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Jethro Bithell**

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK LIFE AND WRITINGS OF MAURICE
MAETERLINCK ***

Life and Writings
of
Maurice Maeterlinck
BY
JETHRO BITHELL

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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

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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.

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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.

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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 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.

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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.

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JETHRO BITHELL.

Hammerfield,

Nr. Hemel Hempstead,

31st January, 1913.

[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).

[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.

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MAURICE MAETERLINCK

CHAPTER I

Maurice Polydore Marie Bernard Maeterlinck^[1] 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.^[2] Here through the paternal garden the sea-going ships seemed to glide, "spreading their majestic shadows over the avenues filled with roses and bees."^[3]

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Those bees and flowers in his father's garden stand for much 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."^[4] That hospital on the canal bank which starts a poem in *Serres Chaudes*^[5] 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.

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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-Barbe^[6] their narrow tyranny.... I have often 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."^[7]

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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.^[8] 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 clandestinely, as other schoolboys smoke their first cigarettes;^[9] 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 spoiled 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,

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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.^[10] 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."

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."

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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.

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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.^[11] even if the latter had not placed on record his high admiration of him. This was Jules Barbey d'Aureville (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'Aureville 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.

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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 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*,^[12] 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).

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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.^[13]

It is a story which reproduces the delightful quaintness of early 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

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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...."

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"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...."

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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.^[14] Henri de Régnier was on the point of doing so.^[15] 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;^[16] not because they are all, technically, symbolistic, but because each is in a new manner.

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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 Vielé-Griffin, he is said to have introduced it by translations of Walt Whitman;^[17] 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*.

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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 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 *Mercure 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*.^[18]

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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 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.

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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.

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

[2] 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*.

[3] Mme Georgette Leblanc, *Morceaux choisis*, Introduction.

[4] Anselma Heine, *Maeterlinck*, pp. 7-8.

[5] *Serres Chaudes*, "Hôpital."

[6] "The literary history of modern Belgium, by the freaks of chance, was born in 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.

[7] Mme Georgette Leblanc, *Morceaux choisis*, Introduction.

[8] Anselma Heine, *Maeterlinck*, p. 9. But cf. Léon Bazalgette, *Emile Verhaeren*, p. 14.

[9] Gérard Harry, *Maeterlinck*, p. 9, note.

[10] Gérard Harry, *Maeterlinck*, p. 26; Heine, *Maeterlinck*, p. 9.

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

[12] 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.

- [13] *The Massacre of the Innocents and other Tales by Belgian Writers.*
- [14] 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.
- [15] *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.
- [16] It was in 1886, too, that Gustave Kahn with the collaboration of Jean Moréas and Paul Adam, founded the review *Le Symboliste*.
- [17] 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.
- [18] He himself told Huret that *La Princesse Maleine* was written in *vers libres* concealed typographically as prose.

CHAPTER II

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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,^[1] Edmond Deman,^[2] and others) put their heads together and founded a bantam magazine, *La Semaine des Etudiants*.^[3] This magazine was the beginning of the modern movement in Belgian literature. In October of the "following 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.

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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 abcess. 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.^[4] 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,"^[5] the most discussed, the most suggestive literature in Europe.^[6]

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In this reaction against naturalism in Belgium, Maeterlinck's work was hardly more effective than the dreamy poetry of 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;^[7] 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:

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"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 at the deeps, but without seeing anything in them other than the trembling reflection of the things around him."^[8]

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.

[1] The famous Wagner tenor.

[2] The Brussels publisher.

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

[4] Iwan Gilkin, *Quinze années de littérature*.

[5] Albert Giraud, *Hors du Siècle*.

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

[7] 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."

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

CHAPTER III

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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 inactive^[1] 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.

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And that was a dreadful thing in Belgium. Nay, in that country, 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 writings^[2] Maeterlinck was refused some modest public office for which he applied.

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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.^[3] Even when the absurdity is an application of the theories of the symbolists it is often apt 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: [Pg 26]

"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 poems^[4] appeared to some people who are ardent Maeterlinckians that they assume he may, for a period, have been mentally ill.^[5] 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.^[6] 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. [Pg 27]

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 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: [Pg 28]

"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.^[7] Perhaps, elsewhere (Tancred de Visan suggests the Song of Solomon) this method has been applied successfully. The poems in *Serres Chaudes* are experiments.

[1] 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..."

[2] 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."

- [3] "Chambres pleines de songe! Elles vivent vraiment
En des rêves plus beaux que la vie ambiante,
Grandissant toute chose au Symbole, voyant
Dans chaque rideau pâle une Communiante
Aux falbalas de mousseline s'éployant
Qui communie au bord des vitres, de la Lune!"
—*Le Règne du Silence*, p. 4.
- [4] 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—nothing but fragments, so to speak, of the most varied things."
- [5] 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.
- [6] 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."
- [7] See Tancrède de Visan's interpretation in *L'Attitude du Lyrisme contemporain*, pp. 119 ff.

CHAPTER IV

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Some of the most eminent symbolists were strongly influenced by the pessimistic philosophy of Schopenhauer^[1] 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.

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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.

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."^[2]

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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.^[3] 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

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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 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.

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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 himself^[4] 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."...

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"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.^[5] 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 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."^[6]

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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.

MALEINE: And nobody can get in?

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

In the murder scene^[7] 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.

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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 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.^[8]

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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 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.

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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....

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- [1] Maeterlinck told Huret that he had been influenced by Schopenhauer "qui arrive jusqu'à vous consoler de la mort."
- [2] Figaro, 24th August, 1890.
- [3] Pronounced in German like the French *Maleine*.
- [4] Preface to *Théâtre*, p. 2.
- [5] 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?"
- [6] Schlaf's *Maeterlinck*, p. 31.
- [7] Suggested, perhaps, by the strangling of Little Snow-white in Grimm's story.
- [8] Preface to *Théâtre*, pp. 4-5.

CHAPTER V

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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."^[1] 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 preface^[2] 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.

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"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.^[3] In this cavern man gropes about in exile, with his back to the light he is seeking.

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

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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:

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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*^[4] that the charge of plagiarism was turned against him. Now the fact is that Maeterlinck, to a certain extent, collaborated in *Les Flaireurs*.

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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;^[5] 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." 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.

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It will be seen that whereas in *The Intruder* there is nothing which cannot be explained by natural causes, the symbolism of *Les Flaireurs* 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."^[6] The fable is this:

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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 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.

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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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The Sightless is a notable example of clear symbolism. The dead priest is religion. Religion is dead now in the midst of us; and we are without a guide and groping in the dark. "There is something which moves above our heads, but we cannot reach it." We are prisoners in a little finite space washed round by the Ocean of Infinity, whose mighty waters we can hear in our calm seasons. Above the dense forest somewhere rises a lighthouse (Wisdom). We have strayed from the asylum (that goodness which religion instilled in us when it was alive). The baby alone can see; but it cannot speak yet (the future will reveal).

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The virtues and failings of humanity are hinted at with gentle irony. One blind man, when he goes out in the sunshine, suspects the great radiances; another prefers to stay near the good coal fire in the refectory.... The oldest blind woman dreams sometimes that she sees; the oldest blind man only sees when he dreams.... The young beauty smells the scent of flowers around them (the promptings of sense guide us; and the beautiful are the sensuous); one who was born blind only smells the scent of the earth (Philistines).... Heaven is mentioned, and all raise their heads towards the sky, except the three who were born blind—they keep their faces bent earthwards....

Lessing thought no man could write a good tragedy till he was thirty. Here are two written by a man of twenty-eight.

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- [1] "Les Avertis" (in *Le Trésor des Humbles*), p. 53.
 - [2] Cf. also "L'Evolution du Mystère" (in *Le Temple Enseveli*) Chapters V., XXI., and XXII.
 - [3] See Chapter XXVIII. of *L'Intelligence des Fleurs*.
 - [4] In a letter inserted in the programme when *Les Fleurs* 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.
 - [5] But Death, in *The Intruder*, is understood to have made some noise while coming upstairs.
 - [6] Is. van Dijk, *Maurice Maeterlinck*, pp. 81-82.

CHAPTER VI

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Few men entirely outgrow the influences of their education: the mind is made by what it is fed on while it is growing just as much as the body is. Carlyle was always more or less of a Scotch preacher threatening the world with hell. Gerhart Hauptmann (who, by the way, was born in the same year as Maeterlinck) never got over his Moravian upbringing. Maeterlinck came to hate the Jesuits; but his monastic training lingered in his love of the mystics. Mysticism is in any case a Flemish *trait*; and it is one of the outstanding features of Flemish literature as it is of Flemish

painting. It is not astonishing, then, that Maeterlinck should have felt drawn to the most famous of Flemish mystics. He published, in 1891, *L'Ornement des Noces spirituelles*, a translation, illuminated by a preface, of Jan van Ruysbroeck's *Die Chierheit der gheesteleker Brulocht*. The "doctor ecstaticus" was born in 1274 at the little village of Ruysbroeck, near Brussels. He was a curate in the Church of Sainte Gudule in Brussels; but in his old days he with several friends founded the Monastery of Groenendal (Green Dale) in the Forêt de Soignes, two miles from Brussels. The fame of his piety attracted many pilgrims to his retreat, among others the German mystic, Johannes Tauler, and the Dutch scholar who founded the Brotherhood of the Common Life, Geert Groote. He died in 1381. His contemporaries called him "the Admirable."

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Maeterlinck warns us in his preface to *The Ornamentation of the Nuptials of the Spirit*, the subject of which is the *unio mystica*, the mystic union of the soul with God, that we must not expect a literary work; "you will perceive nothing," he says, "save the convulsive flight of a drunken eagle, blind and bleeding, over snowy summits." He only made the translation for the benefit of a few Platonists. But, apart from the translation itself, the preface is of value as showing how deeply read in the mystics Maeterlinck already was at this time, and the importance he attached to their teaching. "All certainty is in them alone," he says, paradoxically. Their ecstasies are only the beginning of the complete discovery of ourselves; their writings are the purest diamonds in the prodigious treasure of humanity; and their thoughts have the immunity of Swedenborg's angels who advance continually towards the springtide of their youth, so that the oldest angels seem the youngest. Embedded in the preface are gems from Ruysbroeck's other writings. Here is one of them:

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"And they (the doves) will tarry near the rivers and over the clear waters, so that if any bird should come from on high, which might seize or injure them, they may know it by its image in the water, and avoid it. This clear water is Holy Writ, the life of the Saints, and the mercy of God. We will look upon our image therein whenever we are tempted; and in this way none shall have power to harm us. These doves have an ardent disposition, and young doves are often born of them, for every time that to the honour of God and our own beatitude we consider sin with hatred and scorn, we bring young doves into the world, that is to say new virtues."

The translation of the mystic was followed, in 1891, by a playlet in one act, *Les Sept Princesses* (The Seven Princesses). It is "the angel" among Maeterlinck's productions, a weakling which no fostering can save. Few critics have a good word for it. "A girl's unpleasant dream," interprets Mieszner. "An indecipherable enigma," says Adolphe Brisson. "The piece is something *seen*, purely pictorial," says Anselma Heine, "a transposition of paintings by Burne-Jones." "Can only claim the rank of an intermezzo," says Monty Jacobs, "an unfinished sketch." "We must not seek a literal signification," says Beaunier, "its signification is in its very strangeness." "Perhaps the weakest thing in Maeterlinck," says Oppeln von Bronikowski, "a sketch, or a testing of mystico-symbolic apparatus." "*Passons*," says Adolphe van Bever. The Princesses have, however, found a friend in a Dutch critic, Dr Is. van Dijk, whose book on Maeterlinck is suggestive. His analysis and interpretation of the play runs somewhat as follows:

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"In a spacious marble hall, decorated with laurel bushes, lavender plants, and lilies in porcelain vases, is a white marble staircase with seven steps, on which seven white-robed princesses are lying, one on each step, sleeping on cushions of pale silk. Fearing lest they should awaken in the dark, they have lit a silver lamp, which casts its light over them. The lovely princesses sleep on and on; they must not be wakened, they are so weak! It is their weakness that has sent them to sleep. They have been so listless and weary since they came here; it is so cold and dreamy in this Castle in the North. They came hither from warm lands; and here they are always watching for the sun, but there is hardly any sun, and no sweet heaven over this level waste of fens, over these green ponds black with the shadows of forests of oaks and pines, over this willow-hung canal that runs to the rounded grey of the horizon. It is home-sickness that has sunk them in sleep. They sleep forlorn. Everything around them is so very old. Their life is so dreary with their long, long waiting; they are weary, weary.... They are waiting for the comrade of their youth; always they are looking for his ship on the canal between the willows; but, 'He cometh not,' they say. Now at last he is come while they are sleeping, and they have bolted the door from the inside. They cannot be wakened. With sick longing the Prince gazes at the seven through the thick window-panes. His eyes rest longest on the loveliest, Ursula, with whom he had loved best to play when he was a boy. Seven years she has looked for his coming, seven years, by day and by night. He sees them lying with linked hands, as though they were afraid of losing each other.... And yet they must have moved in their sleep, for the two sisters on the steps above and below Ursula have let go her hand; she is holding her hands so strangely.... At last the Prince makes his way into the room by an underground passage, past the tombs of the dead. The noise of his entrance awakens six of the Princesses, but not Ursula. The six cry: 'The Prince has come!' But she lies motionless, stiff.... She has died of her long, long waiting, of the deep, unfulfilled longing of her soul...."

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Dr van Dijk is indignant at the criticism of René Doumic, who, in an article on Maeterlinck, dismisses *Les Sept Princesses* with these few words: "As for *The Seven Princesses*, the devout themselves confess they can find no appreciable sense in the play. All that I can say of it, now that I have read it, is that it is a thin volume published in Brussels, by Lacomblez."^[1] "Let me

have this French critic in my tuition six months," continues Dr van Dijk. "My curriculum would then be as follows: The first month he should learn by heart, in Greek and French, Plato's myth concerning *The Chariot of the Soul*, with the obligation of course to ponder on it. The following month he should learn by heart, in Greek and French, Plato's myth of *The Cave*, with the obligation of course to ponder on it. Then he should impress the well-known fable of *Amor and Psyche* on his mind, so as to accustom himself to the atmosphere of fables. Then he should ponder for a month on the sovereign freedom of a poet to remould a fable wholly or in part. Another month he should spend in reflecting over the fact that in order to understand a whole one does not need to know all the parts. And the last month he should be left to himself to try and find whether there was anything in his own soul which in any way could be said to resemble unfulfilled longing."

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Another plausible interpretation is that of another Dutch critic, G. Hulsman, in his *Karakters en Ideeën*. He quotes the following poem from Paul Bourget's *Espoir d'aimer*:

"Notre âme est le palais des légendes, où dort
Une jeune princesse en robe nuptiale,
Immobile et si calme!... On dirait que la Mort
A touché son visage pâle.

Elle dort, elle rêve et soupire en rêvant;
Une larme a roulé lentement sur sa joue.
Elle se rêve errante en barque au gré du vent
Sur l'Océan, qui gronde et joue.

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"Elle ne le voit pas, le beau Prince Charmant
Qui chevauche, parmi les plaines éloignées
Et s'en vient éveiller sa belle au bois dormant
De son sommeil de cent années"—

and continues:

"Our heart is this palace, and in this palace lies our soul, a beautiful sleeper. It sleeps, and dreams, and waits for the coming of the ideal hero, who shall awaken it out of its slumber and cherish it with the warmth of his love. And these seven princesses are the different qualities of the human soul."

Hulsman thinks that Maeterlinck must have thought of the Buddhist idea, according to which the human soul consists of: the breath of God, the word, the thought, Psyche, the power of living, appearance, and the body.

"Ursula, the middle sister, is Psyche, that is, the real self, the deepest, the essential in our being. This real self is unconscious and unknowable. Let the ideal come, no ideal can unveil the deepest. It is dead to us."

Maeterlinck's imagination has been compared "to a lake with desolate and stagnant waters, unceasingly reflecting the same black landscapes, on whose banks the same suffering personages for ever come to sit." The same old castle, the same subterranean caverns, the same dark forests, another old tower, are the scenes of *Pelléas et Mélisande* (Pelleas and Melisanda) which was published at Brussels in 1892, and performed at the Théâtre des Bouffes-Parisiens in Paris on the 16th May, 1893. The scene is the same; but there is a difference between this play and those which preceded it—here for the first time we have characters almost of flesh and blood; "the asphodelic shadows and marionettes begin to colour themselves with blood-warm humanity."^[2] We have personages who represent the same ideas as those of the previous plays—Melisanda is again the soul—but here the puppets are moved by Love, not Death. In *Princess Maleine* love is one of the means by which Fate moves the puppets to death; in Pelleas and Melisanda death is the bourne to which Love drives his sheep. The sheep do not know whither they are being driven; when they come to cross-roads they do not know which to take; but they do feel, dimly, that they are not on the road to the fold. Hence the tragedy of their emotions; and it is the state of the soul filled with love, as tragic and as mystical a consciousness or subconsciousness as that of the soul in the clutch of fate or in the shadow of death, that Maeterlinck projects into *Pelleas and Melisanda* as into *Alladine and Palomides* and *Aglavaine and Selysette*.

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We have nothing to do here with morality or the laws which regulate marriage. The soul knows nothing of such things; is unconscious even of the sins of the body.^[3] The soul is subject only to such laws as are inherent in itself: "the secret laws of antipathy or of sympathy, elective or instinctive affinities."^[4] The soul, remembering the fair sunny clime from which it came, pining in the cold air of the marshlands, groping about helplessly in the dark, always meeting closed doors, always gazing through glass at the unattainable, is an eternal searcher for the light; and if it meets a comrade who has the key to the closed door of its happiness, or who holds the lamp to light its path, it will follow the gleam blindly. It must do, for that is the law of its being. The tragedy lies in this: that it follows the gleam blindly, and the gleam leads it—at all events at present, because alien souls come athwart the path it is following—into the abyss of night.

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Civic laws were made to fetter the body; but the soul has no consciousness of the body, of the senses, and cannot therefore be fettered by civic laws. So long as you hold that love is a function

of the soul, and not of the senses, you cannot call Francesca da Rimini or Melisanda faithless wives. In your philosophy they are not on the road to adultery, but to the happiness for which their soul cries out, and to which it has inalienable right.

The story of *Pelleas and Melisanda* is as old as love: it is the story of Francesca da Rimini; it is Sudermann's *Geschichte der stillen Mühle*. Golaud,^[5] a prince of blood and iron, whose hair and beard are turning grey, losing his way while hunting in a forest, comes upon a lovely being whose dress, though torn by brambles, is princely. She is weeping by the side of a spring, into which her crown (the symbol of her royal birth; all souls are royal) has fallen. Somebody has hurt her—who? All of them, all of them. She has fled away, she is lost ... she was born far away. Golaud marries her, and takes her to the Castle, where his grandfather, King Arkel, holds rule over a famine-stricken land by a desolate sea. Here dwells also Pelleas, his young brother.

Pelleas is very anxious to depart on a long journey to see a friend who is dying. If he had done so, the tragedy might have been, if not prevented, at all events retarded. But his father is lying dangerously ill in the Castle (the only use for this father in the economy of the play is to be ill); filial duty chains him there. This is in the nature of an accident; and by the canons of dramaturgy accidents must not precipitate tragedy, but Maeterlinck's plays proudly ignore the canons of dramaturgy. (Maeterlinck would say the accident was arranged by Fate.) Pelleas and Melisanda meet on a high place overlooking the sea. They watch a great ship—the ship that has brought Melisanda—sailing across the strip of light cast by the lighthouse, sailing out into the great open spaces where the soul is at home. A few words of common speech tell us what perilous life is awakening in these two sister souls that till now had not lived:

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PELLEAS: Let us descend here. Will you give me your hand?

MELISANDA: You see I have my hands full of flowers and leaves....

PELLEAS: I will hold you by the arm, the path is steep, and it is very dark here.... I am going away to-morrow perhaps....

MELISANDA: O, why are you going away?

We find them again under an old lime-tree in the dense, discreet forest, at the "Fountain of the Blind." (They are the blind.) Melisanda would like to plunge her two hands into the water ... it seems to her that her hands are ill. Her hair, which is longer than her body (what poetry Maeterlinck has dreamed into hair and hands!) falls down, and touches the water (a Burne-Jones). She tosses her wedding-ring into the air (as the Princess at the fountain under the lime-tree in the dark forest near the King's castle in *The Frog Prince*^[6] tosses a golden ball), and just as noon is striking it falls into the water. She had cast it too high towards the sunlight.... We hear soon that at the twelfth stroke of noon Golaud's horse, taking fright in the forest, had dashed against a tree, and seriously injured its rider. While Melisanda is at her husband's bedside, he notices that her ring is gone. She lies to him; she has lost it in a cave, she says. Does she lie? Her union with Golaud is an external bond; but her soul knows nothing of things external, her soul is innocent of whatever her mouth may say to a man who is a stranger to her soul. He sends her to the cave to look for the ring, in the dark—with Pelleas. She is frightened by the noise of the cave—is it the noise of the night or the noise of silence? Later on Pelleas finds Melisanda combing her hair at the casement of a tower. She leans over; he holds her hand; her golden hair falls down and inundates him (another Burne-Jones):

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PELLEAS: O! O! what is this?... Your hair, your hair comes down to me!... All your hair, Melisanda, all your hair has fallen from the tower! I am holding it in my hands, I am touching it with my lips.... I am holding it in my arms, I am putting it round my neck.... I shall not open my hands again this night....

Doves (the doves of the body's chastity, perhaps) come out of the tower and fly around them. Golaud surprises the pair, and tells them they are children. What he suspects, however, we know from a scene in the caverns under the Castle, when he is on the point of pushing his brother over a ledge of rock into a stagnant pool that stinks of death. But his jealousy has not yet grown sufficiently to force him to murder, and he contents himself with warning Pelleas. There follows a scene which brings the house down whenever the play is acted: Golaud questions his little son by a former marriage as to how the pair behave when they are alone; and lifts the little boy up so that he may peep in at the window of the tower and tell him what they are doing in the room. Golaud in his anguish digs his nails into the child's flesh, but he finds nothing to justify his suspicions; nevertheless in a following scene he loses his self-control, and, in the presence of his grandfather, ill-treats Melisanda. In the meantime the father is declared to be out of danger (Fate needs the father's recovery now to precipitate the tragedy); Pelleas is free to go away, and he asks Melisanda for a last meeting, by night, in the forest. She leaves her husband asleep, and the lovers meet in the moonlight. "How great our shadows are this evening!" says Melisanda. "They enlase each other to the back of the garden," replies Pelleas. "O! how they kiss each other far from us." Here Melisanda sees Golaud behind a tree, where their shadows end. They know they cannot escape; they fall into each other's arms and exchange their first guilty kiss. Golaud kills Pelleas, wounds Melisanda, and stabs himself. But Melisanda, ere she dies (of a wound which would not kill a pigeon) gives birth to a daughter, "a little girl that a beggar woman would be ashamed to bring into the world." On her death-bed Golaud implores her to tell him the truth—has she loved Pelleas with a guilty love? But she can only whisper vague words.

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The child-wife dies; and King Arkel, the wise old man of the play, closes it by a few fatalistic sentences:

"She was so tranquil, so timid, and so silent a little being.... She was a mysterious little being like everybody else.... She lies there as though she were the big sister of her child.... Come away, come away.... My God! My God!... I shall not be able to understand anything any more.... Don't let us stay here.—Come away; the child must not stay in this room.... It must live now, in its turn.... It's the poor little one's turn now...."

[1] *Les Jeunes*, p. 230.

[2] Johannes Schlaf's *Maeterlinck*, p. 32.

[3] See chapter "La Morale mystique" in *Le Trésor des Humbles*. This is the doctrine for which quietism was condemned. I find the following definition of the soul quoted in *La Wallonie* for February to March, 1889; "Qu'est-ce donc que l'âme? Une *possibilité idéale* qui réside en nous comme la substance réelle de nous-mêmes, que les erreurs et les tâches de la vie ne peuvent entamer, que ses découragements ne peuvent abattre et qui les contemple avec sérénité dans l'extériorité réelle, et séparés, pour ainsi dire de sa propre essence."—JOHNSON.

[4] "Le Réveil de L'Ame" (in *Le Trésor des Humbles*), p. 38.

[5] Perhaps a Gallicised form of Golo, the lover of Genoveva. The name of Golaud's mother is Geneviève.

[6] M.G.M. Rodrigue, of *Le Thyrsé* tells me (and Grégoire Le Roy told him) that Maeterlinck at the time he wrote his early dramas drew inspiration from Walter Crane's picture-books. *The Frog Prince* was one of them. Perhaps Maeterlinck had Grimm's *Household Stories*, done into pictures by Walter Crane (Macmillan, 1882).

CHAPTER VII

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It is natural that an artist should wish to recreate something he has attempted and not completed to his satisfaction, or which, when his mind is more mature, he thinks he could do better. The three plays which Maeterlinck published together in 1894 are such attempts at reconstruction. *Alladine and Palomides* is a love story which has much in common with *Pelleas and Melisanda*: "both dramas are dominated by the idea of the enigmatic in our deeds" (van Hamel), and in both the love that is given is taken from its lawful owner. *Interior* is clearly a version of *The Intruder*. In *The Death of Tintagiles* we have again, but more concentrated, the physical anguish of *The Princess Maleine*.

The three plays had for their secondary title "trois petits drames pour marionnettes" (three little dramas for marionettes). But we have seen that Maeterlinck had described his very first play as a drama for a marionette theatre; and the three 1894 plays are not a whit less adapted for the ordinary stage than those which preceded them. Perhaps in deliberately ticketing his plays with this ironic label Maeterlinck wished to indicate that they were unsuited for the garish light and the artificial voices of the present-day tragedy style on the stage. It is more probable, however, that he would not have dreamt of suggesting a slight on his actor friends. The characters are described as marionettes, it is likely, because the scene is spiritualised by distance. We look down on the movements of the puppets as from a higher world—we are richer by an idea than they are: we see what Player is pulling the strings, the strings of which they are only half conscious. Our position in all these plays is the same as that of the greybeard, the stranger, the two girls, and the crowd in *The Interior*, and the acting of the family in this play is an example of the "active silence" which Maeterlinck in his essay, "Everyday Tragedy," was to suggest for the theatre when the actor is become an automaton through which the soul speaks more than words can say.

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"In *Alladine and Palomides* there is more than one scene in which silence is the principal speaker; so, for instance, when Alladine and Palomides meet on the bridge over the castle moat, and the girl's pet lamb escapes from her hands, slips, and rolls into the water:

ALLADINE: What has he done? Where is he?

PALOMIDES: He has slipped! He is struggling in the middle of the whirlpool. Don't look at him; there is nothing we can do....

ALLADINE: You are going to save him?

PALOMIDES: Save him? Why, look at him; he is already in the suck of the whirlpool. In another minute he will be under the vaults; and God himself will not see him again....

ALLADINE: Go away! Go away!

PALOMIDES: What is the matter?

ALLADINE: Go away! I don't want to see you any more!...

[Enter ABLAMORE *precipitately*; he seizes ALLADINE and drags her away roughly without saying a word.]

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Perhaps such a scene as this, with its prattling as of children, would be better in perfect than active silence, that is, as pantomime. (That pantomime may fascinate a modern audience has been proved by Max Reinhardt.) But to relate our story: Alladine's pet lamb, a symbol of her

peace of mind or maiden apathy, had been frightened by Palomides' charger when the two first met. He had come to the castle (gloomy, etc.) of King Ablamore, to wed the latter's daughter Astolaine. Here he finds Alladine, who has come from Arcady.

Ablamore has been surnamed "The Wise";^[1][Pg 71] he was wise because nothing had happened to him, because hitherto he had lived

"In apathy of life unrealised,
And days to Lethe floating unenjoyed."

But now he stands on his turrets and summons the events which had avoided him. They come—and they overpower him. It is love that brings the events. "How beautiful she is," he says, bending over Alladine while she is asleep. "I will kiss her without her knowing it, holding back my poor white beard." He would fain make her his queen; but she returns the love which Palomides, untrue to Astolaine, conceives for her. Astolaine discovers the truth; but she, the first of Maeterlinck's strong, emancipated women, feels no jealousy. Her behaviour is similar to that of Selysette in a later play; but her character is identical with Aglavaine's in that play: the rôles of the women in *Aglavaine and Selysette* are reversed. It is Aglavaine's beautiful soul for the sake of which Méléandre is untrue to Selysette. Palomides recognises, when his love turns from the woman to the child, "that there must be something more incomprehensible than the beauty of the most beautiful soul or the most beautiful face"; and something more powerful too, for he cannot help obeying it. Palomides is quite aware that Astolaine is a type superior to Alladine. He loves her even when he is faithless. "I love you," he says to her, "more than her I love." (The situation is the same in Grillparzer's *Sappho*: Phaon prefers Melitta, also a little Greek slave, to the renowned and noble poetess.) "She has a soul," Palomides says of Astolaine, "that you can see round her, that takes you in its arms as though you were a suffering child, and which, without speaking, consoles you for everything...." This doctrine of the soul's fluidity appears in the scene in which Astolaine tells her father that she has ceased to love Palomides:

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ABLAMORE: Come hither, Astolaine. It is not so that you were accustomed to speak to your father. You are waiting there, on the threshold of a door that is hardly open, as though you were ready to run away; and with your hand on the key, as though you wished to close the secret of your heart on me for ever. You know well that I have not understood what you have just said, and that words have no meaning when souls are not within reach of each other. Come nearer, and speak no more. (ASTOLAINE *comes slowly nearer*.) There is a moment when souls touch and know everything without there being any need of moving the lips. Come nearer.... Our souls do not reach each other yet, and their ray ^[2] is so dim around us!... (ASTOLAINE *holds still*.) You dare not?— You know then how far one can go? Very well then, I will come to you.... (*With slow steps he comes near ASTOLAINE, then stops, and looks at her long*.) I see you, Astolaine....

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ASTOLAINE: My father!... (*She sobs and embraces the old man*.)
ABLAMORE: You see that it was useless ...

Palomides promises Alladine that he will take her away from this cold clime where the sky is like the vault of a cave to a land where Heaven is sweet, where the trees are not a wilderness of boughs blackening the steep hill-sides like carrion ribs, but a wind-waved sea of rustling shade.... They are both poor little wandering souls weary in exile. While they are preparing their flight, the events Ablamore has summoned drive him mad; and now, with golden keys in his hand (gold glinting against white walls, no doubt, another Pre-Raphaelite picture), he

"Wanders along the marble corridors
That interlace their soundless floors around
And to the centre of his royal home,"

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singing a dirge with a refrain which is Maeterlinck's best lyric line: *Allez où vos yeux vous mènent*. He thwarts the lovers' plans by shutting them up, blindfolded and pinioned, in the vast caverns under the castle. "These caverns," comments Mieszner, "are the place we all dream in, the place where our longing for the light leads us astray into strange, contradictory deeds." The symbolism of the play is concentrated in these scenes below the ground: the thought that life is sublimated in moments of enchantment which pitiless light soon dispels. The prisoners break their bonds. When their eyes get used to the light, it seems to them that they are in a great blue hall, whose vault, drunken with jewels, is held aloft by pillars wreathed by innumerable roses. They see below them a lake so blue that the sky might have flowed thither.... It is full of strange and stirless flowers.... They think they are embracing in the vestibules of Heaven.... But suddenly they hear the din of iron ringing on the rock above them.... Stones fall from the roof; and as the light pours in through the opening, "it reveals to them little by little the wretchedness of the cave they had deemed wonderful; the miraculous lake grows dull and sinister; the jewels lose their light; and the glowing roses are seen to be the stains of rubbish phosphorescent with decay."

Ablamore has fled raving into the land; and the good Astolaine (this woman of Maeterlinck we love) has come to rescue the forsaken lovers. She comes too late—they have been poisoned by the deadly reek of the unreal in the caverns they dreamed in; and they die moaning piteously to each other across the corridor that parts their beds:

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ALLADINE'S VOICE: They were not jewels....
PALOMIDES' VOICE: And the flowers were not real....

The passion of love may break the bonds of custom, and for a swift space the world may seem lit by a magic light; but the awakening comes, and the poison works, and in the cold wretchedness of reality even love will die. Love (sensual love) is a short dream of fair things that fade....

Interior, which was performed at the Théâtre de l'Œuvre in March, 1895, is better than *The Intruder* in so far as the coming of death is not indicated by suspicious signs (which turn out to be from natural causes) and dim forebodings (which might possibly be the drivelling of old age). Here everything is taken absolutely from life. *Interior*, too, shows a great mastery of "active silence": some of the scenes in *Alladine and Palomides* approach pantomime; in *Interior* we have actual pantomime—the family whom the tragedy befalls are seen sitting in the lamplit room of their house, mute characters, and the spectators, together with the speaking characters, see them, through the three windows, resting from their day's toil. There are three daughters in the family, as in *The Intruder*; but one of them has drowned herself.

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"She was perhaps one of those who won't say anything, and everybody has in his mind more than one; reason for ending his life.... You can't see into the soul as you see into that room. They are all the same.... They only say the usual things; and nobody suspects anything.... They look like dolls that don't move, and such a lot of things are happening in their souls.... They don't know themselves what they are.... No doubt she lived as the others live.... No doubt she went on saying to the day of her death: 'It's going to rain to-day'; or, it may be: 'The fruit isn't ripe yet.' They talk with a smile of flowers that have withered, and in the dark they cry...."

"The Stranger" has waded into the river, and brought the body to the shore; and now he, with "The Greybeard," a friend of the family, is in the old garden planted with willows. The Greybeard is to tell the bad news before the crowd arrives with the corpse. But while he looks at the peaceful idyll in the lamplight—the mother with the baby sleeping on her left shoulder, not moving lest it should awake, the sisters embroidering, the father by the fire—his courage sinks, and it is only when the crowd with the body arrive that he enters the house. We see the father rising to greet the visitor, and one of the girls offering him a chair. By his gestures we know he is speaking. Suddenly the mother starts and rises. She questions the Greybeard. The whole family rush out at the door. The room is left empty, except for the baby, which sleeps on in the arm-chair where the mother has put it down.

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Interior needs no interpretation. It is one of the simplest, as it is one of the most terrible, masterpieces in all literature. Some critics consider it the best thing Maeterlinck has written.

In *The Death of Tintagiles* the tragedy takes place behind a closed door. ("Victor Hugo said that nothing is more interesting than a wall behind which something is happening," Jules Lemaître reminds us.^[3] "This tragic wall is in all M. Maeterlinck's poems," he continues; "and when it is not a wall, it is a door; and when it is not a door, it is a window veiled with curtains.") Behind the closed door, in an enormous tower which still withstands the ravages of time when the rest of the castle is crumbling to pieces, dwells the Queen (Death). The castle is stifled by poplars. It is sunk deep down in a girdle of darkness. They might have built it on the top of the mountains that take all the air from it.... One might have breathed there, and seen the sea all round the island. The Queen never comes down from her tower, and all the doors of it are closed night and day. But she has servants who move with noiseless feet. The Queen has a power that none can fathom; "and we live here with a great pitiless weight on our soul." "She is there on our soul like a tombstone, and none dares stretch out his arm." Ygraine explains this to her little brother Tintagiles, whom the Queen has sent for from over the sea. There is some talk of the boy's golden crown, as there was of Melisanda's; every soul is royal, and comes from far away, you remember. Bellangère, the boy's other sister, has heard the Queen's servants whispering. They know that the Queen has sent for the boy to kill him. The only friend the two sisters and the boy have is Aglovale, a greybeard, who, like Arkel, has long since renounced the vanity of resisting fate and having a will of his own. "All is useless," he says; but now he is willing to defend the boy, since they hope. He sits down on the threshold with his sword across his knees. The Queen's servants come with stealthy feet, and Aglovale's sword snaps when he tries to prevent them from opening the door. But this time the servants, meeting resistance, withdraw, only to return when Aglovale and the sisters are asleep. Tintagiles is sleeping too, between the sisters, with his arms round their necks; and their arms are round him. His hands are plunged deep into their hair; he holds a golden curl tight between his teeth. The servants cut the sisters' hair, and remove the boy, still sleeping, with his little hands full of golden curls. At the end of the corridor he screams; Ygraine awakes, and rushes in pursuit. Bellangère falls in a dead faint on the threshold. The fifth act is a picture of unendurable anguish. "A great iron door under very dark vaults." Ygraine enters with a lamp in her hand. Faint knocking is heard on the other side of the door; then the voice of Tintagiles. Ygraine scratches her finger-nails out on the iron door, and smashes her lamp on it. The boy cries out that hands are at his throat. "The fall of a little body is heard behind the iron door." Ygraine implores, curses, sinks down exhausted.

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It is probably wrong to look on *The Death of Tintagiles* as, principally, a picture of physical anguish. That would be dramatic, and therefore, in Maeterlinck's idea at the time he wrote the play, vulgar. The play is rather based, like *The Sightless*, on the sensations of fear we have when we awaken from the poisoned apathy, which is the safeguard of the peace of mind of most

people, in the stifling air of the Valley of the Shadow of Death. (The Queen's Tower overshadows all the rest of the castle.) Everything is plunged in darkness here.... Only the Queen's Tower is lit.... We know, but we do not understand....

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TINTAGILES: What do you know, sister Ygraine?

YGRAINE: Very little, my child.... My sister and I, since we were born, have trailed our existence here without daring to understand anything of all that happens.... I have lived for a very long time like a blind woman in this island; and everything seemed natural to me.... I saw no other events here except a bird that was flying, a leaf that was trembling, a rose that was opening.... Such a silence reigned here that a ripe fruit falling in the park called faces to the windows.... And nobody seemed to have any suspicions ... but one night I found out that there must be something else.... I wanted to run away and I couldn't....

We cannot flee from our exile; and "we have got to live while we wait for the unexpected," as Aglovale says.

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- [1] Ablamore was not really wise, according to the theories propounded in *Wisdom and Destiny*. A wise man is one who knows himself; but he is not wise if he does not know himself in the future as well as in the present and in the past. He knows a part of his future because he is himself already a part of this future; and, since the events which will happen to him will become assimilated to his own nature, he knows what these events will become (Chapter VIII).
 - [2] Cf. in Strindberg's *Legends*, "The soul's irradiation and dilatibility": "The secret of a great actor lies in his inborn capacity to let his soul ray out, and thereby enter into touch with his audience. In great moments there is actually a radiance round a speaker who is full of soul, and his face irradiates a light which is visible even to those who do not believe." The idea is more or less of a commonplace.
 - [3] *Impressions de Théâtre*, huitième série, p. 153.

CHAPTER VIII

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In 1895 Maeterlinck published *Annabella*, a translation of John Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*. It had been acted at the Théâtre de l'Œuvre on the 6th of November, 1894. The published play is preceded by some entertaining gossip concerning Webster (whose *Duchess of Malfi* Georges Eekhoud translated) and Cyril Tourneur, "les deux princes noirs de l'horreur ... les deux tragiques mercuriels, compacts comme la houille et infernalement vénéneux, dont le premier surtout a semé à pleines mains des fleurs miraculeuses dans les poisons et les ténèbres"; concerning also "Jhon Fletcher" and "Jonson, le pachydermique, l'entêté et puissant Ben Jonson, qui appartient à la famille de ces grands monstres littéraires où rayonnent Diderot, Jean Paul et l'autre Jhonson, le Jhonson de Boswel." Interesting, too, is the way Maeterlinck reads his own theories into the Elizabethans. Ford, he finds, was a master of "interior dialogue":

"Ford is profoundly discreet. Annabella, Calantha, Bianca, Penthea do not cry out; and they speak very little. In the most tragical moments, in those most charged with misery, they say two or three very simple words; and it is, as it were, a thin coating of ice on which we can rest an instant to see what there is in the abyss."

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There are some quaint passages inspired by mysticism; as this, with reference to the "great cyclone of poetry which burst over London towards the end of the sixteenth century":

"You seem to be in the very midst of the human soul's miraculous springtime. These were really days of marvellous promise. You would have said that humanity was about to become something else. Moreover, we do not know what influence these great poetic phenomena have exercised on our life; and I have forgotten what sage it was who said that if Plato or Swedenborg had not existed, the soul of this peasant who is passing along the road and who has never read anything would not be what it is to-day. Everything in the spiritual regions is connected more closely than people believe; and just as there is no malady which does not oppress all humanity and does not invisibly affect the healthiest man, so the most undeniable genius has not one thought which does not modify something in the inmost soul of the most hopeless idiot in the asylum."

It is in this style that Maeterlinck discusses mysticism in the introduction to *Les Disciples à Saïs et les Fragments de Novalis* (The Disciples at Saïs and the Fragments of Novalis), published also in 1895.

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"All that one can say," he discourses, "is nothing in itself. Place in one side of a pair of scales all the words of the greatest sages, and in the other side the unconscious wisdom of this child who is passing, and you will see that what Plato, Marcus Aurelius, Schopenhauer, and Pascal have revealed to us will not lift the great treasures of unconsciousness by one ounce, for the child that is silent is a thousand times wiser than

Some of the things he says here prepare the way for his dramatic theories:

"Open the deepest of ordinary moralists or psychologists, he will speak to you of love, of hate, of pride, and of the other passions of our heart; and these things may please us an instant, like flowers taken from their stalk. But our real and invariable life takes place a thousand leagues away from love and a hundred thousand leagues away from pride. We possess an *I* which is deeper and more inexhaustible than the *I* of passions or of pure reason. It is not a matter of telling us what we feel when the woman we love abandons us. She goes away to-day; our eyes weep, but our soul does not weep. It may be that our soul hears of the event and transforms it into light, for everything that falls into the soul irradiates. It may be too that our soul knows not of it; and if that be so what use is it to speak of it? We must leave these petty things to those who do not feel that life is deep...."

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"I may commit a crime without the least breath inclining the smallest flame of this fire" (the great central fire of our being); "and, on the other hand, one look exchanged, one thought which cannot unfold, one minute which passes without saying anything, may stir it up in terrible whirlpools at the bottom of its retreats and cause it to overflow on to my life. Our soul does not judge as we do; it is a capricious, hidden thing. It may be reached by a breath and it may be unaware of a tempest. We must seek what reaches it; everything is there, for it is there that we are."

Maeterlinck has striking things to say concerning the German romanticist. "He is the clock," he says, "that has marked several of the most subtle hours of the human soul." In the following passage he shows him to be a forerunner of the symbolists,^[2] one of whose chief doctrines is that things are bound together by mysterious correspondences:

"Perhaps he is the man who has most deeply penetrated the intimate and mystical nature and the secret unity of the universe.... 'He sees nothing isolated,' and he is above all the amazed teacher of the mysterious relations there are among all things. He is for ever groping at the limits of this world, where the sun shines but rarely, and, on every hand, he suspects and touches strange coincidences and astonishing analogies, obscure, trembling, fugitive, and shy, that fade before they are understood."

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The fragmentary style of Novalis, though it provided Maeterlinck with ideas, did not influence his prose as much as that of Emerson did. He had written a preface for I. Will's translation of seven of Emerson's essays which Paul Lacomblez brought out in Brussels in 1894. This preface and the introductions to Ruysbroeck and Novalis are reprinted in abridged form in *Le Trésor des Humbles (The Treasure of the Humble)*, which the *Mercure de France* issued in 1896. These essays are clearly modelled on Emerson's. He calls Emerson "the good morning shepherd of the pale green pastures of a new optimism." He came for many of us, Maeterlinck thinks, just at the right time. This points forward already to *Wisdom and Destiny*. The heroic hours which Carlyle glorified are less apparent than they were:

"All that remains to us is our everyday existence, and yet we cannot live without greatness.... You must live; all you who are crossing days and years without actions, without thoughts, without light, because your life after all is incomprehensible and divine.... You must live because there are no hours without the deepest miracles and the most unspeakable meanings.... Emerson came to affirm the secret grandeur which is the same in every man's life. He has surrounded us with silence and with admiration. He has set a ray of light under the feet of the artisan coming from the workshop.... He is the sage of ordinary days, and ordinary days make up the substance of our being...."

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Emerson's gospel of everyday life harmonises admirably with the theory of the tragic advanced in another essay of the book, "*Le Tragique Quotidien*" ("Everyday Tragedy").

"Is it really dangerous to assert," asks the essayist, "that the veritable tragedy of life ... only begins the moment what are called adventures, griefs, and dangers are passed?... Are there not other moments when one hears more permanent and purer voices?... Nearly all our writers of tragedies only perceive the life of olden time; and one may assert that our whole theatre is an anachronism.... I admire Othello, but he does not seem to me to live the august, everyday life of a Hamlet, who has the time to live because he does not act. Othello is admirably jealous. But may it not be an ancient error to think that it is at the moments when we are possessed by such a passion, or by others of equal violence, that we really live? I have come to think that an old man sitting in his arm-chair, simply waiting in the lamplight, listening without knowing it to all the eternal laws which reign around his house, interpreting, without understanding it, all that there is in the silence of the doors and the windows and in the low voice of the light, undergoing the presence of his soul and of his destiny, inclining his head a little, without suspecting that all the powers of this world intervene and hold watch in the room like attentive servants, not knowing that the sun itself sustains the little table

on which he leans his elbows over the abyss, and that there is not one star of the sky nor one power of the soul which is indifferent to the movement of an eyelid that falls down or of a thought that rises—I have come to think that this motionless old man is living, in reality, with a deeper, more human, and more general life than the lover who strangles his mistress, the captain who wins a victory, or 'the husband avenging his honour.'"

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This eloquent passage has made many critics shake their heads. "Put a vivisectional rabbit in the arm-chair," says one, "and all that is said still holds good."

It is in Emerson's "spiritual brother," Carlyle, that Maeterlinck finds his mainstay in the opening essay of the book, that on "Silence." This chapter is perhaps the most famous of his essays; and it must be understood if much in Maeterlinck's other work is not to remain obscure. He distinguishes between active silence and passive silence. The latter is only the reflex of sleep, death, or non-existence:

"It is silence sleeping; and while it is sleeping, it is less redoubtable even than speech; but an unexpected circumstance may awaken it of a sudden, and then its brother, the great active silence, seats itself on the throne. Be on your guard. Two souls are going to reach each other...."

What practical value such theories may have is seen from the dramas for marionettes, in which something never before attempted has been done. Maeterlinck has indeed used silence to make the soul speak. But it may be questioned whether it is a doctrine solid enough to build with. It might, logically, lead to Max Reinhardt's wordless plays; but the latter, so far as they have yet been produced, have rather the reverse effect to that which Maeterlinck aimed at—Reinhardt spreads a feast for the eyes, and the silence of his pantomimes is only to enhance the spectacular appeal. Be that as it may, there are many astonishing things in Maeterlinck's mysticism, as there are in all mysticism. Many of them, no doubt, could be explained by the philosopher's "doctrine of identity."^[3] From a practical point of view, however, Maeterlinck might seem to be teaching that when we say "fine weather to-day," or "pass me the salt" (these are common words, but what "interior dialogue" may there not be behind them?) we are expressing our souls; but that when we speak in the full heat of passion, or with that eloquence which pours from us in the brighter moments of our brains, we are expressing nothing. When the old King in *Princess Maleine* asks whether there will be salad for breakfast, he expresses admirably the state of a foundered soul; when Golaud finds Pelleas playing with Melisanda's hair in the dark, and, instead of bursting into a torrent of speech, says simply: "You are children.... What children!... What children!" his taciturnity, or, if you like, his active silence, renders to perfection his pained surprise, the confused feelings which he is forcing himself to restrain till he can be sure of his ground—but to pick out a few effective instances like these only proves that the theory will stand examination, not that it is universally valid. Golaud, for instance, is taciturn and slow to believe, and therefore the few words he speaks in the scene mentioned are well motivated; but put a man in his place whose passions are nearer the surface—a character of equal use to the dramatist, though of course less profound—and a torrent of words would have been more natural and equally effective.

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If we cultivated silence more, we should perhaps discover, with Maeterlinck, that the period we live in is one of the soul's awakening. "The soul," he says in another of these essays, "is like a sleeper who, under the weight of her dreams, is making immense efforts to move an arm or lift an eyelid." The soul is becoming visible almost: it does not shroud itself now in the same number of veils as it used to do. And "do you know—it is a disquieting and strange truth—do you know that if you are not good, it is more than probable that your presence proclaims it to-day a hundred times more clearly than it would have done two or three centuries ago." (If the essayist had added here that this is because our sensibilities are more refined, it would have been an evident truth; but he goes on to say: "Do you know that if you have made a single soul sad this morning, the soul of the peasant you are going to exchange a few words with about the storm or the rain was informed of it before his hand had half opened the door....")

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The soul's awakening is seen best in those whom he calls *Les Avertis* (those who are forewarned), and in women. "The forewarned" are precocious children, and those doomed to die young. As to women, Maeterlinck sees in them what Tacitus saw in the women of the Germans, something divinely prophetic. "It seems," he says, "that woman is more subject than we are to destinies. She undergoes them with a much greater simplicity. She never sincerely struggles against them. She is still nearer to God, and she surrenders herself with less reserve to the pure action of mystery." His description of woman's ennobling effect on man (the main belief of the Minnesingers) is like the woman-worship in John Masefield's poem *Imagination*:

"All the beauty seen by all the wise
Is but body to the soul seen by your eyes.

"Woman, if my quickened soul could win you,
Nestle to the living soul within you—,
Breathe the very breathing of your spirit,
Tremble with you at the things which stir it,

"I should know the blinding, quick, intense

Lightning of the soul's spring from the sense,
Touch the very gleam of life's division.
Earth should learn a new soul from the vision."

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In the chapter headed "The Star" Maeterlinck discusses fatalism. His conception of it, as might be expected from the dramas already discussed, is identical with pessimism. "There is no destiny of joy," he says, "there is no fortunate star." He explains the Scotch word "fey," and thinks it might be applied to all existences.

In the chapter on "La Morale Mystique"—one which has been sharply criticised by Christians—Maeterlinck sunders the soul from the conscious acts of the body.

"What would happen," he asks, "if our soul suddenly became visible and had to advance in the midst of her assembled sisters, despoiled of her veils, but charged with her most secret thoughts, and trailing behind her the most mysterious acts of her life that nothing could express? What would she blush for? What would she wish to hide? Would she, like a modest woman, cast the long mantle of her hair over the numberless sins of the flesh? She knew nothing of them, and these sins have never reached her. They were committed a thousand leagues away from her throne, and the soul of the Sodomite even would pass through the midst of the crowd without suspecting anything, and bearing in its eyes the transparent smile of a child. It had taken no part in the sin, it was pursuing its life on the side where light reigns, and it is this life alone that it will remember."

This might comfort a criminal; but it is nothing more than a pure worship of the spirit. Maeterlinck might reply to his Christian traducers that they in their creed have forgotten the soul, or found it hard to think of it as independent of the body; and that it might have been better for them had they concentrated their worship on the Holy Ghost (as he does, on the Holy *Spirit*), for their worship of Christ is a species of idolatry, the worship of a graven image, an image graven in flesh.

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It is especially the "interior beauty," of which Maeterlinck treats in the last essay in the collection, which fills the play *Aglavaine and Selysette*, published in the same year. It is a competition between two women for the greater beauty of soul, a competition in which simplicity gains the victory over wisdom.

In a castle by the sea live Méléandre and his wife Selysette. They have been married four years. They have been happy, though sometimes the husband has asked himself whether they have lived near enough to each other. Now they are joined by Aglavaine, the widow of Selysette's brother, who has been unhappy in her marriage. Before she has been eight days in the castle, Méléandre cannot imagine that they were not "born in the same cradle" [*sic*].

Aglavaine on her part does not know whether he is her radiance or whether she is becoming his light. Everything is so joined in their beings that it is no longer possible to say where the one begins and where the other ends. (Pure love, according to the essays, is "a furtive but extremely penetrating recollection of the great primitive unity."^[4]) They think of loving each other like brother and sister; but they know in their hearts that it will not be possible. (The senses are beginning to intrude into Maeterlinck's writings.) Nor can they run away from each other, or, at least, they make out they cannot: "A thing so beautiful," says Méléandre, "was not born to die; and we have duties towards ourselves." They kiss; a cry of pain is heard among the trees, and Selysette is seen fleeing, disheveled, towards the castle.

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This wounded wife has less control over her natural feelings than Astolaine had in similar circumstances; but Aglavaine, in several pages of parchment speech, shows herself so wise and strong a woman that Selysette's jealousy of her is turned into love. Now all three dream of a triangular love of equal magnitudes. "We will have no other cares," says Aglavaine, "save to become as beautiful as possible, so that all the three of us may love one another the more.... We will put so much beauty into ourselves and our surroundings that there will be no room left for misfortune and sadness; and if these would enter in spite of all they must perforce become beautiful too before they dare knock at our door." They dream of a *unio mystica* of souls: "It seems to me," says Méléandre to Aglavaine, "as though my soul and my whole being and all they possess had changed their abode, as though I were embracing, with tears, that part of myself which is not of this world, when I am embracing you."

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But Méléandre, though he loves Selysette's awakened soul more than in old days he loved her girlish body, cannot help loving Aglavaine more. "Is it not strange?" Aglavaine asks Selysette, "I love you, I love Méléandre, Méléandre loves me, he loves you too, you love us both, and yet we cannot be happy, because the hour has not yet come when human beings can be united so."

It is clear that one of the two women must go. In spite of her duty to herself Aglavaine, in a fit of generosity, decides to sacrifice herself; but Selysette makes her promise not to go till she herself tells her she may. She talks mysteriously to Aglavaine of a plan she has conceived for putting things right; and it is the great weakness of the drama that the wise woman, who can read souls so easily, cannot guess the truth in this one instance. A fool would have known that Selysette was contemplating suicide; but Aglavaine could not be allowed to wreck the tragedy....

There is an old abandoned lighthouse tower that the seagulls scream round. It is crumbling away at the top. Méléandre had only climbed it once, and then he was dizzy.... Here comes Selysette with her little sister, Yssaline, for whom she has promised to catch a strange bird with green

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wings that has been seen flying round the tower.... She thinks it has built its nest in a hole in the wall just where she can lean over.... She leans over to seize it, and the top of the wall gives way. She is precipitated on to the sands below. She would be killed if it were not for the fifth act; but she lives long enough to make out that it was a pure accident, so that the two surviving lovers may be happy ever after with a clear conscience.

In spite of great beauties, the play as a whole is disappointing. The fourth act, indeed, is perfect. In the first four acts we have the doctrine of silence, as well as various other doctrines, dinned into our ears. Méléandre is a milksop; Aglavaine is a bore; but Selysette is a beautiful creation—the only one of Maeterlinck's women, perhaps, who is absolutely natural. She is "unconscious goodness," says a critic, whereas Aglavaine is "conscious goodness"; and no doubt she does represent an idea;^[5] but she is nevertheless a real, created woman. Méligrane, the spiteful old grandmother, is in the main the same idea (wisdom is in babes and the very old) as the greybeards of other plays; but there is not very much of her, and she must be remembered for saying this (to her granddaughter, Selysette):

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"And so it is thanks to you that I was a mother for the second time, when I had ceased to be beautiful; and you will know some day that women are never tired of being mothers, and that they would rock death itself, if death came to sleep on their knees."

Aglavaine and Selysette is at all events important as being a turning-point in Maeterlinck's development. We have seen that he had applauded Emerson's sturdy individualism. There is as much individualism as fatalism in this play. It is true that love is fatal to Selysette, but that is because Aglavaine is a monstrosity, not because love is a *dark* power—in this play it is distinctly painted as a *bright* power. Death is only called in as a saviour from an intolerable situation: Selysette dies, but she dies with a clear mind, and with a smile.

Aglavaine and Selysette is legendary in its setting only; and it is not vague, but a clear handling of a problem which is a favourite with contemporary dramatists—another notable example is Gerhart Hauptmann's *Einsame Menschen* ("Lonely Lives"). Hauptmann, like Maeterlinck, simplifies the complexity by the suicide of the most sensitive member of the group: both dramatists come to the conclusion that the time is not yet ripe for reorganising cohabitation on a plural basis, and that (to quote Dryden) one to one must still be cursedly confined. What Maeterlinck has contributed to the problem is that he makes the two women love each other as well as the man they sandwich....

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There is nothing of this awakening courage to live in the collection of poems modelled on folksong (the symbolists generally learned much from folksong) which Maeterlinck published in this year of 1896. In *Douze Chansons* (Twelve Songs) which are now included in *Quinze Chansons* (Fifteen Songs) at the end of *Serres Chaudes*, the poor human soul is still groping in surrounding dark, and only catching rare glimpses of the light. In one poem the soul has been wandering for thirty years, seeking her saviour; he was everywhere, but she could not come near him. Now, in the evening of her days, she bids her sister souls of sixteen years take up her staff and seek him; they also, far away. *Les Filles aux Yeux bandés* and *Les sept Filles d'Orlamonde*^[6] are sketches of a motive which was worked out in *Ardiane and Bluebeard*.

The poems are so beautifully illustrated by Charles Doudelet's woodcuts that it is hard to say whether the pictures illuminate the poem or the poems the pictures. Maeterlinck's Tower is there, hauntingly desolate, a nightmare, set against *The three blind sisters*. You know the meaning of *She had three diadems of gold* when you have seen the picture to it: the love you bestow on a person is a net wherewith that person imprisons you. The most desolating imprisonment of all is that in which a mother is plunged by her children (for there is no love so *deep* as hers): Doudelet shows us a woman chained up in a hole whelmed with snow.

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To dream over this rare volume for an after-noon, stretching out its leaves before you like the wings of a bird, is to be borne into the atmosphere of the soul. And when you come to the last picture and the last poem "*You have lighted the lamps*"—

"The other days are wearisome,
The other days are also shy,
The other days will never come,
The other days shall also die,
We too shall die here by and bye"—

you would like to bury your head in your hands and sob like a woman—without knowing why....

[1] See note 3 below.

[2] One of the features which distinguish the poetry of the symbolists is the mixing of *genres*. Cf. the following fragment (p. 103 in Maeterlinck's translation): "One ought never to see a work of plastic art without music, nor listen to a work of music anywhere save in beautifully decorated halls."

[3] Cf. Dr van Dijk, *Maeterlinck*, pp. 26 ff.; "Now in order to find the life interior you must be at the other end of all your agitations, you must be behind your conscious thoughts, words, and deeds. Behind all that makes you finite, keeps you finite, lies the infinite; the

ocean of the infinite flows round you there, and there lie the ice-fields of mystery, the great treasures of the unconscious, there are the deeps of the interior sea. *There* is no longer that which has an end, a bound, a limit, that which is shared and divided, that which is joined and separated, *there* is perfect identity of all things, *there* is everywhere and always identical mystery, *there* God is. There it is, too, says Maeterlinck, that we first understand each other, for subtle, tender bonds are there between all souls.... When you now, with Maeterlinck, turn your back on the conscious in every form, it follows that even the best word will always be a more or less disturbing wrinkle, a wrinkle that darkens the unmoving silent waters of the unconscious. Think and put your thoughts into words, and you must move further and further in the direction of the conscious; that is, in the direction of that which is limited and the limiting." Cf. one of the opening sentences of the essay "La Morale mystique": "As soon as we express something, we diminish it strangely. We think we have dived to the depth of the abysses, and when we reach the surface again the drop of water glittering at the end of our pale fingers no longer resembles the sea it came from."

[4] In *The Invisible Goodness*.

[5] According to Mieszner, Aglavaine is a "Mannweib," Selysette a "Nurweib."

[6] Is the name from the German *Volkslied* "Herzogin von Orlamünde"?

CHAPTER IX

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Towards the end of 1896 Maeterlinck settled in Paris. His life here was no less retired than it had been in Ghent. A new light had come into his life. *The Treasure of the Humble* had been dedicated to a Parisian lady, Georgette Leblanc. To her also he dedicates *Sagesse et Destinée* (Wisdom and Destiny), in 1898, in these words:

"To you I dedicate this book, which is, so to speak, your work. There is a higher and a more real collaboration than that of the pen—that of thought and example. I have not been constrained to imagine painfully the resolutions and the actions of an ideal sage, or to draw from my heart the moral of a beautiful dream perforce a little vague. It has sufficed me to listen to your words. It has sufficed me to let my eyes follow you attentively in your life; they were then following the movements, the gestures, the habits of wisdom itself."

The book was a great surprise for Maeterlinck's already world-wide community. "By the side of *The Treasure of the Humble*," wrote van Hamel, "it gives you the impression of a catechism by the side of a breviary." Not the unconscious, but the conscious, occupies the first place. The earlier philosophy is directly contradicted.^[1] Whereas in *The Treasure of the Humble* we read of "the august, everyday life of a Hamlet ... who has the time to live because he does not act," we now hear of "the miserable blindness of Hamlet," who, though he had more intelligence than all those around him, was no wise man, for he did not, by exercising will-power, prevent the horrible tragedy. In the first book of essays action hinders life; in the second, to act is to think more rapidly and more completely than thought can do. To act is to think with one's whole being, not with the brain alone.

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"It is our death that guides our life, and our life has no other object than death," Maeterlinck had said. Now he can write: "When shall we give up the idea that death is more important than life, and that misfortune is greater than happiness?... Who has told us that we ought to measure life by the standard of death, and not death by the standard of life?"^[2][Pg 102]

That a great change had taken place in Maeterlinck's conception of the universe would be clear to anyone who read his works consecutively. He himself wrote to G. van Hamel, soon after the publication of *Sagesse et Destinée*, to this effect. Van Hamel does not give the exact words, but reports the gist of the letter as follows:

"The mysterious seems to have lost a great deal of its attraction for him. Only the great, the 'metaphysical mystery,' 'the unknowable essence of reality,' continues to chain him. But the many mysteries which have dominated the mind and the life of men, and which possess no sufficient reality, he would now banish from art as well. Fate, divine justice, and all those other obsolete ideas have no longer the power to dominate even the imagination. Life, the life of the artist too, must be cleansed of all that is unreal."

Maeterlinck added to the above (these words are quoted in French):

"I do not know whether I am doing better or worse; all I do know is that I want to express things more and more simple, things more and more human, less and less brilliant, more and more true."^[3]

The change in Maeterlinck is generally ascribed to the inspiration of Mme Georgette Leblanc. He has himself drawn her portrait in a chapter of a later book, *Le double Jardin*. In 1904 she published a novel, *Le Choix de la Vie*; it is full of the words "beauty" and "happiness."

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Happiness is what humanity was made for, Maeterlinck teaches in *Wisdom and Destiny*. Misery is

an illness of humanity, just as illness is a misery of man. We ought to have doctors for human misery, just as we have doctors for illness. Because illness is common, it does not follow that we ought never to talk of health; and the fact that we live in the midst of misery is no reason why the moralist should not make happiness his starting-point. To be wise is to learn to be happy.

To be happy is only to have freed our soul from the unrest of unhappiness. To be happy we must learn to separate our exterior destiny from our moral destiny. Nothing happens to men except what they will shall happen to them. We have very little influence over a certain number of exterior events; but we have a very powerful action on what these events become in ourselves. It is what happens to most men that darkens or lightens their life; but the interior life of good men itself lightens all that happens to them. If you have been betrayed, it is not the treason that matters; it is the forgiveness that has come of it in your soul. Nothing happens which is not of the same nature as ourselves. Climb the mountain or descend to the village, you will find none but yourself on the highroads of chance.

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In proportion as we become wise, we escape from some of our instinctive destinies. Every man who is able to diminish the blind force of instinct in himself, diminishes around him the force of destiny. Destiny has remained a barbarian; it cannot reach souls that have grown nobler than itself. That is why tragic poets rarely permit a sage to appear on the scene; no drama ever happens among sages, and the presence of the sage paralyses destiny. There is not a single tragedy in which fatality reigns; what the hero combats in all of them is not destiny, but wisdom. If predestination exists, it only exists in character; and character can be modified. Fatality obeys those who dare give it orders, and therefore there is no inevitable tragedy.

The shadow of destiny casts an enormous shadow over the valley it seems to drown in darkness, and in this shadow we are born; but many men can travel beyond it; and those who cannot may find happiness in wisdom which no catastrophe can reach.

But what is wisdom? Consciousness of oneself; knowledge of oneself. It is not reason: reason opens the door to wisdom. It is from the threshold of reason that all sages set out; but they travel in different directions. Reason gives birth to justice; wisdom gives birth to goodness. There is no love in reason; there is much in wisdom. Not reason, but love, must be the glass in which the flower of genuine wisdom is cultivated. It is true that reason is found at the root of wisdom; but wisdom is not the flower of reason. Wisdom is the light of love; love, and you will be wise.

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And does the sage never suffer? He suffers; and suffering is one of the elements of his wisdom. It is not suffering we must avoid, but the discouragement—it brings to those who receive it like a master. People suffer little by suffering itself; they suffer enormously by the way they accept it. Misfortune comes to us, but it only does what it is ordered to do.

What is it that decides what suffering shall bring to us? Not reason, but our anterior life, which has formed our soul. Nothing is more just than grief; and our life waits till the hour strikes, as the mould awaits the molten bronze, to pay us our wage.

What if it be true that the sage be punished instead of being rewarded! What soul could be called good if it were sure of its reward? And who shall measure the happiness or unhappiness of the sage? When we put unhappiness in one side of the scales, each one of us lays down in the other the idea he has of happiness. The savage will lay alcohol, gunpowder, and feathers there; the civilised man gold and days of intoxication; but the sage will lay down a thousand things that we do not see, his whole soul perhaps, and even the unhappiness which he will have purified.

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Let us be loath to welcome the wisdom and the happiness which are founded on the scorn of anything. Scorn, and renunciation, which is the infirm child of scorn, open to us the asylum of the old and weak. We should only have the right to scorn a joy when it would not even be possible for us to know that we scorned it. Renunciation is a parasite of virtue. As long as a man knows that he renounces, the happiness of his renunciation is born of pride. The supreme end of wisdom is not to renounce, but to find the fixed point of happiness in life. It is not by renouncing joys that we shall become wise; but by becoming wise we shall renounce, without knowing it, the joys that cannot rise to our level. Certain ideas on renunciation,^[4] resignation, and sacrifice exhaust the noblest moral forces of humanity more than great vices and great crimes. Infinitely too much importance, for instance, is attached to the triumph of the spirit over the flesh;^[5] and these alleged triumphs are most often only total defeats of life. It is sad to die a virgin. But there must be no satisfaction of base instincts. Not *I would like*, but *I will* must be the guiding star.

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When the just is punished, we are troubled by the negation of a high moral law; but from this very negation a higher moral law is born immediately. With the suppression of punishment and reward is born the necessity of doing good for the sake of good. So teaches the book.

There is still mysticism in the kernel of this philosophy: the identity of the soul with the divine; but in its practical results it is a positivist, a realist philosophy. "There is nothing to hope for," we are told, "apart from truth. A soul that grows is a soul that comes nearer to truth." Death and the other mysteries are now only the points where our present knowledge ends; but we may hope that science will dispel our ignorance. In the meantime if we seclude ourselves from reality to dream of loveliness, the fair things we see will turn into ashes, like the roses that Alladine and Palomides saw in the caverns, at the first inrush of light. The most fatal of thoughts is that which cannot be friend with reality.

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The book is strongly anti-Christian in its rejection of what are called parasitic virtues—arbitrary

chastity, sterile self-sacrifice, penitence, and others—which turn the waters of human morality from their course and force them into a stagnant pool. The saints were egotists, because they fled from life to shelter in a narrow cell; but it is contact with men which teaches us how to love God.^[6] It is anti-ascetic too. Maeterlinck has the courage to say that a morbid virtue may do more harm than a healthy vice.^[7] In this connection one might say of him what Stefan Zweig has said of Verhaeren:

"His whole evolution—which in this respect coincides with that of the great German poets, with Nietzsche and Dehmel—tends, not to the limitation of primordial instincts, but to their logical development."^[8]

Perhaps the most tangible doctrine in *Wisdom and Destiny* is that of salvation by love. Love is wisdom's nearest sister. Love feeds wisdom, and wisdom feeds love; and the loving and the wise embrace in their own light. "Ceux qui vivent d'amour vivent d'éternité," Maeterlinck might have said with Verhaeren.^[9] The main difference between Maeterlinck's final philosophy and that of his great countryman is this: that whereas Maeterlinck, like Goethe, brings his disciple to the shores of the sea of serenity and leaves him in a state of calm, Verhaeren sees spiritualising forces in passion, in exaltation, in paroxysm, and teaches that to be calm is to diminish oneself.

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Wisdom and Destiny contains few of the apparent absurdities which confuse the reader of *The Treasure of the Humble*; but whether all the ideas will escape contradiction in independent minds may be questioned. To give an instance: it is no doubt true that a man may fight destiny; but if a man does fight destiny, it might be argued that it is only because it is his destiny to fight destiny. Louis XVI. is given as an example of a victim of destiny. He was the victim of destiny because of his feebleness, blindness, and vanity. But why was he weak, blind, and vain? According to the creed abandoned by Maeterlinck, it was his fate to be weak, blind, and vain. In *Wisdom and Destiny* the argument is: If he had been *wise* ... But how *can* a weak, blind, and vain man be wise? No wisdom on earth can make a fool anything but a fool. Character can be modified, urges Maeterlinck; and we must be content with that. Not a few of us, too, must feel that the stoic fortitude Maeterlinck would have us show when our loved ones die will seem less divine than the passionate despair once breathed into tearful numbers for lost Mystes.

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"The destinies of humanity are contained in epitome in the existence of the humblest little animals," is a thought of Pascal which might well have suggested Maeterlinck's *La Vie des Abeilles* (The Life of the Bee). It appeared in 1901. Maeterlinck had kept bees for years; and continued to do so when he set up his abode at a villa in Gruchet-Saint-Siméon in Normandy.

The Life of the Bee is not a scientific treatise, though it is scientifically correct; it does not claim to bring new material; it is a simple account of the bees' short year from April to the last days of September, told by one who loves and knows them to those who, he assumes, have no intimate knowledge. His intention is to observe bees and see if his observations can throw light on the destinies of humanity.

To begin with, bees are incessantly working, each at a different trade. Those that seem most idle, as you watch them in an observation hive, have the most mysterious and fatiguing task of all, to secrete and form the wax; just as there are some men (the thinkers) who appear useless, but who alone make it possible for a certain number of men to be useful.^[10]

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The bee is a creature of the crowd: isolate her and she will die of loneliness. From the city she derives an aliment that is as necessary to her as honey. (We remember that in *Wisdom and Destiny* saints were called egotists because they fled from their fellow-men.) In the hive the individual is nothing. The bees are socialists, we shall find; they are as united as the good thoughts that dwell in the same soul; they have a collectivist policy. This was not always so; and even to-day there are savage bees who live in lonely wretchedness. The hive of to-day is perfect, though pitiless; it merges the individual in the republic, and the republic itself is regularly sacrificed to the abstract, immortal city of the future. The will of Nature clearly tends to the improvement of the race, but she shows at the same time that she cannot obtain this improvement except by sacrificing the liberty of the individual to the general interest. First, the individual must renounce his vices, which are acts of independence. Whereas the workers among the humble-bees, a lower order, do not dream of renouncing love, our domestic bee lives in perpetual chastity.

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It is the "spirit of the hive" that rules the bees and all they do. It decrees that when the hour comes they shall "swarm." This desertion of the hive was previously thought to be an attack of fatal folly (we are in the habit of ascribing things we do not understand to "fatality"); but science has discovered (what may not science discover?) that it is a deliberate sacrifice of the present generation to the future generation. The god of the bees is the future. To this future everything is subordinated, with astonishing foresight, co-operation, and inflexibility. It is clear that the bees have will-power. You may see where this will-power, which is the "spirit of the hive," resides, if you place the careworn head of a virgin worker under the microscope: within this little head are the circumvolutions of the vastest and the most ingenious brain of the hive, the most beautiful, the most complicated brain which is in nature after that of man. Here again, as everywhere else in the world, where the brain is there is authority, the real strength, wisdom, and victory. Here

again it is an almost invisible atom of that mysterious substance that organises and subjugates matter, and is able to create for itself a little triumphant and durable place amid, the stupendous and inert powers of nothingness and death.

The description of the swarming is very beautiful. When the beekeeper is collecting the bees from the bough they have settled on, he need not fear them. They are inoffensive because they are happy, and they are happy without knowing why: they are fulfilling the law. All creatures, great and small, have such a moment of blind happiness when Nature wishes to accomplish her ends. The bees are Nature's dupes; so are we.

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Some observers, Lord Avebury for instance, do not estimate the intelligence of the bee as highly as Maeterlinck does; but the experiments on which they base their conclusions do not seem to Maeterlinck to be more decisive than the spectacle of the ravages of alcohol, or of a battlefield, would be to a superhuman observer trying to fix the limits of human intelligence. And then, think of the situation of the bee in the world: by the side of an extraordinary being who is always upsetting the laws of its nature. How should we behave if some Higher Being should foil our wisdom? And how do we know there is no such Higher Being, or more than one, who might be to us as indistinguishable as man, the great ape, and the bear are to the bee? It is certain that there are within us and around us influences and powers as dissimilar and as indistinguishable.

It is as interesting and as important to us to discover signs of intellect outside ourselves as it was to Robinson Crusoe to find the imprint of a human foot other than his own on the sandy beach of his island. When we study the intelligence of bees we study what is most precious in our own substance, an atom of that extraordinary matter which has the property of transfiguring blind necessity, of organising and multiplying life and making it more beautiful, of checking the obstinate force of death and the great irresponsible wave that rolls round in earth's diurnal course all eternally unconscious things.

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This intelligence is the devouring force of the future. Do not say that mankind is deteriorating. Alcohol and syphilis, for instance, are accidents that the race will overcome; perhaps they are tests by which some of our organs, the nervous organs for instance, will profit, for life constantly profits by the ills it surmounts. A trifle may be discovered to-morrow which will make them innocuous. Confidence in life is the first of our duties. We have everything to hope from evolution. It will lessen exertion, insecurity, and wretchedness; it will increase comfort. To this end it will not hesitate to sacrifice the individual. And let us note that progress recorded by nature is never lost. Life is a constant progression, whither, we do not know.

The whole book is a powerful epic of brain force. It is easy, Maeterlinck concludes his message, to discover the preordained duty of any being. You can read it in the organ which distinguishes it, and to which all its other organs are subordinated. Just as it is written on the tongue, in the mouth, and in the stomach of the bee that its duty is to produce honey, so it is written in our eyes, our ears, our marrow, in every lobe of our head, in the whole nervous system of our body, that we have been created to transform what we absorb from the things of the earth into that strange fluid we call brain power. Everything has been sacrificed to that. Our muscles, our health, the agility of our limbs, bear the growing pain of its preponderance.

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Now in this cult of the future and of the human brain which is to make man God, Maeterlinck is not alone. By a different route he has reached the same goal as Verhaeren. The "futurists" have based their manifesto on what these two Flemings teach; and though the futurists go to scandalous extremes they will do some good if they shock those good people who feed on classic lore into a suspicion that new ideals have sprung into being:

"Voici l'heure qui bout de sang et de jeunesse ...

Un vaste espoir, venu de l'inconnu, déplace
L'équilibre ancien dont les âmes sont lasses;
La nature paraît sculpter
Un visage nouveau à son éternité."^[11]

[1] Schrijver in his *Maeterlinck*, pp. 54 ff., collects passages in *The Treasure* which point forward to *Wisdom and Destiny*.

[2] *Sagesse et Destinée*, p. 122. Cf. Verhaeren, "Un Matin" (*Les Forces Tumultueuses*):

"Il me semble jusqu'à ce jour n'avoir vécu
Que pour mourir et non pour vivre."

[3] *Het Letterkundig Leven van Frankrijk*, pp. 180-181. Cf. also Chapter VII of "L'Evolution du Mystère" in *Le Temple Enseveli*.

[4] In the *Buried Temple*, Chapter XXI, Maeterlinck says: "Nature rejects renunciation in all its forms, except that of maternal love."

[5] Cf. Chapter XXI of *L'Inquiétude de notre Morale* (in *L'Intelligence des Fleurs*): "We are no longer chaste, now that we have recognised that the work of the flesh, cursed during twenty centuries, is natural and legitimate. We no longer go out in search of resignation, of mortification, of sacrifice; we are no longer humble in heart nor poor in spirit."

[6] "Man is created to live in harmony with others; it is in society and not in solitude that he

finds numerous opportunities of practising Christian charity to his neighbours."—Swedenborg.

- [7] In "Portrait de Femme" (*Le double Jardin*) Maeterlinck distinguishes between virtue and vice: they are the same forces, he says ... a virtue is only a vice that rises instead of falling.
- [8] *Verhaeren*, p. 298.
- [9] *Les Heures d'après-midi*.
- [10] *Wisdom and Destiny*, Chapter I.
- [11] Verhaeren, "La Foule" (*Les Visages de la Vie*).

CHAPTER X

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Of *Ariane et Barbe-Bleue* (Ardiane and Bluebeard) and *Sœur Béatrice* (Sister Beatrice) which are contained in the third volume of *Théâtre* (1901) Maeterlinck has said that they were written as libretti for musicians who had asked for them, and that they contain no philosophical or poetical *arrière-pensée*.^[1] Critics, however, seem to be agreed in reading considerable meaning into both plays. The fact that of the six wives of Bluebeard five bear the names of Maeterlinck's previous heroines—Melisanda, Alladine, Ygraine, Bellangère, and Selysette—at once suggests a symbolic intention, which we are the more inclined to suspect when we find that Ardiane, though a new name, is in reality the same person, or the same idea, as both Astolaine and Aglavaine.

The drama was written under the direct inspiration, and probably collaboration, of Mme Leblanc, whose ideas, as expressed in *Le Choix de la Vie*, are emphasised in the second act, which, apart from its doctrine, is beautiful.

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The five child-like wives have been thrust by Bluebeard into the familiar dark caverns under his castle; and, since they are the passive creatures of the former plays, they endure their incarceration without the least attempt to effect an escape. They merely wait, praying, singing, and weeping. They could not flee, they say; they have been forbidden to.

They are joined by Ardiane, the strong, wise woman of Maeterlinck's second period; and she delivers the poor little limp creatures. When they have the monster at their mercy, however, they are more inclined to fondle him than to harm him; and when Ardiane throws the door open, announces her intention of returning to freedom, and invites them to follow her, they remain at Bluebeard's side. The play has for its sub-title *La Délivrance inutile* (The Vain Deliverance); and it is to be interpreted as meaning that women are in great need of emancipation,^[2] but that it is their nature to cling to the brute who oppresses them.

An unmistakable motive of the play is that sanctification of the flesh which emblazons the breviary of the second Maeterlinck. Ardiane bares the arms and shoulders of the timid wives. "Really, my young sisters," she says, "I do not wonder that he did not love you as he ought to have done, and that he wanted a hundred wives ... he had not one.... We shall have nothing to fear if we are very beautiful."^[3]

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Sister Beatrice is another work which is variously interpreted. To Mieszner, Sister Beatrice represents "the human soul prisoned in prejudice." To many who have read *The Treasure of the Humble* it will suggest itself that we have here a spectacle of the human soul remaining pure while the body it dwells in is steeped in sin. To Anselma Heine, the nun is "one who has been made richer, one who has lived"; and it may indeed be the poet's intention to show us that the flesh is holy and is not contaminated by fulfilling its functions. If the latter interpretation is correct, Maeterlinck has not enforced his meaning so convincingly as Gottfried Keller, the great Swiss writer, did in his short story "Die Jungfrau und die Nonne" (one of his *Sieben Legenden*).

In Maeterlinck's play the nun flees from the convent, seeks love and finds degradation, and returns, after twenty-five years, to find that her duties have all the time been performed by the Virgin Mary. In Gottfried Keller's story, Beatrice, the door-keeper of the monastery, feels her heart turn sick with longing for the world outside. "When she could no longer hold back her desire, she arose in a moonlit night of July ... and said to the statue of the Virgin Mary: 'I have served You many a long year, but now take the keys, for I cannot endure the heat in my heart any longer.'"

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She goes out, and rests till dawn in a dim glade in an oak-forest. When the sun rises, a knight in armour comes riding along. He asks her whither she is bound, and she can only tell him that she has fled from the cloister "to see the world." He laughs at this, and offers, if she will go with him, to put her on the way. He lifts her on to his saddle, and merrily they gallop along; and when they come to his castle, Beatrice lies with him and stills her longing, and after some time he makes her his lawful wife, and she bears him eight sons.

But when the eldest son is eighteen, she arises one night from her husband's side, goes to the beds of her sons, and kisses them gently one after the other; she kisses her sleeping husband also; then she shears the long hair that had once folded him in flame, dons the nun's gown in which she had come to the castle so many years ago, and wanders in the howling wind and

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through the whirling autumn leaves to the convent. Here the statue of the Virgin tells her that She Herself has taken her place all the time; she has only to take up her keys and resume her duties where she had laid them down when she fled.

Ten years after her return the nuns make preparations for a great festival, and agree together that each one shall bring an offering to the Virgin. One of them embroiders a church banner, another an altar-cloth. One composes a Latin hymn, and another sets it to music. They who can do nothing else stitch a new shirt for the Christ-child, and the sister who is cook bakes Him a dish of fritters. Beatrice alone gets nothing ready: she is tired of life, and living more in the past than in the present. But when the festive day arrives and the nuns begin their chant, it happens that a grey-haired knight comes riding past the convent door with his eight stalwart sons, all on their way to the Emperor's wars. Hearing the service in the chapel, he bids his sons dismount, and enters with them to offer up a prayer to the Virgin. In the iron old man and the eight youths like so many angels in armour, Beatrice recognises her husband and her sons, and runs to them in the presence of all; and when she has confessed her story all agree that her gift to the Virgin is the richest offered that day.

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Gottfried Keller's story is a glorification of family life. His nun is a healthy girl who needs children; and so does Heaven if the truth were known. In his story Beatrice never "falls." Her only mistake is when, driven by morbid superstition, she deserts her real duties to return to her imaginary ones. We never lose our respect for her. Maeterlinck's heroine, on the other hand, sinks lower than harlotry: when her body is beyond buying she sells her hand. She is a depraved being. It would be humbug to make out that the depravity of men forced her into such dirt. If she had been good, she could have died; if she is not good, what feelings is the drama to awaken in us? Feelings of pity perhaps, but not of sympathy; and when we have no sympathy for the subject of a drama, the drama is wasted. To glorify this woman's debasement, as Maeterlinck's play might seem to do, would be to wallow in morbid Christianity. But that would be a strange charge to bring against so anti-Christian a writer; and it is no doubt preferable to interpret the play by the theory of the soul's immunity from the body's pitch.

Maeterlinck's immediate source may have been a translation of the old Dutch version of the legend by L. Simons and Laurence Housman, which appeared in *The Pageant* for 1896, the year in which this now extinct magazine printed the poem *Et s'il revenait* and Sutro's translation of the *Death of Tintagiles*. Adelaide Anne Procter had made a poem out of the legend; John Davidson's splendid ballad (worth all Maeterlinck's play) is well known. The story was brought home to tens of thousands of spectators in London in 1911-12 by Max Reinhardt's staging of Karl Gustav Vollmoeller's wordless play *The Miracle*.

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As a reading play *Sister Beatrice* is ruined by the species of blank verse in which it is said to be written. Typographically it is arranged in prose form; but palpable verses of this kind madden the reader:

"Il est prudent et sage; et ses yeux sont plus doux
Que les yeux d'un enfant qui se met à
genoux."

One of the things that Maeterlinck had treated in *Wisdom and Destiny* was the principal of justice. In *Le Temple Enseveli* (The Buried Temple) he deals with the subject exhaustively. He asks whether there is a justice other than that organised by men, and he finds it where he found fate, in their own breast. He proves that there is no physical justice coming from moral causes. Excess and imprudence have often a cause which we call immoral; but excess and imprudence may have an innocent or even heroic cause. Drunkards and debauchees are not necessarily criminals; they may be drawn into excess because they are weak and amiable (we all know very charming men who like drink; and what excellent uncles city bachelors often make). You are imprudent if you jump into the water in very cold weather to save somebody, and the consequences, let us say consumption for yourself and your children, are the same for you as for the villain who falls into the water while trying to throw somebody in. There is the same ignorance of moral causes in nature, the same indifference in heredity.^[4] Why should the offspring of amiable drunkards be punished while the children of parricides and poisoners go scot-free? As to debauch, justice strikes according as precautions are taken or not, and never takes account of the victim's state of mind.

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But we should be wrong to complain of the indifference of the universe. We have no right to be astonished at an injustice in which we ourselves take a very active part. Look at poverty, for instance—we class it with ills that cannot be helped, such as pestilence and shipwreck, but it is surely a result of the injustice of our social organisation. We shudder from one end of the world to the other when a judicial error is committed (Dreyfus affair); but the error which condemns the majority of our fellowmen to wretchedness we attribute to some inaccessible, implacable power. Again (this argument is in the section "La Chance," Chapter VII), look at animals. Compare the fate of the pampered race-horse with that of the tortured cab-horse: for all your talk of predestination, it is a case of injustice. But to the animals we work to death we are as the powers behind Nature are to us. Should we then expect more justice from Nature than we mete out to animals? Let us not condone our culpability by any appeal to Nature: Nature is not concerned with justice; her one aim, as was shown in *The Life of the Bee*, is to maintain, renew, and multiply life. Nature is not just with regard to us; but she may be just with regard to herself. When we say that Nature is not just, it comes to the same thing as saying that she takes no notice of our little virtues; it is our vanity, not our sense of justice, that is wounded. But because our morality is not proportionate to the immensity of the universe, it does not follow that we ought to

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give it up; it is proportionate to our stature and to our restricted destiny. Justice is identical with logic. It is in himself, not in Nature, that man must find an approbation of justice.

The second part of the book, which has much in common with *The Life of the Bee*, is devoted to the "reign of matter." Maeterlinck here (Chapter V) takes the opportunity of praising vegetarianism, which he is said to have tried. He says:

"It is not my intention to go deeply into the question of vegetarianism, nor to meet the objections that can be made to it; but it must be recognised that few of these objections withstand a loyal and attentive examination; and it may be asserted that all those who have tried this diet have recovered or fortified their health, and felt their mind grow brighter and purer, as though they had been freed from an immemorial, nauseating prison."

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The admirers of Maeterlinck's mysticism were more astonished when, in 1902, *Monna Vanna* appeared than they had been on reading those worldly-wise essays in *Wisdom and Destiny*. Why here was a real play! A play in the theatrical sense, with action, attempted murder, conflict, tension, "honour," and all the rest of it. A play with characterisation at least attempted; for, though Marco is that wise old man we know so well by this time (the most awful version of him was in reserve for *Mary Magdalene*), though Guido Colonna is Golaud *redivivus*; Prinzivalle is at all events a passable shadow of Othello, and Monna Vanna is a heroine who positively develops (let us admit that Selysette had developed too). A play rhetorical in style; pictorial even—a city lit up by fireworks, the Leaning Tower of Pisa all aflame "your Hugo-flare against the night," (William Watson might have jeered). A play with a situation which might have been written specially for that dear old lady, Mrs Grundy; a situation which makes a licence for its performance quite out of the question in Mrs Grundy's England.^[5] And when the play proves a great success in Paris and Germany, and more especially when the great dramatist goes on tour with it and Mme Leblanc,^[6] who plays the title-rôle, Maeterlinck's old guard call him a renegade to himself, to the Maeterlinck who had once held forth the exciting prospect of a stage without actors and without action. But why should a writer not change his views?

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Monna Vanna is written, partly, in the same kind of blank verse as *Sister Beatrice*—very poor stuff considered as poetry, and very troublesome to read as prose. From the point of view of style it is quite impossible to consider it as a great work of art. Dramatically, however, it is one of the most interesting plays produced so far in the twentieth century.

This is the first of Maeterlinck's plays which has not some legendary Weisznichtwo for its scene. These are not shapes seen vaguely through a gloaming of romance; they move in the full light of reality. *Monna Vanna*, in short, is a historical drama, a species of drama which, as we shall see, Maeterlinck rejects in a chapter of *The Double Garden*.

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Perhaps, however, those critics are right who deny to *Monna Vanna* the title of a genuine historical drama. It is at all events evident that the chief interest lies in the soul's awakening in love of Monna and of Prinzivalle. It is concerned, too, with truth: no marriage can be moral in which either party doubts anything the other party says—if you love, you must believe. Historically, the characters are untrue: Marco could not have read Maeterlinck at the time he lived, and, not having read Maeterlinck, he could not be so wise as he is; Monna Vanna could not have read either Maeterlinck or Ibsen, and therefore she could not have had such ideas as she has. But why should a modern play be truly historical? Friedrich Hebbel, a far greater dramatist than Maeterlinck, said something to the effect that a play may be historical if it keeps fresh long enough for our descendants to see from it how we, at our period of history, conceived the past.

However, when the curtain rises we find ourselves in Pisa at the end of the fifteenth century. The town is being besieged by Prinzivalle, the general of the army of Florence. The inhabitants are starving, and the city can hold out no longer. Guido Colonna, the commandant of the garrison, has sent his father, Marco, to Prinzivalle, and the envoy's return is awaited. He comes with this message: Florence has decided to annihilate Pisa. There is to be no question of a capitulation; the town is to be taken by assault, and the citizens butchered. Florence is pressing Prinzivalle to deliver the final assault; but he has intercepted letters by which it appears that he is unjustly accused of treachery. Death awaits him at Florence after his victory. He undertakes, therefore, to introduce a huge convoy of munition and provisions into the starving city, and to join the besieged army with the pick of his mercenaries. His condition is this: Monna Vanna, Guido's wife, shall come to his tent for the night, and she shall be naked under her cloak.

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Guido is furious; but Monna Vanna decides to go. She has it in her power to save a whole city; and she thinks, as her father-in-law does, that two people have no right, by considering themselves, to ensure the destruction of so many thousands. There is no attempt on the dramatist's part to belittle the sacrifice she is willing to make; she has, at the time she makes up her mind, the time-honoured idea as to the importance of the sexual act. But she is an altruist, like the bees: it is not she, it is not her husband, it is the community that matters. Guido, however, is an egotist of the old school; he clings to his "honour" to such an extent that he thinks Pisa should be butchered to keep it intact. Monna Vanna goes....

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ACT II.—Prinzivalle's tent. Sumptuous disorder. Hangings of silk and gold. Weapons, heaps of precious furs, huge coffers half open, overflowing with jewels and gorgeous raiment. Interview with Trivulzio, Commissary of the Republic of Florence; a copy of Cassius in *Julius Cæsar*—the emaciated man of thought, "the clear, fine intellect, the cold, acute, instructed mind"—"believes

in Florence as the saint tied to the wheel believes in God." Prinzivalle on the other hand is an utter alien, a Basque or a Breton; but his victories have made him popular in Florence, and he might make himself dictator; Trivulzio, therefore, has denounced him to "the grey-headed, toothless, doting fools at home." Prinzivalle unmasks Trivulzio, who attempts to stab him, but only succeeds in gashing his face. Trivulzio very noble in his way; all for Florence. Excitement of the audience: will Vanna come? She comes; is she naked under her cloak? She has been wounded on the shoulder by a stray shot; just a scratch, but enough to serve as an excuse for exciting the audience. Prinzivalle tells her to show him the wound, and she half opens her cloak. He asks her directly: "You are naked under your cloak?" She answers "Yes," makes a movement to throw her cloak off (great tension), but he "stops her with a gesture." Now follows the great love-scene, in every way one of the finest things in modern drama. It turns out that they had played together as boy and girl in Venice. He has loved her ever since. He loves her now; and for that reason there is no question of her removing her cloak. Love triumphs over luxury. She goes back to Pisa, taking him with her, to save him from the Commissaries of Florence.

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ACT III.—Convoy arrived, Pisa rejoicing, Guido cursing. Vanna comes, deliriously acclaimed. She has the great news for Guido that she returns unscathed. He refuses to believe it. Everybody refuses to believe it except Marco. She introduces Prinzivalle; and Guido persuades himself that she has trapped the brute, and brought him for private butchery. Since Guido will not credit the truth, she gives him the lie he asks for: "Il m'a prise," she cries out. But she claims Prinzivalle as her own prey, and has him conducted to the dungeons on the understanding that she will end his life herself. The spectators, however, who have an advantage over Guido in that they hear various asides, understand that she will rescue the Florentine general and elope with him. Guido can believe she could lie, therefore he does not love her—he only loves his "honour"; therefore she cannot love him, Prinzivalle, on the other hand, had been most undisguisedly frank in his private interview with her. It is clear he loves her; and since she is no longer bound to love her husband, she is free to love Prinzivalle. "It was an evil dream," she says; "the beautiful is going to begin...."

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To some critics the weak point in the drama might seem to be this: Monna Vanna goes out to Prinzivalle although she has no reliable information as to what manner of man he is. There was the greatest likelihood, Guido might have urged, that the man who makes such an infamous condition will not dream of keeping his promise. But the dramatist makes the heroine tell Prinzivalle that the one man who could have given her a favourable account of his character (and who, as we know, had given a favourable account of it to Guido) had told her nothing about him; possibly Maeterlinck desired in this way to emphasise the motive that Monna Vanna goes to sacrifice her honour *on the mere chance* of saving the city.

The scene between Prinzivalle and Trivulzio in the second act has points of similarity with the argument of Browning's *Luria*. This was pointed out by Professor William Lyon Phelps of Yale in an article in the *New York Independent* of the 5th March, 1903. Browning's play, too, is set in the fifteenth century on the eve of a battle between Pisa and Florence; and, like Prinzivalle, "Luria holds Pisa's fortunes in his hand." Both *Luria* and Prinzivalle are "utter aliens"; and both are modelled on Othello (*Luria* is a Moor; Prinzivalle is "a Basque or a Breton," but he has served in Africa). The character of the two Commissaries in the plays is identical. Maeterlinck wrote as follows to Professor Phelps:

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"You are quite right. There is a likeness between [Browning's play and] the scene in the second act, in which Prinzivalle unmasks Trivulzio. I am surprised nobody has noticed it before, the more so as I made no attempt to conceal it, for I took exactly the same hostile cities, the same period, and almost the same characters; although of course it would have been very easy to alter the whole. I admire Browning, who, in my opinion, is one of the greatest of English poets. For that reason I regarded him as belonging to classic and universal literature, and as a poet whom everybody ought to know; and I thought I was entitled to borrow a situation, or rather the fragment of a situation, from him, a thing which occurs every day with Æschylus, Sophocles, and Shakespeare. Such borrowings take place *coram populo*, and are in the nature of a public homage. I regard the scene as a passage which I have piously dedicated to the poet who created in me the atmosphere in which *Monna Vanna* was written."

With this naïve and sincere letter Maeterlinck clears himself of any charge of plagiarism. If he was a plagiarist in *Monna Vanna*, he was a plagiarist, too, in *Joyzelle* (1903), for in a postscript of his letter to Professor Phelps he confesses that this play was written in the atmosphere of Shakespeare's *Tempest*.

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Joyzelle, another dramatised essay, is again written in the irritating blank verse which Maeterlinck at this stage of his career seems to have grown perversely fond of. To Merlin (Prosper rechristened) on his enchanted island comes his long-lost son Lancéor. The first person the newcomer meets is Joyzelle, who is destined to be his bride if she stands the trials prepared for her. The young couple fall in love with each other at first sight; but Merlin, who is attended by Arielle, his disembodied genius (his interior force, the forgotten power that sleeps in every soul), is also in love with Joyzelle.

Merlin, being a magician, is able to set traps for the lovers. He clouds the brain of Lancéor, and delivers him up to instinct, so that he compromises himself with Arielle, who for the purpose of playing the tempter has become visible, has half opened the veils that invest her, and unbound her long hair. (Men always fall into traps when their instinct leads them, their frailties being necessary for the designs of life.) Joyzelle discovers her lover in the act of embracing the

supposed lady; but, with that nobility above jealousy which distinguishes the heroines of Maeterlinck after Astolaine, she continues to love him. She reveals to Lancéor, in curious language, the depth of her affections:

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"When one loves as I love thee, it is not what he says, it is not what he does, it is not what he is that one loves in what one loves; it is he, and nothing but him, and he remains the same, through the years and misfortunes that pass.... It is he alone, it is thou alone, and in thee nothing can change without making love grow.... He who is all in thee; thou who art all in him, whom I see, whom I hear, whom I listen to without pause, and whom I love always.... We have to fight, we shall have to suffer; for this is a world which seems full of traps.... We are only two, but we are all love!..."

"Men are victimised by every beautiful woman," comments Mieszner, "and only the woman to whom they surrender themselves blindly can educate them to a higher love. This is the idea that clearly shines through the action ... woman rescuing sensual man from his sensuality."

Merlin now instils a subtle poison into Lancéor's veins, confirms Joyzelle's suspicions that her lover is on the point of death, but offers to save his life if she will give herself to him. "You would not need to tell him," the old swine suggests. "But I should have to tell him, because I love him," she answers. (Moral again: love cannot lie.) Joyzelle is not willing to do for one human being, though he is the being she loves best on earth, what Monna Vanna was willing to do for hundreds of strangers. She feigns consent, however, and promises to come at night; but she makes Merlin restore Lancéor there and then. When she comes to the old man's couch, it is with a dagger ready; she finds him sleeping, and lifts the dagger, but Arielle prevents the blow. Her trials are over; she has stood the last test. Merlin explains matters to his son: "She might have yielded," he says, "might have sacrificed herself, her love; she might have despaired—and then she would not have been the one love craves." To Joyzelle he says that it was written that she and those who resemble her should have a right to the love fate shows them; and that this love (the one love in life) must break injustice down. As to his own love for the girl, he bids Arielle kiss her; it seems to her then that flowers she cannot gather are touching her brow and caressing her lips, and Merlin tells her not to brush them aside, they are sad and pure—a symbolisation, perhaps, of intellectual love which renounces sensuality.

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Joyzelle was first performed, with Mme Leblanc in the title-rôle, at the Théâtre du Gymnase in Paris on the 20th May, 1903. In the same year Maeterlinck's comedy, *Le Miracle de St Antoine* (The Miracle of St Antony) was performed at Geneva and Brussels. It has been published in German, but not yet in French or English.

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- [1] Preface to *Théâtre*, p. XVIII. The interpretation given on the following page is his own, as given to a friend.
 - [2] Cf. *Le Temple Enseveli*, Chapters XXVI and XXVII.
 - [3] "Aus unseren Zierpuppen und aus unseren Blaustrümpfen werden erst Vollmenschen, nachdem die Mädchen und Frauen ihre natürlichen Reize entdeckt haben und sie selbst gebrauchen lernen."—Mieszner, *Maeterlinck's Werke*, p. 48.
 - [4] Cf. also Chapters XXVIII and XXIX of *L'Evolution du Mystère* in this volume.
 - [5] It was performed in December, 1911, by the Players' Club in Dublin.
 - [6] The play (the symbol of the fates of the poet and Mme Leblanc, according to Oppeln-Bronikowski, the German translator of Maeterlinck's works—*Bühne und Welt*, November-Heft 2, 1902) had been specially written for her. As Monna Vanna, she made her debut as an actress—she had previously been an opera-singer.

CHAPTER XI

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Maeterlinck's essays do not centre round himself. His vision is cosmic; the subject of his essays is the universe. But *Le double Jardin* (The Double Garden), a collection of essays strung together and published in 1904, is more personal than his other books, though it is still concerned with presenting a cosmic philosophy. Here he gives us glimpses into his life; we see him as a lover of dogs and flowers; on his travels in the south of Europe; as an automobilist; as an amateur of fencing.

The first essay is that famous one—"On the Death of a little Dog." Those who fight shy of Maeterlinck because they credit the report, sufficiently widespread, that he is a platitudinarian, might be advised to sample him in this essay. If, when they have read it, they are unable to admit his charm and originality, they may be considered cases of obstinacy. It is not written with any ostentation of style; its style, in these days of fine writing by intellectual acrobats, is not even brilliant. It is written so simply that you would say it had been written for children; and it is as touchingly beautiful and as full of meaning as that other sublimely simple story about the ugly duckling.

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It is the life-story of a little bull-dog that died of distemper when he was six months old. He had a

great bulging forehead, like Verlaine's. He was as beautiful as a beautiful natural monster. Life was as full of problems for him as it is for the burdened brains of the children of men. He had to resign himself, like any other mystic, to the mystery of closed doors; he had to admit that the essential bounties of existence, generally imprisoned in pots and pans, are inaccessible. What a lot of orders, prohibitions, and perils he had to class in his memory; and how was he to conciliate them all with other more vast and imperious laws implanted in him by instinct, laws which rise and grow from hour to hour, which come from the beginning of time and of the race, which invade the blood, the muscles, and the nerves, and of a sudden assert themselves, more irresistible and more powerful than pain, and even than the master's order and the pain of death? And then the stolen joys—first and foremost the refuse-tin! He sees the cook cleaning a fish—but he does not appear curious as to where those delicacies go; he bides his time.

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The only animal that has made a compact with man is the dog. To the dog man is God—ideas soon to be made visible in *The Blue Bird*.

There is a beautiful essay on old-fashioned flowers—those which are being ousted out of our modern gardens by such flowers as tuberous-rooted begonias, with their red combs always crowing like so many cocks; and one on chrysanthemums, a symbol of the onward march of culture. (We know from *The Blue Bird* that our descendants are to have daisies as big as tables, grapes as big as pears, blue apples as big as melons, and melons as big as pumpkins: all the beauty, all the bounties of the future are only waiting for the intellect of man to awaken them.) In "The Olive Boughs" the teaching of the volume is concentrated:

"Hitherto the pivot of the world seemed to us to be formed of spiritual powers; to-day we are convinced that it is composed of purely material energies."

It is by the study of concrete things—the mechanism of an automobile, the adaptability of dogs to climate and occupation,^[1] the evolution of flowers—that we shall learn to solve the riddle of existence. This teaching, like that of *The Life of the Bee*, is absolutely identical with Verhaeren's.

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An important essay is that on "The Modern Drama." Maeterlinck has some hard things to say about historical dramas, "those necessarily artificial poems which are born of an impossible marriage between the past and the present." The passions and feelings that a modern poet reads into a past age must of necessity be modern, and cannot live in an alien atmosphere. The modern drama "unfolds itself in a modern house, among men and women of to-day." The task of the modern dramatist is to go deeper into consciousness than was the custom of old: the drama of to-day cannot deck itself out in gaudy trappings, the ermines and sables of regal pomp, the show of circumstance; it cannot appeal to divinity; it cannot appeal to any fixed fatality; it must try to discover, in the regions of psychology, and in those of moral life, the equivalent of what it has lost in the exterior life of epic times. And the sovereign law of the theatre will always be *action*. No matter how beautiful, no matter how deep the language is, it is bound to weary us if it changes nothing in the situation, if it does not lead to a decisive conflict, if it does not hurry on to a final solution.

L'Intelligence des Fleurs (English translation: *Life and Flowers*), published in 1907, is another collection of essays twining "the instinctive ideal" round the solid pillars of reality. Maeterlinck describes the vehement, obstinate revolt of flowers against their destiny. They have one aim: to escape from the fatality that fixes them to the soil, to invent wings, as it were, so that they may soar above the region that gave them birth, and there expand in the light which is their blossoming. Flowers set us a prodigious example of insubordination, of courage, of perseverance, and of cunning. It is the genius of the earth which is acting in them—the earth-spirit, Maeterlinck might have said with Goethe. "The ideal of the earth-spirit is often confused, but you can distinguish in it a multitude of great lines which rise aloft to a life more ardent, more complex, more nervous, more spiritual." Insects and flowers bring gleams of the light without into the dark cavern in which we are prisoners. They, too, have something of the fluid which religions called divine—the fluid to which man, of all things on earth, offers the least resistance. Their evolution should make us feel that man is on the way to divinity.

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The chapter called "L'Inquiétude de notre Morale" strides over dead religions to hold out a hand of welcome to the religion of the future. Two main rivers of contemporary thought, whose sources are Tolstoy and Nietzsche, flow with high waves far from the bogs and shallow pools where those who are poisoned by dead religions lie stifling. One of these rivers is flowing violently backwards to an illusory past; the other roars foam-flecked in its fury to an improbable future. Between these two rivers lies the broad plateau of reality; and we who are Maeterlinck's disciples may add that we build our homesteads round the placid lake his teaching forms on this broad plateau between the two dangerous rivers....

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The chapter "In Praise of Boxing," is not a literary exercise on a fancy subject. Maeterlinck is a boxer who needs some beating. We have all read in all the newspapers in the year of grace 1912 that a public match in the interests of charity had been arranged between him and the middleweight champion of Europe, Georges Carpentier.

Another section, "Our Social Duty," tends towards Socialism. "Extreme opinion," we read, "demands immediately an integral sharing, the suppression of property, obligatory work, etc. We do not know yet how these demands can be realised; but it is at this moment certain that very simple circumstances will make them some day seem as natural as the suppression of primogenitureship and the privileges of the nobility.... Truth here is situated less in reason, which

is always turned towards the past, than in imagination, which sees farther than the future.... Let us only listen to the experience which urges us forward; it is always higher than that which restrains us or throws us backward. Let us reject all the counsels of the past which are not turned towards the future.... It is above all important to destroy. In all social progress, the great work, the only difficult work, is the destruction of the past. We do not need to be anxious about what we shall set up in place of the ruins. The force of things and of life will undertake the work of reconstruction."

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L'Oiseau bleu (The Blue Bird) is an epitome of these and other Maeterlinckian ideas. But this is no dramatised essay. The characters, it is true, are still ideas personified; but this time they are galvanised into life by a saving quality—humour. The humour that made the essay "On the Death of a Little Dog" so irresistible makes this presentation of Maeterlinck's philosophy for children a thing of pure delight. It is, moreover, as easy to understand, and as sparkling to the eyes in its magic changes, as a Christmas pantomime. And a child who has seen this fairy tale on the stage has not only enjoyed itself immensely, and had an experience it will never forget, but it has also learned, it cannot fail to have learned, lessons that should have an immediate and lasting effect on its character and behaviour. Maeterlinck has many jewels in her crown; but the brightest is that which came to him for having brought happiness and taught goodness to children.

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The Blue Bird was first produced at the Théâtre des Arts in Moscow on the 30th September, 1908. This theatre, which had been supported for years by a group of rich amateurs, first paid its way when *The Blue Bird* drew thousands to its boards. In December, 1909, Mr Herbert Trench staged it, with a poet's understanding of a poet at the Haymarket Theatre in London; it ran till June, and was revived for Christmas, 1910.

The Blue Bird, like another modern pantomime for children, Richard Dehmel's demoniac *Fitzebutze*, is as entertaining to read as it is fascinating to see. The two children of a woodcutter, a boy, Tyltyl, and a girl, Mytyl, are sent out by a fairy in quest of "the blue bird, that is to say, the great secret of things and of happiness." They are accompanied by Light (whom the fairy conjures out of the lamp in the cottage), the Dog, the Cat (a very nasty cat—cats must be nasty because dogs, the friends of man, don't like them), Sugar (who breaks off his fingers for them to eat when they are hungry), Bread (who slices his paunch to add substance to the sugar), Fire (a red-faced lout), Water (whom Fire keeps at a respectful distance because she has not brought her umbrella), and Milk (a very shy, impressionable youth—as one might say, a milksop). First the children pay a visit to their dead grandparents in the misty Land of Memory. They find the old couple asleep on a bench in front of the same old cottage they occupied on earth; they awaken at the children's approach, and we are taught that the dead awaken every time the loved ones whom they left behind think of them. Before they leave, the old people make them a present of a blackbird which is quite blue; but when they have left the Land of Memory they find it has turned black. (It was not real, it was a dream, and could not bear the light of reality.)

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Continuing their wanderings they come to the Palace of Night. The Cat has hurried on in advance to tell Mother Night, with whom he is in league, of the coming of their enemy, Man, who is guided by Light. Night is very much upset: already, she complains, Man has captured a third of her mysteries, all her Terrors are afraid and dare not leave the house, her Ghosts have taken flight, the greater part of her Sicknesses are ill. The children arrive, and in the end capture a number of blue birds behind one of the doors to which Night holds the key. But as soon as the company have escaped from the Palace of Night, the birds are seen to be dead. Like the roses in the cavern in *Alladine and Palomides*, they could not live in the light of day.

They reach the enchanted palaces where all men's joys, all men's happinesses are gathered together in the charge of Fate. First they meet the Luxuries of the Earth, bloated revellers whose banqueting-hall is separated from the cavern of the Miseries only by a thin curtain. The Blue Bird is not here. Next they interview the Happinesses (the Happiness of Home, the Happiness of Being Well, etc.) and the Great Joys (the Joy of Maternal Love, the Joy of Understanding, etc.). In the end they arrive at the Kingdom of the Future, an Azure Palace pretty high up in the clouds. Here all unborn children, enough to last to the end of the world, more than thirty thousand, are awaiting the hour of their birth. When the fathers and mothers want children, Father Time throws back the opalescent doors which open upon the quays of the Dawn, and ships the babies off in a galley with White and gold sails; then are heard the sounds of the earth like a distant music, and the song of the mothers coming out to meet their children. Gliding about among the children are taller figures, "clad in a paler and more diaphanous azure, figures of a sovereign and silent beauty"—the race which shall inhabit the earth when man has made way for his offspring the superman. The babes unborn are pondering, while they wait:

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"some little plan or chart,
Some fragment from their dream of human life,"

the inventions they are to make, the happiness they are to confer, the crimes they are to commit. Of a sudden Father Time discovers the children, and comes towards them in a fury, asking them why they are not blue; but Light tells the boy to turn the magic diamond which has preserved them thus far, and she has just time to whisper that she has got the blue bird, when down goes the curtain.

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ACT VI. shows the children in their little cots, where they were when the play opened; it has all been a dream.

For *The Blue Bird* Maeterlinck was in 1912 awarded, for the third time in succession, the Belgian

"Triennial prize for dramatic literature."

In 1910 appeared his translation of *Macbeth*, and the English translation of another play of his, *Mary Magdalene*. *Macbeth* was performed (a sensational event, and a triumph for Mme Maeterlinck) at the Abbey of Saint Wandrille, the Benedictine cloister which Maeterlinck saved from being turned into a chemical factory,^[2] and which is now his home. *Mary Magdalene* was first performed at Leipsic and Hamburg; in Great Britain it shares with *Monna Vanna* the honour of being refused an acting licence (because the voice of Jesus is heard in it!) [Pg 147]

For *Mary Magdalene* Maeterlinck borrowed two situations from a German play, *Maria von Magdala*, by Paul Heyse—"namely, at the end of the first act, the intervention of Christ, Who stops the crowd raging against Mary Magdalene with these words, spoken behind the scenes: 'He that is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone'; and, in the third, the dilemma in which the great sinner finds herself, of saving or destroying the Son of God, according as she consents or refuses to give herself to a Roman." Paul Heyse refused Maeterlinck his authorisation to develop these two situations; whereupon Maeterlinck decided that "the words of the gospel, quoted above, are common property; and that the dilemma ... is one of those which occur pretty frequently in dramatic literature." It was the very situation, Maeterlinck claims, which he had himself imagined in the final trial of Joyzelle.

The death of Christ is a tragedy which is waiting for a great dramatist to master. Both Grillparzer and Hebbel pondered it. Maeterlinck has not done what they left undone; he was not dramatist enough to do it. Grillparzer would have spun his play round Judas as a type of an envious man; Maeterlinck places Mary Magdalene in the centre, not the sinner, but the convert—and this convert is the same character as Aglavaine, as Monna Vanna—Maeterlinck's strong, wise woman. This tragedy is again in the nature of a dramatised essay—another essay on wisdom. The idea is that the wise, who are certain of their knowledge, cannot yield to what is wrong. Joyzelle, we remember, would not sacrifice to save one man (it is true she pretended to be willing to, but her pretence was foolish, for she should have known it would be vain, seeing that Merlin was a magician) what Monna Vanna was willing to sacrifice to save a multitude. Mary Magdalene refuses to make the same sacrifice to save Christ: for Christ has made her a wise and therefore a good woman, and she would be untrue to Him in her if she were to rescue Him from Death—in other words His teaching, the essence of His Soul, must not be soiled, whatever torture be inflicted on His poor, human body. There would be tense tragedy in the situation when she hears Him being led to crucifixion, if we did not feel that she is no character but a wise idea; and if, too, the Roman who has it in his power to save Christ were not such a vulgar, melodramatic villain. Maeterlinck has been singularly unsuccessful in this drama. As a courtesan Mary Magdalene is a bore; as a convert she is still a bore. [Pg 148]

It is not a human drama. If Jesus has the power to awaken the dead, and to summon the living so that they walk as in sleep (Mary comes to Him in this way), there is no human conflict. One might suspect sexual attraction in Mary's conversion, but she gives one the impression of being a sexless blue-stocking; we are forced to the conclusion that she is mesmerised. Jesus is a mesmerist;^[3] from a dramatic point of view. He is no more convincing than Svengali. Maeterlinck's play is on a level with those of Hall Caine; his Roman villain especially might have been conceived by Hall Caine. [Pg 149]

In 1911 appeared, in an English translation (the French original was not published till 1913), another book of essays under the title of *Death*. Maeterlinck takes up the thread of what he had said about death in his previous writings, especially in the noble essay on Immortality in *Life and Flowers*:

"For us, death is the one event that counts in our life or in our universe. It is the point whereat all that escapes our vigilance unites and conspires against our happiness. The more our thoughts struggle to turn away from it, the closer do they press around it. The more we dread it, the more dreadful it becomes, for it battens but on our fears lie who seeks to forget it burdens his memory with it; he who tries to shun it meets naught else. But though we think of death incessantly, we do so unconsciously without learning to know death." [Pg 150]

The book shocked many of its critics, who found one of Maeterlinck's ideas repugnant—his plea that it is to no purpose to prolong the agonies of the sick-bed.

"Why should the doctors," asks the essayist, "consider it their duty to protract even the most excruciating convulsions of the most hopeless agony? Who has not, at a bedside, twenty times wished and not once dared to throw himself at their feet and implore them to show mercy?... One day this prejudice will strike us as barbarian. Its roots go down to the unacknowledged fears left in the heart by religions which have long since died out in the mind of men. That is why the doctors act as though they were convinced that there is no known torture but is preferable to those awaiting us in the unknown.... The day will come when science will turn against this error, and no longer hesitate to shorten our misfortunes."

Why should we fear death? It is not the nightmare which superstition has made it out to be. It is not the arrival of death, but the departure of life which is appalling. [Pg 151]

"Here begins the open sea. Here begins the glorious adventure, the only one abreast

with human curiosity, the only one that soars as high as its highest longing. Let us accustom ourselves to regard death as a form of life which we do not yet understand; let us learn to look upon it with the same eye that looks upon birth; and soon our mind will be accompanied to the steps of the tomb with the same glad expectation that greets a birth."

It may be doubted whether men will ever grow so wise that they will look forward to death as they look forward to a birth; in the meantime, as Mr Basil de Sélincourt pointed out in the *Manchester Guardian*, they will be getting toothless, bald, and blind, and "the logic of the mystics may wish to assure us that these are processes of life and not of death; we shall continue to think such an assurance rather sophisticated and insipid.... The fear of the moment of death and a passionate protest of the soul against the idea of its finality are probably as normal in the highest types of men as in the lowest."^[4] And there is another consideration, subtly suggested by Charles Bernard in an article in *Le Masque*, Série ii, Nos. 7 and 8: the fear of the physical agony of death and the decomposition that follows it intensifies the raptures of health, and even all the moments of pleasure an ageing man can snatch from his decay.

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But the importance of the book does not lie in this discussion of the physical facts of death. It lies in its investigation of ideas concerning the immortality of our soul. Whatever the soul be—whether it be that mysterious thing which cannot be definitely located, but which we carry about with us like a mirror in a world whose phenomena only take shape in so far as they are reflected in it,^[5] or whether it be the sum total of our intellectual and moral qualities fortified by those of instinct and sub-consciousness^[6]—Maeterlinck's suggestions, in his various essays, of a solution brings us to something which strengthens the spiritual, or if you like the intellectual, part of our nature.

"Is it not possible" he asks, "that the enjoyment of art for its own sake, the calm and full satisfaction we are plunged into by the contemplation of a beautiful statue or of a perfect monument, things that do not belong to us and that we shall never see again, which excite no sensual desire, which can profit us nothing—is it not possible that this satisfaction may be the pale gleam of a different consciousness filtering through a fissure of that consciousness of ours which is built up of memories?"^[7]

Death appeared almost simultaneously with the news that Maeterlinck had been awarded the Nobel prize for literature. The occasion was celebrated by a public banquet offered to the poet by the City of Brussels; official Belgium had at last awakened to the fact that its poets were more honoured in the world than its rulers. As to the one hundred and ninety thousand francs, he had no need of the money for himself, and it was announced that his intention was to found a "Maeterlinck prize with it," to be given every two years to the writer of the most remarkable book published in that period in the French language.

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[1] He does not mention the soft mouth of the old English sheep-dog.

[2] The Abbé Dimnet, in an article in *The Nineteenth Century* for January, 1912, charges Maeterlinck with indelicacy for having occupied the abbey so soon after its confiscation! The abbé does not mention the chemical project.

[3] LAZARUS: Come. The Master calls you.
[MAGDALENE *leaves the column against which she is leaning and takes four or five steps towards LAZARUS as though walking in her sleep.*]

MAGDALENE: He fixed his eyes for but a moment on mine; and that will be enough for the rest of my life.—(p. 72).

[4] I have re-translated from the French in which Mr de Sélincourt's article was reproduced in *Le Thyrsé* for January, 1912.

[5] "L'Immortalité" (in *L'Intelligence des Fleurs*) p. 282.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 295.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 307.

CHAPTER XII

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I have reported little of the gossip concerning Maeterlinck. Everybody knows that he smokes denicotinised tobacco; that he resides in the summer at Saint Wandrille and in the winter at his house "Villa des Abeilles" at Nice (having now left his villa aux Quatre Chemins, near Grasse in the south of France); and so forth. One little picture I would like to contribute; I have it from a friend and admirer of his, and it concerns a visit to the Villa Dupont, the house in the Rue Pergolèse where Maeterlinck lived when he first settled in Paris:

"His study was like a monk's cell, but very original in style. It was simply lime-washed; and this lime-wash was of a hard, raw blue in colour, approaching indigo. For furniture,

a little looking-glass, a table of rough wood, and three chairs. No books at all. But the walls were covered with little white butterflies in flight. These were *thoughts*, and every one was fastened to the wall simply by a pin. The effect was singular, violently original at all events, but with nothing that gave you the idea of a pose. Maeterlinck at this period received no visitors, saw none of his friends. He had installed himself in surroundings as bare as possible, so that he might meditate; and to these surroundings he had given the colour he desired.

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"This room was empty when I was brought into it; and I beguiled the tedium of waiting for Maeterlinck by reading some of the thoughts on the slips of white paper pinned to the wall. Some of them were nothing very particular; others were obscure or appeared rather childish—isolated, as I read them;—but some were very beautiful. Maeterlinck coming into the room and finding me thus occupied, laughed heartily. But severely I pointed to the butterflies on the wall, and inquired about the name of each species. The names, I was told, were very great names indeed. I tried to guess one or two, but luck was against me, and I felt it a puzzle to set the right name to each bit of paper.

"Maeterlinck, reading with me, smiled as he saw me attack a new battalion of thoughts. These were placed somewhat apart from the others. 'Are they yours?' I asked. 'Yes,' he answered modestly; 'nothing more than studies for a book I am working at. But take notice of this one, please, and of this one, and of this one too. Are they not most beautiful?' Then, in a tone of jubilant admiration, he pronounced the name of their author—the name of a French lady who, some years afterwards, was to be Melisanda, Monna Vanna, and Ardiane on the stage. Several of these thoughts, I must say, seemed really worth attention; and I felt particularly surprised that a woman should have been able to compress them into three short lines, or even into five or six words."

As to Maeterlinck's personal appearance at the present time, the following is the impression he made recently on Mr Frank Harris:

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"Maeterlinck is easily described: a man of about five feet nine in height, inclined to be stout; silver hair lends distinction to the large round head and boyish fresh complexion; blue-grey eyes, now thoughtful, now merry, and an unaffected off-hand manner. The features are not cut, left rather "in the rough" as sculptors say, even the heavy jaw and chin are drowned in fat; the forehead bulges and the eyes lose colour in the light and seem hard; still, an interesting and attractive personality."^[1]

A few words must be devoted to the present position of Maeterlinck in critical estimation. Since the award of the Nobel prize imposed him on the public consciousness as one of the foremost of living writers, voices have been raised in protest. The attack of the Abbé Dimnet in *The Nineteenth Century and After* for January, 1912, may be dismissed as Jesuitical. Various opinions, mostly favourable, by celebrities, were collected in the Brussels review *Le Thyrsé* for January, 1912, under the heading, "Maeterlinck et le prix Nobel." One of these letters is from Alfred Fouillée, who suggests that Maeterlinck's philosophy owes much to that of Jean Marie Guyau. The old complaint that the dramas are "childish" is rarely heard nowadays; but there is a vague feeling in the air that the substance of the essays is a potpourri from earlier writers. It is the easiest thing in the world to make such a charge; it is far more difficult to substantiate it. Not one critic has given us the exhaustive list of parallel passages which would be required to shake our credit in Maeterlinck's essential originality. Typical is the attitude of Mr Frank Harris in his too inaccurate and loosely written but not negligible articles in the *Academy*: he finds nothing in the essays which is not already contained in "Moralis" (does he mean Novalis?) and the other somewhat recondite writers in whom he (Mr Frank Harris) is obviously so deeply read. But even if it were proved that Maeterlinck, like Molière, has taken his wealth where he found it, there would be no more reason to think the less of him than there is to think the less of any artist for melting old metal and re-casting it, or of any thinker for sifting, rejecting, and re-stating old conclusions. It is an effort of profound originality to take whatever is good from a vast, and in some cases buried literature, and from this stock to polish and set in currency ideas which have an immediate effect on the spiritual or mental life of to-day, which fortify character, give us confidence in the future, make us better men and force us to make our children better men than we are ourselves.

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By far the most scathing of Maeterlinck's detractors is a Belgian critic born in Ghent, Louis Dumont-Wilden, a critic who, as he confesses, was in his youth enchanted by the "morning charm" of *The Treasure of the Humble* with "its violent and sustained effort to soar to a kind of philosophical lyrism," who has still a good word to say for the early dramas, but who condemns "the adulterated æstheticism of *Monna Vanna*, the cold allegory, the elementary philosophy of *Joyzelle* and *The Blue Bird*." Already in *La Nouvelle Revue Française* for February, 1910, Dumont-Wilden attempted to shatter the idol in the following terms:

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"Le succès permet toujours aux hommes de lettres le supporter très bien l'angoisse métaphysique, et Maeterlinck, grâce à ses admirateurs et à ses amis, était devenu un homme de lettres. Prisonnier de ses premiers livres, et de son premier public, il trouva l'art subtil d'accomoder les balbutiements effarés de Mélisande, le naturisme ingénu qui fait le fonds de sa sensibilité de flamand, et ce vague optimisme 'humanitaire,' ce socialisme esthétique et scientifard, qui règne aujourd'hui parmi ceux que Nietzsche appelle 'les philistins de la culture.' Il est vrai qu'un peu de mysticisme arrange tout;

mais tout de même, quel chef-d'œuvre de 'littérature': faire croire à Monsieur Homais qu'il appartient à l'élite, et à l'élite qu'elle peut se permettre les sentiments de M. Homais!

"D'abord la prose de Maeterlinck, sauce merveilleusement onctueuse, fit passer ce singulier ragoût intellectuel, que le grand public international, le public des lecteurs de magazines et des institutrices polyglottes continue à prendre pour le chef-d'œuvre de la cuisine française."

As to the last item in this fierce diatribe, it would appear to be true that Maeterlinck's greatest public is composed of "the philistines of culture." Maeterlinck is an antagonist of Christianity; and yet perhaps the majority of his admirers are those who love him because he has such beautiful things to tell them about their immortal souls. Like Voltaire, he fights 'l'infâme'; and yet to many a Christian virgin his works are an edifice which he might have inscribed with the device: *Deo erexit Maeterlinck*. Again, he has prophesied the inevitable victory of socialism; but has he helped the socialists? Is he counted one of the paladins of socialism? It might be argued that he has not the zest in hard fighting which alone can help a fighting cause: he stands apart from the mêlée with a wise face imperturbable: he would persuade, not fight, and he is too persuasive to persuade. Those who waver or resist must be shattered into conviction, the fanatic might urge. In short, Maeterlinck is a socialist much as Goethe was a patriot.

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Well, probably the fact is that Maeterlinck is no more a "socialist" than Goethe was a "patriot." All such terms may be interpreted variously. Goethe *was* a patriot if you consider that his fatherland was the world. Maeterlinck *is* a socialist if you look away from the din of the mere present to the future his writings undoubtedly prepare. Maeterlinck is first and foremost a *futurist*, a seer of the future. Even as a dramatist (apart from his later dramas, which must, on the whole, be rejected) he is a futurist. And in this sense he has his public among the élite. M. Dumont-Wilden would not call Johannes Schlaf a philistine of culture? And to Johannes Schlaf, as to me, Maeterlinck's importance lies in the fact that he is *the* perfect type of Nietzsche's *New European*, in himself a prophecy of the race our descendants will be when patriotism is: to be a citizen of the whole world, and religion is: to be noble for nobility's sake. As for his Christian readers, why should they not, if they can, find confirmation of their own creed in the teaching of an enemy of it? The fact of Maeterlinck's vogue with Christian readers only proves that Christianity has much in common with the religion of the future.

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In an article, which created a sensation, in *La Nouvelle Revue Française* for September, 1912, M. Dumont-Wilden compares Maeterlinck's popularity with that of Bernardin de Saint-Pierre three generations ago. He says:

"La gloire de Bernardin n'est point négligeable, et la comparaison s'impose d'elle-même entre Maeterlinck et lui. En écrivant *Les Etudes de la Nature*, cet auteur vieilli dont on ne lit plus guère qu'une blquette charmante qu'il composa en se jouant, apportait une nourriture salubre au public de son temps, à ce public moyen que Jean-Jacques dépassait. Son finalisme ingénu calmait les inquiétudes de ceux que la sécheresse d'une morale utilitaire et d'un matérialisme sans grandeur avait déçus et qui, pourtant, se refusaient à faire, même avec Chateaubriand, le voyage du pénitent vers les autels délaissés."

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Now, if Jean-Jacques was to Bernardin de Saint-Pierre what Nietzsche is to Maeterlinck, it would not be difficult to prove that Maeterlinck appeals to Nietzscheans, and that his teaching has points of contact with that of Nietzsche. To be quite short, Maeterlinck's man of the future is essentially the superman. And even if it were true that Maeterlinck's writings will be no more read in the future than are those of Bernardin de Saint-Pierre to-day, that would not reduce him to the rank of a minor writer. Voltaire's writings, which prepared a revolution, are now little read; and yet how much of Voltaire's thinking, or abstract of thinking (was Voltaire "original"?) is woven into the fabric of the mental life of to-day? We cannot, it is true, draw a close comparison between Voltaire and Maeterlinck, for Maeterlinck has no venom, and no disposition to thrust himself forward into the forefront of public interest; but it would be possible to compare his present position with that of Goethe (another writer the great mass of whose writings, as far as the non-German reading public is concerned, is dead). What Goethe was to the élite of Europe in the opening decades of the nineteenth century, Maeterlinck is to-day. His position, too, was assailed by a younger school of authors; but they could not shake it. Goethe, by the final moral of *Faust*, taught his generation to channel their activities and, confident of the result, to pour their strength into unselfish work; Maeterlinck teaches the same doctrine, and it may be said again of him, as he has said of Goethe, that he has brought us to the shores of the sea of serenity.

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So much for Maeterlinck's philosophy. But his critics, especially M. Dumont-Wilden, are apt to forget one thing—his poetry. It is possible, of course, to state even his dramas in terms of philosophy; but when you have interpreted the symbols, there still remains something that cannot be set down in equations—the poetry. Granted that Maleine = the human soul: does she not still remain a beautiful dream, a Sadist's dream of a girl?^[2] Against M. Dumont-Wilden's criticism

Albert Mockel, *La Wallonie*,
June and July, 1890.

it must be urged that Maeterlinck, besides being a thinker, is also a poet—not a lyric poet, of

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course (his rank is low here), but a creator of new things, a master of atmosphere and suggestion—in short, when all deductions are made, a great writer. The philosophy will be absorbed by everyday life and become commonplace; but *Interior* and *The Sightless* will always be the first-fruits of a new poetry and deathless works of art.

There is one other thing to be said. There have been thinkers whose private life did not bear comparison with the ideals proclaimed in their writings. Of Maeterlinck the man nothing but good is known. The man he is would stand unshaken if all his literary works withered like bindweed round a tree at the first breath of winter. A eulogy of his character based on the long list of his good deeds is impossible; for these are unknown—suspected merely, or secrets of his friends and not to be revealed without offending him. But the sage needs no approbation save his own; and Maeterlinck's good deeds were done, not for praise, but because he was Maeterlinck.

[1] *Academy*, 22nd June, 1912.

[2] "C'est une fillette de van Lerberghe si inconsciemment venue dans les *Serres Chaudes*, et qui s'y meurt; étouffée en ce palais empoisonné, elle s'y meurt, elle s'y meurt! Elle est claire, elle est pure, d'une chasteté d'étrangère apparue,—et pourtant son haleine est d'une malade, il sourd de sa poitrine des effluves angéliques et pervers; elle est équivoque et triste, et nul ne saurait affirmer avec certitude que tout cela existe, ni qu'elle-même *est* bien là, devant nous. C'est la Princesse, la Princesse ... Elle, ses paupières vagues et toutes ses boucles en lianes; ses cheveux qui s'enrouleraient de caresses vivantes, étrangement tièdes sinon de glace, un col irréel où s'enlaceraient des malheurs,—un san Giovannino de Donatello parmi des terreurs ambiguës, un Botticelli dans la Malaria."

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CHRONOLOGICAL LIST OF MAETERLINCK'S WORKS

- 1889 Serres Chaudes
La Princesse Maleine
- 1890 Les Aveugles
- 1891 L'Ornement des Noces spirituelles de Ruysbroeck l'Admirable
Les sept Princesses
- 1892 Pelléas et Mélisande
- 1894 Alladine et Palomides
Intérieur
La Mort de Tintagiles
- 1895 Annabella
Les Disciples à Saïs et les Fragments de Novalis
- 1896 Le Trésor des Humbles
Aglavaine et Selysette
Douze Chansons
- 1898 La Sagesse et la Destinée
- 1901 La Vie des Abeilles
Théâtre I & III
- 1902 Théâtre II
Le Temple Enseveli
Monna Vanna
Théâtre de Maurice Maeterlinck
- 1903 Joyzelle
- 1904 Le double Jardin
Das Wunder des Heiligen Antonius
- 1907 L'Intelligence des Fleurs
- 1909 L'Oiseau Bleu
- 1910 Macbeth
Mary Magdalene
- 1911 Death
- 1913 La Mort

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