

THE THREEPENNY REVIEW

worked on it from 1884 to 1887. Although the painting did not travel from its home at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the show included many preparatory sketches, of nude women cavorting merrily in a pool of water. Demonstrating once again that male desire manifests itself similarly regardless of its object, the painting recapitulates the theme, and to some extent the composition, of Thomas Eakins' exactly contemporaneous painting, *The Swimming Hole*. But Eakins was a realist, and Renoir, who was by this point emulating Renaissance masters, created a tableau that risibly transposes Renaissance gestures into an Impressionist painting. He had lost his way.

Or maybe he was looking forward, to a future in which a painter depicted what was inside his head with little regard for what was in front of his eyes. The shift was clear to me when I compared two versions of the same subject, starting with an early, atypical nude of an adolescent boy nuzzling a cat (clearly a symbol of female sexuality). Renoir viewed him from behind, with an emphasis on his behind. He is androgynous but real, with a gawky adolescent grace. That painting dates from 1868. In 1911, Renoir painted another adolescent boy. This one he clothed in a shepherd's fleece and straw hat, with birds circling around his outstretched hand as if he were Francis of Assisi. With his rosy cheeks and lips, this boy is not androgynous but feminine, a stand-in for Renoir's soft, voluptuous women. The artist no longer bothered to acknowledge the difference.

I was ready to give up on Renoir at this point, but then something changed. He went from merely being excessive to charging completely and madly over the top. The nudes that he painted in the last two years of his life are as marvelous as the late water lily paintings by Monet, who was a close friend. The picture plane is flattened. The scenes are filled with roses—in vases, on hats, along river banks—and the women are as overblown and colorful as the blooms. The profusion of fabric patterns in *The Concert* looks back to Delacroix's *Women of Algiers* and points toward the windowed rooms that Matisse had just begun to paint in Nice. In his final masterpiece, *The Bathers*, Renoir transmuted the trees, the sky, the nudes, into glorious swirls of painted brushstrokes. The women float like lily pads.

The catalogue informs me that among its hoard of 178 paintings and pastels by Renoir, the Barnes owns 29 late nudes. Next time I am there, I will seek them out. And one more thing, while I am at this game of reassessment: the show at the Clark included two exquisite paintings by François Boucher, another artist I have always scorned without ever exploring. One of the pictures, *Diana Leaving Her Bath*, was copied in the Louvre by Manet, Whistler, and Fantin-Latour. Renoir said it was the first painting he ever loved. I'm going to give Boucher another look.

—Arthur Lubow

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AS I SIT at the piano practicing Franz Schubert's song cycle *Winterreise*, the image of a refugee—a single refugee among the many of our time—haunts me. Composed nearly two hundred years ago in 1827, to texts by the poet Willem Müller, *Winterreise* tells the story of a "winter's journey" made by a rejected lover expelled from a town, wandering alone through a frigid landscape. It is a journey without shelter, without friend, and with no arrival.

We are given few details of our wanderer's past. His "Liebschen," or "sweetheart," has no name. And, from the opening lines, he, himself, is described only as "a stranger."

A stranger I arrived,
a stranger I depart.
The month of May was kind to me,
with many flower bouquets.
The girl spoke of love,
her mother even of marriage.
Now the world is dreary,
the path covered in snow.

Schubert paints a stark, cold present, colored by the emotional warmth of memories, the heartbreaking pain of exile, and, above all, a relentless aloneness. This "winter's journey" verges on the abstract, at times the hallucinatory, and avoids sentimentality. It gained the reverence of the most rigorously anti-sentimental of modern prophets, the writer Samuel Beckett. With understatement and expressive precision, Schubert depicts a common individual pushed to existential limits, a man who has reached the end of his rope.

Schubert intensifies the underlying emotion of the texts with musical genius: frozen tear drops fall as halting staccato chords in the piano, the river which no longer flows grows in menacing power from a whisper to a powerful outcry, the illusory dream of spring appears in a major tonality too sweet to believe. Each poem receives a musical setting that powerfully merges the physical with the psychological, so that at once we receive a visual sense of the poetry and an underscoring of the drama within. The work is monumental in scale (its length exceeds an hour) and yet, at the same time, *Winterreise* is fragmentary, terse, and economical in its aesthetic. It is, above all, intimate, and there is a sense throughout that we are overhearing a monologue in which the speaker is addressing no one but himself—no one is listening. Perhaps it is here that we find a kinship to Beckett's theater.

The opening song, "Good Night," sets the strange mood, as the piano's walking pace trudges relentlessly forward. Night. "I can not choose the time of my journey, I must make my own way in this darkness..." There is mystery surrounding our wanderer's hasty departure. Why is he in a hurry? Why does he leave on a long journey in the dark of night? The cycle draws additional power from what is left unsaid, from what we do not know. How much of this romance was real, how much imagined? The beckoning trees, speaking winds, singing birds all seem to address the protagonist; he, in turn, talks to the snow, the barking dogs, the river...but absent from his landscape is another human being,

until, in the twenty-fourth and final song, he sees, only from a distance, a barefoot, aged organ-grinder.

Winterreise was composed in 1827, at a time when Schubert was coming to terms with the gravity of his declining health. His friend, the poet Mayrhofer, when hearing the song cycle for the first time, noted that Schubert "had been long and seriously ill, had gone through shattering experiences, and life for him had shed its rosy color; winter had come for him. The poet's irony, rooted in despair, appealed to him; he expressed it in cutting tones. I was painfully moved."

The bleak and contemporary open-endedness to this cycle of twenty-four songs is underlined by its concluding not with an answer, but with two questions: "Shall I go with you, strange old man? Will you play the hurdy-gurdy to my songs?" The solitary organ-grinder, outcast, poor, barefoot, appears in the distance to our traveler, almost a ghostly doppelgänger. The hollow repeated drone of open fifths in the piano, the winding melodic fragment, the weary vocal line—which leaves the final question shockingly unresolved musically, hanging in the air—create a haunting sense of time stopped: there is no moving forward, no moving back...

What is real, if not the details of his past or the character of his moral behavior, is what the individual feels. And here Schubert uncannily mines the essential existential questions of life by depicting with such emotional honesty, simplicity, and painful beauty the state of aloneness. It is a state that each of us knows to varying degrees; in a sense, it is our unifying experience. Our separateness, at times frightening, is what we share. In this remarkable musical work, Schubert reaches across that divide of aloneness to make a human connection, one that can still reach us two centuries later. *Winterreise* tells us, today, something about the fragility of our own world and what it may feel like to make the journey from being on the inside—of a home, a village, a community—to that unknown other side.

—Sarah Rothenberg