

Let Us Now Praise Famous Men

by Theodore Dalrymple (November 2015)



A Procession by L S Lowry

As I grow older, my inclination to praise famous men increases. By fame I do not mean celebrity in the vulgar sense, I mean it in the old-fashioned sense of outstanding excellence in some admirable or desirable quality. I have been fortunate to meet many such famous men, and it seems to me wrong that I should not pay tribute to their memory.

One of them was Tom Rosenthal. He was a publisher and an art historian and critic. He owned and ran a small publishing company when I knew him, and he had published three of my books when I presented him with a manuscript (in those days, such things still existed) of an altogether more ambitious kind. He read it within two weeks and said to me, 'I like it and think it ought to be published. I'll publish it.'

He held no discussion with his marketing department or his accountants. Of course, he wanted to make money like everyone else; but that clearly was not his only aim. He saw publishing as a vocation and service as well as a business. He earned my undying respect, admiration and gratitude for his devil-may-care attitude to his accountants and marketers. Whether his literary judgment was correct in this case is hardly for me to say; but he made no loss on my book and even a small profit, since its entire print-run sold.

He was a large man, both physically and in personality, with a booming voice, and I dare say some people found him egotistical; certainly he exuded self-confidence and enjoyment of life which, however, I found neither offensive nor excessive, since he was a man of accomplishment. He rose in my estimation when he told me that he did not drive; I have found that men of high intelligence who do not drive are almost always distinguished. Why this should be so I do not know; but it is so.

I had no contact with him for a number of years, but one day bought his monograph on the painter of the industrial north of England, L. S. Lowry,

published in 2010. Rosenthal was born and grew up in Manchester, and knew Lowry a little. As a young man, he interviewed him for the BBC and clearly developed an insightful sympathy and liking for the man which aided his understanding and appreciation of the pictures. Rosenthal knew how to write about art in a knowledgeable but non-technical way (he held a doctorate in art history), with judicious but not intrusive attention to detail, background and biography.

I wrote to him to say how much I liked his book. It was beautifully produced, as indeed art books ought to be; the text illuminated the pictures. It has certainly enabled me to see far more in Lowry than I ever saw before, and to enable a reader to see further into an artist is surely the main function of such monographs.

Rosenthal wrote back to me: 'How marvellous to find your letter on my return from day surgery for a malfunctioning fistula (I am on dialysis!).' It ended, very sadly, 'I can't travel much for obvious reasons.' It was written in what was clearly an infirm hand, almost – as I learned a few weeks later – that of a man on his deathbed. He died not very long after he wrote this letter, in which he promised me (if I came to London) 'a good meal.' As he was dying of the complications of diabetes at the time, this seemed to me to show the most splendid spirit. Again he had my admiration.

Lowry, it also seemed to me, was a suitable subject for Rosenthal to write about, quite apart from the personal connection: for Lowry ploughed his own artistic field for years, decades, before he achieved recognition: and when such recognition came, it did not change his simple mode of life. He had a day job until his retirement at the age of sixty-five of a most unromantic and unartistic kind: he worked as a rent-collector for a property company in the days when tenants of tiny workers' houses paid their rent weekly and in cash. He painted between collecting rents. It was his genius to see in the bleak townscapes of the Industrial Revolution, and in the inhabitants of those townscapes, a subject worthy of artistic representation, as nobody had before: finding a beauty in them without in the least prettifying them, or without resort to sentimentality.

Of course, Rosenthal was a man of a different ilk: born by no means rich into Manchester's Jewish community, he became a kind of archetypal clubman, enjoying the acquaintance, company and friendship of the eminent (I was flattered that he

even remembered who I was). You would have thought that he was born privileged. Nevertheless, there was an essential uprightness and integrity to him which, I think, must have attracted him strongly to Lowry. Although the Tate Gallery (the most important public collection of British art) had a fine collection of Lowry's work, for long it refused to display any of it, mainly from a kind of snobbery. Lowry was utterly a provincial, he was allied to and influenced by no current of modern art, theoretical or practical, and (in the end) he was widely loved by people who otherwise had no artistic tastes. He was original in an original way. For a certain kind of aesthete, for whom the main attraction of the appreciation of beauty is to mark him off from the philistines, Lowry was all wrong. Even worse, Lowry did not care what anyone thought: he did what inner necessity dictated.

When Rosenthal was the young man who interviewed him, Lowry gave him one or two pictures. In a sense Rosenthal was lucky, but in another he was simply rewarded for his discriminating appreciation of the artist's work: for not only did Rosenthal interview Lowry, but Lowry interviewed him. He had to prove to Lowry that he knew what he was talking about.

In one respect, I think, Rosenthal was mistaken: he says that Lowry had no followers, founded no school. No one painted again exactly as he had done, it is true; but followers are not imitators, nor is a school composed of copyists. Again, much of Lowry's subject matter has disappeared (he was also a fine painter of seascapes, however); the first Industrial Revolution has now run its course, and tens of thousands of 'hands,' as Dickens calls them in *Hard Times*, are no longer required. The factory siren no longer draws crowds of humans to it as a magnet draws iron filings. The Satanic Mills, still alive and smoking in Lowry's middle age (he was born in 1887), have closed down, leaving a dispiriting mess behind them.

But Lowry eventually had an influence by expanding the proper subject matter of art. Indeed, I have several paintings by another Manchester artist, born in 1920, who painted his native city in a way that I do not think he would have done, or even been able to do, but for Lowry. He hated to be called a follower of Lowry, whom he knew slightly, and his style – expressionist – is very different from Lowry's. But Lowry opened up a path for him.

His name is William Turner. He died in 2013. There are several parallels with

Lowry in his life. He was born poor and achieved no recognition until very late; like Lowry, he ploughed his own furrow irrespective of any encouragement or, more to the point, discouragement that he might receive. He sold so few paintings that they piled up in his (small) house. An art-dealer friend of mine bought a number of his early paintings, when he otherwise sold none, which in turn I bought. Now I never tire of them, and see more and more in them – which, I suppose, is a test of artistic merit. I make no claims for him that he was a great painter, in the sense that Velasquez was a great painter, only that he was a true artist of manifest integrity.

Like Lowry, Turner saw beauty in the ugliness of his surroundings, without in any way sentimentalising it or turning the industrial landscape into a Cotswold village. One very large painting, dating from the 1950s, for example, is predominantly chemical pollution-brown, and shows some large fuel storage tanks in a sea of oily brown mud. In the foreground, mysteriously, a desolate-looking donkey is tied to a post by an expanse of dirty water. Towards him walk two men, but their heads (as always in Turner's pictures) are bowed: that they are walking towards the donkey is a coincidence.

Behind and above the fuel storage tanks is a tall industrial chimney, which spews a little flame and a plume of smoke into the brown sky. At its top, the plume separates into two branches; and it was only after looking at this picture for some time that I saw that the smoke was, in fact, a Crucifix looming over the whole scene. Once you have seen it as a Crucifix, you cannot *un-see* it, as it were; and in fact it is very cunningly painted.

My art-dealer friend told me that Turner, though he had by no means led a life of conventional virtue, was in fact a religious man, and this is seen in the painting. Christ on the Cross died for Man's sins, among them creating a landscape such as this, without a trace of greenery, as if indeed Man had seen in vegetation his worst enemy and declared genocide upon it. And, of course, Christ looks down on the scene with a sense of pity also, for those who have been condemned to live among such filth and ugliness – though the picture itself is beautiful, implying that, whatever Man does, however he abuses it, the world is good. The picture has a message, or at least a possible interpretation; I think there is no end to reflections it can stimulate, all while pleasing the eye.

Another of the pictures, dated 1953, shows a narrow street typical of the industrial north of England, with rows of red brick terraced houses on either side, going up a small incline at the brow of which stands a powerful industrial chimney. The evening light glints red upon the chimney (which belches thick black smoke) and on the chimneys of one row of the houses, suffusing even this superficially grim scene with a refulgent beauty. And in the street is a man, a lone figure, in a blue cloth cap, carrying a small ladder, on the side of the street opposite him standing a bucket. One presumes he is a window-cleaner, which in itself suggests something moving: that the inhabitants of these tiny houses, by today's standards very poor, took a pride in keeping their houses clean despite the constant outpouring of thick black smoke above them. And indeed in those days women of the working class would regularly scrub the doorsteps of their houses, to demonstrate their cleanliness. Poverty is not itself inimical to a proper pride and self-respect.

Though redolent of the impoverished life led by the working class at the tail end of the Industrial Revolution the picture also conveys something of the human warmth of that life, a warmth of which reformers and town-planners took no account when they moved whole populations into their planned utopias, in which everyone would dispose of so many cubic metres of space. It was easier to increase living space than preserve or replicate the human warmth; bureaucrats do not do human warmth.

Turner's picture records a world that has disappeared, a world that in many of its externals was terrible, and yet for whose disappearance one cannot (knowing what has replaced it) be entirely glad. And this itself teaches us something valuable, that there can be no perfect life for Man.

The style of the picture is expressionist, the idea being that it should convey a deeper realism than a merely literal representation of the scene would have conveyed. But another lesson of art history is that there is (thank goodness) no single way to get to the essence of things. What is necessary – though not sufficient – is integrity. That integrity Lowry, Turner and Rosenthal, in a different field of activity, all had.

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