

# LITERARY PICTURES OF THE YEAR

## I. SHAKESPEARE, TENNYSON, DICKENS

In the year's art taken as a whole there are signs of a healthy reaction in the relations between painting and literature; and it is a matter upon which saner ideas are much needed. Much good has been done of late years by the recognition that the crafts, as crafts, are distinct; that a line from Tennyson does not make a bad landscape good, or the possession of the most subtle allegorical ideas justify the violent disarrangement of the muscles of a fellow-creature's leg. But in place of the old sentimentalism there has come upon us the tyranny of a dogma equally fantastic and illogical—the notion that the two arts may not even be allied, as poetry and music are allied in a song. Critics have arisen who bitterly accuse a picture of intelligible meaning: “literary,” “symbolic,” and “moral” have become vituperative epithets of great strength; and it is touching to reflect that an artist of older sympathies might read through a tirade in which his work was torn in pieces with the firm belief that it was being tenderly appreciated. Now, this attempt to isolate art in a world where all things are linked together is really a somewhat humorous thing. Every occupation, of course, can be looked at purely technically if necessary. Good shooting, for example, is good shooting, whether we shoot a target or shoot our maiden aunt. If we shoot her under circumstances (technically) difficult, as, for example, if she is running violently across a distant range of mountains, then the shot which brings her down is (technically) admirable. But to say that good shooting is good shooting whether we shoot a target or shoot our maiden aunt is one thing; to say that it does not matter which we shoot is quite another. Her death may be regarded from a moral, a legal, a financial or a poetic point of view. So it is with the higher arts; a man who objects to a thing having many aspects should rebel against the three dimensions. This singular modern desire to resolve things into their elements is surely the mortal sin against civilisation. A man who seeks to break these immemorial unions, to keep everything separate, might as well analyse the

air and divide the world into Oxygenists and Hydrogenists. And of all these alliances the highest is that between painting, and literature the parent of nearly all the pictorial masterpieces on earth. But if men must protest against painting, and literature the parent of to the sister art of letters, they would be more logical if they did not, the moment they have gained their freedom, name their pictures after the sister art of music.

Probably the picture which is the most hopeful in this respect of all those exhibited this year is that Shakespearian picture of Mr. Abbey which flares like a great dawn of crimson and gold at the end of one of the chief rooms at Burlington House, “The Trial of Queen Catherine.” It may well flare like a dawn, for it is the rise of historical painting once more, after its long discredit. When it fell, it had become an ignorant and bombastic thing of padded calves and Byronic whiskers, nor did it deserve much sympathy when its stagey hypocrisy went down before the fiery lances of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. But now that it returns, it comes from the land of Whistler and Pennell, with all the technical mastery and dashing realism of the young American school. But though his craftsmanship is modern, Mr. Abbey comes to deliver us from that Impressionist twilight in which there were no harmonies except between the greenest grey and the greyest green. He does not condemn the portrait painter forever to ply his trade in the darkest corner of the room, as though he were selling bad hats. He offers to the artist once more the ancient wine of colour and poetry and historic passion. The red robes of Wolsey are alone a raging fire to scare away the weak-eyed lovers of “art colours.” And as the pictorial method has lost its early Victorian clumsiness, so the literary feeling has lost its early Victorian superficiality. Wolsey is not the somnolent hippopotamus we knew of old: his face, gross indeed, is able and vigilant—it has more of the character of Charles Fox. Mr. Abbey has another Shakespearian picture, “The Penance of Queen Elea-

nor." We build some hopes upon both of them. It seems to us that a purified art has been reunited to an enlightened history.

Indeed, if there were any class of pictures in which one would look for the signs of a literary revival, it would be in the Shakespearian pictures, for in them a singular quality resides. We do not sympathise with reckless imputations of universal power to Shakespeare—to be the greatest of earthly dramatists is enough for one son of Adam. We do not hold the theory that Shakespeare could have been Lord Chancellor; nor the alternative transatlantic theory that the Lord Chancellor succeeded in being Shakespeare. But we do seriously believe he might have been a great painter. Among the mazes of psychological interest, too little notice has been taken of his unique habit of symbolising his moral crises in singularly highly coloured and arresting pictorial groups. All other poets give a general sense of decorative unity—he alone is in love with contrasts, the contrasts of figure landscape and costume which make practical pictures. Touchstone and the Shepherd, Bottom and the Fairies, Lear and the Fool, Hamlet and the Gravediggers, are all scenes in which moral irony is expressed in definite diversities of colour and form. And in this he is qualified to unite the arts. He is a symbolist: he represents the mysterious mental connection between shapes and ideas, which must finally defeat any purely technical view of painting. A man can no more see certain clouds at evening without growing thoughtful than he can see a Bengal tiger without jumping. Both feelings are equally primal, fundamental, anthropological. Of all Shakespearian characters, that which has most perplexed actresses is Ophelia—probably, we think, because she was a pictorial rather than a psychological creation—and the bodily vision of weak, wild beauty, crowned with flowers and dancing to death, meant more to him than he could express in the character. Miss Amelia Bauerle's "Ophelia" in the Society of British Artists is interesting and original in this connection. Her "Ophelia" is not especially mad—she is merely tearful. And the same peculiarity may be noted in Mr. Clifford's picture in the Institute of Painters in Water Colours. We think

these artists are right. Ophelia's madness was little more than a slight improvement on her previous intelligence; she was never sane enough to go vigorously mad. It was far different, for example, with Lear. Mr. Arthur Rackham, in the Society of Painters in Water Colours, has a remarkably strong and able portrait of the wandering King against which no charges of mental lucidity can be brought. Here we have the madness of a strong man and a king, the madness which, rising into the sublimity of Job, could welcome fire and hail, since they were not his daughters. In the Royal Academy (before we quit this subject) there are two pictures of Lear in his Court, by Mr. Cyrus Cuneo, in which a good black and white illustration has the appearance of being mysteriously cut in two. As a literary interpretation his picture gains most interest from his version of Cordelia, who, he is convinced, was an uncommonly ugly young woman. It is certainly a conceivable view of the story; the elaborate praise bestowed upon her voice gives it (to the artful) a certain human probability. The studies are interesting, but we do not understand the eccentric plan of them. By drawing the top line of the picture so low, Mr. Cuneo has, with a despotic caprice worthy of Lear himself, cut off the heads of two or three courtiers. But if their heads were like Cordelia's we are resigned.

Mr. Fred Shaw's picture of Ariel and Ferdinand is graceful, but we are not sure that Ariel ought ever to be painted, except perhaps by moonlight and secretly, on some strange sea-shell or stone, with the colours of moth's wings and the silver lines of the spider.

Besides the scenes from the Shakespearian dramas there are, of course, numerous pictures founded on isolated quotations. The method is, perhaps, more applicable to the great Elizabethans than to many writers, since their splendid genius for irrelevancy so often led them to squander the most gorgeous literary wealth upon a simile or a parenthesis. Among these may be especially noticed Miss Nell Tenison's "Murder most foul—as at the best it is," which depicts a priest stabbing his enemy upon the steps of the church. The study is intentionally only rough and suggestive, but the murdered man is falling vigorously and re-



"RECALLED TO LIFE."—FROM "A TALE OF TWO CITIES." BY T. B. KENNINGTON.

freshingly flat. Curiously enough, however, the picture which is most truly Elizabethan, in a sense one might almost say Shakespearian, is not an illustration to Shakespeare. The striking fact about Mr. John da Costa's excellent picture, "Una and the Wood-Gods," is the courage with which he has combined the purely mediæval costume of Una with the classicism of the surrounding fauns. It would be impossible, perhaps, to inter-

pret Spenser better than by this risky yet effective inconsistency. For it brings home to our minds the thought that there was a time in the world's history—the best period of the Renaissance—when men saw no inconsistency between the beauty of a Bacchanal's thyrsus and that of a saint's aureole, when the lion of St. Mark lay down among the lambs of Pan. It may be that in this age of tickets and badges we cannot fight back to that om-



"HER EYES ARE HOMES OF SILENT PRAYER."  
—"IN MEMORIAM." BY MRS. NORMAND.

nivorous idealism, but Mr. da Costa has struck a spirited blow. His wood is the true sylvan chaos of Shakespeare—the wood of the *Midsummer Night's Dream*. Bottom, Shakespeare's true hero, is the type of the art enthusiast of that time, omnivorous, inconsistent, extravagant, the man with the ass's head. The modern Ibsenite and Student of the Drama has got rid of this hybrid character, though we are not quite sure to which of the two animals he has been finally assimilated.

Spenser again, like Shakespeare, has not escaped being illustrated in detail. Mr. Frank Smedley has a stately allegorical design with the motto "The Heavens know what is best for me." Though the picture does not aim at any of the Spenserian æsthetic interpretation of Mr. da Costa's work, we are glad to have a spiritual subject from Spenser—surely the most religious of all our poets.

After moving among many pictures in which the treatment of poetic subjects, however agreeable, is necessarily traditional, one is conscious of a sudden change of feeling on coming face to face with any picture by a man of commanding intellect. "The Return of Godiva" is not one of Mr. Watts's most successful pictures, but that matters little when comparing it with the work of others.

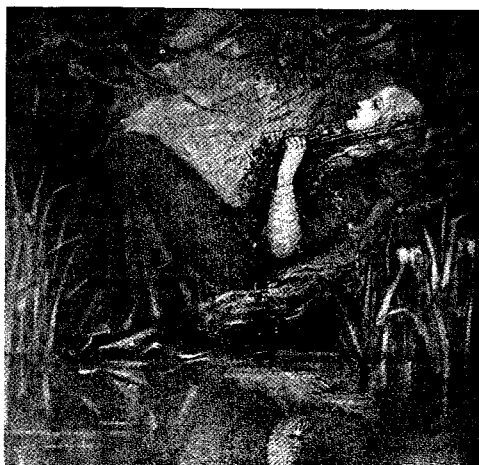
Perhaps the most really distinctive mark of the work of a great man is the mere fact that he could give a reason for painting it. It may seem a simple need, but it is absent from the works of many capable men. Painting is their trade, a picture must be painted, a graceful subject must be chosen; Ophelia, Lear, Ariel, are undoubtedly graceful subjects, and those subjects are painted. But Watts, alone among artists, has never, to our knowledge, painted a picture, however old the subject, without adding to it a definite idea, strong enough to be a motive for throwing away a cigar, or getting out of an armchair. There have been innumerable pictures of the ride of Godiva. But in the "Return of Godiva" there is a new idea—the deathlike collapse and reaction of a healthy spirit that has trampled a strong normal nature in obedience to a strong abnormal need. Godiva, no paltry beauty, but a giantess and a mother of men, falls as a tower falls, fainting among her women. It is the only faint that we have seen in art which we are certain was not due to a mouse.

Mr. Watts's picture, though its version is clearly drawn from Tennyson, is by no means Tennysonian; there are no poets outside the Bible and Æschylus whose spirit is exactly his spirit. But there are many pictures in the galleries which owe their inspiration to Tennyson, and rightly, indeed, since he is the most decorative of all poets. There are, for example, two pictures of the Lady of Shalott—one by Mr. George Robertson at the Royal Academy, which is sumptuous and robust, one by Mr. Garstin Harvey at the New Gallery, which is pal-



"THE TEMPEST." BY FREDERICK SHAW.





"OPHELIA." BY AMELIA BAUERLE.

lovers; their sins are not forgiven them, for they have not loved much.

Mrs. E. Normand's dignified and beautiful rendering of the line, "Her eyes

"O SWEET, PALE MARGARET."—TENNYSON. BY J. F. H. DUTTON.

lid and æsthetic. The latter traits are even more characteristic of Miss Mabel Ashby's "Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere" in the Institute of Painters in Water Colours. We do not know that we have ever seen a more complete embodiment of the modern Maeterlinckian view of the old stories. There were no blinding raptures, no barbaric self-abandonments in this love. With a clear-eyed prophecy more shameful than any madness they foresaw the futility of their own sin. These are the new æsthetic



"THE LADY OF SHALOTT." BY G. E. ROBERTSON.



"KING LEAR." BY ARTHUR RACKHAM.



"QUILP DISCOVERED LISTENING TO LITTLE NELL AND HER GRANDFATHER'S PLANS OF ESCAPE."  
—"OLD CURIOSITY SHOP." BY H. R. STEER, R.I.



"LITTLE NELL AND HER GRANDFATHER THE SUBJECT OF DISCUSSION AT 'THE JOLLY SANDBOYS.'"  
—"OLD CURIOSITY SHOP." BY H. R. STEER, R.I.





"IN THE SPRING A YOUNG MAN'S FANCY LIGHTLY TURNS TO THOUGHTS OF LOVE." BY TOM BROWNE, R.A.



"UNA AND THE WOOD-GODS." FROM SPENSER'S "FAIRY QUEEN." BY JOHN DA COSTA.

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are zones of silent prayer," shows that Tennyson is still a quarry for mottoes. Another pretty picture of the same style is Mr. John Dutton's "O Sweet, Pale Margaret." But the most charming and in its own absurd way the most poetical of all the pictures which owe their titles to Tennyson is a little study by Mr. Tom Browne: "In the Spring a Young Man's Fancy Lightly Turns to Thoughts of Love." Its quaint delicacy is more admirable, because the artist has avoided a million pitfalls of vulgarity that beset him. There are two children, but there is no pet dog. There is a boat on the river, but there are no ladies with sunshades in it. The two are child-lovers, but not child-lovers as they are nauseously leered over by their elders, but alone and solemn and independent in their own kingdom of Elfland. In the twilight of the picture the two figures stand like goblins of Dutch extraction; the artist has clinched our sense of fairyland by giving the dark boat two eyes like a dragon. Here at least is a poetical picture; and if it treats the line with levity, how else is one to treat that Locksley Hall love which depended upon the almanac?

If we strayed, however, from the more ideal to the more grotesque literary pictures, there would be many to claim our attention. Chief among these would be Mr. H. R. Steer's illustration of Quilp, Nell and her grandfather from the *Old Curiosity Shop*. Mr. Steer has another picture from the same novel, the scene of Nell and her grandfather in the tavern,

but we mention the former more especially because Quilp is an excellent example of the figure that is both pictorial and literary. It is people whose appearance is an allegory of themselves (Napoleon, Dante, Richard III.) who make effective pictures; many people appear to have run away with some one else's allegory. Quilp, with his dandified completeness of shape and dress, just stunted and pulled awry as in a distorting mirror, is certainly the finest of Dickens's studies in the horrible and repulsive—with the exception, perhaps, of Little Nell herself.

Dickens, who was so singularly picturesque in his half-fantastic treatment of the ugliness of modern costume and architecture (in this point lies, it may be said, his most enduring artistic originality), was naturally even more pictorial when he treated of the incidents of a romantic period—as in the *Tale of Two Cities*. Mr. Kennington has a great picture, "Recalled to Life," from that novel. The picture is highly characteristic of the artist, but inevitably, because of its more stately subject, less characteristic of the author than such pictures as those of Mr. Steer.

As we proceed through the galleries, pictures begin to group themselves in a manner expressive of several distinct tendencies in literary painting. The operation of these tendencies among the miscellaneous pictures we hope to treat in another article.

G. K. Chesterton and J. E. Hodder Williams.

### DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI

A genius-light, as from a beryl stone,  
 Dwells on thy page, and from thy canvas gleams—  
 Thou painter-poet of the realm of dreams,  
 Singer of songs so sad and strange of tone!  
 Thy name and art reflect the spirit lone  
 Of Dante and that southern race which deems  
 That Life and Love are genius' holiest themes.  
 What seeds of Thought and Truth thy hand hath sown!  
 With thy Christina's sad and sister song  
 Thine own shall live. The brotherhood of art  
 Shall boast of greater names than thine; but long  
 Before a starry soul like thine shall dart  
 That pure and solemn light that maketh strong  
 The race of man to dwell with gods apart.

Ashley Auburn Smith.