Francis Jammes

on the life and work
of a modern master

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The Unsung Masters Series at Pleiades Press
Warrensburg, Missouri, 2014

ISBN: 978-0-9641454-5-0

Published by Pleiades Press
Department of English
University of Central Missouri
Warrensburg, MO 64093

Distributed by Small Press Distribution (SPD)

Book design by Wayne Miller. Series design by Kevin Prufer.

First Pleiades Press Printing, 2014

Our profound thanks to Wayne Miller and Phong Nguyen for their advice and support. Also to Brian Blair for his support and to our children, Alice Nuernberger Blair, Theo Whiteman Maynard and Severin Whiteman Maynard, who kept us entertained. —*KN & BW*

Invaluable financial support for this project has been provided by the Missouri Arts Council, a state agency. Our immense gratitude to this fine organization.

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Introduction

Bruce found Jammes by following his ear:

As a graduate student working on Pound's *Cantos* over thirty years ago, I remember noticing Jammes' name several times in various essays by Pound. I was already then a reader of French poetry, but my passions went more in the direction of Rimbaud, Lautréamont, and Baudelaire than in the fin-de-siècle, and I did not follow up on Jammes at that time. Perhaps I looked him up and, like so many readers, was dissuaded from reading his poems by the narrative of his re-conversion. It strikes me as absurdly superficial now to have shrugged off a fine poet merely because he became a devoted Catholic after his first books; but, well, I was a callow youth wild about Modernism and rather disdainful of the traditions of conventional religious poetry. (Blake was a different story.)

Much more recently, as part of my research towards a never completed dissertation on French art song and depth psychology in the period before Freud's advent, I discovered a series of letters in the Bibliothèque Jacques Doucet in Paris (Mss. 3666) written to Jammes by the wonderful French composer Henri Duparc (1848-1933), whose settings of Baudelaire and other poets I was already deeply passionate about. The Doucet will not allow photocopying

nor will it permit one to use a digital camera to take photographs of manuscripts, so I had no choice but to sit in a reading-room at the Sorbonne (where the Doucet librarian arranged for readers to consult manuscripts) and transcribe by hand this interesting group of letters. Duparc's was a sad case. After studying with César Franck, and after a brilliant beginning when he wrote a handful of the finest songs in the French *mélodie* repertoire, he fell ill with what usually gets described as hyperaesthesia, an abnormal sensitivity to stimuli, and stopped composing in his late thirties. He lived for almost fifty years after his work largely ceased, and like Jammes, whose poetry he admired, he too re-converted to Catholicism. In any case, this series of letters inspired me go to the closest FNAC, where I found copies of Jammes' first two books, including the texts of the "Elégies" and "Tristesses," both of which I later decided to translate.

Jammes had not yet published anything during Duparc's active period of composing, so there are no Duparc-Jammes collaborations. But I soon enough learned that Jammes' poetry had been set by other composers, most notably Lili Boulanger, who set some of the poems from "Tristesses" as a song cycle called *Clairières dans le ciel*, published in 1919 after her death. Lili Boulanger also had a tragic history as a composer. She was the sister of the noted pedagogue Nadia Boulanger—the teacher of so many American composers among others—and was the first woman ever to win the Prix de Rome, France's highest musical award at the time, the one which Ravel infamously did not win. But she was ill much of her life, and died at the age of twenty-four of Crohn's Disease in 1918, leaving, among other projects, an unfinished opera based on a Maeterlinck text. She set only roughly half of the poems in Jammes' series (thirteen of the twenty-four), but her cycle is an extraordinary achievement. Darius Milhaud would later set the entire cycle of poems in the mid-1950s, when he was still teaching part of the year in California; but while his settings are good, Boulanger's far outshine his in passionate intensity.

It is often stupidly claimed that the worst poetry makes for the best song texts, on the argument that good poems have their own intrinsic music and are not easily set to a different one. But too many examples can be cited to support the counter-argument, not least among them Duparc's setting of Baudelaire's "L'Invitation au voy-

age," one of the finest French songs of all, not to mention settings by Ravel and Debussy of poems by Baudelaire, Mallarmé and other accomplished poets. The poems of Jammes set by Boulanger, Milhaud, and other French composers are admittedly somewhat simpler, at least in terms of content, than these examples, but their music is of a high quality, a quality that nevertheless did not stop the composers from reimagining them in a different musical context. To listen to "Elle était descendue au bas de la prairie," the first poem in "Tristesses" and the first in Lili Boulanger's cycle, is to re-hear a delicate music transformed. She does not vitiate Jammes' music; she gives it a different aural legitimacy and psychic compulsion.

Where music and poetry collocated are the concern, it is worth recalling Stravinsky's contention: "From the moment song assumes as its calling the expression of the meaning of discourse, it leaves the realm of music and has nothing more in common with it."[1] In other words, a great composer leaves a poem alone and tries to voice its quiddity in a parallel art form. The music does not interpret the meaning in any obvious way. Good poetry, then, is as open to a composer's music as lesser poetry (and that lesser poetry has been gloriously set to music is certainly true). Jammes was fortunate in his composers, as they too were fortunate in having his poetry to move them to composition. It has been a pleasure for me to discover and to live with both.

For Kathryn the road to Francis Jammes began with Marianne Moore:

After working my way through Marianne Moore's complete poems for the second time, I wanted something new to read that I would enjoy at least half as much and decided to start with her influences, one of whom, I learned, was the little known poet Francis Jammes. Translations were hard to come by, but there were a few rare offerings, first published in the 1960s and 1970s by Teo Savory, Barry Gifford and Bettina Dickie, that I was able to get my hands

1. Igor Stravinsky, *Poetics of Music in the Form of Six Lessons*, trans. Arthur Knodel and Ingolf Dahl, Preface by George Sefaris (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1977), 42-43.

on through interlibrary loan. And what a treat it was to discover Janine Canan's feature of translations and commentary in *Exquisite Corpse* and then to find that she had recently published a book of selected poems through a publisher in Australia.

Though quite different from Moore's poetry, I certainly enjoyed Jammes' work half as much and then some. While he was contemporary to the Symbolists, there was a crispness to his imagery, a frankness to his voice, and a strangeness in his sensibility that kept me reading. At first I thought of his mystical attention to a concrete reality and his facility in drawing correspondences between interior and exterior experience through evocative imagery as a proto-Surrealist impulse. However, essays in this book have convinced me Jammes' departure from the Symbolists is a departure that anticipated and then influenced the development of American Modernism.

In an arc reminiscent of W. B. Yeats' trajectory as a poet, Francis Jammes began his career writing excellent examples of nineteenth-century literary aesthetics, but instead of settling into the familiar voice and style that brought him so much attention and praise, he continued to experiment and to challenge his readers' aesthetic expectations. Unlike Yeats, Jammes' mounting mysticism and imagistic tendencies were dismissed by his French contemporaries as provincial dogmatism and the later work was disregarded. But, as a number of the essayists in this volume point out, American Modernists were still paying attention.

I speak some French and spent a great many hours reading French critical assessments of Jammes, but the conversation about his work petered out in the 1950s and Jammes increasingly became a slight footnote in the anthologies, at best. It was T. S. Eliot who first suggested that the literary canon is not written in stone, but is rewritten by each generation of writers, who claim some voices as influences and disregard others. In that spirit I sought out Bruce Whiteman, who had published a few very fine translations of the elegies I had encountered around the web and mentioned in his bio note in *Jacket2* that he was working on more. I contacted him to see if he would co-edit a volume on Jammes for the Unsung Masters series. It was a vision of a canon of the past constructed by writers of the present that guided us in seeking appreciations and commen-

tary on Jammes from writers primarily known for their poetry, as well as academics and translators. These essays give some insight into what Jammes' place in literary history has been, but they also imagine what his place might become.

We hope you find as much to enjoy and admire in this collection as we have in our explorations of Jammes' life and work.

—Kathryn Nuernberger & Bruce Whiteman

A Folio of Writing by Francis Jammes

Jammisme: A Literary Manifesto

I

I think that Truth is the praise of God; that we must celebrate it in our poems for them to be pure; that there exists but one school, the one where, like children imitating a model of perfect handwriting as precisely as possible, poets conscientiously copy a pretty bird, a flower, or a girl with charming legs and graceful breasts.

II

In my opinion, that's enough. What on earth am I to think of a writer who delights in depicting a living turtle incrusted with precious stones?[1] I cannot believe that such a person is worthy of the name of poet, because God did not create turtles for this purpose, and because their habitats are ponds and the seashore.

III

All things are worthy of description when they are part of nature; but natural objects comprise not only bread, meat, water, salt, a lamp,

1. This is a reference to J. K. Huysmann's novel *Á Rebours* (1884), in which the central character, Des Esseintes, sets gems on a tourtoise's back, killing it.

a key, trees and sheep, man and woman, and high spirits. Swans, lilies, coats of arms, crowns, and despondency, among others, are also included.

What am I to think of a man who, because he sings of life, wants to prevent me from celebrating death, or vice versa; or who, because he paints a thyrsus or clothes edged with ermine, wishes to prevent me from writing about a rake or a pair of socks?

IV

I find it perfectly natural that a poet, in bed with a solid and pretty young woman, at that moment prefers living to dying; all the same, if a poet who has lost every worldly possession, who has been struck down by a cruel disease, and who is a believer, composes deeply felt lines in which he asks the Creator to take his life away soon, him I think quite acceptable.

V

Many schools have come and gone over time (as the Buddha said, "I was led into schools, I know more about them than the doctors")—but to the founder of any given school, has it not always represented the vanity of watching a group of inferiors gather together to add to his personal glory? Could it be said that this is to advocate for some philosophical system in a selfless fashion? Such childishness, since one man's meat is another man's poison, and there is only the one system: Truth which praises God.

VI

A poet is therefore in the wrong to tell his fellow poets: You will always walk beneath linden trees; take care to avoid the scent of irises and not to taste beans: because they cannot love the scent of the linden, only the smell of the iris and the taste of the beans.

VII

But since all is vanity, and even this statement is another vanity, it is the right thing in this century for everyone to establish a literary

school. I ask everyone wishing to join mine, in lieu of founding another, to send their subscriptions to Saint Peter Street. Orthez, Lower Pyrenees.

[trans. Bruce Whiteman]

These Are the Works

These are the works of man which are great:
To measure foaming milk into pewter pannikins
To gather ripe wheat-ears into sheaves
To cover fresh loaves with white linen napkins
In autumn to compost scudding leaves
To tap fiery maples for their syrup
To seek honey drunk by wild bees from the hyssop
To put new soles on old shoes in the winter-dark
room where the scarred cat and the blinded lark
doze in the chimney-nook near children at play
To answer the crickets' shrilling at dusk
with the loom's steady boom and creak
To herd the cows home at the close of day
To bake bread and tread wine
To husband the vine
To sit by stony brooks plaiting reeds …
In spring to turn soil for new seeds.

[trans. Teo Savory]

The Village at Noon

The village at noon. The lacewing fly drones
between the bullock's horns.
If you wish to, we will go
to the dun-colored fields now under plough.

Listen to the cockcrow… to the strike of the clock.
In the paddock the donkeys bray
the tree-swallow planes away
the water runs under a ribbon of poplars to the lock.

The well is choked with moss. Hear the chain
as it creaks and creaks there
when the girl with golden hair
pulls up the blackened bucket that drips silver rain.

The girl walks away leaning to one side
the pitcher on her golden head
her head like a gold beehive
mingling in sunshine with the flowers of that olive.

And see how the farmhouse roof of black slate
shoots blue sparks at the blue sky
and the lazy trees hardly sway
against the horizon under the noonday's weight.

[trans. Teo Savory]

The Useful Calendar

In the month of the Ram, sow thyme,
carrots, cabbages, peas, lucerne and clover.
Harrowing is over, and spading; it is time
to rake the beds and feed the trees, turn over
the earth under the vines, cut them back
and stake them, and to tie each stalk.

For the byre-animals, no more winter groats.
They can be led to the meadows now, the young
dark-eyed heifers, their coats smoothed by the tongue
of their mother, where they will soon find fresh oats.
The days draw out an hour longer, dusk is sweet;
at evening the trailing goatherd puffs his flute,
the goats pass by the working collie
who guards and keeps them from their folly.

[trans. Teo Savory]