

EKPHRASIS, A NARRATIVE TROMPE L'OEIL AND SOMETHING MORE

MÁRIO AVELAR

TRANSLATION BY SORAYA VASCONCELOS

At the outset of Jorge Semprún's novel, *The Second Death of Ramon Mercader*, the reader is met with a detailed account of an urban fabric. I say fabric, rather than space, because throughout this apparent wandering of the eye, close attention is given to textures, densities, shades of color, shadows and subtleties of light.

The viewpoint is that of any one masculine character, placed at a waterfront which reflects the veiled sunlight, whose dormant surface, acting almost as a mirror, seems to deny the depth below as well as the mysteries (and fears) that it encloses, as Herman Melville so well depicted in *Moby Dick, or the Whale*.

With a travelling movement, the eye drifts towards the grey waters of a canal and onto the boulders of a pier, whose textures speak of the constant stroking of water. From here, from these rocks, the eye resumes its narrative, almost cinematographic movement, rising to unveil the identity of the buildings that frame this very pier; they are figures in a scene as much as locations where actual transactions take place. Indeed, can we not consider the pier to be - ever since modernity - the ultimate sign of commercial trade and routes?

Not even stasis - that final moment which in tragedy precedes the climax's decisive confrontation -, deriving from the quietness of the docked boats, eludes the intense movement of people and merchandise that anticipated this moment of observation and will arise in the moments to follow. That is the inevitable: the dynamics of business on which the class we have come to call the bourgeoisie bases its activity. All this, and much more, crosses the line of sight and thought of the character contemplating the scene.

The narrator makes it clear that this gaze is just a point of view when he refers a *somewhat slanted perspective*. It is through this perspective that we proceed to unravel details such as the reflections of buildings in the water and, breaking the silence that prevailed up to then, the eventual sound of passersby — *the possible sound of voices*. Finally, the gaze falls upon two women close by, noting the textures of their clothing, speculating on the significance these may have in their daily routines.

The eye then zooms into a group further off, composed of two women and two men possibly discussing their trades and dealings in that microcosm. All four, men and women, would be experiencing stasis, awaiting the right moment to cross over to the other bank. Clouds of different shades of grey float in the sky, confirming the melancholic atmosphere; or so it seems to the character who witnesses the scene.

Until, somewhat unexpectedly for us readers, accustomed as we have become to assume that the gaze of the character stands for reality — his reality or the narrative reality, as it were —, *we are met with a declaration/statement: to the right, placed a little behind the visible characters, as if he himself were one last, invisible character in this painting, as if the painter - three centuries ago - had foreseen his arrival...* (Semprún 23)

This revelation calls into question our previous reading; that wasn't, after all, the description of the character's location - conceivably the protagonist of this story -, but a particular type of description, that of a painting. This was not one of those narrative categories we are used to consider - the description -, but rather an ekphrasis, or in other words, the description of a work of art, which in this case is a painting by Vermeer, *the View of Delft*.

Therefore, one must conclude that Jorge Semprún created a simulacrum, an illusion, a narrative *trompe l'oeil* that misguides the reader into confusing an ekphrasis - conducted by a character in the story - with the description of the physical setting in which this very character is placed. The slice of time chosen by Vermeer for his painting cuts into the flow of the story, thus introducing an ambiance that functions as a foreword to the ensuing plot.¹

¹ Carlos Fernandez Pérez reveals possible biographical impacts, namely those involving the exile of Semprún, in the essay "Painting and Memory in the Novels of Jorge Semprún".

Before returning to the concept that motivates this reading - that of the ekphrasis -, I must clarify another that underlies the expression used above: *slice of time*. This formulation can be traced back to a notion discussed in an essay that is key to the history of critical thought around the relation between word and image. This history has a fundamental chapter rooted in the platonic texts - in particular *The Republic* and *Cratylus* -, and the Horatian phrase *ut pictura poesis*, from *Arte Poética*, which will carry its weight for centuries, until it is deconstructed by Gotthold Lessing, in the eighteenth century, in *Laocoon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*.

Because it is not my intention to deal with that work here, I draw attention to what is of consequence to my reflections: the subtitle chosen by Lessing. It addresses that which in the author's opinion are the underlying strategies of painting and poetry. Painting and sculpture (photography will later fit into this category, while cinema, being the art of moving image, sabotages it) are characterized by representing a significant moment of a narrative. Let us remember that, up to a certain period, a rigid hierarchy of genres and subgenres, inherited from classicism, led to a standardization of the subject matter of paintings, provided by the primordial and noble repositories of mythology, the epics and the bible.

The isolation of an instant from its narrative flux – from a before and an after - was considered a decision of the utmost importance in modeling an event, a character or a heroic act. This is why Lessing considered painting and sculpture to be spatial arts - as this was the category that prevailed in them. Poetry, on the other hand (and epic poetry in particular, being the subgenre that, again by classic standards, was considered to be superior), was associated to a narrative becoming, and for this reason perceived as a temporal art.

Let us then return to *The Second Death of Ramon Mercader*. In opting to use what I termed a *trompe l'oeil* – which is no less than a simulacrum (some might consider this a post-modern strategy) in which an artwork is mixed up with the narrative – Jorge Semprún takes advantage of the potential of the spatial arts, of their means of activating and displaying an atmosphere.

The melancholy that is summoned through the account of the painting's details, seems to derive from an ordinary description (inasmuch as it is a narrative category related to the suspension of a becoming)

articulated by a character in the story. Although it is the nuanced portrayal of objects and/or characters inhabiting that space in Delft that can be deemed melancholic, in fact the reader is led to confuse Vermeer's melancholy with that of the character in the story by Ramon Semprún.

The mismatch between representation and object, between a painting and an everyday scene, mostly derives from Semprún's skillful use of the virtues of ekphrasis, namely *enargeia*, i.e., a particularly vivid description that uses words to bring an object to life, before the eyes of the reader.

When delving back in search of the roots of ekphrasis, one realizes the emphasis contained straight off in its etymological origins: the confluence of *ek*, meaning "to the end", and *phrazô*, "to point out or explain" (Avelar 40, Maurison, 180). But also, early examples of ekphrasis come to mind, such as Pliny the Elder's celebration of works by the classic greek painters Apeles and Zeûxis.

Still, the first known occurrence of ekphrasis dates further back, in book 18 (478-608) of Homer's *Iliad*, when Achilles is about to enter combat to avenge the death of his friend Patroclus at the hands of Hector. Tethys, his mother, wishing to protect him from an outcome the oracle had predicted would occur following Hector's death, asks Hephaestus to forge the weapons for the hero. The scene bears witness to the interference of the divine sphere in human matters.

Regardless of its role in the narrative, this moment can be understood in somewhat archaeological terms, given the allusion to social, cultural and historical memory. Maria Helena da Rocha Pereira refers "the way Hephaestus forges Aquilles' shield, as if it were made of steel, in a proto-geometric or geometric style, and yet applying gold, silver and bronze inlays in the Mycenaean manner" (66). Further on, the reputed classicist highlights geographic and astronomical aspects - the plains, surrounded by the river Ocean, the Sun, the Moon and primary constellations; and the detailed anthropological settings - the peaceful city and its festivities, the description of a trial, the city in times of war, the rural quotidian (plowing, harvesting, grazing). She emphasizes: "Note the presence of music, both in daily work and on festive occasions, and the absence of navigation or fishing, which we interpret as [...] evidence that maritime activities as of yet could not compete with agriculture." (idem: 80-81)

We are set in front of a fresco that reveals itself to the eyes of its addressee (Tethys) and its reader; and yet this gaze occurs in discourse only, as the shield is not prior to the text nor does it exist beyond it. In fact, it only *exists* in the text. Clearly, this is an imaginary ekphrasis, which Anglo-Saxon critique refers to as *notional ekphrasis*. And yet its imaginary condition does not make it less of a synopsis of cultural and social behaviour, broadly speaking a quasi-anthropologic testimony of an epoch (Avelar 42-43).

In the literary domain, the merits of ekphrasis justify it being considered a pedagogical device. Unsurprisingly, it is referred to for the first time in the study of Rhetoric assigned to Dionysius of Halicarnassus (Rhetoric, 10:17), although only much later, in the early Christian era, is it mentioned, by Hélio Teão, specifically in the context of pedagogy. Descriptions of people, actions, places, seasons and festivals are among the topics selected by Teão to typify the uses of ekphrasis. In turn, Hermogenes, the Greek architect of the temples in honor of Dionysius and Artemis Leukophryene — respectively in Teos and Magnesia — dedicated himself during his youth to composing works on rhetoric, having even abandoned the art that, according to Vitruvius, immortalized him. Instructions concerning the construction of ekphrasis are specified in *Progymnasmata*, attributed to Hermogenes. Clarity (*spaheneia*) stands out, alongside vivacity.

Clarity (*spaheneia*) stands out, alongside vivacity. The eminently practical nature of Priscian's work and his profound pedagogical vocation in the field of Latin and textual hermeneutics, show the emphasis given to ekphrasis and, therefore, to the interaction between a written text and an artifact. Thus, ekphrasis stands out as a peculiar instance of intertextual dialogue that treats the visual sign as territory for word-based interpellation, and should not be confused with the figure of hypotyposis, which consists in the description of a non-visual sign or set of signs.

Later, in the modern *salon* of the 19th century, ekphrasis will be applied to a new kind of discourse, that of art criticism. To make the object of his analysis known to the reader, the critic makes use of ekphrasis in his texts, focusing on the various aspects that make that object unique. Besides the more obvious, indicative elements, such as the title of a work, there is an entire visual and technical lexicon that the critic aims to translate into words with vivacity (again, with *enargeia*). Referring to this subject, Charlotte Maurisson

considers: “[the ekphrasis] is at once a description and an autonomous discourse, that reflects upon a work of art. So it is a discourse that is descriptive as much as it is prescriptive.” (183)

In fact, this moment anticipates another, in which ekphrasis becomes a common figure in modern novelistic narrative and begins to be employed as simulacrum; that very simulacrum that dominates post-modernity. And yet, before wandering into these terrains that are closest to us, such as Jorge Semprún’s, I must point out an inevitable precursor: Marcel Proust. Indeed, the monumental work of Proust is constantly calling upon pictorial discourse, so I will just point out two cases that demonstrate two distinctive functions of ekphrasis.

In *Du côté de chez Swann*, a certain secondary character is described by way of a reference to Giotto’s Charity. This ushers in a series of topics arising from the works of the Italian painter. In this case what prevails is the evocative power of painting, which contributes to thicken the narrative. Another example, that demonstrates a second function, is to be found in the fictional character of the painter Elstir, presumably modelled on J.W. Turner (Rodriguez 2). In this case, the ekphrasis is obviously imaginary (the aforementioned notional ekphrasis), therefore confirming the presence of painting as textual simulacrum. If, on the one hand, this presence suggests a *trompe l’oeil*; on the other, an imaginary painter – creator of imaginary paintings –, allows the writer to develop an entire aesthetics, the aesthetics of Marcel Proust. It is therefore in a space that flows with narrative intentions – among which count the simulacrum, the evidence of fictionality -, aesthetic evocations and stylistic possibilities, that this device, that the discipline of Rhetoric explored during classic antiquity, is still thriving today, whether unsettling a less attentive reader or activating new paths of meaning.

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