

**THE BOOK OF
MASKS, PP. 1-265**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649081523

The Book of Masks, pp. 1-265 by Remy de Gourmont

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REMY DE GOURMONT

**THE BOOK OF
MASKS, PP. 1-265**

**THE
BOOK OF MASKS
BY RÉMY DE GOURMONT**

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JOHN W. LUCE AND COMPANY
BOSTON MCMXXI

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
AUTHORS PREFACE	9
- MAETERLINCK	21
- VERHAEREN	35
- DE RÉGNIER	43
VIELÉ-GRIFFIN	51
- MALLARMÉ	59
- SAMAIN	69
QUILLARD	73
HEROLD	79
RETTÉ	85
DE L'ISLE-ADAM	91
TAILHADÉ	101
RENARD	109
DUMUR	117
ECKHOUD	125
ADAM	135
- LAUTRÉAMONT	141
CORBIÈRE	153
RIMBAUD	161
POICTEVIN	167

CONTENTS

	PAGE
GIDE	175
LOUYS	183
RACHILDE	189
HUYSMANS	195
LAFORGUE	205
MORÉAS	213
MERRILL	221
SAINT-POL-ROUX	229
DE MONTESQUIOU	235
KAHN	243
VERLAINE	251
TRANSLATIONS FROM THE TEXT	254

Librarian
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10-13-38
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INTRODUCTION

TO take critical questions seriously, even passionately, is one of the marks of a genuinely civilized society. It points to both personal disinterestedness and to an imaginative absorption in fundamentals. The American who watches eagerly some tilt in that great critical battle which has gone on for ages and has now reached our shores, is released from his slavery to the immediate and the parochial; he has ceased to flinch at the free exercise of thought; he has begun to examine his mind as his fathers examined only their conscience; he is a little less concerned for speed and a little more for direction; he is almost a philosopher and has risen from mere heated gregariousness to voluntary co-operation in a spiritual order. His equipment is, as a rule, still meagre, and so his partisanship is not always an instructed one. He may be overwhelmed by the formidable philosophical apparatus of one critic or merely irritated by the political whims of another. Hence nothing could well be more helpful to him than an introduction to a foreign critic who is at once a stringent thinker and a charming writer, who permitted his insight to be obscured by neither moral nor polit-

INTRODUCTION

ical prejudices, who is both urbane and incisive, catholic and discriminating.

Remy de Gourmont, like all the very great critics — Goethe, Ste. Beuve, Hazlitt, Jules Lemaitre — knew the creative instinct and exercised the creative faculty. Hence he understood, what the mere academician, the mere scholar, can never grasp, that literature is life grown flame-like and articulate; that, therefore, like life itself, it varies in aim and character, in form and color and savor and is the memorable record of and commentary upon each stage in that great process of change that we call the world. To write like the Greeks or the Elizabethans or the French classics is precisely what we must not do. It would be both presumptuous and futile. All that we have to contribute to mankind, what is it but just — our selves? If we were duplicates of our greatgrandfathers we would be littering the narrow earth to no enriching purpose; all we have to contribute to literature is, again, our selves. This moment, this sensation, this pang, this thought — this little that is intimately our own is all we have of the unique and precious and incomparable. Let us express it beautifully, individually, memorably and it is all we can do; it is all that the classics did in their day. To imitate the classics — be one! That is to say, live widely, intensely, unsparingly and record your experience in some

INTRODUCTION

timeless form. This, in brief, is the critical theory of Gourmont, this is the background of that startling and yet, upon reflection, so clear and necessary saying of his "The only excuse a man has for writing is that he express himself, that he reveal to others the kind of world reflected in the mirror of his soul; his only excuse is that he be original."

Gourmont, like the Symbolists whom he describes in this volume, founded his theory of the arts upon a metaphysical speculation. He learned from the German idealists, primarily the Post-Kantians and Schopenhauer, that the world is only our representation, only our individual vision and that, since there is no criterion of the existence or the character of an external reality, that vision is, of course, all we actually have to express in art. But to accept his critical theory it is not necessary to accept his metaphysical views. The variety of human experience remains equally infinite and equally fascinating on account of its very infiniteness, whatever its objective content may or may not be. We can dismiss that antecedent and insoluble question and still agree that the best thing a man can give in art as in life is his own self. What kind of a self? One hears at once the hot and angry question of the conservative critic. A disciplined one, by all means, an infinitely and subtly cultivated one. But not one shaped after some given pattern, not a replica, not