

Ekphrasis and Intersemiotic Transposition: Literature, Visual Arts, and Culture

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This article analyses the inter-semiotic transposition of two poems from the Anglo-American poetic tradition (the poems "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" by W. C. Williams and "Musée des Beaux Arts" by W. H. Auden) and three poems that are representative of contemporary Macedonian poetry ("A Visit to a Museum" by Blaže Koneski, "The Soldiers of Xi'an" by Petre M. Andreevski, and "St. Tryphon, Nerezi" by Vlada Urošević). It proposes an analysis of the process of ekphrasis (description of visual works of art) from two aspects: 1) as a kind of "translation/transposition" of the image into text, and 2) as a form of intercultural communication through the act of commenting on a painting.

Keywords: literature and visual arts / intersemiotic relations / intercultural communication / transposition / ekphrasis / palimpsest / American poetry / Williams, William Carlos / Auden, Wystan Hugh / Macedonian poetry / Koneski, Blaže / Andreevski, Petre M. / Urošević, Vlada

Since its earliest days as an academic discipline, comparative literature has kept reminding researchers that translation is indispensable to the achievement of communication, dialogue, and exchange between different cultures and literatures. Furthermore, in the complex processes of intercultural communication, apart from inter-linguistic translation, an important role is also played by inter-semiotic translation or transposition. In this context, describing a painting from a different era or country often requires thematizing the features of the specific cultural or artistic context in which this work of art was created. On the other hand, those describing the visual work of art attempt to offer their own interpretation of the painting, all the while establishing a personal relationship with a personal creation. Thus, I propose an analysis of the process of ekphrasis (the verbal description of visual works of art) from two aspects: 1) as a kind of translation of the image into text, and 2) as

a form of intercultural communication through the act of commenting on a painting.

Among the many attempts to precisely classify the inter-artistic products that are the basis of my research, I have selected Leo Hoek's classification, based on two criteria: 1) the production criterion (according to which one could distinguish between primacy of image or primacy of text) and 2) the reception criterion, which implies a simultaneity of image and text. According to these criteria, Hoek distinguishes four types of discourses resulting from the text-image relations: transmedial, multimedial, mixed, and syncretic:

Text/image:	Transmedial relation	Multimedial discourse	Mixed discourse	Syncretic discourse
Distinctiveness	+	+	+	–
Self-sufficiency	+	+	–	–
Polytextuality	+	–	–	–
Interrelation	transposition	juxtaposition	combination	fusion
Examples	ekphrasis, art criticism, photo-novel	emblem, illustration, title	poster, comic, advertisement	typography, calligram, visual poetry

Table 1: Types of intersemiotic relations according to Leo Hoek (74)

From a semiotic perspective, the verbal description of images is a typical example of a transposition of symbolic signs from one semiotic system to another. Some researchers characterize ekphrasis as a phenomenon that is close and analogous to the art of illustration: just as an illustration should transform (i.e., transpose) the verbal (literary) text into a visual text (painting), so could literary description be treated as a sort of transposition of visual information into a linguistic message (literary text). In this view, Hoek studies ekphrasis as one of the main forms of intersemiotic transposition, whereby one aesthetic expression transforms into another (Hoek 66). In fact, if one doubts for a minute that the visual text (work of art) has the capacity to transpose verbal (literary) messages into visual, iconic information, it seems that one of the most famous works of art by the Flemish master Pieter Bruegel (1525–1569), the painting *Flemish Proverbs* (1559), is convincing proof of precisely that. No less than 118 Flemish proverbs are transposed, painted, and also “recognized” (or, more precisely, “read”) on Bruegel's canvas.

It is exactly through the criterion of successiveness from the perspective of aesthetic production that Hoek explains not only the analogy but

also the basic difference between ekphrasis and illustration through the lens of intersemiotic transposition: “Starting from a perspective of production in the text/picture relation, a question arises whether the text precedes the picture (as is the case with the illustration) or the opposite occurs (as is the case with ekphrasis)” (66). In this context, making an analogy between ekphrasis and illustration, Claus Clüver describes the basic feature of ekphrastic communication through the lens of intersemiotic transposition: “in the literary genre that mostly resembles illustration in books, Bildgedicht or ekphrastic poem, the reader is similarly invited to explore the relation between a poem and an assumed pre-existing visual work it evokes. If we find related matching, we might decide to read the text as a translation from the visual text” (57).

William Carlos Williams, “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus”: The “Almost Unnoticed” Fall

Having in mind poetic ekphrasis as a specific sign practice and strategy of literary representation, I propose a comparative analysis of several paradigmatic ekphrastic texts from the American and Macedonian poetic traditions. One of the most prominent proofs in American literature that poetry might be based on intersemiotic transposition of works of fine art is the collection *Pictures from Brueghel* (1962) by William Carlos Williams. In the final two decades of his life, Williams wrote several poems regarding the opus of the Flemish master Brueghel, such as “The Dance” (1942), a longer poetic passage on the subject of “Adoration of the Three Wise Men” in *Paterson V* (1958), as well as some dozen poems first published in *The Hudson Review* in 1960 and then in his final poetic collection *Pictures from Brueghel* (1962), which were posthumously awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1963.

The title of the book (*Pictures from Brueghel*) implicitly recalls both the heritage of the Imagist poetic approach and the idea that poems “based on” the most renowned works of the Flemish master are also implicitly “pictures.” On the other hand, it further proves that the poetic images are a verbal translation or transposition of the “visual texts.” It is interesting to note that on the basis of Bruegel’s *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (c. 1558) there have been, in the twentieth century alone, over forty different poetic texts describing or “transposing” this sixteenth-century artwork in many different manners.

Two of Williams’ poems are dedicated to the subject of the fall: “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus” and “The Parable of the Blind,” in-

spired by Bruegel's paintings of the same name, the former dated circa 1558 and the latter 1568. When discussing *ekphrasis* as an inter-semiotic translation, it is important to stress that both of Bruegel's canvases are themselves "visual transcriptions" of literary subjects, the first of the myth of Daedalus and Icarus, recounted by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses* (Book VIII), and the second a visual interpretation of the Biblical parable of the blind (Matthew 15:14). In fact, with the opening line "According to Brueghel," the poet stresses his awareness that the painter offers his own interpretation of the myth of the fall of Icarus, which is the only motif from ancient mythology in Bruegel's opus:

According to Brueghel
when Icarus fell
it was spring

a farmer was ploughing
his field
the whole pageantry

of the year was
awake tingling
near

the edge of the sea
concerned
with itself

sweating in the sun
that melted
the wings' wax

unsignificantly
off the coast
there was

a splash quite unnoticed
this was
Icarus drowning

With the first verse, the poet demonstrates not only the interpretive dimension of his poem, but also shows that both on the canvas and in his poem the emphasis is placed on the landscape rather than on Icarus' tragic fall. Thus the poet, in fact, quite consistently captures the atmosphere and Bruegel's landscape in minute detail. It is evident that, in almost all the poems of his ekphrastic cycle, Williams first locates the season in order

to relate it to the landscape and to what the people are doing (“a farmer was ploughing / his field”). Hence, from the order of the description in the process of “translating” the picture into poetic text, one might note that Williams stresses that the landscape is in the foreground, and not the mythical hero’s tragic death! Analogously to Bruegel’s canvas, in which a small part of Icarus’ body is depicted (his left leg and part of the right one), Williams also devotes only the last verses of the poem to the fall of Icarus and his subsequent drowning: “this was / Icarus drowning.”

In this context, I would like to emphasize the role of the painting’s title in the complex process of intersemiotic transposition. In his study *Words in Painting* (*Les Mots dans la peinture*, 1969), the French novelist Michel Butor warns that Icarus’ fall might go “almost unnoticed” (23) by the viewer, as indicated by Williams in the poem as well, and stresses that the spectator needs to read the full title of the painting, *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, so as not to fail to even notice Icarus, as suggested by Williams’ verses. Furthermore, Wendy Steiner finds that Bruegel’s piece is full of formal and semantic problems that the poet wishes to address. In fact, by transposing or translating the visual signals, the poet decides to remind the viewer or reader of what can be seen in the lower right corner: “this was / Icarus drowning.” In this context, Claus Clüver tends to draw a parallel between the typographic arrangement of the vertical column and the subject of the fall: “The sentence is inevitably read as falling down the poem . . . which had a double temporal dimension: it shows the lasting of the fall and stresses its simultaneity with the other activities . . . Williams’ poem descends from ‘when Icarus fell’ to ‘Icarus drowning’” (Clüver 74–75).

What is particularly important in the process of transposing the details from Bruegel’s painting into poetic text is that, like in the other poems of the cycle, Williams suggests to the readers a particular order of “reading the painting,” guiding them to the most relevant detail that portrays the last stage of the mythical hero’s fall. Hence, the reading of Bruegel’s *Landscape* ends with the fall of Icarus. In fact, reading the poem offers another way not merely of observing, but also of interpreting the painting.

W. H. Auden, “Musée des Beaux Arts”: The “Human Position” of Suffering

The opening verses of one of Auden’s most renowned poems (*Musée des Beaux Arts*), related to the same work by Breughel, can be interpreted not only as paying homage to the Old Masters but also as a poetic meditation on the “human position” of suffering:

About suffering they were never wrong,
The old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position: how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;
How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
For the miraculous birth, there always must be
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
On a pond at the edge of the wood:
They never forgot
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

The paintings to which Auden merely alludes in his poem are Breughel's works as well (*The Census in Bethlehem*, 1566 and *The Slaughter of the Innocents*, c. 1564). Yet, one can only be certain that Breughel's painting *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* serves as the "key image," as the key visual sign, an illustration, a sort of visual "paradigm" for the Old Master's wisdom concerning the "human position" of suffering:

In Breughel's *Icarus*, for instance: how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water, and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

Thus, it is more than obvious that, in the process of intersemiotic transposition, the poet is referring to the painting thanks to its title. According to James Heffernan, "[n]either we nor Auden himself could see a drowning Icarus in this painting without the words of its title, *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, which in the poem becomes simply 'Breughel's *Icarus*'" (149).

Blaže Koneski, "A Visit to a Museum": Reading Ekphrasis In-Between Words and Images

In 2006 I had the honor of preparing a thematic selection of contemporary Macedonian poetry for the Struga Poetry Evenings Festival, titled *Ut Pictura Poesis—Poetry in Dialogue with Plastic Arts*. On this occasion, as the

starting point of my discussion dedicated to ekphrasis as a product of intersemiotic transposition in contemporary Macedonian poetry, I selected “A Visit to a Museum,”¹ a short poem by Blaže Koneski (1921–1993):

Their arms touched each other
in silent excitement
at the entrance to the small hall.
They sat together, closely, on the bench.
They had no need to talk about their life –
they just stared at Claude Monet’s *Red Water Lilies*,
and behind them, in silence, Picasso’s *Guernica*.

This poem might be read as a simple poetic testimony of an ordinary event in one of the great museums, but also as a metaphor of the dialogue between the visual and the verbal, between plastic arts and literature. From the viewpoint of the spatial arrangement, it is indicative that the protagonists are in between two representative works of fine art. On the other hand, the reader of this text, visiting this small poetic museum, is confronted with the titles of the two paintings in the two final verses. In his book *Museum of Words*, James Heffernan reminds one that “the ekphrastic poetry of our time ... represents works of art within the context of a museum, which of course, includes words that surround the pictures we see, beginning with picture titles” (97).

Certainly, even this poem—in which the works of art are merely named, not described—clearly shows that the creation of the meaning of the text is impossible (or incomplete) unless the reader is familiar with the paintings in question! In fact, from the (inter)semiotic perspective, it does make a difference which two paintings the museum visitors are located between. It is indicative that the description, even the very mention of the paintings in a literary context, must represent a sort of in-between experience for the reader. In order to achieve the effect of the poem, the readers need to project the paintings in question onto their mental screen. Moreover, the readers should—at least for a minute—find themselves in-between these works of art. In other words, when dealing with the poem “A Visit to a Museum,” the reader requires knowledge of the works of art as a precondition to understanding the poem.

Only a reader that had previously viewed Monet’s and Picasso’s paintings could read the narratives of the poem’s protagonists. “They had no need to talk about their life” because that role is played by the paintings that they find themselves between. In this poem the paintings (or,

¹ The Macedonian poems (by Blaže Koneski, Petre M. Andreevski, and Vlada Urošević) were translated into English by Zoran Ančevski.

even more precisely, the titles of the paintings) should replace words. Meanwhile one must not forget that through the mediation of words the reader is offered the opportunity to recollect the works of art. The experience of ekphrasis is an “experience of two representations in two different media simultaneously” (Benton 375). Through the poetic text, the reader learns which work of art they are regarding (the idyllic landscape), and which painting is behind their backs (the most famous painting about the horrors of war). Hence the question: could the reader understand and interpret the poetic text without the semantic potential of the visual texts (Claude Monet’s *Water Lilies* and Picasso’s *Guernica*)? Michael Benton offers an answer: “Being a spectator involves reading the relationship between two arts, the visual and the verbal ... The ekphrastic spectator is engaged in a more complex and varied activity than the viewer of a picture or the reader of an ‘unattached’ poem ... The ekphrastic spectator is one that contemplates a painting or a sculpture through the eyes of a poet, aware ... that the visual work so represented remains, essentially a poetic fiction” (367–368, 370).

Petre M. Andreevski, “The Soldiers of Xi’an”: Ekphrasis and Intercultural Communication

The poem *The Soldiers of Xi’an* by the Macedonian poet Petre M. Andreevski (1934–2006) is an illustrative example of the fact that the ekphrastic text in the process of intersemiotic transposition frequently plays certain roles in intercultural communication. Namely, it is indicative that Andreevski’s poem is accompanied by a footnote that the poet enclosed in order to inform the reader about the work of art that the verses in the poem refer to:

The emperor Qin Shi Huang (the first of the Qin dynasty) had a necropolis built during his reign (221–206 BC) in which some 10,000 terracotta warriors were placed in order to escort and protect the emperor in his afterlife. The artistic mastery in the making of these figures is highly impressive: life-size, they are placed in strategic formations and each head has individual facial characteristics expressing readiness for combat. (Andreevski 9)

An ekphrastic poem may certainly be published without this explanation by the author as well, but, in addition to the essential information on the time and place of creation of a great army of sculptures, the poet also offers information on the context of the creation of the sculptures, as well as their function in the tomb of Chinese Emperor Qin Shi Huang. In the

accompanying note, the poet Andreevski also highlights the readiness of the warriors to fight for their ruler, which is certainly an important piece of information for the reception of the poem:

The cavalry stopped,
the infantry stopped,
ready to die
for their dead king.

Two thousand years
stopped and don't grow old,
two thousand years
always awake.

Speechless the soldiers,
mute the horses,
only silence is heard.

Still there they guard
their king's death.

When referring to warriors of Xi'an, the poet highlights the temporal distance from the creation of the sculptures (over “two thousand years”), thus offering a reminder that to this day sculptures have had the same function as in the time of their creation. Hence, the meaning of the ekphrastic poetry is deeply linked to the understanding of the cultural context in which the sculptures were created.

Vlada Urošević, “St. Tryphon, Nerezi”: Ekphrasis as a Palimpsest of Cultures

Referring to the works of art created in various historical periods and cultural contexts implies a dialogue with cultural memory. In contemporary Macedonian poetry, there are a great number of poems in which poets establish a dialogue with medieval fresco paintings. One could single out a particularly interesting example—the poem “St. Tryphon, Nerezi” by Vlada Urošević (1934), inspired by the twelfth-century frescos at the St. Panteleimon Monastery in Nerezi.

The poem “St. Tryphon” by Mateja Matevski, published in the poetry collection *Linden* (1980), and the poem “St. Tryphon, Nerezi” by Vlada Urošević, published in poetry volume *Mane, Tekel, Phares* (2001), are not only connected by the same intermedial hypotext signaled in the title of

the poems. One may also conclude that there are several metatextual relations between them. Urošević's poem has several sources: the fresco from the monastery in Nerezi, the poem by Matevski, but also the ekphrastic tradition related to the medieval painting and frescos from the St. Panteleimon Monastery.

Certainly, the poem is exceptionally illustrative of the palimpsest nature of ekphrasis if studied precisely as a poetic commentary as well as an interpretation of those previous texts (i.e., through the lens of its metatextual dimension): the key question that they strive to provide some kind of answer to is the question of the model of iconographic presentation of the saint painted. In this context, it is relevant to note that Matevski's poem is divided into two parts precisely on the basis of the focalization of the lyrical subject. In the first part, the painted character speaks, from a position of somebody that is inside—in the fresco. It is particularly significant that, in the first part of Matevski's poetic text, the intermedial communication is thematized, whereby the lyrical subject (the character painted) addresses those that are looking at the fresco and reading the ekphrastic text at the same time. In short, Matevski's poem implies the following questions: Who, in fact, is behind the character of the fresco painted? Who is the model? What is his identity? These questions are essential to the interpretation of this subject matter in Urošević's poem.

The impression from Matevski's lines is that the poet identifies the model of the painted saint with a boy whose character was captured by the fresco plaster, and who, according to the text, shows particular affinity for nature and wine, thus making a semantic connection between the saint and viticulture. In fact, the painted character in Matevski's poem demands to be freed from the fixed form of the work of art, lamenting that he is the only boy in the fresco. After changing the position of the lyrical subject and the perspective, in the second part of the poem the poet addresses the painted saint. Comforting the painted saint that, thanks to the fresco, he remained "young forever," the poet highlights in a hymnic pathos that he is a paradigm for posterity for the strength of artistic creation.

One way of reading "St. Tryphon, Nerezi" by Urošević could be to treat the poetic text as a (re)interpretation and certain (pre)creation concerning the issue of who is hiding behind the painted saint on the fresco. In it I see a new interpretation, a brand new reading concerning the iconographic presentation of the saint, whose cult in the calendar corresponds with pruning the vine. Namely, if Matevski finds the prototype (model) of the painted St. Tryphon in local colors, making comparisons between the painted saint and the young boy from the village of Nerezi near Skopje, then in Urošević's poem the iconographic roots are sought in ancient civi-

lization. Therefore, from an ekphrastic perspective, the poem by Urošević manifests an obvious paradox: the lyrical subject addressing the fresco from the medieval monastery does not describe what he sees immediately (remnants from the twelfth century fresco), but, by making allusions, actualizes once again and evokes (through memory) several known artistic representations of the ancient god of wine, Dionysus:

You have seen and touched everything, you have tasted it all
you have traveled a long way
before coming to us
you have died and been born many times
In one form you planted vineyards by the Nile
in another you crossed the Indus

The lines from the poem suggest that the current painting on the fresco is but another metamorphosis of the artistic presentation of the pagan god of wine. The lyrical subject looks at the fresco with the posture of an archaeologist and an art historian and tries to identify older layers in the iconographic presentation of St. Tryphon as well. In fact, the lyrical subject recognizes a cultural hero in the character from the fresco that “traveled a long way / before coming to us.” Even though several elements of the Dionysian myths are present in the poem, still it is precisely an ancient work of art that can help identify this deity. Namely, I believe that the lines “in sea as thick as wine / you ordered the grapes to ripen on the mast” could be read as an allusion to the famous painting *Dionysus Sailing among the Dolphins* painted on an ancient vase (c. 525 BC), kept at the Munich Museum. As is the case with the myth of the metamorphosis of Dionysus, the emphasis in the poem is placed on a similar process of metamorphosis in artistic representation:

Your image has travelled long
from Fayoum to Pompeii
from the Greek vases to this church
but you never grow old
You have seen and touched everything, you have tasted it all
I know you are not from here
you have come from afar and have yet far to go.

Actually, the lyrical subject treats the painting of the patron of viticulture as one of the many artistic manifestations or appearances of the god of wine.

Conclusion

Studying and comparing these few examples in which a dialogue is established between poetry and painting, it can be concluded that, in the attempt to transform the paintings in a poetic text, poets are inevitably put in a situation to make a choice of which visual information is to be transposed into poetic discourse. In that process, the semantics of the ekphrastic poetic text is inseparable from—even incomplete without—the connection with the work of art that is the subject of literary description.

In ekphrastic communication, memory plays a central role. Not only are ekphrastic texts a type of archiving individual experiences and interpretations of works of art, but also the visualization of poetic images is inseparable from the process of memorizing works of art. Hence, the reader of ekphrasis is put in a very complex (inter)semiotic position, comparing the experiences from his own reception of the work of art and the poetic text referring to the work.

The examples presented illustrate the fact that one of the major features of poetic ekphrasis is exactly the wide range of possibilities for describing works of art, thanks to various positions, perspectives, and roles of the lyrical subject in the poetic text. Poetic ekphrasis is a very complex semiotic, hermeneutic, aesthetic, and intertextual phenomenon. Intersemiotic transposition does not only mean a transfer of information from one semiotic sphere to another (from visual to verbal) but it very often implies the reader facing various subjective readings and interpretations of the works of art.

The poem always depends on the role of the viewer that the reader receives, connecting the words of the poem with the work of art (i.e., a painting or sculpture) to which they refer. Therefore, a work of art could be treated as a “visual catalyst” of the poem, whereas the poem can be seen as an opportunity—thanks to the art of language—to see the visual (art)work in a new way.

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Ekphrasis in intersemiotična transpozicija: književnost, likovne umetnosti, kultura

Ključne besede: literatura in likovna umetnost / intersemiotičnost / medkulturno sporazumevanje / transpozicija / ekfrazna / palimpsest / ameriška poezija / Williams, William Carlos / Auden, Wystan Hugh / makedonska poezija / Konevski, Blaže / Andreevski, Petre M. / Urošević, Vlada

Primerjalna književnost kot akademska disciplina nas že od svojih začetkov nenehno opominja, da je prevajanje neogibno potrebno za sporazumevanje, dialog in izmenjavo med različnimi kulturami in književnostmi. V kompleksnem procesu medkulturnega sporazumevanja je poleg jezikovnega prevajanja odigralo pomembno vlogo tudi intersemiotično prevajanje oziroma transpozicija. Opis določene slike, ki pripada neki drugi deželi ali obdobju, pogosto zahteva tematizacijo lastnosti značilnega kulturnega ali umetniškega okolja, v katerem je bilo

umetniško delo ustvarjeno. Obenem pa si oseba, ki to delo opisuje, prizadeva ponuditi svojo lastno interpretacijo slike, medtem ko vseskozi ustvarja osebno razmerje z osebno stvaritvijo. V članku skušamo torej analizirati proces ekfrazе (opis vizualnih umetniških del) z dveh zornih kotov. Najprej kot neke vrste »prevod oziroma transpozicijo« podobe v besedilo; potem kot obliko medkulturnega sporazumevanja s komentiranjem slike. S semiotične in medkulturne perspektive se lotevamo primerjalne analize intersemiotičnega renosa oziroma transpozicije dveh pesmi iz anglo-saksonske pesniške tradicije (»Pokrajina z Ikarjevim padcem« Williama Carlosa Williamsa, »Musée des Beaux Arts« Wystana Hughha Audena) in treh pesmi, ki so del sodobne makedonske poezije (»Obisk muzeja« Blažeta Koneskega, »Vojaki Šijana« Petreta M. Andreevskega in »Sv. Trifon, Nerezi« Vlade Uroševića). Predstavljeni primeri ponazarjajo dejstvo, da je ena izmed poglavitnih lastnosti pesniške ekfrazе široka paleta možnosti opisovanja umetniških del, zahvaljujoč različnim stališčem, perspektivam in vlogam lirskega subjekta v pesniškem besedilu. Pesniška ekfrazа je zelo kompleksen semiotični, estetski in medbesedilni fenomen.