Jules Laforgue Biography

Jules Laforgue

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Biography

The work of the French poet Jules Laforgue (1860-1887) is distinguished by its qualities of skepticism and irony and its development of the technique of free verse.

Jules Laforgue was born on August 16, 1860, at Montevideo, Uruguay, one of five children of an emigrant French family. Returning to France in 1866, he went to school at Tarbes in southwest France until the family moved to Paris in 1876. Unsuccessful in the *baccalauréat* (university entrance) examination in 1878, he began to write but led a solitary life with few friends and no regular employment. In 1881 he was appointed French reader to the empress Augusta of Germany and spent almost 5 years moving round imperial residences in Germany with the court--a well-paid life with plenty of leisure, but rigid, boring, and isolated from the literary world of Paris.

Laforgue's natural pessimism, which was reinforced by his solitary life and by his study of the German philosophers Arthur Schopenhauer and Eduard von Hartmann, underlies all his poetry. It is especially obvious in a kind of cosmic despair, linked to a rather facile irony, in his first collection of verse, *Le Sanglot de la terre,* abandoned in 1882 and published posthumously. He then turned to the *Complaintes de la vie* (1885), a series of poems using the rhythms, verse pattern, and colloquial language of the *complaintes,* the popular songs of Paris, coining striking images and even new words against a persistent background of irony. They were followed at the beginning of 1886 by another book of poems, *L'Imitation de Notre-Dame la Lune,* in which linguistic innovations are less prominent and the symbol of the *pierrot,* or clown, sad behind his comic mask, represents the poet's own melancholy.

In September 1886 Laforgue resigned his post and married an English woman, Leah Lee, on December 31, returning to Paris in the hope of continuing his literary career there. But he had contracted tuberculosis, and after months of illness and poverty he died on Aug. 20, 1887. In 1890 his last poems, *Derniers vers,* probably written in 1886, came out; in these Laforgue reaches full maturity. The somewhat dilettante and decadent young dandy has now given way to a truly creative poet, using free verse and great variation of rhythm and imagery to express a haunting melancholy, as if he knows of his imminent death.