

PAINT, PAIN, AND FICTION

Beryl Bainbridge's *Master Georgie* (London: Abacus, 1998) and Michael Frayn's *Headlong* (London: Faber, 1999)

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These fin-de-siècle novels are at first sight an unlikely pair. *Headlong* is a comic novel set in the present concerning a young academic's farcical attempts at defrauding his neighbour of a Breugel painting; *Master Georgie* obliquely narrates the Crimean War through people who were present (including photographers), and devolves into tragedy. Both, however, are obsessively concerned with the relations between verbal and visual art, and between visual art and the pain of war. That only one of them is also conscious of the relationship between its own verbal art and the pain of war, is one point of interest which emerges from their dialogue. This essay will consider first the place of visual art in the novels, and then the place of war.

Headlong stands in the tradition of Dostoevsky's *Idiot*, Wilde's *Dorian Gray*, and Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* in according central importance to a single painting. In form, the novel is the philosopher Martin Clay's confession of his possible responsibility for destroying a long-lost work of Breugel's, *Merrymakers*. As is the case with every first-person narration on the part of someone with no claims to literary ability (to comic genius of the order of Frayn's, let's say) the reader simply has to accept that he produces a narrative which we enjoy reading, as well as knowing how to describe paintings. This raises the question of what the difference is between verbal description of anything visual, and ekphrasis - between describing the suggestion of his neighbour's wife's breasts under her red jumper, and describing the exposed breast of Giordano's Helen of Troy on his neighbour's wall. We are certainly meant to see the similarities of the women. Both are beautiful; both are, dubiously, the possessions of the coarse country squire Tony Churt; and both are carried off by the narrator.

This is how Martin describes Helen: 'A number of armed men are [...] supporting what seems, from the strain on their muscles, to be a substantial burden – a stoutish lady whose clothes have been disarranged to reveal her left knee and her right breast.' [34] And this is Laura: 'Not much more than half his age, for a start – a lot younger

than me, younger than Kate even. She's thin and dark, and she's dressed not in brown but in scarlet – a loose scarlet sweater that rises high around her neck and comes halfway down over dark velvet trousers. She smiles at us, but doesn't offer her hand.'

[21] Whereas Laura moves in time and space, Helen is frozen in both; such action as is implied in the painting pertains to the men. Freezing is likewise what the eponymous Master Georgie, an amateur photographer, does to the young Myrtle when he 'ordered me to stand stock still and not blink' - and what their friend Potter notices when he reflects at the funeral at Balaclava: 'There is something of black magic in the photographer's art, in that he stops time.' [180]

Yet in both the descriptions of *Headlong's* women what is given, over narrative time, is the formation, over narrated time, of Martin's responses to what he sees. By making the narrative persona palpable the narrative acknowledges that any verbal description of the visual is only the description of a response to a physical or mental vision, and that such responses must not only be described over time but experienced in it. As Martin says of seeing the supposed Breugel: 'already my eye's doing what the human eye always has to do to take in the world in front of it. It's flickering and jumping in indescribably complex patterns, back and forth, up and down, round and round, moving over and over again each second, assembling part after part into a first approximation of a whole; amending the approximation; amending it again.' [42-43] A further similarity between the descriptions is that *The Rape of Helen* and *The Merry-makers* are no more existent than Laura. Giordano and Breugel lived but we don't know which of Giordano's Rapes of Helen is in question, and by definition we don't know what the missing painting from Breugel's *Seasons* looks like. We can compare the view of Mont Blanc from the Vale of Chamonix with Percy Shelley's description of that view in his poem of that title, but in *Headlong* we must take Martin's tentative, self-correcting words for everything.

When his descriptions of art become novelistic – when he puts himself in the painter's viewpoint and describes the merry-making scene – the distinction between visual and narrative art becomes still more blurred: 'It's spring. On the woods below the snowline, and tumbling away in front of me from where I'm standing, there's the first shimmer of April green. The high valley air's still cold, but as you move down into the valley the chill dies away. The colours change, from cool brilliant greens to

deeper and deeper blues.’ [44] This is Frayn’s art, though influenced by Flemish paintings he has seen. This imaginary visualization is itself given an image in *Master Georgie*, in which the professional photographer Pompey says that: ‘Master Georgie once told me that if I concentrated hard enough the memories might come back, like the images that reared up on his photogenic plates.’ [4] He carries about him a photograph of Myrtle which came out black: ‘I’d made pin holes in her eyes and scratched lines where her hair might have been, and in time I believed I saw her plain, though it’s possible she was in my head and it was my mind that printed her likeness.’ [147] An obvious difference between the novels is that *Master Georgie* concerns photography rather than painting, and the process of creating pictures, rather than their interpretation. But it’s likely that Bainbridge had seen photo-journalism from the Crimean War, and that her intention in writing *Master Georgie* was to imaginatively reconstruct the circumstances of their creation, which is precisely what Martin tries to do with *The Merrymakers*. It’s just that in *Master Georgie*, the interpreter figure is not foregrounded as the narrator, but is invisibly present as the author of the work.

Both Frayn and Bainbridge suggest that art can mislead. Martin uses art as a type, or metonym, of lying, when he visualises his fantasies about making money out of the Breugel as: ‘Blue after blue. Grinding the azurite coarse for the deep blues, grinding it fine and milling it with whitelead for the paler tones near the horizon...’ [95] When he is about to present his first lie to Tony he tells us: ‘Breugel isn’t to be believed, not literally. He’s doing what I’m doing in my dealing with Tony Churt: constructing a fiction.’ [93] Of course, Breugel was not asking anyone to believe that the Netherlands had great ravines and crevices, any more than Frayn was purporting to narrate real people – whereas photography, at its birth, was welcomed for its documentary potential. *Master Georgie* shows how photographs can mislead, and that a responsive act of imagination is required to identify how this might be the case. Notably, in the last photo taken in the novel - a propagandistic photo of smiling British soldiers - the dead Georgie is held up as alive, in order to balance the composition. ‘What we want [...] is a posed group of survivors to show the folks back home.’ [211]

Headlong is also much concerned with the correct interpretation of paintings. One way in which the characters are distinguished is in their aptitude at this – with Tony,

Laura, and their dogs, poor at it, and Martin, Kate, Quiss, a Sotheby's employee, and a dealer in their different ways good at it. Typical of art criticism in the novel (or art *history*, as the academic discipline is significantly known) is the fact that the Giordano painting and the supposed Breugel send Martin respectively to a well-known narrative (the rape of Helen), and to extra-artistic history. First-time readers of *Headlong*, or even of a historical novel such as *Master Georgie*, can have no such reliance on a known story – but nor are they as necessarily impelled to investigate the novel in terms of its context (in this article I make no analysis of the historical context of either novel). Historical research is shown to yield uncertain rewards. Martin's main goal is to discover whether the painting which he has briefly glimpsed *is* the missing Breugel, and he acknowledges that he ends his account awaiting: 'A judgement that can in the nature of things almost certainly never be delivered.' [394] Unless, of course, the April-May painting of *The Seasons* is found, in which case sales of *Headlong* would soar, and Frayn would acquire precisely that honour of association with the painting to which his character aspires.

A more material difference between criticism of art and fiction is money. There is almost no money in literary criticism, whereas in knowing your art – being able to tell a follower of Vrancz from a Vrancz from a Breugel – there is potentially a great deal. Martin hopes that a great deal with Sothebys will keep him and his family for life, and mean that – significantly – he never has to teach the Introduction to Verbal Reasoning to students again. But, as he acknowledges on his first visit to the Churts, he isn't really *that kind* of art historian – the kind who can identify a painting or its exchange value. He is, rather, the kind who writes books about art which make no money, and is therefore the opposite of Wilde's definition of a cynic - someone who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing. He is with us, let us say - the literary critics.

And yet it is precisely his headlong interpretative activity which impels us, his critics, into a position of relative passivity. At one point Martin asks 'who am I talking to now? [...] Who are you? You're almost as elusive as Breugel. How much do you know already? How much do I have to explain? How formal do I have to be?' 'So here's what I'm going to do. I'm going to treat you as if you were one of my students. A reasonably able one, but a bit short on concentration and tenacity. [...] Agreed? I

think it must be, because here I am, doing it.' [143] And so, whether listening to his art historical lectures, or his amusing confessions of his own incompetence, we are encouraged simply to sit back and cling on. In *Master Georgie* the opposite is the case. The making of each of the six photographs which are taken in the novel (one in each chapter) is made clear to the reader – it is as though we are watching Breugel paint his painting - but we have to work hard for everything else. It is never immediately clear who the narrator is, nor who the mother of Georgie's children is, nor what the relationship between him and Pompey is. Reference to neither myth nor history will help, therefore we cannot avoid being literary critics.

In both novels the violence of which both contain so much is largely concealed both by the visual art within them, and by the rest of the narrative. *Merrymakers* is a pastoral scene painted at a time of bloody repression of Netherlandish Protestants by Spanish forces. The photographs taken in *Master Georgie* either avoid representing death altogether, or beautify it. In *Headlong* Martin merely infers that Tony beats Laura, and that he possibly killed his wife. In *Master Georgie* violence is rarely experienced or even witnessed by the narrators, but inferred by the reader. Georgie's friend Potter tells us, in the novel's only reference to the war's most famous incident: 'I am at least better off as far as transport is concerned; three days ago over two hundred cavalry horses of the Light Brigade stampeded into the camp, their riders having perished in a charge along the north valley'. [141] Most violence occurs either before the narrator has arrived, or after she or he has left. Myrtle sees a pet puppy being pulled apart by stray dogs, but it is Potter who narrates this section, and he concentrates not on her but on the fact that the children were too late to see it. A soldier is killed after Myrtle has passed him for the first time, and before she returns for the second. Another soldier waits for Potter to pass before shooting himself in the foot. The most direct mentions of battles are given in detached journalistic pastiche: 'It was only after dangerous dithering that the Grenadiers and the Coldstream Guards reassembled and successfully routed the Russians.' [171] Martin informs us of the violence of the Eighty Years' war as a historian likewise: 'Charles V introduced the Papal Inquisition to the Netherlands. By the time Charles abdicated, according to Motley, between 50,000 and 100,000 Netherlanders had been burned, strangled, beheaded, or buried alive.' [146] Only at the very end of both novels is violence confronted directly. Pompey sees a Russian gun aimed straight at him, and shortly

afterwards sees another Russian gun kill Georgie. Martin sees Tony part-strangle Laura, and soon afterwards feels a shot from Tony's gun graze his hand.

Of course, there are very different reasons for the obliquity on the part of the two novels. *Headlong* is set four and a half centuries after the war concerned, and husbands do not generally beat their wives in front of strangers. The case of *Master Georgie* is more striking, since its three narrators are increasingly surrounded by violence. But in both novels there is a tension between the absence and presence of violence - and connectedly between ease and strain, safety and fear, pleasure and pain, levity and seriousness. One of the most profound differences between the two novels is that whereas *Master Georgie* is fully conscious of this strain, and in part *about* it, *Headlong* is only partly conscious of it, and is weakened by it.

In *Master Georgie* it exists at several levels. Most of the central characters are in the Crimea by choice - out of love, curiosity, pride, or for the the febrile, pre-war social life of Istanbul: 'the hectic gaiety which must have prevailed during the last days of Rome.' [86] The only one to go for career reasons is Pompey, the photo-journalist. So he resembles the soldiers in Britain's professional army, and the others resemble the officer class who bought their commissions. Bainbridge more resembles the former; we, choosing to buy and read the novel, more resemble the latter, and like them we continuously make negotiation between entertainment and suffering. In the concert party at Varna, a song about a widow is sung parodically, and a women's underpants used in place of 'The widow's sombre cap' on a female impersonator's head. The troops roar the words 'She weeps in silent solitude'. [136] Such wartime hysterical gaiety and black humour is forecast as early as the beginning of the novel, when we are told that Mr Hardy used to sing a song about 'a little drummer boy who called for his mother as he lay dying on a battlefield, [...] It had very sad words but he bellowed so heartily when it came to the line, *Mother dear, I am fading fast*, that no one could forbear laughing' (later in the novel a drummer boy has his genitals ripped off). [24] It is therefore appropriate that Pompey's photographic van, in which he develops photos of exit wounds and severed limbs, is a former Punch and Judy van - Punch and Judy being characters who engage continuously in domestic violence for the entertainment of children. The contradictions of the war are reflected in such details. Far from constituting light relief for the reader, they are unnerving. The prose does

not make the reader inebriate, or anaesthetized, as the soldier who loses his ear is euphoric until he drops dead. On the contrary, the very aversion of the prose to the depiction of violence renders it as disturbing as casually-mentioned suffering

Georgie, Myrtle, and Potter have different strategies for dealing with horror. Georgie's is to cut himself off from emotion as far as possible; Myrtle is as though anaesthetized by her obsession with Georgie. But Potter's refuge is in the literature and history of previous wars; the approach to Balaclava reminds him of the description of the approach to the country of the Laestrigones. This refuge breaks down; when he is told that Georgie is dead he 'stuffs some pages from his book into the stove' – this is probably not just for heat. [211] The novel itself is not verbal art which provides any such consolation; moreover it carefully points out the mendacity of the visual art which is being created out of the war itself. The novel, unlike the photographs, is conscious of its own status and responsibility. It leaves central questions unanswered. When and where are the three narrators writing their contributions to this account of Master Georgie? Why are their styles so similar when their educations and temperaments are so different? There exist no plausible answers to these questions, but the novel's impossibility in this respect takes it decisively out of the realm of realism, and into that of a self-conscious exploration of the relationship of entertainment and suffering.

Headlong explores this relationship in the painting *Merrymakers*, but not in relation to its own art. Its entertainment and suffering are, roughly, split between the comic novel of academic life which occupies approximately half its pages, and the account of an investigation into the horrific circumstances of production of a sixteenth century painting, which occupies the other half. This relationship is uneasy, but the treatment of the reader is such as to induce him or her to overlook this. Martin presents himself as overwhelmed by his problems, and as permanently shaken by them, but in fact they may be summarised as follows: he has got into some debt, briefly angered his loving wife, almost started a reluctant affair, troubled his conscience by trying to make money out of a man he dislikes, and possibly, involuntarily, helped to destroy a significant work of art. This is stressful, but hardly to be juxtaposed with the troubles of the Netherlanders, as it is as when his wife Kate comes across him in the company of the woman with whom she suspects that he is having an affair, and on her

departure Martin's narrative continues: '1565. The uneasiness, the terror, the wrath... Yes, rapidly culminating to a crisis.' [353] Martin's problems become darker and more stressful as he gets more deeply involved in the history of the painting's period – but the two types of strain sit uneasily together, and the novel neither reflects upon, nor encourages the reader to reflect upon, this fact. Frayn occasionally uses flashes of humour to keep the reader's attention through the art-historical sections; after summarizing a period of horrors Martin states: 'This was the happy land in which Breugel passed the first twenty-five or thirty years of his life. Then things got worse.' [146] Of course, to Martin in 1999 his problems are of greater magnitude than are those of the Netherlanders represented by a painting, but his readers are neither the Netherlanders nor him, and both narratives are presented to us through the medium of Frayn's verbal art. Moreover, we are aware that Martin's problems have less historical reality than theirs.

If *Master Georgie* refuses to allow its narrative fabric (or that of *The Odyssey*, for Potter) to permit escapism from the war, this does not mean that it is anti-artistic.

Violence presents its own artistic aspects. Pompey comments that: 'Men died posed like the statues in Mr Blundell's glass-house.' [208] 'We found six men, comrades and foes, linked together, bayonets quivering in a daisy chain of steel.' [210] When Naughton at the opera wrongly attacks an officer for having insulted Myrtle, 'There followed a most dramatic incident, far exceeding in authenticity and excitement anything we had yet seen on stage. [...] Teetering, the hussar raised one hand, and tracing what appeared to be the sign of the cross, dropped to the boards below. [...] the unfortunate fellow landed to the accompaniment of percussion.' [102] *Headlong* contains no such artlike violence itself, only violence sublimated into art, or concealed in propaganda. There it works by symbolism, as the rest of the novel's narrative does not.

Yet both novels are interested in the dilemma of whether to defend people or art.

Pompey feels that Georgie is showing concern for his photographic equipment rather than himself when he tells him to use the high road near Liverpool in order to avoid the ruffians on the shore. Georgie 'helped with the photographs, even though it meant neglecting his medical duties' on arrival in the Crimea. [145] Pompey, as a war journalist, faces the old journalistic dilemma of whether to record or rescue. In

Headlong the choice between art, and saving human life, is also presented. Martin lets *The Merry-makers* tumble out of his hands and down the stairs in order to stop Tony from strangling Laura. But he then grabs ‘hold of Laura with one hand and the picture with the other.’ [382] As they flee in a Landrover he won’t look at her bruises because he is too busy thinking of an idea they have given him about the meaning of the painted man tumbling into the pool at the corner of the supposed Breugel. And when he crashes the car into this novel’s equivalent of a Punch and Judy van – an ice cream van – he chooses to try to save the painting, or his chance to interpret it, before Laura, and fails in both. Tony rescues her. Of course, she cannot die; it is not that kind of novel. In this novel only thousands of Netherlanders die, in history books.

This disjunction is the more striking because Martin’s study of *Merry-makers* explores precisely the tension between entertainment and violence. April and May is when merry-making is traditionally depicted, and Martin speculates that perhaps Breugel was a hack of the Counter-Reformation, and ‘merely serving up the same old reassuring myth [...] of a happy bucolic world untouched by the conflicts and savageries of real life, one more episode in the long-running story of Arcadian shepherds and Bourbon milkmaids, of Soviet tractor drivers and Merrie England.’ [156] But he comes to reject this because, as Laura’s bruises provoke him to realise, the little man tumbling into the mill pool represents the drowned prisoners of Philip II: ‘The small event at the edge of things that gives the scene its significance, just like the fall of Icarus [...] The busy year revolves, but before the first season’s out the small concealed murder has occurred that turns the whole idyll into an irony.’ [384]

Does this detail turn the whole novel *Headlong* into an irony? Is Martin, like the dancing peasants at the foot of the gibbet in Breugel’s *Landscape with the Magpie on the Gallows*, too wrapped up in his own concerns to bother about the ghastly structure that towers over him? Or is Frayn? I think not. But they are less canny at treating the relationship than Martin credits Breugel with being. And, I would argue, less sensitive in treating it than *Master Georgie* proves Beryl Bainbridge to be.