

SOME VIEWS ON ACTING.¹

BY TOMMASO SALVINI.



O my quiet country villa among the woods of Vallombrosa some echoes reached of the friendly controversy which seems to have been waged in American and English magazines and newspapers regarding one of the underlying principles of the art to which I have devoted my life; a controversy in which were ranged on opposite sides two such eminent actors as Mr. Henry Irving and M. Constant Coquelin. These echoes have remained ringing in my ears until, despite the fact that I think an actor is as a rule better employed in studying the words of others than in committing phrases of his own to paper, I have ventured to shape, as briefly and simply as possible, my own views on the point in dispute. This point, if I have rightly understood it, resolves itself mainly into the simple question, Should an actor feel positively and be moved by the emotions he portrays, or should he be entirely negative and keep his own emotion at arm's length, as it were, and merely make his audience believe that he is moved?

Let me, in the first place, frankly state my own opinion, warning my readers first of all that it is merely an opinion (for questions of art can never be solved definitely, like a mathematical problem), and then I can at greater length strive to show why I hold such views. I believe, then, that every great actor ought to be, and is, moved by the emotion he portrays; that not only must he feel this emotion once or twice, or when he is studying the part, but that he must feel it in a greater or less degree — and to just that degree will he move the hearts of his audiences — whenever he plays the part, be it once or a thousand times, and that he must cultivate this susceptibility to emotion as carefully as he cultivates the development of his vocal organs, or the habit of moving and walking easily and gracefully. This is what I believe and always have believed, and I think it must be acknowledged that my position as to the point at issue is no doubtful one.

M. Coquelin, on the other hand, maintains, if I rightly interpret his extremely well and forcibly put expression of opinion, that an actor

should remain perfectly calm and collected however stormy may be the passion he is portraying; that he should merely make believe, as it were, to feel the emotion he strives to make the audience believe he really feels, and that he should act entirely with his brain and not with his heart, to typify by physiological organs two widely differentiated methods of artistic work. That M. Coquelin really and truly believes this somewhat paradoxical theory and endeavors to put his theory into practice, I do not for one moment doubt. Accomplished and versatile artist as he is, I have been struck more than once, as I have enjoyed the pleasure of his performances, with the thought that something amid all the brilliancy of execution was lacking; and this want, so apparent, was due, I apprehend, to the fact that one of the most skillful artists in the world was deliberately trying to belittle himself and the art of which it was in his power to raise the interpretation to such lofty heights. The actor who does not feel the emotion he portrays is but a skillful mechanic, setting in motion certain wheels and springs which may give to his lay figure such an appearance of life that the observer is tempted to exclaim: "How marvelous! Were it only alive 't would make me laugh or weep." He who feels, on the contrary, and can communicate this feeling to the audience, hears the cry: "That *is* life! That *is* reality! See — I laugh! I weep!" It is, in a word, the power of feeling that marks the artist; all else is but the mechanical side which is common to all the arts. There are many born actors who have never faced an audience, as there are many true poets who have never written a verse, and painters who have never taken a palette in hand. To some only is given the power of expression as well as of feeling, and they become artists in the sight of the world as the others are in the sight of our semi-divine mistress, the Art universal.

It is at this point that I approach more closely to M. Coquelin. "The actor," he says in effect, "must carry self-restraint so far that where the creature he simulates would burn, he must be cold as ice. Like callous scientist, he must dissect each quivering nerve and lay bare each throbbing artery, all the time keeping himself impassive as one of the gods of old Greece, lest a rush of hot heart's blood

¹ Translated by Alexander Salvini and Horace Townsend.

come and spoil his work." I also say that the actor must have the gift of impassivity, but to a certain point only. He must feel, but he must guide and check his feeling as a skillful rider curbs and guides a fiery horse, for he has a double part to play: merely to feel himself is not enough; he has to make others feel, and this he cannot do without the exercise of restraint. Let me make use of an instance afforded me by M. Coquelin himself. Once, he says, he was tired before he came on the stage, and falling sound asleep when feigning sleep, he snored real snores instead of feigned ones. The result was, he tells us, that he never snored so badly. Naturally so, since he had lost control of the stead of feeling, by the fact of his sleeping, and so it ran away and carried him he knew not where; but had M. Coquelin at some time in his experience shed real tears, while at the same time in full possession of his waking faculties, and had he been able to guide those tears into the channel that his artistic sense told him to be the right one, then we should not have heard that the audience found those real tears less effective than tears wholly feigned and the product of intellect rather than of feeling.

Raphael, when he painted his Madonnas, shed real tears, not imitative ones, and the result we know. Michael Angelo in earnest threatened his statue because it did not breathe; but I do not think M. Gérôme or M. Bouguereau, the talented countrymen of M. Coquelin, admirable as their work is, feel any acute emotion as they produce their pictures so brimful of astonishing technique, and, may I be permitted to hint, so wanting in soul and feeling.

It is difficult for me to write on a subject such as this without incurring, or running the risk of incurring, the reproach of being egotistical. I cannot, however, refrain from referring to my own experience and my own methods in some degree, especially as by so doing I can, I doubt not, make more clear the theory I hold than by any other means; for I shall be able, as it were, to show not only how I put my theory into practice, but what the visible results have been. That I am chiefly guided by feeling is probably the reason that I have never been able to play with satisfaction, either to my audience or to myself, any part with which I have not full sympathy, and of late years I have not even attempted any such part. This attitude of mine towards his creations should, I conceive, be assumed in a greater or less degree by every actor who has a part to play, and not be confined simply to those who, like myself, have identified themselves more closely with what, for want of a better term, I may call "heroic" rôles. One may sympathize even with a villain and yet

remain an honest man, so that in counseling a student first of all to put himself in sympathy with his character I am by no means urging on him the acquirement of even the remotest obliquity of moral vision. After having satisfied myself that the character I was about to attempt was one with whom I could put myself in full sympathy, I have next set myself laboriously to study its inner nature, concerning myself not one particle with the outward characteristics or the points wherein the supposititious being might differ in his figure, bearing, or speech from the rest of his fellow-men. These are trifles, the simulation of which is, or ought to be, within the scope of any actor who has learned his trade and is skilled in the mechanics of his art. What is of supreme importance, though, is the mental and spiritual differentiation of the character from those around him. As to how I actually attain this object I can speak in no way that could be clearly understood by my readers, for I do not clearly understand the process myself. It is perhaps at this point that what we are wont to call inspiration comes to our assistance, and helps to elevate the artist above the artisan. Now, having got in touch with inner workings of my character's nature, by this process of spiritual dissection, which I find it so difficult to classify, I proceed by slow degrees to an understanding of how he would speak and act in the various situations in which he has been placed by the dramatist, and here I am on surer ground, so far as giving some comprehension of the means I adopt towards the end is concerned. I simply try *to be* the character I am playing; to think with his brain, to feel with his feelings, to cry with him and to laugh with him, to let my breast be anguished by his emotions, to love with his love and to hate with his hate. Then having thus hewn my creation out of the block of marble provided me by the dramatist, I clothe him with his proper clothes and endue him with his proper voice, his tricks of gesture, his walk — in short, his outward and bodily appearance, as distinct from, though doubtless depending upon, his inward and spiritual fashioning. When this is completed to my satisfaction, when I have my man shaped, both in his inner and outer being, as I would have him, I am ready to place him before my public, and they help me to his further completion. M. Coquelin, doubtless, if he adheres with fidelity to his admirably expressed theories, could play a part as successfully and artistically in an empty room as in a crowded theater. I must confess that I could not. I cannot live my mimic life save in the glare of the footlights; for it is only the sympathy and feeling of my audience which react upon me and allow me, on my part, to

cause my audience to sympathize and feel with me. But what I particularly wish to impress upon my readers is, that while I am acting I am living a dual life, crying or laughing on the one hand, and simultaneously so dissecting my tears and laughter that they may appeal most forcibly to those whose hearts I wish to reach. And what my experience has been the experience of all the greatest artists I have known. Ristori shed actual tears night after night, as she herself has told me; while one of the most gifted of comedians it has ever been my pleasure to know has assured me that he entered so fully into the spirit of the character he was playing that he became to all intents and purposes one with him, enjoying his humor as though he himself had fathered it.

That this susceptibility of the emotions tends to uneven or unequal impersonations of the same character by the same actor on different occasions, I absolutely deny. That the jealously conscientious soul of the artist is at times troubled by the consciousness that on some certain occasion he has not equaled his own best work is doubtless true; though, as I conceive it, the conscience of the devotee of the mechanical system must be equally touched at times, for even the most skillful wood-turner cannot every day turn his rings of exactly equal size and shape. But if this difference is due to the emotional nature gaining too great control and taking the mental bit into its mouth instead of being guided by it, then art is lacking, and knowledge and skill of craft also. There are actors, it is true, who allow themselves to be guided by the emotion of the moment; there is one who by her genius has added lus-

ter to the American stage; but, genius notwithstanding, they are not artists in the truest sense of the word. This is the Scylla of unrestrained, untrained, and disproportionate emotion, akin almost to hysteria, which we must avoid, while at the same time keeping clear from the Charybdis of cold, deliberate mechanical artificiality, which leads indubitably to monotony of method and treatment, and to consequent lack of the art which conceals the art and its mechanism from the most keen-eyed of watchful spectators.

I gather that M. Coquelin deplors the tendency of the day to subordinate the actor to the costumer and scene-painter—a tendency which will, in my judgment, after working an infinity of harm to art, end by being swept away by a reaction which will carry us back to something akin to the archaic simplicity of the days of Shakspeare, Molière, and Alfieri, or, to go even farther along the corridors of time, to those of Sophocles and Euripides. I deplore it, I say, and yet I fail to see that it is more dangerous to the art we both love than would be the general adoption of the views he has so eloquently, and in a manner so much more graceful than my own, espoused; views which would degrade the art of acting to the level of mere mimicry and make of the actor but a cleverly articulated piece of mechanism, informed by no breath of that Promethean fire we call genius; views which would inevitably make of the stage a means but to amuse, and would rob it of all claim to be considered as a channel of as ennobling an art in its highest aspect as can be claimed by poet, sculptor, or painter.

Tommaso Salvini.

TO A FRIEND ACROSS THE SEA.

(w. c.)

BUT once or twice we met, touched hands.
 To-day between us both expands
 A waste of tumbling waters wide,
 A waste by me as yet untried,
 Vague with the doubt of unknown lands.

Time like a despot speeds his sands:
 A year he blots, a day he brands;
 We walked, we talked by Thamis' side
 But once or twice.

What makes a friend? What filmy strands
 Are these that turn to iron bands?
 What knot is this so firmly tied
 That naught but fate can now divide?—
 Ah, these are things one understands
 But once or twice!

Austin Dobson.