

The Representation of Nature in Henry James's *The Europeans*

Christine Raguet-Bouvard, University of Bordeaux III

In terms of the representation of nature, *The Europeans* (1878)¹ has a unique status among the works of Henry James since it is the only novel in which New England's natural environment is so extensively pictured. Nature is not central to the factual development of the novel—its plot, quite awkwardly romantic, might have paralyzed the dynamics of composition—however, once the objectives have been established, space remains free for artistic embellishment. The reader is faced with a series of static pictures in a typified setting—almost a caricature of New England as seen by two Europeans.

The complete title of the novel is: *The Europeans: A Sketch*—and the word "sketch" situates the novel on a dual artistic plane since it may apply to both writing and painting; as though Henry James had meant to endow his page with a supplementary function in case the original would not have satisfied all the artistic requirements. On top of that, one of the two protagonists is himself a painter and his professional occupation is disclosed in a succession of touches, taking different forms throughout the novel, as if the reader were observing the artist at work until he has completed his sketch.

Henry James prepares his sketch for William Dean Howells and *The Atlantic Monthly*, the writing paper is his surface, but his evocation extends beyond the limits of the page to cover canvas too, as can be guessed from a letter to Howells: "It would be meant, roughly speaking, as the picture of the conversion of a dusky, dreary domestic circle to epicureanism. . . . The merit would be in the amount of color I should be able to infuse into it."² The textual surface is thus treated like canvas: landscapes, street scenes, or garden scenes alternate with theatrical living scenes so as to have the reader become the visitor of a museum and the spectator of a play. On the occasion he is invited to observe several aesthetic and picturesque facets of a decor suddenly animated with life during those scenes. So the contact is both visual and absolutely static: the observer is invited to follow the proceedings without being requested to participate in any evolutive movement.

As a matter of fact, from the early pages of the novel, the reader has the impression of entering a picture gallery where first-rate and second-rate masters are perhaps indifferently hung on the walls; he has to discover and appreciate a collection of paintings and the plot is not the main interest. What

¹ Henry James, *The Europeans* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971). All references are to this edition, and will appear in the text.

² Letter dated 30th March 1877 to W. D. Howells in *Henry James: Selected Letters*, ed. Leon Edel (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967) 44.

counts is the work of art we are beholding. Therefore the novel is built around the notion of artistry: both in the artist himself and the work in progress—his sensitivity as well as his activity are at the core of the novel—the writer reflecting the image of his own creative activity: ". . . the whole affair is very amusing. I must make a sketch of it (9)," declares Felix, the hero-painter of the novel.

At first sight, the text seems to offer the eye a series of picturesque images meant to arouse the reader's curiosity. Moreover, reality is not at stake in the descriptions of the environment because there is no such thing as an "objective perception of nature." Here, nature is not natural, but reproduced by, and filtered through, the artistic conscience of its "re-creator." Consequently it is presented in picturesque terms—namely with pictorial devices.

The novel opens on an urban landscape and the reader is immediately in the position of observer. His eye is carried over every minute detail, which helps him make out the events taking place around. Curiously enough the scope never widens, because it is physically impossible, for the human visual field is limited. Therefore the beholder passes from one striking feature to another. Here is an approach mirroring both the attitude of the spectator and of the artist—the onlooker would be struck by particulars first, and then step back in order to have a larger view of the picture, just as the painter would polish up special points as necessary elements of a whole. Contrary to what is usually admitted, he works from the particular to the general. This urban landscape is discovered line after line as Felix, the painter, is seen drawing it: ". . . in front of the fire, at a table, sat a young man who was busily plying a pencil. He had a number of sheets of paper, cut into small equal squares, and was apparently covering them with pictorial designs—strange-looking figures." (5). At this stage, the figures are still "strange-looking" because they have not been properly visualized yet. They have not been specified, the surroundings have only been very partially described, and we do not know what they represent. The reader is induced to activate his artistic sensitivity in order to appreciate the text not only for its plot, or for the psychological portraits of his characters, or as the study of the conflict between two cultures, but also in visual terms through Felix's eyes. Most descriptions are introduced with technical words and either seen within a frame—when the picture is already completed—or disclosed in the act of being painted: ". . . there was a great flaming, flickering, trickling sunset. Felix sat in his painting-room and did some work . . . as the light . . . began to fade, he laid down his brushes. . . . Presently, as the sunset expanded and deepened, the fancy took him of making a note of so magnificent a piece of coloring. He returned to his studio and fetched out a small panel, with his palette and brushes, and, placing the panel against a window-sill, he began to daub with great gusto" (134-35).

We are definitely taken into the world of arts, in which we cannot view nature as it is, but as it is depicted, with shapes, colors, composition imposed upon us. The artist's fancy is at work, and the reader's attention is awakened to the world of art and artists. These Jamesian evocations prompt cultural associations. Several schools of painting are referred to—both American and European—depending on the idea and ideals they are intended to convey for the author. Specific roles are distributed: there are American artists, there are

European artists and there are visitors in the "museum world"³ of *The Europeans*.

The American School is present in diverse forms and various artists: the folk artist style is resorted to in order to evoke a distant heritage. Traditional American iconography, local color or history are seen with European eyes, which might distort reality but enhance commonplace perception. The image of America is reflected in the characters' hearts and imaginations: it is always banal and hackneyed and very "decorative" in so far as it brings an exotic touch to the place. A good example is to be found in Eugenia's mental image of her American garden: "An old negress in a yellow turban. . . . I want to look out of my window and see her sitting there on the grass, against the background of those crooked, dusty little apple trees, pulling the husks off a lapful of Indian Corn. That will be local color, you know." (57) The character and the details she attributes to her environment have no other function but a decorative one; the whole picture looks like one of the lithographs printed and sold by print dealers like Currier and Ives, or like the illustrations in magazines for women.

The landscapist is another representative of the American school. He fascinates for his vast and imposing scenes, his glaring sunsets or subdued undertones in bushy and wild woodland, or for his raging waters that only bold and brave and determined men can face. The ordinary urban man must be satisfied with the vicarious experience of a glorious representation on canvas, usually of imposing dimensions. It is exactly the feeling one experiences when faced with landscapes belonging to that category in *The Europeans*: "There was something in these glorious deeps of fire that quickened his imagination; he always found images and promises in the western sky" (135).

Felix, the painter, must have dipped his brush into the ruddy oils of cheap romanticism to paint his sunsets. They recall Frederick Church's skies,⁴ certainly a good technician, but perhaps not the type of artist Henry James would have liked to be: ". . . if we were able to handle a brush, we should not use it, in some places . . . exactly as Mr. Church does; but his own brush is an extremely accomplished one, and we should be poorly set to work to quarrel with the very numerous persons who admire its brilliant feats." His pictures correspond to a rather common and conventional trend at the time, yet what they lack is refinement, and belong to "the kind of art which seems perpetually skirting the edge of something worse than itself, like a woman with a taste for florid ornaments who should dress herself in a way to make quiet people stare . . ."⁵

Felix's works are certainly derided here, yet his being aware of his own limits—he keeps repeating he is an amateur—prevents him from becoming a pedantic and conceited character. His simplicity makes him all the more ac-

³ See Adeline R. Tintner, *The Museum World of Henry James* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1986).

⁴ As in the famous picture exhibited in the Museum of Art of Cleveland, Ohio, entitled *Twilight in the Wilderness*, 1860.

⁵ Henry James, "On Some Pictures Lately Exhibited," *The Galaxy* July 1875, in *The Painter's Eye: Notes and Essays on the Pictorial Arts*, ed. John L. Sweeney (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1956) 102.

ceptable as an inferior but mercantile artist. Neither nature nor Art are his main concerns.

Altogether these American attempts at rendering the beauties of nature give rather awkward results which are reflected in the hero's treatment of his surroundings—hence his being unadapted to Europe and European manners but his possibly adjusting to the American way.

Generally speaking all allusions to America are read in images of the American School, whereas hints at Europe refer to European artists. A happy transition is operated when Robert Acton, the American, and Eugenia, the European, are leisurely strolling in a rustic setting recalling Thomas Cole's works,⁶ with a brook nearby, mountains in the background and a tree trunk in the foreground, while Mrs Münster is talking about her life in the German Principality where she comes from, and her descriptions of the gothic landscape (79-80) would make the reader think of Caspar David Friedrich.⁷ In America, nature is still Edenic because wild and under divine control whereas in Europe, the hand of man is responsible for what spirituality there may be.

Contrary to what might have been expected, pastoral America has to pass via European culture to recover her Arcadian origins, even if Peloponnesian or Canaanite,⁸ shepherds are metaphorically present in the New England landscape: ". . . it was a return to nature; it was like drinking new milk, and she was very fond of new milk" (51). Eugenia seems to have reached Canaan, yet most of the idyllic descriptions of nature are certainly less biblical than pictorial. More often than not, the reader is offered a scene inspired from Watteau: young couples converse happily along wooded alleys on a hillside near a lake. In one particular passage the impulse is given by the two European characters: Felix is trying to lead his three friends into an amorous adventure and Eugenia flirts with young Clifford.⁹ Not only is pleasure suggested in James's as in Watteau's work, but also the overall ambiguity and ephemereal quality of love. Love is lurking in the woods like death. Nature may be idyllic but not necessarily generous or protective. The wild and turbulent nature of the American masters was safer than this pleasurable European landscape foreboding the fall and the appearance of death. James is warning his reader; yet as far as Art is concerned he knows where his preference lies: "Watteau, surely the sweetest French genius who ever handled a brush. . . . the more you see him, the more you like him . . . he is always spontaneous . . . His clear good faith marks the infinite distance, in art, between the light and the trivial; for the light is but a

⁶ Note the famous picture by Thomas Cole, a painter of the Hudson River School, exhibited in the Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, entitled *Landscape with Tree Trunks*, 1827.

⁷ Romantic German painter, 1774-1840, of the grandiloquent school, he developed a style founded on gothic elements and a sense of the sublime.

⁸ Strictly speaking, the book of Exodus is more "Oriental" than Western or European. What is considered here, is the artistic treatment (the Classical and 18th-century schools of painting) of the subject which developed in Europe.

⁹ The above description evokes *Le pèlerinage à l'isle de Cythère* by Antoine Watteau, in Paris: Le Louvre, 1717.

branch of the serious. Watteau's hand is serious in spite of its lightness, and firm with all its grace."¹⁰

This return to Classical Arcadia appeals to Felix, the painter, and his creator, because in America they discover the ideal environment of yesteryear. In the allusion to eighteenth-century libertines, the rake and the adventuress are not the heroes nor are excesses praised, but in nineteenth-century America a moral lesson is drawn: through artistic creation why not try and recover lost happiness in a happy harmony with nature, because "A work of art is an abstract or epitome of the world. It is the result or expression of nature, in miniature."¹¹ Among his contemporaries, Henry James is one of the first to appreciate the art of Antoine Watteau whom he may have interpreted in Emersonian terms in his relation to nature. "The poet, the painter, the sculptor, the musician, the architect," like James himself, "seek each to concentrate this radiance of the world on one point, and each in his several work to satisfy the love of beauty which stimulates him to produce."¹² Thus Henry James's conception of "beauty" is exemplified in the pages of the novel suggestive of Watteau's *Le pèlerinage à l'isle de Cythère*.¹³

Altogether, the novel is not influenced by one style or one school of painting. Pictorial arts are used to represent under the best possible brush such or such situation, as if Henry James, like the amateur painter of his novel, were trying his hand at different techniques in order to propose a wider range of images according to his needs.

Indeed this device is a pretext to dwell on the perceptive and creative acts. Is not the title ambiguous in itself? *The Europeans: A Sketch*, alludes to two separate artistic fields—painting and writing—and also to the superfluity and incompleteness of the creation, opening vistas for the perceptive mind: the hero's, the creator's and the reader's.

The hero is undoubtedly a painter, but he is an "amateur"; never has he managed to secure a personal style. Besides, James himself, after having plied the brush under the guidance of William Morris Hunt, renounced becoming a painter and began working as an art critic. In 1878, he was still under the influence of the masterpieces of his youth, was still undecided about the Impressionists and much impressed by the Pre-Raphaelites, who were, most of them, both painters and writers.

Thus the creator is in a very precarious situation when he is not a well-known and well-formed artist. And this novel may reflect James's personal doubts as to his art. Yet the eye the creator casts on his surroundings is essential and uncommon: once he has perceived he becomes responsible for ren-

¹⁰ Henry James, *The Painter's Eye* 76.

¹¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Selected Writings* (New York: Signet, 1965) 196.

¹² Emerson 196.

¹³ Here a reference to Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay on "Nature" cannot be omitted: "Thus in art, does nature work through the will of a man filled with the beauty of her first works" (196). In his chapter on "Beauty," James's views on the relationship between art and nature—at this point of his creative career—are close to Emerson's.

dering what is seen. A good hand without a good eye would be useless, and vice-versa. But what is a good eye? An eye that helps the mind transpose in artistic terms what is beheld: "Describe them. Give me a picture"(31).

Here the attention of the reader is drawn to the work of art, what is wanted is a special kind of picture, not the picture that would correspond to reality, but the most personal artistic representation of what is perceived. And this is a very modern approach to art and the role of perception. Obviously "vision" cannot be objective: the observer—who is the creative authority—"remarked that it was apparently a country in which the foreground was inferior to the plans reculés" (34); landscapes are put into perspective, with foregrounds and backgrounds, and appreciated accordingly. Our senses are responsible for bringing forth impressions and activating the imagination, thus emotions prompt a specific form of expression on the canvas. As a consequence, the painter provides an "interpretation" of reality which is imposed on the public; in the present case, his public is the reader. This is where painter and writer meet in *The Europeans*.

As a matter of fact, they meet very early in the novel. On the first page, as mentioned above, Felix is "busily plying the pencil" (5): he is sketching, or transferring on paper his own vision of things—but is he drawing or writing? The answer is not totally clear. He thus becomes a creator, even as he is a character in the novel we are reading, and the hero of a sentimental tale when he first appears before Gertrude who is reading *The Arabian Nights*.¹⁴ He acts and functions on several levels as if he were mobile on a narrative scale, assuming various roles and acting as a substitute for the creator to assume the part of "creating creator." The limits are so unsteady that the boundary between writing and painting is completely blurred and confused since what Felix says may be immediately translated into terms of writing or painting; all this is emphasized by the ambiguity of "sketch." There is a narrator who is never directly implied in the creative act; his role is that of a witness who would comment on facts, but who delegates the responsibility for creating to genuine artists, even though they are "amateurs." Consequently creator and writer remain apart, before all obstacles and difficulties. When Felix is introduced, he "might have passed for the undispirited young exile revisiting the haunts of his youth" (14). The comparison employed at the opening of the novel does not advance the plot, since it is Felix's first visit to America, so it must be of some other avail: it works on a self-reflexive level, inviting the reader to see the artist in the artist—that is, Henry James is training our eye.

The author's presence is already felt in the title, implying intimate involvement and aesthetic distance at the same time. At the personal level, there seems to be a desire to give a very specific shape to a fond theme, in a fond

¹⁴ A very interesting instance of "mise en abyme" is observed at this point of the novel as part of a complex development on reflexivity: the first time Gertrude sees Felix, she is reading *The Arabian Nights* and thinks he is the Prince Camaralzaman and she, the Princess Badura. Thus he becomes the hero of a sentimental tale, the part he is given in James's novel. Furthermore, he is an artist painting a series of portraits and landscapes while Henry James is portraying his characters in their setting. We cannot but insist on the implicit modernity of the device, still a very uncommon phenomenon at this time.

manner, as if to stave off the old memories of his failure as a painter when a youth, with the oppressive feeling of having been excluded from some holy industry when he realized that he "had somehow come into the temple by the back door," and that "*the porte d'honneur* opened on the other side."¹⁵ The connection between the author's experience and what his character lives illuminates one's reading of the whole novel because the images of nature offered to us are James's "interpretation" of the memories of the America of his youth.

¹⁵ Henry James, *A Small Boy and Others, Notes of a Son and Brother, The Middle Years*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983) 285.