

CHAPTER 15

Arthur Fidelman's Aesthetic Adventures and Malamud's Poetics of Creativity

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Published in 1969, *Pictures of Fidelman: An Exhibition* is, in the words of Bernard Malamud, “a loose novel, a novel of episodes, like a picaresque piece” (Ducharme 129). It consists of six stories woven into a novel that trace the adventures of a would-be artist, Arthur Fidelman, who takes a long journey to Italy, in pursuit of artistic greatness. Though the first story, “The Last Mohican,” had been published twelve years earlier in *The Magic Barrel* and the next two, “Still Life” and “Naked Nude,” in 1963 in *Idiots First*, Malamud insisted that he conceived the idea of writing the novel soon after he wrote his first story on Fidelman. As he himself put it in an interview, “Right after I wrote ‘The Last Mohican,’ . . . I worked out an outline of the other Fidelman stories, the whole to develop one theme in the form of a picaresque novel” (Field and Field, “Interview” 14). In a later interview, he expanded on his earlier comment:

After I wrote the story in Rome I jotted down ideas for several incidents in the form of a picaresque novel. I was out to loosen up—experiment a little—with narrative structure. And I wanted to see, if I wrote it at intervals—as I did from 1957 to

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1968—whether the passing of time and mores would influence [Fidelman’s] life. I did not think of the narrative as merely a series of related stories, because almost at once I had the structure of a novel in mind and each part had to fit that form. (Stern 65)

Philip Davis, Malamud’s literary biographer, concurs that the author intended it to be “a looser work, written occasionally, to make a picaresque comedy freed of the pressures of a continuous life or single-minded career” (265). Nevertheless, critical reception of *Pictures of Fidelman* diverged widely, partly because the book was considered as lacking the coherence and unity of a novel and partly because Fidelman’s depiction departed significantly from the familiar Malamudian hero and the moral seriousness he is characteristically endowed with. Thus, while most critics note that *Pictures* was “not precisely a novel, but rather a series of vignettes built around a single character” (Helterman 12), they also agree that, in the end, it was robbed “of the moral breadth, the grand lugubriousness, that distinguishes Malamud’s best stories” (Broyard 5).

Taking heed from Peter Brooks’s *Reading for the Plot*, I argue in this essay that Malamud employs ekphrasis¹ and ekphrastic models² as a primary literary device that creates and sustains narrative movement toward narrative completion. I claim that in *Pictures*, Malamud’s insertion—in absentia—of the visual element in the verbal text is used as a way to advance plot and achieve complex metonymic interconnections, working toward a sense of an ending. Indeed, ekphrastic narration serves, to paraphrase Brooks, as that which helps the plot “move forward” and “makes us read forward, seeking in the unfolding of the narrative a line of intention and portent of design that hold the promise of progress toward meaning” (xiii). Fidelman’s obsessive desire to produce great art, described in the text vividly and often elaborately through the ekphrastic rendition of his artwork, is, employing Brooks’s terms, the dynamic element of the plot that “connect[s] narrative ends and beginnings, and make[s] of the textual middle a highly charged field of force” (xiv). *Pictures*, then, does what all narratives do: “both tell of desire—typically present some story of desire” and “arouse and make use of desire as dynamic of signification” (37). The ekphrastic representation of the protagonist’s creative desire is, then, the “motor force” that drives the text forward through repetition, postponement, and error (Brooks evoking Barthes’s “dilatatory space”)³

aarons 1p.indd 257 2/2/16 9:07 AM Arthur Fidelman ’s Aesthetic Adventures258

until its final resolution and cues the reader that a (mock) epiphany waits Fidelman at his journey's end.

At the same time, on a metanarrative level, *Pictures* is about the struggle involved in the creative process and the urge to penetrate the mystery of artistic greatness in relation to the visual arts as well as literature. Malamud spoke frequently, if obliquely, of his pestilential need to expand his writerly forces while he speculated on the art-life nexus. As he confided in a letter to Rosemarie Beck, his painter friend and confidante, "I . . . want to know the secret of great [artistic] strength" (Salzberg, "Rhythms" 52). Added to this, his engagement with art and aesthetic practice in *Pictures* articulates his own ambivalence toward art's romantic premise on disinterestedness⁴ and the view of the artist-as-hero as virtually incompatible with contemporary society. In the midst of the most turbulent decade in American history, the 1960s, Fidelman's abandonment of his native country, his embrace of a bohemian life, followed by his frantic attempts to create great art inspired by the European Old Masters is indicative of Malamud's skeptical doubts with regard to the role of the artist-as-hero and the value of the arts of our times. *Pictures* suggests the author's preoccupation with the use of artistic talent and whether "this marvelous bit of magic" (52), as he calls it, could be employed any longer as a mode of human engagement with the world. In a revealing letter to Beck, Malamud attempts to give his definition of a "good" artist:

When I say I want to be good, it is partly because good is beautiful; only thus may I become my own work of art. Many of us do too little with the self, starving it for art; but I think the art would be richer if the self were. The more the self comprises, in the sense of containing as well as understanding; in the sense of being able to "respond" to others, to their need for food of various kinds, as well as beauty, the richer the self is for life, for freedom, for the flight imagination takes from it, for the art it creates. Life, humanity, is more important than art. (53)⁵

Nevertheless, the fact that Fidelman remains confined within the limits of his destructive obsession over artistic perfection reflects Malamud's own loss of confidence in the power of art to effect or stimulate moral renewal. Not surprisingly, in exploring the aesthetic and ethical reaches of

his artist's life and work, Malamud models Fidelman after Balzac's artist-hero Frenhofer, the fictional painter in "The Unknown Masterpiece" who was claimed as an influence by some of the greatest artists of the twentieth century.⁶ Fidelman, like his legendary predecessor, is haunted by the ideal of absolute art, but unlike him, Fidelman is obliged to accept his artistic failure and become a deft craftsman of glassblowing in the final tale of *Pictures*. Though the tone of *Pictures* may be "largely comic" (Abramson, *Bernard* 78), the book puts into serious question Malamud's personal aesthetic goals and, in particular, the possibility of contemporary art to carry out its ethical imperative, given our persistently romantic notion of art as autonomous and isolated from society. In this sense, the use of ekphrasis in *Pictures* both exhibits Fidelman's artistic attempts and reflects on the nature of these attempts, or their "self-knowledge," as W. T. J. Mitchell would have it.⁷ The representation in language of authentic and fictional paintings creates an intermedial text that not only makes possible a metonymic movement toward a satisfactory narrative resolution but also, on a metatextual level, challenges the idea of the artist (and by analogy of the writer) as creative genius and the reconcilability between life and art. To the extent that the visual and the textual complement each other to this effect, *Pictures* requires reading the relation between two arts and invites a larger reading public that goes beyond Malamud's (Jewish) American readership to include a transnational and interdisciplinary audience.

One might begin by examining the title of Malamud's novel, *Pictures of Fidelman: An Exhibition*: the term "pictures" of the title alludes to the artworks that the struggling, passionate artist composes (or fails to compose), or it may refer to the multifaceted aspects of Fidelman's subjecthood. Thus, on the one hand, relying on the lure of the visual, a virtual gallery of real or imaginary artwork is provided within the space of the novel, while on the other hand, each story presents us with a different life sketch of Fidelman's identity. The book's subtitle enhances this dual impression, as it relates to the ways in which the tales both depict an imaginary tour of Fidelman's artistic compositions and "exhibit" the hero's adventures, framed—literally and figuratively—by the artistic process. The title's duality encourages the reader to "read" the book as both a collection of pictures and a collection of narratives.

Interestingly, Arthur Fidelman, a Jewish American from the Bronx, is already "a self-confessed failure as a painter" (*Pictures* 3) when we meet

him in the first story, “The Last Mohican.” He arrives in Rome hoping that his exposure to “all this history” (52) will inspire him to complete a critical study of Giotto. Malamud’s choice of Giotto is by no means accidental, as he is credited with being the father of the Renaissance “for his devotion to physical and emotional accuracy in portraying humans” (“Giotto”). Giotto’s unparalleled grasp of human emotion is precisely what Fidelman seems to lack as a person and as an art critic. Paradoxically, Fidelman’s uncanny encounter with one of the Italian painter’s major frescos does not help him access “humanity.” Instead, he attempts to possess Giotto’s creative power for himself, as it were.

Upon Fidelman’s arrival in Rome, he meets Susskind, an impoverished European Jew who challenges Fidelman’s hollow belief in the autonomous artist and the authenticity of art. It should be noted, however, that despite the prevalence of the aesthetic in this and the subsequent tales of this multileveled novel, most critics emphasize the Jewish qualities of “The Last Mohican.” For them, the story focuses on issues of Jewish identity, with Fidelman being the assimilated American Jew whose Adamic “innocence” and lack of appreciation of his Jewish inheritance is castigated by Susskind, a parodic version of the archetypal Wandering Jew, who stands for “the vital values” of a living ethnic culture (Ahokas 62). No doubt, the peddler’s pursuit of the aspiring art critic aims at reuniting him with his own self and with his past, from which he has always been estranged. As Edward Abramson argues, Fidelman is forced “to come to a realization of what Susskind symbolizes—his own Jewishness and a needy recipient for his compassion” (*Bernard* 80).

But in my reading of the story, the “triumphant insight” (*Pictures* 37) that Fidelman experiences in the end of the story is not so much related to his reconciliation with his ethnic past as it is with the transmission of affect through Giotto’s fresco. Thus, Susskind’s provocative attitude in the course of the narrative does not seem sufficient to shatter Fidelman’s naïve belief that he might find creative self-realization in art. Neither Susskind’s claim to the American’s second suit, made three times in the story, nor his theft of Fidelman’s manuscript and its eventual destruction⁸ prove enough to awake the hero to the affective/communicative dimension of art. Not even the insight and wisdom that canonical Western texts presume to offer and that both characters frequently reference seem to have the capacity to deepen Fidelman’s self-understanding and human

compassion (i.e., Dante's *Divina Commedia*,⁹ Chekhov's "The Cherry Orchard,"¹⁰ Tolstoy's "What Is Art?"¹¹).

Carefully woven into the texture of "The Last Mohican," the ekphrastic depiction of Giotto's fresco is that which unexpectedly alters Fidelman's vision, its intensive quality opening up onto an artistic world that he wants to conquer. "The student" (i.e., Fidelman vis-à-vis the Old Master) "lay upon the stone floor, his shoulders keeping strangely warm as he stared at the sunlit vault above. The fresco therein revealed this saint in fading blue, the sky flowing from his head, handing an old knight in a thin red robe his gold cloak. Nearby stood a humble horse and two stone hills" (*Pictures* 46).¹²

The sight of Giotto's "San Francesco dona le vesti al cavaliere povero" (*Pictures* 36) brings about in Fidelman an instantaneous transformation that seems to culminate his ambition to become a Giotto critic. The fresco's expressive and lively narrative encourages him to turn his hand to active painting. He is now ready to part with his extra suit as well as the stolen manuscript in order to pursue his new (old) passion of painting and a life of a bohemian, autonomous artist.

Unlike critics who see Fidelman's revelatory experience as resulting in his acknowledgment of "Susskind's dismal present" and "the suffering experienced by European Jewry" (Urdiales Shaw 161) and as demonstrating "moral growth" (Abramson, *Bernard* 81), I read the protagonist's sudden change as his aesthetic response to his visual encounter with the Giotto fresco. The expectation roused by the look at the pictorial scene provokes a displacement of Fidelman's desire: from this narrative point onward, he embarks on a doomed hunt for an always already unfulfilled plenitude, translated as his pursuit of artistic perfection. In this sense, the ekphrastic description of the fresco operates as the locus where desire, having reached a state of intensity, as Brooks would have it, must move on and the fabula must go forward. Thus, the narrative power of the visual is reinforced as it actively structures and motivates the development of the plot.

Fidelman's transformation from an art student to an active painter initiates a new phase in his life, marked by four episodes. Each one of these is accompanied with an ekphrastic manifestation of the protagonist's artistic adventure, as if it were a complete pictorial image presenting itself in its entirety to the glance of the beholder, while, brought together,

all episodes form a phantasmagoric gallery of actual and imaginary pictures. Each chapter/episode bears an appellation that stands as a caption to an imaginative picture, what Gérard Genette would term *le paratexte* of the intermedial composition: the space beneath (in this case, above) the main text that constitutes an access to the main text and its meaning.¹³ “Still Life,” “Naked Nude,” “A Pimp’s Revenge,” and “Pictures of the Artist” all accurately describe each chapter’s content while at the same time self-reflexively alluding to the protagonist’s painterly efforts.

In the first of these episodes, Malamud uses the convention of the still life to explore Fidelman’s artistic peregrinations intertwined with his sexual adventures in an attempt to assert his individuality as a man and an artist. Although there is no direct correspondence between a single ekphrastic rendition of a still life picture and the chapter’s title, “Still Life” presumably acts as an indirect artistic self-portrait. In this way, the pictorial term *still life* is used to describe the stillness of the protagonist and his nonprogress. From assembled commonplace objects to abstract forms to conspicuous imitations of old masterpieces to a blank canvas, all Fidelman’s painterly attempts ekphrastically reenacted are important as they convey both the artist’s struggle for self-expression and his anxiety that each new creation be also novel. At the same time, his solipsistic self-absorption entraps him in a vicious circle that isolates him from his environment.

As expected, the ekphrastic representations tend to be brief and fragmentary, reflecting Fidelman’s half-wrought compositions. When his desire to paint coalesces with his lust for Annamaria, his landlady and fellow artist, he claims her as his muse and finds in her a model to depict or represent. As he admits, “He would paint her, whether she permitted or not, posed or not—she was his to paint, he could with eyes shut. Maybe something will come, after all, of my love for her” (*Pictures* 54). On a narrative level, painting the visual becomes a way of possessing it,¹⁴ but on a metanarrative level, describing the visual is an attempt to accommodate it within the linear dimension of textuality in anticipation of narrative closure. Thus, Fidelman’s sexual desire awakens him to creative activity, which is ekphrastically rendered in the verbal representation of “Virgin and Child.” “Annamaria, saintly beautiful, held in her arms the infant, . . . her face responsive to its innocence” (*Pictures* 54). Interestingly, the ekphrastic rendition of the painting “Virgin and Child” does not allude

to a single artwork but to a pictorial type, a visual topos common to the Old Masters, which underlines Fidelman's antagonistic relation with the painterly aesthetic tradition. Seeing the painting so affects Annamaria that she decides to comply with Fidelman's sexual demands. She says, "You have seen my soul" (55), a statement that by now should not come as a surprise, given the affective force of pictures and the transformative power of the act of looking ekphrastically. As James Elkins observes, "Ultimately, seeing alters the thing that is seen and transforms the seer. Seeing is metamorphosis, not mechanism" (11–12).

Fulfillment of Fidelman's desire at this narrative moment, however, would lead to an abrupt ending of the tale without any of the protagonist's self-interrogations having been resolved or his lust for Annamaria having been appeased. In order for the narrative to continue unfolding, desire must be deferred. It is unsatisfied desire that sets Fidelman "on fire" to paint again, this time a self-portrait. He attempts to portray himself in priest's vestments, "envisaging another Rembrandt: 'Portrait of the Artist as Priest'" (*Pictures* 66). As a consequence, Fidelman "worked with smoking intensity and in no time created an amazing likeness" (66). Allusion to the work of the Dutch precursor may be regarded as a contentious act of competition, a representation of the artist's struggle to clear a space for himself by overcoming the precursor.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the painterly simulation brings about the desired result, which is Fidelman's sexual possession of Annamaria, and in this way, the story reaches its most spectacular denouement. Note that Annamaria is profoundly affected not by Fidelman's impersonation, who stands in front of her wearing "a cassock and fuzzy black soupbowl biretta" (66), but by the representation of his impersonation as priest in the manner of Rembrandt. Added to this, the brief and unembellished ekphrastic transfer of the visual source allows a "free play" of the imagination, to Annamaria's story-making imagination (Louvel).¹⁶ Which is to say that, with a detailed description of the narrative implications of the painting missing from the actual narrative discourse, Annamaria's unexpected sexual surrender comes to reinforce/ accentuate the painting's mysterious power as site of alluring enigma and tantalizing desire.

Regarding the significance of the finale of "Still Life," the opinions of critics differ. For instance, Robert Solotaroff contends that it is "the beginnings of the sexual opportunist" (93), and Robert Ducharme notes

that “the moral curve of Fidelman’s progress . . . is downward” (136). Edward Abramson remarks that Fidelman “is a prisoner to his lust for Annamaria” (*Bernard* 83), and Martin H. Friedenthal regards the scene as “more punishment than an act of joy for either one” (qtd. in Shimazu 12). Sandy Cohen points out that the Malamudian hero ought to abstain from using “either art, religion, or life as means to reach each of the others. None should be the means to an end. This fact is what Fidelman must learn” (97). In reality, “Still Life” does not provide any atonement or cleansing, punishment or reward. Fidelman is entrapped in his vision of the alienated romantic artist who is dedicated to art and art alone and remains emotionally detached and socially isolated. This lack of character development is reinforced by the title of the story: “Still Life” articulates a “still movement” or “suspended moment” in Fidelman’s artistic itinerary, captured by ekphrasis.

The same holds true for the next episode, to the extent that in “Naked Nude” the only change that takes place is Fidelman’s geographical movement. Having abandoned Rome for Milan, he becomes involved in a bizarre scheme of two Italian villains to steal Titian’s *Venus of Urbino*. In order to do so, he is asked to copy the Titian painting so that they can replace it for the genuine one. Fidelman’s initial refusal but final surrender to this odd demand results in his successful copying of the masterpiece, with which he subsequently becomes so enamored that he ends up stealing “his counterfeit creation” (*Pictures* 91). Accordingly, the text speaks directly to the aesthetic tropes of artistic integrity, authenticity and innovation, convention and representation that have concerned the fictional painter.

To begin with, unlike the previous (and the next) tale, which evokes “pictorial *cliché[s]*” (Yacobi 629) like the Madonna with Child, “Naked Nude” references ekphrastically a unique piece of artwork, namely, the famous Renaissance painting *Venus of Urbino*. Malamud’s recourse to the particular Titian, rather than to the existing tradition of the reclining female nude, first and foremost pays homage to the Old Master’s artistic talent, which is later displayed in the sensual ekphrastic rendition of the original painting. Added to this, his appeal to the old masterpiece, which the fictional painter is asked to make an exact copy of, raises serious questions pertaining to mimesis, representation, and originality in literature and art at large. Concerns of “artistic direction, progress and

frustrations" haunted Malamud throughout his writing career (Salzberg, "Rhythms" 44), becoming even more urgent in the late 1950s and with the advent of postmodernism. The new view of art employed playful reproduction and appropriation of old forms and styles, challenging modernist beliefs in purity, seriousness, and individuality in a direct correlation between liberal-humanist principles and moral conduct. It is no wonder that Malamud, an inveterate storyteller that he was, would feel torn and tormented between these alternative aesthetic approaches. As a result, the number of fictional artists in his work who are unable to finish their art product (novel or painting) and suffer from blockage proliferates.¹⁷

Fidelman is no exception in his affliction with self-doubt over the quality of his work, sparked by anxiety concerning the difficulty of originality. He paints first directly on canvas and scrapes it clean seeing "what a garish mess he has made" (*Pictures* 80). It is a distortion of the original that he carries "perfect in his mind" (81). He makes several drawings on paper of nude figures from art books, in vain. He goes back to a study of Greek statuary to compute the mathematical proportions of the ideal nude; he experiments with "Dürer's intersecting circles and triangles, and studies Leonardo's schematic heads and bodies" (82). As all his efforts go to waste, the copyist asks himself, "What am I, bewitched, . . . and if so by whom? It's only a copy job so what's taking so long?" (82).

In a letter to the author, Beck explains the fictional painter's failed painterly attempts as follows: "Fidelman's block might reside in his knowledge of Titian's process, his wishing to be true to it. His problem, poor nut, is insoluble, given time and conditions" (Salzberg, "Rhythms" 49).¹⁸ Putting aside the issues of artistic technique that the epistolary exchange raises, it also reveals both the writer's and the painter's yearning for originality with regard to traditional painterly canons. Even more eloquent is Beck's response to an earlier admonition of Malamud that she paint like a master: "You say to me 'I hope you want to paint like a master.' What you should say to me is I should paint like myself (and that believe me is no small matter) and I should tell you the same. . . . Once we have gotten rid of all the mannerisms of a time and a style, the fear of losing face in the world of fashion; . . . then maybe we can shake hands with the masters, or at least, understand their humanity" (52). Beck's reaction is so Malamudian in spirit that I would think Malamud deliberately posed a provocative question to receive the expected response. Beneath

this friendly exchange of artistic opinions, however, we recognize what Harold Bloom would characterize as the expression of filial struggle for creative autonomy from previous artists.

While “Naked Nude” ekphrastically depicts Fidelman’s heroic efforts to literally paint like Titian, the visual artist at the same time finds himself pressured to compete with the master and to paint “as though he were painting the original” (*Pictures* 88). Paradoxically, he takes it upon himself to bring into life an “original copy,” to create “a fake masterpiece.” Thus, as he paints, Fidelman “seems to remember every nude that has ever been done. . . . He is at the same time chocked by remembered lust for all the women he had ever desired” (88). Scrupulous examination of the original painting is followed by submitting it to his erotic gaze and recognition of his desire to possess the painted nude and the masterful art of painting it. And as Peter Brooks reminds us after Lacan, “Desire necessarily becomes textual by way of a specifically narrative impulse, since desire is metonymy, a forward drive in the signifying chain, an insistence of meaning toward the occulted objects of desire” (84). Fidelman’s desire desperately seeks visual expression on the canvas, while simultaneously its verbal articulation in the text performs a creative act of seeing. “Fidelman feels himself falling in love with the one he is painting, every inch of her, including the ring on her pinky, bracelet on arm, the flowers she touches with her fingers, and the bright green earring that dangles from her eatable ear” (*Pictures* 88–89). As the old myth of Pygmalion is revived, the ekphrastic moment coincides with the painting’s completion in the text. Fidelman, having reached the climax of his achievement, triumphantly exclaims, “The Venus of Urbino, c’est moi” (89). As in the previous stories, the narrative proceeds through the “metonymic unpacking” of the ekphrastic rendering that “prolongs and formalizes the middle, and also prepares the end” (P. Brooks 320).

As in “Still Life,” here, too, there seems to be no significant change in the protagonist’s character or attitude. Nevertheless, even though, according to Abramson, Fidelman achieves “a sense of artistic elevation” (*Bernard* 84) in producing his best piece of work so far, his worship of his handiwork is an act of embrace of his own imaginative, artistic powers of creation. Indeed, Fidelman falls in love with his own performance and artistry and thus becomes trapped “by the notion of art as a form of autoeroticism” (I. Alter 136). The reader is asked to judge Fidelman’s

questionable achievement, taking into account the artist's psychic retreat from society. The result of this double reading is on the one hand to acknowledge Fidelman's serious commitment to his art and on the other to become aware of the dangers ensuing from his refusal to accept art as anything less than the romantic concept of perfection uncontaminated by the real world.

Malamud's ambivalent sketching of Fidelman is nowhere more unequivocally articulated than in "A Pimp's Revenge," thematically more ambitious and visually more compelling than the side stories. Through an ironic prism, this fourth story of *Pictures* and third episode of Fidelman's painterly adventures brings forward both Malamud's fascination with and frustration at the fundamental presuppositions underlying the belief in the artist as genius and the romantic vision of art: its imminent self-creativity, the guilt of belatedness, the indisputable value of the "eternal masterpiece." Put in narrative terms, after many trials and tribulations, the Malamudian hero reaches the apogee of his art in creating his "most honest piece of work" (*Pictures* 142), while he conspicuously neglects and maltreats everyone around him. From this standpoint, Fidelman can be seen as the embodiment of romantic genius who apprehends the world in aesthetic not moral perspectives. "If I'm not an artist, then I'm nothing" (124), he claims. "Art is my means for understanding life and trying out certain assumptions I have. I make art, it makes me" (128). And again, "In my art I am," he boastfully professes (110). At the same time, he may also be regarded as a total moral failure since he uses his girlfriend, Esmeralda, not only as a model for his painting but also for conveniently supporting him with her prostitution earnings. In the meantime, the more Fidelman agonizes to complete his masterpiece, the more arrogant and less invested—even disinterested—with real life he becomes. Although Malamud critics have been almost unanimous in their condemnation of Fidelman's egotistic conduct, his "moral bankruptcy" (Abramson, *Bernard* 86) and exploitation of others (I. Alter 139), it seems to me that Malamud's response to his artist hero is a lot more complicated.¹⁹ He is at once fascinated and repelled by Fidelman's passionate devotion to art and insatiable thirst for absolute perfection. By this I do not mean to suggest that Malamud is insensitive to Fidelman's lack of moral fiber. But rather than have Fidelman reach a moral consciousness, Malamud stretches his artistic passion to its limits. In an unexpected narrative shift, Fidelman's

conviction of having achieved “a first-class work,” one that would supposedly secure him a place in the history of the art canon, is fittingly punished: Ludovico, Esmeralda’s former pimp, initiates a wave of insecurity in Fidelman, undermining his artistic achievement with his remarks and thus leading him to irrevocably ruin the picture. In this regard, Fidelman does not differ much from his literary predecessor Frenhofer. Like Balzac’s romantic painter in “The Unknown Masterpiece,” Fidelman’s supreme confidence over his “grand oeuvre” is shaken by Ludovico’s criticism.²⁰ As in the case of his legendary predecessor, Fidelman’s obsessive ambition for aesthetic perfection leaves no room for the imagination. His intense effort to add more verisimilitude to the female portraiture, “to make her expression truer to life” (*Pictures* 146), results in ruining his own painting and precipitates his aesthetic downfall.

Interestingly, the germ of the painting that Fidelman has been trying to get on canvas for five years is an old photograph of himself as a boy with his mother. The clichéd distinction between photography as an “exact copy” of the subject and painting as an “interpretation” of it appears here, only to underscore the superiority of painting and by extension of literature over photography, because the first one nourishes imagination, whereas the other involves merely mimesis.²¹ In Fidelman’s trouble to capture his mother’s image on the canvas, “to release her from the arms of death” (122), as he characteristically puts it, he sets himself an impossible task. He says, “I always go back to ‘Mother and Son’” (123), and as he redoes the female figure endlessly, he finds it changed from “Mother and Son” to “Brother and Sister” and finally to his masterpiece, “Prostitute and Procurer.”

As a matter of fact, since Malamud’s *Pictures* depends on the deference of Fidelman’s desire to visually create, as it has been argued, ekphrastic variation in “A Pimp’s Revenge” is achieved with the completion of the pictorial referent—even if only temporarily. In this story, Fidelman succeeds in extricating himself from the entrapments of the “family romance” with masters of the past and the existing tradition (Bloom, *Anxiety* 8). After endless frustrations of despair and self-doubt, he finally achieves what he perceives as artistic excellence: “But the picture was, one day, done. It assumed a completion: This woman and man together, prostitute and procurer. She was a girl with fear in both black eyes, a vulnerable if stately neck, and a steely small mouth; he was a boy with tight insides, on

the verge of crying. The presence of each protected the other. A Holy Sacrament” (*Pictures* 143). Although the finished picture still evokes a model image that corresponds to a genuine, historical art object (the Mother with Child topos), it nevertheless remains a fictional occurrence of visual art that owes its existence to ekphrasis. Like previous cases, the ekphrastic rendition functions in two ways: it motivates the plot, moving it forward with its dramatic force; and given the controversies of the description, it stimulates the reader’s imagination to capture the visuality of the literary painting in the process of making sense of the narrative. Textually, however, ekphrasis does not stop with the verbal representation of Fidelman’s masterwork-in-progress. It spills over the boundaries of ekphrastic description of the masterwork to include literary depictions of still lifes (Fidelman crossing the market, examines “a basket of figs,” “pumpkins on hooks,” “a bleeding dead rabbit”; 102), portraits (Esmeralda’s “black eyes like plum pits,” “small mouth,” and “Modigliani neck”; 105), and landscape paintings (the “sunlight on the terraced silver-trunked olive trees”; 106). In fact, ekphrasis itself—being both “as narrative as it is descriptive,” to recall Mieke Bal—far from stopping the “flow of time” (342), “generates narrative because it animates its environment” (369–70) and acts as a source of narrativity.

If “A Pimp’s Revenge” represents Malamud’s most intense efforts to address the agonies of creative life and its profound abysses, what happens with Fidelman’s desire to create when he himself becomes a “murderer” (*Pictures* 147) of his own artwork, as is the case in this tale? Apparently, Fidelman’s passion to realize his artistic vision has not exhausted itself in this self-inflicted punishment. As we have seen in Brooks, each text is “an exploration of the conjunction of the narrative of desire and the desire of narrative” (48). Subsequently, flouting bourgeois respectability, Fidelman embarks once again on a bohemian quest to seek individual expression and innovation, animated by his desire, which is also “the very motive of narrative” (48).

Yet “Pictures of the Artist,” the fourth and final episode of Fidelman’s adventures as artist, differs from the three previous ones. For one, Fidelman abandons representational art, though not painting, and moves onto more improvisational and expressive artistic styles. As if reflecting Fidelman’s turn to aesthetic formalism, the tale, too, is “composed montage fashion” (Greenfeld 60) and uses “a neo-Joycean, comitragic, surrealistic stream-of-

consciousness, visionary sequence” (Grebstein 43). The story’s disjointed style offers Malamud the opportunity to explore the accusation against contemporary art as being opaque, difficult, and above all, “too focused on personal symbols and gestures” (Siegel 138). Although, as Salzberg argues, Malamud more often than not professed his attraction to nonrepresentational and experimental art, there were times he became highly critical of what was regarded as “the wasteland of contemporary art” (“Rhythms” 50). In a 1965 letter to Beck, having probably Fidelman in mind, Malamud condemns contemporary art’s “hyperbolic offences” (50). As he half jokingly says, “The op-art shows are hard to take, I take little pleasure from them above the simplest, and trickiest esthetic satisfaction. I can’t even call it satisfaction: it is that my eyes follow the command. To prove it they hurt and I come to the edge of nausea. Can I predict the next step in painting: more epater le viewer—the picture itself opens in the center, a mallet comes out and strikes the observer on the head” (50).²²

Malamud’s cause of dissatisfaction—“to the edge of nausea,” as he puts it—was the eccentricity and individuality of some artistic practices in contemporary art. Although in many ways Fidelman is for Malamud the archetypal artist in his obsessive adventuring into his interior vision, he is also derided for his preposterous artistic experiments. For example, in a manner reminiscent of Claes Oldenburg’s proto-earthwork *The Hole* (1967) and other conceptualist practices, “the sculptor,” as Fidelman is now called, digs perfect holes in the ground “singly or in pairs according to the necessity of the Art” (*Pictures* 153). Like the conceptualist artists, Malamud’s artist refutes the equation of expensive materials with aesthetic value and instead uses earth, soil, or dirt, material that is “unprocessed and unreinforced, thus producing a temporary form” (Boettger 8), left to change and erode under natural conditions.²³ He also repeats their chief claim that the articulation of an artistic idea suffices as a work of art and that concerns such as traditional forms, skill, and marketability are irrelevant standards (“Conceptual”). The increased emphasis on abstract form and rejection of representation naturally affects ekphrasis, which is called on to conjure with words the concrete visible image of site-specific art. Fidelman says, “I create my figures as hollows in the earth” (*Pictures* 151). And elsewhere, he would “dig a perfect square hole without measurement. He arranged the sculptures singly or in pairs according to the necessity of the Art” (153).

Nevertheless, Fidelman's "need to create and not to be concerned with the commerce of Art" (154) not only suggests the emphasis placed on the process of making art rather than the final product but also disregards viewers' response to it. Malamud's concern with contemporary art's removal from everyday experience, its incapacity to establish meaningful connection with viewers, is suggested through the reactions that Fidelman's new artistic tendencies provoke in its audiences. These range from mere curiosity to "amazement and disbelief" (154) to disappointment and hostility. On one occasion, the intense debate between the sculptor and a visitor of the exhibition/site over form and content in art ends with the stranger pushing Fidelman into the hole he himself had dug and filling it with earth. "So now we got form but we also got content" (160), says the stranger in response to Fidelman's insistence that "emptiness is not nothing if it has form" (159).

Brooks contends that "the desire of the text (the desire of reading) is hence desire for the end "but desire for the end reached" not "too rapidly—by a kind of short-circuit"—but through "the at least minimally complicated detour, the intentional deviance, in tension which is the plot of narrative" (102, 104). Following Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, as "a dynamic-energetic model of narrative plot," Brooks argues that just as in life there is the danger of an "improper death," an "improper end" lurks throughout narrative, as well (108). "The organism must live in order to die in the proper manner, to die the right death. One must have the arabesque of plot in order to reach the end" (107). As has been demonstrated, Fidelman's artistic desire articulated through ekphrastic means serves as the "energy generated by deviance, extravagance, excess" (108) that binds together the tales that make up *Pictures*. Although the possibility of the premature discharge of energy, of short-circuit, has been a threat throughout the narrative—given Fidelman's repeated failures to achieve great art, which might have led him to abandon prematurely all effort to create art—the distance between beginning and end is finally maintained, and the collapse of one into the other is prevented through the detours and repetitions at play.

In the final tale of *Pictures*, titled "Glass Blower of Venice," Fidelman, now called "the expainter" (177), has turned into a boatman ferrying passengers across the canals of Venice, apparently overwhelmed by his artistic inadequacy. Later, and under the guidance of Beppo, a master

glassblower and husband of his mistress, he learns the craft of glassblowing. He also becomes the homosexual lover of Beppo, whose counsel “If you can’t invent art, invent life” (199) he takes at face value and starts following. After drifting for some time in Venice and apparently in a gesture of compassion toward Margherita (his mistress and Beppo’s wife), who asks him to leave, he sails to America, where “he worked as a craftsman in glass and loved men and women” (208).

Critical accounts of the “Glass Blower of Venice” have almost unanimously concluded that in this final tale of *Pictures*, Fidelman loses his self-centeredness in his love for Beppo. For Tony Tanner, the use of the term “assistant” to describe Fidelman’s new status is itself indicative of the hero’s moral development, because “we recognize the term as honorific in Malamud’s moral universe” (339).²⁴ Abramson claims that Malamud, in giving this ending to the novel, must have settled into believing that “‘perfection of the life’ is more important than the work” (*Bernard* 89),²⁵ while Howard Harper goes as far as to interpret Fidelman’s love for Beppo as “less an acceptance of homosexuality than an affirmation of unselfish love for all humanity” (215).

Critics who emphasize Fidelman’s moral growth and, as a consequence, privilege a moral reading of *Pictures* may be right in discerning Malamud’s intentions, but the novel’s intermedial form breaks through those intentions. The visual in the novel, which is textually present in the form of ekphrasis and thematically prevalent in the fictional artist’s creative endeavors, seems to enact Malamud’s own ambivalence toward art’s moral imperative and its (ir)reconcilability with life. Although Malamud returned to a painfully serious exploration of the artist’s responsibility and the conflict between art and life in *The Tenants* (1971) and numerous short stories,²⁶ in *Pictures* he does so in a playful yet ironic manner through ekphrasis. By incorporating into his novel the amazingly bizarre and whimsically odd pictorial descriptions of Fidelman’s artistic endeavors conjointly with original works of art, Malamud creates a verbal text that mirrors the disenchanted writer’s self-doubt and “throbs with frustration and rage” at engaging in meaningful creativity (King 22). At the same time as the ekphrastic descriptions propel the fabula, they also embody metanarrative reflection on the current status of art and its engagement with the present moment. Even though Malamud does not subscribe to the notion of art as a narcissistic venture of the artist’s self-exploration,

his equivocal depiction of Fidelman, along with his interpellation of the fictional painter's flawed work, reveals his deep apprehension about art's failure of communication and lack of social relevance. In short, the visual saturation that characterizes *Pictures* provides the opportunity for narrative cohesion, while it opens to multiple, even conflicting readings that raise wider questions without regard to disciplinary and national borders.

NOTES

1. The commonly accepted understanding of ekphrasis as a verbal representation of visual representation is applied throughout the text.
2. I use the phrase "ekphrastic models" interchangeably with Tamar Yacobi's "pictorial models," which she defines as "the ekphrasis of a visual model (as opposed to an ekphrasis of a single work of art)" (627).
3. The creation of a "dilatatory space" concerns "the questions and answers that structure a story, their suspense, partial unveiling, temporary blockage, eventual resolution" (P. Brooks 18).
4. I use the term not with its Kantian connotations but to emphasize art's detachment from all pursuits that have any correspondence to a utilitarian purpose. I regard the condemnation of the commercialization of art along with the autonomy and authenticity of the artist as part and parcel of the romantic dream.
5. The letter was written on April 10, 1959, immediately after Malamud had won the National Book Award for *The Magic Barrel*, in which, as already mentioned, "The Last Mohican" makes its first appearance. The approximately three hundred letters that make up the Malamud- Beck correspondence range from 1958 to 1985. All references to their correspondence come from Joel Salzberg's article "The Rhythms of Friendship."
6. No critic to my knowledge has commented on Malamud's debt to Balzac's plots and characters and, in particular, to the many similarities between *Pictures* and "The Unknown Masterpiece."
7. In *Picture Theory*, Mitchell uses the term *self-knowledge* as "a metaphor" to define what he calls "a metapicture," that is "any picture that is used to reflect on the nature of pictures." Pictures are "objects that seem not only to have a presence, but a 'life' of their own, talking and looking back at us," but by doing, so they also "call into question the self-understanding of the observer" (57).
8. The destroyed manuscript is a recurrent theme in Malamud's fiction. See *The Tenants*.

9. In the last cemetery scene, the refugee, who has already assumed a symbolic role, is called “Virgilio Susskind” (*Pictures* 36).
10. “Call me Trofimov, from Chekhov,” says Fidelman proudly when he first introduces himself to Susskind (*Pictures* 8).
11. In the last dream scene, Susskind and Fidelman have the following exchange: “Have you read Tolstoy? / Sparingly. / Why is art?” asked the shade, drifting off” (*Pictures* 36).
12. Characteristically, this dreamlike experience takes place in a cemetery “all crowded with tombstones” (*Pictures* 35), a site that is literally an access point to the other world. As has been pointed out by Urdiales Shaw, Malamud very effectively moves the fresco to this cemetery from its original place, on the nave of the Upper Church of San Francesco in Assisi (160n11).
13. More specifically, according to Genette, the paratext of the work consists of *peritext*, which includes “the title or the preface and sometimes elements inserted into the interstices of the text, such as chapter titles or certain notes,” and *epitext*, which comprises “all those messages that, at least originally, are located outside the book, generally with the help of the media (interviews, conversations) or under cover of private communications (letters, diaries, and others)” (*Paratexts* 5).
14. This constitutes a perfect example of Brooks’s “erotic nature of the tension writing” (103).
15. In “Rembrandt’s Hat” (1973), a mediocre sculptor, Rubin, wants to become as great as Rembrandt. We have yet another example of Harold Bloom’s idea of the “anxiety of influence.”
16. Liliane Louvel calls “double fiction” this fiction that runs parallel to the text, adding “a critical fictional effect to the text being read” (46).
17. The struggles of Fidelman to copy the painting resemble Harry Levin’s (*The Tenants*) travails to finish his unfinished novel.
18. Malamud enjoyed Beck’s astrological speculations and was not averse to using them “as a recourse to invent the character of Arthur Fidelman.” In a July 2, 1962, letter to Beck, he writes, “Can you get me Fidelman’s horoscope[?] . . . He has been having a miserable painter’s block—can’t get the Venus right. What do you see in his Venus from June 16 to 30[?] When is a more propitious time for him? Why is he having trouble[?] . . . Give me the business” (Salzberg, “Rhythms” 49).
19. Robert Scholes observes, “Even the artist’s name in this tale dwindles from Fidelman to F” (34).

20. Frenhofer in “The Unknown Masterpiece,” after ten years of trying to complete his would-be-masterpiece, yields to his friends’ demand to see the painting. When they tell him they see nothing but “confused masses of colour and a multitude of strange lines, forming a dead wall of paint,” Frenhofer is devastated. The following morning he is found dead in his studio, with all of his canvases burnt (Balzac).
21. Indeed, Fidelman can begin to capture pictorially the density and profundity of the model only after Esmeralda destroys the old photograph and releases him from medium specificity.
22. The reference is to *épater la bourgeoisie*, which means “to shock the middle classes.” The phrase became a rallying cry for the French Decadent poets of the late nineteenth century.
23. Although the term was first used in the mid-1970s, the starting point of earthworks, according to Suzaan Boettger, is the year 1967, with Claes Oldenburg’s *Placid Civic Monument* (aka *The Hole*). As Boettger explains, the term *conceptual art* was applied to a variety of vanguard forms, and Oldenburg corroborates the use of conceptual art for his excavation. The critic goes on to describe the impact of this negative sculpture, which was dug (and then filled by professional diggers) under the artist’s supervision in Central Park. “Oldenburg dug into the park soil to create a sculpture that consisted of a recession into the ground instead of a projection upward from it” (8).
24. The reference is to Malamud’s second novel, *The Assistant* (1957), in which Frank, the assistant, learns to find grace and dignity through his contact with his employer.
25. Abramson here refers to the epigraph for *Pictures* which is from Yeats: “The intellect of man is forced to choose perfection of the life or of the work.”
26. Short stories included in *The Magic Barrel* and *Rembrandt’s Hat*, among others.