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GENDER AS PERFORMANCE IN HENRY JAMES: THE ROLE OF PORTRAITS IN *THE AMERICAN*

In the novels of Henry James descriptions of pictures and portraits occur frequently and the art of portraiture is parallel to that of the storyteller. Questions of gender identity are pivotal in James, too, judging from the number of contemporary accounts one comes accross in scholarly journals. However, in what way these two aspects can be joined still proves to be an open question, since issues of iconography and gender are usually handled separately in criticism, as if the two problems excluded each other in the minds of Jamesians. The problem at hand, then, is how to join the two aspects and in what way a gendered discussion of the pictures in the novels can complement canonized iconographical readings of them. Naturally, the investigation involves the analysis of actual images in James's *The American.*

I.

Let me indicate briefly the relevance of iconography and gender as two separate aspects of study to James today to legitimate this project. Iconography, for one, or to be more precise: not iconography *per se* but the discussion of the role of pictures in James has been an important element of James reception and is still on the critical agenda today. The most commonly cited study on the role of pictures in James's work was Viola Hopkins Winner's study *Henry James and the Visual Arts* from 1970. Winner discusses the presence of the visual arts in James's writings and the pervasive analogies between the art of the writer and the art of the painter in Jamesian theory and practice (Winner 1970, 59, 71). In her *The Museum World of Henry James* Adeline Tintner concentrated on James's fictional use of the visual and plastic arts and the artifacts of material culture (Tintner 1986, 3). Both readings are integrate images into their explication to some point: sometimes they seem to be mere catalogues of images in the novels, but in some cases also refer to art objects in their interpretations.

I believe it is worth mentioning here that the visual aspect of Jamesian writing is a critical area in its own right within James studies. These accounts of James' use of images are not neccesarily executed from the perspective of iconography, but rather target textual accounts of imagistic visual impressions that are the products of a center of consciousness. The narrator is using the perspective of a character and through his or her eyes, the reader is presented accounts of moments in such detail that they pass for verbal images (Griffin 1991, 5). Critics reflect on such instances by reminding the reader of James's idea in "The Art of Fiction" that writing and portraiture are not very far from each other, as they are both ways of representation (James 1984, 46). This direction of James criticism is also left uninfluenced by the gender issue.

As to the other aspect, problems of gender identity and performance in James have been discussed widely only recently; because, I suppose, they have been in all areas of the humanities influenced by the cultural turn. Today we have a new, powerful image of James influenced by gendered readings of his texts. In James's letters we glimpse the image of the young man with tropes of homoerotic panic lurking among the lines. In the biographies, we find the image of

the consciously feminized bachelor artist who has taken a conscious decision not to be a productive member of society in any material sense of the word. In his Notebooks, we get acquainted with the image of the homoerotic ageing man.

The issues discussed in recent important monographs on James often relate to the problem of gender. As a case in point, James's relation to women in general was studied by Alfred Habegger in his *James and the Woman Business* to show the falsity of the account of James' relation to his cousin, Minny Temple, which is revealed to be mostly James' own creation (Habegger 1989, 231). Also, in her *The Epistemology of the Closet* Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has discussed post-Romantic male homosexual panic in James' texts, letters (Sedgwick 1990, 208) and Prefaces (Sedgwick 1995, 233). Even the acclaimed Americanist, John Carlos Rowe published his latest book on James titled *The Other Henry James* about homosexual implications in noncanonized short stories (Rowe 1998, 3). Perhaps as a companion piece to Rowe's book, Donatella Izzo analyzed technologies of gender in stories about women in 2001 (Izzo 2001, 2).

To make sense of the gender upsurge, Richard Henke goes so far as to say that gender has a lot to do with the rehabilitation of James' reputation in the 1980s and 90s: I have to quote him extensively:

> As the well-known story goes, a group of devoted critics in the late 1930s and early 40s transformed an eccentric and increasingly unread author into one of the most important writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. James may have earned his place in the revised canons of British and especially American literature because of shifting literary priorities that resulted in a new understanding and respect for modernism that his experimental late narratives seemed to prefigure. What has not been so often noted about the rise of James's literary fortunes is how pivotally issues of gender played in his redemption. (Henke 1995, 227)

In other words, Henke claims that a discussion of issues of gender was central to the critical rehabilitation of James today, after his formal reception whereby New Critics assigned him his canonized position as a pre-Modernist author, a canonic figure of American national literature. To put it bluntly, his homoerotic interest is no longer a shame but an attraction for us.

So far I have tried to show the relevance of our topic "Iconography and Gender" to James in the context of the revived critical interest in him, in which issues of gender prove vital whilst iconography seems to be losing ground in consequence. At stake is the possibility of reinvigorating visual analysis through gender; so in what follows, I propose to carry out a small test. However, since it is impossible to give you a survey of the role of the gender aspect of the pictures used in James in general, I am to focus on one novel, *The American* 1877.

Before plunging into a discussion of *The American* though, let me digress a little and make some final introductory remarks about terminology. Firstly, when talking about iconography, I am not after the third-level meaning of an image described by Panofsky, where the *deepest level,* the intrinsic meaning or content of the work is apprehended (Panofsky 1974, 30), because I have problems with the notion of this 'deepest level.' Instead, I accept Ernst Gombrich's use of the term in the broad sense as an interpretative study of images (Gombrich 1972, 32). Secondly, as for the term gender, I am to use the concept of gender as performance, as an act—the way it is shown to function in Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble.* As we all very well know, for Butler gender is an apparatus of cultural construction that establishes sex as prediscursive, as a given (Butler 1990, 5). However, gender is at the same time open to splittings that reveal its phantasmatic status. In other words, gender can be shown in operation, in performance, if you like (Butler 1990, 9). In this sense, talking about gender is talking about the act wherby our notions of sex are *acted out,* are performed. Thirdly, the relation between picture and text here refers to a relation between pictures seen by characters within the text of the novel. The reason for this is

that the other type, illustration, where the picture is actually beside the text was not liked by James (Bogardus 1974, 117) and the only place where photoes can be found in his novels are the volumes of his New York Edition. Morover, these photoes are not illustrative of the novels in the sense of showing a specific setting or a character but are only generally related to the themes and settings of the novels, so I will not discuss them. Instead, I shall analyze three scenes of the novel that take place in the Louvre in Paris and in which pictures play a part as performances of gender and then I shall to recontextualize this reading within gendered interpretations of the novel.

II.

James's *The American* seems to call out for a joint production, for an analysis of the *iconography* of *gender*. The reasons are: you find several references to pictures in the novel that are relevant to the story, and as the story is about the failure of a marriage plot, issues of gender identification are likely to occur in it, too. Actually, there are three scenes in the novel through which one can trace the performance of gender on the part of one character, Noémie Nioche. Noémie is a young woman who passes her time by copying pictures in the Louvre. Newmann, the protagonist, buys a picture from her and the story of her relation to Newman constitutes the subplot of the novel. We can trace the relation between Newman and Noémie through an analysis of their three meetings in the Louvre. The very first scene is the one where Noémie sells a picture to Newman, the second scene is when they select further originals for Noemie to copy -- for further money --, and the last one is the one where Noemie gives up her project to paint and decides to become a prostitute instead. So let us see how she decides to sell her body instead of her pictures.

Fig. 1. Bartolomé Estoban Murillo (1618–82) Madonna.

The opening scene of the novel takes place in Paris, the salon Carre in the Louvre. Newman, the protagonist has just arrived from America and is intent on having a holiday. He wants to "live" a little after having earned a fortune back home. He is sitting in the salon Carre admiring Murillo's *Madonna* and also admiring a copyist who busies herself with reproducing Murillo's picture. Newman is admiring the copy by this young woman perhaps more than the original. He eventually decides to approach the woman and asks about the price of the painting. The copy itself is a tragically bad one, so the woman, Mmlle Noémie Nioche, is surprised to hear the offer. Nevertheless, she goes on painting, puts a rosy blotch to the Madonna's cheek, and asks for a ridiculously high price. Newman objects to the cheek being too red, but, not having an idea of the artistic merits or mistakes of the copy, he accepts to pay the ridiculous sum although he suspects he has agreed to pay too much for too little. The idea of pos-

sessing a copy of the Madonna excites him more than the actual quality of the copy.

The bargain exposes the gender positions both participants act out. Newman is intent on purchasing a copy by all means, but there are additional aspects of his deciding not to ask for a lower price. Firstly, the little copyist is actually very pretty and has acted out the process of painting as if it involved a performance especially for Newman who has been watching her for a while. But making the Madonna lively with the rosy blotch is too much for Newman. For him it is more impressive that Noémie is also shown as a shrewd businesswoman who is willing to squeeze the highest price out of him. This is an ability Newman himself can appreciate, as he is a clever businessman himself. So what is going on in the salon is not simply the purchase of a picture but also a way to express Newman's appreciation of Noémie's ability to handle a commercial situation. The scene is more about the art of business than about a business of art.

Fig. 2. Rafaello Santi/Giulio Romano. (1483–1546) Portrait de Jeanne d'Aragon.

The second scene in the Louvre is when Noemie and Newman select five further pictures for Noemie to copy. The girl tests Newman's intentions with her through his selection of the subjects of the paintings. What subject is Newman after? He wants both profane and sacred subjects, which is not telling for Noemie. Prompted by the lack of affirmation in Newman's selections, Noémie asks him directly if he considers her a bad girl. To this Newman reflects only to himself and notes mentally that this girl has never parted with her innocence: she simply never had it because she had been "looking at the world since she was ten years old, and he would have been a wise man who could have told her any secrets" (52). Instead of a direct answer, they go on discussing that Noémie's father had complained to Newman about Noémie. The father thinks Noemie is a *coquette,* which Newman does not believe to be true. When Newman refuses to select a small Italian painting, the *Marriage of Saint Catherine*, because the woman in it is not pretty enough, the girl asks him if he is a connoseur of pretty women, which he in turn denies. Instead, he opts for a Venetian portrait of a lady as large as life with golden hair, purple satin, a pearl necklace. Newman wants a copy which is the size of the original. The last picture to be copied is Rubens's *Marriage of Marie de Médicis* to top the list up. Noémie then breaks down and con-

Fig. 3. Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640) Marriage de Marie de Médicis.

fesses that it is beyond her ability to paint the six most difficult pictures in he Louvre. Newman makes clear that he only intends to provide her with a modest dowry because of his respect for her father, the impoverished Frenchman. To this Noemie replies she has no desire to marry on as little monye as the copies would bring and looks expectantly at Newman, who says he does not understand any of this and leaves the premises speedily.

What is to be made of this scene in terms of the performance of gender? Again, it is a scene of identification performed in front of and by the help of the pictures. Noémie pretends to discuss the pictures depicting marriage scenes while it is the possibility of her own marriage that is being erased. She seems to throw away a lot of money by confessing her inability to copy the pictures Newman ordered for 2000 Francs each, but together with the confession she has another, underlying plot that might yield at least the same amount of money. If Newman considers her a *coquette* and a "bad girl", he should act in accordance with that and if he cannot buy the bad copies, then he should buy Noémie herself. But Newman refuses to take the hint and flees. So in terms of gender identities acted out, against the backdrop of the marraige scenes, Noémie performs her willingness to sell her body instead of her copies, while Newman performs his lack of interest in purchasing her. Although Newman understands Noémie's intentions perfectly, he claims not to have understood her motivations at all.

The third and most conspicious scene of Noemie's performance is the last one in the Louvre, when Newman meets her in the company of Valentin Bellegarde, the brother of Newman's fiancée. Newman comes to inspect the state of the picture Noémie is painting for him, while Valentin happens to be around and inspects the woman instead of her copy. They find Noemie in the room of the Italian masters looking intently at two ladies of high fashion instead of actually copying. Valentin agrees with Noémie that she should not paint, and flatters her by saying she can probably do some things better than paint:

> "All I say is that I suspect there are some things that you can do better than paint," said Valentin.
> "I know the truth—I know the truth" Mademoiselle Noémie repeated. And, dipping the brush into a clot of red paint, she drew a great horizontal daub across her unfinished picture.
> "What is that?" asked Newman.
> Without answering, she drew another long crimson daub, in a vertical direction, down the middle of her canvas, and so, in a moment, completed the rough indication of a cross. "it is the sign of the truth," she said at last.
> "You spoiled your picture," said Newman.
> ... "I like it better that way than it was before," said Valentin. "Now it is more interesting. It tells a story. Is it for sale, Mademoiselle?"
> "Everything I have is for sale," said Mademoiselle Noémie. (133)

After this scene Valentin comments to Newman that Noémie has the material for a great adventuress, she is pretty enough for her purposes and she is intelligent, which is half of her charm.

In terms of gender identifications, the presence of a more willingly comprehensive male than Newman triggers Noémie's performance with the painting. She gives up making her bad copy and adds a detail of her own to her painting, as if a sign of her own presence. The rosy blotch of the first copy has transformed itself into a crimson cross that is now a definite marker of her intentions. Valentin is able to read this sign as one of many indicating her devillish talent for being an adventuress. Newman has only an inkling of what is going on, he makes note of Noémie's provocative manner, but sees nothing charming or mildly exciting in it. In other words, he retains his position to turn Noémie's offers down, but Valentin's presence enables Noémie to actually paint her mark on the canvas and thereby also mark her her willingness to produce a socially unacceptable but at least personally rewarding image and set of roles for herself.

The story of the three scenes constitutes a simple triangle of three characters. Newman, Noémie, and Valentin in *The American* can be described as the interpersonal space in which all three of them act out their gender identities in relation to each other. Noémie has been waiting for a rich man like Newman for years to make the most of her becoming a prostitute. Accordingly, she is trying to make Newman purchase her services rather than her copies, but she does not succeed in achieving this. The reason for the failure is Newman's unwillingness to react to her provocative speech acts. Newman is actually aware of Noémie's maneuvres but dislikes their purpose. To Valentin Newman says he is only interested in the case because he wants to see how Noémie's father handles the situation of his daughter, if immorality will be tolerated because of the flow of money it achieves. In other words, Newman seems to be interested in the case on an abstract or commercial plus a moral level only. However, the scenes in the Louvre indicate that he is practically unwilling or unable to perform the role of the active, virile male in the scenarios with Noémie. So in the first two scenes analyzed, it is only Newman's unwillingness to cooperate that prevents Noémie from performing more acts of identification. Indeed, when Valentin de Bellegarde appears to fill in the place of the other in Noémie's game, he fits the role of the active male perfectly and Noémie is free to paint the telling red blotches into her copy, blood red marks to indicate the truth, to indicate her decision to draw blood, to carry out her lucrative plan of becoming a first class harlot and cross out her existence as a copyist of madonnas: she begins to create her own life by selling her body which happens to be more marketable than her pictures.

III.

The quick glance at the scenes in the Louvre helped us to fathom the process of gender identification on Noemie's part. Still, Newman's reserve to perform in these scenes remains unexplained. If one considers Newman's other acts of gender identification, the reason may become clearer. Eric Haralson's article on *The American* characterizes the story as a 19th-century Freudian beating fantasy in which Newman is the little boy wishing to take the power of the father and is beaten in consequence. Newman plays the role of the vengeful male child who has to realize how little power he actually has over others. Haralson argues that this plot is an expression of James's awareness of the difference between the bachelor artist position and that of normative masculinity (Haralson 1992, 486). In another gendered reading of the novel Cheryl Torsney discusses homoerotic desire in the novel. She claims that homoerotic desire is played out within the very situations in which heterosexuality is ardently pursued. As an example, he analyzes Newman's gift to a fellow American traveller, Babcock, an ivory statuette of a monk, as a fetish, a vaccination against the desire of man, a sign of homosexual panic in the scenario of Newman intently looking for a wife (Torsney 1993, 173). So either as a beaten male child or as a repressed homosexual, Newman is interpreted as a male person unable to perform normative masculinity. His unwillingness to do so in his interaction with Noémie is another manifestation of this lack in him.

In sum, the little test of interposing iconography and gender aspects for an analysis of *The American* turned out to display one strand of the gender issue that fits in with other gendered readings of the novel: Noémie's story of liberation as complemented by Newman's story of repression. However, it remains to be noted that it would have been possible and perhaps even fruitful to interpose either iconography or gender or both with the role of the French cultural context in the novel. We should not forget that when Newman refuses to act out the part of the active male, he also fails to recognize that the patron of the art role he plays with Noémie is

already culturally coded in France: in the given situation, it has little else to indicate but his interest in the copyist-woman and not in the paintings. In that sense, Newman's acts are performing his gender identity in an ambiguous way for a French(wo)man. This indicates his general ignorance of the social-cultural context of Europe, and also his unwillingness to understand, too. So perhaps it is just to say that his unwillingness to act out normative masculinity is part of his unwillingness to act out a European contextualized social performance required of him in the main plot of the novel where Newman's marriage is prevented exactly by his cultural ignorance and unwillingness to conform socially.

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