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## Two poems by Léon-Paul Fargue

by Louis Simpson

*Translated by and with an introduction from Louis Simpson.*

Léon-Paul Fargue (1876–1947) was born in Paris near Les Halles, the illegitimate son of a chemical engineer and a dressmaker. In school, he had some extraordinary teachers: Stéphane Mallarmé at Condorcet and, in the Ecole Normale Henri iv, the philosopher Henri Bergson. (Bergson advised him to drop out of school.) Alfred Jarry, the future author of *Ubu Roi*, was a schoolmate.

In 1894 Fargue collaborated with Jarry in publishing *l'Art littéraire*. Henri Régnier brought him to one of Mallarmé's Tuesday gatherings, and Fargue was accepted by this inmost circle of the avant-garde. He began publishing at an early age with *Tançrède* (1895), a small collection of narratives in prose

followed by poems. The next year, the *Mercure de France* published most of the poems he would gather in 1914 under the title *Pour la musique*. In spite of this early start, Fargue was reluctant to publish his poems—it was said that one practically had to tear them out of his hands. Modesty, or fear, or revulsion . . . some poets have a feeling of privacy about their work. There is a secret, not about themselves but about the poem, a mystery surrounding its birth. It is no great pleasure to see it dragged into the light and exposed to praise or blame.

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After the war, Fargue was honored in an issue of *Feuilles libres*. Among the contributors who said that Léon-Paul Fargue was a great poet were Claudel, Picasso, Ravel, and Rilke. These testimonials may have been received with mixed feelings, for his poetry had few readers. He had to be content with friends, such as the poet and translator Valéry Larbaud, who were able to appreciate originality, those readers whom Stendhal called “the happy few.”

Nevertheless, Fargue was an important figure in the literary life of Paris. He organized lectures and readings at Adrienne Monnier's bookshop in la rue Odéon. The literary historian Robert Sabatier describes Fargue: "A dazzling conversationalist, maker of puns and epigrams, always amusing, sometimes disenchanted, he would be all his life a joyful figure." Anecdotes went around Paris about the comical things Léon-Paul said or did, but his writing reveals a different side, tender and often sad. Max Jacob said, "Fargue taught us to sublimate the life of everyday and make the highest poetry out of it." Additional poetry was collected in *Poèmes* (1905) and *Espaces* (1929).

Sabatier observes that Fargue inherited the Symbolists' art of half-tints and "fluidity." He doesn't aim to be modern in the usual sense of the word—he doesn't write like Paul Morand about a taste for speed and cosmopolitanism. Fargue's travels take place in imagination, "a universe of memory, visions, contiguous realities intended to retain indefinable feelings, regrets, foggy illusions, to fix the unsayable, wonderings before the beauty that suddenly appears at a turn in the road."

--Louis Simpson

### *Kiosks*

In vain the sea makes the voyage  
From the far horizon to kiss your feet so sage.  
    You draw them back  
                    Always in time.

You are silent, I say nothing.  
Perhaps we no longer think of it.  
But the flashlights of the fireflies  
Are coming closer. They wink  
Just to illuminate  
The tear in your calm eyes  
That I one day was obliged to drink.  
The sea has enough salt in it.

A blond and blue medusa  
That wants to learn by being sad  
Crosses the moving floors of the sea,  
Neat and clear as an elevator,  
And removes its lamp on the surface  
To see you drawing in the sand  
With your umbrella, crying,

Three cases of triangles being equal.

### *Romance*

We certainly loved you,  
Marie. You knew,  
Didn't you? Do you remember?

One evening  
We set off at night,  
Arthème and I, going quietly to see you  
Beneath the apse of the summer sky, as at church.

There was a light and you were reading.

We kept the drawings  
With three crayons, and the birds in blue ink  
That you made.

Ah, Marie, you sang so well!  
It was during the time  
When you were happy, at the Sisters' school,  
When the Procession of pale flowers  
Sang in the desert of Sunday.  
Trembling  
I was near you, who were all in white.

The organ spoke of shadows . . .  
On the altar the blue day hung.  
Through wounds in stained glass, the call of the breeze  
Fused with a loud hum of onyx, drove the fire  
Of the candles toward you, tipsy  
With light and sacred songs.

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