EKPHRASIS AS ENARGEIA

Assistant, PhD, University of Petroșani

Abstract: The close connection between literature and painting had been established centuries ago and the perception of the two media throughout history, emphasizing both the similarities and differences existing between them, has largely been the result of the various aesthetical and philosophical theories approaching the two realms. Ekphrasis, a term that has its origin in the Greek language and entered the English language during the eighteenth century, has stirred serious debate, which resulted in various definitions depending on the specific argument set forth by each critic or theorist. One of the attempts at defining ekphrasis, conceived as a thorough description of a visible entity, connected the notion to the ancient rhetoric device of enargeia, in an attempt to pause the temporal flow of the discourse. In doing that, verbal art is considered to have come closer to the visual arts – although words and pictures should not be understood as being alike – and become an apparent natural sign.

Keywords: ekphrasis, enargeia, media, natural sign, conventional sign.

Certain theoretical and critical opinions (Krieger, 1992: 70) state that, while looking for an all-encompassing definition of imitation, Plato, who widely approached the relation of language to natural signs in *Cratylus* and enlarged the concepts of *Book 3* of *The Republic*, had concluded that imitation was possible owing to the capacity of all arts to "mirror the thing we perceive … by making an illusionary substitute for it." (Krieger, 1992: 70) Imitation would consequently include the dramatic, lyric, and narrative discourses as long as they are able to create images out of the words they used.

Meanwhile, the further division of signs into sensible and intelligible, with the first ones employed in visual arts and the second ones in verbal arts, made possible the subsequent separation between natural signs and arbitrary-conventional signs. It appeared that, in order to represent an object, which could be identified with its existing counterpart (as in representational visual arts), no difficulties were encountered; consequently, a similar, unproblematic process was expected to be dealt with bin the representation of objects by words seen as the embodiment of enargeia. Yet, owing to the fact that verbal arts have as a goal the emulation of the effects of natural-sign arts, namely, to create mental pictures in spite of their invisible medium (the words), and thus to manipulate deceiving illusions, Plato is considered to have condemned non-dramatic verbal arts:

"… though the non-dramatic verbal arts, with their arbitrary signs, are semiotically unlike a visual art, they *seek* to emulate that art in the way they would function, thereby using the visual arts as their model in their attempt, despite their disadvantaged (because invisible) medium of words, to create pictures bin their readers' minds. Their objective is to be like the sensible arts, …, even if they bare only intelligible."" (Krieger, 1992: 75)

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With Horace (1783), the key phrase 'ut pictura poesis' appeared to have reasserted a poetic art that was looking to mimic the visual arts. The phrase is acknowledged as having its origin in Simonides of Ceos (556-468 BC, the Greek poet, included by the ancient scholars of Alexandria in the list of nine lyric poets of critical study), who was supposed to refer to poetry as to a 'speaking picture' and to pictures as to 'mute poetry', and came to be used in order to emphasize the analogous relations among the arts while setting forth the supremacy of visual arts and the strife of verbal arts to adapt to the model. The result was the coming out of a theory of the fine arts, at around the middle of the eighteenth century, which focused on the mutual analogy of the visual arts, natural signs and imitation of nature.

Neoclassical theory turned out to combine Plato's illusionistic mimetic theory with natural-sign developments that traced a 'semiotic process' according to which poetry, from a vernal description, shifted to a mental image and transformed itself into the verbal equivalent of painting. Accordingly, through 'ut pictura poesis' all non-dramatic poetry had been equated as analogous to visual arts.

In the opinion of Addison (*The Spectator*, 1891), who established a hierarchy of the arts, with sculpture occupying the leading position, owing to its three-dimensional character that allowed it to be mistaken for the object it imitated, followed by painting, and, finally, by the verbal art, reduced to description, a sort of reinforced enargeia is required in order to define poetry's representational function: words should be employed with a view of determining in the audience the vivid perception of the natural object in the absence of that object, which meant that they were supposed to resort to ekphrasis:

"Words, when well chosen, have so great a Force in them, that a Description often gives us more lively Ideas than the Sight of Things themselves. The Reader finds a scene drawn in stronger Colours, and painted more to the Life in his Imagination, by the help of the Words, than by an actual Survey of the Scene which they describe. In this case the Poet seems to get the better of Nature; he takes, indeed, the Landskip after her, but gives it more vigorous Touches, heightens its Beauty, and so enlivens the whole Piece, that the Images that flow from the Objects themselves appear weak and faint, in Comparison of those that come from the Expressions."

Addison's conception regarding the ultimate goal of all the arts – that is natural-sign representation – involved human mind's recollections that turned into forceful representations stimulated by the objects of art. Accordingly, art objects were attributed an evocative function which, in the case of ekphrasis, induced in an audience a visual representation of the original object through a verbal description. The insistence on the superiority of the real/ original objects as compared with their art representations acknowledged natural-sign arts as the archetype for all other arts and placed arbitrary-conventional sign art – poetry – in an inferior position.

The late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries also witnessed a tendency that opposed to the previously mentioned assertions which made of the verbal art a representation of a natural-sign object (an ekphrasis) by way of enargeia. The opposite tendency focused on paintings capable of emulating literature while attempting at abandoning the spatial dimension and incorporating temporality. And, in order to do that, visual arts (more specifically narrative painting) had to select the 'pregnant moment' out of a literary narrative sequence that should be, in fact, the most representative moment towards which all previous moments converge and from which all subsequent moments come out. Nonetheless, in the opinion of the twentieth-century theorists, the selection of such a moment in the visual arts does not imply a reference to temporality owing to

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the fact that the flow of life is stilled in the 'pregnant moment' which reasserts spatiality. (Krieger, 1992)

Both ekphrasis as enargeia and ekphrasis as imitation ('ut pictura poesis') and illusion, via the opposition between natural-sign arts and arbitrary/conventional-sign art are, nonetheless, considered to have come out of a comparison operated between items that could not be compared: on the one hand, visual arts were referred to as void of medium (as natural-sign arts), on the other one, verbal art (poetry) was referred to as possessing a medium capable of representing an object only indirectly (arbitrary/conventional sign art). Consequently, such a comparison resulted in a paradoxical situation that urged art to leave aside its own characteristics in order to strive to emulate visual arts.

Criticism (Krieger, 1992) appreciates that the moment when the visual arts began to be analyzed as conventional signs (as verbal art was) and started to use their previously denied medium (their materials) as means of transposing those signs into 'perceptual structures', verbal art ceased to hide its conventional character and be read in terms of the visual arts; meanwhile, visual arts have come to be treated in terms of 'texts to be read' displaying conventional signs characteristics.

Critical opinions (Krieger, 1992) have also been formulated in connection with a different kind of enargeia whose origins can be found in Longinus's treatise *On the Sublime* (1890). That type of enargeia required the audience to identify with the writer in order to take part in the representation. Consequently, the mimetic character of the representation softened and the emulation of the natural sign was no longer its main goal; instead, the emotional response of the audience was being stressed, together with the yearning of word art to call attention on itself:

"It is natural to us to feel our souls lifted by the true Sublime, and conceiving a sort of generous exultation to be filled with joy and pride, as though we had ourselves originated the ideas which we read… when a passage is pregnant in suggestion, when its is hard, nay impossible, to distract the attention from it, and when it takes a strong and lasting hold on the memory, then we may be sure that we have lighted on the true Sublime… . …when the same book always produces the same impression on all who read it, whatever be the difference in their pursuits, their manner of life, their aspirations, their ages, or their language, such a harmony of opposites gives irresistible authority to their favorable verdict."" (Longinus, 1890: VII/2)

It has been further asserted (Krieger, 1992) that this type of empathy-inducing enargeia collapses the distance between the audience and the subject, which results in a sort of emotional blending of the two entities that no longer has mimetic function as its main goal. The change having occurred in the perception of the mimetic theory through enargeia (which had previously stressed intense visual representation) is now centred upon the intense emotional response of the audience that seems to reject mimetic representation. New territories open for a concept of the arbitrary, conventional/ non-natural verbal art superior to natural-sign arts. Verbal arts is then able to claim its superiority exactly owing to the shift having occurred at the level of audience perception: words as medium are to be interpreted, but interpretation in this case, is much broader than in the case of an audience observing natural-sign arts or even natural objects.

Longinus's theory on enargeia is considered to have been developed subsequently by Edmund Burke (1883: 246-251), who asserted that, contrary to visual arts, verbal arts, in their arbitrariness, were not required to reproduce external reality as faithfully as possible and suggested that they were free to exert their emotional impact on audiences to a larger extent than

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visual arts. He went on to delimitate the category of the 'beautiful', incorporating the pictorial art, from the category of the 'sublime' that encompassed the word art which although obscure, at times, was able to determine deeper emotions in the audience. Burke insisted that words characterized by a connotative obscurity were supposed to be employed by poets with a view to influence the emotions of the audience. Visual arts appeared then as lacking the affective dimension attributed to words:

"Painting affects … with the superadded pleasure of imitation. Architecture affects by the laws of nature and the law of reason; from which latter result the rules of proportion, which make a work to be praised or censured, in the whole part or in some part, when the end for which it was designed is or is not properly answered. But as to words; they seem to me to affect us very different from that in which we are affected by natural objects, or by painting or architecture; yet words have as considerable a share in exciting ideas of beauty and of the sublime as many of those, and sometimes a much greater than any of them; … If words have all their possible extent of power, three effects arise in the mind of the hearer. The first is, the *sound*; the second, the *picture*, or representation of the thing signified by the sound; the third is, the *affection* of the soul produced by one or by both of the foregoing. … I am of opinion, that the most general effect, … does not arise from their forming pictures of the several things they would represent in the imagination; because, on a very diligent examination … I do not find that once in twenty times any such picture is formed, and when it is, there is most commonly a particular effort of the imagination for that purpose. … words operate, …, not by presenting any image to the mind, but by having from use the same effect on being mentioned… ."

With Burke, as with Longinus, the emphasis is no more on the poem/ object, but on audience/ subject, which is considered to eliminate any distance that separates object from subject in order to identify with the object. The hereby conception is also accompanied by a shift from the spatiality of the visual arts towards the temporality of the word art under the influence of the evolution theories in the nineteenth century. Language is assumed a time dimension that seems connected with human heritable existence that is supposed, at its turn, to determine human emotions.

The ideas regarding the expressive capacity of the word art was further advocated and developed by P. B. Shelley in *A Defence of Poetry* (2004) where he established an immediate connection between poetry and its poet, claiming that poetry was, in fact, the expression of the poet's 'internality'. Owing to that connection that turned language into an 'unmediated' ("because arbitrarily produced by imagination") representation of the inner being, lyric poetry came to be given a prominent status. Shelley implied that, in the case of the visual arts, expression could not come out immediately from conception due to the 'fracture' brought by materials and instruments:

"… language is arbitrarily produced by the imagination and has relation to thoughts alone; but all other materials, instruments and conditions of art, have relations among each other, which limit and interpose between conception and expression. The former is a mirror which reflects, the latter as a cloud which enfeebles, the light of which are both mediums of communication. Hence the fame of sculptors, painters, and musicians, …, has never equalled that of poets in the restricted sense of the term, as two performers of equal skill produce effects from a guitar and a harp."

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Accordingly, the arts appeared to be evaluated in accordance with their "closeness to the source of expression"" (Krieger, 1992: 109) so that natural-sign arts (the visual arts) came to hold a position which was (owing to their reflection of an external reality) inferior to that of the word art (poetry), which was the immediate reflection of the poet's 'internality'. The direct effects of these assertions are considered to be the praise of the subjectivity, expressiveness, and obscurity of the word art as opposed to the representational transparency and 'referential precision' of natural-sign arts. Consequently, ekphrasis as imitation/ enargeia should be avoided due to its static character that comes out to be contrary to temporality and the flow of consciousness.

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