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Booklover -- First and French

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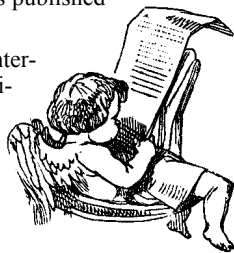
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Booklover — First and French

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Naiïvete — a word with roots in 17th century Old French is defined as the quality of being naive; that is marked by unaffected simplicity. I have flown over France several times, experienced a layover at Charles de Gaulle airport a decade ago, drunk wines from the French regions of Bordeaux and Rhone, and have several friends who live in France. Other than these experiences I am somewhat naive when it comes to French. When I decided to research **Sully Prudhomme** (**nom de plume for René François Armand Prudhomme**), the French writer who won the first **Nobel Prize** in Literature in 1901, I found myself with a dilemma. There were few if any translations of his works. This dilemma was soon resolved as my Portuguese friend, **Natalia**, is also fluent in French. **Natalia** is very adept at language, is attuned to the nuances of communication, and has a wicked sense of humor. I approached her with a request to solve this dilemma and she happily agreed to help me. I have been somewhat persuaded that it is very French to meet in a cafe for refreshments and discourse with colleagues. **Alchemy Coffee** located in the Charleston's Avondale Point Business District seemed the perfect location for us to meet and discuss **Prudhomme** and his works. This discussion was going to take a little different direction as I had found a book of poetry, but I did not wish **Natalia** to translate. Poetry has its power in language and this power is very easily "lost in translation." I wanted to feel the language, to be able to sense the subject from the sounds, so I asked **Natalia** to read five selected poems to me in French and then let me relate the impression of what I heard. Only then we would discuss the poem. I had designed an interesting and fascinating experiment for myself, and I was anxious to get started. But first I must tell you the story of how I acquired *Œuvres de Sully Prudhomme - Poesies*, the book we would use in this literary experiment. It was published in Paris at the turn of the century.

After a somewhat frustrating internet search I remembered my previous experience with **PASCAL** (**Partnership Among South Carolina Academic Libraries**), a search engine that is quickly becoming my best friend — a friend I hope not to lose as



I understand funding is becoming scarce. I quickly switched from **Google** to **PASCAL** and entered **Prudhomme's** name in the query box. Several volumes of **Prudhomme's** poetry were listed in the query results, so I picked one at random. Three days later a "Circulation Notice" appeared in my email "Inbox" announcing that the book had arrived at the **MUSC** library. This is just too easy. I went to pick up the book and was stunned when this tiny, almost century old book, leather-spined, and marbled paper covered, was handed to me. As the spine appeared to be unbroken I believe this little gem had waited 100 years to be read. As I carefully opened the book I discovered 269 pages of French poems, a table of contents, delicate graphic definitions at the end of each poem and the beginning of each section, and stiff paper pages that are now brown with age. Modern library stickers, barcodes and stamps are recent embellishments. I was enchanted. My imagination was swirling like the marbling on the cover and I was anxious to begin this experiment.

Prudhomme "declared it his intent to create scientific poetry for modern times." I have long been intrigued by society's continual battle of the "head vs heart." This dichotomy has always been present in my own life as well, and maintaining my "heart/head" balance is decidedly a work in progress. Poetry speaks to our essence. It makes us laugh or cry, ponder, and hopefully be inspired. Entire lifetimes have been spent contemplating the power of a single poem. With **Prudhomme's** *raison d'être* in mind, I chose five poems after carefully looking at each page. But the first two poems that immediately caught my imagination were entitled: "L'Artiste" and "La Science."

At **Alchemy Coffee**, **Natalia** and I exchanged a few pleasantries. Of course we had to touch on my previous column about **Jose Saramago's** book *Blindness* and then we enjoyed a brief philosophical discussion as a prelude to our mutual endeavor. We decided it would be best if **Natalia** first read the poems to herself before reading them to me. Watching **Natalia's** facial expressions as she read each poem for the first time was a real treat. An arched eye brow, a slight smirk, or an under-the-breath comment made me suggest that she never play poker. I asked her to read "L'Artiste" first. She noted that the poem was dedicated to "A **Maurice Albert**" before she began to read. Lyrical — this was the word that leapt to my mind as she read. The sounds were smooth and pleasing — what I am calling subject-appropriate

sounds. When she described to me what she had read, I was captivated by "the idea of what it is to imagine" and the phrase "his fingers will carry out his dreams."

"La Science" was quite the opposite. Once again **Natalia** noted the poem's dedication to "A **Charles Richet**." The staccato cadence of the poem suggested discipline and structure. The poem spoke of: *Being ignorant is worse than night — it is death; Even a blind man can make his way; Mother of victory is knowledge; and Without knowledge the soul is in a spider web with nowhere to go.* But is scientific knowledge that only knowledge? Over a hundred years, and the scientists and poets are still in debate.

The next poem places the debate right in the title. As **Natalia** read "Science et Poesie" she was smiling and I heard "life": *The soul hears the angry roar of the ocean; Science sees the hydrogen and oxygen of the water; Science sees the elements in the forest; The soul is shocked by the horror of silence; Science describes how a spring becomes a river but the soul sees the tears from someone crying for her. And here is another reference to blindness.*

"Science et Charite," dedicated to the Founder of the Federation against Tuberculosis, is a depressing series of stanzas. **Natalia's** impression is that he must have known someone with TB. **Prudhomme** tells of: *Breathing since childhood with the breath killing you; Life is an enemy to life; Medicine (science) might prolong your life; Man is the ruler but is subject to infirmities that he must conquer to stay alive.*

The final poem chosen for the experiment is "Solitaire." Many a scientist or an artist has toiled in the solitary environment of his or her mind. **Natalia** with a furrowed brow said: "This one is hard to get into." As she read I heard "despair." "Depressing — he must have had a fight with someone he loved," she said. *I'm still alone even with my family; Only with faith of God is there hope; Ache for clarity, light and need to drink from this source and more references to blindness.*

The repeated references to blindness are not lost on **Natalia** and me. We both recall again **Saramago's** *Blindness* and the destruction of a society that becomes physically blind. Interestingly, **Prudhomme** suffered from an eye condition that is reported to be the reason behind his decision to switch careers from engineering to literature. One has to ponder this influence of the physical condition on the professional situation. Can knowledge make us blind or help us see? **Prudhomme's** poetic outcome challenges us to continue the heart/head debate and maybe cautions us to not to become blind to our feelings. As we end our literary experiment I am anxious to plan another, lost in the sounds of words, listening for the subject, and thinking with my heart and my head. 🐾

Our Apologies

In **Donna's Booklover** column titled "Bridges" that ran in our December 2009 - January 2010 issue we would like to apologize for an error in the spelling of **Ivo Andrić's** name. A mishap at the printer caused the last character of his name to disappear. The correct spelling is **Ivo Andrić**. We have posted the correct file on the **ATG NewsChannel** which you may view by visiting www.against-the-grain.com. — **KS**