Jamesian Impressions of the Cities

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A writer's narrative style is about the way in which he or she comes to handle a subject—it can be a theme, a character, or a place, etc.. When someone tries to define Henry James's writing style, for instance, he or she is amazed by the sense of richness in Jamesian styles, because of the writer's own life experience and life style. Travelling around different cities and going to art galleries and museums certainly construct James's unique way of seeing. In this article, the author wants to focus on Jamesian ways of seeing the relation between art and writing. Treating novel as a form of fine arts, the author would suggest, James uses techniques of painting and photography in the writing about the impressions of the cities.

Keywords: Henry James, impression, Paris, London, New York

Introduction

William James, in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), proposes his understanding of the process of seeing, focusing on the way which human consciousness interacts with the external world, in order to see “what the world means to us” (Wilshire, 1968, p. 9). Human consciousness is the nexus of William James's metaphysical interpretation of subject-object dualism, because it does not appear to itself chopped up in bits. Such words as “chain” or “train” do not describe it fitly as it presents itself in the first instance. It is nothing joined; it flows. A “river” or a “stream” is the metaphor by which it is most naturally described. In talking of it hereafter, let us call it the stream of thought, of consciousness, or of subjective life (James, 1981, p. 233).

The subject perceives the external world by making sense of the visual objects—what one sees. Using the word “stream” as a metaphor of depicting how human consciousness works to produce impressions, William James's claim actually comes to reveal the significant relation between vision and mind through the process of seeing, in a way which visual objects are internalised as impressions via vision and consciousness. In Henry James's novels, the reader can see the way in which impressions are formed through the stream of subject-object dualism.

Paris

Henry James's writing style is personal and experimental, as the French impressionist painters do in their paintings. The French impressionists, as James claims in his essay “The Impressionists” (1876), collectively represent a new artistic way of seeing the external world. The French impressionists are not interested in

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portraying the exact look of visual objects. Instead of painting what the external world looks like, the impressionists would paint their own unique impressions of what they see. The impression would be taken as the truth, showing the artist's vision and design in a work of art. Henry James himself, as a literary artist and art critic, sees the aesthetics of French impressionism as a process of conscious "arrangement, embellishment, selection" (James, 1989, p. 114). Similar to an impressionist approach, the author would suggest, in *The Ambassadors* (1994), the act of seeing people, things and places reveals a particular Jamesian strategy of knowing the truth, instead of searching for meanings only through the surface of things and visual objects.

Jamesian artistic vision is expressed through "the stream of thought", which serves as an "account of a process" of seeing (James, 1994, p. 4). The novel *The Ambassadors* itself is an impression of an anecdote of a friend, whose name is Jonathan Sturges (Matthiessen, 1946, p. 15). Through writing, the city of Paris comes to unlock Strether's process of observation. Eventually, Strether's way of seeing Paris reveals his impression of the city, which comes to form the significance of Jamesian narrative style.

A writer's style can be read as a textual pleasure of his or her own. The reader can recognise this style while reading, as if seeing the "signature" (Donoghue, 1995, p. 228) of the writer. A writer's narrative style also indicates "the conscientiousness with which he works" (Donoghue, 1995, p. 228). Seeing literature as an artistic form, James depicts Strether's stream of feeling, thought and memory in an objective way. In order to achieve "objectivity" (Wellek, 1958, p. 309), James uses an objective point of view—the narrator's own—to depict truth in his fictional world. To define the term "stream of consciousness", Baldick (2008) points out that "Marcel Proust's novel *A la recherche du temps perdu* (1913-27)" is one of the best examples for this writing technique, presenting "the connection between sense-impressions and memory" (p. 318) directly from the first person's point of view. Jamesian style at this point is a perfect first person narration, given by the narrator "I", observing and depicting Strether's process of seeing.

The picturesque view of the French countryside is significant, including a boat which contains "a man who held the paddles and a lady, [...], with a pink parasol" (James, 1994, p. 309). James's literary image depicts two human figures in the boat, referring to an Impressionist expression of leisure, as John Singer Sargent's lady, Violet Sargent, and her parasol in *A Morning Walk* (1888, as cited in Adelson, 1997, p. 22). The brightness of the sunlight seems to be Sargent's "salute to Monet" and his *Woman with Umbrella* (1886, as cited in Adelson, 1997, p. 22). Strether, bathing in the sunlight, comes to achieve his ultimate vision of the truth—an impression of Madame de Vionnet.

London

James's narrative point of view is personal and significant. It is a powerful way to show perceptions of a character, in which the external world is observed by the viewing subject. James's aesthetics of objective point of view helps to examine human psychology in details, as in an experimental process of seeking "an impossible perfection" (Wharton, 1925, p. 90), as in his novel *The Golden Bowl* (1903). The obsession of a perfect portrayal of human consciousness, according to Fredric Jameson, is the very reason why Henry James is not "a minor nineteenth-century man of letters" (Jameson, 1981, p. 222). Using the British Museum and the Bloomsbury area, James's London in *The Golden Bowl*, again, like his Paris in *The Ambassadors*, becomes a place where secrets and hidden motives hide underneath artistic appearances. The "crack" (James, 1903, p. 429) of the gilded bowl

was seen. The crack was mentioned by Maggie in a dialogue. Ignoring the reader's impatience, there are always more to be said, before one reaches the essential point of James's novel.

The city of London fulfils the "suggestiveness" (Woolf, 1986, p. 23) of the feeling of Maggie, which is externalised as "the impression betrayed by her companion's eyes" (James, 1983, p. 429). Maggie's feeling is depicted in detail, but indirectly. The city of London reinforces the scene of Maggie's process of seeing in a dramatic way, in which the novel takes its "dramatic step" (James, 1983, p. xlvi). Maggie's walk on the London streets is "an independent ramble, impressed, excited, contented, with nothing to mind and nobody to talk to [...]" (James, 1983, p. 412). The Bloomsbury area is a place where "funny little fascinating" shops—such as "an old bookseller's, an old printmonger's, a couple of places with dim antiquities in the window"—all these, in James's writing, give the reader an "optical echoes" (Grossman, 1994, p. 321) of the world of objects in which photographic realism emerges, indicating Maggie's "unexpected finds" (James, 1983, p. 412) would happen soon. James's power of description certainly is in the hidden visual significance of the city.

Through depicting London, James's verbal art also comes to represent the mood of an era. Taking *The Awkward Age* as an example, in Book 1, "Lady Julia", the reader can see that Vanderbank and Mr Longdon have a nostalgic moment in a rainy and stormy London day. Through "the pleasant, ruddy room" (James, 1999, p. 2), the afternoon light leaves an impression in the room. Vanderbank observes Mr. Longdon, having an impression that "he had somehow an effect" (James, 1999, p. 3) of his 30 years of living in London. For Mr. Longdon, Van is young, representing the new generation of the London society. The framed photograph in the room is a gift from Little Nanda, indicating friendship between herself and Mr. Longdon.

Vanderbank the young man would not believe in friendship in London. The city, for him, is like "a huge 'squash', [...]—an elbowing, pushing, perspiring, chattering mob" (James, 1999, p. 13). For John Kimmey, James's London "was becoming a mad world, 'a huge squash', without delicacy, discrimination, or a sense of privacy" (Kimmey, 1991, p. 114). In this respect, Nanda's photo seems to preserve a sense of innocence, as the person in the image makes the reader visualise the generation gap between Mr. Longdon and Van, which is a 30-year "process of change and decay" (Hall, 1963, p. 35). James's London indicates a dialectical tone of writing, in a way which the traditional light of realism and the sophisticated and dynamic modern light are synthesised. Looking at the photograph, Mr Longdon's vision comes to reveal the city's nostalgic past, which is so untouchable as his tears and his "emotions of grief" (Kimmey, 1991, p. 143).

New York

James's New York city contains a strong sense of discontent. In one of his New York stories, "The Impressions of a Cousin", the narrator's journal is full of detailed descriptions, revealing what the narrator "I" think and how "I" feel in the city. The narrator comes to New York for seeing the family members, although the narrator thinks that the city itself is "nothing to sketch" (James, 2006, p. 383). Underneath the appearance of the "too hideous" cityscape, "the narrow, impersonal houses, with the dry, hard tone of their brown-stone, a surface as uninteresting as that of sandpaper [...]" (James, 2006, p. 383), the narrator Catherine Condit finds it is the best to write and to draw her own emotional status, which is constructed through her reactions toward people and things around her. James's realism in this short fiction does not quite fit into a standard definition of realism. The dull appearance of New York city, in James's writing, does not create "a lifelike illusion of some 'real' world

outside the text” (Baldick, 2008, p. 281). Catherine’s verbal sketch does show psychological realism in James’s own term, which expresses through a direct first person narrative form, representing Catherine’s personal impressions in a very sufficient way.

In Catherine’s journal, there is a verbal portrait of Eunice, which depicts a moment of Eunice’s smile. Her smile is highly suggestive, in a way which the narrator Catherine is very much confused. The meaning of her smile is very much unknown—is Eunice troubled by seeing what Mr. Caliph wants, through his brother Mr. Frank’s marriage proposal? How much does she know about her own situation? Catherine’s impression of Eunice, in “a very hot night” (James, 2006, p. 429), is as ambiguous as Eunice’s thought. In a “very hot night”, Eunice,

...was alone in her room, without a lamp; the windows were wide open, and the dusk was clarified by the light of the street. She sat there, among things vaguely visible, in a white wrapper, with her fair hair on her shoulders, and I could see her eyes move toward me when I asked her whether she knew that Mr Frank wished to marry her. I could see her smile, too, as she answered that she knew he thought he did, but also knew he didn’t. (James, 2006, p. 429)

Eunice says there is nothing that Catherine can do, with “a laugh that was not like her usual laughter” (James, 2006, p. 430). She may not know exactly what Catherine knows—“Mr. Caliph is pushing his brother” (James, 2006, p. 430). Eunice’s situation is like the view outside of the window. There are hundreds of gas lights, standing there, looking exactly the same, “as ugly as a bad dream” (James, 2006, p. 430). Catherine’s gaze and impression reveal a typical “Jamesian moment” (Poole, 2006, p. 78) of knowing.

Conclusion

There is no ultimate version of truth. It depends on what one sees and how one expresses his or her own truth. There are many different versions of truth, depending on not only one’s own perspectives, but also the social context which one is situated in. As Maupassant once stated, “to believe in reality” is actually a very “childish” thing, as “[o]ur eyes, our ears, our sense of smell, of taste, differing from one person to another, create as many truths as there are men upon earth” (James, 1948, p. 72). Psychological realism is a style, in which James is able to depict the mood of his own particular age. As an American travelled and lived through different European cities, the significance of Henry James’s style, the author would suggest, is its difficulty to be understood by the reader, with the international literary theme. Comparing Rome to New York, Catherine finds New York is not very much likeable. As Tóibín (2009) once pointed out, the city of New York represents “a mixture of a remembered Eden and a failed style” (p. 248). In James’s writings, the reader can sense his preference of European cities. The charm of European cities stimulates James’s passion for art and life, as in the garden party of Sunday afternoon, in 1895, in McNeill Whistler’s old house, James “reads into the Howells figure the pith and precision of his character’s emotion” (Hocks, 1997, p. 43). Strether, in Paris, comes to realise that he “has accordingly missed too much” (James, 1994, p. 1). Paris and London have their own charm, because they are both old enough to arouse deep emotions and thoughts about art and life. James’s narrative style does have a personal aim. The purpose of writing, for James, is to explore life through different places, in order to make “the art, for if a picture a tale, or a novel be a direct impression of life” (James, 1948, p. 71). Henry James, in this respect, is not merely a novelist. He is, ultimately, an artist.

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