

Theses of a doctoral (PhD) dissertation

Landscape and depiction

Connections between literature and painting in

Eugène Fromentin's life work

Bereczki Péter Levente

Consultant: Dr. Lőrinszky Ildikó



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Faculty of Humanities
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1. The objective and the applied methods of the dissertation

The main objective of our paper is to analyse the connection between literature and the fine arts through the life work of Eugène Fromentin (b.1820-d.1876), the 19th century painter and writer, who while still popular at the beginning of the last century even in Hungary, today is undeservedly forgotten.

The domain offers a wide range of literature both in French and Hungarian. We relied mostly on the critiques of the artists of the age, like Baudelaire, Sand, Gautier and Flaubert, as well as on the essays of some prominent contemporary analysts, such as Thibaudet, Souquet and Sainte-Beuve. Current research on the theme, most of all the results of Louis Marin, Philippe Hamon, Bernard Vouilloux, Isabelle Daunais and László F. Földényi, Katalin Gellér and Ildikó Lőrinszky were most instrumental for us.

What played an important role in our choice of subject and research was that Fromentin, having traversed several Oriental lands – Algeria and Egypt – seemed to feel at ease in both branches of the arts. Although Fromentin did not belong to the great innovators, his canvases and literary works compelled the admiration of numerous authoritative critics of the time, Sainte-Beuve and George Sand among them, as well as Théophile Gautier. Let us mention a single name among Hungarian critics, that of Albert Gyergyai, who made a direct comparison between the author's novel *Dominique* and Flaubert's masterpiece, *The school of emotions*¹. Fromentin's works reflect will and perseverance combined with talent, much rather than the might of a genius able to create something new from nothing. It is not surprising then that Sainte-Beuve describes him as a 'conscientious, austere and sophisticated' creator, which, in the interpretation of this arbiter of criticism equals to a description of an artist who is reliable, not far removed from traditions and above all, virtuous².

During the artistic battles pertaining to the birth of impressionism and symbolism, Fromentin's name was already clearly associated with art which was outmoded and to be rejected, thus – to counterbalance the highly exaggerated and unfair criticism of Zola and Huysmans – we essayed to give an objective assessment of the virtues and shortcomings of Fromentin's art and to place him in

the artistic life of his time. In our efforts to do this, we were greatly helped by the work of Barbara Wright, Francis Claudon and James Thompson.

Despite the favourable reception Fromentin experienced in his early career, his name sank into oblivion, almost overnight, in the 1930s, and it is only now that his work is being rediscovered by French literary critique. It was in the light of this knowledge that we surveyed the analyses related to the artist, paying special attention to the small number of essays and articles written in the Hungarian language. In this respect, apart from the above mentioned article by Albert Gyergyai, note should be made of the writings by Tibor Szana and Irén Magoss.

While Fromentin proved to be a most prolific artist as regards the visual arts, the range of his literary works is limited to two accounts of Algerian travels, the above mentioned novel, and a single art history essay³. In our analysis, we made a conscious effort to examine as many of his fine art and literary works as possible. Through parallel analysis of the pictures and the literary pieces, what becomes evident is that there are essential – although not necessarily thematical – connections between the paintings and the writings (especially the descriptions); connections which are not at all explicit at first sight. The artist's works, whether his Oriental landscapes or his novel, *Dominique*, set in the French countryside, are derived from the same root and are woven together with many a thread.

Since Fromentin, a painter first, was extremely conscious in building his career, apart from the aesthetical reasons for his 'course correction', we also touched upon the sociological changes, which greatly contributed to the reorganisation of literary hierarchy in the 19th century. Here, we mainly relied upon the literary sociological analyses of Pierre Bourdieu and Bernard Vouilloux. These transformations are discernible both in Fromentin's art theory and in his literary and fine art practice.

Since land is the central motif of the artist's paintings, we explored the features of Fromentin's works through drawing a parallel between his descriptions of the land and his paintings which show similarities to his literary work in theme, structure or motifs. Having made a comparison between the landscapes, we were able to define the basic pillars of the Fromentine art: motionlessness, invariability, melancholy, and memory.

With regard to the descriptions of the land, we noted the highly autobiographical and self-reflective nature of all Fromentin's works. With this

knowledge, we tried to cast light upon the fact that central in all his works are the artist's fundamental personal qualities, which form an unbroken net of motifs among pieces of art which depict no similarities at first sight. Reflecting on this, we gave an interpretation of the questions of mediocrity and melancholy, another recurring aspect not only of the author's autobiographical writings and his novel, but of the writings of several contemporary authors, like Flaubert, as well. We also examined the connections between the autobiographical nature of the texts and Fromentin's favoured genres: journey accounts, psychological novels, landscape and genre painting in particular. The format of the writings also contributes to suggesting a sense of stillness and invariability: the fictive letters in the journey accounts endow the text with a certain slow rhythm. The text, with its actual uneventfulness and balanced, concise but lyrical style, reminds one of the presumed mentality of the Arab world. The story, related in *Dominique*, suggests a sense of being closed (closed down and closed in at the same time) in all aspects: the starting and the end point of the frame story coincide. The unfolding story itself also lacks substance, since what we have here is a single extension of memory, of which Dominique is desperate to get rid of. The only actual meeting in the novel 'takes place' between the narrator and the main character; everything else is merely part of Dominique's recollections.

In our research and interpretation of a typical feature of the works, the recurring motifs, we mainly relied on the results of the French genetic and thematical critiques. The former proved helpful in the interpretation of the recurring motifs in the artist's paintings, journey accounts and novels, while through the latter, we were able to understand and place these motifs in the whole of Fromentin's life work. The relevant chapter of Jean-Pierre Richard's essay, *Littérature et sensation* (1954) is considered the most comprehensive and most versed analysis of Fromentin's art. In our analyses, we took into consideration not only the linguistic and lexicological aspects, but several significant factors when examining a painting as well, namely delineation of space, treatment of colours and composition.

„(...) thus the form, recurring in this manner with continuous modifications, received a particular significance, which included the triangle and the original circle, but resulted in completely different outcomes.”⁴ These few lines read like a complete summary of Fromentin's literary and art life work. Just as obscurity,

every other theme and form recurs regularly in his works, which seem to be variations of the same fundamental idea or rather the prevailing atmosphere and attitude towards life.

From the reports of the time it emerges that Fromentin was highly esteemed among his contemporary critics mainly because they believed to detect a true reflection of his paintings in his literary works. In contradiction to the critics' opinion and the widely held view among the 19th century artists, which promote a close relationship between literature and painting – mainly as regards depictions, naturally -, Fromentin saw a much deeper gap between the two artistic branches. In his academic writings, however, he would insist that there must be a clear separation of subjects suited for painting and literature, respectively, and all tools the artist uses must be adjusted to this choice. In this respect, Fromentin clearly continues the Lessing traditions. Nevertheless, the analysis of the artist's works proves undoubtedly that no sharp contrast can be made in practice between the two artistic branches: in Fromentin's case, the paintings and writings are rooted in the very same memories and continue to complement each other. This way, the artist remains true to his theoretical argumentations without making the mistake of becoming exaggeratedly and unnaturally painterly in his writings. With regards to this question, relying on the contemporary accounts and analyses of Huysmans, Sainte-Beuve, Zola and Thibaudet, we examined the painter-writer's relationship with the classics and the trends in the theory of art which were considered modern at the time, as well as the elements of the Lessing arguments to be manifested in Fromentin's life work.

Fromentin is a most exciting subject in examining the connections between painting and literature exactly for the reason that his works are spontaneous illustrations of the strong ties between the two artistic branches, as much as he is inclined to deny it. In our essay accordingly, we endeavoured to examine the contradictions between the artist's theoretical claims and their practical implementations, that is between the correspondence and the preface to the *Sahara* – added later – on the one hand and between *Dominique* the novel and the journey accounts on the other hand.

Fromentin's life work was fundamentally influenced by his encounter with the Orient and within the Orient, the desert. The motif of the desert- immense, ever changing yet fundamentally ever its same self- coincides beautifully with the

artist's nature, who had described himself with almost the very same words. It is not surprising then that this motif, transformed every time (set in the French countryside in the case of *Dominique*, for example), continually appears in the works. In the artist's writings, the natural environment takes on a life of its own, and as a voiceless character, takes its share in soul description, which, in the case of *Dominique*, reveals just as much about the characters as about their creator himself. In point of fact, this is what makes Fromentin's art so unique and remarkable.

The artist, having completed his first Oriental canvases, was never able to rid himself of his subject he had chosen quasi involuntarily, which he had admitted to have overcome him and never let go of him. The intimate relationship which is detected at every turn in the journey accounts and is on the verge of being a love affair between the traveller and the object of his observation, clearly added to the artistic description of the connection between Dominique and his land.

In relation to the nature paintings, we examined Fromentin's views on beauty, which had found their most concise expression in the motif of the desert as well. Beauty, in the fromentinian interpretation, is invariable in itself, and is judged on instinct. It is merely its outward form and the artistic tools to be used for description which take new shapes.

Since the multifarious themes appear in his life work at various points, which are very distant from each other both in terms of genre and time, we dedicated a separate chapter to the role of memory and recollection, taking as our starting point the works by Iser, Genette and Leujeune. Through recollection, practical experiences and observations lose their distinct outlines and links; however, Fromentin consciously builds on the potentials behind the imperfectness of recollection. The method proves to be all the more fruitful, since the author's memories- rather indifferent to the objective reality and very similar to Dominique's recollections- record a feeling or impression of the moment rather than concrete facts. This question is especially interesting from the point of view that contemporary critics, themselves impressionism enthusiasts, would often compare Fromentin's works with the aspirations of the art of *plein air* painting. Because of the excessively and unfairly aggressive nature of the deprecative criticism towards Fromentin, with writings of Zola and Huysmans among them, our endeavour was to explore the important role that memory played in the formation of Fromentin's

'dissecting'⁶ style and the creation of artistic effects. In connection with the question of style, we also touched upon the parallel that can be drawn between Fromentin's and Flaubert's course of life and *ars poetica*, respectively.

2. Outcomes of the essay

Having analysed the texts, we were able to draw the conclusion that in Fromentin's case, memory plays a similar role in the process of creation as imagination does in Baudelaire's *ars poetica*: it systematizes and enriches the sensory impressions, upon which description is based, with new connections. He is able to raise these sensory impressions – fundamentally important for Baudelaire as well – onto a higher level without running up a wall between depiction and reality. Formulating these impressions is seen by the poet as the foundation of modern art.

An increased interest during the 19th century in travelling and the Orient, manifested itself in all branches of the arts. Let us not forget that at the time, the concept of the Orient was much broader than it is today, thus the Moorish culture in Spain or even the region of Eastern Europe was considered somewhat mysterious. On Gautier's art, with strong ties to the Orientalist movement, Spain had the greatest influence; the wanderers of the Middle East were Fromentin, Nerval and Chateaubriand, while Pierre Loti from the next generation, covered almost the whole Earth during his sea travels. Since the discovery of ancient civilizations, generations of artists have been dreaming of distant lands, where they can set their imagination free and break out from the moral and aesthetic constraints of a 'civilized' western society. For them, the Orient represented the Unknown-unreachable thus far and even unimaginable, which, given its novelty nature, held out at least as many artistic challenges as public successes.

Since 19th century art was deeply impressed by Oriental themes, we made an effort to point out those aspects of the Oriental myth, which greatly defined Fromentin's works, paying special attention to the questions of timelessness and motionlessness. An attribute of Fromentin's self-prompted and introverted art is that when he raises the veil which hides the Orient, he does it differently from his often voyeuristic predecessors and contemporaries. With Fromentin, exactly

because of his strive for simplicity, Isis herself transubstantiates, and her miracles are manifested most of all in the ordinary.

In order to better understand the unique features of the fromentinian Orient-image, we reviewed the works of significant models like Flaubert and Delacroix, who elaborated on the Oriental themes. Furthermore, we examined how Fromentin's artistic vision was enriched by his immediate predecessors (Decamps, Marilhat and Chassériau). The Oriental landscapes and the journey accounts illustrate only too well how the works which feed on common memories and experiences, blend into each other and how they can be interpreted as a continuation of thoughts. Time, which noticeably plays a central role for the artist, forms a tight link between his paintings and his writings. It was this approach we applied when we analyzed two paintings, both exemplary with regards to the theme (*Pays de la soif – The land of thirst; and Une rue á El-Aghouat – A street in El-Aghouat*), as well as the descriptions of the closely related journey accounts.

The parallel between the artist's writings and paintings, as if a perfect illustration for Lessing's proposed argument in *Laokoon*, claims that painting lends itself well merely to record a single moment, rather than being able to represent processes. The paintings, related to the descriptions in the journey accounts, record in still pictures the experiences which bear particular significance for Fromentin, while the texts also shed light upon what precedes and what follows the motifs. Thus, the canvases and the texts, together as a whole entity, bring out the connections of which, in reality, neither can be given a proper interpretation without being familiar with the other. That is why Fromentin's life work can be fully experienced only through a joint analysis of the two processes of creation.

It was also through the Lessing doctrines, so significant for Fromentin, that we examined the issues of description and story telling. In Fromentin's case, this question quickly led to the realisation that the sheer depiction of a scenery and consequently, painting as a tool for this description is inadequate, and that it is literary works themselves which are most suited to eliminate the inadequacies.

The artist's exceptional sensitivity with which he could react to the slightest change in the land, protected Fromentin from the danger of being lost in orientalist painting, a movement which at the time had become commonplace. The uniquely close bond between nature and its observer is especially characteristic of the artist's late paintings and literary works. Fromentin puts all his impressions through

a double filter: on the one hand, he examines how the impressions influence him directly; on the other hand, he summarizes the experiences of his predecessors. This way he establishes a duality which characterizes both the subjects and the tools of his art in which tradition and individuality complement each other perfectly. The pictures, born from the painter's experiences in Egypt and the descriptions of the land in *Dominique*, are closely interlinked. Without the painter's direct experiences, neither the subtle observations of the novel's 'landscape painting' nor the expressive composition could have come to life. Since the artist had approached the arts primarily from the viewpoint of a sensualist and considered the main task of the arts as making the invisible visible and as describing certain feelings and emotions, several aspects of his personal Oriental experiences appear in an almost untouched form in his novel, the emotional background of which has numerous aspects in common with the impressions created by the immense desert.

It is exactly this kind of unwavering ambition, which gives Fromentin prominence among the many artists who belonged to the rather popular orientalist movement of his time. He strived to grasp not only the immediate scenery but also the 'soul' of the land. Thus in his works, objective experiences are inseparably interwoven with the stirring of the observer's soul.

Having drawn a parallel between the artist's literary works and his paintings, we are confident to posit that Fromentin, while at first trying to make a clear distinction between the two forms of art, eventually found a way how to line them up to serve the very same purpose. With this, he was able to create such harmony between his literary and painting works, which was unprecedented even in the 19th century, champion of the synthesis of the arts.

FOOTNOTES:

¹ A. GYERGYAI, 'Dominique' in *Nyugat* 1920, vol.22-23, pp1127-1130

² SAINTE-BEUVE, CH.-A., *Nouveau lundis*, vol. 7, Paris, Calman Lévy, 1883., p102

³ The journey accounts are entitled *Une année dans le Sahel (A year in Sahel)* and *Un été dans le Sahara (A summer in the Sahara)*. The *Les Maîtres d'autrefois (Old masters)* examines the masters of 17th century Dutch painting, especially the painting of Rembrandt and Rubens.

⁴ FROMENTIN, E., *Dominique*, translated by János Szávai. Budapest, Európa Publishing house, 1971, p29. Cf „*et la figure arrivait ainsi, et en se répétant avec des modifications nouvelles, à des significations singulières qui impliquaient le triangle ou le cercle originel, mais avec des résultats tout différents.*” FROMENTIN, E., *Dominique*, Lyon, Lardanchet, 1920, p30

⁵ The adjective 'dissective' is often mentioned in connection with Flaubert's style. In our analysis, we tried to emphasize the similar qualities between the the two artists' notions of style and their practical implementation.

PUBLICATIONS

1) ARTICLES

A) ARTICLES IN THE FIELD OF THE THESIS

- „Le pinceau et la plume: Fromentin face à l'orient féminin”, in *Du sexe, rien d'autre, Actes du Colloque des Journées d'Études Françaises*, Debrecen, Département de Français, „Studia Romanica”, 2008, pp. 163-175.

In preparation

- „Eugène Delacroix: le plus classique des romantiques?”, in *Actes de l'École doctorale de Poděbrady*, 2006, No. 2, 8 p.
- „Fromentin tájai, avagy a mozdulatlanság diadala”, in *Szkhólion*, 2010, No. 1, 8 p.

B) OTHER ARTICLES

- „Flaubert Goethe nyomdokain”, in *Szkhólion*, 2008, No. 2, pp. 39-48.

2) REVIEWS

- JANION, Maria, „A vámpír. Szimbolikus biográfia”, in *Nagyvilág*, 2008, No. 6, pp. 621-624.
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3) BIBLIOGRAPHY

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4) TRANSLATIONS

- DERRIDA, Jacques, *Az archívum kínzó vágya: freudi impresszió*, Budapest, Kijárat Kiadó, 2008, pp. 7-104.
- JOUVET, Louis, *A testét veszített színész*, Lombár Izabellával és Matyelka Tímeával közösen, Budapest, Kijárat Kiadó, 2005, 237 p.
- KEENAN, Ruth, *2000 év lakomái*, Budapest, Glória Kiadó, 2001, 191 p.
- VAGO, Pierre, *Egy mozgalmas élet*, Budapest, Holnap Kiadó, „Az építészet mesterei”, 2002, 316 p.

In preparation

- SCHWOB, Marcel, „A 081-es vonat”, in *Műhely*, April 2010, No. 1-2, „Vonat”, 5 p.

5) CONFERENCES/LECTURES

A) LECTURES IN THE FIELD OF THE THESIS

- Title of the conference: XXV. Országos Tudományos Diákköri Konferencia, 9-11 April 2001, Szeged. Lecture: *Szalambó, avagy Egyiptomtól Karthágóig*
- Title of the conference: *La forme et le sens*, 1-4 February 2006, Poděbrady. Lecture: *La forme et le sens dans les écrits théoriques d'Eugène Delacroix.*
- Title of the conference: „*Du sexe, rien d'autre*”, *Sexualité, sexe(s) et genres dans les études françaises*, 4-6 October 2007, Debrecen. Lecture: *Le désert de Fromentin.*
- Title of the conference: Fiatal irodalmárok fóruma, 2 December 2009, Debrecen. Lecture: *Fromentin tájai.*

B) OTHER LECTURES

- Title of the conference: XXVI. Országos Tudományos Diákköri Konferencia, 22-23 April 2003, Veszprém. Lecture: „*Mesék a paradicsommadárról.*” *Johann Wolfgang Goethe* Wilhelm Meister tanulóévei és *Gustave Flaubert* *Érzelmek iskolája* című regényének összehasonlító elemzése.