

A NOTE ON GUSTAVE MOREAU.



T is at first necessary to separate some of Gustave Moreau's characteristics from the loose admiration they have brought about. A dim recognition of his excellence has been caught by the current of opinion, for it has root in an old longing, that touch of *nostalgic* unrest we have, wrapped among the habits and renunciations forming our ways—in that truly spiritual leaven, to push circumstances at times beyond their common scope, in our craving for manna, at least, upon the alien sand. But whatever in the present finds self-expression in his work has, after all, gathered there into some special thing, lifted out and beyond the capacities of his surroundings; and the existence of so complete, so finished an art utterance amid the unkind haste of to-day becomes strange if one forgets for the moment how irresistible is all art growth, whatever may be its everyday conditions, how separate is always its real achievement, contemporary opinion concerning it being merely a matter of accident. If an air of pallour in its fruition marks this obstinacy in growth, art, nevertheless, has become gifted by the effort with a new sense of beauty, or one, that, for its degree, seems different from the older sense that was only enamoured of health; the temptation to see things by this newer knowledge will in part explain the fascinated return of the art mind to the past, for we watch it in perspective, conscious of its calm (tinged possibly with weariness), through an atmosphere coloured by the atoms of our many experiences and ways of thought,—through a subtle apperception of our weakness, become a subject also of interest in our half-longing return to that past, so divine in shoulder, so youthful in its immunity from failure. Yet such retrospective curiosity may prove new only for its present degree; one may be tempted to imagine it part of all art effort, in revolt from the immediate, were not opposition too partial, too limited in work, too separate from the grave sense of growth and expansion, that is art, to be of serious value as suggestion.

In a characteristic phrase Gautier once sketched this desire to possess the past with the added charm it now has for us; he ends with a mention of Flaubert as incurable in this matter, and Flaubert's correspondence teems with revealing touches evoked at the actual contact with facts meaningless to others as mere loose rubble or dust of the past, but, to his gift of divination, redolent of rare sensations, intense, even to the verge of awe; so that a stray aroma of rose or balm from the rent in some sepulchre conjured up to him the shapes, the passions of a world whose being, passed into his books, yields the essence of that magic he felt so keenly, with much, to the reader, of that sunset glamour, of nostalgia.

This love of forgotten things joined to Flaubert's admiration for Moreau's pictures, has led to obvious comparison between the two artists, though a slight pause in judgment might show how false all such comparisons must be. With Flaubert that haunting force was vivid to create the real light of a possible past with each detail cast out into clearness, or troubled only by the emotions of his actors to whom these realities become strange

strange at times, as so many things must have been in those periods of unquestioning expression.

With the painter the case is all different, for Gustave Moreau remains a lover of mythical half-light, light not yet lost in the encroaching night nor absorbed by the approach of day, of emotions in a morning twilight when Cerberus, forgetting his chain, may wander beside dark pools, near ghostly reeds; for time, a thing so present with the author, has become suspended to the moment when neither ship nor god need be gone yet; and nothing is importunate with its reality. We are in a world only of mid-distances, bounded by low-breathing seas, with littoral towns against the sky; in a place where the passing of a bird, for its suddenness, is an emotion. Here are flowers with strings of crystals made sharp in hue and texture, for appeal to our visual-touch, to forbid the conviction that all this may be mirage, that his mystic creatures must soon vanish with the perfumes ceasing to breathe in those censers, and leave with us but a handful of aromatic dust, the dust of hair, dust of laurel leaf, and the glimmer in the grey of forgotten things; as, in ancient urns, we find a tarnished coin among the faded ash, a gilded siren as symbol of some story it is unable to recall. Thus all resemblance to Flaubert lies only in the compass of their hatred for the commonplace.

In a book of impressions on art (*Certains*) Monsieur Huysmans lays too great stress on the element of contrast in some designs Gustave Moreau executed toward the illustration of La Fontaine. With him, for the sake of critical emphasis, much of the painter's work becomes too paradoxical in means not to be somewhat mechanical. His descriptions elsewhere of other pictures, as well as this note, abound, it is true, with acuteness of feeling; they have unfortunately over-influenced subsequent criticisms more general in tone. It is through these, possibly, that Monsieur Huysmans' statements become annoying; nevertheless, in justification of him, Gustave Moreau's consent to become involved in such a task was strange it must be admitted, in some degree unlucky, none of the fables suggesting a subject fitted to his great, but entirely lyrical scope. Animals under unaccustomed conditions—at the best, persons sententious on manners—lay outside the world of his vision; not to seem purposeless, they had to be clothed with a new air of unreality, to move in the flora and cloud of a fairyland empty of those gracious figures that meet him there half-way, for his great knowledge of them. The number of these drawings became troublesome, and, despite the beauty of many, one turned with a sense of relief to other works where his handling, with its virile nervousness, moved with more freedom; where motives dear to him made quick his hand and pleased his vision, realising those instants so suggestive, when the fury of an act has passed or gathers into new purpose beneath skies flushed by an aftermath of sun that recall for their touches of orange and bands of brooding purple these words, "*quelles violettes frondaisons vont descendre?*"—words so expressive of that hush in nature, become strange in expectation of some countersign pregnant for the future.

It is against a sky like this an all-persuasive figure moves away, the
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head of Orpheus lies between her hands, and one scarcely knows if her fastidious dress, decked with so many outlandish things, has been clasped to her wrists and chaste throat in real innocence of the burden she holds mystically ; but this hint of sentiment is too slight, too fugitive in the picture to become heavy or morbid. Enigmatic forms in contemplation move through other works ; the *Salomé*, for instance, where she is already conscious of the doom between her and this face whose nimbus grows in the declining daylight, as the dawn might grow on a blind when the lamp goes out ; the sky centres to a blood-like spot, half cloud, half garment of the executioner passing beyond, a fearful messenger to God. It is a spot of blood like this, in the shape of a little cloud above the sea—clasping in its most secret blue the future Rhodes,—that gives to the picture of Helen an undercurrent of doom to which the actors in it are half or all indifferent. This picture, unless my memory deceives me as to its execution, confirms his tendencies in one effort whose elements of beauty had haunted him before, but, till then, not achieved so supreme an aspect. From the brow of a cliff that is a town Helen moves, pedestalled on broken colours that creep upward across her dress in a succession of amulets and fronds, to twine and twist into frail leaves, with stray spilths of ruby towards the chalice of a blossom she holds near her face whose flesh is luminous against the samite sky. And below her rainbow garments in which the colours of the clouds and earth are married, so grouped and so clasped together to form part of the ramparts, are the wan faces and faded hands of those who, for her sake, have been won to Death ; and their mouths smile yet, for, at the moment of death, when the lips grow wreathed, and the eyes profound, they have sunk into the arrested sleep of some Elysian place, to wait, with “that touch of irony that must have been Persephone’s,” their return to life, or the prolonging of their rest into this hour plucked from out of time. Thus, leaves of laurel and gathered buds are still in their hands, or the swords whose edge was fashioned against themselves. And that silent brotherhood, this buttress to the house that must not stand, is clothed with wreaths and incense haze, as if about a mystic sacrifice for which nothing can be too good, too strong, nothing too fair. What touch of foreboding may linger here smoulders, away in the cloud and horizon, for the artist does not tell if she, who found nothing but praise between the lips of man, and praise gazing from his eyes, is capable of happiness even ; if hand over hand she is about to leave this place whose nights and days have become bitter with the ache of love and grief ; if this phantom knows herself to be more than woman, a symbol in some divine semblance, and would exult could she know laughter or tears. In this picture Baude-laire’s hymn to beauty has become visible, but purged of whatever, through the limitations of a language, may be touched by posture, epigram ; and her eyes know they have no need to see.

Moreau has shown her elsewhere (in a small water-colour drawing, *L’Enlèvement*) under the closer light of actuality, imaginative actuality, but wrapped always in her separateness from blame. She leans softly in an amorous bend against Paris, on the foppery of whose Phrygian dress the

artist has dwelt with minutest care, making it a delicate setting to her half-nakedness ; the flight of their chariot drawn by willing horses is past a landscape of crags, the sky burns its passion out above the sea becoming black ; and in the blue, among the rocks, the Dioscuri still on horseback are accomplices. The artist has abandoned the strenuous finish in workmanship of his masterpiece, to become rapid of hand in the pencilling of cloud and form, and by an afterthought, half poetic intuition, half sheer pleasure in colour, he has added a bird dipped in crimson as a stray envoy of Venus, accentuating by its aerial flight the buoyancy of the lines in the picture ; for he is always lucky in such suggestive touches, and his shrewd sense of literary suggestion in painting never fails him.

Literature, by gradual process of appeal to the imagination, the sense of growth through which it brings things about, may show any incident, implying its degree of import in a hundred ways, conveying a sensation all pleasurable subtil, where the eye, called to view only a result, might find mere fact in illustration. Take the sonnet by Ronsard, whose subject at first sight would appear almost pictorial with its implied winter light and mirror gleam in which Helen, become old and wrinkled, muses sadly on her vanished beauty. Imagine it translated in painting with the implied splendour once hers only dimly shadowed forth, how uncertain would be the result dramatically ; outside the field of words her momentary bitterness, or harlot's petulant frivolity, or whatever might make her more real to us, would become a record only of that mood.

In an early phase of his art one great painter has succeeded in painted narrative. When taking up the tangled threads of a remote legend, Rossetti has cast together under the search-light of an intense and generous imagination, not only the incidents of a story interwoven with new poetic additions and suggestions, but the almost digressive element of personal predilections (predilections with a touch of surprise, discovery) in circumstances and counter-incidents ; shrinking from no complexity for his certainty of grasp in close-knit design and handling whose expressiveness never flagged.

With Gustave Moreau, the dramatic element is entirely evocative ; one of undoubted intensity, but under lyrical and ornamental conditions his creatures would become troubled and shadowy indeed ; if brought face to face with facts and real passions, they would swoon upon themselves, called back by some sudden Lethean murmur, or inner portent ; their realities are confined to a few fair things fostered in the shadow of palaces and ravines, in the mists from rivers, where light, water and air have become resolved into the cold limpid colours of the topaz. The evidence of separate life, of the *without*, so hotly insisted on by Rossetti, is reduced to the half-fascinated wheeling, the circular-flight of a bird, fraught at times with great realistic point, as in the shrieking seamew that flashes across the fall of Sappho from the rocks. His choice is of half-mystic things, things of ritual ; in this and his partiality for certain colour harmonies will be found his greatest limitation ; yet in this lies also a sense of voluptuous melancholy so attractive to the spectator if unbiassed by the conventions of French and English habits.

The danger is great by over-emphasis to deprive a living thing in art, with its variety and many phases, of lifelikeness and freedom, as bad painters deprive their subject of all "undulation" by a rule of thumb they are pleased to consider completeness of rendering. The art of Gustave Moreau is living, varied and, like all living things, capable of that counter-change in virtue or personal force that is allowed even to divisions in nature, through force of will, desire, or in mere reaction and fatigue.

Therefore among his pictures some will be found very different in temper, pictures impetuous in dramatic feeling, as the *Diomède dévoré par ses chevaux*, in which the feet of the tortured man bend back with suffering, and his whole body is borne from the ground in its fall by a vehement gesture of cursing and the rush of his horses; the *Phaéton*, *L'Hydre de Lerne*, *Le Retour d'Ulysse*, the *Sapho expirante*. But these are largely a reaction from too long a brooding in his charmed habitual mood, and in a score of things they have a sense of nervous refinement, an implied languor in their rage, that groups them in his enigmatic world of terrible silences. Yet it is odd, not a little illustrative of the real lack of artistic activity now prevalent, that such works should be the only pictures that recall the autocratic, the over-bearing impetuosity of Delacroix, produced by one whose temperament might well have been averse to this frenzy.

To-day accusations of plagiarism are broadcast against very ordinary performances even, lest, in the hurry, one man should fortunately escape. With this great artist none of these accusations is reconcileable to the authentic stamp of his personality, drifting as they do between Mantegna, Turner, Blake! or vaguely the Italian masters.

Such questions are hopeless, such similitudes would have puzzled King Solomon himself; had it been on the subject of art similitudes that the bright queen wished to be enlightened, his wisdom might—who knows?—have been tasked beyond the powers of his divining ring, and that amulet of his, for the control of "loose spirits in their places and the very insects whose ways are in the sand."

An influence of Chasseriau has been put forward; an early picture, belonging, like the *Jason et Médée*, to a period of transition (of youthful ingenuity), will largely explain this critical impression, for Moreau inscribes it, in a dedication near the frame, to the memory of this dead artist. But the youth (in *Le Jeune Homme et La Mort*) who crowns himself on the threshold of Death's house, a handful of plucked flowers in his hand, is far removed in purpose from anything seen hitherto in French art, though some accents to the drawing remind one that Gustave Moreau was once the winner of a now forgotten Prix de Rome; and there is a difference of more than two art centuries between his shape and the passive figure of Death, whose work of destruction is left to an Anteros, too young, extinguishing a torch tricked with nightshade.

It might be difficult to account for so many opinions concerning the genesis of his pictures, did one not know the tendency in most people to discover similitudes through a lack of some genuine test to their impressions.

With the unaccustomed passer, trailing his feet about a gallery of antiques,
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all remain alike as unaccountable things in stone; this casts an oblique light into much criticism that, before work fastidious in its expression, jealous of its point of view, will recognise the uniform stamp of refinement on imitation, and, till the word be found by others, expressing our indebtedness for this new knowledge, knows but the word Plagiarism, so smooth to the ears of indifference.

There are many unusual influences blent in the fabric of his creations, influences of many moods and memories, playing on them, drawing expression where they strike in some delightful iridescence of tone and thought. None would resolve the beauty of a crystal into known gases, in some arrangement of angles; and art, unlike natural products, besides its elements of composition, contains some of the divine initial force that brings it about in emanation, as it were, whose quality calls force to force. To experience the sense of fascination holding him at work; for its sake, to combine, to hoard, towards that season when this end is achieved, weaving positive time and emotions into it, must be the only way of enjoying work like his, certainly of no use to persons of acquired feelings, to whom all new effort remains objectionable and obscure. Yet the penetration of this obscurity is to find it enchanted with "spirit eyes"; this strangeness outside our immediate experience becomes a simple possession for to-morrow, winding as a stirring freshness might among the leaves, in that which each day brings of bud to bloom. In the wrack of the past ("that approximate eternity certainly ours") this artist has plunged, to bring with his return the evocative chime on chime of a new thing or message. One sentence of De Guérin's recalls to my mind not only this, his great gift, but, very curiously, the possible aspect of a picture by him; the lines describe a young fisherman whose body, for a moment swayed against the sky, plunges among the trouble of the waters, to return, his head sometimes radiant with wreaths.

His gift of renewing our interest in old, outworn subjects is revealed in many works—*Moïse exposé sur le Nil*, *La naissance de Vénus*, *David*. It would be difficult to imagine a more noble picture than this last for invention, yet more *intimate*, with all its splendour of detail, though, to some, the handling might seem thin, for the colour scheme growing into an evening silver. Each touch is indeed fortunate, from the waning of the incense to the faded lily David holds in guise of sceptre; this hush over all seems the soul of the dying man become mystery and colour, wherein a lamp burns whiter every instant; as each cloud sinks, the weight of a crown bends the royal head towards the hands whose grasp is loose; between the pillars with their symbols moulded in gold, against the marge of the horizon, a bird sings. But, at the foot of the throne, nestling like a dove upon a shrine, its limbs and body folded among the kingly vestments, is a visible spirit of God, clothed with the androgynous garments of the angels; the face has, with its awful joy, some suggestion of a Christ at the age when he disputed with the Doctors, and, by a touch of the imagination really inspired, the fingers of this apparition pass across the harp whose strings the king can no longer know.

Hantise is the word by which a new critic has conveyed the secret note
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whose obsession strikes so weird a sweetness through the work of Gustave Moreau. And his art is verily haunted by that fantastic and goading spirit of perfection, who dwells always in the centremost chamber of the past ; but his personal way of bringing this near to others remains his grave achievement. In a train of delicate purposes he passes a sponge across the lost hues of some ancient picture of passion, making it visible, not only for that moment but for many moments of return ; he makes actual that which must be too frequently but the echo of a remote recollection, *nostalgia*, for lack of a better word, an emotion naturally decried of those passers, whose bread is the wreck and refuse from the sea of circumstance, and to whom this strange activity seems hectic, even dangerous.

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