

SUMMARY

Bartosz Swoboda, *Form Aesthetic Experience to Experience of Language. Ekphrasis in Polish Modernist Literature*

Experience is a term that has been pushed beyond the confines of scientific humanities for decades. For some time now, however, experience has seen its resurgence, reconstituting its cognitive value in academic reflection in numerous disciplines, while also yielding a significant transfiguration in literature research. The turn towards experience, observable in Polish literature studies for almost two decades, may derive from the conviction, aptly phrased by Ryszard Nycz, who in article entitled *Modern literature facing the experience* stated that “Literature devoid of the bond with experience would inevitably become an empty, self-reversible game.”

The main purpose of the thesis *Form Aesthetic Experience to Experience of Language. Ekphrasis in Polish Modernist Literature* is to situate reflections on ekphrasis in the perspective of the category of experience, with particular emphasis on aesthetic experience and experience of language. The starting point is to adopt a hermeneutic view of aesthetic experience that renders the phenomenon a methodologically valuable reference system in a research project with the primary task of exploring the phenomenon of ekphrasis. The argument is formulated that the subjective opening to the world of art, the encounter with a work of art drives the process of writing. On the analytical ground, however, the description of an art object is approached as a special form of articulation of aesthetic experience.

Provided that the interpretative key to modernist ekphrases may be the category of aesthetic experience, on the level of the research concept, the assumption is made that the act of literary expression, which to some extent is any description of a work of art, adopts the structure of subjective reference to reality, which is invariably mediated by language. Language also mediates the act of perception of a work of art and its interpretation, since these are processes that take place under the constraints set by discourse.

The work has a tripartite structure, but the main considerations are preceded by an introduction and thorough prolegomena, consisting of two separate chapters. The preface and the first chapter are of a purely methodological nature, while the subsequent chapter introduces a historical discussion of ekphrases from antiquity to modernism. The broad

historical and literary outline is extended by reflections on aesthetics, which situates ekphrasis in the context of categories of experience; the individual links of the chapter are also accompanied by analyses of different literary examples.

The first part of the thesis has a fairly homogeneous structure, as it consists of a series of analyses, to some extent taking on the character of a series of a few “case studies”, captured through the distinguished modernist modalities of aesthetic experience: path and encounter, contemplation and ecstasy, followed by analyses of significant textual examples from the area of native modernist literature: descriptions of gothic cathedrals in Stanisław Wyspiański’s letters and ekphrastic poems of Kazimierz Przerwa-Tetmajer and Leopold Staff.

The second part of the thesis presents greater diversity and brings a reflection on the bundle of various issues and problems, which, in contrast to the considerations in the first part, are rather on the side of ekphrastic techniques and writing strategies. In the following chapters of the second part of the work, the argumentation gradually advances to the level of a broader conceptual approach, based on a diagnosis of the challenges and difficulties faced by the authors in their efforts to describe the work of art, seeking to identify and discuss selected discursive practices and concrete writing solutions.

In the first part of the thesis, the most important contexts complementing the analysis of literary texts are structured against philosophical and aesthetic theories that prevailed in early modernism. In the second part, however, this essential context is outlined with reference to theoretical and literary reflections focused on issues closely related to ekphrasis.

In the first chapter of the second part of the work, the influence of pioneering trends in European art on the formation of the language of ekphrasis is thoroughly analyzed. The reflections focus on the search for examples of how methods of artwork description adapted to new artistic phenomena. The material for analysis is based on critical texts and reviews published in the modernist press, analyzing ekphrases of Japanese *ukiyo-e* woodcuts and descriptions of avant-garde artworks.

The following chapter addresses the ekphrastic device for rendering voice to silent works of art. Reflections and analyses of poetic texts refer to issues of mutual relations and struggles between verbal and visual representation that organize the space of relations between word and image.

The next, and last, chapter of the second part of the work examines the issue of ekphrasis as a means of artwork interpretation. It identifies and discusses two basic directions of its development, 1) a work of art is the starting point of a broader reflection, which, by

detaching from the work itself, transcends the ekphrastic description and, concurrently, delineates the direction of interpretation; 2) the interpretation is elaborated against a meticulous description and an insightful analysis of a selected piece or detail.

The last part of the thesis comprises two additional chapters, furthermore supplements and concludes the considerations opened in its second part. The first chapter discusses the transformations of the language of ekphrasis, illustrated by examples found in the poetry of Zbigniew Herbert and Aleksander Wat. The second chapter explores the issue of inexpressiveness, addressing this issue with the examples of essays by Zbigniew Herbert and Konstanty A. Jeleński.

The chapters of the third part of the thesis define a certain point of access, stemming from the presumption that the reflection on the texts of the early modernists has to be related to the development of ekphrasis in the following decades, to how its language(s) evolved in the face of new phenomena in art, new aesthetic and existential experiences (including war experiences). Concurrently, the last part of the work suggests a certain starting point for the analysis of ekphrastic writing in postmodern literature by expanding relevant contexts and applying the tools elaborated in the first chapters of the work.

The inclusion of reflections on ekphrasis in the Polish modernist literature under the category of experience is a way to adopt such a research perspective and view of the analyzed literature so as to highlight existence, transition, and involvement in the text. The research conclusions result in formulating a conviction that at the source of ekphrasis lies the desire to express the subjective experience of a work of art, a broad complex of experiences developing between admiring art and writing about art. Moreover, the model of experience always organizes in a certain way the manner of description, and is tangible in that way, being the source that initiates a specific process, and remains constantly present in its course.