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Jean François Millet

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JEAN FRANÇOIS MILLET

There were three painters named Jean François Millet, but he who was born October 4, 1814, and lived at Barbizon, is the only one we know. It is even more suggestive that of all the world's great painters, our reverential love goes out to "our Millet" with an especial fervour. We feel as if he were one of us, and that from him, personally, we may learn much; more, perhaps, from his living and his painting. His biography and especially his letters may have a distinctive and vital value for us, other artists seeming detached, or impersonal, often characterless, at least without the intimacy and helpfulness of one in whose heart reigned the religion of fused truth and beauty for which most of us do little more than yearn.

"Art," he writes, "declined when the artist no longer leaned directly and simply upon impressions taken from Nature. Clever execution then took the place of Nature and decadence began. . . . In the end it always comes back to this—a man must be touched himself before he can touch others; and however clever, work done as a speculation cannot effect this, because it has not the breath of life." "Every one," he said to Sensier, "should have a central thought, *une pensée mère*, which he expresses with all the strength of his soul and tries to stamp on the hearts of others. The mission of men of genius is to reveal that portion of Nature's riches which they have discovered, to those who would never have suspected their existence. 'God resisteth the proud but giveth grace to the humble.' Nature gives herself without reason to all who come to inquire of her. . . . If we love works of art, it is because they come from her. All the rest is pedantry and emptiness."

Le beau c'est le vrai, was the truth at the heart of his æsthetics, never for a moment neglected throughout his living and working. "Art is a language, and all language is intended for the expression of ideas. Say it, and say it over again. A peasant I was born, and a peasant I will die! I am determined to say what I feel, and to paint things as I see them." When tormented by criticism, Millet is only more resolute: "I stand firm. They may call me a painter of ugliness, a detractor of my race, but let no

one think he can force me to beautify peasant-types. I would rather say nothing than express myself feebly. Give me sign-boards to paint, yards of canvas, if you will, to cover by the piece like a house painter, and let me work, if need be, as a mason, but at least let me think out my subjects in my own fashion."

To a man so minded it seems most right that he should love his *sabots* and hate fashionable boots and shoes, for only such a man could be the painter of the souls of his fellow peasants and teach others that their lifelong silent heroism is better than all the pride of a world whose religion is self-indulgence. Millet was never for one instant deceived as to the worth and honour of the lowliest labour and its weariness, when compared with the results of ambition and self-seeking. For the religion of work is the work of religion, and the boy François had early found the faith of all true labourers, when awed by the glory of a sunset he told his father of his rapture; reverently taking off his cap, Jean Louis said, *It is God!* And a little later the truth again comes out with deepening vividness when François told the Abbé Lebrisseux of his love of the sky and the sea, and of the wonder and mystery of the world about him. "Ah, my poor child," said the Abbé, "you have a heart that will give you trouble. You do not know how much you will have to suffer." Once, too, a passing professor from Versailles said that the soul of this Norman peasant-child was poetry itself. How perfectly were religion and art blended in the grandmother, in the father, and in the young man himself, is illustrated by the command of the grandmother to the now fatherless boy: "My François, we must bow to the will of God. Your father, my Jean Louis, said you were to be a painter. Obey him and go back to Cherbourg." The will of God, and of a peasant father that the boy should be a painter—has it not already the sound of the bells of an antique world sunk beneath the waves of art for art's sake?

Many glimpses are given of the consciousness of the living God, the felt union of the human and the divine,—in such remarks, *It is God*, and "We must perceive the infinite." If the metaphysician or psychologist deny such a power, the poet and painter may still do the deed. And that this, as always, brings suffering, again comes sharply to realisation in Millet's rejection of any formula that would render him stoical or indifferent: "Art is not a pleasure-jaupt, rather a combat, the ruthless wheels which crush; the artist's strongest expression springs

from his suffering." In her way, even his little daughter Jeanne felt this truth, when laying her finger on her lips she whispered, "Hush! Father is working!" And he does not fail to deny expressly, that "art consists in a sort of show of professional cleverness." "You understand that the artist must have a great and high aim," he urges; and only Millet could have so zealously striven and so successfully, to realise his aim in portraiture: "I want to show her soul!"

The student of Millet's life and art is soon forced to the recognition, possibly to the defence, of his lifelong emphasis of the sombre and the tragic, the drudgery and the weariness of his fellow peasant-workers. He was, of course, himself fully as conscious of it. Suddenly one day, despite his poverty and the artistic fashions of the day, he ceased the choice of such subjects as "nude women and mythological subjects,"—"not that I hold that sort of thing to be forbidden, but that I do not wish to feel myself compelled to paint them," he says in his letter to Sensier. Then:

"To tell the truth, peasant-subjects suit my nature best, for I must confess, at the risk of your taking me for a Socialist, that the human side is what touches me most in Art, and that if I could only do what I like, or at least attempt to do it, I would paint nothing that was not the result of an impression directly received from Nature, whether in landscape or in figures. The joyous side never shows itself to me; I know not if it exists, but I have never seen it. The gayest thing I know is the calm, the silence, which are so delicious, both in the forest and in the cultivated fields, whether the soil is good for culture or not. You will confess that it always gives you a very dreamy sensation, and that the dream is a sad one, although very delicious. . . . You are sitting under a tree, enjoying all the comfort and quiet which it is possible to find in this life, when suddenly you see a poor creature loaded with a heavy faggot coming up the narrow path opposite. The unexpected and always striking way in which this figure appears before your eyes reminds you instantly of the sad fate of humanity—weariness. . . . In cultivated land sometimes—as in places where the ground is barren—you see figures digging and hoeing. From time to time one raises himself and straightens his back, as they call it, wiping his forehead with the back of his hand—*Thou shalt eat bread in the sweat of thy brow.*

"Is this the gay and playful kind of work that some people would have us believe? Nevertheless, for me it is true humanity and great poetry."

And neither his friend, nor reputation, nor honours, nor the terrible need of selling his pictures, could make him choose sunnier and happier days or themes. Nor even gayer colours

in painting his *True Humanity* and its weariness—"the sense of tears in mortal things."

Hence, naturally, the accepted criticism, the hurting recognition of his profound want, as a man, of play, and of light, and of lightsomeness. Too deeply had the iron entered his heart. There is no laughter, no feeling of the abundant energy that soars above the miseries and tragedies of labour by the mere sense of soft resistant power that forgets slavery and smiles at fate. If once, even, he could have seen the radiant face of his brother of Assisi! With the pathos of his suffering fellow-peasants filling and overflowing his soul, it was inevitable that he should forget the sunset; and although a painter of superlative power, that he should so much have ignored the glory and the revelatory wonder of colour and light. The heaviness and density of his colours, the preponderance of dark, even muddy tones, the solidities and rigidities of his living forms and of his textures, were perhaps usually seen among his people; but were they without exception? Were the seriousness and austerity invariable? Would it not have been better, both for artist and for model, one feels like asking, if these sad-hearted toilers had been taught, forced to know, that the combined beauty and truth, which was the abiding axiom of his artistic faith, should have been wooed to some glad beatitude by the God who indeed made the colours of the sunset, the landscape's palpitant stir at dawn and brooding hush at even, whose love and light were there at the heart of the mother and her babe, and whose fortitude was that of good men who smiled and sang their defiances at burdens and poverties. One may gather that the alternative—either colour, light, and freedom, or sombreness, heaviness, and toil—was not so compulsive as Millet's stern sense dictated. In pastel and pencilled sketch the normal appreciation is more frequently noticed than in the great works to which his genius was devoted. His choice was doubtless also stressed by a natural deficiency, psychic at least, of colour-sense, and an inaccuracy of optical function for which there is abundant proof.

This is also suggested by the noteworthy fact that the composition of his pictures was not usually made directly from his models, or single observations of nature, but from his later and cumulated recollections of them. It was not a composite photograph, however, indefinite and valueless, of vague and blurred outlines, but a collocation of all the true and revealing

characteristics of many observations which are required to make up the perfect whole and which are never present in a single time or place. The accuracy of Millet's memory in retaining exact details of form is marvellous. This for him, and perhaps for him alone of artists, did not weaken truthfulness to nature, but really increased it, because it is certain that nature does not pose; so his habit allowed him to supplement the inadequacy of any single occasion or one-time gathering of peculiarities, by the details of similar circumstances added to the memorised incident and form of the first-suggested sketch. Of many such instances take the grasp and poise of the hand in *The Gleaners*. Many single glances of the painter might not have found that when some already gathered heads of grain or straws are held by certain of the clutched fingers, the attempt to add others in the same hand necessitates a peculiar strain of the fingers, hand, and arm—an effect that once, at least, had been caught by the painter's inerrant eye. In later years he said that he worked little from Nature, "for she does not pose." He was, in fact, watching her unconscious poses all his life, and fusing them finally to a perfect whole in each of his great synthetic works.

From Millet's single-hearted devotion of his life and art to the lives and artlessness of his brother toilers, and more, because of his amazing power of making the simplest attitude show the most subtle and spiritual of psychic realities, it was only natural that his purpose should be misapprehended and that criticism and calumny should wound him deeply. The Parisian critics maligned him as a socialist, even as an anarchist, and their furious nonsense was repeated with each new picture. Such a state of mind was beyond the understanding of Millet, who wrote:—"What can I find that is true and serious and might help to correct my faults in the invectives of these gentlemen? I look and find nothing but noise!—not a single piece of advice, not one hint which may be of use to me. Is this the sole office of the critic, to abuse a man and disappear? . . . This expression —'the cry of the ground'—was heard long ago. My critics are men of taste and instruction, I suppose, but I cannot put myself in their skin, and since I have never, in all my life, known anything but the fields, I try and say, as best I can, what I saw and felt when I worked there."

Long after the death of Millet the real socialistic or anarchis-

tic art made its appearance, and the true adherents of this faith should welcome it more naturally and more enduringly than they did that of Millet. It was, to be sure, as unlike the art of Millet as hate and violence are unlike love and restraint. It is a mystery which none has exactly or adequately explained that not even the best technique can make us accept an art-work as worth money, and can make us place upon our walls a picture, which is devoted to the praise of hatred, cowardice, or other attribute which makes for evil and death. We endure Rodin's *Burgesses of Calais*, but we do not want to see the group again. A generation after Millet, a skilled literary artist has contended that art is necessarily aristocratic. Would he, one may ask, prefer to have as his own the latest unaristocratic *Lot of Women*, or *Uprising of the Farmers*, or the equally unaristocratic *Angelus*, or *Man with the Hoe*, or *Gleaners*? Nor is it "didacticism," or "tendency" that disposes of the question. When Millet was painting these pictures he was in a desperate state, bodily, mentally, and financially. After many months of bargaining, *The Angelus* was sold for five hundred dollars. Some fourteen years after his death it brought one hundred and sixty thousand dollars.

Besides the hurt of constant and lifelong ill-health and of poverty, Millet's art and heart were outraged by the repeated charge of "socialism." Despite his protestations and explanations, this blind criticism and misrepresentation reappeared to wound him and to mislead the world as to the real significance and appreciation of his art. That it should again rise in another and distant country, twenty-five years after Millet's death, is disconcerting. It was, perhaps many do not know, precipitated by the famous poem of Edwin Markham, entitled, *The Man with the Hoe*, which draws its supposed inspiration from Millet's painting, *L'Homme à la Houe*. Among the many readers of this poem not a few had deep misgivings that it does not represent a true and just interpretation of Millet's picture, or of his art generally. Especially in the mind of one great employer of men, Mr. C. P. Huntington, the conviction grew to clear and vigorous protest of which he immediately proceeded to give a practical demonstration by offering, through *The Sun*, three prizes for the best original poems written from the point of view emphasised in the following letter of January 28, 1900, authorising the competition:

"While I would detract in no degree from the beauty, grace, and strength of his versification, it seems to me that Mr. Markham has twined some very leafy and flowery vines around a vacuum. Either *The Man with the Hoe* is a type of the great mass of those who use farming implements for a living or else he is an exception. If the latter, then the strength of the sentiment uttered lies in the concealment of its weakness, and if the former, then the poem does wrong to a most respectable and able-bodied multitude of citizens, every one of whom ought to resent Mr. Markham's attempt to throw 'the emptiness of ages in his face' and certainly deserves better of the poet than to be called a 'monstrous thing' and 'brother to the ox.'

"From time immemorial the tiller of the soil has been invested with his full share of the honour of this world, and where any individual example of the class—or, in fact, of any honest and respectable class—has given reason for Mr. Markham's inquiry: 'Whose breath blew out the light within this brain?' it can, I think, be safely said that the man's own breath blew it out. There is no occasion for a farmer to have his soul quenched or to become a 'dumb terror.' He can hold his head as high as any man's, and he generally does; and what calling is more honourable—at least in this country—to which, by the way, I understand Mr. Markham's observation and study have been confined.

"What about the man without the hoe—he who cannot get work, or, having the opportunity to labour, won't do it? There are thousands of young men in this country who have been educated up to the point where the honest and healthful occupation of their fathers in the field has become distasteful to them, and, in many cases, they have grown to be ashamed of it and of their parents. In European countries particularly there are multitudes of young men—the younger sons of titled people, for instance—who have been taught that common labour or work in the trades is beneath them, and they sink their individuality, their manhood, and their future in the ranks of the army and in petty Government positions. They must have money, but they must earn it only in a 'genteel' way. These are the men without the hoe—the real brothers to the ox. Who shall tell their story? Who shall best sing the bitter song of the incapables who walk the earth, driven hither and thither like beasts by the implacable sentiment of a false social education, suffering the tortures of the damned and bringing distress upon those dependent upon them because they have lost the true independence of soul that comes to him who dares to labour with his hands, who wields the hoe and is the master of his destiny."

It may be added that Mr. Markham had made more definite his own view as regards the import of his poem by emphatically declaring that it was not a protest against labour, but his "soul's word against the degradation of labour, the oppression of man by man."

Mr. T. B. Aldrich and Mr. E. C. Stedman were chosen judges to award the prizes. This task was arduous and difficult because of the thousand or more poems sent in and of their almost uniform lack of excellence. They agreed at last that but one by

John Vance Cheney, entitled also *The Man with the Hoe: A Reply to Edwin Markham*, was worthy of the first prize.

Him, there, rough-cast, with rigid arm and limb,
The Mother moulded him.

Need was, need is, and need will ever be
For him and such as he;

Cast for the gap, with gnarled arm and limb,
The Mother moulded him,

Long wrought, and moulded him with mother's care,
Before she set him there. . . .

See! she that bore him, and metes out the lot,
He serves her. Vex him not

To scorn the rock whence he was hewn, the pit
And what was digged from it;

Lest he no more in native virtue stand,
The earth-sword in his hand,

But follow sorry phantoms to and fro,
And let a kingdom go.

And yet in spite of the discussion to which his work has given rise it is almost supererogatory to add that in painting his brother peasants the very last thing by which Millet was moved, was any economic, social, or governmental injustice; didacticism was as far from him as from any artist. His was simply and solely a labour of love, of the uttermost sympathy, and because no doctrinal or sermonising impulse thrilled the hand and the brush that painted the picture, there was a divining compassion as perfect as the divine art, and both revealing the labourer's spiritual tragedy in the twilight of the tired day and ending toil.

GEORGE M. GOULD.

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