

TWO PAIRS OF NOVELISTS.



THOMAS HARDY.

WHAT is creation? We say of one novel-writer that he is a great creator, and of another that he merely paints what he sees. But the *seeing* is the point of the whole matter. When we say that a man creates, we only mean, in the last resource, that he sees at once keenly and widely, and sympathetically interprets or *re-presents* what he sees. Goethe—a fine critic as well as a great poet—said well, after a lifetime's experience and study, that the highest art was anything but a spinning out of the fancy, as a spider spins its web from its inside, but a re-presentation of something loving and faithfully remembered. How well this seems to apply to the novels of Thomas Hardy. They are, so far as their individual pictures are concerned, the truest photographs of peasant life in Dorsetshire and round about it. If you went there, you might

find the very types he has portrayed; what belongs to the whole, beyond that, is due to the realising imagination. Not only are they separately true portraits, but, viewed in relation to each other, they give the sense of a whole—a unity such as only a mind like Mr. Hardy's can discern in the tangled and broken threads of actual, everyday life as found there. Take "Far from the Madding Crowd." All the pictures are strung round Bathsheba's love-affairs, and the silent devotion and loving patience of the shepherd, Oak. Mr. Hardy expresses all the subtle emotions they awakened in a way the characters could never quite have done for themselves, while yet the expression is in keeping. It does not surprise us, or seem the least out of nature; and all this is reinforced by touches that are as real and as much the result of observation as though they had been seen just as he tells and at the

moment he sets them down. Take the following picture of Gabriel Oak's refreshment in Warren's malthouse :—

“ ‘And here's a mouthful of bread and bacon that Misses have sent, shepherd. The cider will go down better with a bit of victuals. Don't ye chaw quite close, shepherd, for I let the bacon fall in the road outside as I was bringing it along, and maybe 'tis rather gritty. There! 'tis clane dirt; and we know what that is, as you say; and you bain't a particular man, we see, shepherd.’

“ ‘True, true—not at all,’ said the friendly Oak.

“ ‘Don't let yer teeth quite meet, and you won't feel the sandiness at all. Ah, 'tis wonderful what can be done by contrivance!’

“ ‘My own mind, exactly, neighbour.’

“ ‘Ah, 'tis his grandfer's own grandson! His grandfer were just such a nice, unparticular man!’ said the maltster.”

Here, again, is a bit of memorable talk on a great day in Mellstock :—

“ ‘Yes; Geoffrey Day is a clever man, if ever there was one! Never says anything, not he.’

“ ‘Never.’

“ ‘You might live wi' that man, my sonnies, a hundred years, and never know there was anything in him.’

“ ‘Ay; one o' those up-country, London ink-bottle fellers would call Geoffrey a fool.’

“ ‘Ye would never find out what's in that man—never. Silent? Ah, he is silent! he can keep silence well. That man's silence is wonderful to listen to.’ ”

Now, how did Mr. Hardy attain this remarkable verisimilitude? In the only way in which it can be attained—by living among the people, entering into their life and ways; by an educated sympathy realising their feelings, and so comprehending their actions. All this would, of course, be nothing without the literary power; but the literary power, on the other hand, could be but little divorced from this. So it is true that in this sense, if in no other, Genius is patience—the patience that comes of insight and true affection.

The evident appreciation with which Mr. Hardy tells of the regular and methodic manner in which Mr. Barnes, the Dorsetshire poet, went on his walks and business, indicates some similar spirit in himself; and, if we may trust the interviewers, his home in Dorsetshire is only as a centre round which lie scattered, far or near, the “local habitations” in which, by the aid of leisurely travel in a double sense, he has made us so completely at home with him. It is not for nothing that his peasants never seem in any hurry; he is never in any hurry himself. It is the leisurely, slow unfolding of his tragedies that makes us, in a sense, agree to hear them and find in them a sober joy; while, in his comedies, it doubles the fun and humour. In this he learns something from his peasants too, and the manner of his art is found faithful to the matter.

“ ‘Oh, lady, we receive but what we give,’ and “ ‘hearts that are ready to confer are quicker to perceive.’ ”

Mr. Besant is, by nature, more of the romancer. Even when he concerns himself with pictures of to-day—as “All in a Garden Fair,” or “All Sorts and Conditions of Men”—you detect at every turn more of the tendency to fancy and simple invention. He delights in creating an atmosphere, and is fond of aiding this by apt historical references and associations, as in “Let Nothing you Dismay,” where the romantic old church of Warkworth, Northumberland, is skilfully made the scene where the hero does penance in a white sheet before the congregation entering the church.

His great knowledge of history and antiquity aids him in this; he is a master of illusion—the kind of illusion that a novelist always gains from a true curiosity in the past and intimate knowledge of it. “The Chaplain of the Fleet” is in this way a very characteristic work. All the detail of life in the Fleet and the olden Alsatia are at his fingertips; his art is in the selection, and his way of combining facts and incidents in view of the impression he wishes to produce. Perhaps he has done more walking about London and topographical investigation of its curious corners than any man now living. He could, without much effort, draw you a map of London in the middle of the thirteenth century, with no need of reference to any notes or books. His vast knowledge in this kind might have sometimes misled him, had it not been that he is strongly imbued with social and philanthropic ideals. These have coloured some of his recent and more striking novels—more especially that book which really created and established the Palace of Delight in the East End; and his heroine, Miss Messenger, is, if a little fanciful, one of his most attractive creations. So, in some measure, with his study of girl-life in the region of Hoxton.

Mr. Besant combines well the opposite-looking qualities of the journalist-investigator, intent on finding the facts of the case, and the artist who can mould these into a consistent and effective picture. He has been found taking journeys of miles to satisfy himself about a detail which most novelists would consider of little or no importance, and his travels in the East End and other parts of low London have sometimes led him into trying and even rather risky situations, because he would do his business thoroughly.

His face expresses alike keenness, practical energy, and sensitiveness and refinement—a man at once of great determination and of exquisite genius. In conversation Mr. Besant

is very keen and alert, as though you could hardly speak to him on any topic but manifold associations are awakened. He is about middle height, with a fresh complexion, and eyes of clear blue that seem at once calm and penetrating as he looks on you through spectacles.

When we turn to our pair of lady novelists, we are in what is really a different sphere—at all events in a different atmosphere. Both find impulse, in the religious sense, directly in conflict with theological dogmas or problems, and are fain, in one way or other, to justify the religious sense against them. They are constantly stating that problem in new ways, viewing the contest from different sides. But it is still the same question essentially—how the individual mind and heart may be supported amid the storm and stress of questioning, difficulty and consequent submergence of traditional ideas and ideals. Miss Bayly ("Edna Lyall"), in her two first novels (first, that is, in the general conception, though "Won by Waiting" long preceded them as a published work), tackled the problem of Atheism and Christianity directly. Raeburn,

the Atheist, remains interesting to us because, though intellectually he abandoned the Christian dogmas, he remained essentially Christian in his deepest ideal—the ideal that directs and colours conduct; and Erica, his daughter, is not wholly inconsistent and unnatural in her later development and return to Christianity simply because she had this inheritance. Donovan is not wholly inconsistent and unnatural either, because of certain early experiences and impressions.

It was my fortune to read these two stories in MS., and strongly to recommend their publication; so that I may have something of a paternal interest in them; but, whilst I see a theoretical disadvantage in the novel *with a purpose*, I do think that Miss Bayly, by tact and earnestness, and a wise limitation of her area, did in these two novels not a little to overcome it; and that was the main reason why I had the belief that these stories would succeed—a belief which the public has fully justified. There were undoubted traces of the autobiographic element there; she had herself passed through certain of the



WALTER BESANT.

phases of mental and spiritual experience which she depicted ; and afterwards I came to know that some circumstances in her life had been calculated to stir and to keep them for a time not only alive, but vividly keen.

Even when Miss Bayly is on historical

and kindly. She has taken great interest in work among the young and the poor at Eastbourne, where she resides with a brother-in-law, who is a clergyman there. It is characteristic of her that, though she is a staunch member of the Church of England,



EDNA LYALL.

ground—as in “In the Golden Days” (which deals with the time of Sir Algernon Sidney), and in “To Right the Wrong” (which is concerned with the time of the wars of the Commonwealth)—the same problems, in a less obtrusive form, are still before us. Certainly, one of the most striking and painful pictures in the latter is that of John Drake, the erewhile schoolmaster, who had undergone mutilation for his faith and his conduct, and who, she is careful to tell us, lived in the Jews’ House at Lincoln on the top of the hill.

Miss Bayly is, in person, slim, with an earnest, wistful expression ; lofty brow, under thick masses of hair, and eyes soft, inquiring,

she subscribed to the Bradlaugh memorial, and on the occasion, if I remember right, wrote a characteristic letter along with her subscription.

In Mrs. Humphry Ward’s “Robert Elsmere,” and “David Grieve,” we have traces of the same tendency—to dwell on the effects on the individual soul of awakenings to new truths or the pains of parting from old and accepted beliefs. But in her we have a mind that has been matured and fortified by much study—study of philosophy, of art, of education, and human progress—there we have all the sense of full equipment, if sometimes also with a hint, if no more than a hint, of the self-consciousness that is apt to prove



MARY A. WARD.

alien to art. "Robert Elsmere" may be, in some respects, the more satisfactory story, with greater amity and a certain artistic conclusiveness; but in "David Grieve" there is, in my idea, more token of imaginative power in certain pictures and passages. That sketch of the two young people in their earlier life on the uplands of Derbyshire, and the forecast, as it were, not too defined or protruded, of what was yet to come, are certainly very fine; and if, in some points of the picture of the after-life in Paris, it may have seemed that a doubtful note was here and there struck, yet some preparation or anticipation was perhaps intimated in some of the incidents in Manchester.

Mrs. Humphry Ward has made her mark not only as a writer of fiction, but as a teacher; and I believe that she would be the first to deprecate the doctrine that the novelist, any

more than the poet, in the words of the late Laureate in "In Memoriam":—

"Should work
Without a conscience or an aim."

Her labours and self-denials in connection with the work of education in relation to the great movement for social amelioration might well bear witness for her here.

Mrs. Ward, in personal aspect, is marked by great repose and dignity—head and features almost of the Greek type; in conversation quiet, and prone to suggest and question, with an air of deference and respectful sympathy. On the occasion of an address given by her in connection with the movement in which she is so keenly interested, I listened to her clear and winning tones with a sense of satisfaction felt in only a very few women-speakers.

ALEXANDER H. JAPP.

