

TURNER.

BY EDITH FROST.

*"Sometimes a sad figure, always an amazing one."*

JOSEPH MALLORD WILLIAM TURNER was born in London on April 23rd, 1775; his father was a barber, and the boy, his only child. He went to school and, although in all probability his schooling was of a very second-rate nature, while there he found his vocation and would draw all he could see from the schoolroom window: "his schoolfellows, sympathising with his taste, often did his sums for him." He was not at all of a bookish nature, he never educated himself in that direction, and it is said by some that to the end of his life he could neither write nor spell properly, far less find words with which to express himself. His father recognised his son's genius, and encouraged him as far as it lay in his power. He apprenticed him to an architect who employed him in painting landscapes and skies to his pictorial plans. Thus by the time Turner was thirteen we see him with his school-days far behind him, working at backgrounds, foregrounds and skies, colouring engravings and sketching. He was recognised as a boy of exceptional talents, and he knew and often met the great artists of his day. From this time he went on with his life-work, never stopping or turning aside, known and appreciated, a man of immense energy and vital force, walking or driving up and down England and afterwards travelling in Europe, always working and always gathering and storing the more quickly painted mental pictures for future production. Thus he lived from day to day; his is not a story of any attraction, for apart from his pictures, which belong to a realm of their own, the interest of Turner himself lies in the study of his character.

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Among all his drawings and paintings, of which there is a great number, there is no record of his early years. From his memory, which proved itself to be a storehouse of unique and wonderful capacity, he never recalled to immortalise them visions of happy childhood, he gave to the world no account of light-hearted childish follies nor of joyous comings and goings. This does not prove that Turner was not a happy boy, as some seem to think, it simply shows that certain characteristics of the man were potential in the child. He never painted domestic scenes of any description, nor portraits—people did not interest him. He was all for earth and sky and sea. His towns and buildings and ships are etherealised by the splendour of a Nature that cannot contain herself, but overflows and softens with a tender charm the works of man. Turner's want of interest in human nature and human affairs, his want of learning and his great and overwhelming genius, unite in forming one of the most curious and interesting characters ever known in the world of Art.

He lived by himself and within himself, always and consistently neglecting the ways opened to him by his genius of entering upon a life of some social advantage. Whether impelled by his powers and artistic nature, as some think, or driven by less noble impulses of ambition and desire for wealth and fame, he shut himself up within himself and lived a life of solitariness, self-absorption and suspicion of others. In addition to this his mental existence was one of isolation; from the point of view of the casual observer he was ignorant, stupid and uncouth, and this because he was either incapable of living in touch with others or because he preferred

to be absolutely lonely. However, after reading the blackest account of Turner's character and life, we are told that on a varnishing day he was found making one of his beautiful, glowing skies of a dark and dirty hue because, in all its freshness, it made the others look so dingy—it was only lamp-black, as he explained, and would wash off; and another time, when commemorating the death of a friend, he painted the sails of the ship upon which he had died so dark that a brother artist remonstrated, "Were there any colour blacker than black I should use it," he replied.

Perhaps it is possible to understand to a certain extent. Having no words nor any other medium for self-expression besides his brush, is it not likely that his mind and spirit were concentrated on that one means of utterance, and that we have

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an artist and painter who shows in his work an inner life and character of which the chance acquaintance could have no conception? He reserved all his better parts for his work, and his material life may perhaps be regarded as accidental. He was careless, untidy and dirty in his dress and ways, but, "there does not exist such a thing as a slovenly drawing by Turner;" he was ignorant and apparently unashamed of it, "he knew little else but art and nature, and he knew them by heart." It was ever thus—while hiding himself behind such as the above and other unlovely characteristics, he reveals himself through his work as a man of extreme sensitiveness, with a passion for light, colour and purity, with a penetrating tender perception, and capable of the most delicate shades and nuances of feeling. The usual and natural human capacity for rising and self-development was stunted in him and never showed itself, but this very want may have been part of his genius—a protective device of Nature to prevent his dissipating himself in many directions, so that all the fire and energy of his life, all his best qualities, reserved and pent up, allowed only one means of escape, came rushing out with an extraordinary force and power.

Turner instinctively saw every subject from its most romantic and intimate side, his work is full of the charm of imaginativeness and poetic feeling, "he would throw indefinable charm round it by some gleam of light—some veiling mist, some far-away distance, some alluring sense of mystery, of infinity." As we look at his pictures we realize that we are in the presence of a creative artist and a poet—one who does not attempt to paint the physical world with all its accidental details,—but who breaks through the outer crust and comes into the great Presence, face to face with spiritual forces, with ideals of purity and truth—beauty in its highest sense. Turner's art can never be considered as a photographic reproduction of scenes and places—it tells of bigness, of things incomprehensible, infinite things which cannot be translated into words—

"sensations sweet,  
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart."

*"The Fighting Téméraire—lugged to her last berth to be broken up."*

This is an appeal to the emotions as well as to the sense of beauty. The sun setting in a red blaze of glory, and the

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Téméraire, symbolic, mysterious, breathing of all the fine qualities of heroic patriotism, passing with dignity and all unconcerned to the fate of created things—dragged by a hideous and fussy tug. We are told that Turner was on a holiday with some of his friends—also artists—“Suddenly there moved down upon the artists’ boat the grand old vessel that had been taken prisoner at the Nile and that led the van at Trafalgar. She loomed pale and ghostly, and was being towed to her last moorings at Deptford by a little fiery, puny steam-tug.”

“Take the evening effect with the Téméraire. That picture will not, at the first glance, deceive as a piece of actual sunlight, but this is because there is in it more than sunlight, because under the blazing veil of vaulted fire which lights the vessel on her last path, there is a blue, deep, desolate hollow of darkness, out of which you can hear the voice of the night wind, and the dull boom of the disturbed sea; because the cold, deadly shadows of the twilight are gathering through every sunbeam, and moment by moment as you look, you will fancy some new film and faintness of the night has risen over the vastness of the departing form. ... Of all pictures of subjects not visibly involving human pain, this is, I believe, the most pathetic that was ever painted. ... And this particular ship, crowned in the Trafalgar hour of trial with chief victory—prevailing over the fatal vessel that had given Nelson death—surely, if ever anything without a soul deserved honour and affection, we owed them here. Those sails that strained so full bent into the battle—that broad bow that struck the surf aside, enlarging silently in steadfast haste, full front to the shot—resistless and without reply—those triple ports whose choirs of flame rang forth in their courses, into the fierce revenging monotone, which, when it died away, left no answering voice to rise any more upon the sea against the strength of England—those sides that were wet with the long runlets of English life-blood, like press-planks at vintage, gleaming goodly crimson down to the cast and clash of the washing foam—those pale masts that stayed themselves up against the war-ruin, shaking out their ensign through the thunder, till sail and ensign drooped—steep in the death-stilled pause of Andalusian air, burning with its witness-cloud of human souls at rest,—surely, for these some sacred care might have been left in our thoughts—some quiet space amidst the lapse of English waters? Nay, not so. We have stern keepers to trust her glory to—the fire and the  
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worm. Never more shall sunset lay golden robe on her, nor starlight tremble on the waves that part at her gliding.”

*“Approach to Venice.”*

“To approach Venice is to approach a city without streets, without vehicles or noises, ... a city of splendour, of gold and purple skies. ... Nothing will be found to compare with the distant vision of that city which, on the horizon, seems to be too beautiful ever to be reached.” Venice, with its sea and sky of infinite depth; its background of pale green light shining between the two; the crystalline beauty of the delicate haze that hangs over the sleeping waters; its gondolas with their red cabins and golden ornaments.

The sunset—when the world, so slow to waken, seems as slow and as lingeringly reluctant to sink into rest—makes no call to the people of the enchanted city, for the gondolas are crowded with their gay and busy life, and the soft sound of the waters lapping against their sides mingles with and mellows the sounds of laughter, talk and song as they float on the

evening air. But Nature, knowing that night is near, throws a cloak of soft haze around her children and the splendours of the city; she wraps the buildings in her delicate and many-hued mantle, lifting them into an ethereal realm where they stand aloof and serene, seeming to enter into communion with the spirit of an ancient and glorious Venice.

*“A Frosty Morning.”*

Everybody knows the joy of a clear frosty morning; even those who cannot feel its charm must acknowledge its appeal to the other senses; the sun rising in a redness that fades through every warm shade to palest gold until the light above, white and piercing, is reflected from the cold and brilliant earth; the turquoise sky; the perfect stillness of the atmosphere, when every distant sound is sharp and clear but all Nature is hushed in her deep winter sleep—only the robin dare make his little melody of praise and thanksgiving. Here we have such a morning; no vegetation blocks the view; the road leads straight away into distant hills, deep in their winter quiet. Only man is moving and at work; he must dig and kill, prune and cut and labour without ceasing. Turner’s “old-tempered nag, Crop Ear,” that drew him winter and summer, to and fro, up and down as he went sketching and storing memories, is said to have been immortalised in this picture.

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*“Petworth Park.”*

Again we have a picture of sunrise with all its glamour and charm—the fascination of the dawn of an unknown day; the time of peace and drowsy half-awakening before the world is strained and tired with the anxious cares and burden of the day, when the air is sweet and fresh, laden with the peculiar and exhilarating smell of an early spring morning. The sky is full of the light and life of the morning sun, and Turner has given it to us at its intensest and most vital moment, when every fiery cloud waxes and wanes, burns and fades again in an ever-changing glory until the day is come in its fulness and strength. See the dewy earth, the long trembling shadows, the shades of night loth to depart, the trees, some of them still asleep, others full of morning light, hailing the new-born day.

*“Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage.”*

The title of this picture seems to have but little reference to the subject itself except that it is a representation of Italy—a gigantic task in which Turner set himself to illustrate all that seemed to him most typical of Italian scenery.

“And now, fair Italy!  
Thou art the garden of the world, the home  
Of all Art yields, and Nature can decree;  
Even in thy desert, what is like to thee?  
Thy very weeds are beautiful, thy waste  
More rich than other climes’ fertility;  
Thy wreck a glory, and thy ruin graced

With an immaculate charm which cannot be defaced.”

It is a realization of Italy with its sunny skies; its blue and distant mountains that carry the spirit of man away over and beyond them into an infinity of space; its ruins, bathed in the sunset glow—remains of ancient glories—with their suggestion of romance; its people of to-day in their brightly-coloured clothes, rejoicing in the warm and scented southern evening; its rich vegetation; its stone-pines; its hills, especially that on the right with castle-crowned summit standing sharp-cut against a vivid Italian sky; its woods and water—a wonderful harmony of exquisitely soft and opalescent colour. “Soft outlines melting in the distant atmosphere; gentle curves of earth everywhere; rich masses of remoter foliage, and luxuriant vegetation in the foreground; these of themselves would suggest ideas of beauty, but they are sustained and accompanied by the tenderest, most delicate execution.”

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*“Dido building Carthage.”*

Dido, fleeing from Tyre in sorrow, carrying with her her dead husband’s treasures, came to Africa. She wished to build a city of beautiful and stately buildings, and, being allowed to buy as much land as might be enclosed by a bull’s hide, she had it cut into thongs, and it enclosed enough land to build a nucleus around which the city of Carthage gradually arose.

Turner never went to Africa, but this picture is his finest effect of colour before he had seen Italy. After his first visit to that country he used much richer colours, his effects were brighter and more intense. Apparently, in this as in other paintings of the same kind, he did not even try to find out what were the scenery and atmospheric conditions, but drew entirely upon his imagination and the countless pictures stored up in his wonderful memory. As has been pointed out, this scene might be an English riverside and the palaces Georgian buildings, but Turner has given us here a poem of light and shade—what does it matter how Carthage really looked when we see these shadows of deepening twilight, when, streaming through the valley, the setting sun, in a blazing sky filled with brilliant feathery clouds, lights a path on the waters and picks out to glorify the details of stone and figure? “The principal object in the foreground of Turner’s ‘Building of Carthage’ is a group of children sailing toy boats. The exquisite choice of this incident, as expressive of the ruling passion, which was to be the source of future greatness, in preference to the tumult of busy stonemasons or arming soldiers, is quite as appreciable when it is told as when it is seen.”

Authorities quoted:—

Ruskin. “Modern Painters.”

“Turner Gallery at Marlborough House.”

Master Painters. “Turner, from the works of John Ruskin.”

P. G. Hamerton, “Life of J. M. W. Turner.”

J. C. Monkhouse, “J. M. W. Turner.