

The Romantic Spirit in American Art

ALBERT P. RYDER died on March 28, having just entered his seventy-first year. He was the purest example of the romantic spirit that American art has produced. In his self-chosen solitary life he saw visions more akin to poetry than to painting as our times understand painting. His themes were willingly taken from the poets—Chaucer's Constance alone in a frail boat on a vast sea, Wagner's Rhine Maidens or the storm-driven barque of the Flying Dutchman. At a moment when imitation was the watchword of painting he built up a world of his own the like of which no other eye ever saw. His little pictures loaded and kneaded with colors generally dull in themselves glow with inner light. There are bleak coruscations which recall El Greco and warmer depths that one finds elsewhere only in Rembrandt. The color is simply an index of moods.

It is probable that, being little of a traveller, and in the main more given to contemplation of his own poesies than to analysis of other men's work, he contrived his highly individual style unaided. In any case, the schooling of the National Academy, which he attended for a time, left no imprint on his canvases. Yet his spiritual kinship with such romantics as Delacroix and Monticelli is unmistakable. It is not to belittle him to suggest that he was a sort of Delacroix on a reduced scale. He had the same emotional potency, but keyed on a shorter scale, being lyrical where Delacroix tends to be epic. Ryder was not steadied by the historic sense that was so strong in Delacroix. His interest was not comprehensive, but episodic. He cultivated the small picture as Poe cultivated the short poem. But there never was a more genuine dreamer. No other American painter has been so much at home in the Ivory Tower. No other American painter has given so much of the richness and warmth of revery, and there was some principle of discipline in the man that dictated a unity and simplicity of effect rare indeed among the dreamers. He had that gift of design which lent importance to every subject matter. A hulk on the shingle and a bit of cliff is enough to suggest infinities of adventure. A horse in a stable, a cow in a meadow, becomes a sort of portent. The glamour of such familiar themes is as great as that of the ostensibly imaginative designs, *Death on the Race Track*, *The Temple of the Mind*.

Ours has been the heyday of realism and naturally a man of Ryder's inward vision was an exotic. For all that, he had his share of praise. Charles de Kay acclaimed his genius more than thirty years ago, and the broad-minded dealer Daniel Cottier placed Ryder's works in the best collections of this country and Canada. Ryder's slow and intermittent habits of work kept him, except in his later years, never very far from want. But he led the life he liked and gradually acquired an almost legendary fame which was at times embarrassing.

The tragedy of Ryder's career is not in the isolation, which he willingly accepted, nor yet in the relative poverty, which was his chosen estate. It lies rather in a lack of forethought and training which led him to build up his jewel-like fantasies out of bad pigments and destructive vehicles. Many of his pictures are wrecks. Much of his

old age was spent in conscientiously restoring the paintings of his youth. Very few of his pictures will carry down to posterity any notion of his genius. This fact is due to no wilfulness of Ryder, but to a general condition. There is no sound tradition of technique in painting to which an imaginative artist may adhere. What traditions there are are calculated for the realist. So if a painter develops a great decorative vein or one of pure lyricism, he has to find his technique as best he may. The result is a painful eclecticism, or letting technique take care of itself. Whistler's case, in the nocturnes, was not so unlike Ryder's, and about half of the nocturnes no longer show Whistler's intention.

So great a name as Ryder justly enjoyed has seldom been gained with so little display of works. It is unlikely that as many as half a dozen Ryders have ever hung together in one gallery. The pictures are widely scattered, and few have followed the official channels of showmanship. Hence his fame is based on the sense of beautiful quality in the few square inches of Ryder's work that any critic will have seen. The project of a relatively complete exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum promises a sensation. If it provides a catalogue of adequate reproductions, the exhibition will do a notable work of conservation. For most of Ryder's work can only be transmitted in reproduction.

So large and lucid was Ryder's power of design that one is tempted to think of him as a great imaginative decorator born out of due time. Yet while it is true enough that the stuff of a great mural painter is discernible in his little pictures, it does not follow that his development was really thwarted. His genius was lyric. He wrought his little designs in the spirit of a sonneteer, glad if, in the precision and perfection of the form and in the exquisite definition of the single theme, there should be some suggestion of surrounding infinities. In American painting, as a complete exemplar of the romantic spirit, he enjoys a very solitary distinction.

FRANK JEWETT MATHER, JR.

The Fleming's Debt to France

MR. RENÉ DE CLERCQ, the gifted Flemish poet and a champion, in the front ranks of the Flemish activists, of the cause of Flanders against the Gallophil Belgian Government at Le Havre, once wrote a poem "To those at Le Havre when they forgot that Flanders also lies in Belgium," in which he said "We are of Teuton, not of Latin stock." A doubtful assertion. Anthropological researches have shown that a large percentage of the population of Zeeland, the Dutch province nearest to Flanders, possesses all the characteristics of the Celtic race, and that the further south one goes this Celtic element increases in strength. The native of Zeeland represents the link type between the Hollander, in whom the Teuton is stronger than the Celt, and the Fleming, in whom the Celt subdues the Teuton. By his inflammable temperament, his spontaneity, his love of music, the Fleming shows himself more closely related to the Frenchman than to the cool, premeditating Hollander. As to race, therefore, the Fleming cannot pretend to be of Teuton stock.

Mr. de Clercq was thinking of the language when he wrote

those words. This case is one of many instances that make one realize the difficulty of ever creating peace by giving satisfaction to national cravings. Poets are prone to idolize the language out of which they strike the music of their verse. Their language is their very life, and in it they recognize the sacred stronghold of their people's nationality. But the people itself will instinctively steer clear of this error of mistaking the means of expression for the feeling, the accidental for the essential. Especially in the case of Flanders the language that a poet uses is proved to be a matter of mere accident: Emile Verhaeren did not give a less true expression to the Flemish mind than did René de Clercq. The essence of their poetry is thoroughly Flemish; it is the passionate feeling that makes them brothers, both true interpreters of their common race. And that feeling, expressed by them in different tongues, shows their race's affinity to France. The very spirit of revolt that stirred De Clercq into rebellion against his own Government is a spark of that same fire which the Gallic race of France has ever kept burning on the altar of freedom. He has the mettle of the revolutionary in him, who, unsupported, dared to fight for the cause he has embraced and die its martyr. The German does not rebel, he prefers to obey, obey even where obedience means sinning, and he dies a martyr to his own servility.

But it is not in temperament only that the Flemish resemble the French. Flemish history has, from the earliest days, been bound up with that of France. The southern part of Flanders, Crown-Flanders so-called, was a fief of the French king, and a lively intercourse, both commercial and intellectual, between Ghent and Paris has imbued the civilization of Flanders, from its dawn in the thirteenth century, with the spirit of French life, French sentiment, French manners. Flemish literature of that period is mainly derived from French sources: the poets of the Middle Dutch Reynard the Fox followed and surpassed a French original, and even Jacob van Maerlant, the poet of Flemish democracy and, by his distrust of French expansionism, a thirteenth-century precursor of the modern Flamings, owes the inspiration of his last and most beautiful poem to the muse of Rutebeuf. And what Flanders learned from France she taught again to Holland. This province, about 1600, became the centre of the commercial and intellectual life of the Netherlands. Dutch literature, rising to the summit of its power in the poetry of Vondel, remained true to the inspirer of its youth. The early career of Holland's greatest poet was strongly influenced by the drama of Garnier and the poetry of Du Bartas; in later life, indeed, he turned for inspiration to the classics, but the generation that was in its prime when Vondel, as a nonogenarian, went to his grave, was again caught by the irresistible power of the poetry that made the reign of "Le Roi Soleil" a lasting glory. Corneille, Racine, and Molière commanded the Dutch stage all through the eighteenth century, and the subsequent popularity of Voltaire and Rousseau still added to the influence of France on Dutch life and letters. The horrors of the French Revolution suddenly broke the charm. France became the land of abomination, atheism, immorality, and Germany was, in her stead, proclaimed the home of social and domestic virtues, innocence, truth, honor, obedience, order. The Dutch were not clearly aware of the loss they had suffered by the loosening of the old tie, until this war forced to the surface of their consciousness the slumbering love for "la douce France."

The Hollander has this advantage over the Fleming, that he can afford to love French language and literature without having to fear any loss to his own speech from the encroachments by the foreign tongue. Dutch is the vehicle of government, of politics, of science, of literature, of journalism, of daily intercourse in all classes of society, whereas the Fleming has jealously to guard the maintenance of his mother tongue. Thus it happens that the Hollander, though more Teuton than Celt, is more devoted to France than his Flemish brother of a more Gallic temperament. Some time ago this devotion became crystallized in the Society Nederland-Frankrijk, whose aim is to keep alive the newly awakened interest in the artistic and intellectual achievements of the French people, by organizing exhibitions of French arts and crafts, by inviting French scholars and men of letters to come and lecture in Holland, by the performance of French music, and by facilitating the collaboration between French publishers and Dutch booksellers. By thus asserting their admiration for the French genius, the society pays a debt of gratitude to France for centuries of artistic and literary inspiration. However proud of his Germanic mother tongue, the Dutch man of letters realizes that he would never have mastered the art of making it expressive of his highest ideas and his deepest emotions, if he had not been the heir of Latin civilization.

A. J. BARNOUW

The Hague, March 4

Correspondence

WE WHO ONCE WERE PACIFISTS

TO THE EDITOR OF THE NATION:

SIR: What am I? Last year and even before the fateful 1914, I was a Pacifist, glad to be known by a term not yet recognized by dictionaries, thankful for a word which so exactly defined the vague but earnest ideals that I acknowledged to be mine. I believed that peace was more worthy to be striven for than war. I believed that it was better to fight against hate and brutality and selfish national arrogance than to accept them as an irreducible part of the scheme of things below. I believed in the theory of non-resistance, but not in its practice; since I saw no nation sufficiently heroic to arm themselves with that weapon of the saints. Therefore I believed in force—as a last, imperfect means, to be used when saner methods failed us. Therefore I believed in efficient preparedness—a preparedness nevertheless for ultimate peace, which recognized that hysteric arming, even for defence, inspired fear, and that fear was the mother of warfare. I believed in universal service to the state, of which military discipline and organization should be not the whole but a part. In short, I was a Pacifist, and content with the denomination.

And all this I still believe and hundreds of thousands with me, hundreds of thousands who are preparing earnestly to serve their country in the crisis that is approaching. But what are we?—for the term Pacifist is being torn from us. Pacifist, in the current press, means coward. Pacifist means holding back from war in order to make more money. Pacifist means anarchist, dreamer, traitor to the state. Pacifism is a "poisonous heresy." What rubbish! What dangerous rubbish! Pacifism meant and means nothing of the sort. But if it is too late to complain of the abuse of a noble word,