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## THE MANIFESTATION OF INTERNAL CONFLICT BY MEANS OF EKPHRASIS IN JOHN BANVILLE'S *THE SEA*

*This article explores the function of ekphrasis in *The Sea* by John Banville. It offers an analysis of the actual ekphrasis, introduced by Bonnard's painting *Nu dans le bain au petit chien*, and the notional ekphrasis, provided by the photographs of incurable patients, symbolic of death. Showing that the knowledge of art allows the novel's protagonist to fit the visual images to his own circumstances in order to come to terms with the loss of his wife, the article concludes that ekphrasis also functions to decode his deep internal conflict.*

**Key words:** actual and notional ekphrases, trauma, internal conflict, John Banville.

From the very first pages of John Banville's *The Sea*, the reader is likely to observe the novel's distinctive style, characterized by its numerous references to artworks, names of ancient deities and mythological places, and the scenes transition time, in which past and present are blurred, and which, at first impression, may kindle a feeling of disconnectedness. However, as the story unfolds, this seeming disconnectedness activates multidirectional lines of meaning between image and word, and in fact, leads to a better understanding of the verbal picture created by the author. Just as an artist uses different colours and shades producing a canvas, so Banville utilizes various techniques, the most prominent of which is ekphrasis – a device that exposes the 'intersection of verbal and visual'<sup>1</sup>. Exploring the nature of ekphrasis, Ruth Webb traces the idea of 'placing before eyes'<sup>2</sup> back to the ancient times, and recommends adherence to Theon's definition of ekphrasis as 'a descriptive <...> speech which brings (literally 'leads') the thing shown vividly (enaregos) before the eyes'<sup>3</sup>. Although the history and evolution of ekphrasis generated a significant amount of debate on the conflict between word and image in the past, one of the most well-known sources of which is probably G. E. Lessing's *Laocoon* (1766), *The Sea* is rid of such. Instead, both words and images appear to be united in creating multiple layers of meaning in the novel.

Banville emphasizes the importance of the visual aspect of his works: «For me, in a number of books, painting was a scaffolding <...>. For me, art is always the world itself, the description of the world, the description of the surface of the world <...>. Painting is the supreme art of the surface, and, as Nietzsche says, in the surface is where the depth is, and I believe that»<sup>4</sup>. Indeed, bringing to the surface analogies between visual images and the protagonist's circumstances, the pictorial ekphrasis in *The Sea* enables the reader to notice what lies beneath the surface, and explore the depth of the protagonist's feelings. A connection with art is identifiable from the main character's occupation. It is not incidental that Morden is an art historian, as such an arrangement justifies the incorporation of ekphrasis within his life story. Bonnard's biography is well known to Morden and his works are admired by him; therefore, it is not surprising that in time of distress, Morden turns to the source that is omnipresent in his life, particularly as he sees similarities between himself and the French painter. Quintilian's remark about familiar things being 'most apt to lodge themselves in the mind'<sup>5</sup> from his discussion of ekphrasis adds to an understanding of Morden's recourse to *Nu dans le bain au petit chien*.

The accurate descriptions of Bonnard's paintings and a detailed account of his personal relationship with his wife reveal the author's concern with the reader's knowledge of the painter's life and works. This gives an impression that the reader's reception of Morden's trauma is steered by the author, in a way. Perhaps Banville expects the reader to become familiar with Bonnard to make sure that the novel's ekphrasis creates the intended impact. Such an assumption brings to mind Webb's indication of authors' ability to predict their reader's response, which becomes immediate, and 'practically unconscious'<sup>6</sup>. If built up on the reader's 'cultural competence'<sup>7</sup>. Hence, cultural competence of

<sup>1</sup> Ryan Welsh, 'Ekphrasis' in *Theories of Media* [Electronic resource], *The University of Chicago*, <<http://csmt.uchicago.edu/glossary2004/ekphrasis.htm>> [accessed 22 April 2014].

<sup>2</sup> Ruth Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice* (England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2009), p. 51.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> John Kenny, 'Well Said Well Seen: The Pictorial Paradigm in John Banville's Fiction' [Electronic resource], *Irish University Review*, Vol. 36, No. 1, pp. 52–67 <[http://www.jstor.org/remote.library.dcu.ie/stable/25517292](http://www.jstor.org/remote/library.dcu.ie/stable/25517292)> [accessed 29 March 2014], p. 53.

<sup>5</sup> Webb, op. cit., p. 110.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, pp. 110–111.

Banville's reader is significant for the fully successful process of decoding Morden's feelings.

Morden is working on a monograph of Bonnard, whom he considers a 'very great'<sup>8</sup> painter, and numerous parallels are drawn between him and Bonnard throughout the novel: «When I consider my face in the glass like this I think, naturally, of those last studies Bonnard made of himself in the bathroom mirror at Le Bosquet towards the end of the war after his wife had died – critics call these portraits pitiless...» (130). As the story unfolds, the portrayal of Morden's and Bonnard's physical resemblance prepares grounds for the examination of more significant issues, and allows a connection to be made between their wives. Before Morden's wife Anna dies of cancer, she acquires the habit of taking 'extended baths' (153) – an important thread leading to the French painter's wife Marthe, who also used to spend long hours in the bath: «... she lies there, pink and mauve and gold, a goddess of the floating world, attenuated, ageless, as much dead as alive <...>. The narrow room that is her refuge vibrates around her, throbbing in its colours. Her feet, the left one tensed at the end of its impossibly long leg, seem to have pushed the bath out of shape and made it bulge at the left end, and beneath the bath on that side, in the same force-field, the floor is pulled out of alignment too, and seems on the point of pouring away into the corner, not like a floor at all but a moving pool of dappled water. All moves here, moves in stillness in aqueous silence. One hears a drip, a ripple, a fluttering sigh» (152).

The description of the bathing scene from *Nu dans le bain au petit chien* can be related to both Marthe and Anna; and its lifelike quality brings to mind the ekphrastic technique of enargeia, employed to describe 'a vivid, visual presence' of an event and 'all the emotions that attend its perception before the reader's eyes'<sup>9</sup>. The register is germane to this purpose: 'floating', 'vibrates', 'throbbing', 'pushed out', 'bulge', 'pouring', 'moving', 'a drip', 'a ripple', and 'fluttering' give the scene 'an illusion of life'<sup>10</sup>. Due to the faculty of enargeia, the image from the canvas acquires almost a physical presence, as if transcending the frame of

the painting and settling in Morden's current situation, thus setting in motion his traumatic perception of loss.

Equally important, enargeia is brought out by the narrative's spatial digression that 'stops narrative flow' and 'frustrates the fictional time'<sup>11</sup>, which is observed as the chronology of events in the novel is disregarded. Such a technique underpins the interdependence of word and image and allows present and past to run simultaneously, as if 'locking time within space'<sup>12</sup>. In doing so, the painting not only transforms itself into Morden's situation, providing a sensuous understanding of his trauma, but also activates the decoding of other layers of meaning, which unveils the context of his internal conflict. With sadness, Morden admits that without Anna, their house becomes 'hollow' and 'a vast echo chamber' (146), and these words reveal the doom of his utmost loneliness. It is probably only after her death that he realizes that Anna was his inspiration, just as Marthe was Bonnard's, and therefore, Morden's sudden outburst of anger, marked by an unexpectedly obnoxious register, may seem startling to the reader: «You cunt, you fucking cunt, how could you go and leave me like this, floundering in my own foulness, with no one to save me from myself. *How could you*» (196). These lines express the protagonist's cry of desperation, testifying to his fear of loneliness. Fuelled by spatial digression, the parallels between Bonnard and Morden lead to a deeper examination of Morden's relationship with Anna, bringing to the surface another nuance: Morden's lack of self-confidence. The case of alliteration in the words 'floundering' and 'foulness' indicates the writer's wish to emphasize their meaning and draw the reader's attention to it. Further flashbacks activate Morden's cogitation about his relationship with Anna, unveiling certain meaningful details. Interestingly, the first thing that attracted Morden to Anna was her size: «It was the size of her that first caught my attention. Not that she was so very large, but she was made on a scale different from that of any woman I had known before her. Big shoulders, big arms, big feet, that great head with its sweep of thick dark hair» (100).

The description of Anna's physical appearance allows for an assumption that she was also psychologically and emotionally stronger than Morden. This is hinted at in the novel time and again. For instance, the fact that Anna became the initiator of their marriage and 'invited' Morden to marry her (104), is telling. Due to Anna, Morden felt he gained importance and stood out from the crowd. This is how he reminisces about their arriving at numerous parties: «How grand we must have looked, the two of us, making our entrance, taller than anyone else, our gaze directed over their heads as if fixed on some far fine vista that only we

<sup>8</sup> John Banville, *The Sea* (London : Picador, 2005), p. 40. Henceforth all pages referring to this text will be given after quotes.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew D. Walker, 'Enargeia and the Spectator in Greek Historiography' [Electronic resource], *Transactions of the American Philological Association* (1974-), Vol. 123, 1993, pp. 353–377, <<http://www.jstor.org/remote.library.dcu.ie/stable/284335>> [accessed 13 January 2014], p. 353.

<sup>10</sup> Diane Chaffee, 'Visual Art in Literature: The Role of Time and Space in Ekphrastic Creation' [Electronic resource], *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos*, Vol. 8, No. 3, Primavera 1984, pp. 311–320, <<http://www.jstor.org/remote.library.dcu.ie/stable/27762329>> [accessed 14 January 2014].

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.315.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

were privileged enough to see» (100). Morden's wish to be important can be seen from these lines, a position he appears to lack. His sense of inferiority is repeatedly expressed throughout the novel, while Anna is seen by him as a pillar, and sought for support: «I never had a personality <...>. I was always a distinct no one, whose fiercest wish was to be an indistinct someone. <...> Anna, I saw at once, would be the medium of my transmutation. She was the fairground mirror in which all my distortions would be made straight» (216).

This quotation shows that Morden has relied upon his wife significantly. Therefore, he feels particularly susceptible to loneliness when she dies, for his loss is deepened by a lack of self-confidence. The manifestation of his trauma, sparked by *Nu dans le bain au petit chien*, further reveals that his low self esteem transgresses his personal relationship with Anna, and extends into self-deprecation in his professional field. This is expressed by his dissatisfaction with the project on Bonnard: he feels that he 'has been mired' in it for more years than he 'cares to compute', conceding that he has 'nothing of any originality to say' (40). Morden undervalues himself, considering his work unimportant: «...work is not the word I would apply to what I do. Work is too large a term, too serious. Workers work. The great ones work. As for us middling men, there is no word sufficiently modest that yet will be adequate to describe what we do and how we do it» (41). This view provides a feeling that the protagonist rues the lack of talent, perhaps the one on the scale of Bonnard, and although Morden acknowledges his being a diligent worker, he notes that diligence is never enough (41).

Reflecting on Bonnard's art, Di Piero considers that the painter has changed 'the volume and space that our eye creates'<sup>13</sup>, and this insight proves to be apt for Banville's idea to fit Bonnard's painting to Morden's story. The actual ekphrasis, introduced by *Nu dans le bain au petit chien*, exhibits the extension of its meaning, for not only does it succeed in the portrayal of the protagonist's feelings, generated by the trauma of loss, but also activates a deeper examination of his inner world. The actual ekphrasis thus brings to the surface the elements of Morden's internal conflict, further reinforced by the novel's notional ekphrasis.

Notional ekphrasis occurs when the represented artistic objects are fictional. It is offered in *The Sea* in the instance of photographs of incurable patients, taken by Morden's wife in hospital. Justifying the importance of the novel's ekphrastic scaffolding for the portrayal of the protagonist's inner psyche, the pho-

tographic images amplify the atmosphere of suffering that accompanies Morden's trauma. Their mournful nature becomes the most clear-cut link between photography and death: «There was an old man with one leg gone below the knee, a thick line of sutures like the prototype of a zip fastener traversing the shiny stump. An obese, middle-aged woman was missing a breast, the flesh where it had been recently removed all puckered and swollen like a giant, empty eye-socket. A big-bosomed, smiling mother in a lacy nightdress displayed a hydrocephalic baby with a bewildered look in its otter's bulging eye. The arthritic fingers of an old woman taken in close-up were knotted and knobbed like clusters of root-ginger...» (181).

Similarly to the actual ekphrasis, introduced by Bonnard's painting, the faculty of enargeia of the notional ekphrasis, strengthened by powerful metaphors, similes and epithets, achieves the illusion of almost a corporeal presence of the patients. The gruesome views, captured by Anna, are doubled by the fact that she is also dying, which undeniably emphasizes Morden's traumatic experience and deepens the novel's sorrowful quality. The photographic ekphrasis is immensely germane to the evocation of suffering, pain and death, which proves to attest to Stephen Cheeke's indication of the elegiac nature of photographic art. Pointing out the 'deathwards pull'<sup>14</sup> of photographic images, Cheeke explains that they have 'something to do with Death'<sup>15</sup>, as from the moment when a photograph is taken, the image is being propelled toward its own destruction. Cheeke further goes on to posit the nature of photographic image as 'momento mori or inventory of mortality'<sup>16</sup>, and his point is seminal for the notional ekphrasis in *The Sea*, for its photographic images are incorporated in the novel precisely to convey the meaning of death, strengthened even more by the ekphrastic technique of spatial digression. Embedded in the protagonist's narrative, it enables Morden to trace the deathlike nature of photographs to the past. Then, his recollection of Anna's love for photography crystallizes his *a posteriori* interpretation of the signs of her imminent doom, confirming that they should be viewed as symbols of death. Morden confesses that he disliked being photographed by Anna, for behind the camera she was 'like a blind person, something in her eyes went dead, an essential light was extinguished' (173). He recalls an uneasy sensation, generated by Anna's not looking at the subject of her photograph, but rather 'peering inward, into herself' (173). Her troubling return to 'an old obsession' – photography, when she was ill, gives Morden 'a strong yet unac-

<sup>13</sup> W. S. Di Piero, 'On Bonnard' [Electronic resource], *The Threepenny Review*, No. 76, winter 1999, pp. 36–37, <<http://www.jstor.org/remoted.library.dcu.ie/stable/4384800>>, [accessed 12 May, 2014], p. 37.

<sup>14</sup> Stephen Cheeke, *Writing for Art. The Aesthetics of Ekphrasis* (Manchester University Press : Manchester and New York, 2008), p. 145.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144.

countable sense of foreboding' (174). But only after Anna's death it is harked back to by him as a harbinger of peril, which he has just deciphered.

The symbolism of death, conveyed by photography, is underpinned by another interesting detail – the author's choice of his characters' names, which is unlikely to be incidental. For instance, the consultant, who treats Anna, is called Dr Todd: this word brings to mind the German word 'der Tod', meaning 'death'. Similarly, the meaning of the protagonist's surname can be traced to the German meaning 'to murder'. Rüdiger Imhof observes that Morden's surname is opposite to his compiling the 'Book of the Dead'<sup>17</sup>. With the names adding greatly to the symbolism of death, and clearly indicating that the novel's images 'coincide with the substance'<sup>18</sup>, words and images in *The Sea* prove to be united in conveying the atmosphere of suffering and pain. These further disclose another element of Morden's internal conflict – his quest for spirituality.

Anna's clarification that the photographs are her 'indictment' (183) allows Morden to see them as a form of her protest against 'cruelty' (184), and her collection of evidence. The question then arises as of who is the addressee for this evidence, and who is to be accused of cruelty. Such an interpretation of the function of the photographs along with Anna's overt disagreement on suffering induces Morden to ponder on spirituality: «I am not speaking here of a posthumous transfiguration. I do not entertain the possibility of an afterlife, or any deity capable of offering it. Given the world that he created, it would be an impiety against God to believe in him». (185) This moment of disillusionment shows that the protagonist's indignation and anger are channelled against God. His quest for the spiritual side of life and death is strongly validated by the deployment of the mimetic trope of 'resemblance',<sup>19</sup> tangible from his numerous allusions to mythological elements, such as 'Edenic moment' (89), 'the sack of Troy', 'the sinking of Atlantis' (132), 'Valhallan petulance' (185), and others. Morden compares his mournful state to being in 'Pluto's realm' (23), and draws a parallel between himself and 'a lyreless Orpheus' (24), and his linking of the godlike nature of ancient deities to his own circumstances creates an illusion of their lifelikeness, or 'likeness to an essential and unvarying «nature»'<sup>20</sup>,

<sup>17</sup> Rüdiger Imhof, 'The Sea: «Was't Well Done?»' [Electronic resource], *Irish University Review*, Vol. 36, No. 1, Spring – Summer, pp. 165–181, <<http://www.jstor.org/remote.library.dcu.ie/stable/25517299>> [accessed 10 May 2014], p. 174.

<sup>18</sup> Jan Mieszkowski, 'Art Forms' in *The Cambridge to Walter Benjamin*, ed. by Ferris, David S. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 46.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Lorna Hutson, 'Forensic Aspects of Renaissance Mimesis' [Electronic resource], *Representations*, Vol. 94,

characteristic of mimesis. Hence, the evocation of mythology offers an understanding of spiritual pursuit through suffering and pain, and thus enables the discernment of Morden's internal conflict.

The mythological motifs of the novel's mimetic technique show that the author expects the reader to be acquainted with mythology. Therefore, the reader's cultural competence, discussed previously in relation to Bonnard's art, gains in significance also in relation to mimesis, as it allows the reader to fully grasp Morden's feelings. Such an interpretation can be justified by Webb's indication of the importance of memory on imagination and persuasion in ekphrastic writings, as she notes that authors are inclined to use their own 'visual resources' in order to recall images which 'already exist in the audience's mind'<sup>21</sup>, and that the images may be 'intentionally bizarre' to be 'more memorable'<sup>22</sup>. The deployment of mythological elements stored in the culturally competent reader's memory may therefore suggest that the text in part controls the reader's response in the way that through the evocation of mythology, it leads the reader to decoding Morden's quest for spirituality.

Importantly, the novel's spatial digression unwinds the protagonist's memories, allowing him to trace mythological allusions back to his childhood and youth. Morden recalls 'the time of gods' (5) speaking of his youth, and reiterates on several occasions that he was 'greatly taken with the gods' (73) as a child, which suggests that his reflections about spirituality originate from some earlier experiences, and are not caused by the trauma of loss solely. Therefore, the protagonist's allusions to mythology point to the ontogenetic universal nature of mimesis that is manifest in every human being from childhood<sup>23</sup>. Given that the nature of mimesis is 'critical and inherently conflictive'<sup>24</sup>, the novel's mimetic technique urges the decoding of Morden's quest for spirituality as another element of his deep internal conflict, which he is trying to resolve for himself: «...what I am looking forward to is a moment of earthly expression... the secret aim of all of us to be no longer flash but transformed utterly into the gossamer of unsuffering spirit...» (185).

No. 1 (Spring 2006), pp. 80–109, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/rep.2006.94.1.80>> [accessed 25 March 2014], p. 80.

<sup>21</sup> Webb, op. cit., p. 110.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 111.

<sup>23</sup> Jean-Marie Schaeffer and Ioana Vultur, 'Mimesis' in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, ed. by David Herman et al (London and New York : Routledge, 2008), p. 309.

<sup>24</sup> Matthew Schneider, 'Problematic Differences: Conflictive Mimesis in Lessing's «Laokoon»' [Electronic resource], *Poetics Today*, Vol. 20, No. 2, Summer, 1999, pp. 273–289, <<http://www.jstor.org/remote.library.dcu.ie/stable/1773384>> [accessed 23 March 2014], p. 276.

Mimesis thus serves to demonstrate Morden's wish to discover, or rather re-discover, spirituality, which haunts him throughout his life. Revealing of his evocation of the analogies for the numinous becomes Wallace Stevens and Maria Rainer Rilke's suggestion that 'art and the imagination can somehow take place of religion in the post-metaphysical modern world'<sup>25</sup>, as it indicates that mimesis in *The Sea* is designated to provide an understanding of the protagonist's internal conflict by means of conflation of his knowledge of art and the creative power of his imaginative faculty.

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<sup>25</sup> John Kenny, 'Well Said Well Seen: The Pictorial Paradigm in John Banville's Fiction' [Electronic resource], *Irish University Review*, Vol. 36, No. 1, pp. 52–67, <<http://www.jstor.org.remote.library.dcu.ie/stable/25517292>> [accessed 29 March 2014], p. 52.

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### ПРОЯВ ВНУТРІШНЬОГО КОНФЛІКТУ ЗА ДОПОМОГОЮ ЕКФРАСИСУ В ПОВІСТІ ДЖОНА БЕНВІЛЛА «МОРЕ»

*У статті досліджуються види й функції екфрасису в повісті Джона Бенвілла «Море». У першій частині публікації проаналізовано екфрасис за картиною відомого французького художника, а в другій – демонструється рефлексія на фотографії невиліковних пацієнтів лікарні. За допомогою доповнених текстом зображень виражається біль від втрати близької людини, а також внутрішній конфлікт головного героя.*

**Ключові слова:** екфрасис, травма, внутрішній конфлікт, Джон Бенвілл.

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### ПРОЯВЛЕНИЕ ВНУТРЕННЕГО КОНФЛИКТА С ПОМОЩЬЮ ЭКФРАСИСА В ПОВЕСТИ ДЖОНА БЭНВИЛЛА «МОРЕ»

*В статье исследуются функции и демонстрируется семантическая многозначность экфрасиса в повести Джона Бэнвилла «Море».*

**Ключевые слова:** экфрасис, травма, внутренний конфликт, Джон Бэнвилл.

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