

Shinabargar on Leconte de Lisle, ed. Pich (2012)

Leconte de Lisle. *Œuvres complètes. Tome III, Poèmes barbares*. Ed. Edgard Pich. Paris: Éditions Honoré Champion (coll. "Textes de littérature moderne et contemporaine"), 2012. Pp. 697. ISBN: 978-2-7453-2399-6

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If anyone is qualified to republish the complete works of Leconte de Lisle, it is surely Edgard Pich. Not only has he continued, since his doctoral work, to produce numerous publications on the poetry and correspondence of this key figure in the Parnassian movement, but this is, in fact, the *second* edition of the complete works he has undertaken (the first, with *Les Belles lettres*, published almost forty years ago). Following the recent appearance of tomes I and II, in 2011 (*L'Œuvre romantique*, and *Poèmes antiques*), he now turns his attention to the collection that, by general consensus, constitutes the poet's greatest work--*Poèmes barbares*. Just as he expanded the conception of the *Œuvres* as a whole, devoting an entire new volume to the earliest work, he has taken great pains to reveal the underestimated complexity of this volume.

The 1976 edition appears spare, indeed, by comparison. Apart from a brief introduction, in which Pich identified key changes in its evolution--down to the typography and presence/absence of ornamental motifs--the only significant critical apparatus lay in the footnotes, which included initial publication sources and dates for each poem, and modifications between versions. While these notes are included in the present edition, in the *Dossier* which follows the poems (a regrettable change from the footnote format, in this reader's view, as referencing continually interrupts the reading), Pich has added immeasurably to this material, so that, as in the *Pléiade* series, the poems are followed by extensive appendices—including a list of significant scholarship on each poem, and the editor's own, often detailed analysis of the text (followed, for dedicated readers, by an "Index métrique" and an "Index des noms propres de personnes").

Glossing this particular work is difficult, with its multitude of heterogeneous references--borrowing from and actually rewriting the legends and myths of numerous cultural and religious traditions--and Pich's extensive scholarship provides new access for those readers sufficiently motivated to explore its dense layers. Serving as a knowing guide through the unfamiliar names and narratives, helping us to perceive the thematic unities constituted by groups of poems, he shows how a new, singular landscape comes into being ("Les mythologies égyptienne, chrétienne, indienne, germanique, s'interpépètrent et se fécondent mutuellement" [378]). Particularly interesting is the way in which the metaphysical crisis coming to a head at the time of composition is given its own mythology, paradoxically, through the recurring conflict between pre- and early-Christian European cultures ("Le Bard de Temrah," "Le Massacre de Mona").

With his accumulated knowledge, Pich sheds new light on many individual poems, as well. While he refers generously to the analyses of others--in a wide historical swath, from the poet's own time to present--he goes further: the opening "Quain," one of the most studied poems of the period, is not only a synthesis of preceding instances of revolt, as critics have shown, but prophetic of the Commune, with its realist perspective on the tenacity of established power (349-50); "Les Paraboles de Dom Guy," less read, is revealed as a comparable masterpiece when we "enter into its logic" (607), synchronizing its complex formal structure with other poems in the collection.

Especially noteworthy are the conclusions Pich draws regarding the poet's writing process. In rewriting the many legends he has assembled, Leconte de Lisle is not simply using a scaffolding for the deployment of his own formal achievements, as anyone familiar with the rigorous esthetic code of *Parnasse* might suspect. A number of poems are revealed--when juxtaposed with corresponding passages of the *urtext*--to have a bipartite structure, in which only the first section mirrors the original, the narrative of the second blossoming from the poet's activated imagination. The (rewritten) suicide of Brunhild is indeed revealed as an inscription of the poet himself, as defined in the preface to the *Poèmes antiques*--a being for whom authentic expression only coincides with annihilation of self.

One is perhaps spoiled by the wealth of perceptions here, and wishes only that Pich had gone a little deeper in certain readings. Encountering the powerful, apocalyptic vision that closes the collection, "Solvat Seclum," which fertilizes the universe with its destruction (and *silencing*) of all that has preceded, we are less interested in learning about external literary sources than the volatile, troubling source within the poet himself, revealed earlier. But this reflects perhaps the greatest, most appropriate achievement of the editor-scholar--illuminating enough of a work that readers find themselves pulled into it, wanting to read more.

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