

## IMAGINATION IN MODERN ART.

RANDOM NOTES ON WHISTLER, SARGENT, AND BESNARD.

### I.—THE PEACOCK ROOM.

WE talked a long time of the future of painting while sitting that Sunday afternoon, watching the water under the bridge of King's College; watching the elms on the opposite bank growing gradually dark and without substance, mere silhouettes on the pale blue sky with its scudding cirrus feathers. The tree tops were more beautiful and fantastic still reflected in the river: a wide scalloping of black silver trees on paler silver of water, burnished on unburnished, swaying, rippling, circled by the leaps of the fish; and then, on this pattern of undefinable exquisite metal colour, the long tails of the weeping willow, reflected golden, flaming up and down in the moving water. . . . It suggested to us, not the tiresome old question whether such things could be imitated by painters, but rather, by its delightful fancifulness of pattern and colour, whether painting would, in the future, revert to decoration. And my friend reminded me that I said, one day, that the painters of our times are rather laborious precursors than creators of delectable things, holding, in great measure, a position analogous to that of the Uccellos and Castagnos and Pollaiolos who prepared the way for Botticelli, and Leonardo, and Michael Angelo.

Surely there must come an end to the fuss about Reality, and about the thing which modern painters call Harmony, meaning thereby not pleasantness of total result, but homogeneousness of momentary effect, action and reaction of colour and light and texture at the same instant. As a matter of fact, since fact is invoked, such simultaneity is rarely perceived by our mind, less rarely even retained by our memory and impressed upon our feeling, because we see in time as much as in space, and do not see many things at once. The old masters did not worry about such matters. Titian, for instance, painted a background to the *Sacred and Profane Love* whose light is certainly considerably later on in the afternoon than the light on the figures of the foreground; and Lotto put a moon and moonlit landscape behind his wicked turbaned lady with the stone-pinks (his masterpiece at Bergamo), while illuminating her face with the last daylight. And is this not right? Do we not perceive the figures in the foreground first, the landscape after? and does not our imagination supply the passage, give the moment when the light shall not have crept away from the landscape, when the light shall have already faded from the faces? The colour of the two halves of the picture seems rather to tune our soul to a chord, as it were, of harmonious feeling, a chord



of rapidly succeeding notes like the great ground-out chords of an organ, instead of pitching it to a meagre unison. For pictures like these are painted to please our soul by means of the eye, not to convince our eye idly, with no profit to our soul. And will not pictures be painted again in this spirit? Surely. The time is fast coming when all this research of light and values will be used as Michael Angelo and Perugino used the anatomy and perspective of their predecessors—to please themselves and us.

But of course none of this can happen until not only the painters but (what takes longer) the beholders shall have thoroughly learned the ways of light and surface, the reactions of colours. For the future of painting, the new decoration—decoration for both the eye and the fancy, as all great art is,—the future of painting lies not with line, but with colour, and with the human figure probably reduced to colour pattern; as in the hands of Michael Angelo it once consisted of pattern of line.

The few great poetic paintings which are really modern, and fore-runners of what may come, Besnard's *Ecole de Pharmacie*, and *Hôtel de Ville* ceiling, Michetti's "Votive Procession," and above all, I think, John Sargent's "Carnation, Lily" (a poem of flowers, lanterns, tapers, and children, in honour, one would say, of an unseen Madonna), show us that much. Whatever poetry there may be in future painters, whatever sense of harmony and splendour and mystery they may receive from life and render back, transmuted, through art, will be connected with colour and tone. Nay, there will once more arise a school of *pure decoration* giving us something analogous to the interlaced prophets and sibyls, to the firmaments of gold and blue, among which heraldic creatures lurk and legends blossom out in rhythmic order, as in those most wonderful Borgia Rooms in the Vatican. Only the rhythm will be of colour, not line, as in the forest moss and leaf veinings, the liquid fire-streakings of precious marbles, the wavings and interlacings of water and weeds, the irregular interchange of glaucous purple and sunny gold and beryl green of sea and river shallows.

Nay, the thing has already been done in that wonderful *Peacock Room* of Whistler's—the Peacock Room which so very few of us took the trouble to see, and which at this moment, for aught I know, may have ceased to be visible, nay, to exist any longer! In it one might judge what may be done, particularly with the new susceptibilities brought by contact with Japanese art, analogous to the new susceptibilities brought to mediæval art by the antique. How trifling is the importance of the real form, the structure of the peacock, in this blue field of night, strewn with peacocks' eyes and chrysanthemum petals, where the great birds plume and swirl, with their gold-sequined tails and breasts, and their pupils of diamonds? This is the poetry of the



peacock's feather and colour as it remains in our mind when we have watched him shaking himself, flapping tail and wings in anger, and screaming with tense snake-like throat. The peacock as an anatomical creature, a near relation of fowl and turkey, and liable, if cooked, to the same method of carving, has nothing to do with this. Thinking of that *Peacock Room*, and sitting there watching the water by the bridge of King's College, we discussed in this fashion the chances of painting in the future.

Once painters have learned the necessary craft, and beholders have felt the emotion attaching to things not human, as much as they already feel the emotion of human things; shall we not see walls and ceilings covered with patterns like these river reflections—silver-on-silver scalloping, dark tree tops on pale sky, ripple of current over weeds, circles of jumping fish, flaming in and out of willow boughs turned to green and gold in the water? And will this not, far better than ten thousand landscape views, satisfy the sense of the poetry that lies in nature?

## II.—THE DOOR VAULT OF BOSTON LIBRARY.

The cigarette smoke, as I watch it, recalls the image of Sargent's *Astarte* in her moon-mist; and thence my thoughts go on to the figure corresponding to her in that barrel vault of the Boston Library: the wicked Bull Monster, Apis? Moloch? I know not which, but wicked certainly, with his haunches pressing down the world of ghosts, and his white flaring eyes. An evil creature, or creator. And my thoughts run on the strange change which makes Man deify no longer his own instincts and the material forces of nature, but (and my mind's eye catches the great archaic Apollo, of Olympian type, who is bursting the bonds of Python, and killing him in the midst of the other strange chaotic divinities of that Boston Library ceiling) the human thought which reduces nature and instinct to order, and from mischief turns them to good.

Such is the kind of imaginative value which we may expect, more and more, from modern art. A certain amount of culture, almost of learning, has come to all of us, not remaining necessarily an external, formal matter as history must have been even to our grandfathers; still less a matter of supposed utility of practical application, teaching (as in Montesquieu's and Gibbon's days) lessons for the misunderstood. Future out of a misunderstood Past. The historical sciences are adding to the contents, and, what is more, to the habits of our thought and feeling, very much as the theology of the Middle Ages did to the living imagination of our ancestors. Mankind requires, besides material, intellectual, and even besides purely æsthetic activities, the lazy activity of day-dreaming, of mingled fancy and belief. And the field for this has shifted from the depths of the firmament which the



Middle Ages peopled with eddying choirs of angels and quivering luminous patterns of blessed souls, to those other far-off abysses which we call the Past. Them we fill with forms of wonder, yet not without some discipline of reason; and out of them come to us, at odd moments of our lives, visions we half believe in, like this one of Sargent's strange, painted Theogony.

What each of these figures means, and what is exactly intended by their relation to one another, I have no doubt could be explained verbally by the painter, in perfect exposition faithful to the very latest doctrines of Comparative Mythology. But, even as in the mediæval allegories—say the Pisan "Triumph of Death" and the allegories of St. Francis at Assisi; nay, I contend, even as in the allegories of the pediments of Olympia and the Parthenon—the imagination does not care to dwell on such dry definitions (guessing them to be of very fluctuating kind, and to be upset to-morrow), but makes at once for the complex imaginative impression of the whole.

Here are a few indications of what that Boston Library vault has left in my memory.

One of the rising, gradually vaulted sides of the arch is filled up by that terrible Bull; colossal, dusky, with shining wonderful collar of cow-bells, and with terrible white empty eyes. He is being carried in a palanquin *on a cushion of crushed people*; the palanquin is made of carved and gilded Asiatic lions, open-mouthed, roaring, of burning red gold. It is being carried by black Egyptian figures, erect, tapering, like brands of charcoal. From the gold sun disc round the Bull's head stream golden, spear-like rays with little gold hands at the end. The Bull has, in addition to his bent forelegs, a pair of terrible human arms, which go whirling about his head; except the black silent carriers, the whole procession seems to advance blinking, lightening, and roaring. But the Bull sits sleepy, sleek, fat, implacable, among that hail of gold shafts and that gnashing and roaring of gold lions, crushing the world's inhabitants into jam under his claws and his hind-quarters. And behold! low down, below the Bull's palanquin, the dreadful triumph of life, is the consolation of death: a pale blue mummy-case stands open, and a winged soul, a bird, slowly, silently escapes.

Opposite, meanwhile, floats Astarte in her blue veil. She is, so to speak, the main smoke wreath of unseen fires, and the strange winged creatures surrounding her as in a cocoon, whirling in slow crab movements, are the minor smoke spirals; they form wings to her head and wings to her garment, vague whirling night creatures, arms only and legs, round the long erect goddess, swathed chrysalislike in her blue veil, and they seem in a way to be evoking, nay, *weaving* her into existence, a moon wraith swaying over the sea, a mystic opium vision; the night, muffled, expectant, so lucid and yet so vague, full of possible dangers.



In the central part of the vault the coils of a python form a necklace to a terrible black colossal woman's face, with a scarlet wafer on her forehead; but this face of Night, seen from the opposite side and reversed, turns into a fearful squat face, with a flaming red hole where the nostrils should be. It is thus that in the thoughts of early peoples the same names, the same gods, may stand for various opposite things, the various conflicting parts of different schemes; nay, not of early peoples only: in the theogony of later times, is not the Alma Venus of Lucretius the same as the destroying Cypris of Euripides? nay, in our undivided thought, in our conception of nature, "entgöttert," as Schiller calls it, do we not find such strange double interpretations, the same force regarded as evil or as good, the evil and good merging inextricably?

This is nightmare. But in the central zodiac of the vault, relieved against its duskiess, moves a superb archaic Apollo, with deep curled hair and topknot and cloak of living red; his legs are still tied in the coils of the great python; but he has planted a shaft in the monster's neck, and in another moment he will be free. Will the vision of terrible or ambiguous divinities of nature then be dispelled? We may imagine so.

This is not mere archæology; or what in it is archæology may, as is probable, wither and drop away, and the value of pictorial imagination remain the same, even as, when all the exegetic learning of Renan may have grown obsolete, his visions of patriarchs and prophets will still remain as art. All genuine imagination has the power of calling forth emotion; and the imagination of the painter, as of the writer, of our day may work its transmutations as much on the changing aspects of the past as on the unchangeable aspects of what we call nature. The emotion after all is fed, in both cases, only by what the artist thinks he sees, not by what, were such a thing psychologically possible, he actually verifies as existing.

### III.—THE ÉCOLE DE PHARMACIE.

I had gone to seek the professor on business at the museum of natural history; the errand was tiresome, and such places do not attract my fancy. And behold! I went away charmed, and carried the impression about for days in my mind, like a tune: the spacious, whitewashed halls and staircases, boys and girls waiting about between lectures; on the top floor the professor's small rooms, full of books, papers, chemical bottles and retorts, minerals, dried flowers, and bones of mastodons; no ornament save what reality accidentally brings; also windows opening on big foreign trees and tall bamboos, letting in greenish light and song of birds. What good, impersonal peace! How different an atmosphere from that of historical and critical studies! For here, despite all bickerings of learned men with



each other, the subject of study at least is peaceful, not to be criticised, slandered, vilipended, but awaking only solemn sense of recognition. And as to poetic interest, surely such a life, the life of a student of nature, must have æsthetic moments of its own, supreme, ineffable, when lyrics without words are overheard, and unseen visions caught by the mind's eye.

Such notions are probably familiar to most people; but to me, I confess, they came quite new; and when I ask myself how, never having occurred before, they at last came at all, I feel I owe it all to M. Besnard's frescoes of the *École de Pharmacie*.

I call them frescoes, because, although not technically, they are spiritually such; in order to separate them from all that our moderns have done, well or ill, in the way of paintings to hang in rooms or galleries; and to connect them with the great mural symbolisms in which the old men painting Campo Santo walls or Vatican ceilings presented harmonious sights, not to our eyes merely but to our minds.

What are the precise subjects of these painted poems, as difficult to define as the subject of the greatest written ones, in proportion almost to their emotional, imaginative powers? For a mood, a fancy, is complex and constantly changing. It is easy to write "*Le Travail*," "*La Science*," or "*Temperantia*," or "*Hope*," under the allegorical figure of Puvion de Chavannes or Burne-Jones, because, save for conventional attributes, they are mere court-cards, and certainly provoke no imaginative disturbances, no emotions difficult to define in the beholder. But, even as in the case of the mediæval men who painted the "*Triumph of Death*" at Pisa, the "*Good Government*" at Siena, or the "*Wedding of St. Francis with Poverty*," so in the case of the *École de Pharmacie*, the mind of the painter has caught fire, blazing in a whole train of images and feelings, at the touch of a mere name, a noun; in the case of Besnard, of dreary sounding words in *ology*.

The vestibule of the *École de Pharmacie*; the future apothecaries of France revealing their studies by whiffs of withering fumes; that was to fire the painter's imagination. Out of that he was to make his Amiens portals, his Sala del Cambio, his ducal palace ceilings. Chemicals, drugs, pharmacopeias—what do these words stand for? Why, nothing less than the world's greatest poem, epic, dramatic and lyric turn about; the attack of death, the victory of life. And accordingly M. Besnard painted his two first big compositions; no names attached to them, but which name themselves *Sickness* and *Convalescence*.

*The Attack of Death.* A girl, almost a child, propped up in bed, fainting, the bed seen foreshortened from in front, the doctor holding her up with one arm (a great, strong woman stretches vigorously across the foot of the bed to hold her firm in front), while with the



other hand he stretches out the glass into which another young woman is slowly pouring some medicine. The strong, solemn importance of the doctor's movement; the solemn, restrained, almost hieratic slowness of the girl pouring out; all human pettiness and weakness disappeared (even as it really does) in the presence of tragic emergency; leaving these prosaic modern people as majestic as personages of Michael Angelo's, majestic as, *in reality, they exist in the feelings of the beholder* of such a scene. A clock on a bracket: Life, Death, the long pendulum swinging between them.

*The Victory of Life.* A suffused, sunny, tonic day, indicated by the pale lilac shadows of poplars barely in leaf, and by freshly washed clothes shaking on a drying line. The convalescent woman is supported by a great, strong maid, leading her joyfully and carefully; they are met by a most alive little child, surprised, acclaiming. The wide-eyed convalescent's hands are resting on the hands of the other woman, in a sort of St. Catherine's ecstasy, the rapture of weakness, the oppressed opening out to overstrong joy.

After the uses of pharmaceutical studies, M. Besnard was set to illustrate those studies themselves. Instead of showing us "Botany," "Geology," "Organic Chemistry," in the appropriate figures of Græco-Roman damsels carrying microscopes, retorts, and herbals, he incurred, no doubt, the blame of poetic persons by painting the circular lecture-room full of eager young heads craning towards the professor and his blackboard; and the spring woods with the botanists busy among the glints of sun. But having done this, M. Besnard had by no means finished: indeed, it was now that he showed that he, too, could be poetical. Here are the learned youths studying; yonder, in those compositions of *Sickness* and *Convalescence*, the results we expect from their studies. There remains something more, and this the painter will show us: the thoughts which these studies send up into the souls, the glimpses, the thrills of the student. What may these be? Here is the primæval marsh: dawn, cold, rosy, on the vague grey waters and watery grey vegetation, all level, change just beginning to curdle this monotony; here the tropical river; and far beyond, our modern, weary times: but of that anon. Also prehistoric visions; the great curling glaucous wave, with plesiosaurs swaying in it; one of them, his jaws open, and long neck swollen, is calling passionately to the depths; a red sunset over the unbounded sterile sea.

The next composition is a sort of primitive rice marsh; double-tusked elephants splashing delightedly in the warm, shallow, pinkish water. No room for man here! The next, again, a sunny circular bay: water sweeping in as if angry, surprised at finding itself enclosed. Among pink sands and grey bent grass some wild horses start up, swishing tails, snorting. The world before man, with animals unsubdued, imperious; everything inconceivably fresh and serene in pale rosy and palest grey-green morning.



We now come to Man. Another composition of sad bluish, slaty colour. A woman and child, seen from behind, wading, fishing in a lake. On the beach, under the piles of a lacustrine hut, an ape-like man, making a design on a bone. Opposite, across the water, elephants or mammoths are paddling and great cloud vapours rising. A sense of dawn-chilliness; the vapours seem the evaporations of vaguely seen glaciers; everything lilac, bluish, numb. The man, with the still ape-like head, has yet a look of weariness, almost distress; he is not fitted for this surrounding, not like the elephants opposite, under the steaming hills. A strange, dumb, still half-glacial world, such as that prehistoric world must *seem to us*.

I have underlined the last words, "seem to us," because the chief characteristic, intellectually, of M. Besnard's École de Pharmacie symbols is that he never makes an attempt to paint things as they may really have been; or, rather, that any such attempt he may have made has turned, by the poetic force of his nature, into the painting of our visions of things, of those sights which are conjured up, mood and all, by some deeply suggestive word; the importance of separate items arranging itself entirely according to the imaginative and emotional value. Thus, in the large composition representing Geology, the party of geologists are climbing not so much *up* as *into* the mountains, even as does our fancy; they are a mere vague crowd save in the foreground, where one or two are doing the act of climbing so that we may realise that act for them all; two more are examining a piece of rock, and breaking it. The procession moves diagonally across the frozen snow, towards vague, shadowy blue caves—you would think into the very bowels of the mountain, whose heights are shrouded in blue, beckoning clouds. The human beings, pictorially realised only as movement and the necessary solidity, never as anatomical form, are quite subordinate to their surroundings. It is the great mountains which fill the mind, or, rather, it is the emotional vision of the mountains—the thought of them. It is interesting to compare this interest in the imaginative act of mountaineering and indifference to displaying the bodily mechanism thereof with the way in which even Raphael, when doing symbolism not spontaneously but to order, has concentrated the interest of the group round Euclid in the leg-and-arm balance of the disciples watching the circles.

I have mentioned these ultra modern decorations of the École de Pharmacie in connection with the mural paintings of the great old Italians; I must go further, and say that, to me, these paintings of M. Besnard's have oddly enough (and increased by the delicate lucid, pale colour) the same kind of serenity as Perugino's finest frescoes. Both these men refuse equally to paint real existence, and what they show us is the *contemplated*. Hence it is that the two great rivers of the École de Pharmacie, the great tropical one, brimful in the jungle, and dimpled and veined with the sulphur and lapis-lazuli reflexion of



skies and plants, not a living being visible; and, on the other hand, the great æstuary, moonlit, dotted with steamers, which goes to the sea (between towned continents spread mapwise and busy wharves, cranes, warehouses, railways) under the observatory whence the father and children watch it musingly at evening; these two rivers, both such as only a modern man could imagine, yet flow eternally, yet wash perpetually the same shores, never proceeding, even as is the case with the stream at the bottom of Perugino's green inland valley. Like it they are seen by the inner sense, existing not in space or time, but in sentiment. And similarly, just as Perugino's evening is for ever suspended, his ten minutes of sunset pallor remaining immortally because they remain in our heart; so also in Besnard's Alpine valleys, the great udder-like clouds, moulding the mountains, hang sucking the rock for ever, for ever ready to burst, yet never, we know, turning and bursting.

Literary art? not more so than that of Michael Angelo's *Division of the Light from the Darkness*, or Tintoret's *Christ before Pilate*. The very point of such art as this is, that it appeals to the imagination and the feeling by processes which are utterly unlike those of literature. Not by the reviving of stored-up images in the mind, but by the actual presentation of visible forms which, by their æsthetic potency, compel moods and thoughts to arise. Indeed, one can understand that, as there are persons to whom Michael Angelo represents only marvellous anatomical foreshortening, and Tintoret merely stupendous brushwork and light and shade, so in the future there may be others to whom the *École de Pharmacie* will represent merely masterly economy of modes of realisation, and a scheme of colour limpid, brilliant, eminently modern, and bringing into painting for the first time the innermost tints of the tea-rose, and the iridescent lilacs and silvers and metallic green of glass patina'd by a long stay underground.

As regards M. Besnard's symbolic quality, which is all that I wished to speak about—his power, I mean, of enormously enlarging our emotional conception of things; with regard to this, it is certain that he is at a disadvantage compared with the old religious painters, so far as getting universal comprehension. For, whereas the old painter-poets had the advantage of dealing with scenes familiar to all men, and calling up at once the reverent tenderness especially required; the imagination and sentiment shown in M. Besnard's work is still very personal, very sporadic; and only those can understand it who have been initiated, so to speak, by the grace of their own constitution. But the mural work of the *École de Pharmacie* is not merely an æsthetic delight in itself, but, as I began by saying with reference to my morning in that professor's study, the source of some wider poetic conceptions of life.

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