

GUSTAVE COURBET⁵

Let us take the word 'poet' in its etymological meaning. "One who does, who accomplishes, who creates". Let us add another very active verb: "one who realises". To the eyes and mind of such a man, aspects of the world and of historical epochs present themselves with the resonance of profound, melodious and nostalgic elegy.

These aspects present themselves stripped of their usual logical form that men normally dress them in, a form that is distant from the breath of art, and which to be expressed requires the alphabet we are obliged to use with our fellow men, people who but rarely belong to the divine race of poets. However, when this humanly logical aspect is missing, the spectral form appears, so real, so alive and ineffably sweet in its flavour of eternity, which for us is a sure sign by which we recognise what destiny has chosen to protect from oblivion and eternalize through memory, be it a work of art, a historical fact, an aspect of nature or fundamental human construction.

The artist above any other man has the gift of hearing the secret song that arises from the ever-changing world in its evolution through the centuries. There are certain men among the moderns such as Henry Schliemann and Ernest Curtius, who heard as no one had ever heard before the song of prehistoric Greece. Others such as Thomas de Quincey, Nietzsche and Heine have discovered the real significance of certain seasons of the year. De Quincey felt and expressed the funereal horror of summer so profoundly in his memories of childhood when he spoke of the strong impression the sight of a dead child in a room made upon him, while outside shone all the inexorable heat of a summer day and a terrible and mysterious wind was billowing the window curtains. We are far from the Tibullo's summer elegy:

*Sed Canis aestivos ortus vitare sub umbra
arboris, ad rivos praetereuntis aquae.*

The pathetic sadness of spring is in these lines of Heine's *Adonis*:

Das ist des Frühlings traurige Luft!

and finally Nietzsche, the philosopher-poet, who discovered autumnal bliss:

*Seid mir gegrüsst, ihr plötzliche Winde...
Geister des Nechmittags!*

In the fifty years spanning 1830 to 1880, the lyrical and metaphysical aspect of thought is apparent in the works of many poets, writers, painters and musicians. Throughout the 19th century, Europe exuded a kind of extreme nostalgia in the form of a drawn-out autumn that was especially evident during these specific years. Musset first, then Baudelaire and then again the novelists, among whom shone Flaubert with his drooping moustache and his longing eyes with the expression of a hunting dog, scenting the air of a chase, all gave force to the poetry of their time. Let us not forget old Jules Verne, the great cantor of travel, of schooners, ships, balloons and trains. All of Europe was singing this song, from the anonymous novels of Italy and France (we

⁵ G. de Chirico, *Courbet*, in "Rivista di Firenze", a. I, n. 7, Florence November 1924, pp. 1-7; republished in *Commedia...*, cit., pp. 26-31. Published as the preface to the "Valori Plastici" volume *Courbet* in French and English in 1925.

shall not forget the line: “*Mon amour c’est ma folie, hélas, je n’en puis guérir*” in *Abi Chiquita*, a novel written in memory of a victim of Arsène Houssaye, the man with a golden beard) to pathetic Schubert’s *Lieder*:

*am Brunnen vor dem Thore
ist ein schöner Lindenbaum*

and finally the old melodies of the great Giuseppe Verdi:

Deserto sulla terra... – Deh se m’è forza perderti!

The lyrical aspect of this period of the 19th century radiates from works of art like the lengthening rays of the setting sun gilding all they touch, from the factory to the street, from a closed room with its heavy bourgeois draperies to the dark shop of the antiquarian, from the infantry barracks to the railway station, from the seaport to the smoky suburban café.

Scientific discoveries had opened new horizons, steamships were ploughing the sea and carrying men far from old Europe to the estuaries of American rivers and the shores of islands in the Pacific Ocean. It was a farewell to the warmth of the *bon vieux temps*, it was a prelude of new times; what would they bring?... Industrial and colonizing Europe, troubled and pervaded with gentle melancholy, was sung in the works of her artists, a song like the call of hunters in the cool silence of a summer’s dawn.

Imagination, a divine virtue that is always accompanied by talent, imbued the works of artists. Many think that fantasy is the gift of imagining things unseen. To the painter and artist in general it is the power of transforming what is seen; do not misunderstand the significance of the word “transforming”. Transform, for the world when portrayed in its current significance is reduced to banality. Thus we see today a useless kind of painting that has had its counterpart in all epochs, a mediocre kind of painting, a painting that gravitates near the other one, the one full of fatality and destined to forge the path of art history. Today in Italy painting without imagination goes under the name of “healthy art”. Deprived of imagination a painting is both useless and tedious. Mediocrity is a further, direct consequence of a lack of imagination, which often goes along with absolute ugliness, both in technique and the painterly fabric of the work. A painting of this kind appears to be yawning and also causes the observer to yawn. Imagination has not to do with invention alone, it is a ray of life both from within and without the realm of pure intellect; it pervades a painting, illuminating its colour and making its fabric noble, setting alight and giving grace to every detail of its technique. Fantasy is the primary cause of an artist’s joy. Without the help of this goddess, an artist, even if he is zealous and endowed with a certain disposition for art and is surrounded with the care, admiration and the steady support of some incompetent peers, can find no happiness; he cannot feel the joy of work, all outlet is lacking and every stroke of his brush betrays his weariness; whatever illusions he may have, he carries in himself the indelible signs of failure and oblivion. This explains the sullenness, the chronic irritation from which the cavaliers of the brush suffer in Italy today.

In the 19th century, Courbet was the painter who most strongly felt and best expressed the secret song of the epoch in which he lived.

Much has been written on the works of this man. In Italy he belongs to that little group of French artists, whom our painters speak fondly of and quote incessantly. Meier-Graefe’s monograph sold well in Italy where

a number of our painters loosened the strings of their often very slim purses to buy the precious volume in the hope of finding some useful teachings or some justification to their own shoddiness. Whence all this love for good old Courbet in Italy? Fortunately, I know my onions and am in a position to illuminate the incompetent as to the primary causes and occult origins of this passion.

In Italy there is a strong tendency among painters to seek shelter behind the term “verism”; the peninsula abounds with verist painters who produce with a zeal worthy of better results. Not knowing these painters, one could imagine that they are in love with nature, that they pass their days in the observation and study of the sky, the earth, the waters, men, animals and plants. But alas! This is not the case. They are merely mediocre artists. The gods have denied them not only the gift of genius but even of talent and hence all the powers that go with talent and genius: imagination, a sense of the heroic, sentiment, acumen, lyricism, memory and the faculty of assimilation and of adapting what one has assimilated to their own personality. Indeed, they never observe nature and if they happen to look at it, it is with the eyes of an ordinary man who looks without seeing and not of the artist who studies, deduces and remembers. If you observe such artists when they walk, never will you catch them looking at the sky, the clouds, the earth or the trees with the eyes of a painter, with the attention a real artist demands of himself, in order to fix in his memory some aspect of nature. When they are in their studios they strive to copy as best they can the common nude model or still life before them, and this is what they pompously call being naturalists, that is, taking inspiration exclusively from reality! Producing healthy art! Even worse, Mediterranean art! (May the hands of Nietzsche forgive such thoughtlessness!) And in the presence of so-called cerebral art, they are restless as donkeys before a storm; they burst forth with anathemas against artists who as the old French saying goes: “make literature”. It is an old story. It is a silly little drama that has been going on for many years and not only in Italy. A net woven of misunderstandings stretches itself between blessed healthy art and cursed literature art, by which they strive to diminish the work of artists who, on the contrary, are worthy of the highest praise of those less pure. This is what happened with Courbet’s painting.

During his lifetime, Courbet had the reputation of being a painter who set himself in front of reality and copied what he saw without so much ado about it. He was accused to brutality and vulgarity. In exalting Courbet our verist painters hope to protect the banality and inanity of their own work. They laud Courbet for the mere fact that his paintings do not represent mythological divinities, historical facts, symbolic or allegoric figures, heroes of Homer or Shakespeare; they deceive themselves with the illusion that this fact alone shows an affinity between Courbet’s mentality and their own. They do not understand or pretend not to, that if his work has survived and will survive, if his paintings have always attracted interest well beyond the borders of France, it is due to the inherent poetry and spirit that animates them, which is the distinguishing characteristic of his work.

Courbet is both a romantic and a realist. In fact, the more developed a painter’s poetic faculty and imagination, the deeper his sense of reality will be. Böcklin is the most profoundly poetic painter that ever lived and yet he was a tremendous realist. Realism, as understood by great painters, is the exact opposite of what our mediocre painters mean with verism. For the true artist, realism is a means for efficiently expressing what he feels and imagines, whilst the mediocre artist makes use of verism to try and hide his lack of creative strength.

Hence, Courbet was a realist and a romantic. He was far more romantic even than Delacroix and more of a realist. His romanticism is nothing other than the recognition of the purely astonishing aspects of beings and nature.

In each of Courbet's paintings, from his largest compositions such as *The Artist's Studio* and *A Burial at Ornans*, to the simplest still life, one can always sense a central striking, dominant note which causes the painting to be remembered as a beautiful verse, as the motif of a sonata. Even in such of his works as *The Stone Breaker*, which so unjustly gained him the reputation of a vulgar painter, one can always find angles and parts that lead the imagination into the realm of poetry. A corner of sky beyond high hills, a branch, a plant bent by the wind shown against a cloud, tree trunks and rocks, nothing is copied with the sole intention of showing nature, but everything serves as a means to express an inspired arrangement, which, caught by the artist, reveal the fantasy and lyricism of the world.

Courbet was profoundly sensitive to the poetic aspect of the world in which he lived. An uncultured man endowed with an intelligent and lyrical nature, he had the gift of animating the simplest scenes with a breath of elegy. In the glowing hours of midday the graceful *Young Ladies of the Village* come upon a little shepherdess: it is not the burning midday heat that drives huntsmen and poets to seek the shelter of shade at the river's edge:

... ad rivos praetereuntis aquae

it is the gentle noon of dying summer. The shortened shadows tell us that the sun has reached the peak of its parabola, the four *dramatis personae* do not fear its rays. A gentle weariness fills the entire canvas from the stones and plants in the painting's forefront reaching on to the horizon; the clarity of September gives relief to the profile of the distant land and rocks. We have not yet attained to the Mediterranean autumn, the terrible autumnal beauty discovered by Nietzsche – other painters will speak of this autumn and give expression to it – but in this painting, as in the other one of the picnic where the first gilding of autumn streaks the trees and plants close to where the tired huntsmen rest, one feels the ineffable melancholy of Baudelaire's line:

Adieu vive clarté de nos étés trop courts!