

JUDIT BORBÉLY

THE WRITER'S PAINTINGS AND THE PAINTER'S
SCENES

'To the art of the brush the novel must return, I hold, to recover whatever may be still recoverable of its sacrificed honour,' Henry James writes in 'The Lesson of Balzac,' giving voice to his lifelong conviction that there is an undeniable analogy between literature and painting (*Literary Criticism: French Writers etc.* 136). The novelist and the painter are brothers in James's eyes, since, as he formulates it in 'The Art of Fiction', 'their inspiration is the same, their process (allowing for the different quality of the vehicle) is the same, their success is the same' (*Selected Literary Criticism* 51). The sceptic of a sarcastic turn of mind may say, of course, that it is nothing but sour grapes, for Henry James could not help admitting, unwillingly though, that as regards drawing, his humble attempts were inferior to his brother's artistic achievements, and thus he had to content himself with writing. It is certainly true that it was his brother, William, who had private lessons with Mr Coe, the art teacher at school in New York, where the young Henry could only see William in the back parlour, drawing, always drawing and to make matters worse, 'not with a plodding patience, which, I think, would less have affected me, but easily, freely, and [...] infallibly,' he remembers the early days in his *Autobiography* (*Autobiography* 118). Several years later, when the family settled in Newport, the 17-year-old Henry James finally got compensated for his possible sibling jealousy on meeting John La Farge, the painter, who opened new windows for him. Himself being well-versed in literature, La Farge introduced the young man to Browning and Balzac, and even encouraged him to translate

Merimee's *La Venus d'Ille*, thus leading James to realise that literature is no less art than painting, consequently 'even with canvas and brush whisked out of my grasp I still needn't feel disinherited' (*Autobiography* 294). And it was also La Farge who discerned Henry James's inborn talent for seeing with the painter's eye.

James's attraction to pictures was obvious already at a very young age, together with his habit of connecting pictures and real living scenes. Under the influence of a concrete experience he usually remembered a picture he had seen which, in turn, helped him to interpret the reality around him. We might say that he had the tendency to see an actual scene as if it were a picture. His conscious interest and studies in art obviously gave it further reinforcement but, judging by his earliest memory of Paris that he recalls in his *Autobiography*, he must have been born with the painter's eye:

I had been there for a short time in the second year of my life, and I was to communicate to my parents later on that as a baby in long clothes, seated opposite to them in a carriage on the lap of another person, I had been impressed with the view, framed by the clear window of the vehicle as we passed, of a great stately square surrounded with high-roofed houses and having in its centre a tall and glorious column. (*Autobiography* 32)

Besides being fascinated by the strength of Henry James's visual sense, we must underline a small detail in the above quotation: the view being framed by the window. Framing a scene is typical of James, as we will see, and it is used to its greatest effect at climactic moments of recognition when, in Viola Hopkins Winner's words, 'sight merges with insight' (Hopkins 73). That James was visually stimulated is not surprising, for he frequently accompanied his father to the studios of the latter's artist friends, contemporary painters and illustrators (Thomas Hicks, Felix Darley, Christopher Cranch and Paul Duggan), as we can read in the *Autobiography*. Furthermore, as a child, he was regularly taken to art exhibitions, and later, already as an adult, he consciously explored the great museums and galleries of Europe, so much so that the National Gallery, the Louvre, the Uffizi, the Pitti all became his second home. To have some conception of James's exquisite sensitivity to art and to see what ineffaceable impression the temples of art made on him, let me quote his first memories of the Louvre from 1855 when he was but 12 years old:

[...] the sense of a freedom of contact and appreciation really too big for one [left] such a mark on the very place, the pictures, the frames themselves, the figures within them, the particular parts and features of each, the look of the rich light, the smell of the massively enclosed air, that I have never since renewed the old exposure without renewing again the old emotion and taking up the small scared consciousness. (*Autobiography* 198)

This quotation shows not only the crucial role the Louvre played in his aesthetic development and the effect of art on his perception but also the interplay between picture and reality that characterises Henry James's vision. As we can see, the concrete physical setting where the pictures were placed, the light and even the frames were just as memorable for him as the paintings themselves. This fusion of art and the living present can be found in his art criticism as well where he always discusses a work of art in context, which means on the one hand the 'contribution' of the surrounding pictures to the quality and interpretation of the one in question, and on the other the larger context, i.e. the gallery itself, the area where the gallery is situated, the audience, the owner of the painting and sometimes even the fee to be paid. (As an example, I can mention James's discussion of the Wallace Collection at Bethnal Green that he wrote for the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1873 in which we can find all these details, along which he then strings his exhaustive analysis of a number of paintings.) The emphatic interrelationship between art and reality sheds light on the complexity of the painter's eye in Henry James. For it means more than his sensitivity to colours and forms; James's visual sense is strongly connected with his imagination, he does not merely *see* something but *thinks* about it. In other words, pictorial elements are never separated from intellectual meaning. In his art criticism, he was most positive about paintings which, in his opinion, showed *beauty* found by a painter with *imagination* in an observable *reality*, imagination in this case depending on the presence of literary, historical and psychological associations raised in the beholder. That is why the ekphrastic scenes I have selected are so rich, as I hope to show, and are open to various interpretations.

The wealth of artistic connotations in James's works makes it really hard to pretend to have found a logical organising principle if you want to analyse certain scenes approaching them from this

particular angle but you want to avoid ending up with a hopelessly complicated mass of encyclopaedic information. After much thinking I decided to set up three aspects on the basis of which I am going to compare scenes and pictorial works of art, three different types of ekphrasis, types, of course, by my personal judgement. The first one is the physical appearance of a concrete painting in the novel; in the second one a living scene can be suspected to have been inspired by a painting which is then either explicitly named or can be detected; whereas in the third type I would like to introduce a scene in which James does not 'use' an existing painting but he himself creates one, giving a beautiful example of a literary painting.

I think, the best-known painting actually appearing in a Henry James novel is the Bronzino in *The Wings of the Dove*, which Milly Theale, the central heroine comes face to face with in the great historic house of Matcham. The mysterious Bronzino has been identified as the portrait of Lucrezia Panciatichi by the Florentine painter, Bronzino (Agnolo di Torri), who painted several portraits of the Florentine aristocracy of the time before he became the court painter of the Medicis. The portrait is a wonderful piece of 16th-century Italian Mannerism, a painting that Giorgio Vasari, the contemporary art historian, praised for its 'bella maniera'. Mannerism, as the word suggests, aimed to achieve some ideal manner, i.e. the perfect style, for the sake of which mannerist artists used stylised forms by ignoring rules of perspective, proportions and symmetry. Their figures, which usually have long limbs and a small head, are mostly depicted in an unnaturally sophisticated or rigid posture, as we can see in Lucrezia Panciatichi's portrait as well. But Bronzino managed to combine these typically mannerist formal elements with intense emotions: there is some concealed tension and sadness on the lady's face, in her slightly strained left hand and in her somewhat uncomfortable way of sitting, which are in a strong contrast with the bright red of her dress. Let us see now how the painting is described by James, communicated through his heroine's perception:

[...] the face of a young woman, all magnificently drawn, down to the hands, and magnificently dressed; a face almost livid in hue, yet handsome in sadness and crowned with a mass of hair rolled back and high, that must, before fading with time, have had a family resemblance to her own. The lady in question, at all events, with her

slightly Michaelangesque squareness, her eyes of other days, her full lips, her long neck, her recorded jewels, her brocaded and wasted reds, was a very great personage—only unaccompanied by a joy. And she was dead, dead, dead. (*The Wings* 144)

James's description of the portrait summarises all the pictorial details I have listed above, and it also shows his sensitivity to the deeper meaning, the hidden psychological message. The given Bronzino, which comes to symbolise mortality because the visible elegance and perfection cannot mask the character's overwhelming sadness, marks a moment of great significance in the novel. Milly's self-revelation is not limited to the facial similarity between the dead woman and herself but also implies their existential resemblance. Milly's identification with the Florentine lady means her understanding and accepting her fate, that she will soon die, as her final words suggest when she 'with her eyes again on her painted sister's—almost as if under their suggestion' (148) says: 'I think I could die without its being noticed' (149). Thus the painting is not simply a visual detail, an attractive element in the background scenery but plays a very important role in the plot and also in characterisation. Besides symbolising Milly's doom and reinforcing the theme of there being a contrast between the visible reality and the underlying truth, the Bronzino portrait also serves as an organic link between past and present, the existence of which Henry James considered essential in a work of art.

Let us turn now to the second type of ekphrastic scenes when James uses a painting as a starting-point to create a scene in the living present. The number of cases when a work of art is indirectly present is infinite from vague hints at pictures that the heroes happen to recall under the influence of an experience, to scenes which may remind the reader of well-known paintings. To illustrate the latter, let me mention the famous party in *The Ambassadors* given by Gloriani, the sculptor, the whirl of which with artists and 'gros bonnets of many kinds' (*The Ambassadors* 201) and, of course, the right femmes du monde enjoying the pleasant evening in the beautiful garden in the heart of the Faubourg Saint-Germain bears a striking resemblance to Manet's *Music in the Tuileries*, the cavalcade of which shows the same presentation of elegance and status. Or, I can underline the noticeable similarity between the frontispiece to the first volume of *The*

Ambassadors in the New York Edition, Alvin Langdon Coburn's photograph taken on the basis of detailed instructions from Henry James, and Pissarro's painting of the Pont Royal. Structurally they are the same with the focus on the bridge in both and only the other bank being visible; besides, both the painting and the photo show a boat passing under one of the arches of the bridge and a houseboat. In other words, overall impression and separate details alike seem to be very similar if not completely identical, which is all the more obvious if we add that Lambert Strether's images of Parisian streets during the hero's innumerable walks and especially when he is watching Paris from a balcony strongly remind us of Pissarro's Parisian series.

Perhaps the best-known example of a painting that, though not present, plays a central role can also be found in *The Ambassadors*. It is the small landscape painted by Emile-Charles Lambinet, which enchanted Strether a long time ago at a Boston dealer's, and which he wants to find in the French countryside during his one-day trip. Charles Anderson describes Strether's endeavour as a reverse mirror technique, since in this case it is nature that is expected to reflect art; to which I might add that it is a very strange 'mirror'—whatever it shows, the reflection cannot be true to the 'model'. For one of the characteristic features of the Barbizon School, to which Lambinet belonged, was a form of generalisation, which means that the artists painted their landscapes in the studio on the basis of sketches made on the spot, consequently, the final painting did not represent a particular place, rather showed its idealised version. In 1872 James saw an exhibition of privately owned paintings by Rousseau, Dupre, Diaz de la Pena, Troyon and Daubigny in the rooms of Messrs. Doll and Richards at 145 Tremont Street, and the enthusiastic review he wrote about 'the admirable aesthetic gifts of the French mind' (*The Painter's Eye* 43) shows that he regarded the Barbizon landscapists as the masters of modern painting. To illustrate his hero's state of mind and fuse art and reality in rural France, James could have chosen any other picture from the Barbizon landscapes on display in Boston, e.g. a Troyon with a cluster of magnificent oaks, 'with their sturdy foliage just beginning to rust and drop, leaf by leaf, into the rank river-glass, streaked with lingering flowers, at their feet' (*The Painter's Eye* 43), or a Rousseau with 'an admirable expression of size and space, of

condensed light and fresh air' (*The Painter's Eye* 45). His choice of a Lambinet may be explained by the fact that a typical Lambinet includes all or most of the recurring motifs of the Barbizon School, as we can see in *The Washerwomen* or in *Fishing on the Banks of the Seine* (it might be either of them that Strether recalls): a slow moving river reflecting the luminous sky, a cluster of trees with light filtering through and spacious meadows merging with the horizon, creating the impression of peace and quiet, freedom from pressures and complications. Let us see now James's verbal painting in *The Ambassadors*:

The oblong gilt frame disposed its enclosing lines; the poplars and willows, the reeds and river—a river of which he did n't know, and did n't want to know, the name—fell into a composition, full of felicity, within them; the sky was silver and turquoise and varnish; the village on the left was white and the church on the right was grey; it was all there, in short—it was what he wanted: it was Tremont Street, it was France, it was Lambinet. Moreover he was freely walking about in it. (453)

It is difficult to decide whether Henry James is describing the original Lambinet landscape that he must have seen in Boston, or verbally creating a similar pictorial work of art, modelled on a natural scene that he himself may have seen. Whichever option we choose, it is clear that Lambert Strether's ekphrastic perception achieves the kind of synthesis that was one of the aims of aestheticism: 'to bring the perfect moment into a world of temporality,' as Jonathan Freedman expresses it in his *Professions of Taste* (Freedman 19), i.e. to reach the perfection of perception within the perpetual flux of time. Enjoying the rural idyll, Strether abandons himself to the picturesque details around and he indulges in colours and lights to such an extent that he still feels within the oblong gilt frame of the Lambinet when at the end of his rambling he enters the small village inn on the bank of the river. But at this point the scene ceases to be a Lambinet. (In view of James's immense knowledge of art and his familiarity with paintings, it would not make much sense to claim his ignorance about the shift from a landscape in the Barbizon manner to an impressionist scene. Judged by his essay of 1876, 'The Impressionists', his first reaction was unconcealed dislike to 'the little group of the Irreconcilables' (*The Painter's Eye* 114) who, in his opinion, were

'partisans of unadorned reality and absolute foes to arrangement, embellishment, selection' (*The Painter's Eye* 114), for, as he continues, 'they send detail to the dogs and concentrate themselves on general expression' (*The Painter's Eye* 115). Yet, by the time he was writing *The Ambassadors* (1903), he had learned to appreciate them and incorporated their technique in his works, especially in *The Ambassadors*, which is extremely rich in impressionist elements.) With Strether's arrival at the Cheval Blanc, the village inn, we have left the Lambinet behind and entered Impressionism, which can be seen in several points. Firstly, the *setting*, i.e. an inn by a river with a small pavilion at the end of the garden 'with a couple of benches and a table, a protecting rail and a projecting roof' (*The Ambassadors* 459), almost overhanging the grey-blue stream, is typical of the Impressionists. Secondly, the *subject* of a crowd in a cafe, in a public garden or in an open-air dance place was frequently represented in impressionist paintings; I have already mentioned Manet's *Music in the Tuileries*, to which let me add now Renoir's *Moulin de la Galette*; also, a boating party on the river was a similarly favourite subject with the Impressionists, as we can see in Manet's *Argenteuil, the boatmen* or *In a boat* and in *Rowers at Chatou* by Renoir. Finally, as regards the *figures* appearing in the painting, as opposed to the peasant characters busily doing their daily work who may come to be represented in a Barbizon landscape, the pictures by Manet and Renoir and other Impressionists show city dwellers (it is enough to have a look at their clothes) who, for a change, have left their usual urban existence to enjoy the simple pleasures of an excursion.

It is Renoir's *Rowers at Chatou* that seems to be the closest to the given scene in *The Ambassadors*, when Strether sitting in the pavilion catches sight of a boat advancing round the bend:

They came slowly, floating down, evidently directed to the landing-place near their spectator and presenting themselves to him not less clearly as the two persons for whom his hostess was already preparing a meal. For two very happy persons he found himself straightway taking them—a young man in shirt-sleeves, a young woman easy and fair, who had pulled pleasantly up from some other place [...]. The air quite thickened, at their approach, with further intimations; the intimation that they were expert, familiar, frequent [...]. They knew how to do it, he vaguely felt—and it made them but the more idyllic [...]. (461)

We can find a strong similarity between the scene and Renoir's painting, both in the general impression created in the spectator and in the details, be it the setting, the figures, or the ripple of the surface of the water, 'the rustle of the reeds on the opposite bank, the faint diffused coolness and the slight rock of a couple of small boats' (459). However, the idyll of the scene is broken when Strether realises that the man and the woman, who appear to be so familiar with everything, are Chad and Mme de Vionnet, and the deceitfully enchanting view in front of his eyes is in fact nothing but one of a thousand petty love-affairs, 'the typical tale of Paris' (472). Thus the shift from a Lambinet landscape to an impressionist scene of high life illustrates the thematic development of the episode from Strether's carefree identification of the Lambinet with the rural scenery enveloping him, to his coming face to face with and realising the implications of the sobering reality, in other words from past innocence to present experience.

I would like to round off my presentation on paintings in James's works with an example of ekphrasis when the writer paints his own picture without directly or indirectly taking his inspiration from an existing pictorial work of art. We could mention dozens of scenes taking place in streets and city parks or in private homes which James introduces through carefully selected subtle details which result in a strong visual effect, creating the impression that the reader is actually watching a painter who is adding hue to hue until the full picture has unfolded in front of his eyes. Again, it was rather difficult to select the very episode with which I can illustrate what I wish to say, for there are so many relevant scenes. The one I have finally chosen is a country scene in *The Golden Bowl* which is part of the heroes' second stay in the rich house at Fawns. The house and the immense park themselves would be worth talking about as they are being introduced step by step, but considering the time limit I am going to analyse an episode which appears as an entity and which shows James's technique of framing a live scene to combine life and art.

The first colours and shapes are drawn already inside the smoking-room where the Princess, i.e. Maggie Verver, is watching her father, her husband (the Prince), Charlotte (her father's wife and also her husband's lover) and Fanny, an old friend, playing bridge:

[...] the facts of the situation were upright for her round the green cloth and the silver flambeaux; the fact of her father's wife's lover facing his mistress; the fact of her father sitting, all unsounded and unblinking, between them; the fact of Charlotte keeping it up, keeping up verything, across the table, with her husband beside her; the fact of Fanny Assingham, wonderful creature, placed opposite to the three and knowing more about each, probably, [...] than either of them knew of either. Erect above all for her was the sharp-edged fact of the relation of the whole group, individually and collectively, to herself [...]. (*The Golden Bowl* 382–383)

The passage shows the same combination of artistic detail and hidden tension that we found in the Bronzino. The ‘high decorum’ (383) of the room and the characters’ elegance cannot mask the underlying truth of cheating, lies and adultery. The effect of the mute scene becomes even stronger when Maggie goes out to the terrace, and like the painter who takes a step back to have a better view of the developing picture, she is watching the players from a little distance:

Several of the long windows of the occupied rooms stood open to it, and the light came out in vague shafts and fell upon the old smooth stones. The hour was moonless and starless and the air heavy and still [...].

[...] her companions, watched by her through one of the windows [...] charming as they showed in the beautiful room [...] might have been figures rehearsing some play of which she herself was the author [...]. (384-385)

Framed by the French window, the scene in front of Maggie’s eyes is like a picture the beautiful impression of which hides hideousness and falsity—as if we were looking at a painting that appears magnificent at first sight but a closer look reveals a number of ugly details. As usual, Henry James is communicating his message through a central consciousness, this time through Maggie’s perception, which being a sensitive mind works as that of a painter, identifying the separate elements but at the same time being aware of what is behind them. In my opinion, the given ekphrastic scene which presents a living picture is a splendid example of James’s pictorial talent that can create wonderful paintings even without a brush and a canvas. Although he works with words, the resulting work of art has a visual effect (as well), which, in his view, is more than natural, for, as he

wrote in the *Autobiography*: 'the arts were after all essentially one' (*Autobiography* 294). That not everybody manages to achieve it is another matter.

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