TURNER

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Trieste

CROSSING THE BROOK

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BY

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"FIFTY YEARS OF MODERN PAINTING," "G. F. WATTS,"

"BURNE-JONES," ETC.

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I

ART, LIFE AND NATURE

THERE is a story, one that might be difficult to authenticate, of a mediæval monk, who, having departed this life, and being asked in his next stage of existence how he had enjoyed the beautiful world he had just left, replied that he had never seen its beauty. Had such a question been asked, under such conditions, this might well have been the reply, for Ruskin tells us that a monk of the Grande Chartreuse, when asked why the windows of the monastery faced inwards on a courtyard, instead of outwards over the valley, replied that he and his fellows had not gone there to look at the mountains. Browning, in 'Fra Lippo Lippi,' sets talking a monk who was alive to the beauty of the world, and its wonder and power, 'the shapes of things, their colours, lights and shades, changes, surprises,' and who asked the captain of the guard, a man who had seen the world, if he felt thankful

> For this fair town's face, yonder river's line,
> The mountain round it and the sky above,
> Much more the figures of man, woman, child,
> These are the frame to?

And though Lippi was a very unmonkish monk, and, in his keen enjoyment of the beauty around him, in advance, as the artist must needs be, of most of his contemporaries, yet he and the other artists of his time were but the harbingers of a day when men would have a much deeper and wider appreciation of the beauty of their dwelling-place than had been possible in earlier ages. The story of how mankind has gradually come into enjoyment of this priceless source of happiness, which yet may be free to all, has often been told, and need not be formally repeated here. It will inevitably come up incidentally as we discuss the art of Turner in the following pages; but it is to our immediate purpose to notice that, since Fra Lippo Lippi's day, landscape, after occupying a merely subordinate position in the art of painting, has completely achieved its independence.

Browning recognises the old subordination in the words he puts into the Frate's mouth. The fair town's face, the river's line, the mountain and the sky, are the frame to the figures of man, woman and child; and in the pictorial art of that time they were

never more than this. The beauty of nature, and of nature as modified by the hand of man for his own use, was never painted alone, entirely for its own sake. To-day, the pictures in which there is only landscape, or in which the figures are wholly subordinate to the landscape, form, perhaps, the greater number of all the pictures painted. Probably the word artist, which is really one of very general significance, would at once suggest to ninety-nine out of every hundred people a landscape painter.

The word landscape is a very unsatisfactory one for the purpose it has to serve. Its inadequacy is obvious when we consider that writers, not unfrequently, but not always without an apology, use the word seascape. And if seascape, why not skyscape also? Even land, sea and sky do not in themselves exhaust the landscape painter's subject-matter. Nor do we reach the end when we have included all easily visible, natural objects, living and lifeless. Just as when cattle occupy an entirely subordinate place in a picture, we do not think it necessary to catalogue it as 'landscape with cattle'; so, if human figures occupy only such place, we are content with the term landscape. Yet no hard and fast line can be drawn. That dear old pedant Polonius had all the divisions and subdivisions of dramatic art at his tongue's end. We make land-

scape cover not only the world of earth, air and water, with living things, including man, if they be merely incidents in the general scene, but also, if similarly incidental, the objects that are man's handiwork, cottages, houses, churches, castles, boats and ships on the sea—in short, anything that is to be seen; so that, in common acceptation, a street-scene, in which all of untouched nature that is in evidence may be a mere vestige of sky above the house-roofs, is a landscape.

All these considerations, it may be said, are but so much commonplace. Yet it is necessary not merely to have them in mind, but to insist upon them, when we are approaching the art of Turner; for if we are to call him a landscape painter we must give a very catholic interpretation of the range of the subject-matter to be included within the term. The inadequacy of the word becomes so obvious when we consider his life-work, even if we exclude the pictures and drawings that come clearly or doubtfully under other recognised categories, that we cannot accept it as descriptive of the content of his art, and hardly even as a label negatively to mark off its content from that of works that must strictly be classed as portraiture, genre, history or what else. That Turner himself recognised this is evident from the titles of some of his pictures,