

# Some thoughts on Platen

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give and get». Increasingly he realized that his mind was more like that of Walt Whitman than any other's living — — though he thought him «a very great scoundrel»!

Bridges thought that the «Hyde» of Stevenson's «Jekyll and Hyde» was overdrawn. «You are wrong» said honest Hopkins «my Hyde is worse»!

As Stephen Spender (Horizon, 1940) has well said: «He was ever at war with one side of his personality but he did not reject and condemn the whole of life on the strength of it as Housman did — — one sees the superiority of the Catholic environment to the Protestant and Puritan. In Hopkins there is continual struggle . . . not blank refusal and enforced silence. Housman had what is called «integrity», Hopkins had honesty and «audacity». His poetry is that of *a man who struggles with life and illuminates life more and more in the process.*»

Through years of endeavour his reputation was unscathed and his conscious at peace. When, in the prime of life, he fell a victim to typhoid in Dublin, he said with his last breath: «I am so happy». Thirty years later the fraternal piety of Bridges revealed to the literary world an unknown poet — and to the homophile world the example of a splendid sublimation.

BEUNO.

## Some Thoughts on Platen

The German poet Platen, more restless than ever, was at Naples for the last time in July 1835. On this occasion the town looked different; everybody was scared, since an epidemic of cholera was spreading southward and might soon be at the city gates. People fled in all directions, and Platen followed their example. In September he crossed over to Palermo, a familiar spot; there, on the 11th of November, took root at Syracuse surrounded by admirers and friends like Landolina — took root; not for long. He fell ill on the 23rd of the same month of some gastric or intestinal trouble beginning with a colic, and died after twelve days' suffering in spite of all that medical skill and Landolina's devotion could suggest. It may be true, as has been hinted, that his end was hastened by some violent and pernicious drug which he insisted on taking.

They buried him in his garden. It says something for the esteem in which the Lutheran was held that his funeral was attended by enormous numbers of the populace and by the entire clergy of Syracuse, with the archbishop at their head. There he lies, and his shade in Elysium may draw contentment from the hazard which brought him, the 'last of the Platonists', to rest under a blue sky, among olives and vines, and in soil once trodden by the Master himself.

It cannot be less than fifty-seven years since I read Platen's poems (the diaries and so forth were consulted at a later date). This happened at the gymnasium of Karlsruhe, where they gave us a good dose of him. Our professor was not enthusiastic about this poet. Maybe he disapproved

of Platen's sex life about which we were told nothing; maybe he was prejudiced against his formality, his coldly classical outlook, or perhaps because Platen, unlike Lessing or Goethe, had no great admiration for Shakespeare. I agreed with the professor, my ideals being also those other two and, as a close third, Heine, between whom and Platen, as I afterwards learned, there had flared up an unedifying squabble in the course of which Heine indulged in observations hardly printable anent his adversary's peculiar tastes. Not to appreciate Shakespeare: that was a bad mark against Platen. We were told that his poems were ‚verkünstelt’, which, given the verse-forms he employed and the themes he loved, may be either legitimate or not. Artificiality — artifice — artistry: one learns to distrust these terms. Some of the finest lyrics in our language are the acme of artificiality, and artistry can be woefully out of place.

One single line of all those poems had stuck in my mind; it occurs in some verses written on a certain bridge, and this particular piece, I believe, has been translated by Longfellow. A quite narrative; it glides along as smoothly as the waters flowing underfoot till, suddenly, an unexpected and disquieting thought intrudes — a line that comes as a shock, and herein lies its lyrical worth: ‚Alas, how have you spent your days!’ He would mean misspent or squandered, and the lament was obviously inspired by one of those moments of dejection to which poets, like all sensitive folk, are subject and entitled. That line may well have appealed to me in those days because, at the age of twenty, one is always reproaching oneself for this or that. How have you wasted your days! — yes, I can hear myself repeating those words in Karlsruhe, and for some quite inadequate reason.

Now, having reached nearly twice the age at which Platen died, I no longer complain of how I squandered my days; my one regret is that I have not many more of them to squander. If one has enjoyed life and contrived to extract matter of mirth even out of its not infrequent mishaps, one cannot be said to have squandered one's days. A man's days are his own. He will do well, I should think, not to listen to others as to whether he has wasted his life or not; that is his own concern. Let him analyse the past and draw conclusions, if it amuses him, as to the part he played or was made to play.

And there is this advantage in the writing of books when they are in some measure autobiographical, describing events from early childhood onwards; instead of being confused memories they are authentic documents which allow a man to live his life over again and cast his thoughts backwards with assurance.

This is what I have been doing lately — taking my books one by one, noting the circumstances in which they were written, and commenting in quite haphazard fashion, quite indiscriminately, on anything else which those circumstances suggest. For Platen's exclamation-point I substitute a question-mark. How have you spent your days? How?

Can anything be learned from such books? Will they provide an answer to the question?

We shall see.

X.