

A LITERARY CAUSERIE

ON EDMOND DE GONCOURT



MY first visit to Edmond de Goncourt was in May, 1892. I remember my immense curiosity about that "House Beautiful," at Auteuil, of which I had heard so much, and my excitement as I rang the bell, and was shown at once into the garden, where Goncourt was just saying good-bye to some friends. He was carelessly dressed, without a collar, and with the usual loosely-knotted large white scarf rolled round his neck. He was wearing a straw hat, and it was only afterwards that I could see the fine sweep of the white hair, falling across the forehead. I thought him the most distinguished-looking man of letters I had ever seen; for he had at once the distinction of race, of fine breeding, and of that delicate artistic genius which, with him, was so intimately a part of things beautiful and distinguished. He had the eyes of an old eagle; a general air of dignified collectedness; a rare, and a rarely charming, smile, which came out, like a ray of sunshine, in the instinctive pleasure of having said a witty or graceful thing to which one's response had been immediate. When he took me indoors, into that house which was a museum, I noticed the delicacy of his hands, and the tenderness with which he handled his treasures, touching them as if he loved them, with little, unconscious murmurs: "Quel goût; quel goût!" These rose-coloured rooms, with their embroidered ceilings, were filled with cabinets of beautiful things, Japanese carvings, and prints (the miraculous "Plonguses"!), always in perfect condition ("Je cherche le beau"); albums had been made for him in Japan, and in these he inserted prints, mounting others upon silver and gold paper, which formed a sort of frame. He showed me his eighteenth century designs, among which I remember his pointing out one (a Chardin, I think) as the first he had ever bought; he had been sixteen at the time, and he bought it for twelve francs.

When we came to the study, the room in which he worked, he showed me all his own first editions, carefully bound, and first editions of Flaubert,

Baudelaire, Gautier, with those, less interesting to me, of the men of later generations. He spoke of himself and his brother with a serene pride, which seemed to me perfectly dignified and appropriate; and I remember his speaking (with a parenthetic disdain of the "brouillard scandinave," in which it seemed to him that France was trying to envelop herself; at the best it would be but "un mauvais brouillard") of the endeavour which he and his brother had made to represent the only thing worth representing, "la vie vécue, la vraie vérité." As in painting, he said, all depends on the way of seeing, "l'optique": out of twenty-four men who will describe what they have all seen, it is only the twenty-fourth who will find the right way of expressing it. "There is a true thing I have said in my journal," he went on. "The thing is, to find a lorgnette" (and he put up his hands to his eyes, adjusting them carefully), "through which to see things. My brother and I invented a lorgnette, and the young men have taken it from us."

How true that is, and how significantly it states just what is most essential in the work of the Goncourts! It is a new way of seeing, literally a new way of seeing, which they have invented; and it is in the invention of this that they have invented that "new language" of which purists have so long, so vainly, and so thanklessly, complained. You remember that saying of Masson, the mask of Gautier, in "Charles Demailly": "I am a man for whom the visible world exists." Well, that is true, also, of the Goncourts; but in a different way. As I once wrote, and I cannot improve upon what I said then: "The Goncourts' vision of reality might almost be called an exaggerated sense of the truth of things; such a sense as diseased nerves inflict upon one, sharpening the acuteness of every sensation; or somewhat such a sense as one derives from haschisch, which simply intensifies, yet in a veiled and fragrant way, the charm or the disagreeableness of outward things, the notion of time, the notion of space. Compare the descriptions, which form so large a part of their work, with those of Théophile Gautier, who may reasonably be said to have introduced the practice of eloquent writing about places, and also the exact description of them. Gautier describes miraculously, but it is, after all, the ordinary observation carried to perfection, or, rather, the ordinary pictorial observation. The Goncourts only tell you the things that Gautier leaves out; they find new, fantastic, points of view, discover secrets in things, curiosities of beauty, often acute, distressing, in the aspects of quite ordinary places. They see things as an artist, an ultra-subtle artist of the impressionist kind, might see them; seeing them, indeed, always very consciously, with a deliberate attempt upon them, in just that partial, selecting, creative way in

which an artist looks at things for the purpose of painting a picture. In order to arrive at their effects, they shrink from no sacrifice, from no excess; slang, neologism, archaism, forced construction, barbarous epithet, nothing comes amiss to them, so long as it tends to render a sensation. Their unique care is that the phrase should live, should palpitate, should be alert, exactly expressive, super-subtle in expression; and they prefer indeed a certain perversity in their relations with language, which they would have not merely a passionate and sensuous thing, but complex with all the curiosities of a delicately depraved instinct."

"The delicacies of fine literature," that phrase of Pater always comes into my mind when I think of the Goncourts; and indeed Pater seems to me the only English writer who has ever handled language at all in their manner or spirit. I frequently heard Pater refer to certain of their books, to "*Madame Gervaisais*," to "*L'Art du XVIII^e Siècle*," to "*Chérie*"; with a passing objection to what he called the "immodesty" of this last book, and a strong emphasis in the assertion that "that was how it seemed to him a book should be written." I repeated this once to Goncourt, trying to give him some idea of what Pater's work was like; and he lamented that his ignorance of English prevented him from what he instinctively realized would be so intimate an enjoyment. Pater was of course far more scrupulous, more limited, in his choice of epithet, less feverish in his variations of cadence; and naturally so, for he dealt with another subject-matter and was careful of another kind of truth. But with both there was that passionately intent pre-occupation with "the delicacies of fine literature"; both achieved a style of the most personal sincerity: "*tout grand écrivain de tout les temps*," said Goncourt, "*ne se reconnaît absolument qu'à cela, c'est qu'il a une langue personnelle, une langue dont chaque page, chaque ligne, est signée, pour le lecteur lettré, comme si son nom était au bas de cette page, de cette ligne*": and this style, in both, was accused, by the "literary" criticism of its generation, of being insincere, artificial, and therefore reprehensible.

I have no intention, now, of discussing the place of the Goncourts in literature, or of analyzing the various characteristics of their work. That I shall hope to do some other time, in a more elaborate study than I can write just at present. Let me state only my own conviction, that their work is more worthy of the attention of those who care, not merely for the "delicacies," but for all the subtler qualities, of fine literature, than that of any contemporary writer of French prose.

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