

## LES GONCOURT.



was great work more destitute of charm for the vulgar than that of MM. Edmond and Jules de Goncourt. To the few, to artists in fact, their studies, aphorisms, epithets, are exquisite beyond praise; but by no effort can they prevail upon the applauding public to perform its proper functions. For the multitude they are far too mature. Working upon a formula still young, broad work was necessary in order to be generally appreciated. If Zola found it so great a task to force his way, shouting through the main thoroughfares in the language of the trottoir; smiting with heavy fists the heads insensible to any other influence, where shall MM. de Goncourt be found? With every quality so fresh, so rare, words so daintily chosen and attuned, small wonder they make mediocrity nervous and irascible. It takes the mass of people whole decades to get rid of habitudes once thoroughly acquired; and we must not forget that while readers of the *XIXth Century*, frequenters of artistic salons, and those who go to supper with leading men of science, are in the year 1889, people on the outer edges of culture circles are beginning to recommend George Eliot to their young friends, talking about Millet in subdued voices, and quoting the Duke of Argyll on the theory of evolution.

But though their work is appreciated, however warmly, by comparatively few only, its indirect influence can already be widely traced. It has shown the present

generation of realists most unmistakably that there is no salvation in a formula. Work great in itself is helped by being erected upon a sound scientific basis; it has better chances of being understood if it rests upon a foundation consistent with the spirit of its time; but poor, it gains nothing from the advantage in question.

The artist is always an abnormal creature, a being with an over-developed brain, or diseased nerves, as some express it. As specially distinguished from the literary grocer, he cannot choose but give his own personality in his work. His greatness is in the insight that discovers new motives, and in the earnestness with which he carries them out. It is quite the rule that the really great only gain their place after fierce struggling; for apart from the actual work, they have to create a taste for it, a task generally tedious in proportion to its worth.

If the Goncourts not only announce, but also give effect to, their intention to war with conventionality, no exception will be made in their case, that those whose united tastes and opinions makes conventionality should be defeated at the challenge only—on the contrary.

Documentary fiction is now accepted. The real thing, and variously pretentious imitations of it, are even fashionable. The realist, as we sometimes call him, is sent out to tell us what he sees and hears and feels, but the commission includes authority to select at his discretion. Now the peculiar temperament of the Goncourt personality, its passion for the choice, the rare, makes it produce results too strange. Though they believed strongly in the far superior value of the actually seen and felt, their particular predilections sometimes came in to defeat the immediate purpose, when they reproduced what they, and but a very few similar temperaments, feel and see. I do not mean to say that they exaggerate. Where there is unusual insistence over trivialities, it is merely nature seen by two exceptional organisms of peculiarly rare culture. What they give us is, as a rule, intelligible to any sentient being, which is enough; for writings all of nerve are not for readers made all of gristle.

When we know their aims, how could we remain apathetic towards their work? Understood that the description of some actual scene is preferable to that of one purely imaginary or faintly remembered; agreed that a study of some individual dustman has a higher artistic value than a character composed of the second-hand sentiments of a dozen Christian gentlemen, they carry the superior aim in each case a little farther than it has been carried before. Developing in a direction different from that Zola and Balzac have taken, they do not care so much to include a great variety of types as to exhaustively study a few. So closely is the specimen examined, that the description rendered seems fanciful to the superficial. And for figures so patiently observed, so exquisitely drawn, their artistic minds demand equally perfect environments.

How they manage their still life! The whole art with which they arranged backgrounds and accessories was largely their own invention.

True, the revolt against conventional artistic surroundings was already begun elsewhere. Some of the best English art, for instance (the Preraphaelite work affords a notable example), had been strongly characterised by its freedom from the trammels of tradition. At the present moment, alas! the movement seems to have died down in our midst, and when it returns it will be through France. In moments of supreme emotion, a trivial or irrelevant fact, a strange shape, an unexpected sound, have a value the artist cannot afford to neglect. If the Goncourts were not the first to discover this principle, at all events no one hitherto has so thoroughly understood and consciously applied it as they.

By the judicious use of apparently accidental surroundings, and, secondarily, of epithets quite fit, touching the very essence of the thing described, they sought to retain about an incident precisely those details the absence of which usually distinguishes a description from the recollection of an event. And with what success! Certain of their scenes seem to throb with the very emotion proper to them; that, for instance, where Germinie sits immobile in her room watching the hands of the dispassionate cou-cou, so deliberate in its utterance to-night. Quite a detail in *Chérie*; the mother is tending the last hours of her soldier husband in some fetid shed, where, from beneath blankets thrown over corpses, rats dart with bloody whiskers. All war in one swift phrase.

The Goncourts saw clearly how poverty-stricken was the contemporary novel; and their dream was, no doubt, that the obvious superiority of *their* work would, as soon as it appeared, hurry them to a high seat of honour. Their reception by the public was at first almost favourable; early historical works are praised in a guarded way. Their first novel, published by an ill-chance on the morning of the Coup d'Etat, was entirely overlooked. Then frank hostility met every succeeding volume, until "*Manette Salomon*," when the sudden change of attitude on the part of the critics might very well have persuaded them that patient persistence had overcome their opponents, and that at last they had arrived. But if they suffered the illusion, how brief it was! At the theatre their experience was very similar. To get "*Henriette Maréchal*" requested for the Française looked like unmixed appreciation of their talents; but, the great day of its production arrived, the gallery is filled with shrieking students, assembled by circular to hoot the play before the rising of the curtain; it being alleged that it is only put on through Imperial patronage. The brilliancy, the originality of the first act (it is not worth while adding, the grace of the arrangement, the swiftness of the dialogue) fail to shame the supporters of the cruel conspiracy, who patiently yell until the piece is withdrawn. Immediately afterwards the printed play sells phenomenally.

One sees very clearly the reason of their being hissed one day and bought the next, congratulated in the salons, and spit at in the journals.

The fact is, the more enlightened of the critics could not with any conscience at once defer to the popular opinion; and perhaps the herd at first thought that the originality of the Goncourts was of that specious kind with which the lover of the commonplace likes to be tickled occasionally. But soon, when their seriousness is doubted by no one, when the vulgar find that these authors absolutely refuse to flatter and soothe, the vote of the majority takes effect. No; this sort of thing cannot be tolerated a moment! Life is stern enough as it is; we want the sugary, the ideal, in our scanty leisure. Why these descriptions, so accurate, so irresistible? Who wants to be wrung with another's agony? Unpleasant! Nauseating!

And what shall we, we English, say? we the chosen? we who understand so well that a book, to be good, must recount a series of good actions? we who like the shadow thrown across the hero's path only for the pleasure of seeing it swept away again? who feel impatient if the wedding is delayed? Germinie Lacerteux stayed out late at night? stole from her mistress? Manette Salomon was not married to Coriolis? Put it away! put it away! Dear me! if Freddy should get hold of it! Shocking blemishes, happily so soon discovered. Let us beware of the glittering poison.

To more intelligent people in England they give the same impression as, now, to the corresponding class in France; except perhaps that the English aversion to the exotic is stronger than the French. The concentration, the devotion to the subject, that enables the Goncourts to impart to the reader's nerves the smart of the pain they describe, is condemned, because it is "unpleasant," with more persistence here than there. For the French can certainly claim a higher average artistic intelligence than we, in that at least some appreciable proportion of them understand the phrase "art for art's sake."

Beyond their mere literary achievements, we owe them much. It was they who discovered the youthfulness in the art of the last century; a truth yet to reach us.

Then theirs was the appreciative discovery of the art of Japan, which has so improved the best modern art; has helped us out of our artificial horizons, the conceited tameness of our landscape; has shown us the surprise, the instantaneousness, of action; taught us the great value of blank space, and what a large motive the surface itself can be in the decoration of material.

The example is an unique one, of literary men influencing the manner of seeing, not thinking, of contemporary painters. As opposed to it, see how the German literature has dragged the whole German school into their ponderous pictorial tracts and sermons. It is true they had an advantage in the possession of no ordinary graphic skill; but compared with their contemporaries, the impartiality of their eyes is simply marvellous. The artistic penetration displayed in "Manette Salomon" astonishes us in this year of grace 1889; and it must be remembered

that when it was written the mass of French art seemed devoted to a pleasant "officialism," exhausted with the previous efforts of romanticism, while the tenets of the school of Barbizon had drifted into a mannerism for Goupil.

Rising from realism merely, they seem at some moment to have definitely chosen for their task the study of woman. If we know them at all intimately, we can imagine how the rarity of the undertaking (as they undertook it), and the greater complexity of the feminine nature, would have allured those who said, "Where woman is a masterpiece she is the greatest objet d'art. To the time of Jules' death they had drawn *Sœur Philomèle*, *Renée Mauperin*, *Germinie*, *Manette*, *Madame Gervaisais*. Years afterwards, when Edmond again writes, it seems as if he is only impelled by a desire to make a plunge while any force remains in him, to complete a series of portraits planned long since; for he gives us *La Faustin*, *La fille Elisa*, *Chérie*.

Besides their admirable studies of historic women, which cannot here be noticed, what a gallery their fiction affords! The devoted hospital nurse; the robust *Renée*; *Germinie*, a triumph of psychological analysis; the terrible Jewess; *Madame Gervaisais*, whose femininity is for a time obscured in learned pursuits, but afterwards asserts itself in Rome, the seat of learning and art, but also of the Christian religion; the superb list finishing with the most audaciously rare (I do not mean the best) of all in its ambitiousness, the short life of the young mondaine, granddaughter of Napoleon III.'s War Minister, *Chérie*.

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