

Ferraris-Besso on Berrong (2013)

Berrong, Richard M. *Putting Monet and Rembrandt into Words: Pierre Loti's Recreation and Theorization of Claude Monet's Impressionism and Rembrandt's Landscapes in Literature*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013. Pp. 200. ISBN: 978-1-4696-1365-9

Caroline Ferraris-Besso

“‘Loti was the great Impressionist,’ but what does that mean?” (13). The quote and the question that open Richard M. Berrong’s study highlight that ever since the term “impressionist” was first applied to literature by Ferdinand Brunetière in 1879, “Impressionist literature” and “literary Impressionism” resist definition—and Berrong is not interested in defining them either. In fact, he chooses not to use the terms, focusing instead on only one type of Impressionism, Claude Monet’s, as he endeavors to produce the first “systematic study of the ways in which certain of Loti’s works resemble and evoke some of [the painter]’s canvases” (24). The book proceeds with close readings of Loti’s texts alongside analyses of Monet’s paintings, enriched with references to the painter’s correspondence and to numerous critics, both contemporaries of Loti and Monet and more recent ones.

The first chapter is devoted to what is often considered to be Loti’s masterpiece, his 1886 novel *Pêcheur d’Islande*, which addresses Monet’s impressionism thematically—for example the sea, a motif dear to the painter, is also central to the novel—and stylistically—through suffixes, adverbs, noun phrases, and modal verbs, Loti blurs colors and dematerializes clear images, as Monet does in his paintings. Berrong also argues that Gaud Mével, the main female protagonist of the novel, is a *mise en abyme*, a figuration of the reader-viewer who completes “what she sees or reads so that it makes sense to her” (62). With Impressionism, be it literary or pictorial, incompleteness becomes valuable: it draws in the reader-viewer, who feels the need to fill in the gaps.

In the second chapter, an examination of Émile Zola’s *L’Œuvre* and Pierre Loti’s *Madame Chrysanthème* shows that even though both novels condemn artificial art, the latter acknowledges, through the eyes and voice of its narrator, that Western realism is just another convention. The novel illustrates that rather than recording the world as it is, in the manner of Zola, Loti—like Monet—was interested in conveying feelings to the reader-viewer, which sometimes required changing what was actually seen or omitting details, as shown in *Madame Chrysanthème* when the narrator comes to understand the importance of “arrangement over content” (104).

A series of short, “Impressionist” chapters, *Madame Chrysanthème* announces the form of *Au Maroc*, an 1890 travel narrative consisting of “pure descriptions,” and of *Le Roman d’un enfant*, the foci of the third chapter. Berrong rightly suggests that, for Loti, striking images are meant to be paths to the unconscious and ways to share experience with the reader-viewer. Like some of Monet’s paintings, they also function as a collaborative space, where the *taches* unconsciously left by the author are filled by the reader-viewer’s unconscious.

“The Anti-Establishment, Natural Artist: Rembrandt and *Ramuntcho*,” the final chapter, could at first seem to be disconnected from the previous ones. Rembrandt’s irruption in the book’s Impressionist framework is justified, however, as the painter was celebrated during the nineteenth century as a “natural artist” with little formal training. In *Ramuntcho*, Loti paints scenes reminiscent of “the dramatic landscapes of the great Dutch master” (160), which reflect *Ramuntcho*’s estrangement from the Catholic Church, another institution that Rembrandt perceived as a threat. *Ramuntcho* sees art in nature—as Gaud Mével did before him. Those characters, like the eponymous hero of *Mon frère Yves*, are part of the gallery of “natural artists” Loti crafted in his books.

Published in 2013, *Putting Monet and Rembrandt into Words* appeared in the wake of a few books devoted to Pierre Loti: Alain Quella-Villéger and Bruno Vercier’s *Pierre Loti photographe* and *Pierre Loti dessinateur*, Vercier’s *Pierre Loti d’enfance et d’ailleurs*, and Jean-Pierre Montier’s *Pierre Loti et le Japon*. Those richly illustrated books contrast with Berrong’s, which does not include any color plates due to their prohibitive cost—reproductions of the paintings are hosted on a dedicated website maintained by the author. The fact that the book does not suffer too much from the absence of illustrations is significant. It is indeed primarily about words rather than images. Yet some of Berrong’s least convincing analyses are those that are strictly concerned with language—for example the analysis of linguistic “dematerialization” in *Pêcheur d’Islande* (53). It is his fine demonstrations about motifs—incompleteness; the notion of “vague drawing”—that illuminate the resemblances and allusions existing between Loti’s and Monet’s works and make this book a worthy addition to a constantly growing scholarship.

Volume: 43.3-4

Year:

- 2015