

ESSAY XXXII

ON THE PICTURESQUE AND IDEAL

A FRAGMENT

THE natural in visible objects is whatever is ordinarily presented to the senses: the picturesque is that which stands out, and catches the attention by some striking peculiarity: the *ideal* is that which answers to the preconceived imagination and appetite in the mind for love and beauty. The picturesque depends chiefly on the principle of discrimination or contrast; the *ideal* on harmony and continuity of effect: the one surprises, the other satisfies the mind; the one starts off from a given point, the other reposes on itself; the one is determined by an excess of form, the other by a concentration of feeling.

The picturesque may be considered as something like an excrescence on the face of nature. It runs imperceptibly into the fantastical and grotesque. Fairies and satyrs are picturesque; but they are scarcely *ideal*. They are an extreme and unique conception of a certain thing, but not of what the mind delights in, or broods fondly over. The image created by the artist's hand is not moulded and fashioned by the love of good and yearning after grace and beauty, but rather the contrary: that is, they are idea deformity, not ideal beauty. Rubens was perhaps the most picturesque of painters; but he was almost the least *ideal*. So Rembrandt was

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(out of sight) the most picturesque of colourists; as Correggio was the most *ideal*. In other words, his composition of light and shade is more a whole, more in unison, more blended into the same harmonious feeling than Rembrandt's, who staggers by contrast, but does not soothe by gradation. Correggio's forms, indeed, had a picturesque air; for they often incline (even when most beautiful) to the quaintness of caricature. Vandyke, I think, was at once the least picturesque and least *ideal* of all the great painters. He was purely natural, and neither selected from outward forms nor added any thing from his own mind. He owes every thing to perfect truth, clearness, and transparency; and though his productions certainly arrest the eye, and strike in a room full of pictures, it is from the contrast they present to other pictures, and from being stripped quite naked of all artificial advantages. They strike almost as a piece of white paper would, hung up in the same situation.—I began with saying that whatever stands out from a given line, and as it were projects upon the eye, is picturesque; and this holds true (comparatively) in form and colour. A rough terrier-dog, with the hair bristled and matted together, is picturesque. As we say, there is a decided character in it, a marked determination to an extreme point. A shock-dog is odd and disagreeable, but there is nothing picturesque in its appearance: it is a mere mass of flimsy confusion. A goat with projecting horns, and pendent beard is a picturesque animal: a sheep is not. A horse is only picturesque from opposition of colour; as in Mr. Northcote's study of Gadshill, where the white horse's head coming against the dark scowling face of the man makes as fine a contrast as can be imagined. An old stump of a tree with rugged bark, and one or two straggling branches, a little stunted hedge-row line, marking the boundary of the horizon, a stubble-field, a winding path, a rock seen against the sky, are picturesque, because they have all of them prominence and a distinctive character of their own. They are not objects (to borrow Shakespear's phrase) 'of no mark or likelihood.' A country may be beautiful, romantic, or sublime, without being picturesque. The Lakes in the North of England are not picturesque, though certainly the most interesting sight in this country. To be a subject for painting, a prospect must present sharp striking points of view or singular forms, or one object must relieve and set off another. There must be distinct stages and salient points for the eye to rest upon or start from, in its progress over the expanse before it. The distance of a landscape will oftentimes look flat or heavy, that the trunk of a tree or a ruin in the foreground would immediately throw into perspective and turn to air. Rembrandt's landscapes are the least picturesque in the world, except

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from the strait lines and sharp angles, the deep incision and dragging of his pencil, like a harrow over the ground, and the broad contrast of earth and sky. Earth, in his copies, is rough and hairy; and Pan has struck his hoof against it!—A camel is a picturesque ornament in a landscape or history-piece. This is not merely from its romantic and oriental character; for an elephant has not the same effect, and if introduced as a necessary appendage, is also an unwieldy incumbrance. A negro's head in a group is picturesque from contrast: so are the spots on a panther's hide. This was the principle that Paul Veronese went upon, who said the rule for composition was *black upon white, and white upon black*. He was a pretty good judge. His celebrated picture of the Marriage of Cana is in all likelihood the completest piece of workmanship extant in the art. When I saw it, it nearly covered one side of a large room in the Louvre (being itself forty feet by twenty)—and it seemed as if that side of the apartment was thrown open, and you looked out at the open sky, at buildings, marble pillars, galleries with people in them, emperors, female slaves, Turks, negroes, musicians, all the famous painters of the time, the tables loaded with viands, goblets, and dogs under them—a sparkling, overwhelming confusion, a bright, unexpected reality—the only fault you could find was that no miracle was going on in the faces of the spectators: the only miracle there was the picture itself! A French gentleman, who showed me this 'triumph of painting' (as it has been called), perceiving I was struck with it, observed, 'My wife admires it exceedingly for the facility of the execution.' I took this proof of sympathy for a compliment. It is said that when Humboldt, the celebrated traveller and naturalist, was introduced to Buonaparte, the Emperor addressed him in these words—'*Vous aimez la botanique, Monsieur*'—and on the other's replying in the affirmative, added—'*Et ma femme aussi!*' This has been found fault with as a piece of brutality and insolence in the great man by bigoted critics, who do not know what a thing it is to get a Frenchwoman to agree with them in any point. For my part, I took the observation as it was meant, and it did not put me out of conceit with myself or the picture that Madame M—— liked it as well as *Monsieur l'Anglois*. Certainly, there could be no harm in that. By the side of it happened to be hung two allegorical pictures of Rubens (and in such matters he too was 'no baby'¹)—I don't remember what the figures were, but the texture seemed of wool or cotton. The texture of the Paul Veronese was not wool or cotton, but stuff, jewels, flesh, marble, air, whatever composed the essence of the varied subjects, in endless relief and truth of handling. If the

¹ 'And surely Mandricardo was no baby.'—HARRINGTON'S ARIOSTO.

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Fleming had seen his two allegories hanging where they did, he would, without a question, have wished them far enough.

I imagine that Rubens's landscapes are picturesque: Claude's are *ideal*. Rubens is always in extremes: Claude in the middle. Rubens carries some one peculiar quality or feature of nature to the utmost verge of probability: Claude balances and harmonises different forms and masses with laboured delicacy, so that nothing falls short, no one thing overpowers another. Rainbows, showers, partial gleams of sunshine, moon-light, are the means with which Rubens produces his most gorgeous and enchanting effects: there are neither rainbows, nor showers, nor sudden bursts of sunshine, nor glittering moon-beams in Claude. He is all softness and proportion; the other is all spirit and brilliant excess. The two sides (for example) of one of Claude's landscapes balance one another, as in a scale of beauty: in Rubens the several objects are grouped and thrown together with capricious wantonness. Claude has more repose: Rubens more gaiety and extravagance. And here it might be asked, Is a rainbow a picturesque or an *ideal* object? It seems to me to be both. It is an accident in nature; but it is an inmate of the fancy. It startles and surprises the sense, but it soothes and tranquillises the spirit. It makes the eye glisten to behold it, but the mind turns to it long after it has faded from its place in the sky. It has both properties then of giving an extraordinary impulse to the mind by the singularity of its appearance, and of riveting the imagination by its intense beauty. I may just notice here in passing, that I think the effect of moon-light is treated in an *ideal* manner in the well-known line in Shakespear—

‘See how the moonlight *sleeps* upon yon bank!’

The image is heightened by the exquisiteness of the expression beyond its natural beauty, and it seems as if there could be no end to the delight taken in it.—A number of sheep coming to a pool of water to drink, with shady trees in the back-ground, the rest of the flock following them, and the shepherd and his dog left carelessly behind, is surely the *ideal* in landscape-composition, if the *ideal* has its source in the interest excited by a subject, in its power of drawing the affections after it linked in a golden chain, and in the desire of the mind to dwell on it for ever. The *ideal*, in a word, is the height of the pleasing, that which satisfies and accords with the inmost longing of the soul: the picturesque is merely a sharper and bolder impression of reality. A morning mist drawing a slender veil over all objects is at once picturesque and *ideal*: for it in the first place excites immediate surprise and admiration, and in the next

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a wish for it to continue, and a fear lest it should be too soon dissipated. Is the Cupid riding on a lion in the ceiling at Whitehall, and urging him with a spear over a precipice, with only clouds and sky beyond, most picturesque or *ideal*? It has every effect of startling contrast and situation, and yet inspires breathless expectation and wonder for the event. Rembrandt's Jacob's Dream, again, is both—fearful to the eye, but realising that loftiest vision of the soul. Take two faces in Leonardo da Vinci's Last Supper, the Judas and the St. John; the one is all strength, repulsive character, the other is all divine grace and mild sensibility. The individual, the characteristic in painting, is that *which is* in a marked manner—the *ideal* is that which we wish any thing to be, and to contemplate without measure and without end. The first is truth, the last is good. The one appeals to the sense and understanding, the other to the will and the affections. The truly beautiful and grand attracts the mind to it by instinctive harmony, is absorbed in it, and nothing can ever part them afterwards. Look at a Madonna of Raphael's: what gives the *ideal* character to the expression,—the insatiable purpose of the soul, or its measureless content in the object of its contemplation? A portrait of Vandyke's is mere indifference and still-life in the comparison: it has not in it the principle of growing and still unsatisfied desire. In the *ideal* there is no fixed stint or limit but the limit of possibility: it is the infinite with respect to human capacities and wishes. Love is for this reason an *ideal* passion. We give to it our all of hope, of fear, of present enjoyment, and stake our last chance of happiness wilfully and desperately upon it. A good authority puts into the mouth of one of his heroines—

‘My bounty is as boundless as the sea,
My love as deep!’—

How many fair catechumens will there be found in all ages to repeat as much after Shakespear's Juliet!