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**THE PHENOMENON OF ECPHRASIS IN ANCIENT GREEK
LITERATURE AND ITS PARADIGMATIC NATURE FOR THE
POST-ANTIQUITY LITERATURE**

Ecphrasis is among the notions, whose definitions raise particular interest in literary studies. Ecphrasis is a Greek word, which literally means 'expression, definition' (ec- 'out' and -phrasis 'speak'). Initially it denoted a rhetoric method, which was used to denote a detailed description of a thing in a speech. Later, the term came to be used for the verbal description of an object perceived visually, most frequently a piece of art. Correspondingly, although the term is often used in antique rhetoric and philosophy, it currently denotes first and foremost the description of a thing, mostly works of art, in a literary work. As time passed, a special genre of such description was even created in the antique literature.

Suffice it to take a superficial look at the titles of many works or collections to find that the number of those starting with the word 'ecphrasis' is quite big. Works that have the word 'picture' in their titles are effectively one of them, because they are descriptions of the works of fine arts by well-known authors.¹

It is possible to assert that Homer is regarded as the first author, who used the method of ecphrasis, and was the first to describe works of art in European literature, shaping a paradigm for authors and specialists in

¹ Works by Lucian of Samosata and Philostratus entitled *Imagines* and two works by Procopius of Gaza - *Descriptions* and *Description of a Picture* can also be named here, as well as the description of Hagia Sophia by Paulus Silentiarius, the description of a sculpture by Christodorus of Coptus, *Ecphrasis of the World Map* by John of Gaza, and so forth.

literature.² I think that in this regard, he is not only an example to follow, but obviously a master in using ecphrasis unsurpassed by any other author.

In order to further clarify my position, I would like to compare the description of the shield of Achilles in Homer's *Iliad* with several post-Homer ecphrases of the Antiquity, Renaissance, and modern times.

The Shield of Achilles (*Iliad*, XVIII, 132; 478-609) carries nine pictures and a natural question arises in this connection: What did Homer have in mind in this case? It is ruled out that he had before his eyes the shield Hephaestus had made for Achilles. However, it is also quite clear that he was aware of the tradition of making shields with various pictures on them. The idea of making shields with pictures is no particular novelty. However, the poet's desire to describe the shield in detail is indeed a novelty. Scenes shown of the shield and their positions are not spontaneous and accidental, which becomes obvious from the principles of the compositional arrangement of the scenes.

It is established that at all levels of arrangement, two principles are dominant in *Iliad*: a circular composition, which can symbolically be expressed as a-b-c-b¹-a¹, and a parallel division: a-b-c...a¹-b¹-c¹..., which means that the elements of each structure are organized in Homer's epic, first and foremost in *Iliad*, in accordance with these principles (R. Gordeziani describes this problem in detail: 4, cf. also 10). As we already noted, according to Homer, there were nine pictures on the shield of Achilles. Starting the description of each of them Homer repeats the formula (εὖ δε), which is a transition from one picture to another. The position of pictures according to their meaning is as follows:

- a) Cosmos – celestial bodies;
- b) Peaceful city;
- c) City in wartime – attack on grazing cattle and bloody clashes between two armies;
- d) Peaceful work – ploughing and sowing;
- e) Peaceful work – harvest. King with a sceptre in the centre;
- d1) Peaceful work – harvest, singing and dancing;
- c1) Bloody attack of lions on grazing cattle;
- b1) Peaceful scene of a round dance;
- a1) The river of Oceanus encircling the shield.

² Cf. DNP, 3, 1997, 942 and further; DNP, 13, 1999, 940 and further.

It is obvious that describing the shield, Homer uses the circular composition. However, the use of the aforementioned principle has not only the formal function of organizing the structure in this case. The circular composition is the best means for expressing the circulation of the events defining the regularity of this world populated by mortals. This is a constant alternation of scenes depicting peaceful life and the desire of war, work and bloody clashes within the pictures of the so-called natural elements. Thus, the compositional arrangement of *The Shield of Achilles* is strictly structured and the structure is not simply formal in nature. It also has certain ideological implications.

Describing the pictures on the shield, Homer used two main principles: the descriptions of the first and final pictures are restricted to naming things depicted in them. As regards the rest of pictures, three aspects can obviously be seen here. The main theme of the picture is emphasized at the beginning. This can conditionally be called the name or title of the picture. Homer skilfully describes the main elements that are supposed to be most appropriate in describing the theme. As a rule, every picture bears the author's desire to present the so-called 'dramaturgy' of events described in it or, in other words, animate the action depicted in the picture.

The shield of Achilles can be regarded as a piece of art with cosmic events and Oceanus removed from human life represented in the middle and edges and pictures representing mortals and main elements of their lives positioned between the two pictures.

After the interpretation of the aforementioned scenes, a natural question arises: what are the purposes of the detailed description of the shield in Homer's epic? It is interesting, what is more important for Homer and characters in *Iliad* – the purely military function of the shield or its aesthetic value. In my opinion, certain allusions, which may help to answer the questions, can be found in the poem itself.

At the beginning of the description of the shield, there is a line, which says that Hephaestus made a big and solid shield, which was decorated – πάντοσε δαιδάλλων. Nikolay Gnedich translated the expression into Russian as “весь украшая изящно”. The English translation is “adorning it all over” and Wolfgang Schadewaldt's German translation is “verzirte ihn über und über”. In this case, δαιδάλλων is the crucial word, which means ‘decorate, embellish’. Thus, the poet concentrates on two qualities of the shield: it is big and solid and all of its parts are decorated.

Correspondingly, the shield is for the poet both a weapon of war and a work of art. This opinion is also supported by the impression the shield

makes on Achilles in the XIX Stanza, 15-22: "Howbeit, when Achilles saw the arms, then came wrath upon him yet the more, and his eyes blazed forth in terrible wise from beneath their lids, as it had been flame. And he was glad as he held in his arms the glorious gifts of the god. But when in his soul he had taken delight in gazing on the glory of them, forthwith to his mother he spoke winged words: 'My mother, the arms that the god hath given are such as the works of immortals should fitly be, such as no mortal man could fashion'".

We can see that Achilles' reaction in this case is both that of a courageous fighter and a person able to assess a work of art. The former becomes evident through wrath that came upon him and the latter through the delight he found in viewing the shield. The verb *tevrpein* used twice in this short passage usually expresses the communion with a work of art (cf. 1). Given this, it is quite clear that the shield forged by Hephaestus is important both as a particularly reliable weapon and a work of art. That is why the author describes in detail how the shield was made and what was depicted on it.

Researchers have paid attention to the fact that the pictures on the shield do not have contexts supported by concrete reference points. Correspondingly, none of the pictures is a product of the mimesis of a concrete environment, *topos*, personality, or event. They are generalized images of the reality depicted on the pictures. At a glance, this is a paradox, but it is a fact that the information about cosmic bodies (whose names the author mentions) and the final picture, which depicts the world river - Oceanus - are most concrete. Although Athena, Ares, Eris, Cydimus, and Caerus are mentioned in connection with the "city plunged into battles", they serve to describe personified events rather than deities acting in a concrete war context.

Could Homer have linked the pictures on the shield of Achilles to concrete personalities and events? Of course, he could. In the same poem, the mythological biographies of all heroes participating in the Trojan War and their relatives are a good example to support the assertion. However, Homer probably chose the path of generalization quite deliberately. Correspondingly, as I have already noted, what he sees on the shield are generalized pictures of human life rather than concrete *toposes*, personalities or events. I do not think it is justified, like some researchers, to view allusions to realities linked to Achaeans and Trojans in Homer's pictures and to regard the peaceful city as a symbol of the Mycenaean city and the city plunged into the battles as a symbol of Troy or regard the king with a sceptre as an image of Agamemnon (cf.

www.123helpme.com/assets/16635.html). Had Homer wanted to use the scenes depicted on the shield for reciting once again the developments in *Iliad*, nothing would have deterred him from making his allusions more concrete.

The Shield of Achilles by Homer differs from numerous other ecphrases of the later period in that the level of generalization is high in it, being linked to the fate of the world situated between Cosmos and Oceanus and populated by mortals rather than reality linked to two concrete cities or nations. The fact that the pictures on the shield are positioned within indefinite and generalized frameworks probably also points to this. On the one hand, they are cosmic events and on the other Oceanus. Of course, the first city depicted on the shield may resemble a Mycenaean city far away from the war and the second may be viewed as Troy plunged into battles, but in general, these cities symbolize any other settlement, either peaceful or devastated by war.

Homer's ecphrasis has proved to be so impressive that many authors tried to create their own ecphrases under his influence. In this case, the main thing that interests us is the model of Homer's ecphrasis, which became an inspiration for many authors of the subsequent epochs, although in my opinion, none of their ecphrases can be regarded as important as that of Homer. To make my assumption clearer I would like to summarize in a few words the features of the description by Homer.

In this case, I would like to confine myself to a number of most essential features.

a) The first thing to mention is that the shield of Achilles has two functions with Homer: applied and aesthetic. Both functions of the shield are described in detail in *Iliad*. The shield must be truly excellent in all of its features (solidity, reliability, and a high artistic level), which is guaranteed by Hephaestus himself, as his products are at a highest level in all respects. It is noteworthy that *Iliad* shows how solid the shield is and what aesthetic impact it can have;

b) Scenes on the shield are independent thematic and semantic units. Their absolute majority have their own dramaturgy and frames;

c) The scenes on the shield are not a simple sum of pictures. On the one hand, they are united by strict principles of composition and on the other, present a magnificent generalized picture of multifaceted connections existing in the world. The scenes are not an attempt to depict a concrete myth or well-known information. A high level of generalization can clearly be seen in them. That is why Schadewaldt wrote: "What Homer conveys are the main forms of the universe and life grouped in accordance

with the principle of opposition... The opposed are conditioned by each other, finally presenting an all-encompassing unity".³

If we take a look at the tradition of ecphrases since Homer to our time, we will notice that Homer's model has proved to be paradigmatic for all of the authors. Directly or indirectly, they took into account, albeit incompletely, Homer's principles of writing ecphrases, which obviously makes the description of the shield of Achilles prevalent compared with them.⁴ For example, in *The Shield of Heracles*, which was probably not written by Hesiod, but by someone after him, there are numerous external signs of the principles used in *The Shield of Achilles*. Like with Homer, the en de or en d formula is used in transition from one picture to another. Many pictures repeat the content of Homer's pictures and epic formulas and individual elements used by Homer to describe them. However, as Rismag Gordeziani noted,⁵ the pictures on the shield of Heracles are not united by any single principle of compositional arrangement.

It is also noteworthy that Hesiod makes a lot of attempts to introduce concrete mythological information, featuring gods from Olympus and other divine forces and personalities of the era like Theseus, Aegeus, and others. Correspondingly, although the shield of Heracles was also made by Hephaestus, its pictures are devoid of generalization. They are amazingly eclectic, as they depict horrors of war and demons causing devastation. Unlike Homer, Hesiod shows no balance between war and peace and peaceful scenes and bloodshed in battles.

It is also obvious that the description of the shield of Aeneas in Virgil's *Aeneid* (VIII. 626-728) was inspired by Homer. The pictures on the shield mostly depict the fate of Rome in the future and, correspondingly, are full of concrete themes and figures. The shield features Italian kings; victories of Romans; Ascanius' ancestry; a big number of wars; she-wolf and two infants (5); a description of Rome; the rape of the Sabine women; bloodshed between Romans; agreement of kings on a truce; cattle for slaughter at Jupiter's altar; four horses and Metus; Tullus, Porsena,

³ Schadewaldt W., *Von Homers Welt*, Stuttgart, 1965 (4), 363. My interpretation of the shield of Achilles is presented in detail in my paper, which is to be published as part of the materials of the scientific conference held at the Department of Humanities of Tbilisi State University in 2010.

⁴ For a review of the phenomenon of ecphrasis in Antiquity cf. DNP, 3, 1997, 942 and further. For the reception of ecphrasis in the post-Antique era cf. DNP, 13, 1999, 940 and further.

⁵ Gordeziani R., *Selected Works*, Tbilisi 2000; Гордзезиани Р. В., Проблемы композиционной организации в раннегреческом эпосе, Тбилиси 1978, 156-170.

Aeneads, and Clelia; Romulus roofing his palace with sedge; the emergence of a silver goose followed by the seizure of the fortress by Gauls (8); the Salii and Luperci; the underworld; Catilina opposite Furiae; lawmaker Cato; maritime sights; dolphins and ships; the battle of Actium; Augustus Caesar leading Italians in a battle; Senate, people, and gods; gods helping Agrippa; an army of Barbarians following Antonius from Egypt and Bactria together with his Egyptian wife; ships sailing a big sea (10 lines devoted to the story of Antonius); Neptunia bearing a red mark of murder; two snakes, dragons, Anubis, Venus, Minerva and Mars rising against Neptune; a scene involving goddess of war Bellona; Indians and Arabs, Sabinians and Egyptians retreating from fear of Apollo's bow; the death of the queen; description of the Nile (3 lines); Caesar finally entering Rome with triple triumph and building 300 temples; rejoicing Rome; shrines and cattle for slaughter; Caesar receiving gifts from defeated people; tribes of nomads, Africans, Leleges, Carians, Gelonians, Morinians, and Dahis; and rivers Euphrates, Rhenus, and Arax (15 lines are devoted to the last scene involving Caesar).

It is clear that although Virgil is under the influence of Homer's description of the shield and it is Hephaestus again, who made a shield for Aeneas, the themes depicted on Aeneas' shield are completely different from the principle of positioning scenes on the shield of Achilles. First, Virgil just lists scenes with a much lower level of dramaturgy. Second, he mentions prominent events in Rome's mythological and real history with concrete names of acting figures. Like Homer, it is Virgil who created themes on the shield made by Hephaestus, but unlike Homer, he made no attempt to depict the functioning of the world populated by mortals and generalize multifaceted relations. He confined himself to listing most impressive instances from Rome's mythological and real history.

Many other ecphrases can be found in Antiquity. From a certain period, the description of pictures and works of art became one of the disciplines in schools of rhetoric, which led to the formation of ecphrasis as an independent literary genre. *Eikones (Pictures)* by Philostratus (2nd-3rd c. AD) is a good example in this regard. It describes 65 such works of arts, which have not come down to us. The author's description is amazingly skilful, which even makes it easy to imagine the described images visually.

We will not discuss here other authors of Antiquity and will move to one of the excellent examples of ecphrasis of the Renaissance era in Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece*. The ecphrasis found in this work unites the principles of Homer and Philostratus. Shakespeare follows the latter in describing just one picture and he follows Homer in describing individual

segments of the picture, which means that he describes several pictures within one picture. The ecphrasis comprises 31 strophes (217 lines), of which 18 strophes (126 lines) are devoted to the description of the picture proper and 13 strophes (91 lines) are passages depicting Lucrece's assessments and emotions.

Lucrece, who is waiting for her husband, recalls a picture on the wall depicting the story of Trojan tragedy. The picture effectively shows numerous scenes linked to the Trojan War without concentrating on one moment of the battle. It features events that took place one after another, but the ecphrasis does not present them in a sequence. The author focuses on the episodes in the picture, which attract Lucrece's attention. That is why descriptions follow each other not chronologically, but taking into account Lucrece's emotions. Shakespeare concentrates here not on what the picture is supposed to tell, but on the connections between the scenes in the picture and the protagonist's sentiments and associations. Lucrece's feelings gradually intensify, which finally leads her to tearing out the scene, which is most undesirable for her.

It can be assumed that this case is a pure example of ecphrasis characteristic of the Renaissance. On the one hand, we are dealing with a picture featuring numerous figures and episodes in line with pictures of large-scale themes characteristic of the Renaissance. On the other hand, the work concentrates on the viewer's spiritual and psychological conditions rather than the beauty of the picture and its aesthetic values. The work unites concrete and general aspects, and the picture viewed by Lucrece simultaneously depicts the disaster in legendary Troy and the ephemeral nature of the happiness of a city that was once famous, which can be so exciting that the viewer may lose self-control.⁶

After Shakespeare, ecphrases seldom present abstract descriptions of pictures. What the pictures depict is more frequently linked to the action in the work. Correspondingly, what is shown in the picture gradually becomes an object incorporated in the action. Let us consider two works written in approximately the same period by authors of completely different world views and aesthetic principles. The works are often referred to when discussing ecphrasis. They are *The Idiot* by Fyodor Dostoyevsky and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde. It can be said

⁶ For an overview cf. Boehm G., Pfothenhauer H. *Beschreibungskunst, Kunstbeschreibung: Ekphrasis von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*, 1995. The work also provides ample bibliography.

that ecphrasis in these works is obviously linked to the spiritual conditions of the protagonists and therefore, bear signs of psychologism.

From the end of the 18th century and the start of the 19th century, so-called "religious ecphrasis" mostly focusing on the description of the images of Our Lady starts to play a particular role in the Russian literature. However, the European name of Madonna is more often used in such cases instead of the traditional Russian name. Quite a lot has been written about this kind of ecphrases lately. In my opinion, the picture depicted in *The Idiot* by Dostoyevsky, which has been much spoken about, is a good example of religious ecphrasis.⁷

The Idiot by Dostoyevsky focuses on one of the prominent pictures in Rogozhin's home, showing the Deposition. The picture is first mentioned in the scene, where Rogozhin shows Myshkin around his home. After passing by a line of a number of colourless sceneries, Rogozhin pays attention to it, noting that the picture, which his father bought at a very low price, is becoming increasingly expensive. Although the picture is not described in this episode, the author points to its approximate size, noting that it is a copy of a work by Hans Holbein.

Later, Ippolit describes the picture in detail in his long story. He recalls precisely that picture and describes and assesses it. Ippolit pays attention to the fact that in most pictures showing the scene after the Crucifixion, Christ's face continues to be beautiful despite so much humiliation and ordeal. However, in this picture, Christ's face bears obvious traces of torments, as the painter does not make an attempt to underscore the beauty of the face. Ippolit is excited, because "Looking at that picture, you get the impression of nature as some enormous, implacable, and dumb beast, ... which has senselessly seized, cut to pieces, and swallowed up – impassively and unfeelingly – a great and priceless Being, a Being worth the whole of nature and all its laws, worth the entire earth, which was perhaps created solely for the coming of that Being."

Viewing the picture and imagining the condition of Christ's followers, who saw this terrible sight, Ippolit asks a question: Had their Teacher seen Himself in such a condition before the Crucifixion, would He want to be crucified and to die in this manner? Later, Dostoyevsky describes how the narrator has no peace because of these thoughts.

Thus, it can be said that unlike ecphrases in the Antiquity, those in modern times acquired the function of exerting psychological influence,

⁷ For an overview cf. Меднис Н. Е., Религиозный экфрасис в русской литературе, Критика и семиотика, Вып. 10, Новосибирск 2006, 58-67.

giving rise to questions in protagonists' minds or making spiritual changes in them rather than making just an aesthetic impression.

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde, we encounter a unique case of ecphrasis. The picture is animated to such an extent here that it changes together with Dorian Gray's soul as time passes. Correspondingly, we do not have a long description of the whole picture. Ecphrasis is effectively spread in the whole work, describing changes in the picture taking place along with spiritual changes.

At the beginning, the author describes the picture in one sentence: "Clamped to an upright easel, stood the full-length portrait of a young man of extraordinary personal beauty". In another episode, where Dorian Gray looks at his picture for the first time, he is so amazed that he makes a step back and his eyes glitter with joy as if he sees himself for the first time. This episode in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* seems to respond to the passage in *Iliad*, where Thetis gives Achilles the weapon made by god. Like Achilles, Dorian Gray is unable to conceal his admiration, which convinces readers that the picture is indeed impressive.

However, it is also noteworthy that what Dorian Gray feels is not satisfaction with or delight in the picture, but fear of the future, as he is to change due to implacable time and lose what everyone admires – his beauty. It is at that moment that he asks questions and undergoes spiritual change, which we discussed above.

After this episode, the picture is described in the work on a lot of occasions. It constantly changes and the author mostly describes the changes it undergoes instead of Dorian Gray. In such cases, the author mentions the wrinkled and deformed face, hardened hands, and the weakened body. However, the terrible expression on the face is nevertheless most important, as it exposes the initial sin and distorts the picture more than other features. In these cases, the sentiments Dorian experiences after discovering every change come to the fore.

Wilde provides the most impressive description of the disfigured picture in the episode, where the artist himself sees his work. Like at the beginning of the work, the author shows the viewer's emotion: seeing the mocking expression on the face, the artist utters a heart-breaking cry.

The fact that after Dorian Gray's death at the end of the work, the picture regains initial beauty and youth means that it is the picture that is the protagonist of the work.

The phenomenon of ecphrasis in the literature of recent times also shows very interesting trends frequently expressed in the detailed, almost scientific description of certain items. In these conditions, ecphrasis is a

systemic and dominant element that defines the author's style, not just one of the methods. Since it is impossible to fully review relevant literature in one article, we will concentrate on Turkish Nobel Prize winner Orhan Pamuk's *My Name Is Red*.

The novel describes events that unfolded during nine days in Istanbul in 1591 with Padishah's artists as the main protagonists, who have to establish the identity of a killer after one of the artists and then the chief artist, Enishte, are murdered. The killer accidentally left his painting on the scene of the crime. The only way to find the killer is to identify the style of the picture, which is very difficult, as at that time, artists were prohibited from having their own style, which was regarded as a deadly sin, and the only thing artists did was to copy other paintings. To identify the style the protagonists of the novel have to see thousands of pictures, due to which a lot of ecphrases appear in the work. Examples of ecphrasis are encountered in other cases too, when protagonists speak about their love affairs, recalling similar scenes in illustrations from well-known books. In such cases, the author resorts to ecphrasis in order to convey to readers the content or sentiments depicted in the pictures in order to show what protagonists feel at that moment.

It is noteworthy that the ecphrases in the novel completely differ from each other. Most of them describe individual pictures and even individual segments of some of them. In some cases, the whole plot of a story is described. However, general descriptions of how individual artists painted fighters, shahs, animals, trees, and grass or descriptions of pictures used as illustrations of pages are most frequent in the novel.

People – the killer, the murdered, their relatives, artists – as well as a dog, horse, pictures, the red colour, death, and even Satan are narrators in the novel. Correspondingly, people as well as animals, pictures and colours can act in it. As this process of ecphrasis leads to denouement, readers familiarize themselves with the process of confrontation between the occidental and oriental civilizations historically symbolized by Istanbul, where Europe and Asia met.

The phenomenon of ecphrasis in this work by Pamuk needs special research. In my opinion, the author took into account the entire experience accumulated by the world literature in this field from the times of Homer to our days.

Thus, ecphrasis has obviously travelled quite an interesting road from Homer to our days, i. e. from objective descriptions of pictures to the descriptions of a psychological impact of pictures. With Homer, ecphrasis serves the poet's universal conception of the world and events under way

in it. Through the semantics of the described pictures and their strict compositional arrangement, the poet managed to convey what he wanted to say in a manner removed from concrete facts and as close as possible to the highest level of generalization.

Later, ecphrasis gradually drew closer to specific facts through concentration on fearful elements with Hesiod and the narration of important episodes from Roman history with Virgil. After the Renaissance, ecphrasis acquires increasingly numerous signs of psychologism, being related to the protagonists' spiritual conditions, which finally leads to the animation of a picture and its effective transformation into a protagonist able to affect human decisions with Oscar Wilde. Pamuk's *My Name Is Red* is a good example of the further development of the trend. In his work, ecphrases are conveyed not only by those, who perceive works of art, but also by other human beings or inanimate objects shown in pictures and, finally, by the pictures themselves.