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The Most Indian of the Major French Poets: Charles Leconte De Lisle

by

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The Most Indian Of The Major French Poets: Charles Leconte De Lisle*

Indian civilisation has, time and again, influenced French literary and artistic life in various ways, more particularly from the mid-17th century, when the travel accounts of Francois Bernier and Jean-Baptiste Tavernier achieved great popularity in an intellectual class exposed to the fine goods imported by the French East India Company (*la compagnie des Indes*), or bought by traders. These included Golkonda diamonds, carved ivory, muslin, indigo, cashmere shawls, printed cotton fabrics known as 'Indiennes' or 'madras' , 'Coromandel' screens and miniatures of the Mughal school. The first poems, fables, novels, comedies and operas on Indian themes appeared in Europe in the years that followed.

In the late 1700s, Voltaire and other philosophical luminaries showered praise on Indian books of wisdom and Buddhist scriptures, although they knew but little about them. Anquetil du Perron made the first, sketchy translation of the *Upnekhat* (Upanishads), based on Dara Shikoh's Persian renderings, and soon Paris became an international centre for Indology. By 1830, many of the Rig Vedic hymns appeared in Latin translation by Friedrich Rosen, and the same year the great Sanskritist and teacher of Max Mueller, Eugène Burnouf, translated the Bhagavata Purana, which was preceded and followed by other major Hindu and Buddhist texts, while his colleague Antoine Leonard de Chézy produced the first French version of Kalidasa's *Sakuntala*, which he sent to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. The illustrious German writer declared his admiration for that masterpiece and pronounced it one of the jewels of world literature. Then, between 1854 and 1858, Hippolyte Fauche translated the Ramayana, and, in 1863, brought out the

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first volume of his French rendering of the Mahabharata.

In 1818, when Charles Marie René Leconte de Lisle was born in Saint Paul, in the French island of La Réunion (formerly l'Ile Bourbon), Napoleon had been finally defeated some three years before at Waterloo, and the dynasty of the Bourbons had been restored to the throne in Paris. La Réunion was one of France's stopover points on the way to India and already had a large Indian population mostly employed in the sugar and coffee plantations. Charles' father, a military surgeon, had Indian staff in his household, like most French settlers of that scenic tropical island, and the boy was exposed to the colourful culture of those exotic Asians, which would inspire some of his most superb and moving poems such as *Le Manchy*, *La Ravine Saint Gilles* and *l'Illusion suprême*. He never forgot the wild, volcanic, dazzling magnificence of his native speck of land amidst the Indian Ocean, where he experienced his first love for a girl who was to die a few years later, leaving him seemingly heartbroken for much of his life.

His parents and particularly his father, a stern disciplinarian, wanted Charles to go into the profitable businesses that many traders were carrying on between India and France. However, he soon showed a literary disposition as well as a lack of interest in commerce despite being sent on a cruise to India (probably Pondicherry) and South East Asia to get some training. In 1837, he sailed to France to join the University of Rennes in Brittany, as a law student, but soon shifted to classical languages and literature, including ancient Greek and Latin. Throughout his life he showed scholarly abilities by translating in verse Greek tragedies by Aeschyles, Sophocles and Euripides as well as the poems of Hesiod and Theocritus, and Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey.* His translations were to be a major source of income. In addition, he was an admirer of many modern European authors, including the two great Caledonians Walter Scott and Robert Burns, and was to write six works inspired by the latter's ballads.

This was the Romantic Age, but, as pointed out earlier, it was also the time when some of the great literature of the East was made available in Latin, French, English and German by various pioneering scholars. The young Leconte de Lisle returned to France and moved to Paris in 1846, after spending three years with his family in the island of his birth. He immersed himself, as a handsome and gifted 'dandy', in the lively and restless ambience of the capital, where political and social ideas were being passionately debated. Victor Hugo was the idol of the age, and Leconte made his acquaintance in the literary circles of the city responsible for making that period perhaps the most artistically fertile and brilliant in French history after the 'Great' 17th century. In 1864, he would write a critical survey-cum-anthology of major contemporary poets and dramatists. The austerely stoic Alfred de Vigny in particular had an influence on Leconte's vision of life in his mature years.

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In 1848, a new revolution overthrew the constitutional liberal monarchy of King Louis-Philippe and brought about a short-lived Republican regime. It also abolished slavery which, incidentally, was still prevalent in La Réunion. Leconte, who wrote regularly for a left-wing daily journal called *La démocratie pacifique,* and was inspired by Charles Fourier's utopian socialism, petitioned the revolutionary government to ban slavery.

The first elected president, a nephew of Napoleon, soon staged a coup and crowned himself emperor, claiming the legacy of his uncle. Victor Hugo and many other Republican literary figures opposed this return to monarchy, although they had earlier seen in Louis-Napoléon a champion of the poor and a putative socialist. Hugo went into voluntary exile abroad and became a tenacious foe of the new sovereign, but Leconte de Lisle was by then thoroughly disappointed with the period of anarchical populism, rioting and vandalism which had followed the overthrow of the last king. Some of his writings in that period reflect his disdain for the mob let loose in the wake of the collapse of law and order, and his aversion to democratic demagoguery. He seemingly lost faith in the political utopias that he had embraced in his younger years and henceforth evinced his pessimism about human nature in ways very reminiscent of the conclusions of his illustrious contemporary, Gustave Flaubert, another embittered ‘progressive’.

The aborted second Republic and the advent of the second French Empire put to bed the ‘leftist’ dreams of many writers and artists, while it also spelt the end of the halcyon days of Romanticism. Instead, the financial and industrial dynamism of the new era, supported by political stability, widened prosperity, spurred material progress and fostered faith in science and technology, coupled with a desire to know the remote lands being colonised by European powers.

This curiosity for exotic civilisations generated, as a reaction against the socially alienating and environmentally polluting effects of the Industrial Revolution, a nostalgic longing for the untamed wilderness and bucolic beauty and wisdom (real and imagined) of oriental lands; it was also a fascination with the perceived indolence and sensuality of the East, and India was at the heart of that ‘Asian’ dream, which encompassed even North Africa, then the principal target of French colonisation.

There was hence a flowering of ‘orientalist’ painters, sculptors, architects, musicians and writers who took Théophile Gautier, the high priest of the ‘cult of beauty for its own sake’ as their herald. Like him and the exquisite Théodore de Banville, another virtuoso of prosody, they shunned the romantic notion that the poet should look primarily into his soul, sing his emotions, and claim to be a beacon of social change and political transformation.

It was in that changing cultural landscape that Leconte de Lisle, now an established writer reconciled with and honoured by the Imperial government, found himself drawn once more to the Indian impressions and visions of his childhood. His inspiration was shared by various contemporaries. In the 1850s, Victor Hugo was composing his majestic *Légende des siècles* (Legend of the Centuries), which was intended as a poetic world tour in time and space, a collection of small epics about many episodes of ancient mythologies and national histories on all continents. Prose writers were also exploring and reviving long-vanished cultures and evoking faraway lands and, in 1862, Flaubert produced *Salammbô*, the first great exotic novel of French literature.

In the same decade, Leconte de Lisle defined his own method and style characterised by formal perfection, rigorous metric, oral melody (the music of words), scientific accuracy of descriptions, and detachment from subjective feelings and views. To the tormented and often self-pitying broodings of Romantic poets, he contrasted the ideal of serene, philosophical contemplation as a culmination of a quest for beauty, of a search for the wisdom enshrined in the spectacle of pristine nature, and of a meditation on the vagaries of the human past. In the preface to one of his books of verse, he expressed the hope that poetry and science might come together in the new literary trail he wished to blaze. Yet, as an artistically conservative classicist, he warned against the fad of novelty for its own sake, of breaking rules just to be different, a foible to which our age falls prey all too often.

By 1866, this rich, ornate, often precious, style became known as Parnassian, primarily as a result of the catalytic role of Leconte's publisher, Alphonse Lemerre, who dubbed the group of poets he hosted at his office in the Passage Choiseul in Paris and country estate at Ville d'Avray as 'the new Parnassus'. Neither Lemerre nor Leconte came up with the name, which was suggested by another member of that informal club as an allusion to the vale in ancient Greece where Apollo and the muses were said to gather.

Among those who flocked to the Parnassian banner, metaphorically carried by Leconte, were several names that became famous in their day: Catulle Mendès, José Maria de Heredia, Sully Prudhomme, François Copée and Paul Verlaine. The tormented Charles Baudelaire was seen as a kindred soul, although he often lacked or shunned the technical virtuosity of his Parnassian peers, while the younger Arthur Rimbaud, who found his early inspiration in that school, soon broke away to create his own style. Foreign poets in places as far apart as Spain, Poland and Brazil cultivated the Parnassian aesthetic technique in their respective languages. In Britain, Alfred Tennyson, a contemporary, displayed similar inspiration and musicality, although he appears to have developed in parallel on his own.

Before citing from some of Leconte's famous and acclaimed poems, it is pertinent to mention that by faithfully obeying the rules of classical verse and metre, he was honouring the legacy that Indo–European—and, particularly, romance—languages have preserved from their distant Asian ancestors. Indeed, the most commonly used metric forms of classical and romantic poetry in French are the 12-syllable *alexandrin* (each syllable is called a 'pied' [*pada*]), which matches the Sanskrit *jagati*, often clustered in *quatrains* (four-line stanzas called strophes [ś*loka*]) and the *octosyllabe,* which corresponds to the Sanskrit *anustubh.* In all verse, masculine and feminine rhymes alternate. These forms illustrate the continuity across many centuries of a shared Eurasian tradition. In the Romantic Age, the Indonesian *pantum* (Sanskrit *pançam*) of five-verse stanzas, of which the last is repeated as a

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refrain throughout the poem, was adopted by Victor Hugo in his *Les Orientales*, and was also cultivated by Leconte.

Besides a volume of early but posthumously published poetry, Leconte de Lisle's three major verse collections contain several 'Indian' poems, which were originally written at various dates not always known, as he was famous for crafting his works over long periods with the patience and assiduousness of a jeweller, correcting and rewriting as long as he felt he had not achieved perfection. They are entitled *Poèmes antiques* (1852), *Poèmes barbares* (1862) and *Poèmes tragiques* (1884). This essay will only cite and comment on the pieces that are about India in various periods of her history, ranging from the age of the Vedas to the Mughal era. Leconte was a prolific author and wrote various dramas and musical plays as well as historical works, including a history of 'French' India.

One of the first impressions on reading some of those works, often constructed like short novels or epics, is that their author had absorbed the fundamental 'Indic' notions of Maya and Nirvana—the two sides of the coin of reality—respectively, 'ephemeral appearance' (rather than illusion, as Maya is usually, but inaccurately, translated), and ultimate non-being, or rather the Beyond Being and Non-Being (and not nothingness). That is the key to understanding and sharing the poet's state of mind, and the lesson to his reader. Leconte saw Indian sacred literature as a major chapter of classical antiquity, related to Greek and Latin epics and hymns within the common 'Indo-Aryan' civilisation. To him, Sanskrit lore was not what many scholars and artists still regarded as a strange production of 'barbaric Asia'. That intuitive familiarity with Hindu themes made him an exceptionally faithful interpreter of a venerable and abstruse spiritual and cultural legacy to his contemporaries who, not unexpectedly, found Leconte's poems enticingly melodious and admirably written, but often difficult to understand.

Whereas many Westerners, prejudiced by their own rationalist mindsets, characterised the Vedas as a primitive farrago of bizarre allegories, obscure ideas and absurd analogies, our poet grasped the cosmic insights, the conceptual grandeur and emotional depth of those invocations and prayers.

Probably his best-known poem is *Midi,* included in *Poèmes antiques*. Its final stanzas, capping an impressive description of a torrid summer day in an unnamed tropical country, capture the essence of the bard's ascetic realisation:

Mais si, désabusé des larmes et du rire,
Altéré de l'oubli de ce monde agité,
Tu veux, ne sachant plus pardonner ou maudire,
Goûter une suprême et morne volupté.

But if, purged of tears and laughter,
Thirsting for forgetfulness of this restless world,
And no longer knowing whether to forgive or curse,
You wish to taste a final and gloomy pleasure.

Viens! Le soleil te parle en paroles sublimes;
Dans sa flamme implacable absorbe-toi sans fin;
Et retourne à pas lents vers les,
Le cœur trempé sept fois dans le néant divin.

Come! The sun speaks to you in sublime words,
Let yourself be absorbed endlessly in its implacable flame;
And return with slow steps to the mean and petty cities,
Your heart steeped seven times in divine nothingness.

(Translation: Edmund Ford)

One recurring problem with verse, and particularly with Leconte's highly rhythmic and sonorous sentences, is that translations do not fully capture the magic of the original and often appear to be contrived attempts at interpretation, even when they do not alter the meaning of the phrases. For instance, in the above verses, 'cités infimes' probably alludes to the tiny size of cities when compared to the infinity of the non-human universe, not just to the moral limitations of most of their denizens which the translator has highlighted in his rendering.

I have tried to give my own English retelling of other poems for which I found no existing translation.

His Vedic poems are featured at the beginning of *Poèmes antiques*, as if to acknowledge the chronological precedence of Sanskrit scriptures over ancient Greek literature. Here is the opening stanza of his *Vedic Prayer for the Dead*, first in English, followed by the French original:

I greet thee Agni, Savitri, Lord of beings
Resplendent horseman on thy seven steeds
Shepherd of the world, come! Dazzle with thy fire
The twin dogs of Yama, devourers of the souls.

Je te salue, Agni, Savitri! Roi des êtres!
Cavalier flamboyant sur les sept étalons!
Berger du monde, accours! Éblouis de tes flammes
Les deux chiens d'Yama, dévorateurs des âmes.

The visual power of the allegory evokes the mythological universe of the Vedas, but in other poems the philosophy of Vedanta and of Vaishnava mysticism finds its voice as in *Brahma's Vision,* of which are reproduced here some of the final verses. The poet was clearly struck by the allegory of Brahma, the creator seeking to discover the meaning of his work and finding Vishnu Narayana lying on the great serpent Ananta Shesha amidst the boundless ‘milk ocean’ of the uncreated universe. He meditates on the image of a sleeping, dreaming supreme being who did not need to act because all things are forever in his mind since before time began. What a contrast with the Biblical God who keeps busy building the world, giving life to all beings, and constantly intervening in his creation and trying to keep man on the right path! Brahma is instead like all that he has brought into existence. He wonders about the sense and origin of it all and finds that the ultimate truth is No-Thing and cannot be expressed, understood, or even questioned or doubted, as it lies beyond all pairs of opposites and beyond reality itself, either negative or positive.

Here are a few passages lifted from that vast profusely allegorical poem which contrasts the anxious perplexity of Brahma with the cosmic joy and enigmatic blissfulness of the Supreme Reality. It reminds us today of the often staged conversation between a puzzled Quantic physicist and an enlightened mystic.

Rien n’est vrai que l’unique et morne Éternité
Ô Brahma! toute chose est le rêve d’un rêve.

La Mâyâ dans mon sein bouillonne en fusion,
Dans son prisme changeant je vois tout apparaître;
Car ma seule Inertie est la source de l’Être:
La matrice du monde est mon Illusion.

Brahma! tel est le rêve où ton esprit s’abîme.
N’interroge donc plus l’auguste Vérité:
Que serais-tu, sinon ma proper vanité
Et le doute secret de mon néant sublime ?...

J'ai mis mon Énergie au sein des Apparences,
Et durant mon repos j'ai songé l'Univers.

Nothing is, but still eternity
Oh Brahma, all things are a dream's dream.

Maya in my breast in boiling fusion
through its elusive prism makes it all manifest
for my stillness alone is the source of all being.
The matrix of the world is my illusion.

Brahma, such is the dream which swallows thy mind.
Don't question anymore the mighty truth
What could you be if not my vanity
And the secret doubt in my sublime nought…?

I hid my power within appearances
and during my rest I dreamt up the world.

In *Cunacépa*, another long poem on a well-known Vedic theme, Leconte de Lisle contrasts the thirst for life spurred by desire, which leads young Cunacepa and Shanta, his lover, to beg the sage Visvamitra to save him from the blood sacrifice to which his father has pledged him. After pointing out that life is made of suffering, the rishi relents, moved by pity, and gives him a boon to enable him to escape death. The story inspires a poignant reflection on the elusive and yet very precious character of reality and existence

She (dawn) swathes the soft bluish hills
and the peaceful vales where, swaying in the palms
the red throated birds of shimmering hues

in the warm nests whistle joyfully.

Surya, as a diaphanous crystal rock
In the azure abyss rises, waxes and soars.

Life is like a stream when a heavy thing falls.
A narrow circle forms and spreads out and out
Until it vanishes in its infinity….

And if you still wish to live you shall suffer.

Oh Sunbeam, gone astray in our gloom
Oh happiness! Short lived is thy flash!
(Some lines have been omitted for brevity)

Other works in that volume take off from episodes of the Ramayana (*Shiva's Bow, Valmiki's Death*) and yet another entitled *Bhagavat* refers to sections of the Bhagavata Purana. In *Valmiki's Death,* he pays homage to the poet's genius while vividly depicting his live burial in a termite anthill:

Mighty song of love, goodness and virtue
Forever uplifting in thy floating breath
Dasaratha's great son and the Mithilan maid
Sages, warriors, virgins and gods
And the unfoldment of hoary centuries.
Ramayana, the lofty soul that chanted thee
Rises behind thee in the heaven of bliss…

…Valmiki, the bard immortal
Whose harmonious spirit lights the gloom we indwell
And won't ever die on the lips of men.

In his second major 'recueil' of poems—the 'Barbarian' ones—Leconte has included, along with many others dedicated to the mythologies and epics of exotic civilisations (Egyptian, Persian, Scandinavian, Polynesian, African, Pre-Columbian, Celtic and Slavic), various pieces situated in the Mughal period of Indian history, which fascinated the European public with images of fabulous riches, exotic pageantry, extreme refinement and savage cruelty.

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Those verses reflect the orientalist wave that swept the French artistic scene about that time. Georges Bizet and Jules Massenet, two of the greatest operatic composers of the country, wrote *The Pearl Fishers* (1863), situated in Ceylon, and *The King of Lahore* (1877*),* respectively. In 1877, the operetta *Le Grand Mogol* by Edmond Audran was first performed, and the same year the ballet *La Bayadère* by Ludwig Minkus and Marius Petipa had its debut in Saint Petersburg's Imperial Theatre. In 1883, Leo Delibes' *Lakmé* was staged at the Opéra-Comique.

The genre of the adventure novel was not immune to fashion and its most famous exponent Jules Verne set a few chapters of his *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1872) in India, before situating all of his *La Maison a` vapeur* (The Steamhouse) in the subcontinent, in 1880. Painters such as Gustave Moreau and Odilon Redon, among others, and sculptors and illustrators also succumbed to the lure of Indianism, which had been further popularised by superb photographs taken around the subcontinent by the French traveller and artist Louis Rousselet, between 1863 and 1867.

Leconte's poems on that theme are staged in the Mughal heyday, around the figures of Jehangir and Shah Jahan. In *The Faqir's Advice*, he tells the story of Nawab Mohammed Ali Khan, who is warned in veiled terms by a visiting 'naked faqir' in the presence of his favourite begum that she would murder him. In response, she throws a purse full of gold at the scrawny mendicant, who accuses her of trying to purchase his silence. The ageing Nawab does not heed the premonition, as he is too bewitched by his young and beautiful wife to muster the resolve to separate himself from her, and in the following lines the poet brushes this tragic fresco:

L'homme dort. Le sommeil est doux et coûte peu ;
Les belles visions y sont les bienvenues,
Dit le sage, on y voit danser, vierges et nues,
Les Hûris aux yeux noirs qui devancent tout vœu !

Donc, Mohammed repose au fond du palais sombre.
La blafarde claret d'une lampe d'argent
Détache vaguement son front blême de l'ombre.

Le sang ne coule plus de sa gorge ; et, nageant,
Au milieu d'une pourpre horrible et déjà froide,
Le corps du vieux Nabab gît immobile et roide.

The man sleeps, sleep is sweet, of little cost
Bewitching visions are welcome guests
Says the wise; one sees nude virgins
Dewy-eyed houris who preempt all wishes.
Mohammed reposes in the palace dark
The wan shimmer of a silvery lamp

barely etches his brow against the gloom.
Blood from his throat flows no longer
And cloaked in gory drying purple
The old nawab's corpse lies stiff and still.

The great feminine figures of Nur Mahal (later Nur Jahan) and Jehanara captivate him as he sets them in rhetorical opposition. The former is Jahangir's ruthless paramour, who has her old husband stabbed to death in order to marry the besotted crown prince. The poet sarcastically praises her 'contempt of betrayal', which leads her to murder in order not to be unfaithful. In contrast, Jehanara is Shah Jahan's saintly daughter, who sacrifices her freedom and happiness to tend to her ailing imprisoned father, thus attracting the grudging respect of her brother, the harsh and austere Emperor Aurangzeb.

Leconte's admiration for untamed nature and his liturgical communion with the forces of wilderness are evident in some of his most enchanting verse compositions. He sees the earth and its landscapes as indifferent to man's fate and suffering, but also as bearers of the ultimate wisdom, which can save the soul from its vain reliance on ephemeral and misleading impressions gathered by the senses. In *La forêt vierge*, he broods prophetically about the destruction of the rain forests after painting a majestic landscape of one such impenetrable habitat, but concludes that it will grow back out of our 'blood and ashes' after human civilisation and perhaps species, too, vanish.

But you may sleep, avenged and without regret,
In the deepest night down to which everything must return:

Tears and blood will sprinkle your ashes,
And you will spring back out of ours, O forest!

In *La Ravine Saint Gilles*, which celebrates the mysterious and lush darkness of a deep gorge in La Réunion, he uses the image of a single beam of light piercing dense wet undergrowth to contrast the gloomy material world with sparse rays of celestial illumination, which give us hope and occasional joy.

Hors ce point lumineux qui sur l'onde palpite
La ravine s'endort dans l'immobile nuit
Et quand un roc mine d'en haut s'y précipite
Il n'éveille pas même un écho de son bruit.

Other than this dot of light glimmering on the stream
the ravine goes to sleep in the motionless night
and when a boulder breaks and falls from the cliff
Not even an echo amplifies the thud.

In *Les Jungles*, he masterfully depicts a weary, hungry tiger longing for food in a silent parched jungle and he gradually turns the fierce lord of the wild into a forlorn, emaciated cat by the magic of his words.

In his third major collection, *Tragic Poems,* Leconte returns to his background leitmotiv, *Maya,* which he sings in lines of dramatic and mournful beauty.

Maya! Maya! torrent des mobiles chimères,
Tu fais jaillir du cœur de l'homme universel
Les brèves voluptés et les haines amères,
Le monde obscur des sens et la splendeur du ciel;
Mais qu'est-ce que le cœur des hommes éphémères,
Ô Maya ! sinon toi, le mirage immortel?
Les siècles écoulés, les minutes prochaines,
S'abîment dans ton ombre, en un même moment,

Avec nos cris, nos pleurs et le sang de nos veines:
Éclair, rêve sinistre, éternité qui ment,
La Vie antique est faite inépuisablement
Du tourbillon sans fin des apparence svaines.

Maya Maya, flood of moving chimeras
You bring forth from the human heart everywhere
short-lived delights and bitter hates,
the shadowy world of men and the glories of heaven.
But what is the heart of ephemeral man
Oh Maya, if not thee, immortal fantasy?
The centuries passed, the minute yet to come
sink into thy shade all at once
with our cries, tears, the blood of our veins.
Lightning, sinister dream, lying eternity
age-old life is ever woven out of the endless whirlwind of vain appearances.

Leconte de Lisle knew not only personal trials and economic hardship to support his family, but also honours and rewards in that eventful and troubled period of European history. The Republic returned in 1871 after the French defeat at the hands of the new German Empire forged by Bismarck. Under the new regime, reconciled with democracy, our poet took a revived interest in the socialist ideas that had attracted him in his youth and wrote some long political essays (*A People's History of the French Revolution*; *A People's History of Christianity*) which won him official favour. With the support of Victor Hugo, who had been triumphantly welcomed back into France, Leconte was appointed Deputy–Librarian of the Senate, thus winning financial security and a permanent position. Hostile since his youth to the Catholic Church, he had rejected Christian theology and found an

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answer to his spiritual quest in the metaphysics of Hinduism and Buddhism.

He was selected to deliver a eulogy on behalf of all French poets at Victor Hugo's national funeral at the Pantheon, in 1886, and was subsequently elected to the great man's seat in the French Academy. His literary achievements were praised internationally and he was acknowledged as one of the living treasures of French culture as well as an erudite sage steeped in the wisdom of the ancient East.

Leconte de Lisle lost some of his acclaim in the 20th century with the change in literary taste. His expressionist, almost 'pre-Raphaelite' love for detail and ornamentation was sometimes compared with the lavish brushwork, photographic accuracy and colourful themes of the 'pompier' painters much in favour in the second French Empire and in the first decades of the Third Republic. However, his unsurpassed ability to evoke geographically and historically remote scenes and periods deserves credit, and his rare understanding of the essence of oriental philosophies is admirable even if, for understandable reasons, it was not always appreciated in the self-referential West, where attitudes about Eastern thought and religion were often patronising and derogatory. Thus, in French schoolbooks, his Indian poems are barely mentioned because preference is given to his less 'ethnic' verses that do not explicitly refer to Hindu spiritual concepts.

Inspired by the profusely metaphoric, coruscant and even synesthetic imagery of classical Sanskrit lyricism, Leconte's oriental poems cannot but seem 'baroque' and mannerist to those who extol understatement, but he shares the sense of grandeur and the epic vision of Victor Hugo, his friend and in some ways his teacher too.

Settled in the village of Voisins, around Louveciennes near Paris, he was visited by many writers and artists, young and old, who saw him as their master. The 21-year-old Toru Dutt, then living in Paris, wrote a monograph on Leconte's Indian-inspired works in the 1870s. He remained involved almost to his last days in artistic matters and, in 1887, led a collective of men of letters who demanded that the surging Eiffel Tower be dismantled after the 1889 world fair, as they regarded it as a blot on the cityscape. Such a nuts-and-bolts symbol of the emerging industrial society could not find appreciation in the eyes of a man both steeped in the past and distrustful of the technological civilisation that had taken over the Western world during his lifetime, which ended in 1894.

About the Author

Come Carpentier de Gourdon is a French writer, analyst and scholar born in the Canary Islands, Spain, who has lived, travelled, lectured and taught in many countries. He has lived in India since 2003. He first came to the country as a child with his father in the seventies in the 'Expedition Dharma' and stayed for over seven years. He has described his journeys and experiences in India in one of his books, *Memories of a Hundred and One Moons*. He is the Convener of the International Editorial Board of *World Affairs*, the Journal of International Issues, and contributor to a number of other publications in India and abroad. He has written several articles on topics related to Indian history, culture, philosophy and geopolitics. He is Consultant to the India Foundation and an Associate of the IISES, Vienna, Austria.