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## Picturing Daisy: Narrative in Henry James's *Daisy Miller*

**Abstract:** *With a background resembling both an abstract stage and a tapestry Daisy Miller is at first glance a seemingly facile story. There is certainly a sense of open, stage-like space surrounding the main characters and their performative actions, which resemble the blurred but vivid forms of live figures frozen in the aesthetic stillness of the scenic foreground in Vevey, Switzerland and Rome. In spite of the story's accessibility, however, its stage seems to be set, scene after scene, for veiled allusions, sustained imagery, and allegorical meanings. Under the guise of a story about a young American girl's attempt to establish and assert her sense of identity in the Old World, Daisy Miller is also an encoded text whose strong allegorical dimension yields rich insights into James's intention to imagine in his own fiction the artistic possibilities embedded in the fin de siècle's aestheticist agenda.*

**Key words:** *ekphrasis, aestheticism, allegory, aesthetic, scenery, international.*

Henry James came across Walter Pater's *The Renaissance* while he was in Florence. In a letter to his brother William dated 1873, he wrote: "I saw Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* just after getting your letter, in the English bookseller's window and was inflamed to think of buying it and trying a notice. But I see it treats of several things I know nothing about." For all its casual dismissiveness, the letter was immediately contradicted by James's actions; he must have soon bought, or at least read, *The Renaissance*, for he discussed its essay on Botticelli in the course of a travel essay published in *The Independent* of June 1874, and was soon to write the novel *Roderick Hudson* (1883) that echoed Pater's text.

With its subtle, evocative prose, and its sinuous ambiguities and attention to contemplation, *The Renaissance* was certainly appealing to James's sensibility. James was moved by the series of *portraits litteraires* in *The Renaissance*, which he was to call "partial portraits" in his own writings. And Pater's aesthete possessed a special kind of currency with James's artistic sensibility as a figure of supple and ample consciousness – "one of those upon whom nothing is lost," as James wrote in *The Art of Fiction* (1885), paraphrasing Pater. Like Pater who found value not in 'fact' but in perception or consciousness, James was one of those people with delicate eyes that have undergone the education of libraries and art-galleries, and possessed an artistic sense which had already been steeped in the visual arts.

But unlike Pater, who advocated a hedonistic view of art and an aesthetic temperament with no intrinsic value for the individual save pleasure and no responsibility to create, James devised ways to construct his stories as an interplay between narrative and pictorial representation, a referential narrative code (that included a colorful palette and technical terms borrowed from the plastic arts) and its corresponding *transposition d'art*.<sup>1</sup>

Assessing Pater's *Renaissance* from new perspectives, James wrote several aesthete-novellas that translate into fiction his own tendency to turn the verbal into the visual, an ekphrastic mode that turns the narrative into artful description. To make his style more dramatic while placing it in contrast to Pater's aesthetic proclamations, James incorporated in his fiction the figure of the aesthete, i.e., the idle American art lover whose experience was informed by the increasing American exposure to the doctrines of Pater. Using his own identity of an American expatriate living in Europe, James often added to the aesthete-novella the "international theme" as yet another dimension of a complex fictional structure in stories like *Madame de Mauves* or *The Aspern Papers* and later in such famous novels as *Portrait of a Lady* and *The Ambassadors*.

In this context, James's early and arguably most popular short story, *Daisy Miller* (1878), can be read as an exemplary representation of the aesthete-novella focused on the international aspect: the story's subtitle, "A Study," suggests from the start the fictional attempt to catch the essence of the young woman protagonist, Daisy, who appears centrally visible – a portrait embedded as in a canvas into the story's narrative fabric. Introduced as an observer who embodies the aggression of seeing, Winterbourne is the story's categorizing, life and woman-fearing male, whose consciousness is transported at the edge of thought and crystallized in a tension that recommends him as a sort of a Paterian aesthete uneasily joining moral and aesthetic considerations. Finally, the story's special use of space, particularly of landscape space like the view of Lake Geneva and of the Swiss Alps beyond, and later of the Roman scenery, displays a type of pictorial that not only offsets the purely verbal but also appears marked off from nature and recast as interior landscape embellishing the ornate style of the narrative.

In the story, pretty Annie Miller from Schenectady, who is traveling in Europe with her mother and younger brother Randolph, meets the young American Winterbourne in Switzerland and later in Rome. But the promise of Daisy (as Annie Miller is known to her friends and family) and Winterbourne's romance fades quickly, due to Daisy's disenchantment with Winterbourne's judgmental attitude, particularly during the time which the young lady spends in Rome with a handsome Italian, Giovanelli in whose company she visits such Roman points of attraction as the Pincian Garden, the Palace of the Caesars, and the Colosseum. Rejected by Winterbourne after being seen at night at the Colosseum in the

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<sup>1</sup> Aware of the dangers of excessive contemplation expressed in his "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance*, Pater removed the "Conclusion" from the second edition of the *Studies* (1877), but restored it in the third edition (1888) after he believed that his position had been made clear in his novel *Marius the Epicurean* (1885).

company of Giovanelli, Daisy dies tragically of Roman fever and is buried in Rome's Protestant cemetery.

Beyond the obvious dialectic between America and Europe that the story foregrounds, and the possibility of reading the story, at moments, as autobiographical, I would like to introduce into this polemic a reading of *Daisy Miller* as the story of Winterbourne (the aesthetic youth), of Daisy (the object of his study) and of the text (the various descriptions of space projected as landscape and scenery) intimately intertwined and connected with the meaning of the story seen as an ekphrastic series of mini-tableaux.

A self-proclaimed student of life and passive spectator of the world around him that recall Pater's aesthete, Winterbourne has "a great relish for feminine beauty; he was addicted to observing and analysing it" (Wegelin, 7).<sup>2</sup> Immediately after seeing Daisy, he engages in self-pleasuring contemplation by drawing various mental sketches of the young girl. Projected in a language whose disarticulation or impersonality suggests a pictorial text, Daisy first appears in her "White muslin dress," with its "hundred frills and knots of pale colored ribbons, her fan and the deep border of embroidery of her parasol," in an unforgettable portrait symbolic of her feminine allure and American femininity that make Winterbourne think that she is "strikingly, admirably pretty" (5-6). To Winterbourne's observing eye and aesthetic imagination, Daisy's advancement as someone at the end of a pathway, attuned to a dynamic of approach and withdrawal, and definition and blur, conveys through the narrator's telling voice the impression Winterbourne receives, alerting the reader to James's aesthetic ploy. Further, the narrative's rhythm of near and far evokes in pictorial mode the panorama of "blue lake" (Lake Geneva), the "snowy crest" (the Swiss Alps), and "the parapet of the [hotel] garden which overlooked the lake," articulated in terms of the recessive dimension of the landscape that foregrounds Daisy. Already tantalizing Winterbourne's eye engaged in aesthetic contemplation, Daisy irradiates pictorial associations when, under her observer's gaze, "She then turned her head and looked over the parapet, at the lake and the opposite mountains" (6).

Reintroduced to Winterbourne's contemplation in the evening, Daisy now has the equivalent to her parasol, the fan kept in perpetual motion to add to her feminine prettiness and to energize the movement of the narrative through pictorial convention:

He found her that evening in the garden, wandering about in the warm starlight, like an indolent sylph, and swinging to and fro the largest fan the largest fan he had ever beheld. ... The young girl looked at him through the dusk. ... stopped and stood looking at him. Her prettiness was still visible in the darkness; she was opening and closing her enormous fan." (15-16)

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<sup>2</sup> Henry James, *Daisy Miller: A Study*, in *Tales of Henry James*, ed. Christof Wegelin (New York: Norton, 1984). This text follows the first English edition published by McMillan and Co. in February 1879. The work first appeared in the *Cornhill Magazine* of June and July 1878. All subsequent references are to the Norton edition.

Daisy's appearance, that makes such an indelible impression upon Winterbourne, figures in James's own manner of "picturing" his subjects. Beyond the imagery and movement, the description of the young girl indicates the full extent to which James focuses his attention on portraits. Indeed, in his essay on the painter John Singer Sargent, which had first appeared in *Harper's Magazine* in October 1887 and was later reprinted in *Picture and Text* (1893), James made his famous pronouncement that "there is no greater work of art than a great portrait."<sup>3</sup> Echoing Sargent, who translates life to the canvas, James writes of impressions, by which he means a mental picture constructed, animated and construed in a system of narrative (re)production and (re)presentation. Thus in *Daisy Miller*, Daisy's elegant and luxurious clothes, which are heavy with social status indicating the Millers' wealth, also seems to prevent the human contact between the observer Winterbourne and the young girl. But while the feminine drapery has a paralyzing force that prevents Daisy and Winterbourne from both fully interacting with each other and from fully entering the world of fictional personae, it unites the reader with the portrait of Daisy through pictorial contact channeling the social narrative via Winterbourne's aesthetic perception.

The use of the pictorial beyond the purely verbal, whether in picturing Daisy or capturing the picture of the situation, between Winterbourne and Daisy, between people and objects, between people and places, is ultimately the story's subject. In Rome, for instance, where Daisy meets Winterbourne again, the drawing room of Mrs. Walker, an American expatriate who lives in Rome, is an opportunity to picture the Roman space:

Mrs. Walker was a very accomplished woman and she lived in the Via Gregoriana. Winterbourne found her in a little crimson drawing room, on a third floor; the room was filled with southern sunshine. He had not been there for ten minutes when the servant came in, announcing Mrs. Milla. (26)

The completely arbitrary evocation of Roman color and light captured behind closed doors, as in one of Sargent's *Venetian Interiors*,<sup>4</sup> tells us that like the painter he admired, James possessed a keen sense of dramatic space, and was very purposeful in selecting rooms to reveal his characters and their situations. Thus, in James's story, the little drawing room's Roman crimson sensuousness hardly fits either Mrs. Walker or Mrs. Miller; it also reminds us of all that is not in these American ladies' register or in their social categories. The differences between the décor and the American women vividly highlights the contrast that James figures between the grandeur of the Roman background and the ladies' mundane activities it now supports, namely the uncategorized shape of Daisy herself, following her mother in Mrs. Walker's drawing room in apparent obliviousness to the glory surrounding them.

<sup>3</sup> *Picture and Text*. New York: Harper, 1893. 114.

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed analysis of the relationship between James and Sargent, see "Picture and Text: Venetian Interiors by Henry James and John Singer Sargent" in *The Henry James Review* 23 (2002): 136-156.

Having being warned not to go out, especially alone in the company of a beautiful local man, Daisy walks out of Mrs. Walker's drawing room challengingly and recklessly with Winterbourne in tow to meet Mr. Giovanelli at the Pincian Garden, a place which along the Colosseum is one of the story's pivotal spaces.

With the pictorial element kept surprisingly minimal, the description of the Pincian Garden foregrounds "the slow-moving, idly gazing Roman crowd," which is in itself a subject and a picture, evading emotional intimacy and eluding self-knowledge, with beautiful Giovanelli's image sporting a rakish hat, monocle and nosegay. The Italian is inserted into the narrative when Daisy, with her little laugh, gaily introduces him to Winterbourne with "Here's Giovanelli, leaning against a tree. He's staring at the women in the carriages: Did you ever see anything so cool?" Brought back into the pictorial narrative describing Daisy's walk with Giovanelli at the Pincian Garden are the parasol, the panoramic sunset and the parapet, all artfully arranged, composed and arranged as in a studio painting. This time, however, they are projected against Winterbourne's psychological reactions, culminating in his look at the couple, Daisy and Giovanelli, looking out at the prospect of the old wall of Rome – not the "dimly-seen mountain forms" seen from the *Trois Couronnes Hotel* in Switzerland, but the unambiguously evocative phallic images of the Villa Borghese, with its "great flat-topped pine clusters" and the "western sun" as it sends out "a brilliant shaft through a couple of cloud-bars." The young girl's and the Italian's movements are small, precise, and suggestive, and their physical energy is linked to Winterbourne's individual perceptions, his own sensuality and desires, and his physical and psychological mannerisms that reveal and discover both his subjects' possible intimacy and his own exclusion:

She came a little nearer and he held the parasol over her; then, still holding it, he let it rest upon her shoulder, so that both their heads were hidden from Winterbourne. (49)

Behind the infamous parasol, the couple are not only physically close together, and distant, because screened, from Winterbourne; they are also looking out over the wide prospect of light and Roman color that leaves Winterbourne viewless and foreshadows Daisy's dissolution in what the story's anonymous narrator calls the cynical streets of Rome. The refuge is all the more comforting because it is sought and taken amidst reminders of a glorious past which breathes not immortality, but rather conscious and reluctant mortality, so out of key with the romantic tone of Rome as an eternal city. Like the women in Sargent's *Venetian Interiors*, Daisy and Giovanelli are paradoxically both out of place and too much at home in these extravagantly pictorial surroundings.

The story's pictorial dimension is nowhere in the story employed more brilliantly than in the penultimate meeting with Daisy in the Palace of the Caesars, halfway through chapter 4. The ruined Palace is a "beautiful abode of flowering desolation," in what is a verbal oxymoron but a perfectly pictorial observation. In this "rugged surface," the dead city is "muffled with tender verdure" silencing the historical past and allowing for Daisy's walk on the marble ruins, with their "monumental inscriptions." But just as Daisy's youth is "tender verdure" and her name a flower unable to redeem the past, her and Winterbourne's argumentative voices reach out toward one another, falling back in half-comprehension and just as hopelessly as the now-silenced clamor of the historical past filling up the chattering

drawing rooms of the old Roman lawgivers. Once again, as in Sargent's *Venetian Interiors*, the narrative translates into a closed social world set in an enclosed physical space, heavy with social status and social drapery which muffle the characters' emotions deflecting the psychological turbulence of men's and women's lives and suggesting instead the balanced associations of a tableau with Daisy at its center, strolling on the ruins of Imperial Rome. Embracing this aesthetic vision, Winterbourne "stands looking off at the enchanting harmony of line and color that remotely encircles the city, inhaling the softly humid odors and feeling the freshness of the year and the antiquity of the place reaffirm themselves in mysterious infusion" (44). The unexpected verb near the end of the sentence, "reaffirm," communicates and signifies the idea of an intense vision, not at all casual, that affirms the scene's overwhelming, aesthetic dimension submerging the historical ("antiquity of the place"), the sight, smell ("odors") and touch ("softly humid"), and youth and age ("freshness and antiquity").

The last meeting of Winterbourne and Daisy bring back the parapet, the parasol and the sunset view, whose mostly symbolic functions, refer back to Switzerland at the beginning of the story, and forward to the Colosseum, near the end of the narrative, where Daisy takes her final strolls at night with Giovanelli. In the dusky circle of the Colosseum engulfed in the "pale moonshine" which Winterbourne enters "as a lover of the picturesque" and where death and closure are waiting, there is no parasol, but there is a shadow that, exactly like a parasol, screens Daisy from exposure and shuts out Winterbourne – the "vaguely-lighted monuments of the Forum" and that of the great cross at the center.

In this shaded intimacy, stationed upon the low steps which forward the base of the great cross, Daisy and Giovanelli look over the Colosseum's "clear and silent area," with its rich allusions to the well-known Roman past of lions, Christian martyrs, and being eaten alive. And in these high lightened moments of contemplation in the poetic chiaroscuro of the Colosseum, while Winterbourne has the illumination that gratifies his riddle-solving manhood that Daisy "was a young lady whom a gentleman need no longer be at pains to respect," the careful reader discerns that these are not so much actual scenes or situations. These are narrative mini-tableaux, artfully composed in such a way as to answer James's own conception of Roman spaces in captured moments, depicted in tune with his pictorial interests, and thus similar to intimate scenes drawn with James's brush in the fixity of drawing rooms.

Daisy's death a short time after the scene at the Colosseum, "A week after this the poor girl died; it had been a terrible case of fever" (49), opens up the story's pictorial doublings in the allusive sentence that follows: "Daisy's grave was in the little Protestant cemetery, in an angle of the wall of Imperial Rome, beneath the cypresses and the thick spring flowers."

The wall of Imperial Rome that directs us back, quite dizzily to the same wall of Rome seen from the parapet, of which Daisy, with Giovanelli, had taken in the sunlight over the Pincian Garden, brings under focus story's supple narrative of imagistic allusiveness. Used as the story's echo and narrative double, the Roman landscape and its architectural geometry, complete with monumental inscriptions and luxurious gardens, mark the triumph of the aesthetic contemplation Pater envisioned in *The Renaissance*.

Finally, if the story suggests that even the most naive examples of aestheticizing vision are fatally flawed, the allusion to Winterbourne "studying," and to his interest in a "clever

foreign lady,” locks the door on the story’s narrative dynamic by returning beyond the text to the continuity of Winterbourne’s pursuits and, ultimately, to James’s use of fiction to enter into a vigorous debate with the proponents of aestheticism.

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