TWO INSTANCES OF REVERSED EKPHRASIS: WATERHOUSE'S MIRANDA AND MILLAIS'S FERDINAND LURED BY ARIEL

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Abstract: When attempting at analysing the manner a literary source text is turned into a visual art target text, through reversed ekphrasis, the most important element to focus upon is the perception of the conversion process as an achievement, which is entitled to its own identity and which, although being originated in the literary source text, develops along its innate laws. Reversed ekphrasis develops according to a threefold-stage process, comprising the linear reading of the source text, the conversion of the literary source text, which results in the configuration of the target text and involves two levels of perception, (reframing and destabilization), related to the recognizable character of the source text within the target text, and the substantiation of the conversion, which attributes pictoriality to the target text. With these in view, both Waterhouse's Miranda and Millais's Ferdinand Lured by Ariel should be considered successful reversed ekphrastic conversions of Shakespeare's texts.

Keywords: reversed ekphrasis, Shakespeare, Pre-Raphaelitism, source text, target text.

***Miranda* (1916) by John William Waterhouse**

When focusing on how literary texts are conversed by painters, with a view to be transferred from one medium to the other, it is necessary not to leave aside the fact that the target visual texts, having emerged through reversed ekphrasis, require to be dealt upon both in terms of their artistic excellence and in terms of their condition as transpositions of literary source texts. A wide range of visual art works relying on literary sources, which have become largely known owing to exhibitions, engravings, albums, and reproductions, are to be found in the nineteenth-century British art and Shakespeare's masterpieces seem to possess a remarkable connection with visual art. Three Shakespearean characters, Ophelia, Juliet, and Miranda, appear to have been mostly approached by Victorian painting and the Pre-Raphaelite painters, too, made the period's choice for subjects inspired by the three women part of their own artistic statement. Apart from their Shakespeare-inspired works, focusing on a single character, Pre-Raphaelites also produced a series of paintings that render specific scenes in Shakespeare's plays.

The first scene of act I of *The Tempest* opens aboardthe sinking shipand appears to be the most dramatic opening of Shakespeare's plays. It is followed by scene 2, when Miranda, addressing her father, Prospero, and begging him to calm the tempest, mentions her having witnessed the sinking. Actually, Waterhouse relies his dramatic painting, showing Miranda ashore and watching the troubled sea, on a scene that is only indirectlypresented in the play, through Miranda's words:

"*Mir.* If by your art, my dearest father, you have
Put the wild waters in this roar, allay them.
The sky, it seems, would pour down stinking pitch
But that the sea, mounting to the welkin's cheek,
Dashes the fire out. O, I have suffer'd
With those that I saw suffer! a brave vessel
(Who had, no doubt, some noble creature in her)
Dash'd all to pieces! O, the cry did knock
Against my very heart! Poor souls, they perish'd!

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Had I been any god of power, I would
Have sunk the sea within the earth, or ere
It should the good ship so have swallow'd and
The fraughting souls within her."

(Shakespeare: *The Tempest*, act I, scene 2: 1863)



John William Waterhouse, *Miranda*, 1916, private collection

As I have mentioned in a previous article on Waterhouse's *Ophelias* (Hulea, in J.R.L.S. 9/ 2016) and as far as present-day research is able to document, there is no information at hand, which could offer a perspective upon the first stage of the process of reversed ekphrasis, witnessing the painter's readingof the Shakespearean source. As the painter seemed to have left no diaries and his name was barely mentioned by the epoch's art related correspondence, his paintings remain the only available stuff able to document his craftsmanship.

The conversionstage of the process of reversed ekphrasis through which Shakespeare's source text is turned into Waterhouse's target text relies on a moment which is only indirectly displayed in the *Tempest*, through the mediation of Miranda's words, when addressing her father, Prospero, so that it is carried out according to the level of destabilisation.

The third stage, conversion's substantiation, and its attached inscribing of pictoriality, is centred upon a series of visual elements, which not only define the painting's reframingof space and time, but also charge the target text with a dramatic pressure that results from the painter's construction of the sea storm and character.

Waterhouse is acknowledged to having painted three representations of Miranda: the first one, dated 1875, shows a passive young woman watching a relatively calm sea, while the other two, painted in 1916 (a year before his death), reportedly display similar images, differing only in their size.

At the moment of his death (in 1917), Waterhouse's art, highly regarded some twenty years before, appeared as old-fashioned to certain of the epoch's reviewers (*The Christian Science Monitor*, 1917), who valued it by comparison with Degas and Monet and lacked to observe the painter's modern working manner (especially his plein-air experiments and fluid brushwork) and his mastering of the pictorial craft:

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"Twenty years ago the bright, decorative pictures of J. W. Waterhouse, R. A., dealing cheerfully with myths and legends … were treated with vast respect by the critics; 10 years ago a paragraph took place of half a column; at the last Royal Academy exhibition few critics took the trouble even to notice a Waterhouse. This kind of art has had its day. … His art hovered between the pre-Raphaelites and Burne-Jones, and his pictures were popular because they were bright in color and decorative, and because they told a story. … The taste in art has changed… . Waterhouse's paintings … are charming and scholarly, but not one of his numerous eight-footers gives the tingle and uplift of two small pictures in the Hugh Lane collection – the draftsmanship in *La Plage* by Degas, and the colour values in *Sunshine andSnow*, by Monet."

Largely indebted to the work of the British curators and authors of the painter's monographs, the fresh perception of Waterhouse emphasizes his affinitieswith Pre-Raphaelitism, consisting in rich colour, dramatic compositions, bright draftsmanship, and highly-charged narratives. In the opinion of Peter Trippi (2002: 27), the first paintings of Waterhouse, documenting his inclinationfor classical subjects and compositional style, and often representing sensualfeminine characters, are not inferior to similar works by Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema or Sir Edward John Pointer, exhibiting their author's original technical skill, materialized in his use of a fluid brushwork.

At the time he became an Associate of the Royal Academy, Waterhouse's painting, displaying an increased preference for dramatic subjects (for instance, *The Magic* Circle – 1886), was acknowledged to having been influenced by the French painter Jean Leon Gerome as well as by the Pre-Raphaelites' style (*The Lady of Shalott* – 1888*)*.

According to a comment appeared in the *International Studio, An Illustrated Magazine of Fine and Applied Arts* (1913: 21), Waterhouse's painting "charm by the daintiness of his imagination and the delicacy of his sentiment", while two of his compositions (*A Song of Springtime* and *Narcissus*), showed at the Royal Academy exhibition of 1913, were "admirable in their subtlety of draughtsmanship and freshness of colour." The critical note is congruent with the painter's shift from academic realism to a decorative use of colour, in his paintings belonging to the last decade of the nineteenth century. Although Waterhouse's late paintings, covering the period between 1900 and 1917, are judged as less imaginative, the artist is, nonetheless, attributed the same technical excellenceof his earlier work.

The stage of conversion's substantiationin Waterhouse's *Miranda* seems to owe its dramatic charge to the antithetic encounter between the human element (Miranda, the ship in the distance) and the natural seascape, the painting appearing to exert upon the viewers a powerderiving from the revelation of the powerful and the powerless. The narrative element (which defines most of the Pre-Raphaelite art), involving the ship's wrecking and the woman's witnessing the storm, is present within the spatial and temporal cast of the picture, which, on the one hand, places the image in a broadly defined past, and, on the other one, constructs the space of the scene as a confrontation between the watery element enwrapping the ship and the firm land (with its cliffs and rocky shore), which, although no less threatening and uninviting, shelters Miranda.

Waterhouse's predilection for painting beautiful women is part of his being considered a Pre-Raphaelite painter; still, there are other features that account for his Pre-Raphaelitism, and *Miranda* may stand as a picture displaying affiliations to this nineteenth-century style. The character's translucentporcelainskin of her face and neck (which may be an expression of innocence), her red hair, the amount of details both in the foreground and the background of the image, the steadycolouring throughout the cast, his use of light and shadow, which, together with the heightened details, account for the realism of the scene, materialize

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Waterhouse's successful conversion of Shakespeare's source text into a Pre-Raphaelite target text.

***Ferdinand Lured by Ariel* (1850) by John Everett Millais**

Millais's painting, considered one of his early works made according to the *plein-air* Pre-Raphaelite style, carried out at Shotover Park, near Oxford, and testifying, as well, to the popularity of fairy painting in the nineteenth century, is inspired by Act 1, Scene 2 of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Prince Ferdinand, having escaped the tempest that wrecked the ship of his father, (Alonso, King of Naples) with the entire royal court, is washed ashore on a strange island, and, while wandering through the island, he believes he is the only survivor. Meanwhile, Prospero sends the air spirit Ariel to lure Ferdinand across the island, where he is going to meet his love-to-be, Prospero's daughter, Miranda:

"Where should this music be? i'th' air or th' earth?
It sounds no more: and, sure, it waits upon
Some god o'th'island. Sitting on a bank,
Weeping again the king my father's wreck,
This music crept by me upon the waters,
Allaying both their fury and my passion
With its sweet air: thence I have follow'd it.
Or it hath drawn me rather. But 'tis gone.
No, it begins again.
ARIEL *sings*.
Full fathom five thy father lies;
Of his bones are coral made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes:
Nothing of him that doth fade,
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.
Sea-nymphs hourly ring his knell…"

(Shakespeare: *The Tempest*, act I, scene 2: 1863)



2. John Everett Millais, *Ferdinand Lured by Ariel*, 1849-50, Makins Collection, United Kingdom

The artist submitted the picture to the Royal Academy, in May 1850, along with works by William Holman Hunt and James Collinson, all under The Pre-

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Raphaelite Brotherhood's auspices, and determined a negative reaction from the reviewers, who, seemed not responsive at all to the appeal of the new art.

A critic at the London *Times* (1850: 5) commented that: "The picture of Ariel and Ferdinand (504), by the same artist, is less offensive in point of subject and feeling, but scarcely more pardonable in style. We do not want to see Ariel and the spirits of the Enchanted Isle in the attitudes and shapes of green goblins, or the gallant Ferdinand twisted like a posture-master by Albert Durer. These are mere caprices of genius; but whilst we condemn them as deplorable examples of perverted taste, we are not insensible to the power they indicate over some of the most curious spells of art." and, according to *The Athenaeum*, "Great intuitive talents have here been perverted to the style of an eccentricity both lamentable and revolting. *Ferdinand Lured by Ariel* (504) by the same hand, though better in the painting, is yet more senseless in the conception: a scene built on the contrivances of the stage manager, but with very bad success." (1850: 590-91)

As for Millais, in a letter addressed to Holman Hunt (1984: 74), he refers to his painting manner by mentioning that "you will find it very minute, yet not near enough for nature. To paint it as it ought to be would take me a month a weed – as it is, I have done every blade of grass and leaf distinct." The reference reveals part of Millais's artistic enterprise as well as the 'struggle' to converse his reading of the literary source text into a visual target text.

The painting, initially commissioned by the art dealer William Wethered, had been preceded by two other versions: an 1848 pen and ink drawing and an oil sketch drawn out between 1849 and 1850. The 1850 oil painting is the one that displays the minute details and striking colours of the Pre-Raphaelite style. In order to have his character painted, Millais resorted to Frederic George Stephens (a Pre-Raphaelite himself), who posed for the figure, while the costume is considered to have had as a source Camille Bonnard's *Costumes Historiques*, representing the clothing of a fifteenth-century "young Italian".

As far as conversion, the second stage of the reversed ekphrastic process, is concerned, I consider that, in this particular case, it occurs through a reframingof the source text, owing to the fact that the painter converses the narrative of the source text into a target text that permits the relatively effortless identification of the literary source text. In other words, the source text, though reframed in terms of iconic signs, may be easily recognizable in the visual target text.

In order to substantiate the conversion and attribute pictoriality to the target text, Waterhouse represents Ferdinand as he hears the song of Ariel, (who, in the meantime, tips his hat from the head), but, although his sight seemingly focuses upon the enchanter, he is not able to see it. Ariel and the weird green bats, which are believed to had been the final addition to the painting, contrast with the corporeality of the human figure; they are ethereal beings, invisible to the human eye, appearing as extensions of the background landscape, and apparently connected with the earthly animal world (the green lizard, in the right corner bush, which seems to perceive the presence of the eerie entities).

It is interesting to observe that, in accordance with the Pre-Raphaelite technique of detail rendering, the painting appears to display more of the natural landscape than the viewer's eye is able to perceive. The spatial configuration, exhibiting a fracture between the distance objects are placed in and the extreme clarity of the details, turn the viewing of the image into a weird experience. The painter's rendering of such detailed natural scenery does not only represent an accurate materialization of the living nature, but, more important, seems to augment the viewer's perception of the natural element. This extreme, naturalistic setting forth of vegetal detail, almost claiming for the identification of each leaf or bush, acquires an even augmented strangeness, owing to the insertion of the supernatural beings (Ariel and the green bats).

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The colours employed for the landscape range within a varied palette of greens and browns contrasting with the red, black, and white costume of Ferdinand and, together with the almost flattened perspective (which also accounts for the rigorous detail of the foliage far behind Ferdinand), induce the viewer's sight to the human figure.

The new and significant approaches of the work of the Pre-Raphaelite artists provided by a series of art theorists and critics in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as well as the observation that, despite the various explanations, classifications, and important quantity of terms, a reversed ekphrastic process expresses, in fact, a relational development between a literary source text and a visual target text, the conclusion that the Pre-Raphaelite paintings inspired by Shakespeare's plays represent target visual texts drawn out through reversed ekphrastic processes can be substantiated.

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