

Paris from a Window: Impressionism in Helena Westermarck's Short Story 'Aftonstämning' (1890)

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Abstract

Helena Westermarck (1857-1938) was a Finnish painter, critic and novelist. This article uses Westermarck's short story 'Aftonstämning' (1890) as a springboard for the investigation of the concept and practice of ekphrasis in general, and in the context of impressionism in particular. Concomitantly, reading Westermarck's story through impressionism reveals her strategy of adopting a very modern form to explore social divisions in the Parisian cityscape. Her writing is thus seen to constitute a writerly parallel to the 'middle way' found by the female Scandinavian artists of the time, whose access to the city life immortalised by male impressionists was limited by social convention. This is particularly evident in Westermarck's use of point of view, iconic projection, framing and cropping. Nevertheless, the article concludes by exposing the tensions between content and form in Westermarck's interartistic transposition of visual elements, which contradicts the impressionist project to convey only sensory impressions, not ethical or social interest.

Key words

Helena Westermarck, ekphrasis, Nordic impressionism, literary impressionism

Introduction: Impressionism as literary pictorialism¹

The many recurring definitions of literary impressionism in those literatures that acknowledge this tendency offer a wide spectrum of interpretative possibilities of the notion, ranging from the plotless sketch and fragment through metonymic description to phenomenological perception. This essay addresses the issue by departing from the idea of impressionism in literature as a transpositional prose that aims at reproducing impressionist painterly compositions through the medium of words.² The attempt by writers to capture the motifs of the painters appears to be at the same time both the most evident and the least investigated mode of decoding the perplexing concept of literary impressionism at least in Scandinavia, where scholars mainly have dealt with the grammar, the rhetoric and the stylistics of the phenomenon.³

On the subject of the Danish writer Klaus Rifbjerg's poem 'Monets åkandebilleder' (Monet's Waterlilies, 1970), Hans Lund discusses the possibility of interpreting literary impressionism as a verbal transformation of painterly themes (Lund 1993: 118-9). Lund concludes, however, that even an explicit allusion to works of art (such as the water-lily paintings in the title of Rifbjerg's poem) might transcend an ekphrastic discourse, and also that an ekphrastic reading of a subject treated by the impressionist painters is not automatically to be considered literary impressionism. According to Lund, textual impressionism comes forth only as the author activates a strategy to transfer to words the impressionistic character of the pictorial composition (Lund 1993: 119). Following Lund's reasoning we may assume that Rifbjerg's curious poem may well be a case of impressionism in literature, but does not account for literary impressionism.

In what is considered to be the first scholarly assessment of this tendency – Ferdinand Brunetière's article 'L'impressionisme [sic] dans le roman' (1879) – the French critic already made an effort to distinguish between thematic parallels in painting and writing on the one hand, and methodological analogies on the other: '[...] transposer le sujet est une chose, transposer les moyens d'expression en est un

autre' (Brunetière 1879: 456). To Brunetière, just like to Lund a century later, it is precisely the transposition of painterly 'moyens d'expression' to writing that creates literary impressionism (Brunetière 1879: 452). Nevertheless, investigating pictorialism and iconic dimensions in the texts of writers concerned with impressionism is often, even in the international debate, seen as a naive and insufficient approach to the issue, or at best accepted with reservation. Exceptions are few.⁴

'Aftonstämning': the verbal re-modeling of the impressionist cityscape

Unlike H. Peter Stowell, who claims that the subjects of the literary impressionists 'were not the water, snow, blossoms, clouds, sailboats, crowds, steam, speed, and mist of the painters' but 'the impalpable surfaces of sensory data that attack consciousness' (Stowell 1980: 49), I will argue that one of the ways in which impressionism was translated into literature was through adapting to language the motifs of the painters, to whatever extent this involved the somewhat obscure brunetierian dictum of 'systematically transposing' the *means* of one art (i.e. painting) to another (i.e. writing). My chief concern in what follows will be the attempt to examine the short story 'Aftonstämning' (1890), written by the Finland-Swedish *doppeltbegabung*, painter and writer Helena Westermarck (1857-1938),⁵ as a verbal representation of a motif familiar to impressionist painting, namely the balcony view of a Parisian streetscape. The point at issue here is to set up an interart analogy through the evaluation of a parallel motif, primarily, and parallel methods of composition in painting and writing, secondarily. Since the aspects of visuality in the text will be examined as a response to impressionist painting and its rules of composition, I will first briefly try to evaluate what impact the French impressionists had on Westermarck, then look at her own idea of the analogy between painting and writing before focussing on the interart dialogue through a close reading of the short story. The pictorial motif of the bird's eye view of Paris functions as an 'ekphrastic model' (Yacobi 1995, 1998) in a text that draws on specific markers (Lund 1982: 36-8), which appear to address the aesthetics and the compositional strategies of the

impressionist painters. If the coincidence of impressionist motifs in art and in literature is, as I believe, worth the attention of the one who wishes to capture the breadth of the 'ism', Westermarck's short story also informs us about the history of the reception and comprehension of impressionism in literary works written in Swedish.

Westermarck and impressionism

Helena Westermarck's observations on the impressionist movement can be found in a letter to her mother written in Paris on 4 April 1880; in the articles 'Från Parisersalongen 1884' (From the Paris *Salon*, I, II) that appeared in *Finsk tidskrift* that same year; in the short story entitled 'I marginalen af en museikatalog' (In the Margins of a Museum Catalogue, 1890), as well as in her autobiography *Mina levnadsminnen* (My Memoirs, 1941). These sources illustrate how Helena Westermarck moved from the initial perplexity common among the first beholders of impressionism to embracing the ideals of the movement and overtly paying her homage to the Dane P. S. Krøyer, who went through an impressionist phase. In the 1920s and 30s, when she wrote her autobiography, she no longer mentions the early bewilderment confessed in the letter home. Instead, Westermarck now presents herself as an admirer of the impressionists right from the start, as in the following passage from *Mina levnadsminnen*, which refers to her second visit to Paris in 1884:

Det hände att vi återsågo tavlor som vi fordom ställt ofantligt högt, men som nu tycktes oss bleknade och ointressanta. – Var det inte mer än så? hände det att vi tänkte. Andra åter stego fram i den nya fördelaktiga belysning tiden skänkt dem. Särskilt kommer jag ihåg salen med impressionistiska teckningar och målningar i le Luxembourg, där mycket nytt kommit till. Impressionisterna hade alltid haft stor lockelse för mig, därom bär redan min [...] tidningsartikel från 1884 vittnesbörd. (Westermarck 1941: 336)

(Occasionally we went back to see paintings that we had earlier

praised highly, which now appeared pale and uninteresting to us. – Was that all? we thought at times. Others reappeared in the new flattering light that time had brought to them. I especially recall the room with impressionist drawings and paintings in *le Luxembourg*, where much novelty had been added. I had always felt greatly drawn to the impressionists, as my [...] article from 1884 already testifies.)⁶

When further discussing her taste in art, Westermarck makes a mention of her fascination for the Dutch masters present in the Louvre (Teniers, Rembrandt and Holbein) as well as for the ‘divine art’ of Titian, Veronese and Murillo (Westermarck 1941: 106), although she states in conclusion (1941: 185) her conviction that ‘[...] lärdomarna och de livgivande impulserna skulle dock hämtas från den moderna franska konsten’ ([...] the learnings and the vital impulses were nevertheless to be drawn from modern French art). That the ‘modern French art’ is to be identified with the impressionist experience and with the fashion of *plein air* seems confirmed by several entries in the autobiography dedicated to the trends on the Parisian art scene at the time of young Westermarck’s two sojourns in the French capital, in 1879-81 and in 1884:

Friluftsmåleriet – *plein air* – stod vid denna tid högt i kurs. Impressionisterna hade infört det med hela färgskalan ute i ljuset och solen, där alla reflexer kunde bryta sig mot varandra och åstadkomma det mest förvånande färgspel. Det var ju också något verkligt nytt som därmed fördes in i konsten. [...] Nu slogs dörren till atéljen upp, och konstnären gick ut till sol eller skugga eller till den mycket fint förtonande gråvådersstämningen. [...] Friluftsmålningen både då det gällde figurer och landskap fick ju en utomordentlig betydelse för konstnärerna i alla länder. (Westermarck 1941: 207)

(*Plein air*-painting was greatly appreciated at the time. It had been introduced by the impressionists along with the entire colour chart outside in the light and in the sunshine, where

the juxtaposition of reflections could create the most amazing play of colours. Something completely new had really been introduced into art. [...] The door to the studio was opened and the artist walked out to sunshine or shade or to the delicately shadowed atmosphere of grey skies. [...] Painting both figures and landscapes in the open air really had an enormous impact on artists in all countries.)

During her years in Paris, Westermarck was especially drawn to *plein air* painting in the suburban outskirts still untouched by industrialization, such as Fontenay-aux-Roses and St. Cloud (Westermarck 1941: 136). She also spent the summer of 1884 in Bretagne dedicating herself to painting in the open air. In *Mina levnadsminnen*, she states that it was precisely the novelty of the impressionist movement and its *plein-airism* that attracted the Scandinavian artists to Paris in the 1880s and early 1890s:

Den franska konsten var för de nordiska konstnärerna mönstret och föredömet med den impressionistiska förnyelsen och *plein-air*-måleriet i Frankrikes mjukt förtonande luft, så olik nordens klara och skarpa med de starka färgmotsättningarna. (Westermarck 1941: 183)

(The French art with the impressionist renewal and the *plein air*-painting in the softly nuanced air of France, so different from that of the North, harsh and clear with its sharp juxtaposition of colours, was the norm and the model for the Nordic artists.)

In Westermarck's autobiographical writing, Paris thus comes forth as the point of convergence of all the forces that triggered the new European art and literature, and as an important source of inspiration not only for the Scandinavian painters but also for the writers (Westermarck 1941: 300).⁷ As the relation between the 'sister arts' in the instance of Westermarck is never one of conflict but always of affinity, it has become something of a critical commonplace to stress the importance of the visual arts for her literary creation.⁸ *Mina*

levnadsminnen likewise foments the opinion that Westermarck neatly refused a separation of the two forms of art and bears witness to her conviction that the pen and the brush were to be used to express the same ideas (Westermarck 1941: 240, 255, 281). On the subject of her prize-winning novel *Lifvets seger* (Life's Victory), written in Italy in 1889, she emphasized the interartistic dialogue present in the text. In this case, it was the art of the ancient Florentine masters that, almost unconsciously it would seem, had informed the novel:

Jag tror också att detta mitt ständiga umgänge med den gamla florentinska konsten – modern italiensk konst kom jag här alls icke i beröring med – fick ett alldeles bestämt inflytande på den berättelse jag höll på att skriva under min vistelse i Firenze, nämligen *Lifvets seger*. Medvetet eller omedvetet kom, tror jag, vid skildringen av personerna i min bok något av den stränga linjen från tavlorna och freskerna, som jag här ständigt såg för mina ögon, in i det jag då skrev. Man har senare någon gång påpekat en viss stramhet i framställningen. Själv har jag för övrigt aldrig kunnat göra någon fullständig åtskillnad mellan att måla och skriva. Det kan förefalla obegripligt, men i själva verket höra ju linjer och färger, tankar och ord mycket nära tillsammans. – Det var i synnerhet då jag under sommaren efter min hemkomst slutförde utarbetandet av boken, [...] som jag tyckte mig varsna ett visst sammanhang eller inflytande av de lärdomar jag vunnit med ögonens tillhjälp. (Westermarck 1941: 281)

(I also think that my constant exposure to the ancient Florentine art – I did not see any modern Italian art here – decidedly influenced the tale I was working on during my stay in Florence, namely *Lifvets seger*. Whether consciously or unconsciously, I think that something of the severe contours in the paintings and frescoes I constantly had before my eyes, entered the description of the characters in my book as I wrote. Subsequently, there were occasional comments on a certain severity in the descriptions. I have never myself been able to distinguish neatly between

painting and writing. It may seem incomprehensible, but lines and colours, thoughts and words really do belong quite closely together. – During the summer after my return home as I was finishing the work on the book, [...] I especially felt that I could perceive the analogy or the influence of the things I had learned with the help of my eyes.)

The ekphrastic model

There are, to my knowledge, no comments by Westermarck herself to support a reading of 'Aftonstämning' that would associate the verbal art in the short story with the visual art of the impressionists. How, then, do we approach a text that evokes a recognizable and established painterly motif without indicating a specific pictorial counterpart to the reader? Would it be useful, or even possible, to award ekphrastic status to the passage depicting the panoramic view from above a Parisian street that opens and sets the tone for the narration?

It is well known that the definition of ekphrasis has shifted greatly from the ancient idea of a 'vivid description of visual impressions, including landscapes, architectural constructions, battles, plagues, etc' (Klarer 1999: 1-2) to the modern implication of a double representation, i. e. a 'verbal representation of a visual representation' (Heffernan 1993: 3, 1991: 299). In most studies dedicated to ekphrasis, it seems clear enough that at the core of the modern ekphrastic practice is the very *reference* to a generic model or to a specific work of art, be it existent or fictitious (Clüver 1997: 31). Among the recent voices arguing for an extensive use of the contemporary definition of ekphrastics as 'modes whereby texts engage with visual culture' (Harrow 2010) or as forms of language that 'make us see', as in Mitchell's idea of 'ekphrastic hope' (Mitchell 1994: 152-4), Tamar Yacobi's discussion of the poetics of ekphrasis stands out. If the omission of references to a unique artwork or to a whole set of paintings disengages Westermarck's short story from the traditional ekphrastic discourse, Yacobi's concept of ekphrastic or pictorial models runs to the rescue in the process of interpretation and comprehension of a tale more statically descriptive than narrative. Yacobi (1995, 1998) describes the pictorial model as

a 'neglected form' (Yacobi 1998: 23) of ekphrasis and as a 'visual stereotype' (Yacobi 1998: 33) that does not choose a specific work of art for verbal rendering but makes use of multiple visual sources and generalised references to artistic themes, styles or topoi.

In the case of 'Aftonstämning', investigating those passages that 'act like pictures or "incorporate" pictorial practices' (Mitchell 1994: 4) and raising questions about the interaction between the text and the rules of composition in impressionist painting serves to illuminate Westermarck's evocation of a certain atmosphere that not only expert readers are bound to perceive as characteristic of the age in which the short story is set, and may also enrich our understanding of the way in which the author combined form and content in her writing. If Westermarck seems to strive to avoid the overly anecdotal, concentrating instead on mediating reality through picture-like description, at the feeble narrative core of a story – in which the viewer's gaze, oscillating between high and low, interior and exterior, private and public space, is the true protagonist – is a seamstress, a character belonging to the urban working class and more typical of naturalism. As part of the urban working class, the seamstress is one of many 'arbetets martyrer' (Westermarck 1890a: 34) (martyrs of labour) whose sporadic day off is synonymous with 'frihet, lycka och lifsglädje' (Westermarck 1890a: 34) (freedom, happiness and *joie de vivre*), as opposed to the idleness associated with the leisure time of the wealthy bourgeoisie, as we will see. It is significant that the representational mode should reveal the author's interest in an impressionistic reading of the Parisian cityscape, while the thematic concentration is on a narrow, lower-class sidestreet in the *Etoile*-quarter (rather than on the sophisticated haussmannian boulevard right around the corner) and on a seamstress's day off (in place of the recreational time of the higher classes). If the impressionist painters turned away from the tensions and the ills of contemporary society, Westermarck's way of casting a social message (the juxtaposition of the bourgeoisie and the working class) in a very modern form appears to mirror the Scandinavian artists' tendency to blend naturalism and impressionism into an art of the middle way.

Riitta Konttinen has spoken of the conceptual confusion that prevailed in the Finnish art circles of the time where naturalism

was, on the one hand, made synonymous with impressionism and referred to as a 'klatschmanér' (blotched manner)⁹ and, on the other, employed to designate the 'dangerous' novels of Zola (Konttinen 1996: 4-5). Margareta Gynning explains the middle way assumed by the Scandinavian women painters in Paris in the 1880s as an art that grew out of the example of the painters of the *juste milieu* (Bastien-Lepage, Sargent and Edelfelt, among others); artists who displayed a visible influence from the urban *flânerie* present in Manet and in the impressionists, in spite of their classical education. Next to the male *flâneur*, Gynning writes, the female impressionists took to those aspects of modernity to which they had access and painted modern life from the balconies, choosing a perspective that obliged the viewer to consider the city from a point of view different from the one usually assumed by men roaming the city streets (Gynning 1997: 42-3). Although it must be added that the domestic *flânerie* from the balcony was by no means exclusively feminine (as is demonstrated by the many variations on the *homme au balcon*-theme in, for instance, Caillebotte, Monet, Pissarro, Krohg or Munch), Gynning's comment is relevant to our discussion, as I will try to demonstrate below. So is her observation (which coincides with Helena Westermarck's own *memoirs*) that the freedom which the continental metropolis had to offer the young women painters in the 1880s, did not include spending time unchaperoned in the streets, ballrooms and cafés (Gynning 1997: 42). Westermarck, however, claims to have been quite indifferent to studying the life of the people in night cafés and ballrooms, and maintains that the kind of social studies that attracted her the most were occasions like the one that brought her to attend a speech given by the formerly exiled communist Louise Michel (Westermarck 1941: 136-7).

Paris from a window

In the absence of authorial commentary to support the legitimacy of an interartistic comparison in the specific case of 'Aftonstämning', my conviction that Westermarck's textual decoding of Paris is formed by impressionist art is founded on the author's choice of subject and point of view, as well as on the instructions offered by the storyteller

to heighten the reader's awareness of the type of pictorialisation that the urban environment and the window motif undergoes in the narration. Not only is pictorial allusion quite evident to those readers able to decipher the interplay between the text and the repertoire of the impressionist painters, but it is also signalled by the fictional perceiver, who coincides with the narrator. I will motivate the relevance of a comparison between the text and the visual sources of the impressionists through a discussion of the motif and of the painterly structures present in the narration.

That the bird's eye view of Paris from a balcony or from the window of an atelier was a favourite among the impressionists is something to which the canvasses of the painters who came into contact with the movement at some point of their career bear witness: Monet's two versions of Boulevard des Capucines in the early 1870s and his *Rue Montorgueil* (1878) with its flying flags; Caillebotte's *Rue Halévy, vue d'un sixième étage* (1878) and his many versions of Boulevard Haussmann painted around 1880, such as *Un balcon, boulevard Haussmann; Homme au balcon, boulevard Haussmann; Un refuge, boulevard Haussmann; Boulevard Haussmann, effet de neige* or *Boulevard, vu d'en haut*; Pissarro's *Boulevard Montmartre* (1897), caught in different moments of the day and in different weather conditions, and his *Rue St. Lazare* (1897) and *Avenue de l'Opéra* (1898) as well as Edvard Munch's *Rue de Lafayette* and *Rue de Rivoli* (both painted in 1891), to name just a few. The search for a singular perspective that would allow the beholder an oblique and extraordinary view of a fraction of the urban reality was in line with the impressionistic break-up with the traditional rules for composition. The structural schemes of the impressionists depended both on the influence of the graphic organisation in the much admired Japanese prints, as well as on the often drastic and haphazard framing brought about by contemporary photography, of which Nadar, who had hosted the first impressionist exhibition in his atelier in rue des Capucines, was a forerunner. Nadar's photographic excursions in the hot air-balloon *Le Géant* had shown the painters new points of view and encouraged them to observe the city from above. Helena Westermarck's writing of the city seems to draw on precisely the same visual experience as she opens her story with a balcony perspective of

the urban scene and underlines the boldness of this viewpoint through the observations of the effects that a sharply oblique angle of vision has on the perception of the human figures down below:

Solen hade hela dagen baddat brännande och bländande i de långa avenuern och kommit gatan med dess fina lager af stoft att skifta i hvitt. I slutet af avenuen sågos träd, gata och hus svepta i en gråaktig dimmig ton, och en bit af himmelen upp öfver altsammans fick ett lätt rökfärgadt flor öfver sin blå bottenfärg. [...] Från femte våningens balkong kunde man se hela gatan i fågelperspektiv. Allra nederst syntes människorna i underlig förkortning, mest bara hufvud och armar. En krans af barnhufvud, från den ljusaste gula skiftning till den mörkaste svarta, svängde om midt på gatan efter en dragharmonikas gälla toner. Stolar och bord hade blifvit flyttade utanför dörrar och portar. Där sågs en massa hufvud; några i hvita mössor och fladdrande bjärta band voro i ständig rörelse, de tillhörde kokerskorna, som efter att hela den heta dagen i ända hafva stått vid en glödande spisel, nu svalkade sig en stund där ute. Här funnos ärevördiga gråa hufvud i kalotter, till hvilka hörde hvita skjortärmar och ett moln af fin grå rök ur tobakspipan; gråhåriga slåtkammade hufvud under yfviga svarta spetsmössor, och med dem följde ett par flinka knotiga händer, som raskt rörde strumpstickorna. I dörren till vinkommersen skockade sig en hel hop svarthåriga hufvud på brunbrända breda nackar, och bara seniga armar eller blåa blusärmar gestikulerade ifrigt. Ibland [...] stack sig mellan de korthåriga karlhufvudena med de skarphuggna profilerna fram ett annat hufvud med mjuka konturer, och ett blondt krusigt hår glänste till i ljusskenet, som föll inifrån. (Westermarck 1890a: 25-8).

(The hot and blinding sun had been hitting the long avenues all day and made the street with its thin layer of dust turn to whiteness. At the end of the avenue, a hazy greyish shade could be seen to envelop trees, street and buildings, and the blue foundation of a piece of the sky visible on top of it all was

shrouded in a slightly smokey veil. [...] From the balcony on the fifth floor the whole street could be caught in a bird's eye view. The people at greatest distance were strangely shortened, not much more than mere heads and arms. A garland of children's heads, from the fairest shade of yellow to darkest black, were moving around the street to the shrill sounds of an accordion. Chairs and tables had been arranged outside doors and gates. Countless heads could be seen; the ones in white caps and fluttering ribbons were continuously on the move, they belonged to the cooks, who had spent the whole day in front of a glowing stove and now were out for a nip of fresh air. There were distinguished grey heads in caps, to which white shirtsleeves and a cloud of fine grey smoke from the tobacco pipe belonged; there were well-combed grey heads underneath wide black lace bonnets, and these were accompanied by agile workers' hands, quickly twisting the knitting needles. In the doorway to the wineshop a crowd of blackhaired heads on top of large, suntanned necks gathered, and bare, sinewy arms or blue shirtsleeves were keenly gesticulating. At times [...] another head with soft contours peeped out among the shorthaired heads of the men with their severe profiles, and its blonde curly hair gleamed in the light coming from inside.)

The textual presentation of the cityscape, with its accent on colours and on various atmospherical effects as well as the meditation on the peculiar foreshortenings of the human body, is on its own clearly image-oriented. Nevertheless, it is the plunging perspective from a window opening onto an unhindered vision of a street bustling with life that delivers the scene as an impressionist motif. According to Virginie Pouzet-Duzer, the occasional angle of vision may indeed in itself make up for the impressionist character of a painting. On the subject of Caillebotte's *Rue de Paris: temps de pluie* (1877), Pouzet-Duzer comments: 'Ici, plus que la peinture en-soi, le choix d'un cadre, d'un angle de vue original constitue le caractère impressionniste du tableau' (Pouzet-Duzer 2008: 237).

The diagonal perspective does not remain fixed throughout

'Aftonstämning', but the focus changes as the balance almost imperceptibly tips from description to narration: the eyes of the speaker/perceiver move upwards from street level to the first, second and third floor of the building on the opposite side of the street, again without forgetting to comment on the effects of the point of view on the appearance of objects and people, as if the scene was to be drawn rather than registered in words: 'Ju högre blicken steg, dess mindre blef förkortningen' (Westermarck 1890a: 28) (The higher up the gaze moved, the lesser was the effect of foreshortening). Looking in through a window on a bourgeois family interior on its way upwards, the beholder pauses to fix an image of domestic comfort and coziness. For an instant the narrator stops to outline the new subject of the modern painters, the leisure time of the bourgeoisie: *monsieur* reading the evening paper, *madame* by the lamplight occupied with her needlework, *mademoiselle* at the piano and the young master riding on a chair in front of a pile of books. At last the gaze conquers the top floor of the building to catch a glimpse of the tenants standing outside to get some fresh air, while presumably looking down on the city:

[...] en hvar, som hade en balkong, ett fönster eller till och med blott en liten glugg, försökte skaffa sig frisk luft; ända ut på taken med de gigantiska skorstenarna och rökrören, som stå i rader likt omstjälpta blomkrukor, syntes folk. (Westermarck 1890a: 29)

([...] each and everyone who had a balcony, a window or even just a small skylight, attempted to get some fresh air, people could be seen all the way out on the rooftops with their giant chimney stacks and flue vents that stand aligned like overturned flowerpots.)

The wandering eye reaches its goal when detecting an open window behind the arabesques of a small wrought iron balcony opposite its own:

I femte våningen tvärs öfver den trånga gatan midt emot mig

voro fönstren uppslagna till en liten balkong, hvilken var omsluten af ett järnstaket och en barrier med långa utstående järntaggar, där grannens andel af balkongen vidtog. Här stod en lång rad af blomkrukor med skott och sticklingar i, samt smala trälådor, ur hvilka stockrosorna stucko snedt fram i vädret och trängde sig ut mellan staketets galler för att snappa upp några solstrålar. (Westermarck 1890a: 29-30)

(On the fifth floor on the other side of the narrow street, right across from me, the windows stood open to a small balcony surrounded by an iron railing and a barrier of long iron spikes where the neighbour's part of the balcony began. There was a row of flowerpots with shoots and cuttings and narrow wooden boxes, out of which hollyhocks sprouted obliquely into the air and jostled through the balcony grille to catch a few sunbeams.)

Although nothing has yet been revealed about the tenant living *en face*, the flowerpots and the growing roses escaping through the iron railing are details that suggests what Pouzet-Duzer (2008: 244) calls 'l'espace [...] féminisé du balcon'. Pouzet-Duzer furthermore reads the grilles that frequently surround railroads, balconies and women (not least), in impressionist compositions as elements that emphasise a woman's inability to conquer the alluring and apparently boundless city space offered by the often depicted new boulevards: 'Qu'il s'agisse des grilles du chemin de fer, de celles des balcons, du jeu des piliers et des miroirs des perspectives de Degas [...] on retrouve en effet chez tous ces impressionnistes une représentation [...] de la femme comme entourée, enfermée, encadrée' (Pouzet-Duzer 2008: 241). Thus, the motif of the *femme à la fenêtre*, which also happens to be the sad source of inspiration for the Dane Herman Bang's brilliant impressionistic novel *Ved Vejen* (At Vejen, 1886), has very different connotations from the impressionist canvasses portraying men watching from the balcony or looking out of the window.

Iconic projection, framing and the arbitrary cropping

As portals to the outside, balconies and windows tell of space and of the delimitation of space, of boundaries and of the breaking of boundaries.¹⁰ They also play an important part in those narrations that draw upon pictorial modes of description, as Hans Lund has shown in his discussion of the relation between visibility and literature. Lund's concept of *ikonisk projicering* is, in the scholar's terminology, synonymous with reading a portion of the external reality as if it were an image (Lund 1982: 53). Iconic projection, as defined by Lund, covers both the fragment of reality that is being observed and the actual mode of description. As far as the latter is concerned, the modes of signalling an imagistic approach to the description of reality rely on *markörer*,¹¹ markers that point to the relevance of a comparison between the verbal representation and a visual source, such as: terminology familiar to the description of artworks; a perception typical of that of a painter; an aesthetic distance to the scene described. One way of expressly achieving the desired aesthetic distance is through the use of physical frames such as doors and doorways, windows and windowframes, which delimit the motif:

Med hjälp av den reella eller fiktiva ramen etableras den estetiska distanseringen och mobiliseras den kod som får betraktaren att uppleva former, linjer och färger i sin optiska omgivning som element i en målning, en teckning, ett foto osv. Detta sätt på vilket betraktaren visuellt begränsar och omtolkar den yttre verkligheten är [...] något som man kan belägga i litterära texter från 1700-talet och fram till idag. Författarens val av bildkod för textens ikoniska projicering [...] är givetvis beroende av det bildförråd, det ikoniska lexikon som författarens egen sociokulturella verklighet ställer till hans förfogande. Författaren kommer naturligtvis alltid att i hög grad stå under inflytande av tendenser i samtidens bildkonst och bildvärld, av samtidens sätt att uppleva och tolka den optiska verklighet som fastnar på näthinnan. (Lund 1982: 119)

(A real or fictitious frame helps to achieve the aesthetic distance and to set in motion the code that makes the perceiver

experience shapes, lines and colours in his optical environment as elements of a painting, drawing, photography etc. The perceiver's manner of visually delimiting and interpreting the external reality is [...] something that can be charted in literary texts from the 18th century and up until today. The author's choice of a picture code to support the iconic projection in the text [...] is certainly dependent on the storehouse of images, the iconic lexicon that his own socio-cultural reality presents him with. The author will of course always be greatly influenced by tendencies in his contemporary art world and artistic production, by the contemporary mode of experiencing and interpreting the optical reality that is projected on the cornea.)

Framing through the use of windows and balconies is a frequently adapted imagistic approach to description in 'Aftonstämning'. The following example, with its accent on the play of light, shadow and artificial illumination, may be used to illustrate Westermarck's instances of pictorial framing in general:

Fönstren stodo öppna, och genom det yttre rummet, som var mörkt, föll lampskenet från det inre helt dämpadt öfver balkongen, som i denna belysning tog sig ganska ståtlig ut med alla sina grönsaker. (Westermarck 1890a: 30)

(The windows stood open, and through the external room, which was dark, the lamplight from the inner room fell softly over the balcony, which in this light looked rather majestic with all its greenery.)

The attempt to make both narrator and reader experience the observed views as if they were painted representations is clearly part of the authorial intention, and it becomes obvious when an episode in the text is spoken of in terms of a framed canvas:

[...] genom balkongens fönster och rummets dörr, som bildade likasom en mörk ram till den ljusfulla taflan där innanför, såg

jag symaskinen undanstäld [*sic*] i en vrå samt min granne i
lampskenet sysselsatt med att duka ett festligt middagsbord.
(Westermarck 1890a: 31)

([...] through the windows of the balcony and the door of the
room, which formed a sort of dark frame around the radiant
painting within, I saw the sewing machine stored in a corner and
my neighbour occupied with laying a festive dinner table.)

While the above mentioned examples no doubt represent instances
of visual perception, they are, it must be admitted, no more and no
less reminiscent of an impressionist representation than is the title
of the short story, 'Aftonstämning', literally 'evening atmosphere'.
The title, too, appeals to visual thinking and is suggestive of the
titles of works of many Swedish painters such as Severin Nilsson
(1846-1918), Carl Fredrik Hill (1849-1911) or Wilhelm von Gegerfelt
(1844-1920), among others. Even if it is certainly not contradictory
to claim that those passages revealing the author's fascination for
light effects and the play of reflexes must be attributed to the painter
Helena Westermarck's eye, trying to anchor these paragraphs to the
style of an epoch is hazardous. Although one of the chief concerns of
the impressionists was to explore and try to capture the interaction
between luminosity and matter, and the juxtaposition of outside and
inside light in the case of the window theme, it must be conceded
that the details in the following description of light effects on cheap
glassware and on second-rate silver-plated cutlery are pictorial in a
general sense rather than specifically impressionist:

Rödvinet glimmade i de simpla glasen och kastade oregelbundna
röda fläckar på duken, när ljuset bröt sig igenom; vattenkaraffen
lyste i lampskenet; alfenidskedarna och sockerskålen blänkte
och kastade ut små knippen af kallt reflexljus. (Westermarck
1890a: 32)

(The red wine glimmered in the plain glasses and threw irregular
red stains on the tablecloth as the light broke through; the

water carafe glowed in the lamplight; the teaspoons of alfenide and the sugarbowl glistened and emanated tiny shafts of cold reflected light.)

What the above quoted segment really reveals are the elements on which Westermarck focussed as a painter: light effects, colour treatment, truthfulness to reality, all aspects, according to Konttinen, that indicate how the artist often seemed to accord more importance to the execution than to the motif (Konttinen 1996: 26). How, then, is it possible to endorse the deduction that Westermarck anchors the visual readings of the scenes in the story in the 'iconic lexicon' of her time?¹²

The age of impressionism offers an iconic lexicon that comes across as a storehouse of formal innovations such as snapshot-compositions characterised not only by odd and sharply oblique perspectives, but also by apparently arbitrary cuts, again reminiscent of the art of photography and of the popular Japanese prints. Helena Westermarck's prose shares the pictorial language of the impressionist compositions through the employment of peculiar framings when focussing on the initial street scene of which the narrator only perceives details of the people, and on the events taking place in front. As the seamstress receives her dinner guests, a woman and a man, the narrator comments: 'Jag kunde endast se de hvita skjortärmarna och en profil med ett par svarta mustascher, resten skar dörrposten af' (Westermarck 1890a: 31-2) (I could only catch the white shirtsleeves and a profile with a couple of black moustaches, the rest was cut off by the doorframe). Never once does Westermarck allow her narrator and the reader to catch a full-length portrait of the man who is being observed, but she always provides as much of him as can be seen from the speaker/perceiver's position. Within the given frame, glimpses of his profile appear and disappear, an arm is stretched out and the bluish smoke of a lit cigar blurs the scene. As the dinner comes to its end and oranges are brought in for dessert, the portion of the man's body delimited by the frame has been reduced to a mere hand reaching out for the fruit: 'Af mannen syntes endast handen, som höll upp den ena skifvan efter den andra mot ljuset, doppade den i sockret och lät den försvinna'

(Westermarck 1890a: 33) (What could be caught of the man was only his hand, raising slice after slice up against the light, dipping it into sugar and letting it disappear).

When the Goncourt brothers in *Germinie Lacerteux* (1865) similarly treated a cow, cutting half of its body off in their description, the novelty of this framing technique was noticed by critics such as Louis Desprez and, as Hans Lund has reminded us, Georg Brandes (Lund 1993: 46), who both established an intertextual parallel to painting. Desprez reads the passage as reminiscent of the technique by which ‘un peintre ne réclame plus d’un morceau de ciel ou d’une moitié de vache, si ce morceau de ciel et cette moitié de vache suffisent à l’effet voulu’ (Desprez 1884: 87), which calls to mind the formulation of the philosophy of impressionism as a metonymic mode of description.¹³ Brandes (1901: 117) explains the reference to art in the same piece of prose with an allusion to the ancient idea of the untutored eye reporting only what can be seen, never what is known: ‘[...] naar deres Landskaber saa fuldstændigt gør Indtryk af Malerier eller Raderinger, saa beror det især paa, at de giver det Udsnit af Tingene, der har frembudt sig for deres Øjne, nøjagtigt som de har set det’ ([...] as their landscapes to such an extent give the impression of paintings or etchings, it is specifically due to their way of offering a fragment of the objects in front of their eyes, precisely as they have been observed). With a quotation in translation, Brandes (1901: 117) illustrates this opinion referring to the Goncourts’ description of ‘half of a red cow’s body’ and concludes: ‘En Forfatter af den ældre Skole som Sainte-Beuve havde ikke forholdt os Koens anden Halvdel. Disse Betragtere holder sig strengt til, hvad de ser’ (A writer of the old school, such as Sainte-Beuve, would not have omitted the second half of the cow. This kind of beholders only report what they see).¹⁴ Again, the reference is to the ‘primitive eye’ that was adopted by the impressionists, to the idea, that is, of reproducing only what the eye perceives unaware of what the mind knows *a priori* about the observed scene.¹⁵

Conclusion: form and content

In conclusion, a verbal representation merely sharing the motifs of

the impressionists may not determine the impressionist character of a piece of prose but, in the case of 'Aftonstämning', markers such as the point of view, the odd framing and the organisation of the elements within the given frame as well as the attention, in part, to colours and to light effects testify to Westermarck's knowledge of the innovations in impressionist painting and push the interpretation of the text in the direction of a transformation of impressionist painterly structures into words.¹⁶

In line with the late nineteenth-century Scandinavian understanding – or perhaps rather *lack* of understanding – of impressionism, is also Westermarck's reflection on the social content of the scene, which really eludes the scope of much impressionist art. Not many impressionist canvasses are images suitable for narrativising, pictures that 'tell a story'. Underlining the fact that the term 'impressionism' was coined to mirror the content of canvasses conveying nothing but sensorial perception – *que des impressions!* –, the Swedish art historian Hans Ruin (1949: 16) comments as follows on this aspect of the movement: 'Varken etiska eller sociala intressen, som i så hög grad låg under de föregående decenniernas naturalistiska måleri och diktning, är längre knutna vid konstverket' (Neither ethical nor social interests, which to a great extent had informed the naturalistic painting and writing in the previous decades, are longer attached to the work of art). The revolutionary novelty of the impressionists lay indeed, as has been observed, in the idea of freeing painting 'from the tyranny of the anecdote, since their interest was not in the subject, [...] but in the handling' (Sypher 1960: 172). Westermarck's idea of choosing a flash of reality from impressionist Paris as a point of departure for her narration is then somehow reversing the efforts of the impressionists to turn modern painting away from literature and storytelling. Also, the pictorial stasis and the 'lack of content' of this specific impressionist subject are both contradicted by the very nature of the act of narration. Westermarck's narrator may be observing the scene with the eyes of an impressionist painter, flirt with impressionist aesthetics and shun the anecdotal, but the reflections and the social interest that in the end are added to the description coincide with those that informed the naturalists. The view that releases the narration is, as has been

observed above, that of a narrow street squeezed in between two large boulevards in the *Etoile*-quarter, where there are no top hats in view and where a carriage of the gentry very rarely, the narrator informs us, turns the corner. The bird's-eye view may indeed increase the sense of distance to the scene, prevent involvement and indicate a lack of penetration into the psychology of the fictional characters, but as Westermarck proceeds to close-up sections that concentrate on human themes, she resists the philosophy of *l'art pour l'art* that was gaining ground in the age of impressionism.

My argument then suggests that, as to form, Westermarck's short story counts as an example of textual impressionism. As to content, 'Aftonstämning' should be read as a study in social types, whose diversity and separateness is accentuated by the vertical movement of the viewer's gaze, which underlines the social levelling and the disengagement of the bourgeois family in their apartment from the animated working class crowd below and the seamstress above. Westermarck's impressionism both in the painterly and in the literary field may contradict the lack of social messages characteristic of the French pioneers, but must be considered conventional within the context of the Scandinavian middle way.¹⁷

Endnotes

¹ *Pictorialism* is, in James Heffernan's understanding of the notion (1991: 300 and 1993: 3), a way of representing the world 'with the aid of pictorial techniques' such as 'focusing, framing, and scanning'. Jean H. Hagstrum's definition of pictorialism (1987: xxi-xxii) is more articulate and the phenomenon is considered to exist only when five specific conditions are fulfilled.

² The present study is part of a greater research project with the purpose of investigating the impact of impressionism on Scandinavian literature and defining its multiform characteristics. The first results have been presented in an article in which I have shown the potential that lay within the notion of literary impressionism as a province of the critics within the context of Finland-Swedish literature in the late 19th century, see Storskog 2011.

³ For an essential bibliography of Scandinavian studies dealing with literary impressionism, see Kristensen 1955, Dahl 1969 (ch. VI), and Lund 1993. Works that specifically concentrate on the Danish 'master of impressionism' Herman Bang include Nilsson 1965 and Lindén 2009. Unpublished academic theses concentrating on impressionism and Norwegian literature/literary criticism are available for consultation at the library of the University of Oslo, e. g. Rykkja 1972 and Skeie 1974.

⁴ Among the exceptions is Joy Newton, who has investigated cases of *transpositions d'art* in the prose of Zola, whom the scholar defines as 'an Impressionist word-painter' able to transform canvasses into novelistic incidents (Newton 1973: 325). In a survey of literary impressionism and French literature, J. Theodore Jr Johnson has given attention to those scholars who have tried 'to relate brushwork and the handling of color in impressionist pictures to literary impressionism (Moser, Hatzfeld, et al)' (Johnson 1973: 287). When Richard Berrong argues for the appropriateness of comparing Pierre Loti's novel *Pêcheur d'Islande* to Monet's canvasses, his emphasis is primarily on questions of style: '[...] like its painterly counterpart, literary impressionism must be primarily a matter of style and not just of content. Artists long before the Impressionists painted landscapes, clouds, seascapes, light, etc., but none of them would be considered Impressionists. It is their *style* that distinguishes Monet and his colleagues from their predecessors and successors, not their subject matter' (Berrong 2006: 226). Within the Scandinavian context Bernt Olsson (1983: 5-6), among others, argues for a direct influence of impressionist painting on Vilhelm Ekelund's poetry. With reference to anachronistic analogies in Hatzfeld 1952 and Sypher 1960, Hans Lund (1982: 99-100) warns against the risk of over-interpretation when attempting to tie the visual dimensions of a text to specific painters or artistic movements. However, as Lund (1982: 101-2) moves on to a quotation from J. P. Jacobsen's novel *Niels Lyhne* (1880), in order to point out the characteristics of the passage that draw close to the impressionistic canvasses of Monet or P. S. Krøyer, he seems to admit the usefulness of a similar approach.

⁵ Helena Westermarck (sister of the internationally renowned cultural anthropologist Edvard Westermarck) was born in Helsinki and trained as a painter both in the Finnish capital and in the Parisian *académies* Trélat and Colarossi. Using the signature H-a she contributed with art and literary criticism, as well as with short stories, to the review *Finsk tidskrift* in the years 1879-94. The twelve short stories that make up *Ur Studieboken* I (1890) and II (1891) account for her debut as a writer, while several novels followed around and after the turn of the century. Westermarck also dedicated biographies to Finland-Swedish writers and artists such as Fredrika Runeberg, Fanny Churberg and Maria Wiik. As co-founder and secretary of the women's association *Unionen*, she worked to sustain women's rights and divulged her ideas and opinions in the association's monthly review *Nutid*, of which she was editor. Her autobiography, *Mina levnadsminnen*, was published posthumously in 1941. For biographical information see also Forssell 1999: 461-3, and Kontinen 1996.

⁶ Translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

⁷ On the importance of Paris for Scandinavian writers at the turn of the 19th century see Briens 2010.

⁸ Cfr. Estlander 1891: 57 and Kontinen 1996: 22-4. Erik Ekelund (1969: 348) states that the title of Westermarck's debut, *Ur Studieboken* (From the sketchbook), connects 'både till hennes verksamhet som målarinna och till den litteraturart, den korta, skissartade studien, som var så modär under hennes ungdomstid. Vi finner här realistiska ögonblicksbilder från museerna, ateljéerna och artistkoterierna i Paris, men berättelserna ger också måleriska stads- och landskapsvyer' (both to her activity as a painter and to a type of literature, i. e. the short, sketched study, that was so modern in her youth. What we find

here are realistic instantaneous flashes from museums, ateliers and artistic groupings in Paris, but the stories also offer painterly views of cityscapes and landscapes). Forssell (1999: 461) claims that 'författarinnans anknytning till bildkonsten märks tydligt i hennes landskapsbeskrivningar där linjer och valörer har en viktig roll. Hon skildrar också unga kvinnliga konstnärer i flera noveller och i romanerna *Framåt* och *Vandrare*' (the author's connection to the visual arts is evident in her landscape descriptions, where lines and hues play an important role. She also depicts young women artists in several short stories and in the novels *Framåt* (Forward) and *Vandrare* (Wanderers)).

⁹ Helena Westermarck herself uses this definition to describe the impressionists in the letter to her mother from Paris, 04.04.1880.

¹⁰ Interesting reflections on the symbolic value of gateways and windows are put forward both in Lund 1982: 54-9, and in Lykke 2000: 92-3.

¹¹ Lund (1982: 36-8), adapts Louise Vinge's coinage 'markör' (marker) to designate a textual detail that activates 'läsarens bildkunnande, bildtänkande och eidetiska förmåga' (Lund 1982: 150) (the reader's familiarity with pictures, his visual thinking and eidetic ability).

¹² Lund's notion of *iconic lexicon* stems from Northrop Frye's coinage *visual lexicon* and indicates similarly the 'image bank' that any human mind has at its disposal according to its specific socio-cultural realities (Lund 1982: 119, 173).

¹³ For more details see *Metonymiske former* in Kristensen 1955: 123-9.

¹⁴ In spite of the fact that *Germinie Lacerteux* was written years before the official birth of impressionism, Lund suggests (1993: 46) that the interpretation of this passage, which Brandes delivered in 1882, 'rör sig mycket nära de impressionistiska målarnas sätt att se' (moves very close to the mode of perception of the impressionist painters).

¹⁵ The idea of 'the innocent eye' gained currency through Ruskin's *Elements of Drawing* (1857), but it can be found widely in artistic theory of earlier date. Pouzet-Duzer attributes the invention of a natural and primitive 'œil impressionniste' as opposed to the 'œil académique' with its imposed rules of perception to Jules Laforgue (Pouzet-Duzer 2008: 15, 217).

¹⁶ *Transformation* is in Lund's theorisation (1982: 14) one of the three principal modes whereby word and image co-exist. Transformation occurs when a text aims at 'gestalta en spatial karaktär eller transformera karakteristiska element ur en epoks eller en eller flera bildskapares ikoniska sfär. Ja, den kan till och med, utan att direkt anknyta till reell eller fiktiv bild, försöka överföra bildkonstens struktureringsprinciper eller stilkaraktistika till ordets form' (giving form to spatial characteristics or transforming elements characteristic of an epoch or of the iconic sphere of one or several artists. It may indeed even try to translate the structural principles or the characteristics of style of the visual arts into words).

¹⁷ Cfr. e.g. the discussions that followed the exposition of Westermarck's painting, *En viktig fråga* (An important question, 1883), which encountered the hostility of the critics both because of the radical naturalism of the subject (two ironing women) and for its 'impressionism', cfr. Konttinen 1996: 5-6. Konttinen's definition (1996: 5) of the painting as 'Suomen taiteessa harvinainen kaupunkityöväestön kuvaus' / 'en i den finska konsten sällsynt skildring av den arbetande stadsbefolkningen' (transl. Bianca Gräsbeck) (one of the rare

depictions of the urban working class in Finnish art), reminds us of the fact that the very same topic interested Westermarck as a writer, just as the short story 'Aftonstämning' proves.

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