

Landscape in the drawing of Millet and in the poetry of Baudelaire

At the time of the 1859 Paris Salon, critic and poet Charles Baudelaire wrote a very intense and violent critique directed at the paintings exhibited there by Jean-François Millet:

'It is style, especially, that M. Millet seeks; he makes no secret, rather he makes a show and glory of it. (...) For "style" has been his disaster. His peasants are pedants who have too high an opinion of themselves. They display a kind of dark and fatal boorishness which makes me want to hate them. Whether they are reaping or sowing, whether they are grazing or shearing their animals, they always seem to be saying, "We are the poor and disinherited of this earth – but it is we who make it fertile! We are accomplishing a mission, we are exercising a priestly function!" Instead of simply distilling the natural poetry of his subject, M. Millet wants to add something to it at any price. In their monotonous ugliness, all these little pariahs have a pretentiousness which is philosophic, melancholy and Raphaellesque. This disastrous element in M. Millet's painting spoils all the fine qualities by which one's glance is first of all attracted towards him.'

It is, of course, impossible to be indifferent to the impetuosity of these words, especially when they are directed at an artist like Jean-François Millet, who, as our gaze and reflection in retrospect dictates, was undoubtedly a remarkable painter, extremely important in the realist tendency that marked the mid-19th century in France, having even become one of the founders of the Barbizon School. However, if we read the opening words of this harsh critique of the theme of landscape carefully, we see that it is not the theme suggested in the painting that bothers Baudelaire, so to speak, but the nature of the figuration in Millet that stands out *over* that landscape. It is the representation of a figuration-type created under a sphere of staged sadness and sorrow that, in his words, 'spoils' the qualities 'by which one's glance is first of all attracted'. In it, Baudelaire did not find the human greatness of the peasants that Millet so vehemently wished to depict.

Millet's very particular style, evoking human figures in the landscape, would be tied to the artist's taste for the classics of Antiquity, for epic works by poets such as Homer and Virgil, as well as parables and sacred episodes from the Bible,² in a clear attempt to represent the dignity of the human figure through the effort of work: men and women who work the fields every day, others who experience the reality of oppression, poverty and misery, in a state of deprivation, bowing their head in prayer for good fortune and prosperity in the harvests. These figures appear there almost as angels, celestial beings in peasant clothing, their faces almost always in shadow because of the backlighting of the dawns and dusks that mark the crisp and clear horizon in Millet's painting. Thus, these figure-types bring with them a benevolent aspiration of the artist by depicting human ostracism which, to Baudelaire, does

not cause astonishment or admiration, as the Romanticism he finds in them, according to the poet, is no more than a desire without materialisation. However, could the critic Charles Baudelaire reconsider his cutting thesis when faced with the representation of a landscape without the figuration that undeniably defines the so-called 'style' of Jean-François Millet? Could Baudelaire ever truly *experience* Millet's landscape without the use of figuration as he describes it in the painter's work? What 'fine qualities' are these that he refers to, obscured by these character-types without 'natural poetry', as he calls them?

Opening up this possibility, let us consider, then, what Baudelaire writes about the theme of landscape, expressing, distinctly, a Kantian point of view on the experience of the subject before the artwork:

'If an assemblage of trees, mountains, water and houses, such as we call a landscape, is beautiful, it is not so of itself, but through me, through my own grace and favour, through the idea or the feeling which I attach to it. It amounts to saying, I think, that any landscape-painter who does not know how to convey a feeling by means of an assemblage of vegetable or mineral matter, is no artist. I know very well that by a singular effort the human imagination can momentarily conceive of Nature without Man — can conceive of all the suggestive mass of the universe dispersed throughout space without a contemplator to extract from it comparison, metaphor and allegory. It is true enough that all that universal order and harmony would lose none of the inspirational quality with which providence has entrusted it; but in that case, in default of an intelligence to inspire, this quality would be as though it did not exist at all. Those artists who want to express nature minus the feelings which she inspires are submitting to an odd sort of operation which consists in killing the reflective and sentient man within them; and believe me, the disaster is that for the majority of them this operation has nothing odd nor painful about it at all. (...) Most of them fall into the error to which I drew attention at the beginning of this study. They take the dictionary of art for art itself; they copy a word from the dictionary, believing that they are copying a poem. But a poem can never be copied; it has to be composed. Thus, they open a window, and the whole space contained in the rectangle of that window — trees, sky and house — assumes for them the value of a ready-made poem.'³

Let us focus then on this experience of the subject that contemplates the representation of the real, not only through painting, but also the drawing of landscape. In effect, this experience can, sometimes, be very similar to that which involves the reader through the images evoked by poetry. The experience of both can result in a shareable feeling or, in Kantian terms, a feeling worthy of reflection and debate about the property of that which is called 'beautiful' — in this case, a feeling through the experience of landscape, the memory of a body when it encounters the world that accommodates it.

Thus, it is in view of this experience of landscape and of the place we occupy in relation to it that we propose a reflection about three works belonging to the Calouste Gulbenkian Collection: an emblematic landscape drawing in black and white chalk by Jean-François Millet, *Landscape at Dusk* (1851-1852), and two poems by Charles Baudelaire brought together in two notable editions of his renowned work *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857).⁴

The intriguing particularity of this drawing by Millet is that there is no representation of the human figure, as is so characteristic in his work. Here, Millet depicts only landscape. We are faced with a dark grove of trees, sketched in black chalk, smudged. The arrival of sunset is revealed only by the soft openings of light made with white chalk on the line of the horizon that can be made out between the trees of Barbizon. But this is not a drawing that suggests a feeling of serenity. A gnarled tree, almost at the centre of the drawing, demands our attention and creates a strange, albeit familiar, sensation of instability, imbalance, weight. This small sketch leads us to encounter man's feeling of fragility when in contact with the pulsating force of nature, a feeling which, in the words of Baudelaire, lacks determination in the representation produced by landscape artists of the time. Perhaps as an analogy to the transitory state of mankind, here we are presented with a tree that is bent, broken, isolated from the rest. Much influenced by the romanticism that marked this period, a feeling of true absence is felt: the nostalgia that dusk almost always brings with it, the nostalgia for something or someone who is absent, as the night is ushered in.

This black dust clouded by the whiteness of the chalk, which evokes the premonition of night, is brought together with the written work of Baudelaire, the poems he creates through the intimate use of words that name sensations, composing poetry precisely about this moment that heralds the end of the day: '*A heart that hates oblivion, ruthless censor, / The whole of the bright past resuscitates. / The sun in its own blood coagulates... / And, monstrosity-like, your memory flames intenser!*' ('Harmonie du Soir' ['Evening Harmony']).

This combination of the works of Millet and Baudelaire provides an encounter with the arrival of twilight and, with it, the lingering and tacit landscape of autumn with its bare trees, brittle, cold and isolated: '(...) Last night was Summer. Here's the Fall. / There booms a farewell volley in the sound' ('Chant d'Automne' ['Song of Autumn']). Thus, perhaps, the tremendous effort of those who are artists and authors is realised. Those who evoke the world that accommodates us and the feelings it provides, through its greatness, beauty and extent, now through the attentive gaze of the public, who contemplates their representation. It is, without a doubt, as Baudelaire wrote, 'imagination [that] makes the landscape'.⁵

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1 Charles Baudelaire, 'Salon de 1859 – Lettres à M. Le Directeur de la "Revue Française"' in *The Mirror of Art: Critical Studies by Baudelaire*. Translated and edited by Jonathan Mayne. Doubleday and Anchor Books: New York, 1956, p. 281.

2 Cf. Julia Cartwright, *Jean-François Millet – His Life and Letters*. Swan Sonnenschein & Co., Lim.: London, 1902, p. 60.

3 Charles Baudelaire, *op. cit.*, pp. 279-280.

4 The citations used in this essay are from Roy Campbell's translation in *Poems of Baudelaire*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1952.

5 Charles Baudelaire, *op. cit.*, p. 285.