

NOTES AND SHORT ESSAYS

The French Lieutenant's Woman and "Las Meninas": Correspondences of Art

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Even as creative perceptions cross-fertilize one another, so may contemporary perceptions of the purpose and function of art be renewed by looking backward. There exists, for example, a curious parallel between the art of Diego de Silva Velazquez's 1656 "Las Meninas" and John Fowles's 1969 novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman* in that both artists concentrate in like manner on the creator of the artifact, although he at first appears not to be the obvious focus of either work.

In the foreground of Velazquez's presentation of the Spanish court are the attendants upon the Infanta, who stands in the middle of the painting. Occupying the middle ground on the right side are the shadowy figures of a priest and a nun, while at the left, alone and clearly prominent, is the painter who has just turned away from capturing the likenesses of the King and Queen who are not properly in the scene but whose images are reflected in a mirror in the rear ground. Alongside that mirror stands an observer, framed in an open doorway. Velazquez arranges the nine figures in the painting and the royal couple's reflection so that the eye of the viewer follows a system of triangulations, grouping and regrouping the figures, but never obscuring the reflected image in the mirror. Fowles tells his story in the manner of Thomas Hardy. Charles Smithson, a Victorian fossil collector, becomes intrigued with Sarah Woodruff, a woman whom public opinion has labeled an adulteress. Sarah suffers the hushed comments of the community and the cruel charity of Mrs. Poulteney, who takes the outcast in, seemingly providing her with acceptance but in fact making her life miserable by placing severe moral restrictions upon her. Charles is innocently drawn to Sarah, nearly to the exclusion of his other duties before Dr. Grogan, his confidant, points out to him his neglect of other responsibilities. Charles falls in love with his illusion of Sarah and abandons his fiancée Ernestina Freeman. The narrator moves fluidly within his narrative, addresses his reader directly and, near the novel's conclusion, becomes a participant in the action. The novelist offers his reader either two or three conclusions to his novel, indicating strongly that the ending that comes at the novel's end is the one that will "tyrannize" over the reader's imagination. By doing so he insists on the experience that ends the novel as one aspect of the book's artistry.

As Velazquez represents himself both inside and outside his canvas, so Fowles serves as both narrator and character within his tale. If we fail to see the immediate representation of the King and Queen in Velazquez's painting, the ostensible subject of his *mise en scene*, so also do we fail to see a fully-realized representation of Sarah Woodruff as a character in Fowles's novel. What becomes important in an understanding of both works are the technical aspects of the processes of representation to achieve verisimilitude rather than the subject matter both artists employ; not so

much what is represented becomes significant, as how the subject matter is presented. It is through an appreciation of perspective, balance, tone, setting, as well as character, that we are led to see a harmonious whole and to acknowledge the complex relationships of family, social, and artistic life that comprise the subject matter of both works.

Velazquez presents as the outward subject of his painting the often represented King Philip IV and Queen Mariana. They are the important figures of their time and, as such, the ostensible focus of both the painter and the group assembled within the frame of the picture. Yet, they appear, hazily, reflected in a mirror, slightly to the left of center in the rearground. Fowles in fact presents Sarah in much the same way—we glimpse her through a series of reflections as she is viewed by others, Mrs. Poulteney, Dr. Grogan, even the narrator as he presents himself within the artifact. We see reflections of her, through the observations of the other characters, just as we “see” the King and Queen being viewed by those represented in the foreground of Velazquez’s painting even as they turn away from the artist’s canvas within the frame.

The true focus of Velazquez’s canvas, however, is the Infanta, exquisitely attired as she looks from the canvas we are not permitted to see to her parents. And Fowles treats Charles Smithson in much the same manner as he as controlling artist regards Smithson’s compelling need to reflect on Sarah. Both the Infanta and Smithson draw us into the world of place and time and direct our attention to the subject of apparent interest—the King and Queen, Sarah. Our eye naturally travels in Velazquez’s painting upward, from the Infanta to her parents’ reflection, whereas Charles’s obsession with Sarah focuses our interest on her psychology in the various scenes of the novel. But ultimately Sarah remains enigmatic, for she is far more important for what she suggests than as a character realistically presented.

Surrounding the Infanta are the lesser figures at the court, arranged in various triadic patterns. The foil figure to the lovely Infanta is the dwarf to her left. She, generally, suggests within Fowles’s novel the Victorian view of sexual morality best exemplified by Ernestina. The dwarf’s grotesque exterior features are internalized in the novel as Victorian rigidity and exaggerated notions of responsibility. Both dwarf and lady-in-waiting attend on the figure of focus—the Infanta. Dr. Grogan and Ernestina and the other characters of Fowles’s novel attend on Charles as he contemplates Sarah, again suggested by the triangulation of characters within the fiction’s form.

Point for point parallels, beyond the general means of drawing attention to the ostensible as well as intrinsic subject, however, prove impossible beyond suggesting that the priest and nun represent the religious order, the dog a domesticated natural order (as does Charles’s symbolical search for fossils suggest a dead nature), and the ladies-in-waiting the social order. More relevant, however, is the artistic order, suggested by the painter who is dressed in the apparel of the day rather than in the traditional artist’s smock, calling attention to the creator as well as his creation—the true theme of both works. Velazquez is as much a member of the society presented in his painting as is Fowles’s persona character in the novel. It is he who suggests the special problems of the creative artist.

In the rearground of Velazquez’s painting, yet conspicuous in the light from the open door behind him, stands an observer, apparently objective in being removed from the immediate scene. From his distant vantage point he sees the whole, both the stage-managed set before him, and the world beyond. He stands outside the tableau of the mirrors that Velazquez the controlling artist must have arranged to view himself as well as to see into and beyond the world he presents; the gentleman is framed by the light of an outside world he is about to set foot into. He is,

perhaps, the objective viewer, the reader in the case of the novel. He is linked in the novel's world to the artist's persona, the one who must communicate Charles's immediate obsession with Sarah and the necessity of giving an understanding of the situation universal meaning within time and space.

The figures most in control are, then, the artists, i.e. the painter and the writer. Velazquez depicts himself in an idealized form wearing the Palace Chamberlain's key on his belt and the red cross of the Knights of Santiago rather than as a working painter in a smudged smock, Fowles as a traveler on a train and as stage manager. Velazquez's focus is both on the inner world contained within the frame and on the world beyond the painting. As controlling artist he is ostensibly concerned with verisimilitude but, in reality, with problems of form: he represents himself as an aspect of the perspective, color, tone, balance, and value which comprise the finished painting. Yet he must paint what the King and Queen see, even as they watch him capture their likenesses. His attention to the scene must be completely reversed, however, probably by means of mirrors, for he becomes that which is captured on the canvas as well as the instrument of that capture.

Fowles must as a novelist work with the theme of appearance and reality—he too uses mirrors as an aspect of his imagery—but as creator he must walk one further step: as controlling author he must draw a character who becomes the narrator of the tale as well as a convincing character within the tale. Through this narrator's comments we are, as in Velazquez's painting, directed to the means whereby the meaning of life can be best appreciated through an understanding of how the artist employs his materials to achieve a vision of reality.

A Note on Philip Roth's "Goodbye, Columbus" and Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*

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In his monograph on the writings of Philip Roth, Bernard F. Rodgers, Jr., draws a useful comparison between Roth's first novella, "Goodbye, Columbus,"¹ and Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*.² Rodgers notes that Neil Klugman's final ruminations, at the end of "Goodbye, Columbus," remind us of Nick Carraway's observation about Jay Gatsby having lost something of himself in loving Daisy. Rodgers goes on to suggest that, given their typological similarity, any links between these novels are best seen as inevitable structural similarities which should not get in the way of more tangible differences.³ Nevertheless, several kinds of intriguing correspondences can be pointed to between these novels, some of them close enough to seem, not typological at all, but a conscious part of the artistic design of the later story.

¹Philip Roth, *Goodbye, Columbus and Five Short Stories*. New York: Bantam Books, 1969.

²F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925.

³Bernard F. Rodgers, Jr., *Philip Roth* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978), p.44.