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**EKPHRASIS –A SPECIAL TYPE OF
INTERTEXTUALITY IN THE BRITISH
NOVEL**

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Key words: interdisciplinarity, comparability, (pre/post)modernism, intertextuality, ekphrasis, ekphrastic typologies: *notional* ekphrasis, *reverse* ekphrasis, *complex notional-reverse* ekphrasis, ekphrastic reading, reception theory, reader-response theories, postmodern reader, rereader, historiographic metafiction, multiple relationships of correspondence text-visual source (uni-, bi- and multilateral), (self)portrait, double stance: writer-painter, autoscopia, psychoanalysis, narcissistic metafiction, mythological transplant, (il)legible/(in)visible, Surrealism, Impressionism, Pre-Raphaelism, Baroque.

INTRODUCTION

For the 21st century it has become very clear that the field of literature and consequently, that of literary criticism and theory is a dynamic and heterogeneous one and thus we are walking on a very “fragile ground” as far as it concerns the literary studies. The current state of the discipline of literary studies is one where there is considerable debate concerning basic questions of terminology. I have found the lines of the above quotation very representative for shaping the condition of the *postmodern reader*, and for the parallel between *books* and *paintings*, which is mainly the core of our approach. With Postmodernism we are witnessing the shift from a stable and rational directive reading, when the text was considered a present matrix in which sense is encountered and constructed and into which the reader is cast, to a new kind of “interactive reading”, meaning not only a documentary reading, but also a question of understanding. Social and cultural senses become not a goal, but a discourse, not a closure but a trace in an endless passage that can only aspire to a temporary arrest, to a self-conscious drawing of a limit across the diverse possibilities of the text. We (readers, writers, critics, viewers etc.) are condemned to wander – critically, emotionally, politically, passionately, in a world characterized by an excess of sense which, while offering the chance of meaning, continues to flee ahead us. This is our world, our responsibility, our only chance. As Anne Whitehead acknowledges “this involves among other things, the boundaries which distinguish the literary from the non-literary, the position of literature within the larger sphere of culture, the relationship between literatures of different cultures and questions concerning the relation of literary to other cultural forms within the context of interdisciplinary studies” (Whitehead, 2009: 3-4). The intertextual nature of writing and of the text turns both terms of the traditional model: author and critic into readers: the text is of *multiple writings*, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but *there is one place where this multiplicity is focused*, and that place is the *Reader*, not, as was hitherto said, the author” (Barthes, 1977a: 148). Whilst many would see a tension between a theory of literary history and a theory of reading here, we agree to Barthes who argues that the tension is generated by the text’s and intertextuality’s disturbance of apparently stable

oppositions: reading and writing, author and critic, meaning and interpretation, inside and outside. Thus readers *should not give in to the temptation to solidify the text*, to imagine it as a determinate object: ‘It [text] is used in a highly fluid fashion, both as a general term for the object of an act of reading and in particular contrast with the term ‘work’” (Moriarty, 1991: 143).

Having in mind the above mentioned considerations, the present paper is the result of a vivid interest of a *postmodern reader* (myself) in *the relation of the literary texts to the visual or plastic arts* known as *ekphrasis*, having as theoretical support the various theories of interdisciplinarity, comparative literature, intertextuality, reader response criticism, praising the birth of the Reader not necessarily at the cost of the death of the Author, but more in the direction of what Derrida called the “absence of the writer” or in the direction of Brian McHale’s (1991: 56) “intertextual zone”. The *ekphrastic phenomenon* is an emblematic approach for the dynamic of this relation of literary texts to the visual or plastic arts and according to James A. W. Heffernan’s words “there is no other word for the mode of literature that *ekphrasis* designates: for a mode of literature whose complexity and vitality - not to mention its astonishing longevity - that entitles it to full and widespread recognition” (Heffernan, 1993:2). Due to its complexity, ekphrasis has been a continuous challenge and has been variously treated as a *mirror of the text*, a *mirror in the text*, a mode of *specular inversion*, a *further voice* that disrupts or extends the message of the narrative, a foreshadowing of that narrative (whether false or true) in its suggestions. In the literary tradition, *ekphrasis* has come to designate written works, especially poems that address artworks, usually paintings. The point of departure in my theoretical approach was Heffernan’s definition of ekphrasis as “a verbal representation of a visual representation”, a definition “simple in form but complex in its implications” (1993:3) and the *Dictionary of Literary Rhetorical Terms*¹ account of it as “an extended and detailed literary description of any object, real or imaginary; most commonly used to denote the description of a picture (or other tangible work of art) within a narrative; a common form of METAnarrative” and taking the benefits of the studies of the greatest theoreticians of ekphrasis, finally reaching to shape my own definition for ekphrasis.

Even from the beginning, I have mentioned that my approach is a restrictive one, in the sense that I have selected *the novel* from the literary genres and the *plastic art and photography* from all *art genres*. I have also selected two very controversial figures of the literary canon (Oscar Wilde and Virginia Woolf) and a very new and also appreciated writer, the contemporary Tracy Chevalier, following a diachronic thread in approaching their novels (*The*

¹ See: <http://www.haverford.edu/classics>

Picture of Dorian Gray, To the Lighthouse, The Girl with a Pearl Earring) that make the corpus of my practical analysis, stepping forward from a premodern to a modern and postmodern writer and experiencing all ekphrastic typologies: *proper(actual)* ekphrasis, *notional* ekphrasis, *reverse* ekphrasis and different combinations (complex and cumulative ekphrastic chains) as an attempt of re-discovering new ways of reading their works. The selection process followed three main criterias: formal (novel/ plastic art), referential (real and imaginary pictorial sources) and temporal (diachronic pre/postmodern writers).

The first two chapters of my paper bring together and examine a variety of theories and definitions of the main concepts of our approach: *ekphrasis* and *intertextuality* on the background of a larger context, that of interdisciplinarity and comparative literature, while the other four focus on the practical analysis of the literary texts in the light of such theories. In **Chapter I** first chapter we tried *Pinning down the concept of “intertextuality” in the larger context of interdisciplinarity and comparative literature of the 21st century*. We have used, and hope not abused, the (post)structuralist theories and operational concepts, especially Kristeva’s (*transposition, productivity, genotext*), Riffaterre’s “performed intertextuality”, Bloom’s “anxiety of influence”, Genette’s “transtextuality”, Barthes’ “already read texts”, Derrida’s “deconstructive writing”, reaching to contemporary critics as Linda Hutcheon, Allen Graham and Laurent Jenny that emphasises the reader’s choice or to Professor Pia Brînzeu who brings together the literary field and the quantic physics. If intertextuality has brought so close to the reader’s choice, subchapter I.4. analyzes the reception and *reader response theories and critics*, as complementary to the postmodern concept of intertextuality: Richards and Rosenblatt, Jauss, Iser, Fish, Holland, Eco)Jauss, Iser, Rossembalt, Culler, Riffattere, Fish, and Eco (‘transactional reading’, *Erwartungshorizont* ‘horizon of expectation’, ‘ideal reader’, ‘model reader,’ or ‘super-reader,’ of ‘felicitous reading’ etc.), ending with poststructuralists that bring into focus ‘the questioning of the reader’ . Unlike the traditional interpretation, which seeks to elucidate hidden meanings in texts, I see the relationship between reader and text not as a unidirectional communication and reception but rather as a *dynamic interaction of two linked realities*. Meaning is the result of this text-reader interaction - an effect to be experienced rather than an object to be defined - and the work is a never-completed unfolding of its readings.

By looking at the ways in which *writing, painting and photography* have traditionally been separated, I wanted to make room for an approach which recognises their similarities as well as their differences, but which seeks to appreciate their complex interactions. One of the most important elements is their *shared status as cultural constructs* created by them as parts of an intricate network of narratives, being themselves created and lived by the viewers/readers

who help to construct them. It is in the context of these *narrative webs* that the text metaphor is most useful in attempting to understand the relationship between the written and the plastic/photographic representations. After researching in detail the theoretical field of ekphrasis in **Chapter II “Writing for Art: The Aesthetics of Ekphrasis” (etymology, chronology, typology, avatars etc.)**, and making a deep analysis of various ekphrastic writings (poetry and prose) I have reached to the conclusion that *ekphrasis* can be considered (this is my own definition): *a special type of intertextuality manifested as the intersemiotic translation/transmutation that mediates visual and written signs, entering into various narrative patterns such as plot and characterization, as well as point of view and whose point of resistance lies in the representation of the male/female body*. My paper argues that *ekphrasis* is an intersemiotic “translational” mode or even better “transmutation” in Roman Jakobson’s terms (2002: 114) that takes two forms: the traditional, ‘*contained*’ *description of a visual work of art*, and a *mode of writing that pervades the entire text* and emulates the characteristics of painting. It is a definition that has served to build the practical analysis of the selected corpus of texts in this paper. I started from the premise that the dialogue between the literary text and the painting which it evokes is motivated both at the construction of the intrigue level, and author’s conception about writing, that the ekphrastic models often join forces with narrativity to bring the visual source into distinctively literary play, not least along the time axis.

The major aim of the present paper was shaping a “new way of reading” the *ekphrastic reading* requested by the new interdisciplinary hermeneutics of the literary paradigm of the 21st century, as well as by the dimension of both the ‘reality’ and the (post)modern inhabiting it, regarding the corpus of texts I have selected: Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* and Tracy Chevalier’s *The Girl with a Pearl* (and not only to these, but also to other related prose writings). The three novels have in common painters as major characters, genderly separated (two male painters and a female painter), the rebellion feeling of the artist in his quest for “a new manner in art” which parallels their own search of identity in a world which seems difficult to adapt in or quite unfriendly or ignorant or chauvinist, as well as the (more or less) explicit and openly declared intention of their authors of an experimentalist writing: to “paint with words”.

Our study offers a close reading of the above mentioned literary works (prose) from the end of 19th century, to the 20th twentieth centuries and the beginning of the 21st century alongside high quality reproductions of the companion pictures, covering a broad range of *writing and theory about the relation of literary texts to the visual arts*, and thus extending the subject of *ekphrasis* from poetry (which was dominant) to celebrated prose descriptions of

artworks. Our *intention* was a *double* one. On the one hand, we tried a theoretical diachronical and critical approach by tracing the historical evolution of the term ‘ekphrasis’ from the ancient Greek rhetoricians who invented it and its evolution into the universal literature and the context of its ‘resurrection’, so to say, by the literary critics of the ‘60s till present. And on the other hand, the paper has undertaken *an analytical approach*, trying to highlight the *function of ekphrasis* in the writing mode of construction of the above mentioned narrative texts. The corpus of the analysis is composed *exclusively of prose*. The thesis explores how literary *descriptions of visual artworks affect the narrative and descriptive fabric of a text*. The novels I examine operate on three textual levels: the painter's creative struggles, his/her amorous entanglements with his/her model and/or the painted man/woman of his/her canvas and his/her aesthetic claims to revolutionize the painting.

For instance, Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and the Tracy Chevallier’s *The Girl with a Pearl Earring* successfully adopt the *ekphrastic mode of writing*, transforming the *narrative into canvas*, exploring the notional and actual ekphrasis, but also ekphrastic metamorphoses into reverse ekphrasis, blurring the boundaries between the two media. In both novels the narrative text is generated by the construction or deconstruction of some paintings (real or imaginary) under the creative efforts and passions of a male instance - the painter. While digging in Wilde’s novel “beneath the surface” at “our peril” (**chapters III and IV**), we have traced the threads or the “symbols” of Wilde’s ‘aesthetic’ formation under the influence of radical iconic figures, of that special Art – Life relationship in the wildean aestheticism as the the germs of today’s terms of *ekphrasis*. The *Double ekphrasis within the ekphrastic chain of ‘multiple selves’: Construction vs. deconstruction and evolution vs. involution in Oscar Wilde’s The Picture of Dorian Gray* analyze some fictional art works that could belong to Pre-Raphaelite and Impressionist painters, such as G.F.Watts, Holman Hunt and Manet and even to Caravaggio (and the mythological transplant). We approached the wildean ekphrasis, reflecting what Wilde called “the [postmodern] spectator inside us”, the reader of the 21st century. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is “a curious hybrid” and embodies the doppelgänger avatars: double ‘roman’/ multifaceted painting / notional and reverse ekphrasis / multifaceted narcissism’ and it was finally interpreted as *The Phoenix effect: (notional) reverse ekphrasis decoded in Impressionist key*.

On the other hand, in **Chapter V** we got closer to reverse ekphrasis **Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, where “nothing is ever only one thing”**. Woolf exploits the *reverse ekphrasis* and the realm of modernist Self as in her *framed tableaux* which lead to communal and *linguistic re-enchantment* through the joint act of aesthetic contemplation, using the *stream of consciousness*

technique. Thus, the pictures can be considered as rhetorics or encoded signs that must and can be 'read' with the tools provided by narratology and poststructuralist theories, including feminism. Resonating to Woolf's domestic elements, we found Dali's paintings and his 'paranoico-critical' method, as well as his perception of time as "liquefaction" symbolized by "his melting watches". The use of photography as an interpretive strategy was an additional element in approaching woolfian ekphrastic writing, as the whole novel seems to be a "myse-en-abyme" by the cutting picture game that James and Mrs. Ramsy are engaged into in the first part of it. The central thing remains Lily's painting, an abstract painting that we associated to Dali's "Antropomorphic Chest Drawer". Ultimately, the 'vision', the verbal representation of a visual representation turns back *upon itself* to transmute the fleeting power of language into the paradox of the still living *tableau vivant* that is suspended beyond the confines of space and time and often, but not always, brought to life through the imaginative motion of *memory*. It is interesting also to discover the ekphrastic hermeneutics hidden in the text itself: Woolfian "ut pictura poesis" an answer to Victorian "woman can't paint, women can't write", the lighthouse – the philosopher's stone of a visionary experience, Lily Briscoe's creation: a truly multitudinous form and the matter of Lily's "Chinese eyes', or *To the Lighthouse in Surrealist Key* with Woolf's *chair and kitchen table* and the "sponge woman" versus Gala and Dali and the "anthropomorphic chest drawer".

Chapter VI Chevalier's Pearl: "A Jewel of a Novel" brings to analysis a postmodernist novel, another kind of biography (introducing new concepts such as „historiographic metafiction" transformed into „*Historical-art fiction*", „Postmodernism", „Baroque", „camera obscura" etc), another *Künstlerroman* and another kind of ekphrasis, namely *actual ekphrasis with a real referent*. The referents are a series of Johannes Vermeer's paintings (*Woman with a Pearl Necklace, A Lady Writing a Letter, Woman with a Pearl Necklace, Young Woman with a Water Jug, A Lady Writing, the Milkmaid*, culminating with *Girl with a Pearl Earring*), but also some paintings with an apparent diversion role The Procuress Dirck van Baburen, and other eleven non-vermeerien paintings representing scenes from the Bible, especially the Crucifixion – three of them foreshadowing even from the beginning a myse-en-abyme of the entire text, of Griet's evolution and destiny. Even if in Chevalier's case, the pictorial source was quite obvious –Vermeer's paintings - and her declared ekphrastic intention was well known: "I wanted to write it in a way that Vermeer would have painted: very simple lines, simple compositions, not a lot of clutter, and not a lot of superfluous characters" (Chevalier's Official site), the challenge came while reading the text and discovering authorship effacements beyond the historical metafiction. The tortuous way of Vermeerian paintings

embedded in the *ekphrastic covers* of Chevalier's novel creates a fictional Vermeer: man and artist and his studio both "temple" and "refuge, overlapping 'reality' and 'fiction' and introduces the "Cameleon Chevalier": *motherhood* versus *authorship*, also disclosing Griet as a 'Chevalier in disguise'. Word is replaced by sight and Chevalier's *ekphrastic chain* carries us from the Baroque Vermeerian *canvas* to postmodern *paper* through *Pre/post-work ekphrastic descriptions, cumulative* 'pictorial models': Griet versus Catharina and through Chevalier's ingenious formula for the 'multifaced' Vermeerian model.

Conclusion

At the heart of these (pre/post)modernist texts, the fundamental adherence to the *mimetic principle of art is confronted with the nonfigurative* experiments of their fictional painters. The male/female body, as the embodiment of Art and the manifestation of the artist's desire, becomes the symptom of his/her incursion into abstract painting and the site of the resistance to ekphrasis. The ekphrastic reading goes beyond the difficulties involved in comparing a visual and a written medium and tries to explore the ways in which these are both worked out and complicated through ekphrasis. Rather than glossing over these difficulties, this paper will confront and explore them in an attempt to come to terms with the complicated interrelationships between writing, painting and photography and re-examines and challenges the boundaries which traditionally separated them. This study exposes the need for criticism to evolve beyond the disputes about *paragonal* struggle and segregation between verbal and visual art as to recognise the emergence of an *ekphrastic* 'dialogue' between word and image, if *ekphrastic* is to remain relevant to contemporary practice. Ultimately, this thesis proves that theories of representational rivalry and intersemiotic transpositions ('translation', 'transmutation') between verbal and visual art can and have been surpassed by dialogue and collaborative conversations, demonstrated by the ekphrastic reading of the "art novels" of our primary source bibliography.

At the heart of these (pre/post)modernist texts, the fundamental adherence to the *mimetic principle of art is confronted with the nonfigurative* experiments of their fictional painters. The male/female body, as the embodiment of Art and the manifestation of the artist's desire, becomes the symptom of his/her incursion into abstract painting and the site of the resistance to ekphrasis. The ekphrastic reading goes beyond the difficulties involved in comparing a visual and a written medium and tries to explore the ways in which these are both worked out and complicated through ekphrasis. Rather than glossing over these difficulties, this paper will confront and explore them in an attempt to come to terms with the complicated interrelationships between writing, painting and photography and re-examines and challenges the boundaries which traditionally separated them. This study exposes the need for criticism to evolve beyond the

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