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[Review of Philip Gilbert Hamerton, *Contemporary French Painters. An Essay* (London: Seeley, Jackson and Halliday, 1868).]

The editors, Charles Eliot Norton and James Russell Lowell (friends of HJ), had published one of his first reviews – of Nassau W. Senior's *Essays on Fiction* – in the *North American Review* in 1864. P. G. Hamerton (1834–94) was an artist before becoming an art critic, notably for the *Saturday Review*. Having a French wife, he spent much of his life in France and, in the 1850s and 1860s, argued that British artists (like French) should open their studios to pupils. In 1869 he published *Painting in France after the Decline of Classicism* and in 1870 started up his own art journal, *The Portfolio* (see Edward Morris, *French Art in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), pp. 29 and 212–13). In his 'Preface' to *Contemporary French Painters* (dedicated to B. B. Woodward, the Queen's Librarian and editor of the *Fine Arts Quarterly Review*) Hamerton stresses the importance of pictorial examples in art criticism, and the prohibitive expense involved. The sixteen photographs included, though small, are of high quality (some of engravings or lithographs). HJ later reviewed Hamerton's *Round my House: Notes of Rural Life in France in Peace and War* in the *Nation* in 1876 (rpt. in *LC* 1: 1039–42).

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The profession of art-critic, so largely and successfully exercised in France, has found in England but a single eminent representative. It is true, indeed, that Mr. Ruskin has invested the character with a breadth and vigor which may be thought to have furnished, without emulation on the part of other writers, sufficient stress of commentary on the recent achievements of

English art, – at the same time that, on the other hand, this remarkable man has of late years shown a growing tendency to merge the function of art-critic in that of critic of life or of things in general.[1] It is nevertheless true, that, as Mr. Ruskin is in the highest degree a devotee of art, he applies to the contemplation of manners and politics very much the same process of reflection and interpretation as in his earlier works he had acquired the habit of applying to the study of painting and architecture. He has been unable to abandon the æsthetic standpoint. Let him treat of what subjects he pleases, therefore, he will always remain before all things an art-critic. He has achieved a very manifest and a very extended influence over the mind and feelings of his own generation and that succeeding it; and those forms of intellectual labor, or of intellectual play, are not few in number, of which one may say without hesitation, borrowing for a moment a French idiom and French words, that Ruskin has *passé par là*.[2] We have not the space to go over the ground of our recent literature, and enumerate those fading or flourishing tracts which, in one way or another, communicate with that section of the great central region which Mr. Ruskin has brought under cultivation. Sometimes the connecting path is very sinuous, very tortuous, very much inclined to lose itself in its course, and to disavow all acquaintance with its parent soil; sometimes it is a mere thread of scanty vegetation, overshadowed by the rank growth of adjacent fields; but with perseverance we can generally trace it back to its starting-point, on the margin of *Modern Painters*.[3] Mr. Ruskin has had passionate admirers; he has had disciples of the more rational kind; he has been made an object of study by persons whose adherence to his principles and whose admiration for his powers, under certain applications, have been equalled only by their dissent and distaste in the presence of others; and he has had, finally, like all writers of an uncompromising originality of genius, his full share of bitter antagonists. Persons belonging to either of these two latter classes bear testimony to his influence, of course, quite as much as persons belonging to the two former.[4] Passionate reactionists are the servants of the message of a man of genius to society, as indisputably as passionate adherents. But descending to particulars, we may say, that, although Mr. Ruskin has in a very large degree affected writers and painters, he has yet not in any appreciable degree quickened the formation of a school of critics, – premising that we use the word "school" in the sense of a group of writers

devoted to the study of art according to their own individual lights, and as distinguished from students of literature, and not in the sense of a group of writers devoted to the promulgation of Mr. Ruskin's own views,[5] or those of any one else.

There are a great many pictures painted annually in England, and even, for that matter, in America; and there is in either country a great deal of criticism annually written about these pictures, in newspapers and magazines. No portion of such criticism, however, possesses sufficient substance or force to make it worth any one's while to wish to see it preserved in volumes, where it can be referred to and pondered. More than this, there are, to our knowledge, actually very few books in our language, belonging in form to literature, in which the principles of painting, or certain specific pictures, are intelligently discussed. There is a small number of collections of lectures by presidents of the Royal Academy, the best of which are Reynolds's;[6] there is Leslie's *Handbook*;[7] there are the various compilations of Mrs. Jameson;[8] and there is the translation of Vasari,[9] and the recent valuable *History of Italian Art* by Crowe and Cavalcaselle.[10] For the needs of serious students, these make a very small library, and such students for the most part betake themselves, sooner or later, to the perusal of the best French critics, such as Stendhal, Gustave Planche, Vitet, and in these latter days Taine.[11] They find in these writers, not, of course, everything, but they find a great deal, and they acquire more especially a sense of the great breadth of the province of art, and of its intimate relations with the rest of men's intellectual life. The writers just mentioned deal with painters and paintings as literary critics deal with authors and books. They neither talk pure sentiment (or rather, impure sentiment), like foolish amateurs, nor do they confine their observations to what the French call the *technique* of art. They examine pictures (or such, at least, is their theory) with an equal regard to the standpoint of the painter and that of the spectator, whom the painter must always be supposed to address, – with an equal regard, in other words, to the material used and to the use made of it. As writers who really know how to write, however, will always of necessity belong rather to the class of spectators than to that of painters, it may be conceded that the profit of their criticism will accrue rather to those who look at pictures than to those who make them.

Painters always have a great distrust of those who write about pictures. They have a strong sense of the difference between the literary point of view and the pictorial, and they inveterately suspect critics of confounding them. This suspicion may easily be carried too far. Painters, as a general thing, are much less able to take the literary point of view, when it is needed, than writers are to take the pictorial; and yet, we repeat, the suspicion is natural and not unhealthy. It is no more than just, that, before sitting down to discourse upon works of art, a writer should be required to prove his familiarity with the essential conditions of the production of such works, and that, before criticising the way in which objects are painted, he should give evidence of his knowledge of the difference between the manner in which they strike the senses of persons of whom it is impossible to conceive as being tempted to reproduce them and the manner in which they strike the senses of persons in whom to see them and to wish to reproduce them are almost one and the same act. With an accomplished sense of this profound difference, and with that proportion of insight into the workings of the painter's genius and temperament which would naturally accompany it, it is not unreasonable to believe that a critic in whom the faculty of literary expression is sufficiently developed may do very good service to the cause of art, – service similar to that which is constantly performed for the cause of letters. It is not unreasonable to suppose that such a writer as the late Gustave Planche, for instance, with all his faults, did a great deal of valuable work in behalf of the French school of painters. He often annoyed them, misconceived them, and converted them into enemies; but he also made many things clear to them which were dark, many things simple which were confused, and many persons interested in their work who had been otherwise indifferent. Writers of less intensity of conviction and of will have done similar service in their own way and their own degree; and on the whole, therefore, we regret that in England there has not been, as in France, a group of honest and intelligent mediators between painters and the public. Some painters, we know, scorn the idea of "mediators", and claim to place themselves in direct communication with the great mass of observers. But we strongly suspect, that, as a body, they would be the worse for the suppression of the class of interpreters. When critics attack a bad picture which the

public shows signs of liking, then they are voted an insufferable nuisance; but their good offices are very welcome, when they serve to help the public to the appreciation of a good picture which it is too stupid to understand. It is certain that painters need to be interpreted and expounded, and that as a general thing they are themselves incompetent to the task. That they are sensible of the need is indicated by the issue of the volume of *Entretiens*, by M. Thomas Couture.[12] That they are incompetent to supply the need is equally evident from the very infelicitous character of that performance.

The three principal art-critics now writing in England – the only three, we believe, who from time to time lay aside the anonymous, and republish their contributions to the newspapers – are Mr. W. M. Rossetti, Mr. F. T. Palgrave, and Mr. P. G. Hamerton,[13] the author of the volume whose title is prefixed to this notice. Mr. Hamerton is distinguished from the two former gentlemen by the circumstance that he began life as a painter, and that in all that he has written he has stood close to the painter's point of view. Whether he continues to paint we know not, but such reputation as he enjoys has been obtained chiefly by his writings. We imagine him to belong to that class of artists of whom he speaks in the volume before us, who, in the course of their practical work, take to much reading, and so are gradually won over to writing, and give up painting altogether. Mr. Hamerton is at any rate a very pleasant writer. He took the public very much into his confidence in the history of his *Painter's Camp*, in Scotland and France;[14] but the public has liked him none the less for it. There is a certain intelligent frankness and freedom in his style which conciliates the reader's esteem, and converts the author for the time into a sort of personal companion. He uses professional terms without pedantry, and he practises with great neatness the common literary arts. His taste is excellent, he has plenty of common sense, he is tolerant of differences of opinion and of theory, and in dealing with æsthetic matters he never ceases to be clear and precise. The work before us is an essay upon the manner of some twenty French painters, representatives of the latest tendencies and achievements of French art, and it is illustrated by photographs from their works or from engravings of them. Mr. Hamerton's observations are somewhat desultory, and he makes no attempt to deduce from his inquiry a view of the probable future stages of French art, – in which, on the whole,

he is decidedly wise. The reader with a taste for inductions of this kind will form his own conclusions on Mr. Hamerton's data. He will find these data very interesting, and strongly calculated to impress him with a sense of the vast amount of intellectual force which, during the last thirty years, has been directed in France into the channel of art.

Mr. Hamerton begins his essay with a little talk about David, – the first, in time, of modern French painters, and certainly one of the most richly endowed. David leads him to the classical movement, and the classical movement to Ingres. Of the classical tendency – the classical "idea" – Mr. Hamerton gives a very fair and succinct account, but we may question the fairness of his estimate of Ingres. The latter has been made the object of the most extravagant and fulsome adulation; but one may admire him greatly and yet keep within the bounds of justice. Nothing is more probable, however, than that those theories of art of which his collective works are such a distinguished embodiment are growing daily to afford less satisfaction and to obtain less sympathy. It is natural, indeed, to believe that the classical tendency will never become extinct, inasmuch as men of the classical temperament will constantly arise to keep it alive. But men of this temperament will exact more of their genius than Ingres and his disciples ever brought themselves to do. Mr. Hamerton indicates how it is that these artists can only in a restricted sense be considered as *painters*, and how at the same time the disciples of the opposite school have gradually effected a considerable extension of the term "painting". The school of Ingres in art has a decided affinity with the school of M. Victor Cousin in philosophy and history,[15] and we know that the recent fortunes of the latter school have not been brilliant. There was something essentially arbitrary in the style of painting practised by Ingres. He looked at natural objects in a partial, incomplete manner. He recognized in Nature only one class of objects worthy of study, – the naked human figure; and in art only one method of reproduction, – drawing. To satisfy the requirements of the character now represented by the term "painter", it is necessary to look at Nature in the most impartial and comprehensive manner, to see objects in their integrity, and to reject nothing. It is constantly found more difficult to distinguish between drawing and painting. It is believed that Nature herself makes no such distinction, and that it is folly to educate an artist exclusively as a draughtsman. Mr. Hamerton describes the effect of the classical theory

upon the works of Ingres and his followers, – how their pictures are nothing but colored drawings, their stuffs and draperies unreal, the faces of their figures inanimate, and their landscapes without character.

As Ingres represents the comparative permanence of the tendency inaugurated by David, Mr. Hamerton mentions Géricault[16] as the best of the early representatives of the reactionary or romantic movement. We have no need to linger upon him. Every one who has been through the Louvre remembers his immense *Raft of the Medusa*,[17] and retains a strong impression that the picture possesses not only vastness of size, but real power of conception.

Among the contemporary classicists, Mr. Hamerton mentions Froment, Hamon, and Ary Scheffer, of whose too familiar *Dante and Beatrice* he gives still another photograph.[18] As foremost in the opposite camp, of course, he names Eugène Delacroix;[19] but of this (to our mind) by far the most interesting of French painters he gives but little account and no examples. As a general thing, one may say that Mr. Hamerton rather prefers the easier portion of his task. He discourses at greater length upon Horace Vernet, Léopold Robert, and Paul Delaroche,[20] than the character and importance either of their merits or their defects would seem to warrant. The merits of Eugène Delacroix, on the other hand, are such as one does not easily appreciate without the assistance of a good deal of discriminating counsel. It may very well be admitted, however, that Delacroix is not a painter for whom it is easy to conciliate popular sympathy, nor one, indeed, concerning whose genius it is easy to arrive in one's own mind at a satisfactory conclusion. So many of his merits have the look of faults, and so many of his faults the look of merits, that one can hardly admire him without fearing that one's taste is getting vitiated, nor disapprove him without fearing that one's judgement is getting superficial and unjust. He remains, therefore, for this reason, as well as for several others, one of the most interesting and moving of painters; and it is not too much to say of him that one derives from his works something of that impression of a genius in actual, visible contact – and conflict – with the ever-reluctant possibilities of the subject in hand, which, when we look at the works of Michael Angelo, tempers our exultation at the magnitude of the achievement with a melancholy regret for all that was not achieved. We are sorry, that, in place of one of the less valuable works which

Mr. Hamerton has caused to be represented in his pages, he has not inserted a copy of the excellent lithograph of Delacroix's *Dante et Virgile*, assuredly one of the very finest of modern pictures.

Of Couture Mr. Hamerton says nothing. A discreet publisher would very probably have vetoed the admission of the photograph of his famous *Romans of the Decline*, had such a photograph been obtainable. Couture's masterpiece is interesting, in a survey of the recent development of French art, as an example of a "classical" subject, as one may call it, – that is, a group of figures with their nakedness relieved by fragments of antique drapery, – treated in a manner the reverse of classical.[21] It is hard to conceive anything less like David or Ingres; and although it is by no means a marvellous picture, we cannot but prefer it to such examples as we know of Ingres's work. You feel that the painter has ignored none of the difficulties of his theme, and has striven hard to transfer it to canvas without the loss of reality. The picture is as much a *painting* as the *Apotheosis of Homer* (say) by Ingres is little of one;[22] and yet, curiously, thanks to this same uncompromising grasp towards plastic completeness, the figures are marked by an immobility and fixedness as much aside from Nature as the coldness and the "attitudes" of those produced in the opposite school.

À propos of Horace Vernet and military painters, Mr. Hamerton introduces us to Protais, an artist little known to Americans, but who deserves to become well known, on the evidence of the excellent work of which Mr. Hamerton gives a copy. *Before the Attack* is the title of the picture:[23] a column of chasseurs halting beneath the slope of a hill in the gray dusk of morning and eagerly awaiting the signal to advance. Everything is admirably rendered, – the cold dawn, the half-scared, half-alert expression of the younger soldiers, and the comparative indifference of the elder. It is plain that M. Protais knows his subject. We have seen it already pointed out, that, in speaking of him as the first French painter of military scenes who has attempted to subordinate the character of the general movement to the interest awakened by the particular figures, Mr. Hamerton is guilty of injustice to the admirable Raffet,[24] whose wonderfully forcible designs may really be pronounced a valuable contribution to the military history of the First Empire. We never look at them ourselves, at least, without being profoundly thrilled and moved.

1. [Review of Hamerton's *Contemporary French Painters*]

Of Rosa Bonheur Mr. Hamerton speaks with excellent discrimination; but she is so well known to Americans that we need not linger over his remarks. Of Troyon – also quite well known in this country – he has a very exalted opinion. The well-known lithograph, a *Morning Effect*,[25] which Mr. Hamerton reproduces as a specimen of Troyon, is certainly a charming picture. We may add, that, while on the subject of Troyon, this author makes some useful remarks upon what he calls *tonality* in painting,[26] – a phenomenon of which Troyon was extremely, perhaps excessively, fond, – remarks which will doubtless help many readers to understand excellences and to tolerate apparent eccentricities in pictures on which without some such enlightenment they would be likely to pass false judgement.

Of Decamps[27] Mr. Hamerton speaks sympathetically; but we are not sure that we should not have gone farther. His paintings contain an immense fund of reality, hampered by much weakness, and yet unmistakable. He seems to have constantly attempted, without cleverness, subjects of the kind traditionally consecrated to cleverness. *À propos* to cleverness, we may say that Mr. Hamerton gives a photograph from Gérôme, along with some tolerably stinted praise. The photograph is *The Prisoner*,[28] – a poor Egyptian captive pinioned in a boat and rowed along the Nile, while a man at the stern twitches a guitar under his nose, or rather just over it, for he is lying on his back, and another at the bow sits grimly smoking the pipe of indifference. This work strikes us as no better than the average of Gérôme's pictures, which is placing a decided restriction upon it, – at the same time that, if we add that it is not a bit worse, we give it strong praise. Mr. Hamerton speaks of Gérôme's *heartlessness* in terms in which most observers will agree with him. His pictures are for art very much what the novels of M. Gustave Flaubert are for literature, only decidedly inferior.[29] The question of heartlessness brings Mr. Hamerton to Meissonier, whom he calls heartless too, but without duly setting forth all that he is besides.

The author closes his essay with a photograph from Frère,[30] and another from Toulmouche,[31] – of whom it may be said, that the former paints charming pictures of young girls in the cabins of peasants, and the latter charming pictures of young girls in Paris drawing-rooms.

But Frère imparts to his figures all the pathos of peasant life, and Toulmouche all the want of pathos which belongs to fashionable life.

We have already expressed our opinion that the one really great modern painter of France is conspicuous by his absence from this volume. Other admirable artists are absent, concerning whom, by the way, Mr. Hamerton promises at some future time to write, and others indeed are well represented. But not one of these, as we turn over the volume, seems to us to possess the rare distinction of an exquisite genius. We have no wish, however, to speak of them without respect. Such men fill the intervals between genius and genius, and combine to offer an immense tribute to the immeasurable power of culture.

Notes

1 **things in general**: HJ met John Ruskin (1819–1900), the highly influential critic of art and society, in 1869, noting that he appeared 'scared back by the grim face of reality into the world of . . . unreason & illusion' (*CLHJ 1855–1872* 1: 256). Ruskin came to admire HJ's writing on art and regretted (on the strength of his comments on Tintoretto) that he was not appointed Slade Professor of Fine Art at Cambridge in 1873 (*CLHJ 1872–1876* 1: 250). HJ later became dismissive of Ruskin's ideas (see Henry James, *Italian Hours*, ed. John Auchard (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), pp. xxi–xxiii). See also Viola Hopkins Winner, *Henry James and the Visual Arts* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1970), pp. 19–28, and Roger B. Stein, *John Ruskin and Aesthetic Thought in America, 1840–1900* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), pp. 209–17.

2 ***passé par là***: Passed that way.

3 ***Modern Painters***: The first volume of *Modern Painters*, a defence of Turner's late works, came out in 1843.

4 **the two former**: The opening volume of *Modern Painters* had caused controversy, and *The Stones of Venice* (1851–3) expanded its architectural premise to consider the social and moral state of England. Ruskin had backed the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, and, retaining romantic values, later opposed the Aesthetic Movement. The prophet-like tone of his social criticism fitted ill with the materialist, utilitarian ethics of the mid century.

5 **Mr. Ruskin's own views**: This was the decade in which Ruskin was highly involved in social questions and the publication of *Unto this Last* and *Sesame and Lilies*. In 1869 he became the first Slade Professor of Fine Art, Oxford University, and returned to the criticism of art.