

## Book Reviews

Shormishtha Panja, Shirshendu Chakrabarti, Christel R. Devadawson, eds., *Word, Image, and Text: Studies in Literary and Visual Culture*, New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, pp. ix + 176. Price not mentioned

Let me begin by saying that it has been a great pleasure reading and poring over this substantial volume of essays. The book is marked by a wide innovative and comprehensive scholarship, interdisciplinary rigour and what is important to me, a readable presentational style yielding precise interpretations of texts, images and objects. Besides, the range of topics the volume covers, as also the variety of photographs and paintings, enhance its provenance many fold manifold. Unfortunately, one can't say even half as much about the general run of interdisciplinary papers one often hears at seminars in India. In that sense too the present volume is a welcome departure and a valuable addition to the current debates on literary and visual culture.

### I

The purpose of this volume can be summed up in the words of one of its editors, Shormishtha Panja: "to see if one can evolve a common vocabulary to talk of word and image" (p.8). From Plato down to the impressionist artists, painting and poetry, word and image have been defined as separate and distinct, though in actual interpretations of literary and visual texts this separation gets blurred. We speak of Hardy as a visual novelist and of Virginia Woolf as the most painterly of the modernist writers. We also speak of 'narrative' in painting (as in our reading of *Guernica*). Wylie Sypher defines 'baroque' painting and architecture as a *movement*, 'in a great imagined space'<sup>1</sup> and Joseph Frank in a famous 1941 essay finds 'spatial form' in much modern literature. We have action painting in which 'narrative progression' yields an epiphany<sup>2</sup> and we have examples of paintings that provide continuity to characters in fiction (as does

Holbein to Prince Myshkin in Dostoevsky's *Idiot* or Mona Lisa in Huxley's 'Giacconda Smile'.

In spite of Horace, Laocoon, Plato and Sidney, it has not been possible in practice to find a distinct vocabulary to designate the visual and verbal arts. In our interpretations of literary and visual texts (and cinematic texts too), we use terms such as 'depiction', 'rendering', 'narrating' interchangeably without experiencing any discomfort. All this goes to show that generic demarcations between painting and literature are not rigid or immutable and specific vocabularies for specific art forms, even if possible, need not hamper meaningful interaction between them. After all how does one differentiate between Dr Johnson describing Loch Ness in his Scottish tour with Boswell and the Caucasian scene with which Lermontov introduces his novel *A Hero of Our Time* (1839)? As it is, they could both be describing a work of visual art, such is the evocative power with which the scenes are rendered. Both scenes are 'framed' into what could be called, for want of better terms, spatial perspectives. There are numerous such instances in the 19<sup>th</sup> century European novel (the agricultural fair in *Madam Bovary* comes to mind) in which spatial painterly frames encompass narrative progression.

There is also a tendency among literary and art historians to speak of the arts in terms of blanket categorizations such as gothic, mannerist, baroque and other labels. In such categorizations verbal and literary texts share the same traits. Such categorizations present the development of both literary and plastic arts under the aegis of a dominating style. It is in this sense that Arnold Hauser, the Marxist art historian, sees the mannerist architecture and the poetry of John Donne and Marvell as deriving from the same stylistic canon of anti-classicism. Describing what constitutes mannerism in painting and architecture, Hauser suggests that "Donne is undoubtedly not only one of the most characteristic poets of his age, but also intellectually one of the liveliest representatives of mannerism, though certainly not one

of the those with whom the whole movement's claim to intellectual significance must stand or fall."<sup>3</sup> With its wealth of imagery and metaphor, the mannerist literary style, like the mannerist architectural style 'indulges in associations' of diverse kinds.<sup>4</sup> Another Marxist art historian Frederick Antal studies Florentine painting under the rubrics of classicism and romanticism. And in the third volume of his monumental biography of Hogarth Ronald Paulson sees parallels between the artist and the novelist Fielding.<sup>5</sup>

Antal and Hauser go beyond styles and trace their evolution to a variety of socio-historical factors. Hauser's readings of Cervantes, Proust and Kafka, as also of cubism take into their ambit the social forces that brought forth their distinctive styles. A recent literary critic Peter Brooks reads the paintings of Courbet and the nineteenth century European realist fiction as representative of a world-view dominated by the success of bourgeois rationality.<sup>6</sup> Wylie Sypher looks at Dubuffet's work as a way of taking painting 'back to zero' and sees a close link with the French Nouveau Roman. Both, according to Sypher, are products of what Ortega called the dehumanization of art in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>7</sup> The theme of alienation that Hauser saw in mannerist art of the Renaissance is rediscovered by Sypher in the paintings and literature of our own time.

Literary and visual texts, taken as part of a society's culture, are expressions of a world-view, a collective consciousness that is also a trans-individual subject and answers to culture's needs and aspirations. These texts are embedded in ideologies and assumptions that, even though they belong to individual artists, in many ways encode the consciousness of a class or a community. As John Barrell suggests in his study of the English art, the notion of the picturesque, for instance, has a class basis, an ideological content that lifts it above a merely idiosyncratic expression of an individual mind. As much as being individual productions texts, both visual and literary, are reflective of the *Zeitgeist*. They are involved in the ideological mores of the time, sometimes without knowing it. Quite a few essays in this collection are grounded in such a conception of word and image. As the introduction to the volume suggests, 'poetry and painting enter the arena as rivals and as allies, the points of comparison being mimesis, invention and humanism' (p.7) or, one might justifiably add, ideology or world-view.

## II

In essays by Panja, Sillars and Chakrabarti paintings and poetry are studied in close approximation to each other.

Written with characteristic flair, these essays succeed in maintaining a scholarly scruple and avoid falling into the trap of 'periodism and collectivism' (Gombrich's phrase). Shormishtha Panja's essay 'Titian's *poesie* and Shakespeare's pictures' is rich in detail and acute in critical analysis without being dogmatic about its subject which is to relate Titian's *favoles* and Shakespeare's 'Rape of Lucrece' and 'Venus and Adonis'. She sees a convergence between the two in 'that they do not condemn Venus associated with physicality and procreation' (p.15). Panja's interest in studying Shakespeare and Titian together leads her to ask 'how does visual image encompass narrative free rather than freeze time?' (p.26). She answers this question implicitly by taking a detour via Panofsky to Homer's depiction of the shield of Achilles 'that also tells stories' (p.29)—a detour which allows her to gloss over the differences between narrative and the freeze-frame. Her essays very judiciously and skillfully demonstrate how difficult it is to maintain clear boundaries between genres.

Stuart Sillars' essay 'Image, Word and Authority in Early Modern Frontispiece' establishes a link between the Venetian statecraft to Palladio's designing a triumphal arch. Triumphal arches made political statements. They lent authority and a sense of power to the ruling king. As Sillars puts it, 'the development of the triumphal arch as an elite form expressive of rule and power, the use of its geometrical structures offered an ideal way of imposing the power of the book as a prestigious cultural object'. Sillars relates the figures on the triumphal arches to the special designs of book titles which similarly initiate an entry into 'arcane secrets' of the book (p.18). Sillars fruitfully illustrates his argument by quoting Michael Drayton's 'Polyobliion'. Another instance of this correlation (not mentioned by Sillars) could be the 'barge she sat in' scene from Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*.

One might supplement Sillars' perceptive presentation of the role of the frontispiece by drawing attention to another aspect of the engravings as illustrated by the Pillars of Hercules. The frontispiece in Bacon's *Novum Organum* shows Odysseus outside the pillars against the injunction *ne plus ultra* (not any further). Yet, Homer and Dante show their hero transgressing the injunction, thereby extending the frontiers of human knowledge. It is not for nothing that classical and modern scholars have regarded the Greek hero as the first imperialist out to colonise the world.

In a closely argued essay 'Between Retrospect and Prospect: The Landscape Painting of Claude Lorraine' Shirshendu Chakrabarti analyses the link between Claude Lorraine and the poetry of 'Epicurean retirement in the seventeenth century' (p.86). He sees in this link a universal

harmony, an attempt to recover the classical canons of order, regularity and serenity Öagainst the tortured irregularity of the baroque'(p.85). Claude and Poussin offer models of the happy rural seat (consider Milton's L'allegro and Il Penseroso or Pope's 'Windsor Forest' and Denham's 'Cooper's Hill') in as much as they exclude physical labour or any other intrusions of real life into their imaginary utopias. As Chakrabarti observes after meticulously analyzing Claude's paintings, the painter jettisoned the baggage of symbolism and allegory to present a scene of rural simplicity and charm.

The special merit of the analysis lies in Chakrabarti's refusal to fit Claude into the straitjacket of the 18<sup>th</sup> century aesthetic, particularly the Virgilian aesthetic of the picturesque. Intimating, though not explicitly stating it, he rehearses the later debate on the picturesque and the sublime that dominated the discussion of romanticism in the next century. By bringing in Salvatore Rosa's representation of the savage, the essay prepares the ground for the later understanding of the gothic, and the 'tortured irregularity of the baroque'. (p.88). As Raymond Williams notes in his *The Country and the City*, the rapidly expanding and changing city was to put paid to the manufactured 'felicities' of the happy rural seat.<sup>8</sup> Rosa seems to have had his counterpart in James Thomson who foresaw 'the sons of riot flow Öto swift destruction'.

Despite its Latinate title and occasional convoluted style, Davinder Mohini Ahuja's essay on Bruegel's paintings and Rabelais' Garguanta offers some suggestive insights into the methods of the two artists. In the event it makes a statement about the 'tension in Renaissance literature between its attractions to a past representing the fullness of original truth and its resistance to that past in the face of puzzling historical contingency' (p.67), between its 'adagia' and its 'aporia'. Ahuja reads this insight into what she believes to be the utilization of paradox by both the novelist and the painter. In Rabelais the grotesque body, to use Bakhtin's term, is taken over in the Thelme Abbey scene by its rigid Epicureanism, bringing the 'tropical exotica and the courtly practice' as satirical counterpoints. In Bruegel too there is a gap between the overt meaning and what is hidden, between the fecundity of the bodily detail and what seems to lurk beyond and beneath it. Ahuja extends this paradox to the use of language by the painter and the novelist. Rabelais' incestuous linguistic outpouring matches Bruegel's presentation of ziguratic Babel as both a total confusion of absolute determinate meanings and a utopian throwback to the symmetrical order typified by the tower's structure.(in the painting 'Tower of Babel').

While the parallels drawn by Ahuja make good sense, there is one other thing to consider, namely, the sense of

indifference to tragedy in Bruegel and the sheer delight that Rabelais takes in his linguistic saturnalia. In his poem 'Musée de Beaux Arts' Auden suggests the indifference of the foregrounded people in the painting 'Landscape with the Fall of Icarus' to the drowning of the mythical figure. Similarly there is also the possibility that Rabelais indulges his language deformations for their own sake and not with intentions of satire and parody.

Megha Anwer's essay 'Picturing Power: Politics of the Image in Revolutionary France' is the one contribution that takes a popular-culture approach to the revolution. She draws attention to the desacralisation of the Kingly body in current diatribes culminating in the ultimate ritual of decapitation. In the archival material Anwer refers to, she finds evidence of the popular contempt for the Royals that makes it easier to execute them in order for the new era be ushered in. ( In this respect Jacques-Louis David's paintings are significant). The French Revolution was conceptualized through symbols and rituals and it is important that one understands their significance. Anwer provides enough evidence to suggest that the prevailing iconology managed to insinuate the abstract ideals of the revolution into popular imagination. The figure of Liberty has a paradoxical presence in the popular imagination (as in Victor Hugo's novel *Ninety Three* ). Anwer explains this by saying 'the king represented political tyranny'. The feminine figure of Liberty would provide an antithesis to the patriarchic monarchy, even though Robespierre discarded this figure for Hercules (p.96) who in turn was dethroned for a more caring mother figure. The popular paintings and sketches illustrate this phenomenon in full measure.<sup>9</sup>

In one of the shortest and most focused of essays in this collection, 'Black-and White and Shades of Grey: Lockwood Kipling's illustrations of India', Cristel R.Devadawson brings to the fore the strategies adopted by the colonial power to popularise their rule in India. A successful way to achieve this was to make 'folktales valuable to adult researcher' with interest in the empire. (p.115). To that ends Flora Anne Steele wrote the text of 'Tales of Panjab' and Lockwood Kipling drew line drawings and calligraphic images to accompany it. But these were not innocent exercises, asserts Devidawson, but were geared to create a topological hierarchy of the powerful and the powerless in the empire (also present in the laying out of Mughal gardens, as shown in the paper by Maria Antonia Escayol, pp.48-65). In other words through Kipling's illustrations to the anthropological folktales, the potent presence of the imperial hand, the guide was reiterated. As Devidawson unflinchingly makes clear, animal fable becomes an allegory of empire.

## III

I have chosen to treat some of the essays in this collection more extensively than others for two reasons: one, they more than others are written within the defined ambit of the title of this book. Two, and this is more to my purpose, they are at a definite angle from the conventional treatment of the subjects and could open up fresh inquiries. But it does not mean I see no merit in other essays. There is reasoned argument in them and a palpable positive direction that appeals to discerning readers. At least one essay, by Loris Button on time in visual and literary autobiography, makes me think again about how time is treated in autobiographies and how language, both visual and literary, offers the continuity in time that autobiographies by their very nature encompass. The essay reminds me of S.H Vatsyayan, whose novel *Shekar: Ek Jivani* is regarded as a fictional autobiography, ruminating as follows in an unjustly neglected series of lectures titled *A Sense of Time*.

I am simply a sack puffed out with air,  
Tied at the mouth with ageing,  
And promised to death  
And yet there's this other thing, this love. . .  
This child of an instant can toss aside,  
As if in play. Time's stunning hammer<sup>10</sup>

## NOTES

1. Wylie Sypher, *Four Stages of Renaissance Style*, New York: Garden City, 1955, p.212.
2. See Mehaly Vajda, 'Aesthetic Judgment in Painting' in Heller and Fehrer, *Reconstructing Aesthetics*. Oxford, 1986, p.68.
3. Arnold Hauser, *Mannerism*, Vol. I Text, London, 1965, pp.42-43.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 287.
5. Ronald Paulson, *Hogarth: Art and Politics 1750-1764*, New Brunswick, 1993, pp.30-31.
6. See Peter Brooks, *The Realist Vision*, New Haven, 2005.
7. Wylie Sypher, *Loss of the Self in Modern Literature and Art*: New York: Vintage Books, 1962, pp. 110-138.
8. Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, London, 1973, p.142.
9. For further discussion, see Ernst Gombrich, 'The Dream of Reason' in *The Uses of Images*, London, 1999, pp.162-183.
10. S. H. Vatsyayan, *Sense of Time: An Exploration of Time in Theory, Experience and Art*, New Delhi: OUP, 1981. p.30.

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Nonica Datta, *Violence, Martyrdom and Partition: A Daughter's Testimony*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009, xv + 235 pp. Rs. 695

Oral history in recent years has acquired a salience and acceptance that is both popular and academic and has occupied a recognised place within the scholarly practices of numerous academic disciplines, such as anthropology, education, history, geography, political science and sociology. It is an interesting and developing field which plays a vital role in recovering lost histories while enlarging our understanding of the past. As a methodological tool it is being widely used by feminist historians to contest the subaltern status of women and recover histories that would otherwise remain hidden behind the dominant discourses, thus foregrounding the silenced subjectivities of women. One cannot simply run down subjectivity as not expressing visible facts - the ostensible business of history, because what an informant believes is, indeed, a historical fact as much as what 'really' might have happened. Very often, we find that written documents are only the uncontested transmission of unidentified oral sources. The importance of oral testimony lies not in its strict adherence to a so called fact, but rather in its departure from it, as imagination, symbolism, memory and desire structure it. Education, religion, politics, local and family traditions and public culture -all influence the way the past is remembered and interpreted.

*Violence, Martyrdom and Partition: A Daughter's Testimony* by Nonica Datta is based on the oral narrative of a woman in colonial Punjab. The narrative invests new meanings into the received accounts of communal divide and the concomitant violence which has shaped much of our colonial and postcolonial history. What is significant about this testament is the view from the other side that violence and retribution can also derive legitimacy from the victims' perspective. One could perhaps concede that the specific acts have their own contexts of validation. Datta has worked extensively outside the archive to recreate account of an individual's history as it emerges in uneasy tension with nation and community, by engaging into debates on women, agency, speech/silence and subaltern interrogations of dominant historiographies. She uses memory as an important tool. Of course, memory comes loaded with ideological and cultural representations of both the present and the past, so that accounts of the past are never 'pure' recall of life as it were. As poststructuralists maintain, accounts of experience cannot give direct access to 'reality' because it is impossible to compose or frame them outside the language and discourses in which we make sense of our