

Classic Poetry Series

Jose Maria de Heredia
- poems -

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Jose Maria de Heredia(22 November 1842 - 3 October 1905)

a Cuban-born French poet. He was the fifteenth member elected for seat 4 of the Académie française during 1894.

Early years

Heredia was born at Fortuna Cafeyere, near Santiago de Cuba of Spanish Criollo and French ancestry. At the age of eight he went from the West Indies to France, returning then to Havana at age seventeen, and finally making France his home not long afterwards. He received his classical education with the priests of Saint Vincent at Senlis, and after his visit to Havana he studied at the Ecole des Chartes at Paris. During the later 1860s, with François Edouard Joachim Coppée, René François Armand Sully-Prudhomme, Paul Verlaine and others less distinguished, he was one of the poets who associated with Charles Leconte de Lisle, and were given the name of "Parnassiens".

Career

To this new school, form - the technical part of their art - was of supreme importance, and, as a reaction against the influence of Alfred de Musset, they repressed in their work the expression of personal feeling and emotion. "True poetry," said M. de Heredia in his discourse on entering the Academy - "dwells in nature and in humanity, which are eternal, and not in the heart of the creature of a day, however great." De Heredia wrote very little, and published even less, but his sonnets were circulated in manuscript form, and gave him a reputation before they were published during 1893, together with a few longer poems, as a volume, with the title *Les Trophées*. In the original work, he called to his great friend, Ernest Jean-Marie Millard de Bois Durand, watercolor painter, Montmartre, to illustrate his book of original watercolors.

He was granted French nationality during 1893 and was elected subsequently to the Académie française on 22 February 1894, in the place of Charles de Mazade the publicist. Few purely literary men can have entered the Academy with so few credentials. A small volume of verse - a translation, with introduction, of Diaz del Castillo's *History of the Conquest of New Spain (1878-1881)* - a translation of the life of the nun Alferez (1894), Thomas de Quincey's "Spanish Military Nun" - and one or two short pieces of occasional verse, and an introduction or so - this is but small literary output. But the sonnets are of their kind among the most

skilled of modern literature. "A Légende des siècles in sonnets" M. François Coppée termed them. During 1901 de Heredia became librarian of the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal at Paris. He died at the Château de Bourdonné in Seine-et-Oise on the 3 October 1905, having completed his critical edition of André Chénier's works.

After Petrarch

As you came out of church, all piously
Your noble hands bestowed alms freely there,
And in the darkened porch you shone so fair,
The poor all heaven's riches seemed to see.

I then saluted you most graciously,
Humbly, as suits one in discretion's care,
When, drawing close your robe, with angry air
You covered up your eyes and turned from me.

But Love, that will the most rebellious rule,
Would not permit, less kind than beautiful,
That pity's source all mercy should refuse;

And in your veiling you were then so slow,
That your umbrageous lashes throbbed as does
Dark leafage under filtering starlight's glow.

Jose Maria de Heredia

Antony And Cleopatra

On Egypt sleeping under sky of brass
The twain gazed wistfully from terrace high,
And watched the Flood, through Delta rolling high,
Toward Sais or Bubastis slowly pass.

The Roman felt beneath his thick cuirass -
Like captive soldier stilling infant's cry -
On his triumphant bosom swooning lie
Her form voluptuous in his close embrace.

Turning her pallid head between his arms
Toward him made mad by perfume's conquering charms,
She raised her mouth and crystalline, fond eye;

And o'er her bent, the Chieftain did behold
In her great orbs, starry with dots of gold,
Only a boundless sea where galleys fly.

Jose Maria de Heredia

Church Window

This window has seen dames and lords of might,
Sparkling with gold, with azure, flame and nacre,
Bow down, before the altar of their Maker,
The pride of crest and hood to august right;

Whene'r to horn's or clarion's sound, with tight
Held sword in hand, gerfalcon or the saker,
Toward plain or wood, Byzantium or Acre,
They started for crusade or herons' flight.

Today, the seigniors near their chatelaines,
With hound low crouching at their long poulaines,
Extended lie upon the marble floor.

All still are they, voiceless and deaf; while e'er
They gaze, with stony eyes that ne'er see more,
On window's rose blooming forever there.

Jose Maria de Heredia

Death Of The Eagle

Although beyond the eternal snows, aspires
The vast-winged eagle still to loftier air,
That nearer to the sun in blue more clear
He may renew his eyeball's splendid ires.

He rises. Sparks in torrents he inspires.
Still up, in proud, calm flight, he glories where
The storm breeds lightnings in its inmost lair;
Whereat his wings are smit by their fierce fires.

With scream, in waterspout borne whirlingly,
Shriveled, sublimely tasting flame's last kiss,
He plunges to the fulgurant abyss.

Happy he who, for Fame or Liberty,
In strength's full pride and dream's enrapturing bliss
Dies such undaunted, dazzling death as this.

Jose Maria de Heredia

Life Of The Dead

When over us the cross its shadow throws,
Our frames enshrouded in the mould of night,
Thy body shall reflower in lily white,
And from my flesh be born the ensanguined rose.

And Death divine, thy verse in music knows,
With silence and oblivion to his flight,
In heavens shall show us, lulled with gentle might,
Echanted route where strange, new stars repose.

And mounting to the sun, within his breast
Our spirits twain shall melt and be possessed
Of blessedness of everlasting fire;

But Fame, anointing friend and child of song,
Shall give us an eternal life among
The immortal Shades made kin by glorious Lyre.

Jose Maria de Heredia

On A Broken Marble

Pious the moss to see no more the ground;
For from this wasted wood forever gone
Is virgin who the milk and wine poured on
The earth to beautiful name that marked the bound.

The ivy, hop, viburnum, which around
This ruin gather, all to them unknown
Whether 'twas Silvan, Pan, Hermes or Faun,
Its maimed front their twining horns have found.

Behold! The ray, caressful as of old,
In its flat face has set two orbs of gold;
As though from lip, the vines bid laughter run;

And (mobile spell), wind murmuring blown,
The leaves, the wandering shadows and the sun,
Have turned to living God this broken stone.

Jose Maria de Heredia

On The Book Of Loves Of Pierre De Ronsard

In Bourgueil Gardens more than one of yore
Engraved loved names on bark with heavy stroke,
And many a heart 'neath Louvre's gold ceilings shook,
At flash of smile, with pride to very core.

What matters it? - their joy or grief e'ermore
Is stilled: they lie between four boards of oak,
Where under grass-grown cover nought has woke
Their torpid dust that feeds oblivion's shore.

All die. Mary, Helen, and thee, Cassandra, all
Your lovely forms to lifeless ashes fall,
- Nor rose nor lily sees the morrow's land -

Still, Ronsard by the Seine and Loire has wove
For brows of ours, with an immortal hand,
Fame's laurel leaf with myrtle leaf of Love.

Jose Maria de Heredia

Sea Breeze

The winter has deflowered garden and heath;
Nought lives; and on the rock's unchanging gray,
Where the Atlantic's endless billows play,
The last pistil to petal clings in death,

And yet, these subtle scents the sea breeze hath
Blown me I know not - warm effluvia they
That bid my heart to mad delight give way;
Whence comes this strangely odoriferous breath?

Ah! now it is revealed: - 'Tis from the west
Three thousand leagues, where the Antilles rest,
Beneath the occidental star, in swoon;

And on this Cymric wave-lashed reef today
I've breathed the air perfumed by flower blown
Of old in garden of America.

Jose Maria de Heredia

Tepidarium

O'er their soft limbs has myrrh its fragrance shed;
And bathed in warmth beneath December's skies
They dream, while the bronze lamp with flaming eyes
Throws light and shadow on each beauteous head.

On byssus cushions of empurpled bed
Some amber, rosy figure nerveless tries
To stretch, or bend, or from the couch to rise,
Where linen's folds voluptuously spread.

In nakedness, exhaling ardent fume,
An Asian woman mid the heated room
Twines her smooth arms in pliant, languorous play;

Ausonius' daughters, mad with ecstasy,
Drink in the rich and savage harmony,
As over blushless bust their dark locks stray.

Jose Maria de Heredia

The Flute

Evening is here. Some pigeons cross the sky.
Nothing so well an amorous fever chains
As when with pipe to lip its soothing strains
Blend with the rush-grown stream's fresh melody.

In shade of plane-tree where at ease we lie
The grass is soft. Let, friend, that goat which feigns
Indifference to the trembling kid she weans,
Climb up the rock and browse the herbage nigh.

With seven unequal stems of hemlock made,
Well joined with wax, my flute, or sharply played
Or grave, will weep, or moan, or joyous sing.

Come. Try Silenus' art that knows no death,
And thy sad sighs of love will take to wing
Amidst thy sacred pipe's harmonious breath.

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The Runner

As when at Delphi, Thymus close behind,
He flew through stadium to applause's roar,
So on this plinth now Ladas runs one more,
On bronze foot, slim, and swifter than the wind.

With arm outstretched, eyes fixed, trunk front inclined,
The beaded drops of sweat his face glide o'er;
Surely while sculptor did the metal pour,
The athlete leaped from mould in form designed.

He throbs, he trembles, hopes, yet fears to lose;
His side pants, the cleaved air his lips refuse,
And with the strain his muscles jutting rise.

His spirit's ardor is beyond control,
And passing o'er supporting base he flies
In the arena toward the palm and goal.

Jose Maria de Heredia

The Shell

In what cold seas, under what winters' reign,
- Who can e'er know, O nacreous, fragile Shell! -
Hast thou through current, wave and tidal swell,
In shallows and abysses restless lain?

Today thou hast, far from the ebbing main,
Soft bed in golden sand, 'neath sky to dwell.
Vain hope: full long and sad, within thy cell
Still ever sounds great ocean's mournful strain.

My soul sonorous prison-chamber lies,
And like thyself forever weeps and sighs
Refrain of ancient clamor to be free;

So from the heart-depths all too full of Her,
Deaf, slow, insensible, yet deathless e'er,
The stormy, distant murmur moans in me.

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The Slave

All wretched, shocking, nude, with vilest fare,
Such slave am I - my body bears the signs -
Born free at foot of gulf whose beauteous lines
See honeyed Hybla his blue summits rear.

Alas! I left the happy isle.... Ah! shouldst thou e'er
Toward Syracuse and bees and clustering vines
Follow the swans as winter's cold declines,
Good host, acquaint thee with my loved dear.

Shall I see more her dark, pure, violet eye
Reflecting smilingly her natal sky
Beneath that eyebrow's bow where hearts are slain?

Have pity! - Find my Clearista, pray;
Tell her I live to meet her once again;
Thou'lt surely know her, for she's sad alway.

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To The Divine Mountains

Blue glaciers, peaks of marble, granite, slate,
Moraines whence winds from Begle to Nethou
The wheat and rye send blighting ruin through,
Lqakes, woods of shade and nest, steep crags serrate;

Dark vales and caves - the ancient exile's fate,
Who ne'er submitting to the tyrant crew,
The chamois, bear, the wolf, and eagle knew -
Abysses, torrents, cliffs, blest be your state!

From the harsh town and prison having flown,
Thy twin slave to the Mountains rears this stone -
The sacred guard of liberty to be;

And on these silence-pulsing summits clear,
In the all-boundless air so pure and free,
I trust a freeman's cry again to hear!

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Youth

Juan Ponce de Leon, by the Devil led,
With years weighed down and crammed with antique lore,
Seeing age branch his stubby locks still more,
The far seas scoured to find Health's Fountain-head.

Haunted by fruitless dream his vessels sped
Three years the glaucous solitudes to explore,
Until, heart-sickening the Bermudan shore,
Beneath Floridian skies enchantments spread.

Then the Conquistador his madness blessed,
And with enfeebled hand his pennon pressed
In that bright earth which opened for his tomb.

Old man, most happy thou: thy fortune sooth
Is deathlike, but thy dream bears beauty's bloom,
For Fame has given thee immortal youth.

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