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EKPHRASIS AND ITS FUNCTIONS IN JOHN BANVILLE'S NOVELS

The paper focuses on the provocative character of ekphrasis in the prose by John Banville, one of the most experimental postmodern Irish writers. Two of his novels – *Book of Evidence* (1989) and *Ghosts* (1993) – are of special interest for this purpose. These novels are concentrated on a mysterious and irresistible power of painting, provoking Banville's characters to commit disgusting crimes. Thus ekphrasis becomes the source of novels' plot structure with its elements of thriller and detective story.

Summing up the main approaches to ekphrasis in Banville's novels it is necessary to note that firstly Banville's ekphrasis is not only mere verbal representation of the work of visual art, but it forms the pattern of its perception. Secondly, Banville's ekphrasis becomes the main principle of the generation of the text itself: the way from the object to ekphrasis is connected with multiple crossings of semantic field borders. And thirdly, Banville reveals the paradoxical nature of ekphrasis. On the one hand, creating illusion of visual art by means of words ekphrasis reminds of the supreme power of logos. And on the other, ekphrasis outlines the boundary which word can never cross and behind which there is a great ocean of creative silence.

Key words: ekphrasis, perception, terror, attraction, visual, verbal, intertextual, image, imagination, semantic field

Nowadays we may witness the growing interest of both – writers and researches – to the good old ekphrasis known from the time of the Antiquity. One of the possible explanations of the present ekphrasis renaissance is the specific aesthetic climate of the new *fin de siècle* marked

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by new searches for the interconnection of arts. Being the mixed, borderline concept, ekphrasis seems to be extremely appropriate to the postmodern and post-postmodern culture. Though there is a tendency to broaden the meaning of ekphrasis concept in recent researches, we would use the term in a traditional way as “the verbal representation of visual representation” [6, 152].

The paper focuses on the provocative character of ekphrasis in the prose by John Banville, one of the most experimental modern Irish writers whose fiction has much in common with the narrative technique of postmodernism. But as to Banville himself he is firmly convinced that the time of “isms” in art has already passed and that amid disintegration we yearn for synthesis.

Two of his novels – *The Book of Evidence* (1989) and *Ghosts* (1993) – are of special interest for our purpose. These novels may be called ekphrastic in their essence as they are concentrated on a mysterious and irresistible power of painting and its visual images.

Painting, according to Banville, fascinates us by the surface of things. It is the triumph of looking, of obsessed scrutiny. Thus painting means pure perception, the flight from verbalized world, therefore the only solid reality in Banville’s totally relativizing and shifting artistic universe that reminds of the well-known European conception of the world as a dream. But this fascinating reality of painting turns out the source of frightful perception effects, provoking Banville’s character to commit disgusting crimes.

In *The Book of Evidence* ekphrasis becomes the source of novel plot structure with its elements of a thriller, gothic romance and detective story. The novel is the first-person testimony of its protagonist Freddie Montgomery who is convicted for seemingly motiveless murder of a young girl and who tries to make sense of his crime.

The urgent leitmotif of the narrator’s confession is that of fear. The nature of his fear resembles in many ways the classification of fear that was once offered by a “Gothic” writer Ann Radcliffe in her essay *On the Supernatural in Poetry* where she distinguished two types of fear in fiction-terror and horror. Terror means fearful attraction, while horror is connected with disgust. Disgust is a key-word for the character’s attitude towards both the outer world and his own life. And terror is connected with the mysterious attraction of the picture – the portrait of a woman which fatal influence can’t be expressed in the terms of reason.

The turning point of Freddie's story is his encounter with anonymous painting *Portrait of a Woman with Gloves* which he came upon in the house of his old friend Anna Behrens. Banville's narrator gives us a detailed ekphrastic description of that imaginative portrait which is associated with Dutch school of painting: "*A youngish woman in a black dress with a broad white collar, standing with her hands folded in front of her, one gloved. Her prominent black eyes have a faintly oriental slant. The nose is large, the lips full. She is not beautiful. Her gaze is calm, inexpectant, though there is a trace of challenge, of hostility even in the set of her mouth. She does not want to be here, and yet cannot be elsewhere. The gold brooch that secures the wings of her wide collar is expensive and ugly*" [2, 78].

But the descriptive function of ekphrasis is not of primary importance in the novel. More important is what may be called, according to Dmitriy Tokarev [9, 6–7], "apophatic" ekphrasis, when ekphrasis becomes a kind of a bridge between expressible and inexpressible in its attempts to express the mystery of individual perception. The portrait made Freddie experience the terror of attraction that Pascal Quignard pondered over in his sophisticated essay *Le sexe et l'effroi*. Quoting Caravage's statement "*Tout tableau est une tête de Méduse*", Quignard adds: "*La fascination signifie ceci: celui qui voit ne peut plus detacher son regard. Dans la face à face frontal, dans le monde humain aussie bien que dans le monde animal, la mort pétrifie*" [7, 118]. Banville's character experiences the hypnotic power of the painted woman's gaze at the same time attractive and terrific like that of Meduse: "*There is something in the way the woman regards me, the querulous, mute insistence of her eyes, which I can neither escape nor assuage. I squirm in the grasp of her gaze*" [2, 105].

Thus the terror of picture attraction can't be expressed in a rational way. Picture is a mute essence, untouchable and meaningless to our interrogative rationality. It simply exists. This mysterious existence has powerful influence on its onlookers and may charge them with criminal impulses. Freddie is unable to explain even to himself why he has stolen the portrait, why he has killed a young maiden of the house who became a casual witness of his theft, at last why he has dumped the portrait in a ditch. He can only express a mystical sense of being watched by the portrait he looked at: "*It was not just the woman's painted stare that watched me. Everything in the picture, that brooch, those gloves, the flocculent darkness at her back, every spot on the canvas was an eye fixed on me unblinkingly*" [2, 79].

Painting in Banville's novel exposes its ambivalence combining life and death, attraction and terror. The image stained upon canvas with its immovability, its muteness and timelessness symbolizes death, thus reminding of the etymology of the word "image" as "imago", i.e. the picture on the tomb. Banville accentuates this death association when his character describes what the woman of the portrait may feel as she had her portrait completed: "*She had expected it would be like looking in a mirror, but this is someone she does not recognize, and yet know. The words came unbidden into her head: now I know how to die*" [2,108]. Traditional view of portrait as a mirror is also connected with death connotations, for mirror from the ancient times was struck with awe of other world.

The fearful paradox of the narrator's story is his inability to imagine the girl whom he murdered as an alive person. He makes a striking confession to the court: "*I killed her because for me she was not alive*" [2,108]. And at the same time the woman of the portrait is more alive for the narrator than people around him. She is alive to such extent that he dreamt up a complex scenario of her life. He was capable of imaging a vivid vision of the life of a woman who is but a representation, creating art from art itself: "*She. There is no she, of course. There is only an organization of shapes and colours. Yet I try to make a life for her*" [2, 105].

Thus Banville's artistic universe destroys all conventional boundaries between the objectivity of external world and subjectivity of imagination, between determination of real life and omnipotence of fantasy. Impressed by modern physics theory with its paradoxical discoveries of non-material properties of matter, especially by Heisenberg's indeterminacy principle, Banville found in it the most decisive metaphor for his fiction. Non-classical science denies the most fundamental opposition of chaos/cosmos, replacing it by a queer idea of their inseparability and thus reminding us of James Joyce's famous pun "chaosmos". Banville makes this paradoxical "chaosmos" the foundation for his artistic vision. One of the most important problems of his self-reflective fiction is that of interconnection of art and reality where Banville demonstrates his paradoxes of unreal reality and the real power of artistic imagination. The picture by Russian painter Leo Bakst *Terror Antiquus* seems to be the appropriate visual symbol for Banville's fear of being plunged into chaos of indetermination.

The second novel *Ghosts* emerges out of *The Book of Evidence* which imparts to anonymous narrator of *Ghosts* his name and his life history, clearing up the artful design of fragmentary narrative texture with the shaky design of its plot full of omission, oddities and mysteries.

The narrator is clearly Freddie Montgomery who has just recently been released from prison where he spent ten years for the murder of a girl. He settled on a small island the ontological status of which is highly uncertain. This unreal, mystical island recalls many literary islands and at the same time symbolizes the “ghostly” nature of artistic imagination that inhabits the world with phantoms of its fantasy. The title of the novel is entirely appropriate because each of its personages is aware of its fictional status, thus reminding of well-known lines from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*: “*We are such stuff / As dreams are made on*” [8, 1154].

The only real phenomenon in Banville’s unreal – or rather “surreal” – world is the narrative itself marked with the supreme intertextual abundance. Banville creates a capricious optics of reflections where the outer world is only a mould of the mind of anonymous narrator who in his turn feels himself somebody’s else creation and, like famous six characters by Pirandello, dreams to overcome his fictional status and to slip into the real world.

Ekphrasis in *Ghosts* becomes the main principle of the text structure generation, as the decisive role in creation Banville’s illusory world is assigned to the visual arts. The narrator’s apparent residence on the island is accounted for due his position as assistant to Professor Kreutznaer who also is the inhabitant of this strange place and whose life’s work is the work of the artist named Vaublin. We are told that Vaublin is the painter of *Le mond d’or* which receives much attention in the novel. It is quite obvious that Vaublin and his paintings are Banville’s invention. The artist to whom he refers is strikingly similar in style and content to Jean-Antoine Watteau. Banville’s choice for the artist is not accidental. Watteau might be called a poet in painting for whom the only power is imagination. He is also a painter for whom “all the world’s a stage” where his *fêtes galantes* are performed and it is this sense of theatricality that extends to the figures who wash ashore on Banville’s island. Watteau is a philosopher in painting who tried to express frailty and mystery of the world with light touches of his brush. For Banville Watteau’s painting is a quintessence of art itself with its constant oscillation between reality and illusion, life and death.

In fact, it is Watteau’s paintings that stand behind the most powerful imagery of the novel, his *L’embarquement pour Cythère*, in particular. The island where Freddie lives is transformed by his imagination into Venus’s love island, Cythera or Cyprus, while the real world is hovering on the brink of disappearing. The narrator’s references

to Vaublin's *Le monde d'or* is only camouflage for Watteau's famous picture where his theatrical figures are going to travel to idyllic Cythera. The depiction of Vaublin's work is one of the most striking examples of Banville's skill to find appropriate verbal equivalent for visual images and at the same time to express the peculiarity of its individual vision: "This is the golden world. The painter has gathered his little group and set them down in this win-tossed glade, in this delicate, artificial light, and painted them as angels and clowns. It is a world where nothing is lost, where all is accounted for a while yet the mystery of things is preserved; a world where they may live, however briefly, however tenuously, in the failing evening of the self... in a luminous, unending instant" [2, 231]. To my opinion, Banville's "unending instant" refers to the ekphrasis concept offered by M. Krieger [5, 13–15] who asserts that ekphrasis demonstrates the desire of flow of words, these conventional signs, to become illusory natural signs of visual character and therefore to reach the state of "still moment".

We may make the analogy of this concept with the well-known ending of F. Fellini's famous *Satyricon* where "alive" films' characters are transformed into still figures of ancient fresco. The verbal and changeable become mute and unchangeable, demonstrating some new aspects of interconnection of image and word.

Thus, the paintings of Watteau act as the central images in Banville's novel from which the artistic commentary is delivered, imparting to *Ghosts* some resemblance to a philosophical treatise on art. Banville's hero claims that art imitates nature not by mimesis but by obtaining the status of natural object. This sounds quite urgent in the context of contemporary philosophy of art that inclines to declare equality of real objects and art images, the products of artistic imagination. This point of view explains to a great extent the tragic paradox of the previous novel: Freddie's longing for making his victim alive by power of his imagination.

Teasing his readers with expectations of some enthralling events, Banville almost stopped the development of his plot. He creates subtle pulsation of moods and emotions. In the end of the novel his ghosts-like personages disappeared as suddenly as they once appeared:

These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits, and
Are melted into air, into thin air [8, 1154].

Revealing his desire to be consciously non-Irish but European writer, Banville once claimed: "*I have never felt part of any national tradition, any*

culture even... *I feel a part of a purely personal culture gleamed from bits and pieces of European culture of four thousand years*" [4, 93]. Almost all Banville's novels have intensely familiar features, as familiar as the whole weight of the European intellectual tradition.

In conclusion it is necessary to sum up the main approaches to ekphrasis in Banville's novels. Firstly, Banville's ekphrasis is not only mere verbal representation of the work of visual art. It forms the pattern of its perception, when vision of the painting is of primary importance. Including ekphrasis in his novel texts Banville models the image of an onlooker analogous to that of a reader in traditional literary works. Ekphrasis functions then as a mode of expression.

Secondly, Banville's ekphrasis becomes the main principle of the generation of the text itself. Using structuralist terminology we may say that the way from the object to ekphrasis is rather long, complex and is connected with multiple crossings of semantic field borders.

And thirdly, Banville reveals the paradoxical nature of ekphrasis. On the one hand, creating illusion of visual art by means of words ekphrasis reminds of the supreme power of *logos*: "In the beginning was the Word". And on the other, ekphrasis outlines the boundary which word can never cross and behind which there is a great ocean of creative silence. The closing lines of Banville's novel *Birchwood* written long before his *The Book of Evidence* sound like this: "*Whereof I cannot speak, thereof I must be silent*" [1, 176].

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ЭКФРАСИС И ЕГО ФУНКЦИИ В РОМАНАХ ДЖОНА БЭНВИЛЛА

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Abstract

Цель данной статьи связана с исследованием провокативного характера экфрасиса в прозе Джона Бэнвилла, одного из самых экспериментальных постмодернистских писателей Ирландии. Два его романа – «Улики» (1989) и «Привидения» (1993) – представляют собой интерес для этой цели. Эти романы сконцентрированы на таинственной и неодолимой власти живописи, провоцирующей героев Бэнвилла на совершение отвратительных преступлений. Экфрасис оказывается здесь источником сюжетной структуры романов, содержащей элементы триллера и детектива.

Проводя итоги, касающиеся главных подходов к экфрасису в романах Бэнвилла, необходимо заметить, что, во-первых, экфрасис здесь не только простая вербальная репрезентация произведения визуального искусства, но он формирует структуру его восприятия. Во-вторых, экфрасис у Бэнвилла превращается в главный принцип порождения самого текста: путь от объекта к экфрасису связан с многочисленным пересечением границ семантических полей. И, в-третьих, Бэнвилл раскрывает парадоксальную природу экфрасиса. С одной стороны, создавая иллюзию визуального искусства с помощью слов, экфрасис напоминает о главенствующей власти логоса. Но, с другой, экфрасис намечает ту границу, которую не дано преодолеть слову и за которой лежит великий океан творческого безмолвия.

Ключевые слова: экфрасис, восприятие, ужас, притягательность, визуальный, вербальный, интертекстуальный, образ, воображение, семантическое поле