

William Hazlitt
On Gainsborough's Pictures

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THERE is an anecdote connected with the reputation of Gainsborough's Pictures, which rests on pretty good authority. Sir Joshua Reynolds, at one of the Academy dinners, speaking of Gainsborough, said to a friend, 'He is undoubtedly the best English landscape-painter.' 'No,' said Wilson, who overheard the conversation, 'he's not the best English landscape-painter, but he is the best portrait-painter in England.' They were certainly both wrong; but the story is creditable to the variety of Gainsborough's talents.

Of his portraits, in the present collection at the British Gallery, the only fine one is *A Portrait of a Youth*. This picture is from Lord Grosvenor's collection, where it used to look remarkably well, and has been sometimes mistaken for a Vandyke. There is a spirited glow of youth about the face, and the attitude is striking and elegant. The drapery of blue satin is admirably painted. The Portrait of Garrick is interesting as a piece of biography. He looks much more like a gentleman than in Reynolds's tragi-comic representation of him.—There is a considerable lightness and intelligence in the expression of the face, and a piercing vivacity about the eyes, to which the attention is immediately directed. Gainsborough's own portrait, which has, however, much truth and character, and makes a fine print, seems to have been painted with the handle of his brush. There is a portrait of *The Prince Regent leading a horse*, in which it must be confessed the man has the advantage of the animal.

Gainsborough's landscapes are of two classes, or periods; his early and his later pictures. The former are, we imagine, the best. They are imitations of nature, or of painters who imitated nature;—such as *a Woody Scene*; another, which is a fine imitation of Ruysdael; and *a Road Side, with figures*, which has great truth and clearness. His later pictures are flimsy caricatures of Rubens, who himself carried inattention to accuracy of detail to the utmost limit that it would bear. Lord Bacon says, that 'distilled books are, like distilled waters, flashy things.' The same may be said of pictures.—Gainsborough's latter landscapes are bad water-colour drawings, washed in by mechanical movements of the hand, without any communication with the eye. The truth seems to be, that Gainsborough found there was something wanting in his '*early manner*,'—that is, something beyond mere literal imitation of natural objects, and he seems to have concluded, rather hastily, that the way to arrive at that something more, was to discard truth and nature altogether. He accordingly ran from one extreme into the other. We cannot conceive anything carried to a greater excess of slender execution and paltry glazing, than *A Fox hunted with grey-hounds*, *A romantic Landscape with Sheep at a Fountain*, and many others. We were, however, much pleased with an upright landscape, with figures, which has a fine, fresh appearance of the open sky, with a dash of the wildness of Salvator Rosa; and also with *A Bank of a River*, which is remarkable for the elegance of the forms and the real delicacy of the execution. *A Group of Cattle in a warm Landscape* is an evident imitation of Rubens,

but no more like to Rubens than 'I to Hercules.' *Landscape with a Waterfall* should be noticed for the sparkling clearness of the distance. *Sportsmen in a Landscape* is copied from Teniers with much taste and feeling, though very inferior to the original picture in Lord Radnor's collection.

Of the fancy pictures, on which Gainsborough's fame chiefly rests, we are disposed to give the preference to his *Cottage Children*. There is, we apprehend, greater truth, variety, force, and character, in in this groupe, than in any other. The colouring of the light-haired child is particularly true to nature, and forms a sort of natural and innocent contrast to the dark complexion of the elder sister, who is carrying it. *The Girl going to the Well* is, however, the general favourite. The little dog is certainly admirable. His hair looks as if it had been just washed and combed. The attitude of the Girl is also perfectly easy and natural. But there is a consciousness in the turn of the head, and a sentimental pensiveness in the expression, which is not taken from nature, but intended as an improvement on it. There is a regular insipidity; a systematic vacancy, a round, unvaried smoothness, to which real nature is a stranger, and which is only an idea existing in the painter's mind. We think the gloss of art is never so ill bestowed as on subjects of this kind, which ought to be studies of natural history. It is perhaps the general fault of Gainsborough, that he presents us with an ideal common life, whereas it is only the reality that is here good for any thing. His subjects are softened and sentimentalised too much, it is not simple, unaffected nature that we see, but nature sitting for her picture. Gainsborough, we suspect, from some of the pictures in this collection, led the way to that masquerade style, which piques itself on giving the air of an Adonis to the driver of a hay-cart, and models the features of a milk-maid on the principles of the antique. *The Girl and Pigs* is hardly liable to this objection. There is a healthy glow in the girl's face, which seems the immediate effect of the air blowing upon it. The expression is not quite so good. The *Fox-dogs* are admirable. The young one is even better than the old one, and has undeniable hereditary pretensions. The *Shepherd Boys* are fine. We do not like the *Boys with Dogs fighting*. We see no reason why the one should be so handsome and the other so ugly, why the one should be so brown and the other so yellow, or why their logs should be of the same colour as themselves: nor why the worst-looking of the two should be most anxious to part the fray. The sketch of the *Woodman*, the original of which was unfortunately burned, fully justifies all the reputation it has acquired. It is a really fine study from nature. There is a picture of Gainsborough's somewhere of *A Shepherd Boy in a Storm*, of which we many years ago saw an indifferent copy in a broker's shop, but in which the unconscious simplicity of the boy's expression, looking up with his hands folded, and with timid wonder, the noisy chattering of a magpye perched above him, and the rustling of the coming storm in the branches of the trees, produced a romantic pastoral impression, which we have often recalled with no little pleasure since that time. We have always, indeed, felt a strong prepossession in favour of Gainsborough, and were disappointed at not finding his pictures in the present collection, all that we had wished to find them.

He was to be considered, perhaps, rather as a man of taste, and of an elegant and feeling mind, than as a man of genius; as a lover of the art, rather than an artist. He pursued it, with a view to amuse and sooth his mind, with the ease of a

gentleman, not with the severity of a professional student. He wished to make his pictures, like himself, amiable; but a too constant desire to please almost necessarily leads to affectation and effeminacy. He wanted that rigour of intellect, which perceives the beauty of truth; and thought that painting was to be gained, like other mistresses, by flattery and smiles. It is an error which we are disposed to forgive in one, around whose memory, both as a man and an artist, many fond recollections, many vain regrets must always linger. Peace to his shade!¹

¹ The idea of the necessity, of 'tampering with nature,' or giving what is called a 'flattering likeness,' was universal in this country fifty years ago. This would no doubt be always easy, if the whole of the art consisted in leaving out, and not putting in, what is to be found in nature. It may not be improper to add here, that, in our opinion, Murillo is at the head of the class of painters, who have treated subjects of common life. There is something in his pictures which is not to be found at all in the productions of the Dutch school. After making the colours on the canvas feel and think, the next best thing is to make them breathe and live. But there is in Murillo's pictures a look of real life, a cordial flow of animal spirits, to be met with no where else. We might here particularly refer to his picture of the, *Two Spanish Beggar-boys* in Mr. Desenfans' collection, which cannot be forgotten by those who have ever seen it.