

Children of Decadence: The Forgotten Children's Literature of Remy de Gourmont

I would like to start my talk with a disclaimer. My presentation today is slightly different from what I originally intended to do a few months ago when I submitted my abstract. My research on Remy de Gourmont's books for children has taken me on a different path.

#academiclife.

Introduction

Between 1882 and 1893, French writer and critic Remy de Gourmont published nine children's books, six with the publisher Degorce-Cadot and three with Firmin-Didot, on a broad range of subjects: from Pompeii and hot air balloons to French Canada and Lapland. Nine books is nothing to sneeze at in a writer's career and yet, I was able to find only one never-published talk about these books. It is almost as if Remy de Gourmont had never written them. They are completely absent from the scholarly literature on Gourmont, somehow implying that the beginning of his career does not matter. This is why my goal today is to shed light on the long forgotten children's literature of Remy de Gourmont. I argue that not only do these books need to have a place in our discussion of Gourmont's career, but they also need to have a place in our discussion of any writer's career and stop being disregarded as books of no merit.

I will first provide you with a quick biography of Remy de Gourmont before starting my discussion of his children's books. In today's talk, I will focus in particular on their dismissal both by Gourmont himself and by scholars. Then I will show why we should care about these children's books and discuss a few of the themes they deal with and how some can be reminiscent of themes found in Decadent books.

Who was Remy de Gourmont?

Writer, critic, Remy de Gourmont (who decided to drop the accent off his name), was one of the founders of the Symbolist journal *Mercure de France* alongside Alfred Valette. He was also at the head of a few other journals such as *l'Ymagier*, which barely lasted and consisted mostly of images of wood engravings, and *La revue des idées*. His writing career was quite varied. He published pamphlets, linguistic essays, novels, plays, articles, short stories, etc. But perhaps more importantly, his career started with the publication of children's books in 1882.

Gourmont was a great choice to write these books as he was working at the time at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. He was smart, knowledgeable, and had an easy access to a great amount of resources. For Karl D. Uitti, Remy de Gourmont's conclusions on these children's books were always original and "invariably intelligent" (21). Despite being written for children, these books show a side of Gourmont that was interested by a wide variety of topics and are a reflection of the many interests he will have in his career later on.

As I mentioned earlier, Remy de Gourmont published six books with Degorce-Cadot in the "Bibliothèque du jeune âge" and "Bibliothèque connaissances générales" collections: *Un volcan en éruption* (1882), *Une ville ressuscitée* (1883), *Bertrand du Guesclin* (1883), *Tempêtes et Naufrages* (1883), *Les Derniers Jours de Pompéi* (1884), and *En Ballon* (1884). After a break of a few years in which he published articles as well as two novels, *Merlette* (1886) and *Sixtine* (1890), Gourmont worked with Firmin-Didot and released three books dealing with more political and ethnographical concerns: *Les Français au Canada et en Acadie* (1888), *Chez les Lapons, mœurs, coutumes et légendes de la Laponie norvégienne* (1890), and *Les Canadiens de France* (1893). To my knowledge, there are no documents remaining pertaining to the publication of these books, be it contracts or letters, so we can only assume with a lot of

confidence that Gourmont wrote these children's books for monetary reasons. Since he was writing articles for journals such as *Le Contemporain* or *La Revue du Monde Latin* at the same time, these books alone were certainly not earning him enough to make ends meet.

It does make sense then, when in 1886, after going through the pages of the first issue of *La Vogue* and discovering Symbolism, that Gourmont's reaction was to be disgusted by his career so far: "ce que j'avais écrit jusqu'alors m'inspira un profond dégoût" (*Promenades littéraires* IV, 34). Obviously, Gourmont was not really impressed by his works on hot air balloons or Pompeii. And yet, paradoxically, he continued to publish children's books after his "revelation" and the sub sequential release of his novels *Merlette* and *Sixtine*. As Uitti notes, Gourmont's readers were never that many and the author mostly wrote for an elite (6). It is therefore very likely that his two novels were not selling like hot cakes, which would explain why Gourmont released three more children's books. He could also have had signed a contract with Firmin-Didot a few years before obliging him to release these books. Or, as Bernard Jahier argues, maybe Gourmont continued writing children's books for didactic reasons: maybe the author simply wanted to impart young readers with his love of Antiquity, science, and patriotism.

The rejection

What matters to us here though, is Remy de Gourmont's rejection of his own work, a rejection that was and still is widely accepted and followed by scholars. Indeed, as far as I know, there has been only one study of Gourmont's children's books, by Bernard Jahier, and it has not even been published in an article. In studies dedicated to Remy de Gourmont, his children's books are only very quickly mentioned in the biographical information. Sometimes, a scholar adds his or her own thoughts about the books. For example, Charles Dantzig explains that we should not judge Gourmont based on his horrible children's books and the novel *Merlette* and

that there is a reason why Gourmont decided these books should not be listed under “of the same author” (27): “Quoiqu’ils n’aient pas la niaiserie habituelle du genre, une certaine sécheresse au contraire, il ne faut pas le juger d’après eux” (27). For his part, Garnet Rees considers that while these children’s books certainly demanded a lot of research on Gourmont’s part, they are absolutely without merit (11-12).

In addition to that, some of Gourmont’s children’s books sometimes do not even appear in the bibliographies of his works. This is the case for *Les Canadiens de France* published in 1893 and which can be easily found digitized on Gallica. This book does not appear listed in Anne Boyer’s *Remy de Gourmont: L’écriture et ses masques* (2002) or Karl D. Uitti’s seminal book *La passion littéraire de Remy de Gourmont* (1962). It is also not currently on Wikipedia which I clearly need to change and edit! Finally, despite him mentioning the books in one chapter, Gourmont’s children’s books are entirely missing from Charles Dantzig’s bibliography in *Remy de Gourmont. Cher vieux daim* (1990). One can read « Oeuvres de Gourmont (excepté Merlette et les ouvrages instructifs) » (195). Clearly, these books were deemed not worthy to make an appearance here.

Remy de Gourmont was “disgusted” by his early career works and scholars have also been quick to follow suit by dismissing them as well. Interestingly, Gourmont rejected his books after discovering “Symbolism” in 1886 but one of his colleagues, Lucien Muhlfeld, explained in the Symbolist journal *La Revue blanche* in 1892 that while children’s books typically had horrendous illustrations, were of poor quality, and that their content was asinine, the genre could only be redeemed by doing away with its “articles de bazar” and taking as its focus only stories of antiquity and those based on Christian texts, leading children to rediscover great legends of past times (53). And this is exactly what Gourmont did with his three books on Pompeii or with

the legend of Bertrand du Guesclin. According to Muhlfeld then, Gourmont's children's books were and are worth reading!

Why don't we study these books?

So why don't we read and study them? To me, the issue is not just about the books' literary merit. It begs a bigger question: why are children's books not taken seriously and disregarded when talking about a writer's career? Or as Evelyne Wilwerth asks: "Why do we have a tendency to underestimate this production? Or to forget it?" (189). As Isabelle Nières-Chevrel explains, the reason why we should care about children's books is not just about determining their literary merit. It is also because of their presence in what makes the culture of a country: "For all the countries with a literary tradition, children's literature is one of the components – too often neglected – of what makes a national culture" (97). "No matter what their literary merit is [...] French children's texts [...] are a testimony to the social transformations that were happening and participate in our cultural history" (104). Gourmont's books, therefore, are an example of the culture of France in the late nineteenth-century, a very white, male privileged culture that is. Neglecting children's books is "to deliberately disregard [...] an entire section of a writer's career" (113). This is why today, I deemed it important to discuss Remy de Gourmont's books for children, as despite his and scholars' dismissal, they are part of his career and of France's cultural history.

So what do the children's books of Remy de Gourmont tell us? First, their topics are similar to any other children's books at the time. They have, for instance, a patriotic and nationalist agenda. After the defeat in the Franco-Prussian war and the loss of Alsace-Lorraine, there is a strong nationalist discourse permeating children's literature. The young readers can be urged to get stronger so as to be able to fight back and win against the Germans. This is the case

in *L'Histoire d'un écolier hanovrien* (1886) by André Laurie, where two school kids from France and Germany, who are fighting with one another, end up in the victory of the once weak but now strong French kid. Some of Gourmont's books echo this patriotic agenda and nationalist ideology. *En ballon* shows the genius of the French inventors who created and improved hot air balloons and an entire chapter is dedicated to the role of these balloons during the Franco-Prussian war and how instrumental they proved to be in some of the battles. As for Bertrand du Guesclin, a famous fourteenth-century knight who notably won battles against England, he is described by Gourmont as a "formidable knight" who was able to raise 'France's courage and fortune" (19). This proud, valiant man, is ready to fight the enemy until his death becomes an example to follow for the young male French readers who will need to regain the lost provinces, Alsace-Lorraine, from the hands of the invader, Germany.

Another common topic of children's literature at the time is Colonialism. Many children's books are embracing the colonial ideal. Adventure stories, "aimed at an essentially white, male, middle-class, adolescent audience" were promoting "an individualistic ethos of courage, initiative, and manliness and supported the French colonial enterprise, reinforcing the sense of national pride and cultural superiority (Penny Brown 109). The three books Gourmont published with Firmin-Didot are not adventure stories per say but they are didactic works meant to educate the young readers on France's colonial past and more particularly, its relationship to Canada. Indeed, there was a renewed interest for Canada in the second half of the nineteenth century in both children's literature, with for instance Jules Verne's *Les grands voyages et les grands voyageurs. Découverte de la terre* (1878), and in literature in general. One could buy books about people's travels to Canada such as le baron Etienne Hulot's *De l'Atlantique au Pacifique à travers le Canada et le Nord des Etats-Unis* (1888) or books about Canadian history

such as *Histoire populaire du Canada* by Jacques de Baudoncourt (1888). As for Remy de Gourmont's books, they are meant to redress an issue: French people have forgotten they colonized North America and that a French population of more than two million people live across the ocean (*Les Français au Canada et en Acadie* 7). France needs to prove to the world it was and still is a colonizing and powerful nation. One way to do this is for the younger generation to realize the French were "the true pioneers of America" (6) and that French was the first civilizing language heard on the wild continent (8). Gourmont's books on Canada are not only meant to enlighten the readers on the history, mores, and people of Canada but they are also supposed to "excite the patriotic fiber in the context of the immense national trauma (Jahier, np) of the defeat in the Franco-Prussian war. As Gourmont says, "Le Canada Français est une Alsace-Lorraine transatlantique" (*Les Canadiens de France* 15), French Canada is a transatlantic Alsace-Lorraine : it resisted the dominance and invasion of Anglophone Canadians to remain French just like the lost Alsace-Lorraine will fight the Germans to remain French.

A Hint of Decadence.

The children's books of Gourmont are therefore dealing with tropes many other books were dealing with at the time. But what struck me as I was reading the texts was to see certain themes that were quite reminiscent of themes found in Decadent books at the time, the first of which being the despise of women. While in Gourmont's books women are not the "femmes fatales" described for instance in Rachilde's *Monsieur Vénus* (1884) where the main female character, who dresses up as man, ends up having her lover, whom she has dressing up as a woman, killed, the few women who are mentioned in the texts stand out in their negative depiction. In *Bertrand du Guesclin*, Bertrand clearly despises women. As Tiphaine Ravenel wishes him good luck before a fight, Bertrand declares "Qui en femme se fie n'est guère sage"

(22), that is to say, do not trust women if you are wise. After the fight, he decides to marry her “despite his apparent disdain” (24). True romance! As for the book *En ballon*, which narrates the history of hot air balloons, it is interesting to note that despite the fact that so many men died in their pursuit of progress, the only illustration depicting someone’s death is that of Mme Blanchard, who set a hot air balloon on fire in 1819 and who fell on a house, then on a street “where one found a horribly mutilated body” (92). While Gourmont did not make the illustration, he certainly did not sugarcoat the woman’s death in the text, which was more descriptive than some of the men’s deaths.

In addition to the negative depiction of women, Gourmont’s books also deal with the theme of violence in young people which echoes a chapter in *A rebours* (1884) by Joris-Karl Huysmans. Bertrand du Guesclin starts out as a very violent child who loves organizing fights between children. He usually gathers forty to fifty children and has them fight for hours, even joining the fights himself (9). The first illustration of the book shows one of these fights and Bertrand looks like a menacing figure, holding a stick, ready to hit someone. It is this rage he has in him that will lead him to become a valiant knight, once he learned to control it. This violence and threatening nature is reminiscent of the story of the young Auguste Langlois in Huysmans’ book. The main character, Jean des Esseintes, tries to make a killer and a criminal out of Auguste but fails, luckily. His goal is to create an enemy for the hideous society in which he lives but the society will have to do with one fewer dangerous person. Who knows, maybe Auguste challenged his violence into becoming a good soldier. If Gourmont’s books show young readers how to channel their anger to become a good person and a legend, Huysmans’ novel shows how easily it could be for people to become violent and that everyone has the potential in them to become a nuisance to society. Men are in fact violent by nature and young people can easily be

influenced, as is seen when Bertrand leads children to bloody fights and when Jean des Esseintes aims to unleash Auguste's violent side for fun. But what matters in the end is that neither Bertrand nor Auguste become dangerous and criminals. Both books therefore are a reflection on the violent side of French society and a commentary on how young people should react to their dark side: use it to become a fighter on the right side of history (that is to say, use this to reclaim Alsace-Lorraine) or choose not to be influenced by evil forces and simply ignore the voices of the crazy man tempting you with prostitutes.

Conclusion

There are many aspects of Remy de Gourmont's children's books that could and need to be further investigated. First, one could compare these books to the ones he wrote for adults. One could also study the books themselves: who were the illustrators? Who were the readers? Where were the books sold? Were they given as prizes? Were they popular? What is the relationship between text and image and what can we learn from the placement of the illustrations? But perhaps more importantly, these books need to find a place in our study of Remy de Gourmont, not necessarily for their literary merit but because they are part of his literary career and helped shape who he was and became as a writer. Children's literature in an author's body of works should not be something shameful and undervalued. On the contrary, it needs to be embraced by scholars of various disciplines and today was my attempt toward that goal.

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