

MODES OF LITERARY IMPRESSIONISM

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The term “literary impressionism” has become something of a floating signifier. The first to use it, late nineteenth-century critics such as Ferdinand Brunetière, defined it in terms of its painterly namesake.¹ More recent scholars have often preferred to define it in other terms, however. John G. Peters, for example, in his recent study of impressionism in the works of Joseph Conrad, dismisses parallels with Impressionist painting altogether, beginning his study by declaring that “I posit a much needed definition of literary impressionism based upon philosophical groundings *rather than* upon the visual arts. In this way, I hope to demonstrate literary impressionism’s broad power and significant influence and by so doing argue for *a much more important role* for this movement in literary history than is generally accorded it” (1, emphasis added).

Peters’ wording, “a much more important role,” makes it clear that for him commonalities with Impressionist art are less impressive than “philosophical” issues. Arguing that “Conrad’s techniques represent the way human beings obtain knowledge” (2), he goes on, in the body of his monograph, to study the English novelist’s “philosophical investigation into epistemological processes”

¹ For a more recent example of this, see Helmut A. Hatzfeld, *Literature Through Art: A New Approach to French Literature*. Maria Elisabeth Kronegger, in her treatise on *Literary Impressionism*, also often envisions literary impressionism as functioning like its painterly namesake. See, for example, her chapter on impressionistic heroes (51-67), who, for her, must be passive receptors of the stimuli put out by the world around them because Impressionist painters claimed that their canvases represented unanalyzed (i.e., passive) first impressions of the world around them. In an essay on the Goncourt brothers, who are often cited as the great impressionist novelists, Paul Bourget described the protagonists in their novels in a similar fashion (157-80). We will come back to this issue later when considering the difference between the Impressionist artist’s (alleged) way of reacting to his model/motif and the way she hopes viewers will react to his finished work of art.

(2). For Peters, Conrad's "impressionism saw all phenomena filtering through the medium of consciousness at a particular time and place, thereby representing knowledge as an individual rather than a universal experience" (3).

This emphasis on the way phenomena are received by an individual consciousness was, if not the "philosophical grounding," then at least the conceptual underpinning of Impressionist art as well. As Maurice E. Chernowitz noted years ago in his very fine study of Proust's impressionism, "one of the most vital characteristics of pictorial Impressionism . . . is the emphasis on aconceptual sensation. . . . This instantaneous first impression involves the reaction which is experienced before the intellect has had time to intervene and interpret things in conventional, rational, causal terms. . . .² The Impressionist artist renders his subject as a visual illusion perceived during the split second of this first impression and not as it actually is according to his knowledge of its permanent color and form" (165-66), Peters' "phenomena filtering through the medium of consciousness at a particular time and place." Or, as art critic John Canaday phrased it, "the impressionist does not analyse form but only receives the light reflected from that form onto the retina of his eye and seeks to reproduce the effect of that light, rather than the form of the object reflecting it" (182).³

Still, the difference in media of the two art forms leads to a major difference here. If a painter chooses—or at least claims—to present an "instantaneous first impression [that] involves the reaction which is experienced before the intellect has had time to intervene and interpret things in conventional, rational, causal terms," he cannot also present the subsequent "interpret[ion of] things in conventional, rational, causal terms," what Peters refers to as "the way human beings obtain knowledge." A writer can. She can show not only how an individual first perceives something but also how his mind subsequently goes about making sense of it, Peters' "epistemological processes." More recent scholars

² Early in his career Monet, in Normandy on one of his painting trips, wrote to fellow painter Frédéric Bazille: "what I will do here . . . will simply be the expression of what I myself have *felt*. . . . The more I see, the more I realize that people never dare to express honestly what they *feel*" (I, 425-26). Monet's correspondence is included at the end of the various volumes of Daniel Wildenstein's earlier five-volume catalogue raisonnée of the painter's work. All translations from this and other French texts are my own.

³ Though Monet had enjoyed traveling with Renoir to southern France and Italy when he went as a tourist, when he went there to paint he insisted upon being alone, not wanting someone else's comments (or work) to alter his own immediate reactions to the sights. As he wrote to Durand-Ruel, his dealer and an early champion of Impressionism: "I insisted only on going there by myself, so as to be freer with my impressions. It's always bad to work with someone else" (II, 234; he had written the same thing to Durand-Ruel two weeks earlier as well: II, 232).

writing on literary impressionism, often influenced by phenomenologists like Maurice Merleau-Ponty, have chosen to center their definition of it on this second capacity, in the process distinguishing literary impressionism from rather than likening it to its painterly counterpart. Thus Peters focuses his definition on “the way human beings obtain knowledge” and sixty years before him Chernowitz, quoting Proust on Mme de Sévigné, declared that “the Impressionist order of presentation [in literature is] showing things ‘in the order in which we perceive them, rather than first explaining them in terms of their causes’” (169).⁴

As Peters rightly points out, this concern with “the order in which we perceive things” rather than with the things to be perceived distinguished impressionist literature from what had come before, in which,

whether omniscient or nonomniscient, [the] narrators organize phenomena so that the reader experiences an ordered existence. Omniscient narrators organize phenomena and provide the reader with a breadth of information that is inaccessible in reality [at least to an individual observing a scene while that scene takes place]. Similarly, the nonomniscient narrators also mediate the epistemological process. Even though they are not omniscient, first-person or limited third-person narrators still imply organizing techniques—that is, rather than presenting phenomena as the subject actually experiences them, they organize that information into a coherent chronicle through the narrator’s reflections. (24)

Presenting things “in the order in which we perceive them, rather than first explaining them in terms of their causes” was therefore very definitely a defining feature of literary impressionism, one that distinguished it from previous styles—even if, as Proust notes, certain writers like Mme de Sévigné and Dostoevsky had sometimes used it before. To limit one’s definition of literary impressionism exclusively to this narrative technique, however, while dismissing comparisons with its so extremely well-known and -loved painterly namesake is unnecessarily restrictive and isolating. The painterly qualities remain, for the general public, the hallmarks of Impressionism, and we do neither literary impressionism nor literary criticism any favors by insisting that the former is in no way what the general public would like and expect it to be. Peters explains that he does so because the comparison with painting has led to too many authors being classified as impressionist (3). I do not see why this in itself would pose a problem, but it is true that some scholars writing on literary impression-

⁴ For the original of the passage Chernowitz quotes, see: Marcel Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu* I, 653. Elsewhere Proust’s narrator remarks: “Mme de Sévigné, like Elstir, like Dostoevsky, rather than presenting things in their logical order, i.e., by beginning with the cause, shows us first the effect, the illusion that strikes us” (III, 378), cited in Ruth Moser, *L’impressionnisme français: Peinture-Littérature-Musique* (120).

ism in terms of Impressionist painting have defined the latter so broadly—in terms of its subject matter, for example, which is not one of its distinguishing features—that they have gone on to describe a very diverse group of literary works as impressionist, at which point the term loses any useful specificity.⁵ Just as Peters focuses on the stylistic expression of epistemological concerns that distinguished impressionistic literature from its predecessors, so if we limit comparisons with Impressionist painting to those elements that distinguished the latter from what came before we can retain a specificity of definition necessary for meaningful usage. This definition may not always be “philosophical,” but in showing how an author could go about transferring painterly techniques to writing it is no less interesting and distinctive, and may well serve as a useful way of presenting certain literary works to the large public already enamored of Impressionist painting.

Here Pierre Loti’s 1886 masterpiece, *Pêcheur d’Islande* ‘Iceland Fisherman,’ proves particularly useful. The fact that in his previous works Loti had repeatedly described the scene he was presenting as a “tableau” demonstrates how conscious he was of painting as he constructed his narratives.⁶ Having studied art in Paris while he was there in 1866-7 preparing for the Naval Academy’s entrance exam, a period when the Impressionists were showing seascapes, and having begun his publishing career as an illustrator, Loti was well-equipped to transfer the Impressionists’ innovations to writing.⁷ That André Suarès, the distinguished poet and cultural critic, went so far as to declare that “Far more than Sisley, Claude Monet, or the Goncourt brothers, Loti was the great impressionist” (212), show how well he did so. Following through on the implications of visual Impressionism, moreover, Loti also, like Flaubert and the Goncourt brothers before him, created for *Pêcheur d’Islande* a style that meets more recent scholars’ non-painterly, philosophically-oriented definitions of literary impressionism. The result is a good model for the demonstration of both definitions of the term, one that shows the variety of ways in which a writer can adapt

⁵ As has often been remarked, the subject was of little or no importance to Impressionists like Monet. Enzo Caramaschi, for example, noted: “Impressionism emptied the object of all autonomous reality—at any rate, of all importance—favoring instead its subjective perception and its pictorial representation” (280).

⁶ There are repeated uses of the word “tableau” to describe a scene in *Le Mariage de Loti* ‘The Marriage of Loti’ (1880) and *Mon frère Yves* ‘My Brother Yves’ (1883).

⁷ On seascapes in nineteenth-century French painting and particularly Impressionist painting, see, for example: Juliet Wilson-Bareau, David Degener, *Manet and the Sea*. On Loti as an illustrator, see: C. Wesley Bird, *Pierre Loti, correspondant et dessinateur 1872-1889*; Claude Farrère, *Cent dessins de Pierre Loti*.

to language what the general public already knows and loves in Impressionist painting (that is specific to it) while at the same time demonstrating how he, taking advantage of possibilities specific to language, can pursue the epistemological implications of the Impressionist aesthetic in ways not available to her painterly colleagues.⁸

James J. Kirschke, in his study of Henry James–like Conrad a Loti admirer—explains that though we may think of Impressionism in terms of soft, vague tints and pastels, the Impressionists actually used “strong, pure colors”: “the Impressionists tended to apply their brushwork in loose touches and comma strokes of unmixed color (a technique which also tends to leave to the eye of the beholder the task of synthesis)” (18, 19). As Canaday remarks with regard to Monet in particular, “from a little distance the . . . different tints and colors within single areas tend to disappear as individual strokes. The eye ‘mixes’ them and in doing so creates colors with more vibration, more sparkle, than would have been possible if the various reds or greens or blues or pinks had been mixed on the palette and applied in large areas in the conventional way or pulled together by ‘blending’ on the canvas” (183).

A writer can do this as well. In one of his descriptions of the North Atlantic, descriptions in which the author makes his most extensive forays into Impressionist painting, Loti writes that “dans ce ciel très couvert, très épais, il y avait çà et là des déchirures, comme des percées dans un dôme, par où arrivaient de grands rayons couleur *d’argent rose*” “there were gashes here and there in that very overcast, very thick sky, like openings in a dome, through which arrived broad rays *pink silver* in color” (I:1).⁹ When a storm starts at sea, the wind “traçait sur le luisant miroir des dessins d’un *bleu vert*” “traced on the shining mirror *blue green* drawings” (I:6). The first time the female protagonist, Gaud Mével, meets the fisherman Yann Gaos, “une grande brise d’ouest, qui s’était levée

⁸ Chernowitz saw the value of both approaches to the study of literary impressionism in his examination of the work of Loti’s younger contemporary and admirer, Marcel Proust. On one hand, he pointed out the similarities in the use of form, color, and light between *A la recherche du temps perdu* ‘In Search of Lost Time’ and the paintings of Claude Monet and other Impressionist artists whose works Proust had admired; on the other, recognizing, as Proust himself wrote, that Impressionist painting was based on the idea of “introducing affects before explaining their causes” (141-42), he also focused on the way Proust often began descriptions of objects or scenes with the perceivable affects before providing an explanation of what was behind them.

⁹ As is traditional in Loti scholarship, since the chapters in his novels are so short and since there are so many different editions of them, not to mention so many different English translations of *Pêcheur d’Islande* (I count seven, several of which went through multiple editions), references will be to part and chapter number rather than to page numbers in a specific edition. As always, all translations of the novel and other French texts are my own.

pendant la procession [religieuse], avait semé par terre des rameaux de buis et jeté sur le ciel des tentures *gris noir*” ‘a strong Western breeze that had come up during the [religious] procession had scattered boxwood branches on the ground and thrown *grey black* tapestries across the sky’ (I:4). Sylvestre Moan, another fisherman, “avait gardé ses yeux d’enfant, d’un *gris bleu*, qui étaient extrêmement doux et tous naïfs” ‘had retained his child’s *grey blue* eyes, which were extremely soft and completely innocent’ (I:1). When Yvonne Moan, Sylvestre’s grandmother, bids him farewell before his departure for military service in Vietnam, “si longtemps qu’elle put, si longtemps qu’elle distingua cette forme *bleu-noir* qui était encore son petit-fils, elle le suivit des yeux” ‘as long as she could, as long as she discerned that *blue-black* form that was still her grandson, she followed him with her eyes’ (II:8); etc.¹⁰

Still, whereas the viewer of an Impressionist canvas, standing at a sufficient distance, is not aware of the juxtaposed “strong, pure colors” but only of the synthesis of them that his mind performs, such juxtapositions in literature may leave traces of their original components. This may explain why Loti also blends colors himself, using the suffix *-âtre* (-ish) rather than always leaving the synthesis to the reader as his painterly contemporaries could do. Describing fishing boats at sea that gather to receive news from home, he notes that “leurs petites ailes *grisâtres* apparaissaient partout” ‘their little *greyish* wings appeared everywhere’ (I:6) or, speaking of the chapel in Pors Even, that “un même lichen *grisâtre*, avec ses tâches d’un jaune pâle de soufre, couvrait les pierres, les branches noueuses, et les saints en granit qui se tenaient dans les niches du mur” ‘the same *greyish* lichen, with its pale sulphur-yellow splotches, covered the stones, the knotty branches, and the granite saints that stood in the niches in the wall’ (II:3). As a storm begins in the North Atlantic, “l’eau, *verdâtre* maintenant, était de plus en plus zébrée de baves blanches. . . . Les lames se faisaient toujours plus hautes, plus follement hautes, et pourtant elles étaient déchiquetées à mesure, on en voyait pendre de grands lambeaux *verdâtres*” ‘the water, which was *greenish* now, was more and more striped with white foam. . . . The waves rose up ever higher, insanely higher, and yet they got slashed more the more they did so, one could see huge *greenish* shreds of them hanging’ (II:1). Earlier, “le ciel s’était couvert d’un grand voile *blanchâtre*” ‘the sky had been covered

¹⁰ In his book-length study of the novel, Louis Barthou, the statesman turned literary scholar, cited some of these examples as proof that “Pierre Loti had . . . the eye of a painter. . . . He didn’t reduce all the different greys, or all the blues, or all the yellows, or all the whites, to one. He knew their variety and he reproduced it” (298).

with a huge *whitish* veil' (I:6); later, at the end of a fishing season, fog sets in and "les objets très rapprochés apparaissaient plus crûment sous cette lumière fade et *blanchâtre*" 'the objects that were very close appeared more starkly in this dull, *whitish* light' (III:9). Gaud is intimidated by Yann, with his "regard superbe et un peu farouche; ces prunelles brunes, légèrement fauves, courant très vite sur l'opale *bleuâtre* de ses yeux" 'proud and somewhat ferocious look, those brown, slightly wild pupils moving very fast in the *bluish* opal of his eyes' (I:4). When Sylvestre dies, the Breton sun, "se tenant plus haut dans un ciel *bleuâtre*, . . . éclairait d'une douce lumière blanche la grand'mère Yvonne, qui travaillait à coudre, assis sur sa porte" 'keeping higher up in a *bluish* sky, . . . lit his grandmother, Yvonne, who was working on her sewing, sitting at her front door, with a soft white light' (III:2); etc. Yves Le Hir, quoting this last example, remarked: "Notice these adjectives, which dematerialize any perceptual sensation that is too clear" (54).¹¹

Sometimes, doing something Impressionist painters may have dreamed of but could not achieve, Loti even creates colors that cannot be defined in terms of those we already know. When Yann, having learned of Sylvestre's death, looks out at the sea around him, "la mer, pendant son repos mystérieux et son sommeil, se dissimulait sous *les teintes discrètes qui n'ont pas de nom*" 'the sea, during its mysterious rest and sleep, hid under *discreet shades of color that have no name*' (III:9; emphasis added).¹²

Another quality that distinguishes Impressionist painting is a particular focus on and use of light; as Chernowitz noted, "in Impressionist art it is light that becomes the main character, the main subject" (150).¹³ Painters who had nothing to do with Impressionism have devoted considerable attention in their work to light, of course; one thinks immediately of Rembrandt, and there are certainly others. Impressionist painters had a particular focus here, however; they were often more concerned with reproducing the effect light has on objects than with the objects themselves. As Dina Sonntag has written, "The mood of a

¹¹ Previous studies of literary impressionism have often focused on abstractions of color; as Chernowitz noted, for example, writers like Flaubert and the Goncourt brothers "convert adjectives into abstract substantives" (159). This is very rare in *Pêcheur d'Islande*.

¹² Monet, trying to paint Holland just as *Pêcheur d'Islande* was appearing in installments, wrote to his friend Duret that the Dutch countryside was enough "to make a poor painter crazy; it cannot be conveyed with our poor colors" (letter of 30 April, 1886; II, 274). The passage from *Pêcheur d'Islande* just quoted appeared in *La Nouvelle Revue* a few days later.

¹³ While in Bordighera to paint in 1884, Monet wrote to Alice Hoschedé: "I wrack my brains to put as much of this light as I can in my paintings" (II, 247).

moment, evoked by qualities of light, was of greater importance to these painters than the precise development of details in service of an objective representation of things” (88).

There is a lot of attention to light in *Pêcheur d'Islande*, certainly, and from the very outset of the novel. The second paragraph, describing the interior of the *Marie* and noting that the hatch is closed, promptly goes on to identify the source of the light that illuminates the fishermen: “c’était une vieille lampe suspendue qui les éclairait en vacillant” ‘it was an old hanging lamp that lit them while swaying back and forth’ (I:1; one thinks in particular of Monet’s fascination with trembling light as early as the Grenouillère paintings, “La Grenouillère” or “Bathers at la Grenouillère,” 1869 Wildenstein 134-135).¹⁴ When the hatch opens and Yann enters, “par ce couvercle un instant entr’ouvert, cette lueur si pâle qui était entrée ressemblait bien à celle du jour. . . . c’était bien comme une lueur de soleil, comme une lueur crépusculaire renvoyée de très loin par des miroirs mystérieux” ‘through that momentarily partially-opened hatch the ever so pale glimmer that had entered really resembled the glimmer of daylight. . . . it was indeed like a glimmer of sunlight, like a sunset glimmer, sent back from very far away by mysterious mirrors’ (ibid). While, as in the first example, Loti sometimes describes direct light, which is not particularly Impressionistic—though at least it trembles—, he very often, as in the second, shows a preoccupation with reflected or indirect illumination. In this respect he once again reproduces a specific concern of the Impressionists who, as Canaday remarked (182), were less interested in depicting objects themselves than the play of light off them.

Later in the first chapter as the sun begins to rise, Loti notes that

Les heures passaient monotones, et, dans les grandes régions vides du dehors, lentement la lumière changeait ; elle semblait maintenant plus réelle. Ce qui avait été un crépuscule blême, une espèce de soir d’été hyperborée, devenait à présent, sans intermède de nuit, quelque chose comme une aurore, que tous les miroirs de la mer reflétaient en vagues traînées roses. . .

The hours passed in a monotone fashion, and, in the great empty regions of the outdoors, slowly the light changed; it now seemed more real. What had been a colorless sunset, sort of a hyperborean summer evening, now became, without any night interlude, something like *a dawn that all the mirrors of the sea reflected back in formless pink trails.* (ibid; emphasis added)

¹⁴ For Monet’s paintings I use the titles and numbers in Wildenstein’s revised edition of his catalogue raisonnée, *Monet* (n.p.: Taschen, n.d.), 4 vols.

When the scene shifts to Paimpol, Loti describes Gaud looking out her window at the town square: “la jeune fille, était restée assise près de sa fenêtre, regardant sur le granit des murs *les reflets jaunes du couchant*” ‘the young woman had remained seated near her window, watching on the granite facades of the walls *the yellow reflections of the setting sun*’ (I:3; emphasis added). The previously-quoted passage that speaks of indefinite color also speaks of indefinite light: “il ne faisait même pas absolument nuit. C’était éclairé faiblement, par *un reste de lumière, qui ne venait de nulle part*” ‘it wasn’t even altogether night. It was weakly lit, by *a remnant of light, that came from nowhere*’ (III:9; emphasis added); etc.

Though Loti’s fascination is usually with this impressionistic indirect or soft light, when his story moves to the Far East and the violence of war he changes the illumination accordingly. Sylvestre is wounded during a skirmish in a rice paddy in Vietnam. As he returns toward France on a hospital ship and begs that a porthole be opened so that he can have some fresh air,

il entra de la lumière seulement, de l’éblouissante lumière rouge. Le soleil couchant apparaissait à l’horizon avec une extrême splendeur, dans la déchirure d’un ciel sombre; sa lueur aveuglante se promenait au roulis, et il éclairait cet hôpital en vacillant, comme une torche que l’on balance.

only light entered, a dazzling red light. The setting sun appeared on the horizon in extreme splendor, through a gash in the dark sky; its blinding light moved in sync with the rolling of the ship, and it lit up the hospital while swaying, like a torch that someone is trying to hold upright. (III:2; note, again, the trembling, unsteady light)

Because it focused on capturing the effects of light rather than depicting objects, Impressionist painting, especially Monet’s, is also distinguished by an absence of sharp contour or form. As Chernowitz wrote, “Impressionist art does not draw the sharp outlines of an object” (156). Or, as Maria Elisabeth Kronegger phrased it, “vagueness is a major quality of any impressionistic art” (71) since, as Canaday noted, Impressionists like Monet pursued a “progressive dematerialization of matter” (187; recall Le Hir’s above-cited comment on the effects of modifying color adjectives with the suffix *-âtre/-ish*).¹⁵

¹⁵ Monet continued to pursue the breakdown of outline and form throughout his career and so shaped the general public’s idea of Impressionist painting. Some of the other Impressionists backed away from this position, however, returning to the use of models and outlines and paying greater attention to form. I thank my colleague in art history, Carol Salus, for reminding me of this.

In *Pêcheur d'Islande* there is a fascination with indefinite forms, most notably, again, during the scenes in the North Atlantic. In the first chapter, as Yann and Sylvestre fish for cod, the narrator remarks that “l’oeil saisissait à peine ce qui devait être la mer : . . . *cela n’avait ni horizon ni contours*. . . en haut, des nuages *informes* et incolores semblaient contenir cette lumière latente qui ne s’expliquait pas” ‘the eye barely caught what must have been the sea: . . . *it had neither a horizon nor outlines*. . . up in the sky, *formless* and colorless clouds seemed to contain a latent light that could not be explained’ (I:1; emphasis added). Later, when Yann, again in the North Atlantic, learns that Sylvestre has died as the result of a wound received in Vietnam, “il y avait en haut *des nuées diffuses*; elles avaient pris *des formes quelconques*, parce que les choses ne peuvent guère n’en pas avoir; dans l’obscurité, *elles se confondaient presque* pour n’être qu’un grand voile” ‘up in the sky there were *diffuse storm clouds*; they had taken *some sort of form*, because things really can’t not have one; in the darkness, *they almost fused together* to become just one large veil’ (III:9; emphasis added); etc. One can easily imagine some of Monet’s foggy-sky river paintings, like “Houses of Parliament, Fog Effect” (1904; Wildenstein 1611) or “Arm of the Seine near Giverny in the Fog” (1897; Wildenstein 1474).

Impressionist painting does not simply depict objects that themselves lack sharp outlines, however; this feature is not just one of content. It also blurs the outlines of all images by the nature of its style.¹⁶ While such a style is not particularly difficult to create with paint, transferring it to language is not so obvious. How might a writer go about breaking down the images that words normally evoke? Loti came up with one solution. Filling his language with adverbs like *presque*/almost, *un peu*/somewhat, *plus ou moins*/more or less, modal verbs like *sembler*/to seem, *paraître*/to appear, *pouvoir*/to be able to, *devoir*/to have to, and noun phrases like *une sorte de*/kind of a, *une espèce de*/a kind of, he created in *Pêcheur d'Islande* a linguistic style that undercuts the clarity of the images and ideas that many of his words would normally convey.¹⁷ The first chapter begins

¹⁶ Again, this is a very important distinction. It is how the Impressionists presented their subject matter, their style, that was new and distinguishing, not the subject matter itself (cf. Caramaschi’s previously-quoted remark, 280). In the same sense, subject matter does not define an impressionist literary work, despite what some critics have written; style is paramount.

¹⁷ In a regrettably short article, Henri Scepi quoted two uses of these modal verbs and christened them “the rhetoric of the uncertain” (67-68). Though he did not undertake a systematic study of this “rhetoric” as I have done here, explaining that he did not have the necessary time or space (68), Scepi was, I believe, right on the mark when he began his essay by declaring that, “in fact, in *Pêcheur d'Islande* . . . language is frequently derailed, as if, at times, the narrator was refusing to collaborate with the demons of realism, in order better to stake out the limits of the uncertain” (66).

with a description of the fishermen below deck on the *Marie*, somewhere in the North Atlantic:

ils étaient cinq, aux carrures terribles, accoudés à boire, dans une sorte de logis sombre qui sentait la saumure et la mer. . . . Dehors, ce devait être la mer et la nuit, mais on n'en savait trop rien. . . . De grosses poutres passaient au-dessus d'eux, presque à toucher leurs têtes; et derrière leur dos, des couchettes qui semblaient creusées dans l'épaisseur de la charpente s'ouvraient comme des niches d'un caveau pour mettre les morts.

there were five of them, with powerful shoulders, elbows on the table, drinking, in *kind of a* dark dwelling that smelled of brine and the sea. . . . Outside *must have* been the sea and the night, but one didn't really know much about that. . . . Heavy beams passed above them, *almost* touching their heads; and behind their backs, bunks that *seemed* to have been hollowed out of the thickness of the wooden frame opened like niches of a cave for corpses.

The statue of the Virgin Mary affixed to the wall “*était un peu ancienne. . . . Elle avait dû écouter plus d'une ardente prière, à des heures d'angoisse*” ‘was *somewhat* old. . . . She *must have* listened to more than one ardent prayer, when men were dying.’ As for the crew, “le capitaine *pouvait* avoir quarante ans. . . . ils *paraissaient* éprouver un vrai bien-être, ainsi tapis dans leur gîte obscur” ‘the captain *could* have been forty. . . . they *seemed* to feel a real well-being, crouched like that in their dark lodging.’ The cabin boy “*était un petit garçon robuste, à la figure ronde, un peu le cousin de tous ces marins qui étaient plus ou moins parents entre eux*” ‘was a robust young boy, with a round face, *somewhat* the cousin of all those sailors, who were *more or less* related to each other.’ Outside, “ce qui avait été un crépuscule blême, *une espèce de soir d'été hyperborée, devenait à présent, sans intermède de nuit, quelque chose comme une aurore, que tous les miroirs de la mer reflétaient en vagues traînées roses*” ‘what had been a colorless sunset, *sort of a* hyperborean summer evening, now became, without any night interlude, *something like* a dawn, that all the mirrors of the sea reflected back in formless pink trails.’ Using these words and phrases throughout this chapter and those that follow, Loti blurs the images and ideas that his medium, words, would normally evoke, much as his Impressionist contemporaries did by softening contours and outlines in their paintings.

In creating this verbal equivalent of Impressionist style, Loti was aiming at more than just a literary replication of his painterly contemporaries' visual effects.

On Loti's opinion of the Realism/Naturalism being practiced by his contemporaries, see the acceptance speech he gave upon his entry into the French Academy (7 April, 1892), a speech that permanently alienated Edmond de Goncourt.

As he implies at one point in *Pêcheur d'Islande* and as he states somewhat more directly five years later in *Le Roman d'un enfant* 'The Story of a Child' (1891), this Impressionist style was an essential part of his literary and artistic aesthetic. When, after learning of Sylvestre's death in Vietnam, Yann goes up on the deck of the *Marie* and gazes at the cloudy North Atlantic sky, the text notes:

Mais, en un point de ce ciel, très bas, près des eaux [the clouds] faisaient une sorte de marbrure plus distincte, bien que très lointaine; un dessin mou, comme tracé par une main distraite; combinaison de hasard, non destinée à être vue, et fugitive, prête à mourir. --Et cela seul, dans tout cet ensemble, paraissait signifier quelque chose; on eût dit que la pensée mélancolique, insaisissable, de tout ce néant, était inscrite là; --et les yeux finissaient par s'y fixer, sans le vouloir.

Lui, Yann, à mesure que ses prunelles mobiles s'habituait à l'obscurité du dehors, il regardait de plus en plus cette marbrure unique du ciel; elle avait forme de quelqu'un qui s'affaisse, avec deux bras qui se tendent. Et à présent qu'il avait commencé à voir là cette apparence, il lui semblait que ce fût une vraie ombre humaine, agrandie, rendue gigantesque à force de venir de loin.

Puis, dans son imagination où flottaient ensemble des rêves indicibles et les croyances primitives, cette ombre triste, effondrée au bout de ce ciel de ténèbres, se mêlait peu à peu au souvenir de son frère mort, comme une dernière manifestation de lui. Il était coutumier de ces étranges associations d'images, comme il s'en forme surtout au commencement de la vie, dans la tête des enfants. . . Mais les mots, si vagues qu'ils soient, restent encore trop précis pour exprimer ces choses; il faudrait cette langue incertaine qui se parle quelquefois dans les rêves, et dont on ne retient au réveil que d'énigmatiques fragments n'ayant plus de sens.

A contempler ce nuage, il sentait venir une tristesse profonde, angoissée, pleine d'inconnu et de mystère, qui lui glaçait l'âme; beaucoup mieux que tout à l'heure, il comprenait maintenant que son pauvre petit frère ne reparaitrait jamais, jamais plus; le chagrin, qui avait été long à percer l'enveloppe robuste et dure de son cœur, y entra à présent jusqu'à pleins bords. Il revoyait la figure douce de Sylvestre, ses bons yeux d'enfant; à l'idée de l'embrasser, quelque chose comme un voile tombait tout à coup entre ses paupières, malgré lui, --et d'abord il ne s'expliquait pas bien ce que c'était, n'ayant jamais pleuré dans sa vie d'homme. --Mais les larmes commençaient à couler lourdes, rapides, sur ses joues; et puis des sanglots vinrent soulever sa poitrine profonde.

But, in one part of that sky, very low, near the water [the clouds] formed sort of a more distinct marbling, though it was very far away; a vague drawing, as if traced by a distracted hand; a chance arrangement, not intended for viewing, fugitive, ready to die away. --And that alone, in all of that together, appeared to signify something; one would have said that the melancholy, elusive thought of all that nothingness was inscribed there; --and one's eyes ended up focusing on that, without wanting to.

Yann, as his constantly moving pupils got used to the darkness of the outdoors, looked more and more at that unique marbling of the sky; it had the form

of someone who is sinking down, with two arms that reach out. And now that he had begun to see that appearance there, *it seemed to him* that it was a real human shadow, grown larger, gigantic because it came from far away.

Then, in his imagination where dreams that could not be put into words floated together with primitive beliefs, *that sad shadow, slumped at the bottom of that gloomy sky, became mixed little by little with the memory of his dead brother [Sylvestre], like a last manifestation of him.* He was accustomed to these strange associations of images, such as take shape especially at the beginning of life, in the minds of children. . . . But words, no matter how vague they are, are still too precise to express these things; you would need the uncertain language that is spoken, sometimes, in dreams, of which, upon waking, people only retain enigmatic fragments that no longer have any meaning.

Looking at that cloud, he felt a deep, anguish-filled sadness, full of the unknown and the mysterious, that froze his soul; he understood now, much better than before, that his poor young brother would never reappear, never again; sorrow, which had been slow to pierce his heart's hardy, hard envelop, now filled it entirely. He saw Sylvestre's sweet face again, his good child's eyes; at the thought of kissing him, something like a veil suddenly fell across his eyelids, despite him, –and at first he couldn't really explain to himself what it was, never having cried in all the years he had been a man. –But the tears started to flow, thickly, rapidly, down his cheeks; and then sobs shook his broad chest. (III:9; emphasis added)

In describing this one bank of clouds as “a vague *drawing*, as if traced by a distracted hand,” Loti equates it to an artwork. Because it seems to be an intentional creation, it therefore “appeared to signify something.” Indeed, in this case “one would have said that the melancholy, elusive thought of all that nothingness was inscribed there.” Because it is not clearly drawn, however, the observer finds herself focusing on it, making an effort to understand it: “your eyes ended up focusing on that, without wanting to.”

The result of the viewer's concentration on the unclear artwork is not comprehension of the artist's intent, however, that “melancholy thought.” Rather, the image, because it appears incomplete, causes the viewer's mind to dredge up something of its own to complete the image so as to make it comprehensible—Yann's “memory of his dead brother” Sylvestre—forcing him to confront the dredged-up element—Yann finally cries—and thereby helping her understand it: “he understood now, much better than before, that his poor younger brother would never reappear, never again.” Not only does Yann come to accept the reality and finality of Sylvestre's death, which he had refused to confront when first learning of it (III:7), as well as his own feelings with regard to it; he also comes to understand the reasons behind these feelings: “Ainsi Yann redoutait pour lui-même d'être pris par la mer, comme si cela anéantissait davantage, --et

la pensée que Sylvestre était resté là-bas, dans cette terre lointaine d'en dessous, rendait son chagrin plus désespéré, plus sombre" 'And so Yann feared being taken by the sea himself, as if that put you even deeper into oblivion, –and the thought that Sylvestre had remained there, in that faraway land on the other side of the world, made his sorrow darker, more hopeless' (ibid). All this from viewing one very impressionist "drawing."¹⁸

In case any of his pre-Proust readers missed the aesthetic implications of this passage, Loti laid them out in a more straightforward fashion five years later in his semi-autobiographical novel, *Le Roman d'un enfant*—which, not surprisingly, Proust would quote verbatim in his correspondence (*Correspondance I*, 136). Early in that novel the narrator, Pierre, recounts how, at the age of five or six, he made two drawings, the "Happy duck" and the "Unhappy duck." Like most children's art they were basically sketches, but this very incompleteness gives them, for Pierre, great value. He explains:

J'ai souvent remarqué du reste que des barbouillages rudimentaires tracés par des enfants, des tableaux aux couleurs fausses et froides, peuvent impressionner beaucoup plus que d'habiles ou géniales peintures, par cela précisément qu'ils sont incomplets et qu'on est conduit, en les regardant, à y ajouter mille choses de soi-même, mille choses sorties des tréfonds insondés et qu'aucun pinceau ne saurait saisir.

I have often noticed, for that matter, that rudimentary scribbles drawn by children, pictures with false and cold colors, can impress much more than skillful or masterful paintings, precisely because they are incomplete and you are led, as you look at them, to add to them a thousand things of your own, a thousand things that rise up from your unplumbed depths and that no paintbrush could capture. (IX; emphasis added)

Since Pierre had just linked painting and writing at the beginning of the previous chapter, speaking in one phrase of those "doués pour bien peindre (avec des couleurs ou avec des mots)" 'gifted for painting well (with colors or words)' (VIII), the applicability of this aesthetic to writing seems clear. Loti here states quite directly that he values the apparently incomplete, unfinished work of art because it causes the viewer's or reader's mind to call up elements from its own depths in an effort to complete and thereby make sense of what it sees.¹⁹ This is

¹⁸ It is easy to see why Loti was one of Proust's favorite authors. This one scene in *Pêcheur d'Islande* contains in a few paragraphs the aesthetic that the younger writer would develop at far greater length in *A la recherche du temps perdu*, particularly in the middle section of the last volume, *Le Temps retrouvé* 'Time Regained'.

¹⁹ The passage includes a metaphorical depiction of thoughts emerging from the subconscious thanks to an artistic creation: words printed on the other side of the paper on which Pierre had drawn the

what happens to Yann when he views the vague drawing” in the cloud-covered North Atlantic sky, and to the reader when she deals with *Pêcheur d’Islande*’s intentionally declarifying style. It is interesting to note that in both works Loti expresses his aesthetics in terms of painting. It is also worth noting that in both cases what the viewer—and hence, also, the reader—brings to the artwork cannot be captured by an artist: Loti writes of Yann’s reaction that “words, no matter how vague they are, are still too precise to express these things,” and remarks that the viewer of children’s drawings summons up things “that no paintbrush could capture.”

In this sense, the viewer/reader of an impressionist work, pictorial or literary, is very different from its creator (at least as Monet described his painting to the public; the reality was somewhat different). If the creator works to capture an initial perception of some motive without letting his mind “intervene and interpret things . . . according to his knowledge of [their] permanent color and form” (Chernowitz 165-6; recall Monet’s desire to paint free of anyone else’s reactions to his motifs), the viewer/reader of an impressionist work, faced with its apparent incompleteness, will, even if only subconsciously, make an effort to complete the work so that it makes sense. If Yann does this once as he looks at a cloudy North Atlantic sky, Gaud Mével does it constantly when faced with Yann’s avoidance of her, or even later, after their marriage, when she receives an emotionless letter from him (V:3). She is always completing what she sees or reads so that it makes sense to her. One might therefore argue that she is a figuration of the viewer/reader of impressionist art in the artwork itself, what the French call a “mise en abîme,” a device that Loti would have known from the works of painters like Rembrandt and Velasquez, to which he refers in other writings. This is very different from some critics’ presentation of passive, non-analytical observers as the quintessence of impressionist characterization (see footnote 1), and suggests that there is more than one sort of impressionist character.

The Impressionists, and in particular Monet, distinguished themselves from their predecessors by, in Robert Rosenblum’s words, “intensifying the uniqueness of the artist-observer as the only source of visual truth about the external world” (361). At least in principle, Impressionist painters put on a canvas only what they themselves could see, and from a particular location. The literary art-

unhappy duck bleed through to “complete” the work. This is, of course, all highly evocative of Proust’s writings on the function of art and involuntary memory. For similarities between *Le roman d’un enfant* and *A la recherche du temps perdu* on this issue, see Berrong Ch. 8.

ist can do this as well. In *Pêcheur d'Islande*, Loti suggests the same aesthetic by presenting not a continuous narrative offered through an omniscient disembodied narrator such as one finds in the traditional novels of his predecessors and contemporaries, but rather a series of discontinuous scenes, each of which is constructed as if viewed from the perspective of one human witness who, like Monet's artist-observer, is present in just one identifiable place.²⁰ When it is necessary to provide information about what happens between such observed scenes, Loti generally relies on personalized flashbacks. As a result, this information enters the text not as the atemporal remarks of a non-localized narrating voice, as in traditional narrative, but as the thoughts of the observer of the moment, thereby retaining the "uniqueness of the observer as the only source of truth about the external world."

For example: Part I, Chapter 6 through Part II, Chapter 1 depict Yann and Sylvestre in the North Atlantic. Part II, Chapter 2 opens back in Brittany with Gaud, whom we have not seen since Part I, Chapter 5, when she was in her room in Paimpol, walking to Pors Even. There is no connecting narrative from an omniscient narrator explaining how much time has elapsed since we last saw Gaud, what she has done since then, why she is walking to Pors Even, etc. Only as the chapter progresses does Loti use her thoughts to bridge the gap between this scene and our last encounter with her. When we next see Sylvestre, in his barracks in Brest at the beginning of II:5, Loti uses the character's memories to bridge the gap since we last saw him, in Gaud's recollections, leaving Paimpol for the service (II:2). When we next see him, on a ship sailing to the Far East (II:9), the author employs the young sailor's thoughts to depict what happened to him after his time in Brest (II:5-8), etc.

Given this emphasis on specific individual consciousness and its perception of the world, it is not surprising that Loti took advantage of the temporal quality of his medium, language, to draw his readers' attention to the "epistemological processes" implied by the Impressionist aesthetic that Peters and other recent scholars have declared to be the defining quality of literary impressionism. Rather than simply describing or explaining things as they are, as only an omniscient narrator can do, Loti fills his novel with instantaneous, aconceptual first impres-

²⁰ Jules Lemaître noted a similar narrative structure in the impressionistic novels of the Goncourt brothers, where, he observed, the action is often "broken up into small pieces, cut up into tableaux between which there are rather large empty spaces" (51, quoted in Caramaschi 283). Caramaschi (296) describes this effect in the Goncourts' masterpiece, *Germanie Lacerteux* (1865), whose seventy often short chapters are not always initially linked.

sions, such as consciousness experiences when in contact with the real world, and then has his readers follow how a particular consciousness “intervenes and interprets things in conventional, rational, causal terms” (Chernowitz 166).

When Gaud arrives at the Gaos home in Pors Even, hoping to meet the elusive Yann, she at one point goes upstairs to see the newly-added second floor. Suddenly

. . . Un pas un peu lourd dans l’escalier la fit tressaillir.

Non, ce n’était pas Yann, mais un homme qui lui ressemblait malgré ses cheveux déjà blancs, qui avait presque sa haute stature et qui était droit comme lui: le père Gaos rentrant de la pêche.

. . . A somewhat heavy footstep on the staircase made her tremble.

No, it wasn’t Yann, but a man who resembled him despite his white hair, who was almost as tall as he, and who stood straight like him: his father Mr. Gaos, coming back from fishing. (II:3)

Rather than start with facts that Gaud, given her location and experience, could not know—“Gaud heard Mr. Gaos’ footsteps on the stairs” or something to that effect—the passage begins with only what she could perceive from where she is, an aural impression: “a somewhat heavy footstep on the staircase.” It then follows Gaud’s reaction to this impression—she trembles, obviously assuming at first that Yann has arrived—moves on to the moment when she sees the man who made the noise, and finally conveys the conclusion that she draws from what she sees: this man resembles Yann but is older; he must therefore be Yann’s father. “The facts of the matter” could have been expressed much more succinctly, but Loti is clearly interested, instead, in “presenting phenomena as the subject actually experiences them.”

One of Loti’s favorite rhetorical devices is repetition to highlight a difference. Near the end of the novel, when Gaud has been waiting for months without word for Yann to return from the sea, she again hears footsteps coming from outside her range of vision.

Des pas d’homme tout à coup, des pas précipités dans le chemin! A pareille heure, qui pouvait passer? Elle se dressa, remuée jusqu’au fond de l’âme, son coeur cessant de battre.

On s’arrêtait devant la porte, on montait les petites marches de pierre...

Lui ! . . . Oh ! Joie du ciel, lui ! . . . On avait frappé, est-ce que ce pouvait être un autre ! . . . Elle était debout, pieds nus; elle, si faible depuis tant de jours, avait sauté lestement comme les chattes, les bras ouverts pour enlacer le bien-aimé. Sans doute la Léopoldine était arrivée de nuit, et mouillée en face dans la baie de Pors-Even, --et lui, il accourait; elle arrangeait tout cela dans

sa tête avec une vitesse d'éclair. Et maintenant, elle se déchirait les doigts aux clous de la porte, dans sa rage pour retirer ce verrou qui était dur. . .

--Ah! . . . Et puis elle recula lentement, affaissée, la tête retombée sur la poitrine. Son beau rêve de folle était fini. Ce n'était que Fantec, leur voisin. . .

Suddenly a man's footsteps, hurried footsteps on the path! At such an hour, who could be passing by? She sat up, shaken to the depth of her soul, her heart stopped beating. . .

Someone was stopping at the front door, they were climbing the little stone steps. . .

Him! . . . Oh! Thank heaven, him! . . . They had knocked, could it be anyone else! . . . She was standing up, barefoot; so weak for so many days, she had jumped up quickly like female cats do, her arms open to clasp the beloved. The *Leopoldine* had probably arrived during the night, and dropped anchor across from the house in the bay off Pors-Even, --and he ran; she arranged all that in her mind with the speed of lightening. And now, she was tearing her fingers on the nails in the door in her rage to draw the bolt, which was hard to open. . .

"Ah! . . ." And then she drew back slowly, sinking down, her head dropping on her chest. Her beautiful madwoman's dream was over. It was only Fantec, their neighbor. . . (V:10)

Again, Loti starts with an aural impression, all Gaud could have experienced from inside the hut, "suddenly a man's footsteps, hurried footsteps on the path!," and proceeds to follow one consciousness' analysis of it.

The author treats visual impressions the same way. Chapter I:3 opens as follows:

A Paimpol, un beau soir de cette année-là, un dimanche de juin, il y avait deux femmes très occupées à écrire une lettre. . . .

Penchées sur leur table, toutes deux semblaient jeunes; l'une avait une coiffe extrêmement grande, à la mode d'autrefois; l'autre, une coiffe toute petite, de la forme nouvelle qu'ont adoptée les Paimpolaises: --Deux amoureuses, eût-on dit, rédigeant ensemble un message tendre pour quelque bel Islandais.

Celle qui dictait--la grande coiffe--releva la tête, cherchant ses idées. Tiens! Elle était vieille, très vieille, malgré sa tournure jeune, ainsi vue de dos sous son petit châle brun. Mais tout à fait vieille: une bonne grand'mère d'au moins soixante-dix ans. Encore jolie par exemple, et encore fraîche, avec les pommettes bien roses, comme certains vieillards ont le don de les conserver. . . .

L'autre, voyant que les idées ne venaient plus, s'était mise à écrire soigneusement l'adresse. . . .

Après, elle aussi releva la tête pour demander :

--C'est-il fini, grand-mère Moan?

Elle était bien jeune, celle-ci, adorablement jeune, une figure de vingt ans. Très blonde, --couleur rare en ce coin de Bretagne où la race est brune; très blonde, avec des yeux d'un gris de lin à cils presque noirs. Ses sourcils, blonds

autant que ses cheveux, étaient comme repeints au milieu d'une ligne plus rousse, plus foncée, qui donnait une expression de vigueur et de volonté. . . .

In Paimpol, one beautiful evening that year, one Sunday in June, there were two women very busy writing a letter. . . .

Leaning over their table, both of them seemed young; one had an extremely large coiffe [a lace headpiece that Breton women wore], in the style of times gone by; the other, a very small coiffe, in the new shape that Paimpol women have adopted: "Two women in love," one would have said, drafting a tender message together for some handsome North Atlantic fisherman.

The one who was dictating—the large coiffe—raised her head, hunting for ideas. What do you know! She was old, very old, despite her youthful form as it was seen from behind under her little brown shawl. Very definitely old: a nice grandmother, at least seventy years old. Still pretty, though, and still healthy, with nice pink cheeks, the way some old people are lucky enough to be able to preserve them. . . .

The other one, seeing that she wasn't getting any more ideas, had started writing the address, carefully. . . .

After that, she also raised her head to ask:

"Are you done, grandmother?"

She was quite young, this one, adorably young, a twenty-year-old's face. Very blond, —a rare color in that corner of Brittany, where the race has brown hair; very blond, with flax-grey eyes under almost black eyelashes. Her eyebrows, as blond as her hair, looked like they had been repainted in the middle with a redder, darker line that created an expression of strength and willpower. . . . (I:3)

This chapter could have begun: "Gaud Mével and Yvonne Moan were busy writing a letter to Sylvestre." Instead, as if we have just arrived in the room ourselves and are standing somewhere behind the two women so that we cannot initially see their faces, the two are at first presented without names. Only as the scene unfolds and they turn in our direction do we learn how old they are and, as if recognizing them, who they are. This is certainly a striking example of "the uniqueness of the (artist)-observer as the only source of visual truth about the external world."

It is different from the first two examples, however, where the perceiving and analyzing consciousness belongs to a character we see in the narrative (in those cases, Gaud Mével). In the third example we are still restricted to one person's possible perception and analysis, but this time it is a person who does not figure in the story. It is as if we, or at least the narrator, are physically present in one precise spot in Gaud's room, which is a remarkably effective way of bringing to the reader's attention "the way human beings obtain knowledge" (Peters 2).

Loti opens Chapter II:7 in a similar way. Having described in the previous chapter Sylvestre's time in Brest waiting to be shipped out to Indochina and his refusal to consort with local prostitutes, the text begins:

–Elle est un peu ancienne, son amoureuse! disaient les autres, deux jours après, en riant derrière lui; c'est égal, ils ont l'air de bien s'entendre tout de même.

Ils s'amusaient de le voir, pour la première fois, se promener dans les rues de Recouvrance avec une femme au bras, comme tout le monde, se penchant vers elle d'un air tendre, lui disant des choses qui avaient l'air tout à fait douce.

Une petite personne à la tournure assez alerte, vue de dos; –des jupes un peu courtes, par exemple, pour la mode du jour; un petit châle brun, et une grande coiffe de Paimpolaise.

Elle aussi, suspendue à son bras, se retournait vers lui pour le regarder avec tendresse.

–Elle est un peu ancienne, l'amoureuse!

Ils disaient cela, les autres, sans grande malice, voyant bien que c'était une bonne vieille grand'mère venue de la campagne.

“That lover of his is kind of old!” the others said, two days later, laughing behind him; “it doesn't matter, they seem to get along well anyway.”

They got a kick out of seeing him walking the streets of Recouvrance with a woman on his arm for the first time, like everyone else, leaning toward her in a tender fashion, telling her things that seemed to be quite sweet.

A little person with a fairly energetic form, seen from behind; –rather short skirts, true, considering the latest fashion; a little brown shawl, and a great big Paimpol coiffe.

She, too, leaning on his arm, turned toward him from time to time to look at him with tenderness.

“That lover of his is kind of old!”

The others said that without real malice, seeing clearly that she was a nice old grandmother who had come from the country. (II:7)

Not until the last paragraph do we discover that the woman on Sylvestre's arm is not a girlfriend or more short-term female companion but his grandmother Yvonne, who has made the trip from Ploubazlanec because Sylvestre and his fellow sailors were not granted leave to say good-bye to their families at home. Once again we are limited to a specific, localized consciousness' perspective and perception. Here as well the consciousness does not appear to belong to any identified character, though this time the reader could imagine it belonging to someone who might actually be there, perhaps one of the other sailors in Sylvestre's unit. All four of these examples, like so many others in the novel, draw the reader's attention to “the way human beings obtain knowledge” rather than simply to the knowledge itself. In addition, the frequent use of free indirect dis-

course to present such mental processes, as well as elsewhere in the text, has its own impressionist effect: the unsignaled apparent shifts in perspective between narrator and character blur the distinction between the two.

Other times the initial, aconceptual aural or visual impression is left unresolved, as in an Impressionist painting; we learn only what we would perceive if we were there, looking on, without any subsequent discovery of the missing details, what Ruth Moser, speaking of Loti's previous novel, *Mon frère Yves*, referred to as "turning things over to non-analyzed perception" (135), the essence of Monet's Impressionist aesthetic and an equally valid technique in literary impressionism. Sometimes this involves minor points. In the first chapter, in a passage already cited, the text says that the crew of the *Marie* "paraissaient éprouver un vrai bien-être, ainsi tapis dans leur gîte obscur" 'seemed to feel a real well-being, crouched like that in their dark lodging,' but does not go on to inform us if they really did. When Gaud stops at a chapel on the way to Pors Even and starts to read the commemorative panels in the entrance, the narrative tells us that one "plaque semblait être là depuis de longues années" 'panel seemed to have been there for many years' (II:3) but does not provide us with any corroborative information. When Sylvestre arrives at Port-Saïd on his way to Vietnam, his ship and all the others there "s'engouffraient dans une sorte de long canal, étroit comme un fossé, qui fuyait en ligne argentée dans l'infini de ces sables" 'were swallowed up in sort of a long canal, narrow like a ditch, that fled in a silvery line into the infinitude of the sands' (II:9). Though the reader, better informed than Sylvestre, guesses that this "sort of a long canal" must be the Suez, one of the marvels of nineteenth-century French civil engineering, the text, as if operating through the mind of Sylvestre or one of the other uneducated seamen on board his ship, never provides that information.²¹

²¹ In his essay on the Goncourt brothers, Paul Bourget points out that their style, often referred to as impressionistic,

surrounds the character with a decor seen by an artist's eyes. . . . There is . . . , in the perception that [most] people form of things, a continuous insufficiency; the true painting of that milieu is one that takes into account this insufficiency of perception. It seems to me that those novelists who are primarily preoccupied with transcribing the aspects of life in a very carefully weighed prose do not understand this law. They evoke an interior, a countryside, a street, with the sharpened imagination of a writer, —but the man whom they put in that frame could not see in that fashion.' (194)

This is certainly true of *Germinie Lacerteux*, where the famous "Impressionist" chapters are recounted from one observer's point of view but with vocabulary and a knowledge that none of the characters present could possibly have had. Paul Valéry criticized the Goncourt brothers for this same thing (614). As the passage regarding the "sort of a long canal" just quoted and many others illustrate, Loti did not commit that sort of inconsistency in *Pêcheur d'Islande*.

Sometimes this painterly Impressionism becomes central to the narrative itself. In Part II, Chapter 12, the *Marie* runs aground on something while navigating the English Channel; just previously, the text had mentioned that Yann “paraissait avoir besoin de s’agiter, pour chasser de son esprit quelque obsession” ‘appeared to need to move around, to chase some obsession from his mind’ (II:12). After much effort by the crew the ship finally breaks free. The text makes clear that the grounding has been a metaphorical representation of Yann’s obsession, remarking “*et du même coup*, la tristesse d’Yann s’était envolée aussi” ‘and Yann’s sadness had flown away *as well, as a result of the same exertion*’ (ibid; emphasis added), but it provides no explanation for either problem. We know only what we could see if we were there. In the same respect, Part III, Chapter 11 presents the *Marie*’s encounter with the *Reine Berthe* and then provides the news that the latter was destroyed at sea. The last storm occurred three weeks before the encounter, leaving the crew of the *Marie* to wonder “si, ce matin-là, ils n’avaient point causé avec des trépassés” ‘if, that morning, they had spoken with deadmen’ (III:11). Again, the text provides no resolution of their fear, no information other than that available to the crew.

The same is true of the novel’s central mystery: why, after having shown so much initial interest in her, did Yann spend the next two years avoiding Gaud? After he finally proposes to her she imagines all sorts of reasons (IV:2, IV:5), like the viewer of an Impressionist painting trying to make it make sense, but the narration never offers any confirmations. Chernowitz remarks that Gustave Flaubert, an author both Loti and Proust much admired, also “often prefers to ‘ignore’ facts and to convey the conjectures of a character or of a supposed bystander” (162). As a result, truth becomes subordinate to perception: “A person becomes the sum total of other people’s opinions which he reflects. We do not know what he is *per se*” (152). Chernowitz was concerned with Proust’s Charles Swann: in the early pages of *A la recherche du temps perdu* Proust focuses on how different characters see Swann from very different perspectives, each thinking, incorrectly, that she or he knows him in his entirety.²² Loti does not present so many different perspectives on Yann, but neither does he ever reveal his “mystery,” as Gaud refers to it. We see how Gaud explains his behavior but we never learn if her explanations coincide with the truth, just as we

²² In the same sense, Peters notes of Conrad that “throughout his writings, he rejects attempts to universalize truth and demonstrates that human experience is always individualized” (3).

never learn on what the *Marie* was stranded in the English Channel or whether the *Reine Berthe* she encountered later was a ghost ship.

By focusing on how sight perceives the world, rather than the world itself, the Impressionists foregrounded the senses. Monet was probably happy to read Emile Zola's reaction to his (now lost) "Boats Coming out of the Port of Le Havre" (Wildenstein 89), which the writer saw in the 1868 Salon: "we hear the muffled and panting voice of the steamship, which fills the air with its nauseous smoke. I saw those raw colors, I inhaled those salty smells" (208). Here an author can do the same thing more easily. In *Pêcheur d'Islande* Loti foregrounded individual sensory perception by repeatedly making the reader aware of auditory and olfactory as well as visual stimuli. We have already noted some of the references to sounds, but there are many to smell as well. In the very first sentence of the novel, even before the first annotations regarding sound and light, the text, in describing the interior of the *Marie*, notes that the five fishermen down in the cabin "étaient . . . accoudés à boire, dans une sorte de logis sombre qui sentait la saumure et la mer" 'were . . . elbows on the table, drinking, in kind of a dark dwelling that smelled of brine and the sea' (I:1; emphasis added; this smell is noted again three more times in the opening scene). Subsequently those odors are perceived by some (here unspecified) individual, "on sentait la saumure et la mer" 'one smelled the brine and the sea,' and not just declared to exist: "there was an odor of brine and the sea," or something of that sort. In the next scene, as Gaud recalls her first meeting with Yann, she remembers the sensations she had encountered while walking through Paimpol shortly after her return from Paris. Along with the sights and sounds was "l'église au perron semé de feuillages, tout ouverte en grande baie sombre, avec son odeur d'encens" 'the church, its entrance strewn with leaves, wide open like a great, dark bay, with its odor of incense' (I:4; emphasis added). Again, the olfactory stimulus is presented through the scene's here-specified observer, Gaud, and not through some unlocalized atemporal narrating consciousness. Later in that same scene Gaud, as she sits at her open window, notices that "il y avait du reste une autre odeur douce qui était montée des jardins et des cours, celle des chèvrefeuilles fleuris sur le granit des murs, --et aussi une vague senteur de goémon, venue du port" 'there was also another sweet smell that had risen from the gardens and the courtyards, that of honeysuckle flowering on the granite walls, --and also a vague smell of seaweed, from the harbor' (I:5). When Sylvestre goes ashore in India on his way to Vietnam, he notes the strange, different smells there: "Le vent qui

poussait cette pluie sentait le musc et les fleurs” ‘The wind that was driving this rain smelled of musk and flowers’ (II:10). As Gaud walks back from Paimpol to Ploubazlanec one day, she remarks that “On sentait l’odeur salée des grèves, et l’odeur douce de certaines petites fleurs qui croissent sur les falaises entre les épines maigres” ‘You smelled the salty smell of the shore, and the sweet smell of certain little flowers that grow on the cliffs between the meager thorns’ (III:12). When, waiting for Yann’s return, she goes to the Widows’ Cross to scan the sea, the text notes that “autour de cette croix de Pors-Even, il y avait les landes éternellement vertes, tapissées d’ajoncs courts. Et, à cette hauteur, l’air de la mer était très pur, ayant à peine l’odeur salée des goémons, mais rempli des senteurs délicieuses de septembre” ‘around this Pors-Even cross there were eternally green heaths, carpeted with short gorse. And, that high up, the sea air was very pure, having barely the salty smell of seaweed, but filled with the delicious smells of September’ (V:8); etc.

As we have seen, there are a variety of ways in which literature can be impressionist, some transferred or adapted from the style of painting for which the term was coined, others extrapolated from it but unique to language. One can find some of them in the works of Flaubert, the Goncourt brothers, Proust, James, Conrad, and other writers of the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; others, particularly the transference of Impressionist disintegration of form to language, are more particular to Loti. How many of them, and in what concentration, one has to encounter to qualify a work as impressionist I will leave to each reader to decide. I would emphasize again, however, that, like its painterly counterpart, literary impressionism must be primarily a matter of style and not just of content. Artists long before the Impressionists painted landscapes, clouds, seascapes, light, etc., but none of them would be considered Impressionists. It is their *style* that distinguishes Monet and his colleagues from their predecessors and successors, not their subject matter. Similarly, Loti’s preoccupation with light and formless objects is not sufficient to make *Pêcheur d’Islande* impressionist. It is his undermining of the precision of language, juxtaposition of colors, focus on individual perception, etc., i.e., elements of style, that make the novel like a Monet canvas in a significant way. I hope, should readers of this essay do me the honor of using my categories in their studies of other examples of literary impressionism, that they will keep this in mind.

If I have limited my examples here to *Pêcheur d’Islande*, it is in part because American readers are less likely to be aware of it than the works of

the other authors mentioned and so more likely to learn something new with this essay. It is also, however, because Loti's masterpiece constitutes a particularly comprehensive example of the diversity of ways in which literature can be impressionist, and therefore a particularly effective tool with which to demonstrate how literature can both parallel painting by developing techniques specific to its own medium that allow it to achieve the same effects as the visual art, and complement painting by pursuing implications of the painter's aesthetic that canvas cannot convey.²³ It is therefore worth, on this point, such extensive study. I hope, however, that this analysis of it will also serve as a guide to a more enriched understanding of the ways in which other literary works can be seen as impressionist, as well as demonstrate how fruitful a very focused, specific analysis of literature from the perspective of painting can be.

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²³ The novel has been translated into English seven times, so it is accessible to students of literature or art interested in pursuing the connections between the two. Since the original French text is fairly easy reading in terms of vocabulary and style and since many students have an interest in French Impressionist painting, *Pêcheur d'Islande* is also an ideal text for a fourth-year high school or third-year college French program when there is an instructor who is interested in using art as a way of easing students into the reading of literature in a foreign language. American foreign-language textbook publishers brought out eight school editions of the work between 1896 and 1935, some abridged and some complete, all of which include glossaries (for these, see Berrong 240 n. 11). French teachers may also make use of the website I have created, which provides the full text of the novel "illustrated" by many Monet canvases: <http://www.personal.kent.edu/~rberrong/fr33212/pecheurdislande.htm>

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