

3  
THE ICONOGRAPHY OF CRABTREE  
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The study of the portraiture of Crabtree is based upon the impregnable rock of the Sutherland picture, which, hanging before you and washed by the annual tide of scepticism, remains indisputable in pedigree and provenance.

Yet many of us must confess to a certain feeling of dissatisfaction as we gaze at the portrait. It does not quite fulfil the high expectations we form of one whom Tennyson described in those eulogistic verses, *The Poet*, as:

Dower'd with the hate of hate, the scorn of scorn,  
The love of love.

The figure in this picture appears, superficially at any rate, although not exactly stark, to be dowered with very little in the way of sensibility. And I can sympathise with that great critic who, gazing upon the portrait, uttered the sullen censure, 'If Crabtree, the less Crabtree he!' Precious to us would be a portrait of the poet in the glory of early youth — that he could come back into memory like as he was in the dayspring of his fancy, with hope like a fiery column before him, the dark pillar not yet turned; some pictorial image which would correspond to those verbal descriptions that we have of him, his poet's eyes in a fine frenzy reeling, his characteristic pose, those powerful, nimble hands, the left habitually plunged into his waistcoat, 'leaving his right hand free', as one of his contemporaries nobly described it, 'for the adornment of his discourse and for the manipulation of his liquor'.

The invention of photography, which has in so many different ways increased the public stock of harmful pleasures, has yet bestowed one benefit upon the biographer of modern men of letters. It has given him a new sense of the Seven Ages of Man. Photographs are preserved and become available to the biographer. And, as we gaze upon those mechanical portraits which interleave the biographies of the great, we can observe how, from youth to senility, the human face divine is slowly and progressively tainted by strife, tarnished by misfortune, and ravaged by success. We can see Rimbaud in his first communion suit and pursue that unhappy countenance through care and corruption to his convulsive conclusion. We can see the sprightly and hopeful face of Thomas Hardy as a student at King's College, London, and watch its metamorphosis into the tired and wizened old gentleman of Max Gate.

Now although a few specimens of the early work of Fox Talbot in the Gernsheim Collection could tentatively be identified with Crabtree, the greater part of our poet's life was passed in the age before photography, and his elusive personality was not often caught by the portrait painters, although several of them, expecting a return of their friendly advances, made every effort to do so. And it is unfortunate that the portraiture of Crabtree in his earlier and more interesting years derives principally from hostile, even from calumniating, sources. Unlucky in life and unlucky in death, Crabtree cannot be regarded as well served in the portraits which have been bequeathed to posterity. That he should be included, along with many other poets and men of letters of his age, in Benjamin Haydon's great painting of *Christ's Entry into Jerusalem* was to be expected. It is disappointing, however, to observe that it was for the figure of Judas that Haydon made use of Crabtree's physiognomy. This is now common knowledge. Haydon's joke (and we can only regard it as a joke in very bad taste) seems to have been known to a limited circle at the time. It was just one more of those little misfortunes or indiscretions which have befogged our Crabtree's reputation and wrapped him in a cloud of unknowing from which he is at length beginning to emerge.

I now wish to inform members of the Foundation about a modest discovery of my own, which has provided a new portrait of Crabtree and which throws light on the hitherto obscure quarrel between Crabtree and William Blake. And I must say, to begin with, that the evidence I am going to produce is something that I would very willingly have suppressed, had it been in my power to do so. But trained as we all have been from our early years in scholarly impartiality and a disinterested devotion to plausibility, we can learn to face whatever revelations or discoveries each year brings forth. To any members of the Foundation who may complain that I am not doing honour to Crabtree by bringing these facts to light, I can only reply that *this hurts me more than it hurts you*. As our poet himself has said in one of his fascinating though despondent gnomic verses:

For want of me the world's work will not fail;

When all is said and done, we lie and rot.  
They say the truth is great, and shall prevail;  
But who cares, whether it prevail or not!

It is in a comparable mood of manly disillusionment, gentlemen, that we should approach the biographical problems of the poet whom we honour tonight.

There is no record to help us to decide when Crabtree and Blake first became acquainted. They were nearly of the same age, and it seems likely that the ripening of their friendship, and its putrescence, took place in that obscure decade between 1773, when Crabtree was finally sent down by his University, and 1783, the date of his departure for France. Two such vital personalities (however close their sympathies might be in some respects) were bound to clash eventually; the graceful condescension of Crabtree was unable to mollify the rugged plebeian independence of Blake, who soon began to write in his notebooks mildly satirical epigrams about his friend, such as:

A petty sneaking knave I knew,  
O Mr. Crabtree, how do you do!

Now Blake was, of course, decent enough to write in his notebook 'Cr ' for the name, and modern editors have filled in the blank with the name of Cromek, an obscure picture-dealer of the time. But, considering all the circumstances, *knowing* all the circumstances as we do, we can hardly doubt that it was Crabtree whom Blake had in mind.

I now wish to draw your attention to a curious fragment of Henry Crabb Robinson's *Diary*, hitherto misunderstood and mistranscribed, eluding the interpretative scrutiny even of Professor Edith Morley. Crabb Robinson, you will recall, on several occasions between 1811 and 1827 visited William Blake and left records of his conversations with him. Among a series of miscellaneous notes of their discussions appears this strange statement: 'Crabb Robinson flees ghost'. So far as I am aware, no satisfactory explanation has ever been suggested for these words. There seems to be no record of Crabb Robinson's having run away from a spiritual presence of any kind. But an examination of the manuscript reveals that what the transcriber supposed to be written was 'Crabb R. flees ghost'. And this supposed 'R' was expanded to 'Robinson'. But the genuine reading (in which I have been confirmed by the palaeographical expertise of several of my former colleagues at University College) is unquestionably 'Crabtree flea's ghost' and the second word is not a verb, as had been supposed, but a noun. That is to say, 'Crabtree is the ghost of a flea'.

Now *The Ghost of a Flea* is one of Blake's most famous drawings, one of those fantastical 'spiritual forms' with which he amused and amazed his friends. Here, then, we have the remarkable piece of evidence that Blake admitted to Crabb Robinson that his drawing of *The Ghost of a Flea* (which can be dated approximately 1810) represented Crabtree. Armed with this piece of information, a glance at the original will dispel all doubt. Even apart from the documentary evidence, the likeness with the Sutherland portrait is indisputable. There is the same chin of doubtful direction. There is the same curious pouchiness about the lower left jaw, a sort of one-sided dewlap, which some censorious observers have attributed to the effects of apoplectic fits which afflicted our poet in his middle years — those recurring bouts so pathetically referred to in his beautiful sonnet beginning:

Another year, another deadly stroke...

Now it will not surprise us to find Crabtree referred to as a ghost. Indeed, it cannot be denied that there *is* something unsubstantial about Crabtree, whose wraith-like figure flits to and fro in the literary history of the great century from 1754 to 1854. A hostile critic might even suggest that not only was there something unsubstantial about Crabtree, but that all our Crabtree studies are immaterial. Nor, on the other hand, need we be disconcerted to hear Crabtree referred to as a flea. We are men of the world, and we know that settling the point of precedence between a louse and a flea is one of the recurring, indeed abiding, problems of literary criticism; there is much discriminating work going on in all the Universities of the English-speaking world in order to decide literary problems of precisely that magnitude. No, we need feel no resentment at finding our poet referred to as a flea.

But to have him described — not only described, but also cruelly caricatured — as the ghost of a flea, may be going too far. And I think that even the most lively historical imagination feels a certain withdrawal of sympathy from Blake at this moment, when he was willing to immortalize his old friend, to whom he owed so much in the way of poetic stimulus, in this savage way. But the facts speak for themselves; the argument is conclusive; the

facial resemblance is indisputable. The judgment of Blake upon Crabtree must be regarded as yet another melancholy example of how one great man may misunderstand another. If we recall what Johnson thought of Gray, what Wordsworth thought of Keats, what Byron thought of Wordsworth, or what we think of one another, then we need not be surprised at what Blake thought of Crabtree.

We have one further glimpse of Crabtree before the curtain falls upon his strange eventful history. You will perhaps recall that letter written by Edward Lear to Tennyson in his later years, in which Lear described some of the circumstances of his early life — those days in which he used to wander about the Zoological Gardens in Regent's Park, making drawings for his great work on *Tortoises, Terrapins, and Turtles*. In that letter Edward Lear tells us how he and his companions were struck by the appearance of an elderly gentleman notable for the sweet melancholy of his expression, and for a nose prominent, multitudinous, incarnadine, a countenance at once bardic and Bardolfian; how they, with youthful irreverence, nicknamed this impressive, portentous figure, 'The Dong'. It was a memory which lingered long in the mind of Lear, maturing by a dark inscrutable workmanship, and eventually inspiring him to an outburst of lyric poetry of unwonted glow and splendour. Crabtree (for it can have been none other than he) must have been at this time in his middle seventies:

iam senior, sed cruda deo viridisque senectus.

It is pleasant for us to remember how Crabtree, who began his poetical career by being castigated by Dr. Johnson, should have lived long enough to be the fit subject for one of the most profoundly romantic and, I may say, luminous poems of the nineteenth century.

It is in this mood that I ask now to take leave of Crabtree and conclude my brief and, you may think, unworthy remarks on the physical form in which he lived and moved and had his being among his fellow men. The moral of our Crabtree studies is the moral of all our studies. In the words of the sublime Burke, 'Shadows we are, and shadows we pursue'. Whilst all melts under our feet, we may well grasp at an exquisite passion for this figure who somehow seems to have liberated himself from the confines of space, time, and probability. In our studies of Crabtree, between the idea and the reality, falls no shadow; between the desire and the potency, falls no shadow; between the conception and the creation, falls no shadow. And this is the reason why, for long years to come, Crabtree is the source whence we and our successors will unceasingly drink inspiration — that Crabtree who will retain his incomparable place in our regard as one of his contemporaries conclusively described him:

The loftiest star of unascended heaven  
Pinnacled dim in the intense inane.