Ruskin on Turner

Introduction

The work which we proposed to ourselves, towards the close of the last volume, as first to be undertaken in this, was the examination of those peculiarities of system in which Turner either stood alone, even in the modern school, or was a distinguished representative of modern, as opposed to ancient, practice.

And the most interesting of these subjects of inquiry, with which, therefore, it may be best to begin, is the precise form under which he has admitted into his work the modern feeling of the picturesque, which, so far as it consists in a delight in ruin, is perhaps the most suspicious and questionable of all the characters distinctively belonging to our temper, and art.

It is especially so, because it never appears, even in the slightest measure, until the days of the decline of art in the seventeenth century. The love of neatness and precision, as opposed to all disorder, maintains itself down to Raphael's childhood without the slightest interference of any other feeling; and it is not until Claude's time, and owing in great part to his influence, that the new feeling distinctly establishes itself.

Picturesque

How far he was right in doing this; or how far the moderns are right in carrying the principle to greater excess, and seeking always for poverty-stricken rusticity or pensive ruin, we must now endeavour to ascertain.

The essence of picturesque character has been already defined\* to be a sublimity not inherent in the nature of the thing, but caused by something external to it; as the ruggedness of a cottage roof possesses something of a mountain aspect, not belonging to the cottage as such. And this sublimity may be either in mere external ruggedness, and other visible character, or it may lie deeper, in an expression of sorrow and old age, attributes which are both sublime; not a dominant expression, but one mingled with such familiar and common characters as prevent the object from becoming perfectly pathetic in its sorrow, or perfectly venerable in its age.

For instance, I cannot find words to express the intense pleasure I have always in first finding myself, after some prolonged stay in England, at the foot of the old tower of Calais church. The large neglect, the noble unsightliness of it; the record of its years written so visibly, yet without sign of weakness or decay; its stern wasteness and gloom, eaten away by the Channel winds, and overgrown with the bitter sea grasses; its slates and tiles all shaken and rent, and yet not falling; its desert of brickwork full of bolts, and holes, and ugly fissures, and yet strong, like a bare brown rock; its carelessness of what any one thinks or feels about it, putting forth no claim, having no beauty or desirableness, pride, nor grace; yet neither asking for pity; not, as ruins are, useless and piteous, feebly or fondly garrulous of better days; but usefill still, going through its own daily work, as some old fisherman beaten grey by storm, yet drawing his daily nets: so it stands, with no complaint about its past youth, in blanched and meagre massiveness and serviceableness, gathering human souls together underneath it; the sound of its bells for prayer still rolling through its rents; and the grey peak of it seen far across the sea, principal of the three that rise above the waste of surfy sand and hillocked shore, the lighthouse for life, and the belfry for labour, and this for patience and praise.

Old Tower

I cannot tell the half of the strange pleasures and thoughts that come about me at the sight of that old tower; for, in some sort, it is the epitome of all that makes the Continent of Europe interesting, as opposed to new countries; and, above all, it completely expresses that agedness in the midst of active life which binds the old and the new into harmony. We, in England, have our new street, our new inn, our green shaven lawn, and our piece of ruin emergent from it, a mere specimen of the Middle Ages put on a bit of velvet carpet to be shown, which, but for its size, might as well be on a museum shelf at once, under cover. But, on the Continent, the links are unbroken between the past and present, and, in such use as they can serve for, the grey-headed wrecks are suffered to stay with men; while, in unbroken line, the generations of spared buildings are seen succeeding each in its place. And thus in its largeness, in its permitted evidence of slow decline, in its poverty, in its absence of all pretence, of all show and care for outside aspect, that Calais tower has an infinite of symbolism in it, all the more striking because usually seen in contrast with English scenes expressive of feelings the exact reverse of these.

And I am sorry to say that the opposition is most distinct in that noble carelessness as to what people think of it. Once, on coming from the Continent, almost the first inscription I saw in my native English was this:

"To Let, a Genteel House, up this road."

And it struck me forcibly, for I had not come across the idea of gentility, among the upper limestones of the Alps, for seven months; nor do I think that the Continental nations in general have the idea. They would have advertised a "pretty" house, or a "large" one, or a "convenient" one; but they could not, by any use of the terms afforded by their several languages, have got at the English "genteel." Consider, a little, all the meanness that there is in that epithet, and then see, when next you cross the Channel, how scornful of it that Calais spire will look.

Old fashioned versus contemporary

Of which spire the largeness and age are also opposed exactly to the chief appearances of modern England, as one feels them on first returning to it; that marvellous smallness both of houses and scenery, so that a ploughman in the valley has his head on a level with the tops of all the hills in the neighbourhood; and a house is organized into complete establishment, parlour, kitchen, and all, with a knocker to its door, and a garret window to its roof, and a bow to its second story,\* on a scale of 12 feet wide by 15 high, so that three such at least would go into the granary of an ordinary Swiss cottage: and also our serenity of perfection, our peace of conceit, everything being done that vulgar minds can conceive as wanting to be done; the spirit of well-principled housemaids everywhere, exerting itself for perpetual propriety and renovation, so that nothing is old, but only "old-fashioned," and contemporary, as it were, in date and impressiveness only with last year's bonnets. Abroad, a building of the eighth or tenth century stands ruinous in the open street; the children play round it, the peasants heap their corn in it, the buildings of yesterday nestle about it, and fit their new stones into its rents, and tremble in sympathy as it trembles. No one wonders at it, or thinks of it as separate, and of another time; we feel the ancient world to be a real thing, and one with the new: antiquity is no dream; it is rather the children playing about the old stones that are the dream. But all is continuous; and the words, "from generation to generation," understandable there. Whereas here we have a living present, consisting merely of what is "fashionable " and "oldfashioned"; and a past, of which there are no vestiges; a past which peasant or citizen can no more conceive; all equally far away; Queen Elizabeth as old as Queen Boadicea, and both incredible. At Verona we look out of Can Grande's window to his tomb; and if he does not stand beside us, we feel only that he is in the grave instead of the chamber, not that he is old, but that he might have been beside us last night. But in England the dead are dead to purpose. One cannot believe they ever were alive, or anything else than what they are now names in school-books.

Then that spirit of trimness. The smooth paving stones; the scraped, hard, even, rutless roads; the neat gates and plates, and essence of border and order, and spikiness and spruceness. Abroad, a country-house has some confession of human weakness and human fates about it. There are the old grand gates still, which the mob pressed sore against at the Revolution, and the strained hinges have never gone so well since; and the broken greyhound on the pillar still broken better so: but the long avenue is gracefully pale with fresh green, and the courtyard bright with orange-trees; the garden is a little run to waste since Mademoiselle was married nobody cares much about it; and one range of apartments is shut up nobody goes into them since Madame died. But with us, let who will be married or die, we neglect nothing. All is polished and precise again next morning; and whether people are happy or miserable, poor or prosperous, still we sweep the stairs of a Saturday.

English Character

This, however, is of course true only of insignificant duties, necessary, for appearance' sake. Serious duties, necessary for kindness' sake, must be permitted in any domestic affliction, under pain of shocking the English public.

Now, I have insisted long on this English character, because I want the reader to understand thoroughly the opposite element of the noble picturesque: its expression, namely, of suffering, of poverty, or decay, nobly endured by unpretending strength of heart. Nor only unpretending, but unconscious. If there be visible pensiveness in the building, as in a ruined abbey, it becomes, or claims to become, beautiful; but the picturesqueness is in the unconscious suffering, the look that an old labourer has, not knowing that there is anything pathetic in his grey hair, and withered arms, and sunburnt breast; and thus there are the two extremes, the consciousness of pathos in the confessed ruin, which may or may not be beautiful, according to the kind of it; and the entire denial of all human calamity and care, in the swept proprieties and neatnesses of English modernism: and, between these, there is the unconscious confession of the facts of distress and decay, in by-words; the world's hard work being gone through all the while, and no pity asked for, nor contempt feared. And this is the expression of that Calais spire, and of all picturesque things, in so far as they have mental or human expression at all.

I say, in so far as they have mental expression, because their merely outward delightfulness that which makes them pleasant in painting, or, in the literal sense, picturesque is their actual variety of colour and form. A broken stone has necessarily more various forms in it than a whole one; a bent roof has more various curves in it than a straight one; every excrescence or cleft involves some additional complexity of light and shade, and every stain of moss on eaves or wall adds to the delightfulness of colour. Hence, in a completely picturesque object, as an old cottage or mill, there are introduced, by various circumstances not essential to it, but, on the whole, generally somewhat detrimental to it as cottage or mill, such elements of sublimity complex light and shade, varied colour, undulatory form, and so on as can generally be found only in noble natural objects, woods, rocks, or mountains. This sublimity, belonging in a parasitical manner to the building, renders it, in the usual sense of the word, "picturesque."

Summary

Now, if this outward sublimity be sought for by the painter, without any regard for the real nature of the thing, and without any comprehension of the pathos of character hidden beneath, it forms the low school of the surface-picturesque; that which fills ordinary drawing-books and scrap-books, and employs, perhaps, the most popular living landscape painters of France, England, and Germany. But if these same outward characters be sought for in subordination to the inner character of the object, every source of pleasurableness being refused which is incompatible with that, while perfect sympathy is felt at the same time with the object as to all that it tells of itself in those sorrowful by-words, we have the school of true or noble picturesque; still distinguished from the school of pure beauty and sublimity, because, in its subjects, the pathos and sublimity are all by the way, as in Calais old spire, not inherent, as in a lovely tree or mountain; while it is distinguished still more from the schools of the lower picturesque by its tender sympathy, and its refusal of all sources of pleasure inconsistent with the perfect nature of the thing to be studied.

The reader will only be convinced of the broad scope of this law by careful thought, and comparison of picture with picture; but a single example will make the principle of it clear to him.

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| THE ARTISTS | ABOUT THE ARTISTS | | FAMOUS WORKS |
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| Marc Chagall | Marc Chagall was born on July 7, 1887 in Vitebsk, Russia. In 1932 he moved to France. He lived in the United States from 1941 to 1948, and then returned to France. He died in France on March 28. 1985. | | Over Vitebsk  The Violinist  The Praying Jew  I and the Village |
| Salvador Dali | Salvador Dali was born in Spain in 1904. When he was a child, he showed strange behavior and often interrupted his class in school. As he got older, he started to paint pictures that came from his dreams. His dreams and his paintings were scary and unreal. | | The Persistence of Memory  Crucifixion  The Sacrament of the Last Supper |
| Leonardo Da Vinci | | In 1452, Leonardo Da Vinci was born in an Italian town called Vinci. He lived in a time period called the Renaissance, when everyone was interested in art. Even though Da Vinci was a great artist, he became famous because of all the other things he could do. He was a sculptor, a scientist, an inventor, an architect, a musician, and a mathematician. When he was twenty, he helped his teacher finish a painting called The Baptism of Christ. | Mona Lisa  The Last Supper  Madonna and Child  The Virgin of the Rocks |
| Henri Matisse | | Henri Matisse was born on December 31, 1869 in Le Cateau Cambresis, France. He first got a degree in law and then decided to becoe an artist. He studied for three years with Gustave Moreau. He was also a sculptor and an etcher.  Because Matisse had cancer, he became confined to a wheelchair. From his wheelchair, he completed one of his most famous works, painting the inside of the Chapelle du Rosaire. | Chapel of the Rosary in Vence  The Snail  Beasts of the Sea  Creole Dancer  La Fougere Noire |
| Pablo Picasso | | Pablo Picasso was born in Malaga, Spain on October 5, 1881. His father, Jose Ruiz, was also an artist. Picasso painted in many styles, including [Cubism](artstyle.htm#cubism1) and [Expressionism](artstyle.htm#express). He also sculpted. In cubism, he tried to show the dimensions of the objects in his paintings. When he painted in the classical style, his shapes were round and soft. In cubism, his shapes were square and hard.  When Picasso painted, he had a blue period and a rose period. For about three years in his early twenties, he used mostly light blue colors in his paintings. The rose period came after the blue period. It began after he moved from Spain to France. | Guernica  Three Musicians  The Three Dancers  Self Portrait: Yo Picasso |
| Pierre-Auguste Renoir | | Pierre-Auguste Renoir was born February 25, 1841 in Limoges, France. When Renoir was young, he was a shoe tailor and a dress maker. When he was 13 be began decorating porcelain dishes. He was also close friends with Claude Monet.  Renoir believed that a person should work with his hands. He felt that working with his hands was what made him a working man. Some of his most famous paintings are portraits of women and groups of people. Renoir's paintings were done in the [Impressionist](artstyle.htm#impress) style. People felt his use of color and light in his paintings, plus his talent for painting people, were what made his paintings so beautiful. | Le Bal au Moulin de la Galette  Jeanne Samary  Bathers  The Swing |