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Pontus de Tyard

PONTUS DE TYARD is no very great figure. His name simply makes us think of the *Pléiade*, a constellation from which he borrows a little of the light that has helped him to find his way down to our time.

But if learned attention will concentrate on and linger over this companion of Ronsard and du Bellay, it will discover in Tyard almost all the noble qualities which went to the making of the great men of his period. We know that they were equipped with all the talents, and the whole gamut of human desires was implanted in their fiery souls.

The century from Leonardo to Francis Bacon is particularly rich in universal minds. The curiosity to feel, the voluptuous pleasure of knowing, the passion for creation were carried, in those fabulous times, to an unprecedented pitch. The arts, the sciences, Hebrew, Greek, mathematics, speculative or practical politics, war, theology . . . there was nothing that did not seem desirable and, as it were, delightful and easy to those multifarious monsters, thirsting after knowledge and power, who devoured the whole of the past and gave birth to a whole future.

Our Pontus was a man of the same stamp though of smaller stature. The poet was an astronomer; the astronomer a bishop; the bishop an agent of the King, and served as his pen in the

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polemics of the day. The emblems of the lyre, the miter, the astrolabe might have figured on his tomb. But the fourth corner of the tombstone could well have been decorated with another emblem which, it seems, would be as suitable for Tyard as the others. It would be one of those sublime big-bellied bottles of which he made large and joyous use provided they were filled with Burgundy, which was the wine of his country as well as his own choice.

As for love, Tyard, like everybody else, did not fail to pay the tribute due as of right to that inescapable master. He was much occupied with a certain Pasithée. But in exchange, love made him a present of quite a number of charming lines; it inspired the *Livre des erreurs amoureuses*, where we find graceful things like this:

*O calme nuit qui doucement compose
En ma faveur l'ombre mieux animée
Qu'onque Morphée en sa salle enfumée
Peignit du rien de ses métamorphoses . . .*

I must not forget, in speaking of Pontus de Tyard, that one tradition credits him with having been the first poet to write sonnets in our language. There is some doubt about the merits of our bishop's claim, but this very doubt is a source of fame, for the sonnet is one of the happiest of poetical inventions: the sonnet, whose brevity and strictness of form were feared by neither Michelangelo nor Shakespeare, a form which condemns the poet to perfection, so that the mere suspicion of introducing it to the French is infinitely honorable.

Tyard had a weakness for inversion, which he used a little too often and too markedly; but in poetry it is a useful and

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significant liberty, for it inflicts a noble torture on the normal and humdrum course of expression.

Taking advantage of a total eclipse of the sun to disappear from this life, Tyard died in 1605, aged but not bowed by eighty-four revolutions of our planet; having loyally, and without getting them too mixed up, served Apollo, Venus, Urania, Henri III, Bacchus, and the Church.

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