THE VOLUPTUOUS HORROR OF FANNIE CORNFORTH

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The Turner Erotica: A Biographical Novel
By Robert J. Begiebing
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"ANY WORK OF BIOGRAPHICAL FICTION THAT EMPLOYS CHARACTERS based on the lives of people who walked the earth has . . . a duty to be as true as its author can make it to each consciousness now deceased and unable to defend itself. To that extent I have tried to preserve the spirit and the general life-structure of the historical figures whose lives intersect in this tale" (267). So writes Robert J. Begiebing in the acknowledgments for *The Turner Erotica*, his new novel published by Ilium Press. Begiebing, a Mailer scholar and frequent contributor to the *Review*, takes on the tumultuous relationships and heady times of John Ruskin, William James Stillman, Dante Gabriel and William Michael Rossetti, and other poets and artists associated with The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and nineteenth-century culture in general. As promised, the author presents his characters with realism and compassion despite the long years and cultural gap separating character from reader. And who, recalling Byatt's *Possession* and Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, can resist the kind of intellectual sleuthing and high-brow skullduggery going on here?

Begiebing's plot surrounds the purported burning, in 1858, of erotic sketches and watercolors by the revered British painter J.M.W. Turner.

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Ruskin, who elevated Turner as the great lion of British art, supported the intentional destruction of the work by Ralph Wornum, Keeper of the National Gallery, as a necessity to prevent scandal and to preserve Turner's reputation in the sexually-sublimated Victorian climes. William Rossetti recounts Ruskin's perplexed and stuttering description of the sketches, and we glimpse not only the subject of the art but Ruskin's perception as well: "'Women, with men and without, in every posture of abandonment! Sketches of the pudenda of women, Rossetti! Like studies of flowers by the coldest prying eye.'" (30). Stillman, an American journalist, diplomat, and frustrated artist, narrates Begiebing's story and thereby gives us a more reasonable description of "pen and pencil studies of female genitalia" in the sketchbooks and, on folded sheets, "studies of male-female copulations, much more fully drawn as to the human figures, some washed in with watercolors, some quite sketchy and much less clear of line, as if to obscure the activities of the worshippers" (60). Remarkably, in Begiebing's account, a dozen or so sketches survive destruction and the novel's great good fun follows them from hand to clandestine hand as a few enlightened visionaries try to preserve the sketches from further mishap.

The narrative generally follows the events recorded in the historical Stillman's diary, as Begiebing elsewhere relates, but even the imagined incidents of the purloined sketches and their travels are secondary to the characters' personal narratives and the long drawing-room conversations propelling the story. Stillman-as-narrator provides the major voice, detailing encounters and discussions with forthright detail, yet we occasionally get further insight through letters and, most importantly, from explorer and translator Richard Burton's introduction to a planned private edition documenting the surviving prints.

Historical characters are finely drawn and consistent with the personalities preserved in the diaries, journals, and letters of the day. Ruskin, although peripheral to the main events, emerges as the perceptive critic who understands the intersection of culture and art, but who cannot escape his Calvinist leanings to appreciate it in all its forms. Stillman ascribes Ruskin's short-sightedness as an inescapable form of madness: "I was coming to believe," he ponders, "that Ruskin's madness was all time-bound, weighty, encrusted with the detritus and bric-a-brac of his momentary culture and, worse, of his familial inhibitions and mannerisms" (93).

Stillman himself suffers from inordinate guilt and self-doubt, over-ana-

lyzing his past life choices and expressing the lasting effects his own Calvinist upbringing by seeing every bad event as a punishment for his actions. Indeed, in Begiebing's fictionalized account, Stillman initially swipes the remaining sketches from the rooms of Fanny Cornforth, Pre-Raphaelite model, prostitute, and de-facto trustee assigned by Gabriel Rossetti, who perceives Fanny's station somehow suitable to protect items illegal under British law. Stillman's theft is encouraged by one Allegra Fullerton, itinerant American artist and the entirely fictional subject of an earlier Begiebing novel.

Stillman's involvement in the theft—an implicit betrayal of his friend William Rossetti's trust—and his passion for protecting the sketches collide with other personal and professional disappointments to provoke a mentality of guilt and dread somehow hovering above the narrative. The dreams and visions emanating from this morbid mental state accentuate the story and, indeed, are nearly as important as character and plot in propelling the narrative. Stillman has visions of the late Turner at least twice, once in a dream where the elderly artist doubts Stillman's qualifications for protecting the erotica, and again as a virile artist and romantic rival busy painting a life-study of the youthful Marie Spartali, later Stillman's second wife. Stillman eventually develops an unusual psychological malady, a trick of peripheral vision causing him to witness all sorts of lurking phenomenon. In Athens it is the "fawnlike" Turner lurking behind the columns of ruins (134); at the death of his son, Russie, it is a "dwarfish figure in a shabby black cloak scuttling behind trees" (207). Such visions accentuate the real life menace of Mortimer Winslow, a private agent hired by the Rossetti's to recover the stolen sketches, and his henchman, the prizefighter Monk Ballaster, who always seem to drift in and around the events of Stillman's daily life. "Whether there was something within me in these difficult times to cause a trick of vision," Stillman wonders, "or whether there was some haunting, so to speak, I cannot say. I know only what I glimpsed" (134). Regardless of these musings, Stillman admits that he has come to view the hidden sketches as "at once secret, cryptic, essential, almost indeed occult," and this feeling of supernatural menace adds to the overriding dread of Stillman's narrative (207).

The more practical terror of earning a living as a diplomat and journalist, while failing persistently as a serious artist, makes Stillman's life even more miserable. Begiebing emphasizes the marginal compensation and palpable danger of Stillman's diplomatic station in Crete, where both the Mus-

lim population and the Turkish authorities view his support of Christians with suspicion. Stillman seems forever preoccupied by his slender income, and the occasional quotations from Ruskin's political writings underscore that economics can prevent artistic creation just as social convention and misplaced religious tenets can consign completed masterpieces to the flames.

For a mystery, the book curiously is nearly devoid of action. One terrifying gunfight between Stillman and a posse of Muslim vigilantes, and another brush-up between the likeliest of characters with knife and sword, constitute the bulk of the physical thrills. Much of the novel's tension surrounds the well-intentioned and often desperate actions required to insure preservation of valuable documents, particularly in a non-digital age where personal reputations and social values conspire for their destruction. We are reminded of Carlyle's agonizing loss of his manuscript for the first volume of *The French Revolution* to the impulsive hand of a household maid, and perhaps especially of the intentional destruction of Lewis Carroll's questionable photographs.

For a novel dealing with erotic art, the text is remarkably short on randy action: a bit of sympathetic digital canoodling and Stillman's covert yet chaste tumble with Fannie Cornforth struggle for attention amid much implied procreative sex. Fannie, a minor character in the novel, nevertheless becomes the physical embodiment of the earthy sensuality of Turner's erotica, the physical essence that outraged the pure Ruskin so deeply: "She was large and full-figured, handsome of face, sexual in the most open and unself-conscious way, with a head of wavy golden hair that must have reached the floor when fully loosed" (59). Stillman concludes that Fannie is "the very sort of woman old Turner had inspected and drawn with such bold attention of this own" (77). Mrs. Booth, Turner's landlady and mistress during the later years of his life, more than likely served as model for some of the erotic musings, but it's unclear whether she would accept her role as muse quite as willingly as the lascivious Fannie.

Confronted by the great central mystery of the novel—the intellectual enigma of the erotic sketches—readers will little regret that Begiebing has not replaced James Patterson or *Fifty Shades of Grey* on their nightstands. This narrative is a different kind of thriller, one predicated on understanding the artist-as-man and embracing every element of genius, even when the artifacts of that great creativity conflicts with prevailing personal and social mores. Where Ruskin is confused and revolted by Turner's fleshy, sen-

sual drawings, William Rossetti finds the visual obscurity comparable to that of the artist's nature studies, while Allegra sees "'the same sorrow and joy of humanity, the same vulnerability and nobility—an organic and immutable human drama'" (82). Stillman summarizes the essential mystery of the sketches and thus of the novel itself:

> Were the lubricious illustrations merely obscene graffiti, left behind on purpose to poke the eye of a hypocritical public: a sort of parting shot from a disturbed and disillusioned old man? Or, were they the private, natural channel of the stream of erotic stimulations Turner, both young and old, had experienced while observing the models in his life classes, the bodies of his lovers, and the private parts of his "sailors' women"? . . . . Or, were they Turner's typically literal observations and specifications—the merest data collected from reality—to be used in his construction of the greater, and far more respectable, emblems of the deeper energies flowing through humanity and nature? (45)

Even Ruskin remarks on the sensuality of Turner's canon and suggests that the two girls in *Crossing the Brook* in fact are Turner's illegitimate daughters, leading Stillman to speculate on the great critic's failure. "Why, I wondered, hadn't this man, for all his awareness and insight, been able to see that mass of sketches he had destroyed with such righteous violence as part of the same impulse—and equally significant to our full understanding of the mysterious Turner?" (247).

The intellectual mystery of the Turner erotica is resolved, sort of, in Burton's suggestion that the sketches represent observations of the physical world intended for personal pleasure only, and that their unique reliance upon light and shade "sought some rapprochement of the old Western, Christian sundering of the soul from the body" (241). Stillman further rationalizes that all of Turner's sketches, including the erotica, are studies of natural forms available to human vision, while his finished art represents an extension of those forms into imagination. "The sketches were then the tracings of the eye through memory; the paintings, the synthesis of the particular and the universal. If one was the basis of the old master's art, the other was the end of art: the essential reality behind the optical appearances carefully studied through thousands of sketches." Such a resolution also pro-

vides a blueprint of Ruskin's prudish mind and a rationale for his critical failure: "But as it was those merely 'optical' studies—those erotic sketches that served as the foundation for allegorical ends—it was into *that* world of the physical mechanics and architecture of sex that Ruskin could not follow his master" (248).

Real life is less conclusive and, in the case of these missing sketches, events are more charitable. In fact, a large number of Turner's erotic drawings and watercolors survive. Critic Ian Warrell began exploring the works while curating an exhibition devoted to *Ruskin, Turner and the Pre-Raphaelites* at Tate Britain in 2000 and later published an analysis and checklist of about 150 pieces for *British Art Journal* in 2003. His recent book, *Turner's Secret Sketches*, was published by Tate in 2012 and provides us with a peek at sixty-five reproductions pretty much fitting the description of erotica, whether Ruskin's hyperventilating horror or Stillman's more measured characterization. Evidence of the destruction of Turner's erotica relies upon just a few sources, including an 1862 letter from Ruskin to Wornum, an 1869 diary entry by William Rossetti, and a highly suspect public reading by Frank Harris, the self-possessed author of *My Life and Loves*. "If each of these sources is examined closely," Warrell writes, "it is clear that the narrative was generated and then propagated by individuals who can each be shown to have had ulterior motives for wanting others to believe [the destruction], and to whom the notion of what constituted the truth tended to fluctuate" (20, 22). Perhaps some drawings even more explicit than the surviving examples were consumed in Wornum's grate, or maybe Ruskin's account of the destruction is simply one way of avoiding the attention of authorities charged with enforcing the Obscene Publications Act of 1857.

But never mind**.** Begiebing fabricates character and events in an honorable manner and with the intent to accurately represent historical figures confronted with plausible dilemmas. The result is gratifying both for its insightful analysis of artistic philosophy and technique as well as some engaging description. Consider this imaginative account of the aging Turner's perspective at the waterside brick cottage he shared with Mrs. Booth:

> From the window and the roof terrace he built, Turner had drunk in the river's atmospherics of water and sunlight: the play of light amidst smoke and fog—irradiating, engoldening, gleaming and glittering over the river and shooting all man-made sur-

> faces through with yellow and purple and green; the ever-shifting tidal waters entrapping all manner of diffused lights, luminous vapors transforming the gigantic works of the greatest industrial port into a vision less monstrous, more numinous. (147)

Begiebing—through Stillman—paints a rhetorical portrait at once worthy of Turner's mainstream, finished art and acceptable to Ruskin's soft sensibilities.

Begiebing obviously has devoted a lifetime of study to these historical characters and events, and at times the bolts and nuts of his research shows. Stillman the narrator is too quick with specifics, citing complete street addresses and exact dates were most scribblers of the day would have been happy with just a few dashes. Such detail satisfies our sense of history and adds verisimilitude, but ultimately seems more artifact than advantage. We are also occasionally confronted by people or events better mentioned earlier in the narrative. We learn of Stillman's argument with Ruskin during an extended tour of the Alps early on, but would not that have been better served a few pages before that, while Stillman sets the context of their first, brief meeting? And we learn of Stillman's brother Thomas, an important and supportive figure in the lives of the Stillman family, at just about the halfway point.

Begiebing's historical novel nevertheless comes to a fine resolution with a mystery solved, a great plan interrupted by pride and mutability, and even Stillman's own peripheral demons resolved into less-disturbing corporeal beings. Byatt, no stranger to the scholar-adventurer genre, recently dismissed authors who represent real people in historical fiction. "I really don't like the idea of 'basing' a character on someone," she explained in *The Guardian*. "It feels like the appropriation of others' lives and privacy" (Flood). But Begiebing's astute understanding of his historical personalities, along with his exacting standards for documenting their imagined lives, encourages the reader to dismiss such self-righteous silliness and enjoy a fine narrative of what-might-have-been. We sense that the author did exactly what he intended to do. This work is a novel of dreams, recollections, conversations, and ambitions, and its context enriches our appreciation for these historical characters much as Turner's art provokes our attraction to mystery, nature, and the passion of an everyday spirit.

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