Sex in Jean Richepin's Early Poetry[§]

Despite editions of various Richepin works in recent years, readers of French literature today tend to overlook Jean Richepin who, when he died in 1926, was considered by most contemporaries to be, along with Anatole France, the most representative French author of the period in which he lived. Poet, dramatist, conteur, novelist, he had made his poetry début in 1876 with the Chanson des gueux, a collection of poems that scandalized the puritanical and, in addition to the fine he had to pay, won him a month in prison for his trouble. Little chastened, he treated the public a year later to Les Caresses, a compilation that was almost as audacious as its predecessor. In 1884, still at odds with pedestrian social values, or at least more willing to dispute them in print than other authors were, he returned to the arena with Les Blasphèmes, likewise destined to shock and madden conventional readers.

At the same time, Richepin was becoming a popular dramatist. But other successes as well were beginning to pile up around him. Handsome, with his thick mass of lustrous black hair, virile, athletic, an effervescent and irrepressible conversationalist, he exerted an undeniable appeal on all who met him. Verlaine, who disliked him at first, was struck by his "corps musculeux droit" and his "tête d'empereur."[1] To women he was irresistible. Although he had married several years before, even the Divine Sarah was no exception. Nevertheless, with Les Blasphèmes behind him, Richepin did what most

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bohemians do sooner or later. He settled down, espoused new values, and on the whole tried to live down his earlier sins.

This does not mean, however, that he renounced enthusiastic sex as a literary vein. On the contrary, he would return to it again and again in his later verse, but, as a theme, sex would be less obsessive than it had been in the earlier poems. He never quite tired of writing about it, as we shall see. Elected to the Académie Française in 1908, Richepin became a staunch patriot and a dedicated champion of tradition. Daudet, his elder by nearly a decade, had evolved in more or less the same manner. Generally speaking, Richepin's prosody owes much to Banville, even more to Verlaine. In broad terms, the themes that preoccupied him relate the poet to Villon, Saint-Amant, and Baudelaire. While he was certainly not alone in writing about sex, his stance on matters sexual was pretty much his own.

In his earlier collections Richepin displayed a candid, boisterous attitude toward sex. In sex or in the sex act he nonetheless detected little that could be considered noble. His contemporary, the urbane Maupassant, has a character who, in L'Inutile Beauté, reproaches God for the manner in which humans reproduce. God, this character claims, appears to have created man "pour se reproduire salement," and he emphasizes the point. "Qu'y a-t-il de plus ignoble, de plus répugnant," he contends, "que cet acte ordurier et ridicule de la reproduction des êtres, contre lequel toutes les âmes délicates sont et seront éternellement révoltées?" God has chosen "organes . . . malpropres et souillés, pour leur confier cette mission. . . . On dirait que le Créateur, sournois et cynique, a voulu interdire à l'homme de jamais anoblir, embellir et idéaliser sa rencontre avec la femme."[2] Richepin, in the 1870s and 1880s at least, concurred. The reproduction process was dirty, hence it might as well be used for whatever carnal pleasure it could provide. Moral

considerations, as most people understood them anyway, were expendable. Nevertheless, in the introduction to the Chanson des gueux's second edition, Richepin insisted vehemently that he was an artist and that his poems merely presented the human condition as it was: nature with a certain amount of artistic embellishment but with no moral adornment. Probably he was sincere.

Sex, in Richepin's first three collections of verse, is, as their author claimed, realistically presented. But if sex is treated as sensual, need this mean that it has to be devoid of idealism? In a poem to a deceased actor, Richepin declared:

> Là-bas quelle ombre langoureuse
> s'approche de nous à pas lents!
> Ah! voici venir l'amoureuse.
> Tu mets ta main dans ses doigts blancs,
> Tu mêles ton âme à son âme;
> Elle rit, et pleure, et se pâme,
> Et se sent brûler à la flamme
> Que font les soleils de tes yeux;
> Et l'aigle avec la tourterelle
> Chante la chanson éternelle,
> Et nous emporte d'un coup d'aile,
> Ivres d'amour, au fond des cieux.[3]

Such is "la chanson éternelle." In ideal love, lovers hope, even strive, for total union with one another. But is total union possible? Not according to "Amours fous":

> Amants, enlacez-vous d'une étreinte
> farouche!
> Serrez, à les broyer, vous seins contre
> vos seins!
> Comme un couple noué de serpents abyssins,
> Collez-vous peau à peau, mordez-vous
> bouche à bouche!

Cherchez à vous manger le coeur! Touche
qui touche!
Que vos hoquets d'amour soient des glas
de tocsins!
Que vos yeux, flamboyants de désirs
assassins,
Fassent un chaud creuset du creux de
votre couche!

Amants, abîmez-vous l'un dans l'autre!
Mêlez
Vos regards éperdus, vos crins échevelés,
Vos salives, vos pleurs, vos suers!
Impossible!

Vous voulez, avec deux êtres, faire un
seul moi?
Vous vous traverserez sans rencontrer la
cible.
Vous vous consumerez sans vous fondre. . .
Alors, quoi?[4]

In these very explicit lines, the poet contends that, however frenzied the attempt, true union can never be achieved. But not only does ideal love elude lovers, even its semblance cannot be maintained. In the poet's view, ideal love either is an illusion to start with or else it simply does not last. As one narrator declares in the Chanson des gueux:

Comme un autre j'eus mon jour
où je croyais à l'amour
Sans fin et sincère.
J'ai vu depuis ce que c'est.
Il dure le temps qu'on met
A vider un verre.
Ta maîtresse, si tu veux,
Sur un signe de tes yeux
A tex pieds se vautre.

Vile esclave, à deux genoux
Elle t'aime... Tournons-nous,[5]
Elle en baise un autre.

Love, or least the idea of love, may be eternal, but love with one individual seldom is. Needless to say, less idealized love has no chance whatever to survive. Elsewhere in the Chanson des gueux ("Ivres-morts," 209), a male narrator proposes to a woman he is with that they get drunk and copulate. "Zut à la vertu," he exclaims, adding:

Notre amour qui vient de naître
Demain sera mort peut-être
Avec cette nuit d'été.
. . . . . .

Le vin coule, coule, coule,
Coulons comme lui.

If ideal love is elusive and cannot be sustained, then what is the purpose of sex? Conventional procreation with the church's blessing? For Richepin, this had no appeal at all. The sex act between a married man and woman is no less monstrous than is sex between two other creatures. And the poet describes in mordant, sarcastic terms a married couple's bedroom activities ("Tes père et mère," Blasphèmes, 38):

. . . . . Voici la chose.
Les rideaux
Sont tirés. L'homme, sur la femme à
la renverse,
Lui bave entre les dents, lui met le
ventre en perce.
Leurs corps, de par la loi, font la
bête à deux dos.

Et c'est ça que le prêtre a béni! Ca
qu'on nomme
Un saint mystère! Et c'est de ça qu'il
sort un homme.
Et vous voulez me voir à genoux devant ça!

Such couples' dearest wish is that their male children will grow up to become . . . notaries. It will serve them right if their sons become poets instead ("Chanson des cloches de baptême," Chanson, 204-205). Nothing sublime is involved when a child is conceived:

. . . On est fils du hasard qui lança
Un spermatozoïde aveugle dans l'ovaire.
("Tes père et mère," Blasphèmes, 38)

Moreover, declares the atheist poet, God, "s'amusant à voir souffrir sa créature," made childbirth a horrible ordeal, dripping with tears and blood. What the devil promises is much more attractive. Satan proposes sex for its own sake, with children neither wanted nor expected, "une couche où la femme pâmée oubliera ses douleurs" ("L'Apologie du diable," Blasphèmes, 136).

Quand elle te tiendra sur sa gorge et
sa bouche,
Tout pantelant d'amour entre ses deux
genoux,
Vous jouirez assez pour que ce Dieu
farouche
En devienne jaloux.

If one expects little from what we call love, then the experience can be agreeable. As the poet tells a mistress in "Abdication" (Caresses, 136):

Si vous ne demandez que baisers et
caresses,
Je vous endormirai dans un lit de
paresses,

where desire and two people's bodies are the essential elements. This can be an ideal in itself. In "L'Idéal" (Caresses, 81), the poet is frank in reminding a mistress that he craves her in an almost bestial way.

Puisqu'à mon fauve amour tu voulus te
soumettre,
Il faudra désormais le nourrir comme un
maître;
Et tu sais qu'il est plein d'appétits
exigeants.
Un féroce mangeur! Il n'est pas de
ces gens
Qu'un morceau de pain sec rassasie et
contente.
Ce qu'il demande, lui, c'est ta chair
palpitante,
C'est ton corps tout entier, c'est ton
être absolu;
Et tout le nécessaire et tout le superflu
Seront à peine assez pour notre convoîtise.

What the poet wants when he is with a woman is total abandon. The woman's perfume and jewels, her "toilette de théâtre" as well, can be added enticements, making her and her adornments a "jardin plein de trésors" and her lover a solicitous gardener ("Beauté moderne," "Le Galant Jardinier," Caresses, 107, 91). Recapitulating to a woman a sexual encounter he has had with her, the poet dwells upon her collective charms:

Ces fruits fermes, savoureux,
Que mes désirs amoureux
Savaient être faits pour eux,

Ces fruits d'or et d'émeraude
Sur lesquels l'abeille rôde
Et prend du miel en maraude,

Je pus selon mon plaisir
Les toucher et les choisir
Et m'en repaître à loisir.

Maintenant, sans qu'on m'évince,
Au jardin je suis un prince
Absolu dans sa province.[6]

Smells and taste are as important to Richepin as to Baudelaire. When his mistress has used pills to sweeten her breath, the poet, kissing her, is intoxicated with sensuous delirium.

La salive de tes baisers sent la dragée
Avec je ne sais quoi d'une épice enragée,
Et la double saveur se confond tellement
Que j'y mange à la fois du sucre et du piment.
C'est dans le même instant l'eau courante et la braise;
C'est plus chaud qu'un alcool et plus frais qu'une fraise;
Et ton souffle s'y mêle et me monte au cerveau
Comme le vent du soir grisé de foin nouveau,

he admits in an untitled poem in Les Caresses (Caresses, 93).

Sexual excitement can be even more intense when an element of danger is present, for instance, when desire assails one at the theatre. In a poem

called "Au théâtre," the poet recalls attending an operetta or an opera one evening when he and his mistress were seated not in a darkened box but rather in an exposed area where all could see them (Caresses, 108-109). The two were holding hands. Suddenly the poet all but succombed to a violent impulse as he revelled in the "âpre volupté que le danger procure."

> Nous aurions pu si bien nous embrasser
> chez nous,
> Où j'aurais mis ton corps tout nu sur
> mes genoux
> Pour te porter au lit comme un enfant
> qu'on couche.
>
> Mais ici, c'était fou! Tous ces yeux
> à l'entour!
> Soudain je fis claquer mon baiser sur
> ta bouche,
> Et ce baiser valait toute une nuit d'amour.

Thus, for Richepin, there are thrills connected with sex that are at least as acute as the act itself.

Like almost everything else, sex can be a vice. Corrupt sex, while it did not attract the poet himself, nevertheless has its place in his verse. "La Succube" (Blasphèmes, 217) deals with a lascivious seductress expounding her wicked aims. She loves to subvert judges because doing so appeals to her malevolent needs. She ignores old men who would make sex worth her while, preferring to initiate boys and very young men into her evil practices.

> Je suis l'amante criminelle
> Portant l'enfer dans sa prunelle,

she boasts.

For some, the poet knew, sex is a calling. Although prostitution did not interest him personally, women who sell themselves do occur in his work. If one wants such women, they are available.

La femme se vend. Achète,

he advises their potential customers. Poor men, unlike rich ones, can seldom afford venal, unprincipled women, at least not the smart, modish ones. Monied rakes, on the other hand, can have whatever they want, including

. . . . . les belles putains aux
cuirasses de soie
Dont les seins provacants ne sont
nus que pour eux.
("Sonnet Consoland," Chanson, 233)

But prostitutes will sell themselves to whoever can meet their price, even when meeting it involves crime. "La Nuit" (Blasphèmes, 74-75) describes a soldier, "un vieux soudard paillard," with such a woman. He has committed atrocities, "s'est vautré dans un tas de crimes," and, remorseless, takes what he has earned with these crimes and purchases the woman's favors. Albeit distasteful, Richepin's description is graphic:

Il vient lui dégrafer sa robe de velours,
Et sur cet écrin noir qui s'étage en
plis lourds
Il jette par poignée, au hasard,
pêle-mêle,
De l'or, des diamants, des perles.
La femelle
Lui fait risette, et pour chacun de
ses cadeaux
Lui rend un long baiser dont frissonne
son dos.

Elle montre à son tour ses trésors de
chairs blanches,
Son ventre ferme et lisse entre ses
larges hanches,
Son fessier dur, ses reins souples, ses
seins raidis,
Et ses cuisses, piliers du secret paradis.
Comme sur un fumier fond un oiseau de
proie,
Le soudard bondissant sur la fille de
joie
La chevauche . . . .

The final repelling but vigorous image conveys the poet's horror at both the prostitute and her customer.

Although he was broadminded and could smile with amused tolerance at Rimbaud's adventure with Germain Nouveau while Verlaine was in prison, Richepin appears to have had no homosexual proclivities. Written in gutter French, the terrible poem, "Sans domicile" (Chanson, 176-177), enumerates the multitudinous buildings, sheds, railroad stations, and so on, where a vagrant tries to sleep at night. The man is not particular and once in a while even tries to sleep in men's streetside conveniences, but this can lead to complications that are not to his liking:

J'couch' que'qu'fois dans des pissoires;
Mais on croit, quand vous sortez,
Qu' vous v'nez d'y fair' des histoires,
Et j' suis pas pour ces sal'tés.

Often sex is a game that people play. We have seen in "Amours fous" the hollow area in the middle of a couple's bed likened to "un chaud creuset," as though two individuals having sex were a pair of dice in a game of chance (Blasphèmes, 44). Nor

is it an accident that at one point in "Ivres-morts" (Chanson, 210), which shows us two people drinking to excess and then retiring under a table to have intercourse, the male participant, using a magician's phrase, exclaims to his partner, "Passez muscade!" Now you see it, now you don't!

Except, we presume, for prostitutes and their older customers, sex is a game for the young, a carefree game in which the players devote little thought to the morrow. Youth and its attributes are all the game requires. The elderly male narrator of "La Fin des gueux" (Chanson, 285-295) recalls to his young listener how, as a young man,

> . . . j'ai biscoté bien des filles
> Que je payais de mes vingt ans.

Referring to a medieval and Renaissance article of male attire, he adds,

> Et dans les plis de ma braguette
> J'ai pris de jolis papillons.

Over the years he has fathered many a bastard child, has no idea where they are now, and realizes that, when he dies, none will be there to close his eyes with a kiss. While the life he has led is no burden on his conscience, this man is aware that he has set a bad example, but he is also aware that giving advice is useless. How can those in their prime believe that their own lives, so crammed with excitement at the moment, will in the end turn out to have been void and sterile? Walking away from the old man, the poet has no reason to think his own career will not turn out to be the same. Although he knows that neither will lead to ultimate, secure happiness, he will still continue, in a somewhat brutish manner, to be a poet and a lover. Poetry, after all, is rather like a woman.

In order to create a poem, the poet must subdue his prosodic material.

> La rime est un jupon; je m'amuse à la suivre.
> Je l'accoste; la fille en route se défend;
> Bah! derrière un taillis je lui fais un enfant,
> Et je m'en vais après vers une autre chimère
> Laissant sur mon chemin et l'enfant et la mère.

As for love, or what is called love:

> Je m'en vais en chantant dès le lever du jour,
> Par les prés de l'espoir, par les bois de l'amour,
> Et le long de ta haie en fleurs, verte jeunesse.
> Quand un plaisir est mort, j'attends qu'un autre naisse,
> Et prends celui qui vient sans voir celui qui part.

These last lines provide the key to Richepin's attitude toward sex. Sex is a pleasurable experience and at the same time a highly transient one. Even those with whom one shares the momentary experiences will come and go. Sex, then, especially when one is young, should be enjoyed, but at no time should one demand what it cannot provide.

Richepin's sex poems are never bawdy and are seldom crude. Verlaine, in his Hommes d'aujourd'hui, decried the Chanson des gueux and called Les Blasphèmes "grosses cochonneries."[8] He was not to remain so hostile, however. Far more balanced is

the critical opinion enunciated in a poem entitled "Jean Richepin," published in 1894. Here Verlaine admitted that the poet proclaimed "de sales vérités." All the same, he contended,

> Tout le mal
> Il le chante d'un ton normal.[9]

Richepin wrote about sex as he observed and lived it. He does not preach, does not seek to convert. There is no room for perversion in his sexual outlook. He did not condemn homosexual activities, but he viewed them as no more wholesome, no more spiritual in nature than any other sexual encounters. He did not advocate using sex as a weapon, nor did he approve of exploiting people. He was not what today is called a chauvinist. A male, a most virile one at that, he observes, reports, and comments from the standpoint of a male accustomed to providing women the same ecstatic pleasure he receives. Prostitution he deplored as a vice and because it is, or can be, linked to crime. To copulate for no better reason than to perpetuate the species he considered ridiculous.

Richepin possessed an incisive, even brilliant intellect, but he never intellectualizes about sex. His attitude toward it was a candid and, on the whole, a rational one. He saw the act of sex as natural, but an act about which one were best advised to entertain no illusions. Probably ideal love is impossible, he believed. In any event, it is not durable. The most it can do is provide a transient, ephemeral pleasure that should be taken for what it is and enjoyed. In a sense, this constitutes a kind of ethic, and, examined at close hand, it is far more bleak than it is erotic.

In conclusion, it should be pointed out that if sexual themes occupied Richepin somewhat less in his later poems than in his earlier ones, this is only a relative assessment. Sex continued to haunt the

poet, as is seen in La Bombarde, a collection that appeared in 1899, when he was fifty. A number of poems in this volume demonstrate that the poet's interest in sex had abated but little. These lines from "La Gouge" are a good example:

Dans le bois bleu j'ai rigolé,
Sauté, couru, de long et de lé,
Dans le bois bleu j'ai rigolé
Montrant mon cul sans linge;
Et celle à qui je le montrais,
C'est une gosse au minois frais
Qui le regardait de tout près
Avec de jolis yeux de singe.
Lirlonfa, mistenfli, mistenflé,
Dans le bois bleu j'ai rigolé,
Montrant mon cul sans linge.

Dans le bois rose on m'a aimé,
Au mois d'avril, puis au mois de mai,
Dans le bois rose on m'a aimé
A m'en vider les moelles;
Et celle qui m'aimait ainsi,
C'est une folle au poil roussi
Dont les seins flambaient comme si
Leurs deux bouts étaient deux étoiles.
Lirlonfa, gadouma, gadoumé,
Dans le bois rose on m'a aimé
A m'en vider les moelles.[10]

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NOTES

[1] Paul Verlaine, Les Hommes d'aujourd'hui in OEuvres complètes, V (Paris: Albert Messein, 1922), 323.

[2] Guy de Maupassant, "L'Inutile Beauté," OEuvres complètes, III (Paris: Louis Conard, 1908), 26-27.

[3] Jean Richepin, "A Frédérick Lemaître," Chanson des gueux (Paris: Charpentier, 1918), p. 219. Subsequent references to this collection will be noted in the text.

[4] Jean Richepin, Les Blasphèmes (Paris: Charpentier, 1919), p. 44. Subsequent references to this collection will be noted in the text.

[5] "ó ti án tuχῶ," Chanson des gueux, 219. In this portion of his poem, Richepin seems to recall Vigny's "Colère de Samson."

[6] Cf. Jean Richepin, "Beauté moderne," Les Caresses (Paris: Charpentier, 1917), pp. 106-107:

> Certes, tu m'éblouis quand tu es toute
> nue,

declares the poet, adding that he admires her just as much and desires her even more when she is dressed with care and wearing diamonds,

> . . . . . quand un savant accord
> De rubans, de chiffons, de robe revêtue,
> Dans la toilette étreint ta vivante
> statue.

[7] Jean Richepin, "Germain Nouveau et Rimbaud: souvenirs et papiers inédits," Revue de France, VII, No. 1 (janvier-février 1927), 119-144. Richepin and Nouveau, both habitués of Nina de Villard's salon, collaborated, as did others, on the Dixains réalistes (Paris: Librairie de l'Eau-Forte, 1876).

[8] Les Hommes d'aujourd'hui, V, 321. On October 26, 1887, he boasted to Charles Morice about his article on Richepin and added that his victim "écrit comme un cuistre et pense comme une brute." See Yves Le Dantec, ed., in Verlaine's OEuvres poétiques complètes (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), p. 110, note.

[9] See Verlaine, Dédicaces, in OEuvres poétiques complètes, p. 431.

[10] Jean Richepin, La Bombarde (Paris: Charpentier, 1899), pp. 322-323.