification. As for the domain meant for this operation, it is far from being pure. Indeed, extending this field to the whole soul does not mean to simplify, to purify.

Poe's critical work looks, in our opinion, like a collection of psychological problems, an essay on the best conditions of apprehending a piece of work in verse: a sort of lyrical methodology.

In his analysis, Edgar Poe reaches the conclusion of an exclusive existence of short poems. He opposes the short poem to the long romantic tirades, in fashion at the time. Yet, as a good romantic, he uses, when it comes to form, the eclecticism and recommends the indefinite mixture of the meters. But when he asks for the subordination of all the details of the work to a certain preconceived effect, he acts like a classic.

Yet, we insist on this: Poe does not explain, or he explains it badly when defining the domain of poetry. By identifying it with the whole soul – a synthesis of understanding, sensitivity and passion – he is far from acting like a purist, that is as an abstracter.

In other words, the Edgar Poe moment is marked by methodological preoccupations and by a need for technical rigor, completely different from this modern search of a “lyrical catharsis”. The idealist solution given by Edgar Poe to the problem of poetic space, limiting it within a certain total soul appears today naïve and temporary. It is interesting to note alongside with Poe’s critic toil, the twin one carried on by mathematicians. They were alarmed by the incoherence and the precariousness of some gigantic and debatable works: Euler, Lagrange or Laplace’s treatises, in the same way in which poets were fed up with the disorder of Pope, Tennyson and Byron.

Augustin Cauchy, a catholic and one of Charles X’s reliable men, felt the need to reflect upon the composition of mathematics. He demonstrated with the help of convergent processes, the constructive definition of analytical existences, and enriched the theory of functions with a few new canonical reasonings.

Yet, just like Poe, he stood away from purist preoccupations. He felt no need of using axiomatic foundations and of limiting the domain of his subject. His critical work takes into consideration the methodological conditions of the reasoning, the rigor and the efficiency of the algorithms.

Edgar Poe’s singular position among the poets is, we think, due to this faculty of approaching a problem born within general criticism, turning it into prosodic terms and solving it in his own way.

We assume that Jean Moréas – in order to finally deal with him – possesses a similar quality. But his reform in poetry corresponds to a more ripened moment of the critical consciousness. It prolongs Edgar Poe’s reform as the axiomatic thinking and the global researches of the geometers around 1900 complete the simple methodological preoccupations and the local infinitesimal studies of their forerunners.

14 – For, as we have already said, it is with Hilbert that Moréas should be compared. What Hilbert is interested in is the exhaustive counting of the ideas generating a doctrine out of which it follows through a simple logical development. It is a problem of autonomous substantiation, a problem of purism. For Moréas, the source of any poem is the lyre; not the material one, but a certain rhapsodic attitude.

Once evoked, this lyre will be the origin of a certain number of *aoidos*³ operations and specific rites, which constitute the domain of poetry. The effects of the romantic orgy or of the symbolist orchestra are exiled from this strict creation. What is still left is the gentle breeze compatible with the double tetrachord of Papadiamantopoulos’ stanza.

With Hilbert, geometry rediscovers Euclid; with Moréas, poetry returns to Alcaeus. But this return is reinforced by all the exhaustive force of modern thinking.

Moréas's stanza becomes the rival of mathematical statement. It is clad in the same canonic beauty, thanks to a certain restricted celebrity, a more generally conceived art – the theorem. Emotion is deeper and seemingly enhanced by the density acquired through its limited form. Its musicality becomes that sonorous architecture which Nietzsche was talking about: the opposite of the exhausted symbolist symphonies. The stanza becomes a succession of intelligible measurable intervals: in a word, pure.

With Moréas we finally know the inspired essence that crowns sometimes this world of reminiscences, and which Plato identified with the Poesis.

So, Poe's problem, that of researching upon the real domain of poetry, which he solved by adjunction, is solved by Moréas by exclusion. The domain of poetry is not integral soul, but only that privileged area where the accents of the lyre are heard. It is the place of any intelligible beauty: pure realization, honor paid to geometry.

But Moréas's open-mindedness for the ideas in vogue at the time goes even further. By 1900, the geometers start considering the local differential researches as insufficient. They are replaced by global theories, in which the included mathematical existences are thought within the universality of their domain of existence. It is the epoch of Poincaré's dissertations on the closed geodesic lines and on the integral invariants, the epoch in which analysis found itself invaded by global topological ideas.

Similarly, our Greek, who, still in full Roman error, was dreaming of a poetry philologically valid for the entire interval separating Saint Eulalia from Leconte de Lisle – turned wise and enriched by so many prosodic experiments – decided for a poetry that should no longer be just a linguistic mean, but a savant mean of all the feelings that thrilled human heart from the Greeks on: a very nice and, actually, a very new idea. A form of poetry that might enjoy the same audience at the table of his disciples from Café Vachette as well as at the court of his forefathers, in the kingdom of Ithaca. In the long run, a poetry outside the ties of time and space, having as a real framework that "topos atopos" of the antiques.

Obviously, similar problems on the absolute lyricism were raised by Mallarmé and Valéry. But the former uselessly complicated their enunciation with syntactic or idealistic facts, while the latter slipped very soon into Parmenides's poem, often so beautiful and always sparkling with ideas. Yet, we prefer the essays proper from the admirable Varieties to this kind of rhymed essays.

Moréas is much more pure than these two poets, recognized as such. Pure firstly by the deeply thought choice of his symbols: the seed, the flower, the moon and the lyre. It is amazing to discover how full of knowledge the configurations coming out of such little substance are. It brings to one's mind

Shelley, who composed a vast ritual with his three symbols: the river, the boat and the lamp.

The Moréas of the Syrte had started versifying using this material. But how clumsy it was! Here is the motif of the moon in Otilie:

*With necromancers watches faithful moon
Above the burg, sifting its rays through branches
Like wing flaps some strings resound so boon
A harp into the hall of dreaming armors.*

The verses do not lack virtuosity. But what a hotch-potch! The whole symbolist stuff is there: the Satanism of poor Rollinat, the cardboard Wagnerian background, the mysterious atmosphere and, on top of all, a sort of quite repugnant, marine-like boasting.

*Here is the same motif resumed in The Stanzas:
I feel you in my eye, oh, moon, while shining
You pass through summer nights;
My heart relishes the sweet luring
Of your cold ray-sights.*

Here, the poet really touches the limits of styling. One gets the highly artistic impression of a simplified and represented existence.

It is interesting to realize how Moréas avoids the academicism, he might be a victim of. By invention. But a carefully hidden invention, a very soft touch, meant to make surfaces vibrate, but invisible to the profane looks.

For instance, in the stanza we quoted, the invention resides entirely in the word “attrayante”⁴ and in the place it is used. So that this word surpasses its usual meaning and comes to designate a certain quality of the moon: friendly and magnetic.

Another example of ineffable invention. We find it in the famous stanza:

*Companion of the ether, you idle smoke
How much we are alike!
If your life is one moment, so will be mine
But yet, we both come out of fire.*

Inserted into the absolute framework of the eternal, that “fumée indolente”⁵ acquires a totally different attribute. The evocation of the ether invites us to rethink the word “indolente”, to understand it in its etymological meaning: that of spared from pain. Thus, the line gains a moral sense and becomes touching.

One last example: We quote:

*Oh, infinite skies, bathed into light
Limpid and blue sky of the worlds above...*

Thanks to I don't know what prestige – the enthusiasm of the exulting eye, the considerable quantity of vowels that comment the emptiness of the

image, and finally, the circular limit imposed to this zone of the sky – we no longer feel the banality of the word “innondé”⁶ On the contrary, we feel tempted to split it into two words: “in” and “onde”⁷. The process of undulatory propagation of light is recreated poetically and we witness a real “light whirlpool” around an ideal point. We are simply dazzled.

But such a subtle art is not to be analyzed, indeed.

Sometimes there are people who complain about Moréas’s hermetism. If they refer neither to the difficulties raised by mythological data – which can be solved with the help of dictionaries – and nor to those generated by the extreme concentration of the stanzas, chasing away any transition, then there can be just one kind of hermetism: that overwhelming flow of thoughts and orphic emotions, the grave and subterranean accompaniment of some of the stanzas.

The succession of the seasons, Dionysos’s merging into the landscape, the mystery of germination are felt by Moréas in a sacred way: like an initiated one, breathing hard on the way from Cephis to Eleusis.

This new Attica honey he brings to French poetry is in fact Triptolemos’s corn ear: his own knowledge of a more profound Greece which only Nietzsche’s genius could have predicted.

The eminence of a humanist culture is measured by the aptitude it has to vividly imagine ancient Greece. The France of the Pléiade, or that of the 17th century, each had its own vision: cute, prim, or heroic. But with Moréas, the very soul of this charm and mystery, as evanescent as a sun ray, the whole of that antique Greece, comes to visit France and maybe it is there to stay.

A.B.

NOTES

1. The Foundations of Geometry – German in the original. Note of the translator.
2. One throwing of the dice will never abolish hazard. French in the original. Note of the translator.
3. Aoidos – (Greek) Epic poet who used to recite in ancient Greece. Note of the translator.
4. “luring” – French in the original. Note of the translator.
5. “idle smoke” – French in the original. Note of the translator.
6. “bathed” – French in the original. Note of the translator.
7. “in onde” could be translated by “into the wave”. Note of the translator.