Theme 3: Vermeer and the World of Light

Lesson 5: Vermeer (continued)

Part 1

Here the author is describing, through her narrator Griet, one of Vermeer’s most famous paintings, the Young Woman with Water Jug, probably painted around 1664. The novel, of course, opens in that year, and the novel places the painting in March of 1665. Nevertheless, the novel may well be right, because so little is really known of Vermeer.

One of the problems Tracy Chevalier had to confront in these ekphrastic episodes is that the narrator is illiterate: “I suspected that even if I could read the words I would not understand what each vessel held” (95). Thus Griet must describe the image with utmost care in the simplest terms. Not only in telling us about the paintings, but in describing the house, the family, the town, the social and political environment in which she lives, Griet is limited to the language and worldview of a young lower class maid. Because her father was a skilled worker, an artisan, she feels superior to other maids like Tanneke. Because she belongs to the dominant religion, she feels superior or at least equal to Catholics of even a higher class, like Catharina. Like many young people, she certainly feels morally superior to men like van Ruijven. Because she is our narrative voice, we tend to side with her.

Given the limitations of our narrator, how do we evaluate the ekphrastic text? Many details must escape her. For example, an illiterate maid who has seldom left familiar streets cannot be expected to recognize the map of the Netherlands on the wall behind the young woman. It is true that everything Griet describes can be found in the painting pretty much the way she describes it: the colors, the textures, the pose, etc. It is also true that, given only this description, we could pore over images of Vermeer’s work and likely pick out this Young Woman with a Water Jug with little difficulty.

And yet the passage seems to miss the entire point of the painting. It is not so much prosaic and dull, as somehow wrong. Is this, in fact, a picture of the baker’s daughter? Nothing in the image identifies her as such: no flour, no dough, no oven, and certainly no father. Is this, in fact, a picture of anyone in particular? What is the subject of this painting?
Part 2
In his authoritative study of art history, Janson points out that when we look at a painting by Vermeer, “we feel as if a veil had been pulled from our eyes; the everyday world shines with jewel-like freshness, beautiful as we have never seen it before. No painter since Jan van Eyck saw as intensely as this.” The reference to Van Eyck is telling, for we find ourselves face to face with that same absolute stillness and clarity. Thanks to Leonardo and the Italian Renaissance, Vermeer knows how to soften contours with sfumato and charge the picture plane with dramatic juxtapositions of light and dark, a technique called chiaroscuro; in other words, he has pumped atmosphere into Van Eyck’s airless world. There is another, perhaps more important difference. Janson continues: “Vermeer, unlike his predecessors, perceives reality as a mosaic of colored surfaces—or perhaps more accurately, he translates reality into a mosaic as he puts it on canvas.”

Everything in Vermeer is surface and color: the skin of the world translated into the reflected light that reaches our eye. Remember, color is light; so is visible texture. The subject of this and perhaps all of Vermeer’s genre paintings is simply the way light plays over the world.

We need only marvel at the painstaking way Vermeer handles the pattern of metal, glass, all manner of fabric, rough plaster and smooth skin side by side. Light, and reflected light, and deflected light, and refracted light, and absorbed light—not to mention surfaces in shadow denied the light—turn the picture plane into a convincing illusion of eighteenth-century Delft as it really looked. A place where nothing moves, nothing ever changes, and nothing makes noise. As Simonides of Keos said in Theme 1, this kind of painting is truly silent poetry.

And yet there may be more at work here than a simple delight in rendering the complex surface of visible reality. We saw that Jan Van Eyck loaded his image of the Marriage of Arnolfini with a pictorial language we can no longer read. Consider this exchange between the maid Griet and her blind father:

My father sat back in his seat, frowning. “First you say the cap is white but not painted white. Then you say the girl is doing one thing or maybe another. You’re confusing me.” He rubbed his brow as if his head ached.

“I’m sorry, Father. I’m trying to describe it accurately.”

“But what is the story in the painting?”

“His paintings don’t tell stories.” (91)

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If, as has been suggested here, the subject of Vermeer’s painting is simply how the light interacts with the surface of the world, then Griet must be absolutely right: his genre paintings do not tell stories. They may, however, tell a moral. Such is the idea of Norbert Schneider, among others, who sees in **Young Woman with a Water Jug** the representation of a moral choice, a motif popular in its time. Note how the woman’s posture looks as if she is weighing something in a balance. One hand rests on the leaded window and the other on the pewter water jug. The basin gleams, reflecting the table rug beneath it. Next to the basin stands an open jewelry box with a chain of pearls dangling from the side. The woman herself, it is clear, wears no jewelry at all. Water often symbolizes purity, especially in the form of a fountain, which the jug and basin resembles, while jewels spilling from an open box may symbolize vanity. According to Schneider, the young woman is musing over conflicting sentiments, weighing two courses of action in the scales: should she allow herself to be swept away by vain frivolity (a temptation that seems to be waiting for her outside the window, perhaps down in the street), or should she virtuously “contain” herself, save her virtue, like the water in the jug?²

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