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THE LANDSCAPES OF
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WATTS



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Bayes, Walter
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THE LANDSCAPES OF GEORGE FREDERICK WATTS



THE
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GEORGE FREDERICK
WATTS

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THE LANDSCAPES OF GEORGE FREDERICK WATTS

BY WALTER BAYES



THE reader that looks over the illustrations which are the *raison d'être* of this little book is but passing in review pictures whose production was after all almost a side issue by comparison with the general stream of Mr. Watts' work; yet he will hardly withhold his admiration from, say, the "After the Deluge," with its fleecy splendour of slow-moving cloud, or the solemn simplicity of almost Japanese silhouette in "Ararat" and "Lochness" or—perhaps better than either—the sustained power, sober yet grandiose, of "St. Agnese." This last picture produces an extraordinary impression of the serenely majestic stability of the everlasting hills, whose roots are indeed in the bowels of the earth. In most of Mr. Watts' landscapes the ensemble is well balanced, the transitions suave and gracefully modulated, but he rarely produces a design so richly varied, that is yet so closely knit and simply expressive, as this. It recalls a little a painter who has approached Alpine subjects with something of the same objective seriousness, and with a technique not entirely dissimilar from that of Mr. Watts; but who, one fancies, could never have had much opportunity of being influenced by the English painter's work; I mean Giovanni Segantini, whose painting work had a more masculine intensity than this, but perhaps hardly the same charm.

Charm and a certain quiet dignity exhale always from Mr. Watts' landscapes, but the effect of these dreams in purple and gold was much more definite when we used to see them in current exhibitions, where their observance of the larger, more constant facts of nature became more noticeable by comparison with neighbours preoccupied with the accident

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and glitter of momentary effect. By the side of such "snapshot" impressions of appearance they reaped the advantage of the philosophic moderation that comes of a larger and more leisurely manner of observation, a habit of continuous thought, of co-ordinating and digesting impressions, rather than merely recording them. Mr. Watts never appears to have conceived of landscape painting as Mr. Sargent conceives of it—as a violent attempt to capture the crude appearances of fleeting facts. So much he gained from his contact with the old Masters that he was free from the besetting sin of modern painting—the habit of hasty observation.

In current exhibitions this merit seemed enormous, but now that by his death Mr. Watts comes to be classed, not with current "exhibition painting," but with the painting of all periods, he cannot but be appraised in rather different fashion. It may seem hard that the grave should scarcely be closed over a painter before the voice of detraction begins picking his works to pieces, but it is not really detraction that recognises the changed standards by which a deceased painter must perforce be judged; he enters into the hierarchy of art, and takes his place, if he may, among the great artists of the past; and there is the less need to soften the brusqueness of the changed perspective because an artist is no sooner dead than the whole weight of the picture-dealing interest is devoted to swelling his reputation at the expense of the unfortunate living artist. It is but just, therefore, that criticism should judge him with all the rigour of the new comparisons that are provoked by the question whether by his appearance on this larger stage he fills any noticeable gap in the world of art, has any effect on our conception of its possibilities.

Nature is full of meaning. Paint has very great adaptability, and, in certain inevitable analogies between the processes of painting and the manifestations of nature, lie hid the achievements of the past in painting and its possibilities for the future; and, if there be any excuse for art criticism invoking, as it so frequently does, the name of this or that old Master, it is that each of these names stands for the perfect employment of some such set of painters' processes in their predestined rôle as expressing just those facts, those moods of nature, that they are ideally fitted to express. In this painting world, what is Mr. Watts' place? Has he discovered undreamed-of possibilities, established some new relation between the little world of paint and the large one of matter and spirit? or has he, taking up some already familiar relation between the two, such as painters have long exploited, pushed it to an unexpected poignancy, so that we can say, "he is so-and-so with an added delicacy—or a greater range, or a more definite knowledge of the nature of his art"? Not perhaps entirely valueless to the student is such a mental "placing" of this or that artist's part in the building of the temple of art. It may be his to add a storey, a wing, a brick or two, at any rate, to that edifice, and it were foolish to deny the importance of placing his effort aright. We are told sometimes that the possibilities of art are infinite; rather are they *unknown* in certain directions, but in fact defined and limited enough by

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the innate capacity of paint to express some things and its incapacity to express others. The possibilities of the future are still further restricted by the achievements of our predecessors, a knowledge of whose work forces on us the conviction that in certain directions the ground has been pretty thoroughly covered, and the power of certain qualities of paint to express certain things been carried to a point we can hardly hope to better. On the other hand, paint has possibilities that have never yet found their proper material in nature, and even the old technical processes may be used to other purposes by reason of our now looking out on another world from that of the old Masters. It makes for economy of effort for the art student to take the trouble to inform himself of the time of day, to settle in his mind what has been most definitely done and where there is most probably and immediately something to do.

If possible I would here submit Mr. Watts' landscape to such a mental *placing* as would aid the student who is engaged over this problem. Does this artist come as a forerunner, showing us new possibilities, pointing to unexplored territory, or as a master painter, putting upon his particular branch of landscape art that final stamp of perfection that warns off all followers? Not quite as either, I think. He rather shows in these landscapes as an embodiment of the artistic spirit of the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and looking them over in the mind's eye in their delicate and modest beauty, we are bound to say that they represent that not æsthetically very important period in about as flattering a guise as we could hope to see it.

Compared with the dull average of New Gallery landscapes alongside of which these pictures were usually shown (landscapes flatly literal in intention for all the timidity that prevented their authors following far along the paths of realism) the works of Mr. Watts appear highly imaginative. Here at least is a poet groping after beauty with much delight to himself and not a little to the onlooker, here is *not* a perfunctory tradesman performing an irksome and thankless if perhaps difficult task; and this is what I mean by claiming him as a child of the last twenty years rather than as the survivor from an earlier period, for in these latter days the poetic painter has been rather amateurish, while the capable man is usually a bit of a philistine. There is always delight in watching the inspired amateur with his contagious enthusiasm, which for the moment we feel to be the only spirit in which art work should be undertaken. Amateur as he was, Watts was completely successful in London exhibitions. Among so many that were merely noisy here was one who sang, and his work seemed completely satisfactory in the absence of another singer whose notes were clearer.

But indeed, in any case, the inevitable beauty of perfect technique has rarely appealed to Englishmen so much as this semi-conscious fumbling after a vague splendour; and it is no wonder, with the prestige of a great career behind them, these pictures were highly valued for all their occasionally clumsy painting. To Englishmen the poetic has always

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been the vague, and Watts revelled in the poetic murk. He was artist first and painter afterwards, and convinced that beauty was his affair rather than photographic reality. Enamoured with this beauty he had an almost childlike readiness to respond to anything that struck him as a fresh revelation of it in the works of others; and this impressionable character, so charming in a man of his age and commanding position, gives a slight want of determined direction to his landscape work. In the poetic twilight he grasped many hands, and they led him now this way, now that, without his always quite knowing whither.

"So it were towards beauty was not that enough?" cry his admirers, and indeed it were churlish to be other than grateful to the man who slaked the deserts of London exhibitions with these oases of refreshment, welcome yet the more because one felt latterly that the continuance of Mr. Watts' work, still in such excellent quality, could not, humanly speaking, be prolonged indefinitely; we snatched a precarious delight that could but be fleeting. Now that his more fervid admirers claim for him a permanent place among the great Masters of all time, we are bound, ungracious as it may seem, to review our impressions of these pictures from the other standpoint of their suitability for this longer life.

It is as though some one had discovered a recipe for fixing pastels, the evanescent fragility of whose flower-like beauty we are in the habit of deploring with full conviction of our own sincerity. Yet were such means discovered for making them permanent, can it be doubted that we should look on the pastel we had thought so delightful with sudden qualms—discern in it a certain frivolity, an unsatisfying flimsiness? The guest that comes to make a short stay with us is delightful company—we make much of him, and no compliments seem exaggerated for expressing the pleasure we have in his society. As the day for his departure draws near that pleasure takes on an added poignancy. "Must he indeed go! we would wish to have him with us always." But suppose he turns to us, and heartily slapping us on the back declares he is not going at all, that as we like him so much he will stay with us always, hanging up his hat and becoming a household institution along with our Gainsboroughs and our Vandykes? *Allons donc!* it is another matter; we should perhaps be a little taken aback at being thus bound to our word.

So it is with the charm of much of our contemporary art: we judge it by its power of immediate delight, and from this power it gets a very real value that is no whit endangered by any question as to whether it is destined to a very long life. The man that can care for no art but that which is built for immortality is a blind fool, neglectful of his privileges as a child of time; and the work of transient interest is sometimes perhaps more useful than the one of permanent value, immortality after all belonging properly to perfection—perfection often narrow enough—the doing of some small thing better than it has ever been done before; while it is the diffuse and easy painter, taking with both hands on every side and

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giving as plentifully, that makes for rich and abundant activity. The one bequeaths to posterity a concrete work of art that ages may admire, a name that pedants may catalogue ; the other spreads abroad something of his own receptive spirit, an inspiration that may never identify itself with the man who is indeed not so much an author as a disseminator, that will change its form with the needs of the future and thus gradually become unrecognisable, but will not on that account cease to be. Mr. Watts will not, I think, be found to have set his seal on English art in any sense that binds it to a definite direction ; his influence nevertheless has been very considerable if a little vague ; nor can we imagine the artist, himself so prone to a suspended judgment that shall leave the future open, would have wished that influence to be more definitive than it is likely to be. He has made for imagination in painting, for beauty of richer and fuller character than was dreamed of by the English pre-Raphaelites, and perhaps this variety, this desire to unite in his art many elements, many different kinds of beauty, is the side of his character most likely to be fruitful in the art of the future, though it was perhaps a feature in his painting that hardly made for his own perfection as an artist.

Looking over these photographs one sees that the landscapes of Mr. Watts were not all of the character we remember as typically representing him in this branch of art. There is here, for example, quite a group of indigenous British landscapes, of homely subjects such as "Farm Buildings (Freshwater)," "Green Summer," "A View in Surrey," or "Freshwater (Farrington)," which speak of a varied but purely native inspiration, the "Green Summer" announcing itself more definitely than the rest as descending from the "Norwich School." These are not what appears before the mind's eye when mention is made of Watts' work in landscape ; we think of him in connection with work of more imaginative order, and in many of his pictures landscape plays a part that forecasts somewhat the work he was to do when late in life he addressed himself more definitely to landscape painting, the "Chaos" at Millbank being an unusually fine example of his work in the class of subjects that especially appealed to him. In the manner in which the inert, rough-hewn figures of the recumbent giants are echoed by similar forms in the gaunt mountain slabs leaning as it were one upon the other we have the allegory of form properly used. "After the Deluge" is as much as any of the pictures here reproduced the sort of landscape that we connect with the name of Mr. Watts—a landscape from which all that is coarse and material has been eliminated, and which offers a residuum that is a kind of sublimation of all the most poetic elements in nature. It naturally reminds you a little of Turner, but on the whole, considering the period when Mr. Watts began painting, the influence of Mr. Ruskin and so forth, his landscape is very little Turnerian. This picture and the "Ocean Ghost" (which has almost a touch of Monet also in its composition) are the only works here reproduced whose aspect much recalls the great English master of landscape. Yet had I been called upon suddenly to

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provide an adjective or label to describe Mr. Watts' landscape, I am afraid I should have stumbled upon Turnerian-Japanese, and this strange conjunction of adjectives betrays already the spirit of our period, a period that has been the prey of many influences, solicited this way and that.

To have risen to an intellectual eminence that would have enabled him to include these two so different points of view would indeed have stamped Mr. Watts as a genius of the highest order; but no one will, I think, claim that he achieved anything of the sort. Both Turner and Hiroshige were great decorators, but the cardinal difficulty of adapting landscape painting to decorative purposes they approached in widely different fashion, and it is worth while to dwell for a moment on one aspect of Japanese landscape convention, because this convention seems to have aroused Mr. Watts' admiration, and to have affected his art not a little, and because in his perhaps unconscious imitation of it he hardly seems to have realised to what extent it owed its validity to assumptions widely different from those on which European art, and perhaps more than most European art—the art of Turner—is based.

Broadly speaking, European painting renders a three-dimensions world, Oriental painting shows a world in two dimensions—despite frequent excursions into realism it remains on the whole almost an art of silhouette, of the grouping of profiles. It is based on the conviction that the flat world of nature's *appearances* are as pregnant with significance as her three-dimensioned *facts*, and accordingly already apt for generalisation into symbolic forms. The Japanese renders a wave by drawing it in section with inimitable sense of its force and movement, and gets thereby a symbol of more immediate eloquence than Turner's rendering of the same subject, though the latter is in its way not less vigorous and incomparably richer and fuller in expression. Similarly in rendering Mr. Watts' beloved mountains the Oriental treatment has an immediate and affecting appeal, expressing as it does rather the *idea* of a mountain than the mountain itself—an appeal irresistible to a painter biased in favour of the symbolic abstract side of art, and rather given to fancying himself in the *rôle* of the Oriental seer wrapped in mystic contemplation.

Pulled in this direction by one set of sympathies, he was too much a contemporary of Mr. Ruskin not to have a strong love for literal truth to the facts of landscape, truth to which does not by any means always make for the decorative effect of a picture, for far more in landscape than in figure painting, the treatment of that third dimension is a vital question—a difficulty forced upon us by the very nature of our subject-matter. A figure picture after all may well be designed, as most great painters have designed theirs, in such a fashion that the great planes, the leading movement of the group, are parallel to the picture-plane, and this without involving any great violation of natural probability. In landscape, on the other hand, or at least in the landscape of fact, the horizontal planes, those at right angles to the picture, and which if insisted on would make

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a hole in the wall, are the dominant ones, dominant in even mountain scenery, as Mr. Ruskin insisted in that fine chapter of "Modern Painters" in which he demonstrated that the grandeur of effect of mountains depended on the full expression of the fact that great as were their precipitous heights they were as nothing to the extent of the gradual slopes leading up to them. The older landscape painters avoided as far as possible this predominance of horizontal, and, because horizontal, of foreshortened forms, by dint of great towering masses of trees, precipitous rocks, classic architecture and the like, and were solemnly rebuked by Mr. Ruskin for blindness and indifference to the facts of nature when really they were seeking above all *material for decorative painting* that asks for flat tranquil masses as the basis of its design. Modern realism has shown the wisdom of the convention of Claude by itself doing full justice to the horizontal projection, rendering it by a coarse and violent relief that critics praise for its truth of values, but which for any one with a sensitive feeling for suitability in the use of paint is very disagreeable in its cheap *trompe l'œil* quality. Turner was the ideal Master, rendering indeed the horizontal projection of Nature, but not with the illusion of coarse contrast, suggesting the receding planes not by violent modelling but by delicacy of draughtsmanship, by an arbitrary but always legible use of perspective—and, not a little, by colour. His perspective may be unscientific, his colour not literally true, but both are based on an extraordinary knowledge of the natural laws of light. He knew just what were the colour relations that would subsist between the various planes of different objects at stated distances and under a given illumination, and had at his command a complex series of technical processes which yet moved harmoniously together and left the painter's meaning as clear as day.

To paint thus pictures instantaneously readable as designs in three dimensions calls for an observer learned as Turner in the lore of nature and for a painter with Turner's mastery of a close-linked yet elastic series of technical processes. It cannot be claimed that Watts quite possessed either, and indeed his love for Turner's colour is rather sensuous; he felt its beauty, but hardly apprehended its full significance, its function as one of several factors working together to express the marvellous structure of the world. At least, if he felt it he never seems to have aimed at the same close-knit concerted movement in his own pictures; and indeed with the technique that had become habitual with him by the time he took up landscape painting, the highly developed science that Turner had founded on the basis of previous art was hardly possible, and I cannot conceal my opinion that it is in his consciousness of his own technical limitations that the explanation is to be found for Mr. Watts being so little a follower of Turner, with the aim of whose later work he was so much in sympathy.

And here, at the risk of repeating what I have already said in another place, a word may be excused as to the nature and reason of this change of technique that marks off Mr. Watts' later pictures as different from

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the masculine, directly-executed work of his earlier life. There is probably no manner of working, no *milieu* but in the long run breeds some vice in the painter. Certainly the change of technique that we notice as gradually showing itself in Watts' painting is just what we might expect from his circumstances. The urgent need to produce at any cost that besets the man that is pot-boiling for bare existence breeds haste in execution and sometimes shallowness as well. Mr. Watts, for the greater part of his life, was free from these temptations. He produced at his ease, with no pressing necessity for finishing his pictures up to time ; and from this prosperity, which I think was more dangerous for one of his temperament than the workaday existence from which his patrons saved him, came a technique adapted to perpetual retouching, a scumbling of half dry paint dragged over the surface of the picture in such fashion as always to leave the possibility of a further retouching to-morrow. One can understand the delight with which such a painter hailed the advent of the Raffaelli colours, with their promise of simplifying still further a technique which thus absolved the artist from the necessity of starting with a plan and keeping to it. This tentative system of painting, very different from the vigorously-planned series of processes with which Mr. Watts, in emulation of the painters of the Italian Renaissance, started his artistic career, was still more different from the even more complex facture which Turner had spent a lifetime in fitting for the special purposes of landscape. The iridescent *aspect* of one of Turner's later works might be captured by such means, but its full expressive power never ; and indeed the tense, almost harsh, determination required for attacking such a problem as the painting of a fine Turner may have been quite distasteful to a mind more and more inclined to a kind of suspended judgment balancing rival claims and postponing a final decision. Watts in his later period, to which most of these landscapes belong, was a fumbler, albeit a poetic and delicate one. He came to belong more and more to the generation of Mr. Edward Stott, and dropped naturally enough sometimes into that decomposed colour that Monet and his friends may have invented as a scientific method of painting, but which at all times has been ready to the hesitant hand of the supersensitive painter when he is conscious of inclinations in many ways, but no vehement mastering call in any one direction.

This temper of mind, waiting on accident or impulse rather than formulating a design and abiding by it, is characteristic of much of the best painting of the end of the nineteenth century, painting of palpitating delicacy and charm, but no great creative power. Mr. Watts would appear to have retained to the last so youthful an outlook, such a gift for being in the *mouvement* with the younger generation, that in his landscapes he hardly ever strikes one as being behind the times. He listens to every voice with a humility rather touching in a man of his experience, and has even a companionable impulse to join in the chorus, though, with the discretion that comes of that experience, he refrains

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from following the shrillest of the innovators. Even Monet's impressionism seems to have had an influence on him, though the veteran had studied art too widely to see in the method an "open sesame" to all the secrets of landscape painting. He always utilises it to some purpose of beauty, and is never guilty of the monstrosities which more rabid enthusiasts perpetrated in whole-hearted confidence that scientific impressionism could not lead them astray. On the other hand, Monet's work has, from this very fact of his narrow faith in a method, an experimental value that Mr. Watts' work cannot claim, with its tactful stopping short at the point when experiment becomes doubtful, and in consequence valuable as a test of the validity of his theories.

But if the nature of Mr. Watts' later technique made it impossible for him to achieve the complex task of painting in terms of perspective, as Turner did with the fluency of a clerk's running hand, it equally debarred him from seriously rivalling the austere reserve and dignity of the best Japanese landscape painting. Compared with those great transparent masses of colour crossing and enforcing one another in so simple a fashion, Watts' mysterious smudging and dragging, his bloom of encrusted particles of colour, is a little fretful and undignified. More thoroughly than Mr. Watts, these great masters of Oriental landscape aimed at pushing their art into abstract spheres, at making its functions approximate more to that of music. Attractive as such a programme may sound on paper, the greatest masters of European art have ever felt that it implies abrogating one of the possibilities of painting that is most peculiarly its own. The greatest of the Europeans have not the least insight because they realise that no abstraction is more mysterious than a concrete thing. Watts could not shake off the force of their demonstration of this fact, and in his attempt at exploiting Japanese art fell between two stools. He does not resume the substance of two gospels, but compromises gracefully and adroitly between two manners, which is as much perhaps as any European painter has made of Oriental influence, with the possible exception of Mr. Whistler.

It is this readiness to imitate externals that stamps an artist as an amateur, a man who lives not in a world of his own but in a world of other people's pictures; and the fact that to an increasing extent as he got older he painted pictures of pictures, which is the essence of one of my principal objections to Mr. Watts' work, made probably only for his greater popularity with a public little in the habit of looking at nature at first hand. I think it was Mr. George Thomson in one of his too rare essays in art criticism who pleaded for some philanthropic person to start a "fresh air fund," providing a day in the country for London art critics. He said he wanted a day in the country for London art critics and a day in the country for London cows! Yet perhaps in both cases so sudden a change would have no better effect than to turn their produce sour. Possibly if the less good amongst these landscapes seem to me a little stale and second-hand, allowance must be made for the fact

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that I write these few lines from the lofty ramparts of an old walled town, with the wind rustling through ancient elms and a broad expanse of billowy country before me.

To be judged perhaps a little apart from the rest of the landscapes, "The Parasite" is more definitely an attempt at pictorial allegory; and not one of his more ambitious efforts at pointing an obvious moral by means of paint, is more entirely successful than this presentment of the ivy-festooned trunk in so graceful contrast with uncouth limbs of the bare tree in the background, a tree which the painter, after the fashion of moralists, has chosen from among the ugliest of its kind—a *corpus vile* to prove his point. Yet it is pleasant to find a moralist who has sometimes been suspected of a too "copy-book" correctitude lending for once his support to a more genial morality, recognising for once in a way that indeed we may well condone for their beauty many things at bottom indefensible, and this attitude, more becoming an artist than an inhuman if highly moral correctness, almost disarms criticism of his weaker pictures. May it not be indeed that it was consciously designed to do so, as the veteran half humorously, half regretfully recognised that his art had hardly the independent masculine character he had projected for it in his youth, that it was indeed but a backwash from the Italian Renaissance, sucking its strength from those Masters of the past, and indeed not disdaining to borrow from the smaller saplings of a later day? "Yes," we may fancy him saying, "theirs is the strength; they have their roots deep in the heart of things; but perhaps in the lighter art of this my frolicsome age, that is as it were festooned upon theirs, there is a fairer grace of seeming, just as in the art of Pinturicchio there is fairer and more palpable bloom than in that of the more strenuous painters he pillaged."

Much more definitely when he picked up a hint or two from this or that modern, we can fancy the old painter chuckling at the contrast between the bare awkward growth of the independent creature and the light and fanciful beauty of himself the parasite, chuckling, perhaps, the more as critic after critic appraised him as the stalwart survivor of a sturdier generation. Depend upon it, he knew better when he painted this allegory so genially begging the question of a doubtful position, and we cannot but like him the better for this momentary unbending, nor need we dispute the validity of the plea.

Indeed, here is the subtly corrupting influence of Watts' example which I feel it my duty to expose, even under circumstances which in public expectation call for an entirely laudatory panegyric. We are told that the history of the individual is an epitome of the history of the race. Well, in Watts we see some such spectacle, the spectacle of an old Master crumbling down to a modern, and doing it with so inimitable a grace that every step seems an advance. In his landscapes we see the logical end of the tragic process, and behold they are charming, but I submit with an entirely decadent charm, for the due expression of which,

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however, landscape is so far the natural field as to give to these later landscapes a certain aptness which makes them, in some ways, more desirable than his later figure pictures.

Landscape painting, the painting "by effect," came to be by the end of the nineteenth century, the dominating influence in the art of this country, and has now in current artistic practice set up standards and requirements of its own, widely different from, and even inconsistent with, the requirements of what used to be considered good painting. A whole generation of young painters, and not a few figure painters among them, have been formed on the principles that modern landscape painting has established, and there has come into fashion a certain loose disintegrated execution whose great merit is, that by it a picture is open at any time to those little compensating dabs, this way and that, that balance the all-important but at bottom not very definitely preconceived ensemble, that it keeps the picture in a liquid state, ready even at the eleventh hour to respond throughout to any thrill of emotion. Quite a considerable proportion of modern figure painters belong to this school of the landscape painter's method just as definitely as Claude, and even as, in a measure, Turner belonged to the severer school formed by figure painters. They are improvisors trying doubtful adventures, and Mr. Watts was among them, his work sometimes even more disintegrated, more dependent on accident and mood than that of the impressionist enthusiasts who made a virtue of their decomposed colour. *They* had at least at the back of it a cast-iron science that gave them a certain severity. Mr. Watts sometimes offered the demoralising example of a man parlously near to following simply the line of least resistance. That line happened in his instance to be guided always by good taste, but some of his work is the very embodiment of easy morality. He has the soft indolence that so often besets the Englishman who visits Italy in his youth; and, indeed, his landscape sometimes resembles the typically Italian yet northern art of Costa, but Costa had at his command a series of painting processes that are limpidity and elegance itself compared with the clumsy botching that Watts often resorted to, and had, moreover, at need a precise and dainty draughtsmanship whose interest is indisputable as far as it goes, while Watts keeps as a rule carefully aloof from anything that challenges a close comparison with facts.

What then is the secret of the charm of Watts' landscape, charm so undeniable that it impresses itself even on so hostile a witness as myself? It comes, I think, from a certain reverence that is entirely genuine, and that seems very beautiful in an age of cocksure glibness, when painters seem to take a perverse pleasure in demonstrating that never for them was the world made new, that the sense of sight is to them an everyday affair, nowise miraculous. It is, perhaps, the doing of cheap illustrations in our youth that gives us this unhappy *blasé* air of being familiar to weariness with every subject under the sun, while we have no intimate knowledge of anything. We have taken the bloom off our experience.

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Would you have a recipe for producing a modern picture? You must first eliminate from the subject you paint every element of whose bearing on the others you are not quite sure—make for yourself an ideal world, completely homogeneous, constructed according to those laws of natural lighting and natural structure you have entirely mastered. Paint your picture with perfect confidence on these lines, without allowing any further observation of nature to disturb your equanimity, for after all nature is liable to be constructed on a system more complex than yours. The result may be stale, but it will seem a masterly painting—to anyone with less knowledge than yourself.

But such painting from the outside of a completely understood world can never have the poignant and touching quality of a picture painted *from within the mystery* that the painter himself is seen to feel around. The "masterly" painter may actually give us more of natural fact, but we feel that he is himself a false and misleading spectacle, a posturing performer compared with the other, who so humbly, so sympathetically, confesses his submission to the common lot of man. With all that is said against modern painting, it may be remembered that there have been not a few artists of our time that at least felt and made us feel this reverence for the mystery of things. Perhaps they have usually been painters of uglier pictures, uglier from the superficial point of view I mean, in that they reverence the starker, more serious facts of life rather than the rainbow appearance that masks and flatters them, and for my own part I confess to a greater liking for a painter who, like Fantin Latour, or, to take an even more pertinent contrast, like Matthew Maris, can read untold mystery into the most ordinary backyard, transfiguring it by his earnest gaze into a transcendent symbol of the most intimate facts of life; and I have sometimes had something like an uncomfortable suspicion of Mr. Watts, who sees the glory always where the public expects it, in splendour of rising or of setting sun, or in the blue distance of the everlasting hills. Watts had the merit of retaining a childlike wonder in the obvious: for him the splendour of the sun had not grown stale—he remains a fire-worshipper to the end. The solar glow breaking through turbid mist, the theme of "After the Deluge," is a subject after his own heart: he never wearied of it. So also with mountains, whose distant blue has in his pictures a very exciting quality difficult to account for on any mere material grounds.

This temper of mind maintaining its illusions, its enthusiasm for familiar splendours, made more entirely for excellence in Mr. Watts' landscapes than in his work in the domain of allegory, where the same naive enthusiasm for the obvious resulted in a certain pertinacity in belabouring the customary ogres that are presented for youthful execration by pedagogues desiring to offer their charges exercises in moral indignation, ogres that the average man by the time that he reaches middle age usually finds unreal enough—and this again was for him rather a cause of popularity with a generation that loved not to have its ideas of beauty

THE LANDSCAPES OF GEORGE FREDERICK WATTS

and ugliness, of virtue and villainy, jostled or unsettled. To the more analytical generation that follows it, that has been reared for example on Mr. Bernard Shaw, this obedient pounding away at those familiar abstractions Mammon and Cruelty and Lust and the like, will seem but an industrious beating of stuffed dummies artfully reared for the express purpose of taking buffets; and it is probable that this sophisticated race will tend even to be unjust to the *landscape* of a painter who saw his beauties so much where he was expected to see them, and it may have then to be restated and insisted on that to see beauty in a rainbow is as legitimate as to discover it in a pigsty. We have not quite got to questioning that yet, but we feel that it is the homely and intimate rather than the sublime subject that is the best theme for an art so impulsive, so lyric, so little charged with the more robust virtues as was usually that of Mr. Watts when he went a-landscape painting. It is difficult quite to forgive a man who gave promise of fine performances in heroic art for having become a purely lyric painter—it is more difficult when his best performances are with subjects that seem to ask for, and have often received, handling by an artist of more determined character; for although Mr. Watts seems clearly to have felt an inclination for subjects of humbler and more everyday character, he did not succeed with them (the "View in Surrey" is a possible exception) quite as he did with his blazing firmaments and his towering mountain-tops.

As for any revival so late in the day of the braver manner of painting he had practised in his youth, that he seems to have felt was impossible: after so much smudging and scumbling, he could not again come out into the open and paint directly. Indeed, he seems to have felt the impossibility to be so specially an affair of the technique of painting that, when in the evening of life he gathered himself together for a final effort to do something big before he died, he did not make the essay in the art to which he had devoted the best years of his life, but selected the domain of sculpture for the trial, and acquitted himself, truth to tell, so finely as to mark clearly for anyone's apprehension the decadence, albeit the graceful decadence, of his painting.

With that spirited and striking performance that so fittingly closed his career we have not now to deal, but with a branch of art to which, after all, he devoted but the later remnants of his painting powers, powers that were not enfeebled by age but which he had lost the habit of keeping up to their full pitch of activity by dint of long working for a public that was certainly appreciative enough but not very critical or exacting, who seemed, indeed, to have been ready to extol any work of his as a masterpiece if only its subject came out of the Bible.

It is greatly to his credit under these circumstances that more and more he should have tended in his latter years to eschew these extraneous attractions and take to mere painting. His landscapes are an evidence of this impulse, and he reaped this reward, that in the art of modern landscape painting he improved consistently to the end. As a painter of



Plate I

THE PARASITE

Photo, F. Hollyer

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS
CHICAGO, ILL. U.S.A.
LONDON, ENGLAND
1954

Plate I

THE PARASITE

PLATE I



Plate II

LOCH NESS

Photo, F. Hollyer

1911
COLUMBIA



Plate III

MENTONE AND ST. AGNESE

Photo, F. Holbyer

State of
California



Plate IV

ARARAT

Photo, F. Hollyer

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CALIFORNIA



Plate V

FARM BUILDINGS (FRESHWATER) 1881

Photo, F. Holyer

View of
the house



Plate V'

AFTER THE DELUGE

Photo, F. Hollyer

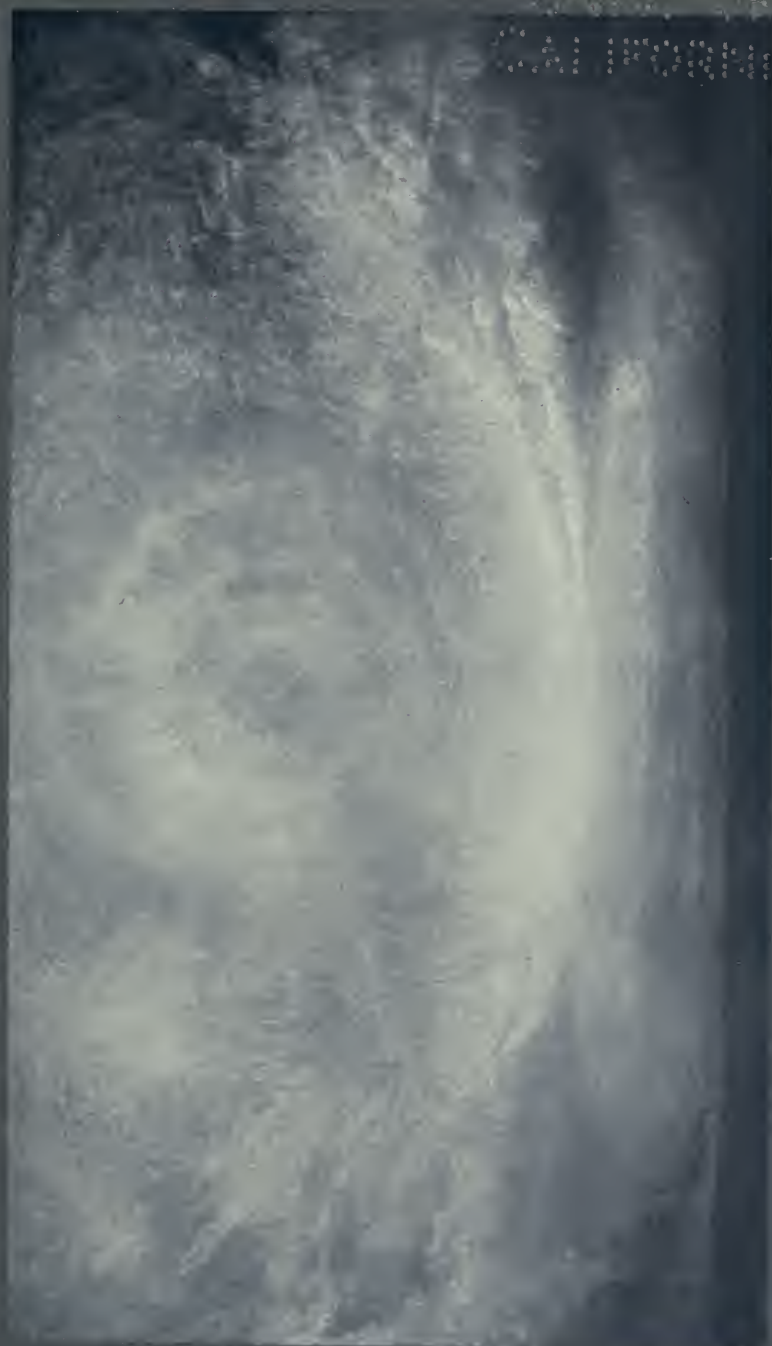


Plate VII

THE SPHINX

Photo, F. Hollyer

Life of
G. M. T. M. M.



A large, soft, white rain cloud is the central focus of the image. It has a billowy, textured appearance with subtle variations in tone, suggesting depth and movement. The cloud is set against a plain, light-colored background, which makes its form stand out. The overall composition is simple and minimalist, emphasizing the natural beauty and texture of the cloud.

Plate VIII

RAIN CLOUD

Photo, F. Hollyer

LINE OF
CLOUDS



PLATE IX

Plate IX

A VIEW IN SURREY

Photo, F. Hollyer

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Plate X

NAPLES

Photo, F. Hollyer

1945, 1946
California



Plate XI

GREEN SUMMER

Photo, F. Hollyer



Plate XII

BAY OF NAPLES

Photo, F. Höllyer

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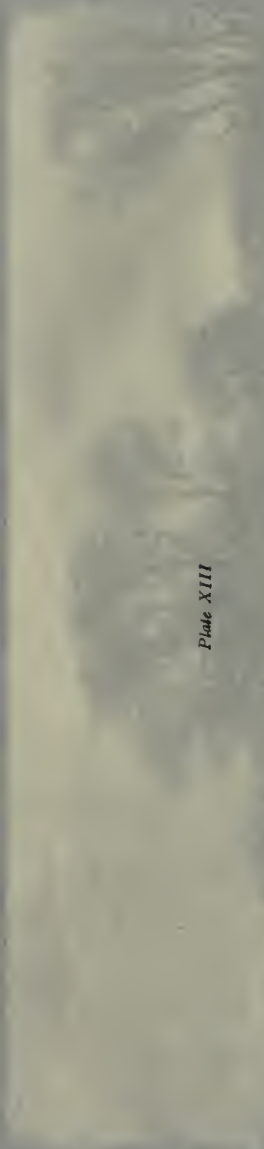


Plate XIII

FRESHWATER

Photo, F. Hollyer

View of
California



Plais XIV

THE DOVE THAT RETURNED IN THE EVENING

Photo, F. Holbyer



Plate XV

OCEAN GHOST

Photo, F. Hollyer



Plate XVI

VESUVIUS

Photo. F. Hollyer



Plate XVII

THE SAVOY

Photo, F. Holtzer

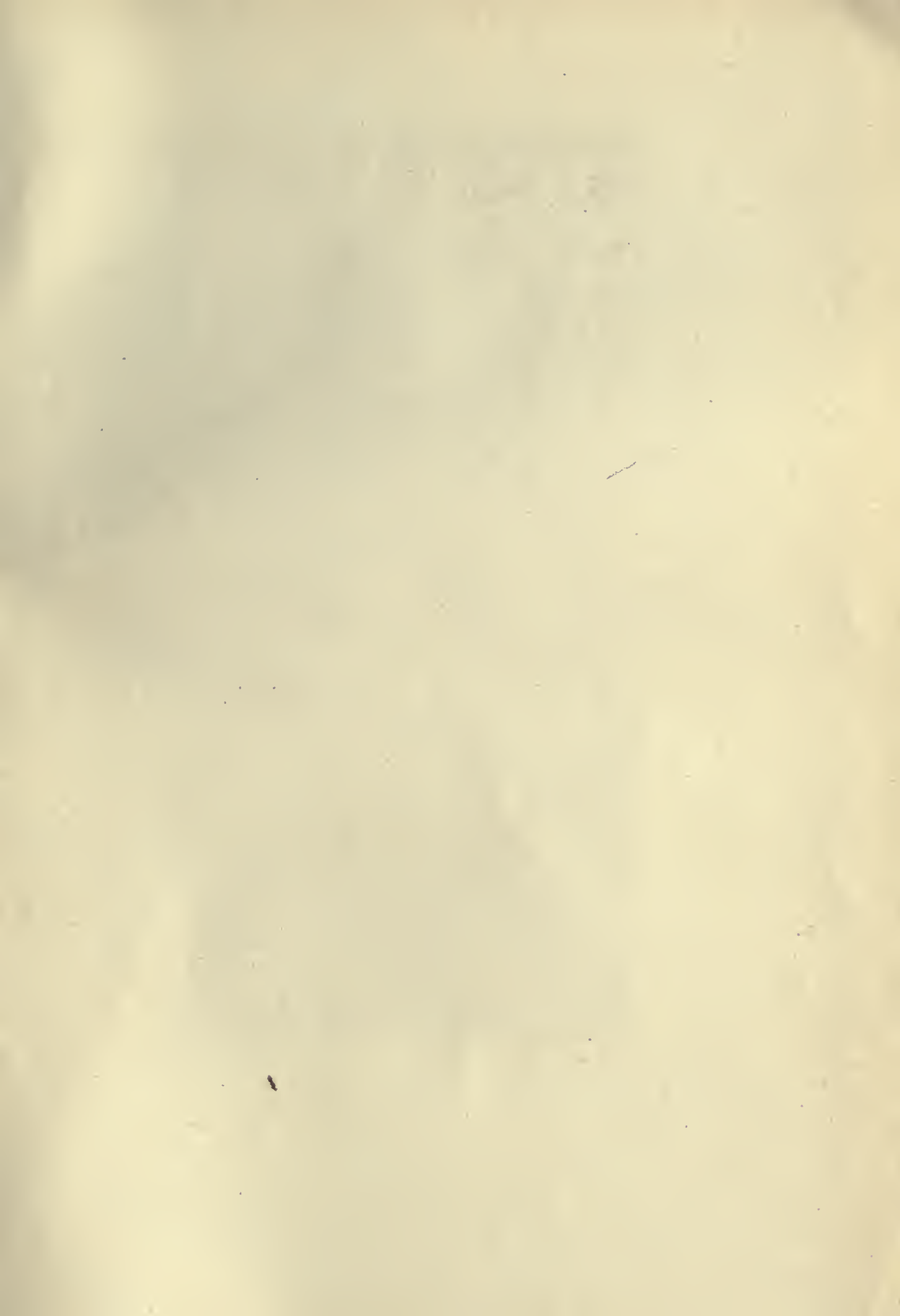
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Plate XVIII

SUNSET ON THE ALPS

Photo, F. Hollyer



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