

James Tissot, *Goodbye, on the Mersey*: a Reading of the Transatlantic Journey

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By the time Tissot exhibited *Goodbye, on the Mersey* at the Royal Academy in 1881, he had already acquired a reputation for commercialism. John Singer Sargent had caustically described him as ‘a dealer of genius’ and John Ruskin dismissed his art as ‘mere coloured photographs of vulgar society’.¹ But such sniping obscures the qualities that make his work more than a mere documentary record of his age, and this is particularly true of *Goodbye, on the Mersey*: a painting that unsettles any straightforward association of progress and development in the migration from the Old World to the New.

James (born Jacques Joseph) Tissot had himself spent ten years as a migrant of sorts in London by the time *Goodbye, on the Mersey* was exhibited at the Academy. Tissot fled to London from Paris in 1871, after the Franco-Prussian war and the fall of the Commune, returning only in 1882. Tissot was 34 when he arrived in London. In the preceding years in Paris he had amassed both wealth and popularity as a painter of modern life, an illustrator of the modern sentiment and style of 1860s Parisian society. His paintings of this period depict fashionably dressed upper middle-class men and women in modern situations; the modish *Young Ladies Looking at Japanese Objects* (1869), for example, both records and capitalises upon the current fad for *Japonisme* in French high society. A savvy occupant of the artistic marketplace, Tissot made a fortune from depicting the ‘modern’ world of the nouveau riche and upper middle-class to itself.

In the move to London, therefore, Tissot was not only separated from his carefully cultivated consumer base but also from his subject. The artist worked steadily from the point of his arrival to secure access to the highest echelons of English society in order to reincarnate himself as a painter of *English* modern life. His appointment as lead caricaturist for *Vanity Fair* gave him access to the leading figures of the day, and the flattering caricatures he produced generated lucrative portrait commissions.² Tissot also spent much of this first year in London acquainting himself with English popular taste (artistic and otherwise) garnered largely, Michael Wentworth claims, from his study of the illustrated popular press.³

The fruits of this research were evident in Tissot’s first English success, *Too Early*, displayed at the Royal Academy exhibition of 1873. The painting depicts a moment of social embarrassment: six guests have arrived at a ball ‘too early’. The ballroom is empty and the hostess, evidently not yet ready to receive guests, is still giving instructions to her



Fig 1 James Tissot, *Goodbye, on the Mersey* (1881). Oil on canvas. Held in a private collection.

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musicians. The six guests stand awkwardly in two clusters, attempting to seem at their ease but revealing in their body language – their averted eyes and affectedly relaxed physical postures – their consciousness of their social faux pas. *Too Early* was a talking point of the 1873 exhibition: reviewers and the public alike were charmed by this glimpse into the niceties of modern English society. Tissot's foreignness was frequently cited as an element in his success, granting him the distance to anatomise English society with a precision and objectivity not available to the English painter: 'Strange to say, a foreign artist – M. Tissot – sets our painters an example in choosing English subjects so characteristic that they seem to be neglected only because they are so near at hand'.⁴ Despite, or perhaps because of, his foreignness, Tissot had gained an entrée as the painter of English modern life. His success in England in the first half of the 1870s mirrored the successes of his Parisian career. By 1872 he had established himself in a luxurious studio in the artists' community of St John's Wood and by 1874 could regularly command over a thousand pounds for a painting, much to the envy and chagrin of English painters.⁵

Goodbye, on the Mersey may appear to be a straightforward example of Tissot's commercialism. The transatlantic passage was a modern topic linked to the fortunes of wealthy Northern industrialists and other such potential buyers; the painting could also appeal to the sentimental associations of those who had seen loved-ones make the crossing. The painting was exhibited at the Institute of Fine Arts in Glasgow immediately after its display at the Royal Academy in 1881: Russell Ash notes that Glasgow was 'a city where the theme of emigration would have held a special poignancy', which may indicate that Tissot was knowingly transferring the painting to its most viable commercial marketplace.⁶ However the painting is far from straightforward. It is laden with tension – both in the artist's characteristic use of psychological drama, and in terms of the painting's treatment of the transatlantic passage.

Tissot frequently used nautical settings in his work in London, but Wentworth identifies an important change in his treatment of such subjects towards the latter years of this period. The nautical paintings of the early 1870s, Wentworth argues, used this context only as setting for the artist's primary interest in human social interaction: the nautical paintings of the later 1870s, however, achieve a symbolic unity where the setting is integral to the paintings' depiction of a particular emotional or psychological state. The figures within the setting are identified by their relation to their maritime context, as

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travellers, rather than as English society types whose location is incidental to their identity. The late nautical paintings are preoccupied with the idea – and psychological effects – of travel.⁷ The titles of the paintings reveal the artist's concern to depict the phenomenon of the journey at various stages of its progress: *Waiting for the Ferry* (c.1879), *Crossing the Channel* (c.1879), and *The Emigrants*, in which an emigrant disembarks at her destination (c.1873, replica exhibited at the Grosvenor Gallery, 1879).⁸

In these paintings, the geographical displacements associated with the journeys are matched by a depiction of the psychological or emotional displacement of the travellers. In *Waiting for the Ferry* the mother of the family party waiting on the pier is curiously isolated and emotionally disengaged from her children and husband. In *The Emigrants* a mother shrinks back from her first sight of her new country as she disembarks with her infant child. The painting's perspective is aligned with the destination shore, meaning the full weight of the displaced and isolated female's terror is projected onto the viewer. The fact she is unchaperoned and a new mother indicates her exile is involuntary, and fleshes out the theme of her 'displacement' by indicating her status as a fallen woman.

In these later nautical painting of the 1870s, Tissot uses the trope of a journey's physical displacement to indicate the psychological and emotional displacements of his subjects. *Goodbye, on the Mersey* follows this pattern but rather than depicting psychological displacement and isolation as a quality of a character within the scene, it forces the viewer to experience those states. The painting depicts a group of English people on a tug in Liverpool harbour who wave to their loved ones as they depart for America on a Cunard liner. The point of view is from the English tug: the viewer sees the scene as though he were one of its English occupants. Through a marked emphasis on perspective and distance, the painting conveys the limitations of sight as it relates to one's physical position. That which is close up – the English figures on the tug's poop-deck – is sharply individuated and characterised, but that which is far away loses clarity. The English passengers who are placed farther away on the tug's prow are an indistinct mob and all sense of individuation is lost in the compromised view of the passengers on the liner, who are reduced to homogeneous stick-figures. The painting forces the viewer to an understanding of the essential solipsistic isolation of the individual within his relative position and 'view'.

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Imprisonment in a subjective state is further conveyed by the painting's symbolic use of colour. The brown and russet tones that dominate the painting are not naturalistic; rather, they are intended to evoke the pain of parting experienced by the English participant viewing the scene: Wentworth describes the painting as a whole as 'eloquent of parting'.⁹ The objective elements of the scene are literally 'coloured' by the viewer's perspective: the vibrant black and red of the Cunard Liner diminished to a sombre grape and ochre in the painting's emotionally tinted view of the scene.

The psychological dissociation depicted is directly related to the scene of transatlantic travel; the alienation explored is incurred upon a family member by the departure of a loved one upon that journey. In the course of depicting the emotional condition of, not a traveller but one 'left behind', Tissot produces in this painting a complex and at times surprising rendering of the transatlantic exchange.

All sense of a direct connection between the Old World inhabitant and the New World destination of the departed loved-one is blocked. No linear relationship exists between the two in this painting. The English tug points north, the tip of its prow occupying the centre of the painting and the near centre of the Cunard Liner, which is placed at a right angle to the tug in its journey from West to East. The physical angles of the two allow no sense of linear succession or continuity between them: rather, they are entirely opposed, at loggerheads. In attempting to convey the irrefutable psychological distance that occurs in the physical breach between the English non-traveller and the proto-American traveller, Tissot's painting denies the transatlantic myth of a seamless development of progress and continuity between Old World and New.

The idea that forward momentum and 'progress' lies with the American half of the exchange is also refused by the painting. First, because it is the English tug which points forward, literally, from the viewer's perspective in this painting. Second, the painting deliberately confuses expectations of motion and movement in this transatlantic context. The stream of black smoke issuing from the liner's funnel indicates it is underway on its journey and hence travelling at great speed. However the depiction of the liner is curiously static. The homogeneity of the stick-figure passengers reduces them to immobility, and the dark band of colour of the ship's bow, the densest and largest block of single colour in the painting, foregrounds the heaviness and weight of the ship rendering it likewise immobile. The only sources of animation in the painting come, surprisingly, from the English side of

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the action. Movement appears with the white flashes of the shore-bound seagulls and the waving English handkerchiefs, and with the animated poses and gestures of the English figures in the painting's foreground. Once again, the painting foregrounds the relativity and solipsism of experience, as that which is closer – the 'English' context – seems more real and present than that which is far away: the small movements in the English scene appear, misleadingly, to be more animated than the grand progress of the transatlantic passage to one who is not embarked upon it.

Tissot's concern to depict the feelings of interiority and separation experienced by the non-traveller produces a complicated view of the transatlantic exchange. That view is mirrored in a literary text composed at roughly the same time as the painting was exhibited. Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Amateur Emigrant* was written between 1879 and 1880 as he embarked on a return journey to America. Stevenson's travel narrative records the immediate disillusionment of his transatlantic assumptions upon his acquaintance with his fellow passengers. He related what had been his 'abstract idea' of the transatlantic emigrant: a dynamic, forward-thinking innovator (bearing 'the stamp of an eager and pushing disposition' and with a sense of 'hope and adventure'), an Englishman whose ambition and innovation exceeds the bounds of his motherland and drives him into the new terrain of future and further achievement. However, he discovers that his fellow emigrant is not a promising proto-American but a failed Englishman: typically middle-aged or elderly, they are 'family men broken by adversity, elderly youths who had failed to place themselves in life, and people who had seen better days'. Thus it is that Stevenson finds that his transatlantic journey is not a linear progression towards a new and improved Anglophone identity, but is instead a stagnation amongst the most backward and retrogressive of his race: 'In a word, I was not taking part in an impetuous and conquering sally, but found myself, like Marmion, "in the lost battle, borne down by the flying"'.¹⁰

Both Tissot's and Stevenson's texts resist the narrative of progress and continuity in the transatlantic exchange. Tissot, however, goes one step further than Stevenson. In denying the smooth connection between Old World and New, he goes on to question the clear connection between any man and his fellow. In depicting the physical fracture that occurs between traveller and non-traveller in this modern transatlantic journey he highlights the psychological fractures which are the product of modern life.

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Endnotes

¹ See Henri Zerner's introduction to the Exhibition Catalogue of *James Jacques Joseph Tissot 1836-1902: a Retrospective Exhibition* (Providence, Rhode Island: Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, 1968).

² Tissot and the editor of *Vanity Fair*, Thomas Gibson Bowles, had been acquaintances since 1869. Tissot had supplied a few caricatures of notable European figures for *Vanity Fair* in 1869 and 1870 and their friendship was cemented during Bowles's residence in Paris from 1870-71 as the *Morning Post*'s special correspondent during the Franco-Prussian war. Bowles also provided Tissot with a roof over his head on his first arrival in London, allowing him to reside as his house guest for a number of months. See James Laver, *'Vulgar Society': the Romantic Career of James Tissot 1836-1902* (London: Constable & Co., 1936), pp. 16-23, 25-26.

³ Michael Wentworth, *James Tissot* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 93.

⁴ *Illustrated London News*, 25 May 1872, quoted in Wentworth, p. 96.

⁵ *Avant le Départ* sold for just under a thousand pounds in 1874; *The Concert* (1875) sold for twelve hundred guineas. Laver, p. 33.

⁶ Russell Ash, *James Tissot* (London: Pavilion Books, 1992), Plate 33.

⁷ Wentworth, pp. 131-32.

⁸ Wentworth, p. 146.

⁹ Wentworth, p. 132.

¹⁰ Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Amateur Emigrant* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1984), pp. 13, 14.