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Tamara Selitrina

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# Henry James: the Painter's Eye<sup>1</sup>

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The multi-faceted subject "James and the fine arts" may be subdivided into clearly distinctive themes: James on Spanish art, James on Italian art, James on French art, James on English art, James on American art, etc. For the purposes of this paper, we will limit ourselves to Henry James's theoretical texts on the art of painting collected in *The Painter's Eye*.<sup>2</sup>

It should be borne in mind that, like science in general, research into the fine arts is always on the move and in progress; this perennial change affects attitudes to the objects of study: texts, canvases and, more importantly, their interpretation; this continuous stream cannot be stemmed, every epoch offers its own understanding and its own explanations.

As from 1805, numerous academies of art were set up in the USA. After the Civil War, America started to import paintings by old masters, and vast collections were amassed; museums were founded which were later to become the greatest treasuries of world art. Such developments generated the need to expound the aesthetic value of the masterpieces of art, to bring home their message to the masses. Undertaking the enlightening mission of an art critic or interpreter of painting, Henry James introduced his fellow-Americans to the works of reputable masters: Frans Hals, Rembrandt, Vermeer of Delft, Velazquez, Murillo, Zurbaran, Daumier, Ingres, the French Impressionists, Reynolds, Gainsborough and Turner, the Pre-Raphaelites.

He was strongly opposed to the idea that pictures should be intended only to gratify and caress the viewer's eyes (*PE* 89). Considering himself to be a keen observer and an art connoisseur, James defined art as a source of general ideas and a means of gaining more knowledge about man and the world: art was a tool for expanding one's view of the world. For him the best examples of

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<sup>1</sup> This article is the extended version of the paper read at the International Conference of the Henry James Society, "Henry James Today," July 5-9, 2002, American University of Paris, France. All views and conclusions are those of the author of the article, and not necessarily those of the editorial staff.

<sup>2</sup> Henry James, *The Painter's Eye*, Selected and edited with an introduction by John L. Sweeney. L., 1956. Subsequently referred to in the text as *PE*.

art criticism were the works by Stendhal and Ruskin, who, in spite of their differences, nevertheless possessed a generic affinity.

Fictionalised books on art were inspired by Denis Diderot's "Les Salons," purportedly written to help those readers who were unable to see the originals or, even, their reproductions, so that they could visualise those inaccessible works of art and partake of their splendour through the medium of literary form. *Les Maîtres d'Autrefois* (*The Old Masters*) by Eugene Fromentin belongs to the same genre, with the author following in Diderot's footsteps, but offering a much more profound interpretation than that of his predecessor and inserting it into a more captivating and enthralling plot. A novelist of considerable talent, the author of *Dominique* resorted to an unconventional literary approach, and expounded everything from the vantage point of a dilettante or rather, an unbiased viewer.

Germain Bazin, a contemporary critic of art, notes in his *Histoire de l'Histoire de l'Art* (1986) that the works described by Fromentin justly deserve sincere admiration. Unlikely ever to be surpassed, they display powers of observation innate in a painter with a brush in hand who is poised to add yet another touch to his picture. According to Bazin, it was only natural that the book should have become so well-known; its excellence was never called into question, it even was a "must" for every student of history of art. *The Old Masters* had to be read to learn how to look at a picture of genuine magnitude. Fromentin's book was also highly appreciated by the circles engaged in art criticism.

Henry James was probably the only person who was not just appreciative, but also critical. In an article published in *The Nation* (1876), James responded keenly to the situation which this critique involved: he was both a novelist reviewing the work of an art critic, and an art-critic reviewing the work of a novelist. He found Fromentin's book extremely interesting, but it struck him as curious rather than valuable. He wrote: "We have always had a decided mistrust of literary criticism of works of plastic art and those tendencies which have suggested this feeling are exhibited by Mr. Fromentin in their most extreme form" (PE 117). Another fault found by James was "too much interest into the technical side of plastic arts" (PE 118).

James thought that Fromentin was but a mediocre artist, a view shared by some present-day scholars. Nevertheless, in the final part of his essay, James gives Fromentin his due: Fromentin could convey a verbal description of North European schools of art, thereby translating their lines and colours into words. On the whole, even though James supposed that Fromentin's readers might disagree with him, he thought they would do justice to the brilliancy of his

work. Its acuteness, delicacy of perception and manner were most exquisite. Probably, the constraints of a newspaper article did not allow James to dwell at length on the pent-up yet exceedingly natural and organic lyricism, frankness and openness inherent to Fromentin's impressive recapitulation of his own emotions.

Germain Bazin shrewdly remarks that an author who turns his attention to artistic matters is not normally interested in objective truth, but is apt to be more concerned with his own vision and interpretation. However, this is not true of Henry James, whose special mission—that of an enlightener—was similar to Ruskin's. In keeping with British aesthetic theories, James believed that a truthful artist could address any theme provided his goal was to divine the innermost essence of his subject matter.

The artist's train of thought, James said, can be expressed in the guise of literary form. He does not reproduce anything to set off the beauty of his subject, he is oriented to the ultimate truth which, in his case, is *meaning*. The completeness of a work of art is made up of its spiritual integrity. It is delineated by the artist creating the plastic contour of a work which is to be reconstructed by its viewer: the latter is thus far from being confined to the role of a passive recipient of impressions; instead, he is invited to apply his mental capacities to the whole. Directed at nature, a plastic outlook can simultaneously see both time and eternity.

James was well aware of the fact that colourful loveliness was only a generalised principle of art, which did not describe it as a whole. He emphasised the delicate texture of artistic imagery, and regarded it as a distinguishing feature of every artistic image and all art in general. In his article "The Lesson of Balzac," James wrote that "[t]he most fundamental and general sign of the novel, from one desperate experiment to another, is its being, everywhere, an effort at representation—this is the beginning and the end of it" (*PE* 9). A verbal work of art becomes an organic, artistic, plastic image. Any artistic image is a form of expression. Any artistic depiction possesses two spatial realities: one is the visible, the other is the private source which forms the basis of creativity. The interpreter must reveal the spiritual life of the protagonists he presents to the reader, in other words, give expression to the private source which is tightly closed to the extraneous powers of perception and their external manifestation.

Highly admiring of the French school of historians of art, H. James had a favourable opinion of Hippolyte Taine, who had focussed his analysis on causal relationships between artistic creativity, environment and period. Taine referred to them as a "law of interconnections." Thanks to Taine, critics began to study the context surrounding the creation of a work of art, its social,

political and intellectual background. James realised that works of art should be treated as historical phenomena.

In his article “An English Critic of French Painting” (1868), James leads us to believe that in terms of the teaching of history of art and the extent of interest it aroused, England was far behind other European countries. At that time, an interested reader could turn only to Joshua Reynolds’ *Discourses on Art*, translations of *Lives of the Most Excellent Architects, Painters and Sculptors* by Giorgio Vasari and *History of Italian Art* by Crowe and Cavalcaselle, and, of course, the volumes written by Ruskin.

James recognised Ruskin’s notable contribution to the solution of a number of problems affecting the art of his period, from Joseph Turner to the Pre-Raphaelites. A key figure in English art criticism,

[Ruskin] has achieved a very manifest and a very extended influence over the minds and feelings of his own generation and that succeeding it, and those forms of intellectual labour, or of intellectual play, are not few in number, of which one may say without hesitation, that Ruskin has *passé par là!* [...] and although Mr. Ruskin has in a very large degree affected writers and painters, he has yet not in any appreciable degree quickened the formation of a school of critics—premissing that we use the word “school” meaning a group of writers devoted to the study of art according to their own individual lights and as distinguished from students of literature, and not in the sense of a group of writers devoted to the promulgation of Mr. Ruskin’s own views, or those of anyone else and yet he has been unable to abandon “the aesthetic standpoint.” (PE 33-34)

James knew that, generally speaking, the artist is naturally apprehensive of the art critic, who often perceives art in a literary manner, totally ignoring its particularities. By contrast, Henry James was quite at ease with the terms pertaining to the fine arts: colouring, drawing, perspective, unity between drawing and colour. James was also aware of the fact that the material value of a painting was the source of the painter’s livelihood: astute and refined art critics could help the painter, no matter what had been created, a masterpiece or a fairly commonplace canvas.

In his day, Diderot did away with the differentiation between connoisseurs and true professionals, a distinction which had hitherto been the subject of perpetual academic controversies. Due to his efforts, the world of art witnessed the emergence of yet another well-defined legitimate personage: the art critic, an intermediary between the artist and the public. Analyzing R. Hamerton’s book about some twenty French painters, James distinguished the following features, which he believed to be inherent to a professional art critic:

- a certain intelligent frankness and freedom in his style which conciliate the reader's esteem, and transform the author into a sort of personal companion,
- The use of professional terms without pedantry by a critic who also practises with great neatness the common literary arts,
- excellent taste, common sense, tolerance of differences of opinion and of theory, clarity and precision when dealing with aesthetic matters.

Whoever James wrote about, be it Jean-Antoine Watteau, a French painter of genius with his delightful *fête galante* or Henri Rousseau and Daubigny with the inimitably lifelike quality of their canvases, the candour of Rembrandt or the explicit naturalistic realism of Spanish painters, he invariably stressed "that it is necessary to look at Nature in the most impartial and comprehensive manner, to see objects in their integrity and to reject nothing" (PE 39).

It is interesting to note his views on English masters. James did not set great store by the works of pure academic art; he found its subjects preconceived and artificial: "Velasquez's children are the children of history; Sir Joshua's, of poetry, or at least of rhymed lullaby-literature. . ." (PE 71). As early as in 1869, he became personally acquainted with Rossetti and Morris. His sympathy for the Pre-Raphaelites was reflected in his high appraisal of their works, of their aspiration to paint from nature with the utmost truthfulness.

Striving for realism in art, James regarded Millais and Holman Hunt as far superior to the Impressionists who seemed to him overly concerned with impression and too little interested in expression. Burne-Jones and Rossetti captivated him with their power of imagination, the exquisite nature of their palette, elevated to such incredible heights by sheer intellectuality. According to James, both Turner and the Pre-Raphaelites were the precursors of the Impressionists. Turner, he proclaimed, was a genius, with his paintings so charmingly imbued with the magic of space, light and atmosphere. The shades of colour seemed to dissolve in unconscious fluids of craftsmanship akin to profound spiritual and emotional manifestations.

A few years later, his erstwhile mistrust of the Impressionists would disappear without a trace. Books written by James give an idea about the vibrant realities of the period, of the pulsating consciousness of a protagonist split between the visible (and the obvious) and the private, the covert part that makes up the essence of life, which may be called "Literary Impressionism." We believe that James's subtle artistic vision, attentive to barely perceptible nuances, capable of "detailing" a scene and his gift for recreating the most

diverse visual impressions, enabled him to capture them in his high-strung, impetuous, vividly colourful prose.

As a sample of James's artistic criticism, we can offer a presentation of his article about the 1872 "French Pictures in Boston" exhibition. The inclusion of a painting in a museum exhibition is commonly regarded as the acknowledgement of its artistic worth, the recognition of its intrinsic aesthetic value. The Romantic Delacroix, the realists Decamps, Diaz, Troyon, Jules Duprez, Daubigny were, to James's mind, "the admirable aesthetic gifts of the French mind" (*PE* 43). James was captivated by Troyon's indisputable mastery in landscape painting: "the edge of a wood, seen on a dampish day in September. A cluster of magnificent forest oaks occupies the middle and left of the picture" (*PE* 43). James was enchanted by "the waning maturity of summers" in a Troyon, when "their sturdy foliage [is] just beginning to rust a drop leaf by leaf, in the rank river-grass" (*PE* 43). He noted an impressive harmony of colours, grey and grey-green, subdued russet and brown. James singled out as a characteristic feature the artist's skill in conveying dramatic moments in the life of nature, in particular "the drama of lusty summer just conscious of the touch of autumn" (*PE* 44). It is well known that Troyon had attained fame by his canvases of grazing cows. Such guileless, bucolic subjects were the painter's familiar medium. He was even said to have overexploited the theme, and James was quick to remark on its banality, remaining, nevertheless, "indefinitely *bonnête*." Very close to Troyon's pastoral scene was a small Decamps painting which reminded James of George Sand's rural novels.

As an artistic trend *per se*, French Realism first manifested itself in landscape painting. One of its more salient and significant exponents was Théodore Rousseau, who, according to James, was free of outside influences and alien to the graceful by-play of a Diaz or, for that matter, the "literary allusiveness of a Decamps." Without a hint of idealisation, Rousseau, who tended to paint unruffled, epic canvases, showed "a broad low plain at dusk, with a small stone farm-house [...] with a light screen of thin young trees" (*PE* 45). James admitted that the picture was noble and faultless, suffused with "the pathos of sincerity." "The tone of its clouds is grey, that of the light—a deep grave crimson, this conflicting cold and warmth, play against each other in the vast realm of evening with tremendous effect" (*PE* 45). James was awed by the expression of light in Rousseau's pictures, the perfect rendition of twilight, the death song of the day, when night is imminent, but the quiet lilac-coloured clouds are still discernible, "as true a sunset as ever was painted" (*PE* 45).

James favourably compared that rich diversity and the fine artistic taste displayed by the French school of landscape painting with the rigid exactness of

some contemporary British and American ultra-realists, probably with reference to their excessive, crude imitation of nature. James focused his attention on an "orientalist" Decamps with the scriptural subject of the centurion beseeching Jesus to heal his paralysed servant. Recognizing Decamps as one of the first modern realists, James admitted that the painter's *chef-d'œuvres*, did belong to the realist pole of art, even though his other works, including the "Centurion", indicated the artist's penchant for picturesqueness, coupled with little regard for truth. James found the painting lacking in the sincere faith so powerfully shown by the best masters of the past: in this case, the scriptural subject was treated "as lightly as possible." Nevertheless, James admired the characteristics that the public found so endearing: the skill of its composition and the expressive colours and spectacular effects inherent to Decamps.

Unlike Delacroix, who never was truly understood or recognized by his contemporaries, Decamps enjoyed unequivocal success. "Delacroix, more than any other painter we know, must be judged by the total impression" (*PE* 47). James marvelled at his optical effects, finding them overpowering and irresistible. James conceded that as a subtle colourist, Delacroix had divined the law of contrasting hues and made every spectrum of colour richer by additional contrastive tinges; by virtue of their closeness, their intensity became more pronounced. James admitted "that the light of Delacroix's mind produces some very singular optical effects" (*PE* 47). According to Delacroix's dictum, it was not necessary for the artist to represent an object: he should paint only its semblance. James astutely remarked the importance of this trait, stressing that Delacroix saw his subjects "in a ray of that light that never was on land or sea—which is simply the light of his mind" (*PE* 47).

James readily forgave Delacroix some deliberate carelessness in his portraits of "men in Eastern dress, gathered about a camp-fire, before which one of them stands, with outreached hands, delivering himself, apparently, of a story or a chant" while tethered horses are pasturing in the background: it was all merely "indicated by the very simplest design" (*PE* 48). But James admired the picture as "singularly forcible and true," because the sentiments "throb there with a vital warmth and [...] human significance, long after the hundred literal merits of certain other painters of mark have come to seem stale and soulless" (*PE* 48). "Delacroix must not be written about; he must be seen and felt" (*PE* 48). That was the verdict James arrived at. Delacroix could be understood only by those possessing a special mindset, feeling and, of course, those deeply rooted in many domains of culture.

In this respect, James derived considerable assistance from the *Belles-Lettres*. Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Jacques-Henri Bernadin de Saint-Pierre (see



his "Essay on Nature" written in 1784) offered vivid descriptions of landscapes and, even, of the Universe. François-René Chateaubriand found the landscape not only the dwelling place, but also an equivalent of human passions. The same can be said about the English Romantics: Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats and Byron. By the end of the eighteenth century, England produced a galaxy of painters equal to great European masters. Such artists as William Hogarth, Thomas Gainsborough, George Romney and Sir Joshua Reynolds painted pictures rightly regarded among the most magnificent masterpieces in Europe.

National characteristics transpiring in the penchant for a meaningful subject and a distinctly visible moral bent recurred in many generations of painters. Hogarth's dictum that the brush was created for narration and edification, but not for catering to visual impressions, has been treated as a behest to be abided by and rigorously followed. The didactic component in art found able advocates in Ruskin, Burne-Jones, Morris and many others. It was precisely that bond between the ethical and the aesthetical that became the distinguishing feature of English art, both Romantic and realistic.

In English art, the concept of the unity of beauty and goodness, an organic link between the ethic and the moral bases, points to a long-standing tradition going back to Shaftesbury. Reviewing paintings displayed at the art exhibitions staged in England between 1877 and 1897, James took a special interest in the particularities of English art, primarily as a manifestation of the English frame of mind. Among the canvases resembling trite and mediocre book or magazine illustrations, James singled out just a few. He was enchanted with Romney's "vividness," and impressed by the exquisite beauty of his characters. He found many portraits painted by Gainsborough "complete and human," but among his contemporaries he gave special praise to Burne-Jones: "it is the art of culture, of reflection, of intellectual luxury, of aesthetic refinement" (*PE* 144).

Taking into account the ties existing in the fine arts, James was looking for parallels in history, literature, philosophy and life. He wanted to feel the rhythm of progress in the arts and single out, in the polemics of discords, what was to be passed on to the next generation: a challenging, formidable task.

Competent critics are brilliant personalities filled with love for and devotion to art, they are well-versed in history, endowed with a rapport with nature, they have a keen perception of beauty and the ability to find objective criteria for articulating their preferences and opinions. The critic is actively involved in the process of artistic creation, always remaining an integral part of this pursuit. Literary criticism is both a genre in its own right and a very specific activity. Artistic criticism incorporates history, art and dissemination of ideas.

It is addressed to all those who are interested in the latest development in art, it is trying to enlist the support of new followers, it makes a direct appeal to artists themselves, by informing them about the public opinion and, vice versa, the opinions of painters and sculptors are likewise brought to the attention of viewers, thus forming a complex system of interconnections where opinions are voiced, interpreted and analysed. The critic abides by his own criteria, conditioned by his upbringing, education, temperament and adherence to literary and philosophic schools. The critic expresses his views, thereby adding his voice to the overwhelming plurality of opinions, where a mere intonation may be a matter of great importance. The critic's worldview evolves in the making of his creative biography, his past experience and artistic gifts playing therein a major role.

Most critics in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries started in life as artists and then replaced the paint-brush with the pen. James began as a critic, however, later he switched over to writing. It is generally acknowledged that art criticism "ages" quicker than the history of art: a review ordered by a newspaper or magazine calls for promptitude, the critic has to cope with his task very fast. But James's exquisite aesthetic taste, his finely turned sensitivity to genuinely artistic canvases convince us that his assessment and views on old and contemporaneous masters are absolutely justified. His erudition and love for various forms of art, his fine perception of reality, his ability to establish a relationship between life and art, his aptitude for seeing the future in the present, make us realize that James was quite unfettered by one-sided, narrow professionalism, because his principal goal was to demonstrate the multiple meanings and the greatness of the undying, imperishable canvases painted by outstanding artists. James's attitude to artistic phenomena starkly contrasts with the manner in which so many historians of art confine themselves to generalities, replete with emotions or abounding in historic facts and concomitant circumstances surrounding works of art.

*Tamara SELITRINA*  
*Bashkirian State Pedagogical University, Ufa, Russia*

