

 **Marta Goszczyńska**

University of Lodz

Monet at a Glance: A Dynamic, Ekphrastic Encounter in Michèle Roberts's "On the Beach at Trouville"

ABSTRACT

The essay analyzes Michèle Roberts's 2012 story "On the Beach at Trouville" as an ekphrasis of Claude Monet's early Impressionist painting, *The Beach at Trouville*. It first approaches the narrative through W. J. T. Mitchell's model in which ekphrasis is understood as staging "a war of signs," only to conclude that the dynamics between the painting and the story is too complex to be satisfactorily explained in these terms. As a result, the essay moves on to read the story as an "ekphrastic encounter" and uses Norman Bryson's concept of the glance to account for what happens between Roberts's text and Monet's image. Bryson discusses the glance in opposition to the totalizing, immobile and disembodied gaze and understands it both as a way of looking and painting. The essay reveals how the glance can be used to explain important dimensions of Roberts's ekphrastic project: its depiction of Monet's picture as a semiotic system of arbitrary signs, its emphasis on the durational, performative aspect of painting, its insistence on the contingent nature of interpretation, and, finally, its attempts to mimic Monet's Impressionist style. All these features, the essay argues, allow Roberts to transform her story into a dynamic scene of intermedial dialogue where word and image enter a relation of what Stephen Scobie describes as "reciprocal supplementarity."

Keywords: ekphrasis, Michèle Roberts, Claude Monet, Impressionism, "the glance."

Monet's *The Beach at Trouville* (1870, National Gallery, London) is often cited as one of the most stunning examples of Impressionist *plein-air* painting (Gedo 102). The picture belongs to a series of breezy, memorable beach scenes completed by the artist in the summer of 1870 during a particularly productive sojourn at the fashionable seaside resort. The stay, which lasted about eight weeks and saw Monet complete as many as eleven paintings, was more than a holiday; it also doubled as a honeymoon after Monet's marriage, on 28 June, to Camille Doncieux, his model, mistress for the past five years, and the mother of his three-year-old son, Jean. In August, the newlyweds were joined by Monet's friend and mentor Eugène Boudin, and his wife. From then on, the two men often worked side by side, an experience which Boudin would remember with nostalgia till late in his life: "I can still see you with poor Camille in the Hotel Tivoli . . . I have even kept a drawing I made that shows you on the beach. Little Jean is playing in the sand and his papa is sitting on the ground, sketchbook in his hand" (qtd. in Gedo 102).

According to Mary Mathews Gedo, Monet's biographer and art critic, the Trouville paintings fall into two broad categories. Most are "representations of the beachfront promenade," which depict "fashionable vacationers strolling or seated on the beach" and the "elegant hotels that catered to them" (101). The second, smaller group are essentially "pictures of Camille at the water's edge" (101). What distinguishes the two groups is not merely the presence or absence of the figure of Monet's wife. The beachfront compositions are more finished and more realistic, their controlled execution indicating that "they may not have been completed in a single session" (102). The paintings presenting Camille, on the other hand, are more sketchlike, raw, unfinished. Executed with thick, bold brushstrokes that testify to the rapidity of their production, they resort to blurs and smudges when rendering details of clothing or facial expression, instead capturing nuances of light and shadow, sea and sand, and the ever-changing sky. They function in a manner akin to family snapshots, as informal recordings of fleeting private moments.

One of the best-known of these snapshots, *The Beach at Trouville*, depicts Camille Monet in the company of a black-clad female reader, whom some critics identify as Madame Boudin while others describe as a "nurse or older companion" (Nochlin 165). Monet's young son, Jean, is nowhere in the painting, his presence on the beach signalled only by "the deftly painted adumbration of little slippers drying on the empty chair" (Nochlin 165). For Linda Nochlin, the scene evokes the leisurely days of summer and the aura of chic sophistication that characterized Trouville and similar seaside resorts. She describes the beach as "the site of peaceful pleasures" and comments on "the tranquillity and sedateness of the

protagonist” (167). Other commentators, however, argue that the scene produces mixed feelings in the viewer: for all its light and breeziness, there is something threatening about it. Susannah Patton describes the scene as both “breezy” and “ominous” (102). Jonathan Jones sees it as depicting “a moment of joy” but draws attention to all the elements suggesting that the scene is “not quite right”: “the uncertain day, the patchy sky, [and] the almost empty beach” which provide the background for the two figures, whose faces he describes as “masks of paint.” And, indeed, clouds gathering on the horizon, grains of sand pockmarking the surface, shadows obscuring Camille’s face, and the funereal blackness of her companion’s dress all add up to produce a sense of uneasiness and disquiet. A number of art critics link the ambiguous atmosphere of the painting to feelings of insecurity and frustration that Monet was experiencing at the time of its creation. His two submissions for the 1870 Salon had been rejected. His financial situation was dire, and he could not expect much support from his family, who did not approve of his unconventional lifestyle. The death of his beloved aunt just nine days after his wedding, and the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian war around the time he took his family to Trouville did little to ease his mind. Eventually, leaving behind unpaid debts and the threat of conscription, he fled France and soon settled in London (Gedo 100–01).

Part of Michèle Roberts’s 2012 collection titled *Mud*, “On the Beach at Trouville” captures the ambivalent mood of Monet’s scene by re-imagining it as what Patricia Duncker summarizes as “a meeting of Pleasure and Death” (53). Like most of the pieces in the collection, the narrative engages in a sustained process of creative recycling whereby pre-existing sources are shaped into new stories and opened up to new readings. Some of these rewritings use characters borrowed from well-known literary texts (including *Beowulf*, *Tristan and Isolde*, *Jane Eyre*, *Madame Bovary* and *Nana*); others feature actual historical figures (such as George Sand, Alfred de Musset or Colette). All of them can be interpreted as instances of feminist re-vision as defined in Adrienne Rich’s 1979 seminal essay. These stories, as I have argued elsewhere, serve a political purpose as they set out “to subvert the myths, remedy the silences and expose the ideological biases of their source texts” (Goszczyńska 94). “On the Beach at Trouville” may be the most daring of these rewritings as it builds upon several different sources, the most important of which is a painting rather than a text. As a result, re-vision also involves here an act of “intersemiotic translation” (Jakobson 114), allowing Roberts to transpose Monet’s scene from the nonverbal sign system of painting into the verbal system of literature. Associating the female figures visible in the picture with Freudian drives (Duncker’s Pleasure and Death, or Eros and Thanatos), the author refuses

to read *The Beach at Trouville* along the lines suggested by art critics as a projection of the painter's troubled inner life (Gedo 109). Instead, she ascribes its ambiguous mood to the emotions of the two women. In an ekphrastic evocation that flies in the face of historical record, Roberts identifies Camille's companion as Thérèse Martin, soon to become an enclosed Carmelite nun better known as Thérèse of Lisieux or Thérèse of the Child Jesus, whom the Catholic church recognizes as a saint.¹ Although historical sources, most notably the nun's autobiography, testify to the fact that she did indeed visit Trouville on a number of occasions, the encounter that the author stages would have been impossible. In the story, Thérèse is fourteen whereas her historical counterpart was not even born till 1872, almost two and a half years after the Monets took their honeymoon and *The Beach at Trouville* was painted.

Inscribing Thérèse into her story, Roberts also places her inside Monet's painting, turning her into an element of what she herself defines as "a composition of light and darkness" ("Oh You Storyteller" 71). Within this composition, Camille and Thérèse constitute "separate ends of the monochromatic scale" (226),² clearly distinguishable not only through their contrasting appearances but also through their clashing philosophies of life. It is what happens between these two women that is really at stake in Roberts's story. As the essay will argue, Camille and Thérèse's meeting can be read not only as a confrontation between the forces of Eros and Thanatos but also as a meditation on what David Kennedy describes as "the idea of ekphrasis as an encounter" (22). Using Norman Bryson concept of the glance, I intend to show how Roberts transforms her story into a dynamic scene of intermedial dialogue where word and image enter a mutually enriching relationship.

¹ Interestingly, this is not the first time that Roberts has taken liberties with the biography of Saint Thérèse. In her sixth novel, *Daughters of the House* (1992), she has similarly woven details of the nun's life into a fictional narrative set against the backdrop of the First World War. On this earlier occasion, the events recorded in the biography have also been shifted in time (some seventy years into the future rather than sixteen into the past) and then distorted to fit Roberts's fictional project. In both of these narratives, Roberts has drawn upon the saint's autobiography, *Story of a Soul*, a one-time Catholic bestseller which Roberts has elsewhere described as "a text piling hysteria upon mysticism [which] would have fascinated Freud" (*Food, Sex and God* 195). Alongside Monet's painting and biographical accounts of his and Camille's life, the narrative functions as an intertext in the story, supplanting some of its imagery and providing the necessary biographical detail.

A forthcoming article by Silvia García Hernández, whose abstract (but not full text) is already available online, looks like a very promising exploration of the dynamics between Roberts's short story and Thérèse Martin's autobiography. As such, it should offer a welcome complement to the analysis presented in this essay.

² Unless indicated otherwise, all the references in this essay are made to Roberts's "On the Beach at Trouville."

For Jerzy Jarniewicz, ekphrasis typically begins with “an attempt to supplement visual works with what language has to offer” (26). This is clearly evident in Roberts’s story where the pictorial contrast between Camille, dressed in white, and the demure figure of her black-clad companion is extended into a verbal description of their clashing personalities. As a result, the story does not only recreate Monet’s picture by describing Camille’s clothes—the “layers of [white] muslin” she is wearing, her “creamy petticoats” and a hat “adorned with red, blue, purple anemones” (219)—or by referring to “the light worshipping her knees” (218–19). It also supplements these visual images with passages of interior monologue that no longer focus on what is externally visible and instead venture into Camille’s mind in order to give us an insight into her thoughts. These passages endow Monet’s wife with a passionate, voracious appetite for life, a quality she shares with a considerable number of Roberts’s female characters who see “sex and food . . . as legitimate pleasures” (Burgass 95) and are eager to experience the world through all their senses (Falcus 19). This is most evident in the scene in which Camille poses for her husband on the beach, and her thoughts are filled with plans for how she will spend the rest of her day. The images are vivid, detailed and sensuous: first, a lunch of *moules à la marinière*, “scented with wine, garlic, parsley and seawater,” whose “gleaming blue and black shells” she intends to “tear open . . . with her fingers” and enjoy along with a glass of “cold Muscadet,” then, back in their “shuttered room,” sex with Monet, presented in equally graphic detail, in a single sentence that goes on for seven lines and begins with the image of “a dazzle of white sheets” and concludes with that of “the long white lace curtains” (219). With her *joie de vivre*, Camille clearly connotes light, life and love, which is further underscored when she is described as “the young bride . . . [on] her honeymoon” (219) and her pregnancy is suggested through a comment on her “rounded stomach” (220), through a comparison Monet draws between her and “Piero della Francesca’s image of the pregnant Madonna, pointing at the slit of her gown, the swell of the baby dancing inside” (220), and Camille’s own memories of the religious scenes of Annunciation where “God sends his angel to announce to Mary he’s chosen her to become the baby’s mother” (218). If Camille represents the forces of Eros, Thérèse is clearly associated with Thanatos. Building, perhaps, on critical comments that describe the black-clad woman in Monet’s picture as a “dissonant note in the dynamic” of the painting (Brown 24), the story depicts the girl’s internal world as equally dark and gloomy. Thérèse’s mind is filled with thoughts of dead and absent mother figures: her mother who died of cancer, and her elder sisters who left the family home to enter the Lisieux convent. Despite her young age, Thérèse is deeply unhappy, but her misery is also self-inflicted. Guided

by one of her sisters, the girl prevents herself from enjoying the holiday through gestures of self-mortification. Like Blesilla in *Impossible Saints*, she embraces suffering and deprivation, accepting "the message that denial and transcendence of the body are the way to God," a message which, as Sarah Falcus argues, Roberts's texts strongly oppose (58).

Commenting on existing models of ekphrasis, critics point to the confrontational and gendered language that these models often employ. It is sufficient to quote two of the most influential theorists of the genre, W. J. T. Mitchell and James Heffernan, to understand what is meant. In *Iconology* (1986), Mitchell describes how the dynamics between literature and the visual arts is traditionally defined as "a war of signs" (47) and refers to Leonardo da Vinci's notion of the *paragone* (47) to account for our "compulsion to conceive of the relation between words and images in political terms, as a struggle for territory, a contest of rival ideologies" (43). Heffernan adds weight to Mitchell's observations by recognizing ekphrasis as having its source in an equally antagonistic impulse. He also draws attention to the gendered character of many ekphrastic encounters, which, in his own words, are frequently understood as "the expression of a duel between male and female gazes, the voice of male speech striving to control a female image that is both alluring and threatening, of male narrative striving to overcome the fixating impact of beauty poised in space" (1). The same line of thought underpins Mitchell's *Picture Theory* (1994), which includes his influential essay "Ekphrasis and the Other." Here, Mitchell considers "the treatment of the ekphrastic image as a female other" to be "commonplace" and points to the sexualized diction of much of ekphrastic poetry with its overtones of "pornographic language and masturbatory fantasy" (168). He also draws attention to the triangular character of the ekphrastic relationship where "the female image" that serves as "an object of visual pleasure and fascination" is described not only "from a masculine perspective" but "often to an audience understood to be masculine as well" (168).

At first glance (and the word is used deliberately here), Roberts's story might be interpreted as an example of such a paragonal contest, an attempt to speak over a silent image, to master it, to fill it with a desired meaning. The gender dynamics surely departs from the one outlined by Mitchell, but it could still be placed within the antagonistic model that stages ekphrasis as the battle of the sexes, the variation being that it is now the female writer who wrestles with the male painter as she attempts to appropriate his work. Certainly, in Roberts's version, the ambiguous emotions that Monet's picture evokes are not linked in any way to the painter's personal problems; instead, as the narrative grants insight into the minds of Monet's silent female figure, the ambivalent mood seems to

stem from their conflicting psychologies as, it needs to be added, they are imagined by the female author. This is important, because the two women in Roberts's story bear recognizable traits of other female characters we come across in her work, their clashing personalities bringing to mind, for instance, those of Leonie and Thérèse in *Daughters of the House*. The themes—absent mothers, the joys of food and sex, the traps of religion—also seem representative of Roberts's writing. Moreover, in order to infuse the narrative with these “personal” motifs, the writer takes considerable liberties with historical material. Not only does she introduce into the painting a historical figure who clearly should not be there, but she also rewrites Camille Monet's biography. By alluding to her pregnancy, the story ignores the fact that Camille and Monet's son, Jean, was three when the events of the story take place, and he was right there, on the beach, when the painting was executed. His small shoes can be seen drying on the empty chair between the two women, and he must be playing somewhere near, under his mother's watchful gaze, just outside the picture's frame (Brown 24). Even though, in contrast to literature, the visual arts are traditionally understood as spatial and atemporal (and thus incapable of “telling” a story), many commentators believe that paintings often try to overcome narrative limitations by selecting and representing what Lessing's *Laocoön* famously describes as “the pregnant moment”: “a single moment of an action . . . which best allows us to infer what has gone before and what follows” (qtd. in Gombrich 294).³ Art critics discern such an embryonic narrative impulse in Monet's picture, where the child's shoes and the mother's observant eyes hint at a larger story (Brown 24, Nochlin 165). The child, however, already absent from *The Beach at Trouville*, disappears completely in Roberts's story, and Camille, rather than keeping a watchful eye on him, is represented as a “daydreamer” (220), a figure “dissolved in her own reverie” (223). As a result, the “background narrative” (Brown 24) that Monet's painting seems to be hinting at is effectively erased and substituted with a new story, a story whose characters, themes and motifs clearly belong within the writer's *oeuvre*.

Rather than conclude that Roberts's ekphrastic story is simply an appropriation that is best read as another battle within the war of *paragone*, I wish to argue that this particular scenario does not really do justice to the dynamic intermedial encounter that is staged in Roberts's narrative. As shown by recent critical studies of ekphrasis, especially ones written by women and/or devoted to female authors, ekphrastic relations are

³ Stephen Scobie describes the “pregnant moment” as “a kind of synecdoche” where “the part is made to stand for the whole, the one isolated moment for the complete length of the story” (24).

often more complex than the paragonal model would allow (cf. Fisher 2–3, Loizeaux, Hedley 24, Kennedy 6–9). While many critics believe that Mitchell's and Heffernan's ideas have been useful in moving discussions of the relationship between word and image beyond the cheerfully utopian models of reciprocity as envisaged, for instance, in the tradition of viewing literature and painting as sister arts (Loizeaux 14), they insist that it would be equally unreasonable to expect that all ekphrastic responses can be subsumed under the heading of rivalry, competition and antagonism (just as, one is tempted to add, not all instances of literary indebtedness can be accounted for by referring to the equally confrontational and similarly gendered model of "anxiety of influence" envisioned by Harold Bloom). The motives behind ekphrasis can be varied and, consequently, as Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux has argued, we need "to broaden the range of relations we see at play in ekphrasis and to recognize the intertwined and various nature of the ekphrastic response" (16). In order to do so, we should create more flexible accounts of ekphrasis, embracing, as argued by David Kennedy, "the idea of ekphrasis as an encounter" (22) where image and word enter into a dynamic relation that is both contingent (6) and mutually transformative (32).

One such account, I believe, can be built around the concept of the glance to be found in Norman Bryson's *Vision and Painting* (1983) and developed in Mieke Bal's *Reading Rembrandt* (1991). Although I am wary of suggesting that the glance should provide a new master trope in the theory of ekphrasis or that it can successfully explain all sorts of ekphrastic relationships, it may provide a welcome alternative to the model based on the paragonal struggle. As I intend to show in the latter part of the essay, the concept can be applied productively to Roberts's story.

Bryson defines the glance in opposition to the gaze, whose emergence he links with Renaissance and post-Renaissance painting as premised on the idea of the "immobile eye" that encapsulates first Albertian and then post-Albertian rules of fixed-point perspective (102–12). As Bal explains further, the gaze is "the look that ahistoricizes and disembodies itself and objectifies" as it "takes hold of the contemplated object" (142). As an alternative to the gaze, Bryson proposes the glance, a way of seeing that he associates with Chinese landscape painting and characterizes as mobile, random, disorderly and potentially subversive. Bryson identifies the glance as a manner of looking, but also as a method of painting that encourages the viewer to "shift our perspective from the *image* . . . to the *painting*, to the carved sheet of pigment, to the stroke of the brush on canvas" (131). As a consequence of the shift, as Bal elucidates, the viewer is forced to recognize "that what one sees is a representation, not an objective reality, not the 'real thing'" (142).

From its opening scene, which pictures the moment when Thérèse comes across Camille and her husband on the beach, Roberts's story emphasizes the qualities of Monet's painting that Bryson associates with the glance. As the girl approaches the pair, the painting process is already under way, and the image on the canvas that she is confronted with resists the totalizing look of the gaze: the picture is "not whole," it does not tell "a coherent story," it "keeps breaking up into bits" (213). This quality is linked with the painter's way of perceiving the world as his look is referred to as a "slippery glance" and its mobility is underscored by describing how it "*travels* along Thérèse's bare arm" (214, emphasis mine). The energy of the glance, however, is reflected in the painting itself, which refuses to be reduced to an unproblematic mimetic representation by calling attention to its technique and form, to itself as what Murray Krieger describes as "a thing of pigment and canvas" (12). As a result, what Thérèse first notices is not a realistic image but "splashes of white" and "thick wide brushstrokes." The "white oil paint" surprises her with its physicality: she views it as "all material" and associates it with "paintflesh" (213). She understands the painting as a system of arbitrary signs to be interpreted where "a curling run of white denotes a frill" and "two white triangles suggest turned-down collar tips" (214). The choice of the verbs—"to refer to," "to denote," "to mean," "to suggest" (213–14)—marks the painting as a semiotic code akin to a language system. This effect is enhanced through other linguistic means. Looking at "a curving shape of whiteness, greyness, creaminess," Thérèse realizes that she "*can* call [it] the sky, the beach" just like "white smudges *can* denote a glove, a book" (213–14; emphases mine). Similarly, a blue, geometrical representation of a parasol makes her think: "A blue star?" (213). What the repeated use of the modal verb "can" and the question indicate is the possibility of different interpretations, suggesting that painting is not "an art of natural signs" (Krieger 9) and that its meaning cannot be conceived of as fixed and stable. On the contrary, it is fluid, contingent, to be actively constructed in an interaction between the painting and the viewer.

Bryson begins his discussion of the glance by drawing attention to "the disavowal of deictic reference" on which, he argues, "Western painting [of the gaze] is predicated" (89). What he means by this is the tendency in European visual art to erase the circumstances of its production in such a way that "the viewer can no longer work out by what route the image on canvas has been reached" (94). As a result, painting is not understood as a process in time nor as a practice of the body but treated as if it existed "outside the mobility of duration, in an eternal moment of disclosed presence" (94). It is this propensity to suppress deixis that allows Western paintings to create the effect of being "frozen in time," placing them in

"a transcendent temporality of the Gaze" (93). What the glance does is to destabilize the fixed, immobile image by restoring deixis and thus emphasizing not only the durational temporality of both painting and viewing but also the dimension of painting as a "physical practice" (94). As Bryson explains, the glance "does not seek to bracket out the process of viewing, nor in its own technique does it exclude the traces of the body of labour" (94).

Roberts's story abounds in deictic reference. Its very title, "On the Beach at Trouville," is one such expression, placing the narrative within a specific, recognizable location. Ekphrastic passages that are scattered through the story also contain repeated references to elapsing time, creating a sense of Monet's work as a sequence of activities that begin around "mid-morning" (224) and culminate some time after "midday" (220). Through such comments, the story emphasizes the origin of the painting in a process and as a process. As we see Monet dabbing paint onto the canvas, wiping his brushes, cursing, steadying the easel and attempting to shield the picture from sand and wind (222), the story foregrounds the performative aspect of painting and celebrates the glance, reconnecting the artwork to the body of its painter and placing its origin within a spatial and temporal context. By referring to wind that "hurls itself inland" and "scoops up sand" (214), the story also accounts for the presence of sand in the texture of Monet's painting, calling attention to its *plein-air* aspect.

If painting is depicted as an active process, so is perception. In Roberts's story, Monet's picture is not observed in the anonymous context of a museum nor from the perspective of a disembodied third-person narrator. Most of the ekphrastic passages are embedded in interior monologues of its three principal characters as they observe each other, and the process through which the painting comes into being. What matters for the reading of the narrative as a dramatization of the glance is that the impressions which these characters have in connection with the scene (depicted in the painting and narrativized in the story) vary—not only from one character to another but also in time. At some point in the text, for instance, Monet sees Camille and Thérèse as "sitting together as calmly as old friends," resting in each other's presence, as "the light knots them together in a white net of secret thoughts" (223). These words suggest a sense of bonding and intimacy between the two women, which Camille clearly feels as she invites Thérèse to lunch (223). A moment later, however, the sky darkens, clouds gather over the horizon, and the woman experiences a change of heart. As Thérèse blurts out her refusal, Camille suddenly finds her presence "threatening" and compares her to "a black tide flooding in" (224). For Bryson, "vision as it unfolds before the participants in the scene is the corporeal, spasmodic vibrancy of flux"

(95), and, in Roberts's text, viewing, like painting, is a dynamic process, and since it depends on the operations of the glance, it is fickle, contingent and subject to change.

An interesting aspect of "On the Beach at Trouville" is its capacity to highlight the restless energy of the glance by imitating the techniques observed in Monet's painting. As a consequence, Thérèse's early designation of the painting as incoherent and "breaking up into bits" (213) can be read as metafictional and applied to the story itself. Bryson associates the glance with "dispersal" (122), and its operations can be detected in the fragmentary narrative, which disintegrates into seven distinct, individually titled sections. Even though these "vignettes" are placed in a near-perfect alphabetical arrangement ("Abstract," "Autobiography," "Annunciation," "Blue," "Clouds," "Darkness" and "Dreams"), the sense of order they create is illusory as the material they contain fails to offer a coherent story. On the contrary, as we move from one to another, chronology and linearity are repeatedly disrupted, and we come across events that are shuffled out of order. This effect of narrative dispersal is enhanced further through the use of focalization: the sections abound in long passages of interior monologue, coming from all three characters, in which their impressions of the present, memories of the past and plans for the future are all fused together. Since these are also combined with comments from the heterodiegetic narrator, certain fragments of the text cannot easily be attributed to a specific point of view or a particular moment in time. To give just one example, at the end of the opening section, Thérèse is shown as leaving the Monets even as they urge her to stay (214). Several pages on, however, she is shown sitting next to Camille. It is never made clear how these two scenes belong together. Should we conclude that Thérèse returns to the Monets? Or does the scene of her departure actually constitute the ending of the story, with all the events that are described later to be understood as an instance of analepsis? Or are they, perhaps, taken from two alternative narratives that are never meant to cohere?

The painterly style is also reproduced in the story in several other ways. Most crucially, perhaps, this is achieved by combining the slim, almost flimsy, narrative with abundant visual descriptions, introduced not only in frequent, extensive ekphrastic passages but also in lengthy stretches of interior monologue, which also abound in visual detail that renders nuances of colour, texture, and the effects of light and shade. Some of these passages are quite static as in the opening section where no active "main" verb is used: "White shapes. Splashes of white in the foreground, thick wide brushstrokes of white oil paint. A shape of white put into the world, a shape that wasn't there before" (213). In other passages, however,

verbs seem to take centre stage as the language tries to imitate the quick, hasty brushstrokes of Impressionism as it renders the visual detail:

On the beach the sky whips with white and grey clouds. Wind races off the sea, buffets Monet as he paints rapidly. The skirts of his jacket flap. Sand whirls around his easel. Its legs rock. He curses, puts out a hand. Stabs his brush in blue, dances it onto the canvas. Dabs darker blue on the parasol rim and ribs, Camille's cuffs, a couple of folds on her dress. (222)

The use of short sentences, the dominance of monosyllabic words, the elision of the conjunction "and" in coordinate clauses ("He curses, puts out a hand"), the absence of subordinate clauses, and the dropping of the subject pronoun "he" ("Stabs . . ." and then "Dabs . . ."), and the presence of strong, kinetic, almost aggressive, verbs (in particular, "to whip" and "to stab") creates the effect of rapidity that characterizes *plein-air* painting. The sense of rhythmic, dynamic activity is also rendered through syntactic repetitions and reinforced through patterns of alliteration ("whips with white," "brush in blue," "rim and ribs," "Camille's cuffs"), assonance ("cuffs" and "a couple," "dabs" and "darker" or "rims and ribs") and consonance ("buffets," "paints" and "skirts" or "Camille's" and "folds" intertwined with "cuffs" and "dress"). A particularly elaborate example of such an orchestration of rhythm and sound can be found in the following passage: "The light pools in her lap. The light laps her. The light lies in her lap like a lover. Her husband buries his face in her lap" (218). Language is used like a brush here, foregrounding Roberts's painterly aesthetic. As a result, while the story does not ignore the differences between literature and painting, it draws attention to similarities between the two arts: first, it shows that painting functions as a semiotic code akin to language; second, it emphasizes the visual potential of verbal representations.

Roberts's decision to centre "On the Beach at Trouville" around a historically impossible encounter also allows us to identify it as driven by the glance. By flaunting the fictionality of her narrative, the writer clearly relinquishes all claims to authority and reveals her ekphrastic project as subjective, provisional and contestable. Thus, while it can be argued that Roberts undermines earlier readings of Monet's painting (extracted by art critics from the image of the little shoes or from the painter's biography), it also reveals all interpretation, including her own, as provisional and constructed. Offering a blatantly counterfactual narrative, she locates meaning not in the painting itself, but in the interaction between the viewer and the painting. One is reminded here of how Wolfgang Iser explains the process by which the reader interacts with the text to create its meaning. Iser writes: "Two people gazing at the night sky may both be looking at

the same collection of stars, but one will see the image of a plough, and the other will make out a dipper. The ‘stars’ in a literary text are fixed; the lines that join them are variable” (287). Iser’s words refer to how we interpret literary texts, not paintings, but his visual metaphor also takes for granted the constructed nature of vision, allowing us to infer that his insights can also be applied to visual arts. Indeed, in the essay, Iser quotes extensively from Gombrich’s *Art and Illusion*, to argue that meaning (or what he calls “the gestalt”) “is not given by the text itself; it arises from the meeting between the individual mind of the reader with its own particular history of experience, its own consciousness, its own outlook” (289). If we substitute “the painting” for “the text” and “the viewer” for “the reader,” we may conclude that our encounters with artworks, ekphrastic or otherwise, will also fill them with new meanings, and that these meanings, to quote from Iser, “must inevitably be colored by our own characteristic selection process” (289).⁴ Unsurprisingly, then, when Roberts casts her ekphrastic glance at Monet, the narrative that emerges will be a corollary of what occurs *between* the painting and the writer.

This quality of in-betweenness is often emphasized in Roberts’s story. The opening section starts by describing the white and the black shape on Monet’s canvas but soon turns its attention to “a curving shape of whiteness, greyness, creaminess” (213–14) that can be found “in between these forms” (213). The manoeuvre is repeated in the ending of the story, where a final glimpse at the painting also shifts from the two female figures to what can be seen between them: “separate ends of the monochromatic scale and in between them blue and blue-grey and dark blue and indigo” (226). While the fact that what is observed there changes from “creaminess” and “whiteness” to various shades of blue exemplifies once again the fickleness of the glance as an interpretational apparatus, Roberts’s repeated focusing of attention on this liminal space signals her interest in such spheres of indeterminacy, transition, and emergence, suspended between potentiality and actuality, between promise and fulfilment, between life and death.

Both Camille and Thérèse are ostensibly located in such in-between spaces. While the story offers a proleptic glimpse of the day when Thérèse

⁴ Iser speaks of “gaps” inside the text that the reader must fill in (285). Similar ideas, in reference to visual arts, have been made by Stephen Scobie, who has taken Jacques Derrida’s notion of the supplement to explain how language “moves to supplement the gaps created and prepared for it by painting” (25). John Berger, on the other hand, associates this sense of incompleteness in a painting with Impressionism as a movement where visual detail “has been more or less sacrificed to the optical precision of . . . colours and tones” (426). As a result, the viewer is forced to rely on his or her memory to fill in what is missing: “The precision triggers your visual memory, while the vagueness welcomes and accommodates your memory when it comes” (427).

"will walk from the public section of the convent chapel" and then disappear "into a dark, tiled vault" to embrace her "death-in-life" existence as an enclosed Carmelite nun (225), the present-tense narration locates its "here and now" in the interim period where the girl is granted "two more years of daylight" (225). Similarly, while Camille imagines herself as standing at the beginning of her new, married life, the story foreshadows her premature death, in 1847, by referring to how she is suddenly frightened of Thérèse, whom she imagines as "a ghost [who] has come to warn of approaching death" (224). For as long as they stay on the beach, poised in front of Monet's canvas, however, their lives seem ripe with possibility. Camille is full of hope as she looks towards her imagined future happiness: "A child. A house, a garden with fruit trees, kitchen shelves laden with copper pans and jars of apricot jam" (224). And Thérèse, for all her attempts at self-mortification, cannot quite stifle her impulse to respond to the sensuality of the surrounding world, to the "shock of cold water" and the "strokes of hot sun" (217). Just before she joins the Monets, she removes her boots and her stockings, "allows herself" to put her bare feet in the sea, takes off her "tight little black jacket" and "rolls up the sleeves of her blouse" as "the air caresses her bare arms" (217). For the duration of the story, the dark future is forestalled. The threatening storm may not arrive. To underline this idea of Roberts's story as a liminal space, the narrative employs strategies whose purpose is to refuse closure. The arrangement of the text into sections that develop from A to D suggests incompleteness, present-tense narration locks the story in the perpetual "now," and, since the final section actually represents the moment when "the painter and his wife invite [Thérèse] to sit down" (225) and then re-creates the opening scene when the girl first looks at the painting, the narrative achieves an effect of circularity, enclosing the characters in the liminal space of "in-betweenness."

Most importantly, however, the space of in-betweenness that Roberts's story creates to stage a meeting between Camille and Thérèse is also the location of a dynamic, intermedial exchange that arises out of its ekphrastic encounter with Monet's painting. For Jarniewicz, "ekphrasis is primarily a bridge-like figure of change: of transition, transfer, or translation, from the world of images into the world of words, from one semiotic system to another" (111). It is within such a zone of contact and potential metamorphosis that Roberts inserts her heroines. Though the story clearly implies that the women may have more in common than meets the eye, their brief encounter amounts to a missed opportunity: the two women fail to enter into a meaningful dialogue, Camille's invitation to lunch is rejected, and the woman is denied the chance to tap into Thérèse's potential for sensuality and so, perhaps, to change the girl's gloomy future. However, the ekphrastic

encounter that takes place within the same textual space proves to be far more fruitful. Removing Monet's painting from the anonymous, impersonal context of a museum, the story brings it to dynamic life, supplementing it with a narrative to reveal its performative, durational aspect and its functioning as a semiotic code. This positive impact also works in the opposite direction as Monet's Impressionist style begins to shape the structure and reinvigorate the language of the story. Ultimately, then, Roberts's text offers the reader much more than another battle between *paragone* or a simple meeting of Eros and Thanatos: it turns itself into a space of intermedial dialogue where "the relation of language and painting is one of reciprocal supplementarity" (Scobie 197). This, however, can only happen once the glance releases Monet's *The Beach at Trouville* from the staticity of the "frozen moment," destabilizes the rigid boundaries between word and image, and transfers the painting into the realm of linguistic contingency.

WORKS CITED

- Bal, Mieke. *Reading Rembrandt: Beyond the Word-Image Opposition*. Amsterdam UP, 2006. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9789048504145>
- Berger, John. "The Eyes of Claude Monet." *Selected Essays*, Pantheon, 2011, pp. 424–29.
- Brown, Kathryn J. *Women Readers in French Painting 1870–1890: A Space for the Imagination*. Ashgate, 2012.
- Bryson, Norman. *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze*. Yale UP, 1983.
- Burgass, Catherine. "Food for the Soul: Reading Mrs Ramsay's Boeuf en Daube." *The Poetics of Transubstantiation: From Theology to Metaphor*, edited by Douglas Burnham and Enrico Giaccherini, Ashgate, 2005, pp. 95–103.
- Duncker, Patricia. "Blues and Beowulf." Review of *Mud: Stories of Sex and Love*, by Michèle Roberts. *Literary Review*, July 2010, p. 53.
- Falcus, Sarah. *Michèle Roberts: Myths, Mothers and Memories*. Peter Lang, 2007.
- Fisher, Barbara K. *Museum Mediations: Reframing Ekphrasis in Contemporary American Poetry*. Routledge, 2006. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203959244>
- García Hernández, Silvia. "Going Down in Herstory: Re-writing Women's Lives in Michèle Roberts's 'On the Beach at Trouville.'" *Journal of English Studies*, vol. 20, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.18172/jes.4784>
- Gedo, Mary Mathews. *Monet and His Muse: Camille Monet in the Artist's Life*. U of Chicago P, 2010. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226284811.001.0001>

- Gombrich, E. H. "Moment and Movement in Art." *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, vol. 27, 1964, pp. 293–306. <https://doi.org/10.2307/750521>
- Goszczyńska, Marta. "Michèle Roberts's *Mud* and the Practice of Feminist 'Re-Vision.'" *Studia Litteraria Universitatis Jagellonicae Cracoviensis*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2018, pp. 89–96. <https://doi.org/10.4467/20843933ST.18.008.8630>
- Hedley, Jane. "Introduction: The Subject of Ekphrasis." *In the Frame: Women's Ekphrastic Poetry from Marianne Moore to Susan Wheeler*, edited by Jane Hedley, Nick Halpern and Willard Spiegelman, U of Delaware P, 2009, pp. 15–40.
- Heffernan, James. *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery*. U of Chicago P, 1993.
- Iser, Wolfgang. "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach." *New Literary History*, vol. 3, no. 2, 1972, pp. 279–99. <https://doi.org/10.2307/468316>
- Jakobson, Roman. "On the Linguistic Aspects of Translation." *The Translation Studies Reader*, edited by Lawrence Venuti, Routledge, 2000, pp. 113–18.
- Jarniewicz, Jerzy. *Ekphrasis in the Poetry of Derek Mahon*. Naukowe Wydawnictwo Piotrkowskie przy Filii Uniwersytetu Jana Kochanowskiego, 2013.
- Jones, Jonathan. "Portrait of the Week: *The Beach at Trouville*, Claude Monet (1870)." *The Guardian*, 14 June 2003, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2003/jun/14/art>, accessed 20 May 2020.
- Kennedy, David. *The Ekphrastic Encounter in Contemporary British Poetry and Elsewhere*. Ashgate, 2012.
- Krieger, Murray. *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign*. Johns Hopkins UP, 1992.
- Loizeaux, Elizabeth Bergmann. *Twentieth-Century Poetry and the Visual Arts*. Cambridge UP, 2008.
- Mitchell, W. J. T. "Ekphrasis and the Other." *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, U of Chicago P, 1995, pp. 151–81.
- Mitchell, W. J. T. *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*. U of Chicago P, 1987. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226148052.001.0001>
- Nochlin, Linda. *Bathers, Bodies, Beauty: The Visceral Eye*. Harvard UP, 2006. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv23dxd7j>
- Patton, Susannah. *A Journey into Flaubert's Normandy*. Roaring Forties, 2007.
- Roberts, Michèle. *Food, Sex and God: On Inspiration and Writing*. Virago, 1998.

Roberts, Michèle. "Oh You Storyteller: On Fiction and Memoir." *Curators of Memory: Women's Voices in Literature in English*, edited by Liliana Sikorska, Katarzyna Bronk, Marta Frątczak and Joanna Jarzab, Wydział Anglistyki UAM, 2015, pp. 61–73.

Roberts, Michèle. "On the Beach at Trouville." *Mud: Stories of Sex and Love*, Virago, 2011, pp. 213–26.

Scobie, Stephen. *Earthquakes and Explorations: Language and Painting from Cubism to Concrete Poetry*. Toronto UP, 1997. <https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442664869>

486

Marta Goszczyńska is Assistant Professor in the Department of British Literature and Culture at the University of Lodz. She completed her PhD in 2006 with a dissertation that explored the hybrid nature of late twentieth-century neo-Victorian fiction. She is co-editor of *Changing Ireland: Transitions and Transformations in Irish Literature and Culture* (Wydawnictwo UŁ, 2010), *The Playful Air of Light(ness) in Irish Literature and Culture* (Cambridge Scholars, 2011) and *Reading Graham Swift* (Lexington, 2020). Her research interests include women's studies, neo-Victorianism, and narrative theory. She has published, both nationally and internationally, on such authors as William Trevor, Sarah Waters, A. S. Byatt, Valerie Martin, Jane Urquhart, Graham Swift, and Michel Faber. <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3156-8670>

marta.goszczyńska@uni.lodz.pl