

## THE INFLUENCE OF FRENCH PARNASSIAN POETRY ON ENGLISH LITERATURE

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### Abstract

*The English and French literatures interact intimately with each other as, for instance, those of Iran and South West Asia. In particular, the 19<sup>th</sup> century formed the heyday of both the British and French empires, which spread over large regions of the world. Increased travel and communication between England and France, apart from the great increase in education in both countries at the time, enabled writers in England to borrow from the flowering of new approaches to poetry in France that encouraged a fusion of art and literature, spearheaded by a literary movement named the Parnassians. The article pinpoints significant Parnassian writers and their work on both sides of the English Channel.*

The Parnassian school of poetry was dominant in France during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It comprised such important names as Théophile Gautier [1811-72], Leconte de Lisle [1818-94], Théodore de Banville [1829-90] and José Maria de Heredia [1818-94]. The Parnassian school, which rapidly developed into a movement, was born out of the meetings held in a Paris bookshop [owned by Alphonse Lemerre]. By the 1870s, the influence of the Parnassians had gained strength in France and had crossed the Channel to England where a school of English Neo-Parnassians came into existence. Its chief exponents and enthusiastic followers were Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837), Sir Edmund William Gosse (1849-1928) and Andrew Lang (1844-1912).

The poetry of the Parnassians held the following objectives to be of primary importance: perfection of form --- in the sense that the same importance to form was necessary for the poet as for the sculptor. Art was to be above socio-political and national considerations and assume a life of its own. Also, a Parnassian could be inspired by anyone or any poetic school but it was a matter of key importance to what use the poet could put his inspiration. What was vital for the Parnassians was love of precision in

form, devotion to beauty and the practice of rhyme. According to Lytton Strachey:

The Parnassians particularly devoted themselves to classical subjects, and to descriptions of tropical scenes. Their rich sonorous, splendidly-molded language invests their visions with a noble fixity, and impressive force.<sup>1</sup>

In the pioneering work of Théophile Gautier [1811-72] the Orient played a significant role. He himself travelled to the Middle East and North Africa and was enchanted by the magic spell these lands wove over his imaginations. This impression he displayed not only in writing but also in painting and exhibits. In this connection, his two volumes entitled *L'Orient: voyages et voyageurs* (1877- posthumously published) are of major importance. *L'Orient* provides an extensive account not only of his own travels but also of other travelers to the East. As early as 1875, a translation in English of Gautier's travels to Constantinople appeared from New York.<sup>2</sup> This covers some 30 chapters in over 350 pages and provides a wealth of detail about life in the great capital city of the Ottoman Empire. In Gautier, and others, we find a profusion of elements used as poetic material but taken from exotic climes not commonly familiar to European men-of-letters. These materials contributed to the poetic enrichment of the Parnassian School. Charles Baudelaire [1821-67], the most eminent of 19<sup>th</sup> century French poets, regarded Gautier as his poetic guide to whom he dedicated his famous poem *Les Fleurs du Mal* [1857] calling him 'Poète Impeccable' [= 'Impeccable poet']. The proclamation of the superiority of art over life is particularly a Parnassian position first enunciated by Gautier. He wrote: 'L'art c'est la beauté, l' invention perpétuelle du détail, le choix des mots.' [= 'art is beauty, the perpetual invention of detail, the choice of words.']

Among the English admirers of the Parnassians School of poetry, James Elroy Flecker [1885-1915] was a most ardent exponent of the merits of this school. He composed several poems in English in imitation of the Parnassians and in prose expounded their qualities and beauties. In his preface to *The Golden journey to Samarkand*, he writes:

<sup>1</sup> Lytton Strachey, *Landmarks in French Literature* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1949), 147.

<sup>2</sup> Robert H. Gould (tr.), *Constantinople from the French of Théophile Gautier* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1875).

All I can do is to praise a very simple theory of poetry which has for me a unique attraction --- that of the French Parnasse.<sup>3</sup>

The relevance of the same Parnassian School was undeniable. It had benefits for English criticism as well. As Flecker writes:

It remained for the Parnassians to raise the technique of their art to a height which should enable them to express the subtlest ideas in powerful and simple words... . As for English criticism, can it not learn from the Parnassian or any tolerable theory of poetic art to examine the beauty and not the message of poetry?<sup>4</sup>

We observed thus great attraction of the stress on the beauty by the Parnassians that appeal to Flecker's poetic consciousness. The *Preface* of Flecker is certainly a remarkable milestone in the history of English literary criticism.

A chance reading of the poetry of Paul Fort [1871-1960], an advocate of Parnassian poetry, converted Flecker into an enthusiastic admirer of his. Fort was one of the last active functioning poets of the Symbolist School of French poetry which itself was one of the offshoots of the Parnassian School. The Symbolist School regarded poetry as an expression of the feeling, not the intelligence. It was reader's function to penetrate the cloaked and suggestive language of the poet to arrive at meaning through his own inferences. Thus the Symbolist masked their intentions with a robe of *l'énigme, le mystère, l'inquiétude* [= enigma, mystery and agitation]. The appeal of Paul Fort to Flecker was shared by Edmund Gosse who wrote of him appreciatively: 'he does not philosophize or analyze, his attitude is extremely simple, but it is charged with the ecstasy of appreciation.'<sup>5</sup> As we have stated earlier, Gosse was an English neo-Parnassian.

The influence of Henri de Régnier [1864-1936] was another avenue of poetic channelization from France to England. Régnier was well educated

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<sup>3</sup> James Elroy Flecker, *Collected Prose* (London: Heinemann, 1922), 237.

<sup>4</sup> Flecker, 238-9.

<sup>5</sup> Edmund Gosse, *French Profiles* (London, Heinemann, 1913), 337.

and could not avoid being drawn into the active literary environment of Symbolist France. As such, Regnier bade farewell to his diplomatic career and devoted all his attention to literature. Soon after this, his reputation became wide spread in French poetic and intellectual circles. As Edmund Gosse writes in his essay on Regnier, '[he] builds his rhyme with deep and glowing colour. In this he is more like Keats than any other recent poets... M. Henri de Régnier is much nearer in genius to the Parnassians than any other of his immediate contemporaries'.<sup>6</sup> Régnier was also a dreamer and sought refuge from an imperfect world in a world of his own. This was a characteristic of both the French Parnassians and the English neo-Parnassian. As John M. Munro writes:

De Régnier lost himself in the Classical world of Greece;  
Flecker sought his escape also in Greece, as well as in the  
Orient of Sir Richard Burton's *Arabian Nights*.<sup>7</sup>

Régnier's poem *Pour la Porte des Guerriers* [= for the gates of the warriors] inspired James Elroy Flecker's much-appreciated poem *The Gates of Damascus*. This poem was regarded by Flecker as his best poem.<sup>8</sup> John M. Munro states with precision: 'He (Flecker) is a late Parnassian who sought to emulate the past achievements of such people as Henri de Régnier and Paul Fort.'<sup>9</sup>

Poetry knows no boundaries either geographical or political so the unique intellectual course that French poetry took in enriching English poetry is palpably obvious. To quote Graham Hough: 'The exotic growths from across the channels, on arrival in England were of course grafted on to existing English stalk.'<sup>10</sup> It is the privilege of the poet to accept and adopt the ideas and influences of his fellow poets. It is also within his rights to alter, change or present the same elements in a new mould, fashion or style. This 'infiltration' of a French School of poetry into English poetic circles was not resisted but rather welcomed. It is a remarkable example

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<sup>6</sup> Gosse, 305-6.

<sup>7</sup> John M. Munro, *James Elroy Flecker* (London: George Prior, 1976), 69.

<sup>8</sup> In *Some letters from abroad of James Elroy Flecker with a few reminiscences* by Helle Flecker (London: Heinemann, 1930), 98.

<sup>9</sup> Munro, 190-191.

<sup>10</sup> Graham Hough, *The Last Romantics* (London: Methuen, 1961), 188.

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how poetic interaction promotes creativity in different literatures by cross-fertilization. As Enid Starkie writes:

At the end of nineteenth century literature in England no longer possessed its fundamentally English character... anymore than literature in France is typically French.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Enid Starkie, *From Gautier to Eliot: The influence of France on English Literature 1851-1939* (London: Hutchinson, 1960), 131.