

Renoir, my father

J.Renoir

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This is of course no ordinary biography, as biographies of close relatives and friends never are. It is based on personal memory not searching through archives, and as such it may not pass the test for objective history, according to the British philosopher of history, R.G.Collingwood who rejected autobiography as history (he had no high opinion of straight biographies either), On the other hand this should not trouble us, as we are not concerned with a forensic investigation, as there is no question of crime.

Being a biography of a father, it at times fuses with the autobiography, starting in media res, or rather at the very end, when the author, and later famed director of movies, is on leave from his engagement in the First World War, where he had been seriously wounded. His father is then old, and newly widowed, and in poor health confined to a wheel chair, yet still painting, because if not where would he be? Interred into the earth of course. Fame is admittedly not always deserved, but more often it goes by them, who would deserve it rather than being bestowed to those who do not. Most people singled out are characterized by single-mindedness of purpose, driven by a passion, which overrides mere ambition, and which most people would be unable to muster. It is this single-mindedness which indicates that there must be something there, because otherwise it could not be sustained. As a painter I am not overly enamored by Renoir. Some of his paintings are obviously very charming, but all those doughy nudes tend not only to bore me but sicken me slightly. But this is of course a matter of taste, and art goes of course deeper than mere taste.

It was at the very end of his life that father and son got closer to each other, and one gets the impression that the bulk of the book, and it is rather bulky with its 400 odd pages, owes its bulk no doubt to those long conversations he had with his father when on leave, reluctant not to put down as much as possible of them, because oral interchanges, unlike written documentation, only exist in the frail memories of the participants ¹. Out of this the author is able to piece together a somewhat connected and consistent narrative. Not with the easy directness of a novel with its firmer purpose, not seldom structured chronologically, but more tentative, just as the nature of recollections tends to be. And while showing rather than telling, it slowly grows on you and give you an inkling of what Renoir might have been like as a person. His paintings do not really give much of clue to his personality, not even as much as the photos show of him as an old man. You would expect from his doughy nudes a sensualist, but the photos conjures up a very slim man with a sharp, penetrating gaze and of an intellectual and stern temperament. But photos lie, based as they are on faces which deceive.

Renoir stemmed from a line of artisans and can be traced to Limoges. When he was

¹ biographies tend to be bulky, most for the same reason that the author has done a lot of work and research and feels that he must do justice to all what he so laboriously has dug up.

four years old his parents left the region and settled in Paris, and we are now talking about the year 1845. This is very important, dates are, and those who do not appreciate this, do not understand time which is a prerequisite to understand and appreciate history. Because it puts him in context. Renoir was a young child, meaning coming late in the family, and his father was born in the 18th century, and as a child he came across an old man who had been an executioner during the French Revolution. The upshot is that Paris in the 1840's, before Napoleon III, before the great reconstruction of the city under Haussmann and the subsequent Belle Epoque, had strong ties with the Paris of the 18th century, and hence of the Medieval times. True, much had flowed under the bridges since the French Revolution, an event belonging to the time of his grandparents, there had been Napoleon, and the reconstitution, and even the small revolution of 1830 which brought about a change of guard; yet the great remodeling of Paris had not yet begun, and Renoir lived in quarters close to the palace, where the high mixed with the low, the fairy-tale of kings and queens, with the mundane reality of getting on. And one day when Renoir went to school, just having come of age, the revolution of 1848 broke out in the streets, but it was not so easy to see that at the time, recreation by narration gives to the past a coherence and purpose which was not there at first. This is why history can be seen as a piece of art, structuring the unstructured. When Renoir's son writes down his memories of his father in the late 50's he is deeply intrigued by the link that his father provides him to the distant past and which provides much of the fascination both to reader and author of the biography.

Renoir grew up in times when the artisan still held sway, before the industrialization of the production of artefacts had seriously started. He would always regret this development because he treasured objects which had been made by a single hand from start to finish and thereby expressing the personality of the maker. An object made out of love, could never be ugly, he claimed. This incidentally ties up with Bronowski's notion² that the beauty of an object resides in its making. He did early on show a definite talent for drawing and was already as a young boy employed decorating plates, in particular with the likeness of Marie Antoinette, which was very popular at the time. He showed himself very adept and made an agreement with the owner to get paid not by the hour as the others but by the plate, taking advantage of his ability to produce quickly. As a result he did early on become financially independent of his parents. To become an artist and a painter of pictures only dawned upon him gradually during his teens and he took the step by enrolling in an art school. This was the beginning, but only the beginnings, because now the long struggle would start in order to become acknowledged as an artist along with the others who would be dubbed the 'Impressionists' as a term of disparagement. He thus made lifelong friends with Monet and Cezanne and the early group of outliers who in addition to names such as Degas, Pissarro, Sisley also included the woman painter Berthe Morisot, unknown today except by specialists, and wife of Manet's younger brother Eugène Manet, also a painter but overshadowed not only by his older brother but also by his wife. Renoir was a social fellow and he came to know not only painters, but also writers and intellectuals, aristocratic hangers-on, and most importantly art dealers, one of whom - Paul Durand-Ruel - was the one who more than anyone else would champion the Impressionists and in the process trying to get a monopoly of their paintings. This might have been resented by the artists

² see the essay on the 'Visionary Eye' in this volume

themselves, but at the same time realizing that this was the fair price they had to pay for his endeavors. And in fact he may be credited with their initial physical survival which eventually would result in their public success, although that would take its time.

The great charm of the book lies in the recollections of Renoir's exploration of the countryside, predominantly in the vicinity of Paris, together with his fellow artists, always working in 'plein air'. They stayed at simple inns and there were always women as models and 'groupies'. Renoir decided to settle fairly late in life, picking his choice of wife to be a young woman some twenty years younger than himself. A very happy marriage ensued, if we are to trust their son, she served as model and expert cook, and in general saw to it that Renoir could paint undisturbed. There were nannies, doubling as models, to take care of the children, and the author recalls with particular fondness Gabrielle Renard who was his nanny and a favorite model of his father, and consequently occupies a rather big part of his memoirs. Renoir as a mature man in his late fifties took up the craze of bicycling in order to explore the surroundings, not to paint, because to bring his equipment, paints, brushes, palette, not to mention the easel and canvas, on his bike would be far too cumbersome, but to look for things to paint. During one of these trips he met with an accident and broke his right arm. Luckily he was ambidextrous so he could still paint, but needed assistance for some of the work. The arm never healed properly and the son blames the accident on the rheumatic disease that struck him and which would make his last decades in life such a torture. His hands, his beautiful hands, as the son remarked, were crippled the fingers bending up in contorted positions and making the handling of brushes difficult, but he never gave up. His health deteriorated further he walked with more and more difficulty, first with one cane, then with two, until he needed a wheel-chair. Once treated by a Vienna specialist who promised that he could make him walk again, he tried it out, succeeded but decided that the whole exercise exhausted him not only physically but also mentally requiring constant attention and relentless concentration, leaving him nothing left for his painting. Painting was more dear to him than walking, and after that he was confined to a wheel chair for the rest of his life. By that time they had required property in Southern France, Cagnes as a matter of fact, where he would actually die in 1919. His wife, twenty years his junior would actually die from diabetes before him, a disease for which there was yet no effective treatment at the time.

Most of the book consists in various anecdotes showing different facets of Renoir's personality as well as his *obiter dicta*. To start out privately. When it came to wines he was scornful of the 'connoisseurs' making fun of their antics of using wine as a mouth wash, while lifting their eyes to heaven in ecstasy; claiming, correctly so, that they did not know more about wine than he did. Food was important in the Renoir household and there are many descriptions of the dishes served often at open tables. Renoir preferred boiled food with grilled meat, avoiding fried and stewed things. The household was managed very economically, according to his temperament with the ambition of creating much out of little.

Once an atheist friend wanted to convert him to atheism, he got annoyed and compared his arguments to that of preaching and hence to a preacher, but the latter are more honest, he explained, as they wear clerical garb giving me a chance to hop when I see them. Basically he was rather religious by temperament and preferred to be told that a tree was

created by God and inhabited by nymphs, rather than just declare it a combination of chemical elements. The world to him was interconnected, all of it was part of the same thing, and he literally believed in the Chinese legend that a mandarin can be killed at a distance by an unconsciously lethal gesture in Paris. If you prefer, you can think of this as another aspect of the butterfly-effect in modern chaos theory. When it came to customs he was very tolerant. He thought the West was hypocritical criticizing the Hindu caste system, this was something that had worked for four thousand years and catered to many human weaknesses. Vanity, for example, because there is always one lower caste, and the weak are protected by the strict rules of occupation. In fact he loved luxury, not for his own sake, but as a display by the rich. To him it was a moral duty of a millionaire to spend his money. He was revolted by the spectacle of the Belgian king who affected to live like the lower middle-classes. A king should be a king, when not society was liable to fall apart when facades were no longer bothered to be kept. A king should go about with a crown on his head and be surrounded by beautiful mistresses.

What can we learn of Renoir as a painter? He was sparing and economical when it came to paint, eight or ten colors squeezed out of tubes sufficed for him, while other artists took advantage of modern industrial technology and were profligate in their use of shades. He loathed the name of the label 'Impressionism'. The famed exhibition at Nadar's place just before the opening of the official Salon was anyway a disastrous failure and the name which stuck referred to small painting by Monet. Anyway he never felt that comfortable being classified as an Impressionist, and in retrospect he rather sympathized with the vocal critics such as Castagnary, although of course not at the time. What he resented though was that they did not appreciate the greatness of Cezanne who had little in common with Monet and had in fact gone beyond Impressionism. Renoir resented literary people expanding on art, people who did not understand that painting is foremost a craft involving material things, and that any theory comes as an afterthought. Theories, he said, even the bitterest opponents may agree on, in art as well as in politics, but it is implementation that causes strife. When it came to the Old Masters they had an incredible technique, but it is no use copying them, he cautioned, if you should copy, you should copy nature, he explained. Yet to understand and really appreciate the old masters you need to copy them, he contradicted himself, cut on the cusp of a conflict he was never able to resolve. How to choose between direct perception and tradition, and connected to that how much of your personality should enter? But as the reader may recall, for Renoir it was important that a manufactured object showed the personality of its maker, but of course the question always remains, how much in each particular case. And Renoir was old-fashioned enough to look at art as steeped in tradition, true to being a craft, and hence being to a significant degree objective. But there are of course limits to objective realism, not that it cannot technically be attained in its perfection, but once that is achieved, meaning that some fellow manages to give the illusion of a forest in which you can smell the moss and hear the brook, painting would be finished for good, he concluded, because would it not be easier just to walk into the real thing? Although he revered the old masters and regretted the passing of a time in which he had happily grown up, he realized that you could only live in your own time, to try and recreate the old time was a sham. Art reflects the times and if you want to recreate it, you need to recreate everything, the religious

sensibilities, general ignorance. It is hopeless, you cannot go back in time. As noted above he resented modernity in the shape of division of labor and the machine. They have tuned the workman into a mechanical hack and killed the joy of work, he felt. This ties in with the opinions of Ruskin as he expressed them in the 'Stones of Venice' in connection with Gothic architecture. When it came to speculation on art he opposed it in principle, but in later life when success came his way, he admitted that he had profited from it, and he was of course grateful to the Durand-Ruels who had supported the Impressionists during hard times and made it possible for them to paint. And they could of course never have done that unless there had been an art market to take advantage of. Finally as to science versus art. Painters woo nature, scientists violate her.

January 24, 28-29, 2019 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se