

Structural, compositional and intercultural peculiarities of ekphrasis complexes

Andrii IVANCHENKO

Odessa State Environmental University

Resume

The article is devoted to the investigation of the so-called ekphrasis complexes which include not only the elements of the image description but also the elements which describe the conditions and the art of the perception itself. The expression produced by the painting on the subject fixed in the verbal form is also included in the ekphrasis complex as one of its components. Such a multisided approach was never used in the papers concerning the problem of ekphrasis. Attention of the scholars was primarily concentrated on the image created by the painting and the description of the models in case of the portraits.

In the paper presented special attention is concentrated not only on the painting and its description but also on the conditions of its perception and appreciation. The emotional effect of the painting is also of the paramount importance. That is why its verbal fixation is also analyzed in detail as well as the process of perception by different observers.

The interculturality and the variability of correlation between the elements of the imagery plane and those of the axiology in ekphrasis complexes may be traced through analysis of the artistic works by S. Maugham, Ch. Dickens, J. Galsworthy, A. Christie as well as the works of Nikolai Gogol, Maxim Gorky. The imagery elements can be greatly reduced while the axiological elements can cover the greatest part of the textual body. This correlation between the dominant elements belonging to different aspects of the ekphrasis complex depends on the concrete artistic tasks and individual style of the writer.

Key words: ekphrasis complex; imagery plane; perception; axiology; suspense; correlation.

This article is devoted to the study of ekphrasis complexes in English-language literary texts. Ekphrasis means a description of works of visual art using verbal means.

Various aspects - and, above all, the actual descriptive elements – of ekphrasis complexes were considered in a number of works.

K.A Barsht and M.A Saparova considered in their articles typological relations between literature and painting as specific codes with a common aesthetic component.

Artistically valuable features of ekphrasis as certain ideological models were in the focus of attention of E.V Yatsenko. N.V Braginskaya tried to classify ekphrasis complexes highlighting at the same time a number of parameters including structural features.

The vast majority of works devoted to ekphrasis were performed based on the Russian-language materials. (Берп 145)

However in all of these studies almost no attention was paid to the correlation of the actual visual segments with other components of ekphrasis description. In this paper the issues on relation of elements of different plans of ekphrasis complexes which we shall call ekphrasis components (EC) are the main subject of the analysis which determines the novelty of the proposed research and its actualite in the light of increased interest to transcoding and interaction of different semiotic systems.

The research is based on the English-language material (literary texts of nineteenth and twentieth centuries).

Ekphrasis complex can be represented mainly by a descriptive line in its verbal implementation and may include elements related to a perceptual plan reflecting the peculiarities of visual perception of observed things.

The descriptive line in a EC can be presented in a sufficiently complete detailed view and also can be extremely reduced. In the latter case it may consist of a listing of individual details, two or three most significant features of an image while the main focus is transferred to the emotional and axiological sphere associated with the peculiarities of perception of observed things. With such shift in focus of attention we do not speak about a description of the properties and characteristics of the entire image and/or the individual items, but, using a variety of verbal means, consider specification of fixed estimates and impressions that these features (whether mentioned or not) produce on a observer. In other words, first of all, the results of object's influence on a subject of observation are described, i.e. a perlocutionary effect of this exposure is described or recorded in terms of communication theory.

Thus we can distinguish ekphrasis complexes with an objective and representational dominant and a subjective axiological dominant. At the same time we may consider the objectivity by a stretch of imagination since even in the case of the most distracted description of descriptive line the subjective aspect remains to be inevitable.

In many cases the elements of graphic and optical or emotional and axiological line appear to be so closely intertwined that it is difficult to consider the dominance of elements of any one sector. Such ECs are characteristic for example for Maugham's works. J. Galsworthy mainly has ECs with emotional and axiological dominant and the descriptive line itself is presented in a rather reduced form and results in fixing of the most characteristic features and properties of the object.

Here is an example of a EC with an axiological and emotional dominant which can be found in the Maugham's novel "The Moon and Sixpence". Interesting thing is that the author pays attention here at the very process of verbalization of emotional experiences:

"They (Strickland's pictures) gave me an emotion that I could not analyse. They said something that words were powerless to utter". (157)

Complexity of verbalization relates both to description of the objects themselves and their emotional impact on a observer. Reader feels only the force of the impact of Strickland's paintings on the observer which makes it difficult to convey their feelings in a clear verbal form. Nevertheless he still tries to share his impressions:

"It was as though he found in the chaos of the universe a new pattern, and were attempting clumsily, with anguish of soul, to set it down. I saw a tormented spirit striving for the release of expression." (ibidem)

Further the author writes:

The portraits were a little larger than life-size, and this gave them an ungainly look. To my eyes the faces looked like caricatures. They were painted in a way that was entirely new to me. The landscape puzzled me even more. There were two or three pictures of the forest at Fontainebleau and several of streets in Paris; my first feeling was that they might have been painted by a drunken cab-driver. I was perfectly bewildered. The colour seemed to me extraordinarily crude. It passed through my mind that the whole thing was a stupendous, incomprehensible farce. (ibidem)

Without describing specific objects from a descriptive line of Strickland's paintings the subject-narrator constantly emphasizes the novelty of manner, unusualness of performance techniques (entirely new; a new pattern etc.).

Because of such unusualness the paintings on the one hand seem to be ugly (an ungainly look; painted by a drunken cab-driver, incomprehensible farce), and on the other – having a great energy charge (striving for the release of expression).

Confusion feeling is coupled with a sense of curiosity and interest appearing when a person experiences something new and unusual.

The narrator tries to analyze his feelings, to enunciate for himself the secret of such a strong impact Strickland's paintings on an observer, though, he notes himself that it is very difficult to do it by verbal means (They said something that words were powerless to utter). Nevertheless the narrator says that the force of impressions is determined by the experience of the passion with which the tortured soul wants to express itself through paintings and colours.

So, this description can be regarded as an EC with axiological and emotional dominant since the descriptive line itself is given in a maximum reduced form.

Only by means of brief references we may get to know that some of the pictures depict the forest of Fontainebleau, and others – the streets of Paris. It remains completely unknown who is depicted on the mentioned portraits.

An example of a description where the descriptive line is closely interwoven with axiological and emotional line is the description of a still life with fruit painted by Strickland. We give a sample of this fairly extended EC:

It was a pile of mangoes, bananas, oranges, and I know not what; and at first sight it was an innocent picture enough<...>

The colours were so strange that words can hardly tell what a troubling emotion they gave. There were somber blues, opaque like a delicately carved bowl in lapis lazuli; and yet with a quivering lustre that suggested the palpitation of mysterious life. (ibidem: 216)

As can be seen from this fragment of EC the narrator-observer emphasizes colouristics, colour palette of the picture (purples; red; the snow; deep yellows; green).

In order to convey colour shades in a more accurate manner from this point onward Maugham introduces similes and metaphors: opaque like a delicately carved bowl in lapis lazuli; purples, horrible like raw and putrid flesh; reds, shrill like the berries of holly; a green as fragrant as the spring and as pure as the sparkling water of a mountain brook.

However the narrator constantly captures his impressions of observed things: there was something strangely alive in them; the colours were so strange; they seemed to possess a somber passion of their own. It was enchanted fruit; they were sullen with unawaited dangers; a fearful attraction was in them etc.

Visual and emotional and axiological lines in this EC, in our opinion, are fairly balanced. The author gives credit to both description of objects and perceptual aspect within the specified ekphrasis component and the axiological component itself (strange, fearful etc.).

There are also cases when EC is given in a maximum compressed form. Practically a descriptive line is missing – an author only names an artistic painting. Axiological and expressive elements are also reduced to a minimum.

So Adrian and Dinny in Galsworthy's novel "End of the chapter" stroll through the halls of the exhibition moving from one picture to another but these moves actually are not fixed. Replicas-reactions on paintings that are not even described by the author are given without verbalization and the process of visual perception itself:

“I noticed your discretions” he murmured, in front of the “Boy Blowing Bubbles”<...>

“Aren’t these Manets good?”. (116-117)

The author includes in the EC Dinny’s reaction on the pictures of Manet naming at the same time only one of them – "Boy Blowing Bubbles" – and absolutely refusing to fix a perceptual process and a descriptive line. There is actually only the name given to one of the paintings of Edouard Manet which the reader could never see and Dinny’s reaction-assessment of all artist’s paintings as a whole.

At the same time a talk about the pictures does not really matter, reasoning about the paintings represents a collateral topic of conversation and the main theme is presence of Tony Croom at the exhibition who is not indifferent to Claire and Dinny.

Dinny’s replica about Manet’s work – is an attempt to divert the conversation from unwanted personal topic. Elements of EC perform here a background function. The main event of the novel's episodes – meeting with Tony Croom rather than observation of Manet’s works.

Special expressiveness is characteristic for ECs in which axiological and expressive elements take precedence of description of a descriptive line as well as description of the process of painting observation and perception. For example in Christie's novel "Five Little Pigs" Poirot first expresses his surprise and impression with regard to the picture and only after that proceeds to describe its descriptive line. Violation of the natural order of the stages of perception allows us to apply a retardation technique (suspense). Due to this reader’s attention reaches maximum concentration. Undoubtedly reader wants as soon as possible to know what impressed the famous detective in the work of the late artist whose death is being investigated by him:

“Poirot caught his breath. He had seen so far, four pictures of Amyas Crale's <...>. But now he was looking at what the artist himself had called his best picture, and Poirot realized at once what a superb artist the man had been.” (124)

Only after achieving the effect of reader’s maximum expectations A. Christie starts to describe the portrait:

The painting had an old superficial smoothness.

At first sight it might have been a poster, so seemingly crude were its contrasts.

A girl, a girl in a canary-yellow shirt and dark-blue slacks, sitting on a grey wall in full sunlight against a background of violent blue sea. Just the kind of subject for a poster. (ibidem)

At first it seems to the observer, Hercule Poirot, that he is looking at some poster – the colours are too screamily: a poisonous yellow, canary colour of a shirt, blue pants, bright sunlight – all that is built on contrasts which are characteristic for posters. Only then he realizes that it is rather a work of art than a poster painting.

The first impression appears to be deceptive. Thanks to analysis Poirot manages to understand the causes of painting's strength: a powerful energy, vital force that is felt to be in the girl shown at the picture:

And the girl-

Yes, here was life. All there was, all there could be of life, of youth, of sheer blazing vitality. The face was alive and the eyes...

So much life! Such passionate youth. That, then, was what Amyas Crale had seen in Elsa Greer, which had made him blind and deaf to the gentle creature, his wife. Elsa was life. Elsa was youth. (ibidem: 125)

Analytical thinking is interleaved with estimates and model description:

"A superb, slim, straight creature, arrogant, her head turned, her eyes insolent with triumph". (ibidem)

This acquaintance with Elsa Greer through her portrait precedes the meeting with E. Poirot. The sharp contrast between portrait and a live model strikes E. Poirot even more. Alive, of flesh and blood, Elsa Greer seems to be lifeless while the image has maximum dynamics and vitality.

In the novel this EC has a multifunctional character. It appears to be an element forming a plot and performs a utilitarian function: allows Poirot to find the thread to the mystery of the murder of artist Amyas Crale.

Poirot reveals the strength of portrait's impact not at once. Only later he starts to realize what exactly impressed him in the portrait: a farewell glance of a female assassin who looks from the picture at a victim artist:

"I should have known when I first saw that picture. For it is a very remarkable picture. It is the picture of a murderess painted by her victim – it is the picture of a girl watching her lover die...". (ibidem: 288)

Portrait allowed Poirot to understand what exactly escaped from him in reality. The portrait which in its reduced and compressed form managed to express the most important thing in a person allowed to penetrate the secrets of its hidden essence, "turned over" the woman depicted in the painting, made it possible for the famous detective to understand that he had a murderer before him.

Therefore ekphrasis complexes have different structures. In each particular case there is a different set of elements of EC whose ratio is defined both by individual author's style and by subject-specific stylistic problems as well as by genre originality of the work. Questions related to structural and content features of EC and to their functional loading require further consideration.

Bibliographical references

Christie, Agatha. *Five Little Pigs*. – М.: Айрис-пресс, 2004.

Galsworthy, John. *End of Chapter*. – М.: Foreign languages, 1960.

Maugham, William Somerset. *The Moon and Sixpence*. – М.: Progress Publishers, 1972.

Баршт К.А. О типологических взаимосвязях литературы и живописи // Русская литература и изобразительное искусство XVIII- нач. XX в.: Сб. науч. трудов. – Л., 1988.

Берар Е. Экфрасис в русской литературе XX в // Экфрасис в русской литературе: сб. трудов Лозаннского симпозиума / Под ред. Л. Геллера. – М.: Изд-во МИК, 2002.

Брагинская Н.В. Экфрасис как тип текста: к проблеме структуры и классификации // Славянское и балканское языкознание: Карпато-восточно-славянские параллели. – М., 1977.

Сапаров М.А. Словесный образ и зримое изображение. Живопись, фотография, слово // Литература и живопись. – Л., 1982.

Яценко Е.В. «Любите живопись, поэты...». Экфрасис как художественно-мировоззренческая модель // Вопросы философии. – 2011. - № 11.