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MODES OF EKPHRASIS: SIMONE MARTINI’S SIENESE CONDOTTIERE THROUGH THE EYES OF ZBIGNIEW HERBERT AND GUSTAW HERLING-GRUDZIŃSKI*

Abstract

The article focuses on descriptions of works of art in essays. It presents the form of ekphrasis and the method of inter-artistic analysis, and also emphasises the efficiency of the translational perspective (e.g. intersemiotic translation) in the study of the phenomenon of ekphrasis. As a starting point for the analysis and interpretation of fragments of Herbert’s and Herling-Grudziński’s essays, the article presents Martini’s *Guidoriccio da Fogliano at the Siege of Montemassi*, from the perspective of art history. Next, it discusses the verbal accounts of the painting presented by Herbert and Herling-Grudziński, examining their contents and poetics and paying attention to the character of the descriptions they propose. The description may focus either on the object or on the viewer, either on the representation itself or on its connotations. Accordingly, it is suggested that the corresponding modes of ekphrasis should be labelled ‘denotative’ and ‘connotative’, respectively. The aim is to present concrete realizations of ekphrasis and characteristic modes of perceiving and writing about a work of art, as well as to show how the subjective perspective of the observer (describing, commenting, interpreting) and an idiomatic style of expression are manifested.

Keywords: description, ekphrasis, intersemiotic translation, interartistic analysis, connotation, denotation

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The Context of Translation Studies

Ekphrases – i.e. texts evoking works of art – can be classified as examples of intersemiotic translation; in this way ensues a reference to the translational perspective (cf. Bassnett 1993; the concept of “intersemiotic translation” itself appears in Roman Jakobson’s “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation” from 1959). Translation is as much an elucidation as a rendering; and, in the case of ekphrasis, the artefact is, usually, at once elucidated (commented upon) and translated (described, or rendered from a visual language into a verbal one; Bilczewski 2010: 116). Thus, I am concerned here with an expanded conception of translation, when it is a matter of a verbal transposition of visual forms, which occurs in the domain of writing about art (whether critical or essayistic) and literature (prose or poetry). Such a standpoint may, in any case, be found in the work of many scholars.

Leo Hoek treats verbal and visual creation as analogous discursive practices, though created with the aid of codes of signification belonging to different forms of representation; while he interprets description (in forms such as ekphrasis) as fulfilling the function of a, broadly conceived, rewriting of a given work (Hoek 1994). These differences between codes, as Mitchell, in turn, thinks, have no relation with the communication of content, of which both language and image are capable; according to the conviction of this scholar, from a semantic point of view there is no fundamental difference between a text and an image (Mitchell 1994: 160). Peter Wagner judges similarly, when he underlines the fact that words and images, though they constitute different systems of representation, have a common denominator in two ways – they are both signifying systems and rhetorical constructions. From this derives the postulate of treating pictures as texts in their own right and of “reading” pictures (Wagner 1996: 34). An analogous interpretative strategy is adopted by Claus Clüver, who underlines the fact that, although equivalents are easier to find in interlingual translation, they are not unattainable in an intersemiotic transposition (Clüver 1989: 63). In a later text, he establishes that intersemiotic citation embraces linguistic re-presentations of cultural texts composed within non-linguistic systems of signification. The scholar speaks of intersemiotic rewriting, which is, for him, a synonym for the verbalisation of a non-verbal text (Clüver 1998: 45). Similarly, Seweryna Wysłouch thinks that one can translate a sign from one system to another, while the “level of the ‘building material’ (the matter

of the sign) cannot constitute an impediment to meaning-creating operations and the creation of meaning, which derives from relations between elements, and not from the substance of which those elements are made” (Wysłouch 2009: 52).

It is necessary, here, to underline the fact that, in the result of an intersemiotic translation thus understood, we do not, in any sense, obtain a reproduction of the given work in another medium; there is no strict equivalence between languages – and even more so between different sign systems, or different media. Languages are not transparent containers for meaning (Bilczewski 2010: 9, 119). Thus, translation is transformation (re-formation, re-creation – one might, in fact, say: transposition). The translation of a work of art into words will not replace the original; this type of translation remains tied to its pictorial source (Elsner 2010: 12). Lawrence Venuti expresses himself in a similar way, when he conceptualises translation (and he regards ekphrasis as one type of translation) as a communication constituting an interpretation of a source text, and not its reproduction. In the case of ekphrasis, we do not have to do with a simple transfer of a formal or semantic invariant, but with a hermeneutic relation, with an interpretation, which varies the form and the meaning of the source text, i.e. the artefact (Venuti 2010).

For this reason, I think that we will attain the best cognitive results if we juxtapose the work of art (here: a painting) indicated by the text, with the text itself, and if we supplement the reading of the ekphrasis with a viewing of the painting, thereby bringing both forms of artistic expression into confrontation with one another. It is in this way, also, that I read the texts selected here for analysis.

Modes of description, types of ekphrasis

As Maria Poprzęcka argues, the “images beneath our eyelids” create our own private museum of imagination (the term comes from André Malraux and his book of essays *Le musée imaginaire*, from 1947; cf. Malraux 2005). The remembered look of a work of art can, however, differ from works in real museums, churches and palaces. This, in turn, has consequences in the case of attempts to recreate encounters with artefacts, especially attempts preserved in the form of ekphrases, and so, speaking generally – in descriptions of works of art. As Poprzęcka emphasizes, it is mainly ekphrases that provide examples of “the simplest evidence of the deceptiveness of seeing, of the

mixing and superimposition of images” (Poprzęcka 2008: 147). Therefore, the question arises whether – in a given descriptive statement with regard to a work of art – we have to do with the evocation of a real painting or with the reproduction of the memory of a painting preserved in the museum of a (deceptive) memory and a (creative) imagination. And, further: is such an expression closer to a form of relation that establishes a distance, or to an immediate presentation of a scene (Stanzel 1970)?¹ These questions, in turn, link up with other issues. I think that particular types of description involve the text being saturated, to different degrees, with the following: information about the work of art and the author who writes about it, the communication of (objective) knowledge and the presentation of (individual) vision (together with the act of perception itself), the reproduction of the work (its faithful description) and the creation of the same work (or, rather its elucidation and interpretation than its description), the presentation of the intellectual reaction of the speculative eye and the emotional reaction of the sensual eye. Thus, the central issue is that of the relation between seeing and description, both objective and subjective (Poprzęcka 2008; Belting 2011).² An objective reading “describes (. . .) simply from the outside, from the perspective of the recipient, the factual state obtaining in the painting” (Balus 2013: 19); whereas a subjective reading would show not simply what the picture is, but what it is for a given viewer and, in this sense, would reveal the gaze – broadly conceived – of the one writing (Wysłouch 2002).³

¹ I make reference to terms from the article by Stanzel, though I transfer them to another context – Stanzel wrote about forms of narrative, while I write about modes of description.

² Poprzęcka undertakes a consideration of the following themes: the heterogeneity of the gaze, the contextuality and physically-conditioned character of seeing, the classical idea of the speculative eye seeking knowledge and, on the other hand, the longing to regain a spontaneity of vision, and, finally, the relation of knowledge to vision. However, she does so, above all, with reference to the discourse of the history of art. Belting, in turn, draws attention to, among other things, the specific non-objectivity and entanglement of every type of image (starting with the mental), as well as to the necessity, arising from this, of interpreting the concept of an image within anthropological categories: “An ‘image’ is more than a product of perception. It is created as the result of personal or collective knowledge and intention”; images “colonize our [human beings’] bodies” (Belting 2011: 9–10).

³ An objective description rests upon knowledge, accepted truths; it has as its goal a presentation of a given object that is as full as possible. A subjective description grows out of the sensuous experiences of the observer. It discloses the perceptual situation; the perceived object loses here its substantiality and stability, it is presented in various aspects, fragmentarily, and also from different points of view.

The goal of this article is to show how these questions are accentuated in the case of specific ekphrases; for this reason, I am juxtaposing, for the sake of comparison, instances of description of the same painting by two essayists. I examine the texts; however, to begin with, I also zoom in on the work of art itself, which stands at the centre of attention, in accordance with the method of interartistic analysis, a method that is close to me (Steiner 1982: 72–90). Essential here is the parallel analysis and interpretation of the text and of the work – created in another medium – which constitutes the corresponding intertext, in the conviction that, with this method, one can better grasp the modes of “mutual illumination” of verbal and visual works (Walzel 1974).

For lack of space, I do not attempt here a discussion on the theme of the various definitions of the concept of ekphrasis, and its historical development (cf. Słodczyk 2018). However, just as an indication, I would like to refer to the formulation of Leo Spitzer, since *de facto* it forms the core of the majority of later formulations and constitutes the departure point for many different methodological approaches. Spitzer defines ekphrasis as follows:

the poetic description of a pictorial or sculptural work of art, which description implies, in the words of Theophile Gautier, “une transposition d’art”, the reproduction through the medium of words of sensuously perceptible *objets d’art* (*ut pictura poesis*). (Spitzer 1955: 207)

There occurs here a narrowing of the meaning of ekphrasis to a description of a work of art and, even more precisely – to a poetic description of a painting or sculpture, a description reproducing in words a sense-perceptible work of art. Of value in this definition is precisely this drawing of attention to the mechanism by which a visual medium is transformed into a verbal one, which is characteristic of ekphrasis. I, myself, refer this term equally to literary texts (of all kinds), as also to essays and to art criticism (I distinguish literary, pretextual, ekphrasis from critical, utilitarian, ekphrasis). I also distinguish denotative from connotative ekphrases, on account of the character of the relevant description. The separation of denotation from connotation is tied to an observation deriving from the reading of descriptions of works of art, which often reveals that the writer concentrates on one aspect: 1) on denotation – when the author focuses his attention on a picture as an artistic creation and on its material dimension, when he elucidates the work of art from a technical or formal point of

view and describes what can be seen in the picture; 2) connotation – when the author describes the artefact in its dimension of meaning, while the description passes into commentary and interpretation exceeding what is straightforwardly shown in a given work, and includes exegeses, private associations and the subjective perception of the writer. The essayistic evocations of works of art analysed below, constitute exemplifications of precisely these two types of ekphrasis.

Martini's Condottiere

From their visit to Siena, both Polish essayists carried home memories of the spectacular juxtaposition of two frescos by the same artist, Simone Martini, in the place where they were originally created: the *Sala del Mappomondo* (the World Map Hall), in the Palazzo Pubblico. I would like to look closely at the second of the two paintings by Martini, evoked by both essayists; namely, not the *Maestà* – about which many authors write, though rarely in detail, in works dedicated to Herbert or Herling-Grudziński – but rather the fascinating *Guidoriccio da Fogliano at the Siege of Montemassi*.



Simone Martini, *Guidoriccio da Fogliano at the Siege of Montemassi*, circa 1330, fresco, 340 x 968 cm. Source: Google Art Project, Fondazione Musei Senesi (public domain).

The painting is an example of the artistic perfection achieved by this Italian creator (though near the end of the 1970's there arose some controversies surrounding the attribution and dating of this work; cf. Mallory, Moran 1986). It shows the taking of the castle of Montemassi, in 1328, by Guidoriccio, who was employed as a mercenary by the inhabitants of Siena. The symmetrical distribution of decorations in the hall of the Palazzo Pubblico situates, on one side, the enthroned

Madonna, the main patron of the city and, on the other side, the fresco just described, representing the embodiment of the military power of the city in the person of the *Capitano della Guerra del Comune di Siena*, the title carried by Guidoriccio (Norman 2003: 94). The immortalization, in the fresco, of the captured castle and the triumphant leader had a political and ideological dimension, in accordance with the conviction that an artistic representation of a castle, located within a building that is a seat of power, constitutes a legal title of ownership analogous to a document (De Castris 2007: 265). In the central section of the work, the painter placed none other than the person of Guidoriccio – for many years the commander of the Sienese forces – in armour, with the symbol of military power in his right hand and with a representative mantle decorated with black rhomboids (once they were probably covered in silver leaf) on a yellow background, as well as a motif of vine leaves, which are an allusion to the heraldic elements of the Fogliano family. Guidoriccio is visible in profile, since he sits on a white horse covered in a decorative caparison, whose colour and decoration blend with the mantle of the condottiere. He is surrounded by an unnaturally barren, almost abstract, landscape, built of massive cliffs, though reminiscent of the clayey foothills surrounding Siena. Here, the artist has depicted two constructions – on the left the castle of Montemassi, on the right a movable siege tower – almost symmetrically on either side of the man and, in addition, an encampment with visible tents and banners. The surroundings indicate the professional activity of the condottiere – he has ridden out of the camp and triumphantly parades against the background of the captured castle or, full of determination, draws near to it as a sign of its destruction. Man and horse present themselves ceremonially and hieratically; they seem to be deprived of a physical concreteness. Moreover, they have been placed unnaturally in their surroundings – the horse finds no stable basis, the position of its hooves does not correspond to the structure of the terrain. In the course of a 15th century restoration, likely arising from the bad conservation status of the plaster (which had absorbed damp), the original azure of the sky was replaced with navy blue. Silver elements – constituting a supplement to the decoration of the robe covering the rider and passing into the caparison of the horse – have also fallen away from the plaster. Thus, the work has lost the refined effects thanks to which it appeared, to an ever greater degree, to be suspended between fantasy and reality; though scholars

nevertheless write of the magical abstraction characteristic of Martini's style (Torriti 1997: 33).

Thus, we observe in this work: a representation – realistic in the context of the first half of the 14th century – of the components of the scene (buildings, tents, cliffs), though only if taken separately, since the painting as a whole does not appear as a faithful representation of reality; the effort the portraitist put into depicting the figure in profile; the plasticity of the forms of the man's body and of the horse's appearance, in relation to the medieval, geometricized and stiff ornamentality of the robes; and, finally, the somewhat curious spatial relation between the desolate landscape and the figure of the rider. This results in us discerning a contradiction, or at least a disharmony, between, on the one hand, the movement towards a faithful rendering of the appearance of the figure, the topographical elements and buildings (such that the whole scene is a recognizable illustration of a given event in a given place) and, on the other hand, a suggested allusion – the symbolic statement of this, to a certain extent fantastic, fresco.

Herbert's Perspective

In his essay "Siena", in *Barbarian in the Garden*, Herbert creates his own distinctive record of a journey, which, as Dorota Kozicka notes, "is not only a compositional frame for reflections on art and history, but also presents, firstly, a personal experience indispensable for these reflections, and secondly, a consciously chosen literary tradition" (Kozicka 2003: 150). On the one hand, we find here the perspective of a concrete sightseer and his subjective commentary; on the other hand, we find someone writing within the conventions of an account of an artistic journey, a distinctive contemporary *grand tour*, sometimes including the use of fragments from a real Baedeker. As Ewa Wiegandt states: "Herbert's essay-writing arose biographically and artistically from the sort of life and creativity which we call a 'journey'" (Wiegandt 1995: 212). Herbert, like past creators, makes artistic journeys and reports on them, but also weaves into them descriptions of places and artefacts of interest to him (cf. Sugiera 1991; Ruszar 2006; Berkan-Jabłońska 2008: 61–114; Fiut 2001). Herbert writes vividly about his visit to the Palazzo Pubblico and his wonder, as he declares in valorising terms, before "the most beautiful frescoes in Siena" (Herbert 1986: 57).

He describes, clearly, the place where the works of the early Italian renaissance observed by him are to be found. What is characteristic here is the wonder, found also in Herling-Grudziński, at the purely aesthetic aspect of these works, which defines the attitude of the recipient and demands that we focus on the description. Herbert devotes three rather short paragraphs to his presentation of the condottiere (after which he moves on – both literally and in the description – to the hall with frescoes by Lorenzetti; in the same way Herling-Grudziński “passes on”):

On the opposite wall – a magnificent equestrian portrait of the condottiere Guidoriccio da Fogliano. It so differs from the *Maestà* that this difference was even noticed by art historians. Painted fourteen years later, it is the negation of the lyrical, celestial *Maestà*.

A man in the vigour of life – stocky, with a common face and clenched fists – rides across a barren, flaxen ground. Over his armour he wears a dark beige coat with brown triangles. A similar caparison covers his powerful steed. Both rider and beast constitute a single body emanating tremendous energy and strength, though they ride at walking pace. Had the chronicles been silent about the cruelties of the condottieri, this portrait would furnish sufficient indictment.

The landscape is dry like a threshing floor. No trees, no grass – only an abatis of dry sticks and feeble flowers of war emblems. At the side of the fresco – the meagre architecture of two castles crowning twin hills. The one on the left is Montemassi whose castellan rebelled against Siena. There is no doubt that Guidoriccio will smash these towers, shatter these walls. (Herbert 1986: 57–58)

The essayist opens his statement with a sentence specifying the position of the fresco in relation to the *Maestà*, equally both in space (“on the opposite wall”) and in the semantic dimension (“it is the negation of the lyrical, celestial *Maestà*”). The commentator, considering himself a good “viewer” of works of art (“I think that I am a very good viewer of painting. I think that this also requires a certain talent” – as he said in conversation with Mark Sołtysik; *Herbert nieznany* 2008: 115), though at the same time complaining about the torments of description,⁴ shares, immediately in the first sentence,

⁴ As one scholar has noted, “the daydreams that a literary description is able to become a simple equivalent for a painting, were foreign [to Herbert]” (Kopczyk 2002: 152). The essayist wrote about this directly, and somewhat coquettishly, in words that have been cited many times by scholars: “I know well, too well, all the agonies and vain effort of what is called description, and also the audacity of translating the wonderful language of painting into the language – as voluminous, as receptive as hell – in which court verdicts and love no-

an assessment of the fresco depicting the condottiere (“a magnificent equestrian portrait”). The lack of personal pronouns, and the first-person form of the verb, mean that these assertions may be read both as a private judgement and as an objective affirmation. There is also no way to avoid noticing the irony in the second sentence, expressing the critical relation of Herbert to historians of art – though it is not completely clear whence this derives. We can read, in this manner of writing, a somewhat haughty, but perhaps also a joking, conviction of the superiority of the non-specialist’s opinion over the opinion of historians of art buried in books, blind to the essence of a work and concentrated solely on its dry analysis. The essayist does not aim for a description that would be complete, exhaustive, comprehensive. As Adam Dziadek emphasizes, scholarly, scrupulous treatments seemed to Herbert barren, boring; which does not mean, however, that he did not make use of them. Still, Herbert’s goal was not “the creation of a complete description of the work”, but rather “an inquiry into the mystery that is hidden in art” and into “individual experience” (Dziadek 2006: 32, 46).

The ekphrasis *sensu stricto* is conveyed by paragraphs in which the observer concentrates on the purely visual aspect, on the rendering of the look of the condottiere and his surroundings. The figure of the man is situated against the background of the landscape, which Herbert describes, pictorially – and having recourse to an anthropomorphic metaphor – as a “barren, flaxen ground”. The condottiere he describes only selectively – namely, by drawing attention solely to key elements of his person (age, build, face, hands, clothing) – and with the help of a few, but artfully chosen, words, which allow a rendering of his appearance, and the impression made by this figure. In a description that is not linguistically elaborate, Herbert makes use of unsurprising one-word adjectival descriptors (man – “stocky”, face – “common”, horse – “powerful”, strength – “tremendous”); these epithets are also created by means of prepositional phrases and other descriptive expressions. The commentator draws attention to the unity, imposing itself on the viewer, formed by the rider and the horse. He captures adequately in words the effect achieved by the just-mentioned pair; he makes use of

vels are written” (Herbert 1991: 96–97). Whereas, in conversation with Marek Zagańczyk, he revealed the following: “The translating of painting into language, the rolling out of these words, recalls the rolling out of dough. To use big words, first – epiphany. One sees at once and one sees everything. Then one begins to take apart the picture, to talk about a yellow-gold-white dress, a black collar; now this is the beginning of an analysis” (*Herbert nieznan* 2008: 2006).

metaphor and notices that they “emanate tremendous energy and strength” (or, more literally, “an uncommon strength and energy blow from them”). Since the landscape is nearly a desert, it is indeed the case that the “fluids” secreted by the mounted condottiere seem to be dispersed by wind, which might blow in the empty landscape. From the appearance and posture of the man, Herbert reads his determination and ruthlessness.

Looking further, he focuses his attention on the terrain surrounding the figure, and reaches for vivid, yet not complex, comparisons: “The landscape is dry like a threshing floor”. He supplements these descriptions (Aleksander Fiut writes emphatically of them as “full of visual power and gripping plasticity”; Fiut 2001: 131) with commentary, additions. The emptiness and barrenness of the landscape is made more distinct by the repetition of the word “żaden” (not any) in connection with the synecdochic singular nouns and the diminutive form of one of them (literally, “not a single tree, not a tiny tuft of grass”). As a result, we experience clearly (in imaginative apprehension) that absolute nothingness in the domain of the life of nature. The writer strengthens the effect, even more, by using a metaphor linked with pictorial epithets: “only an abatis of dry sticks and feeble flowers of war emblems.” The landscape, in Herbert’s snapshot, is completed by two castles on hills; and their severity and inhospitableness, but also brittleness, are rendered with the help of an animating epithet that is an expression of mental shorthand and also a metaphor: “the meagre architecture of two castles”. One must notice that – in this description, which is seemingly simple and short but, at the same time, exhaustive and which intentionally refers to key aspects of the work – the author makes use of the present and future tenses, by which he achieves the effect of making the scene dynamic.⁵ When he asserts: “Both rider and beast constitute a single body emanating tremendous energy and strength, though they ride at walking pace. (...) There is no doubt that Guidoriccio will smash these towers, shatter these walls”, his expression gains the characteristics of an account of actual events, and not of a mere description of an immobile scene from the past.

⁵ Bogdana Carpenter, among others, has written about the style of Herbert’s descriptions of works of art: “Herbert’s style is flexible and has an unusually wide range: it can be factual, concise, and stringent, but it can also be poetic and sensual. Both stylistically and structurally Herbert adapts his narrative to the trait that appears to him most significant and salient” (Carpenter 1992: 129). This scholarly hypothesis would explain the frugality of Herbert’s description – cleansed of redundant, anecdotal compositional additions – which has been adapted to the form of the fresco.

The essayist describes the work, which he admired directly. His account is given, as it were, on the fly; we have the impression that he stands before the fresco.⁶ We do not find here the distance of a time wiping away recollections, nor any traces of the, sometimes torturous, work of memory. The reader is given the perspective of a concrete viewer, which is reflected in the style of the account. Both information about the picture, and the manner of its viewing, are communicated here reticently, in a way that draws attention to that which intrudes upon the senses. The “I” of the writer – who is hidden behind the forms of the description – does not distinguish itself. At the same time, this is not a dry and neutral description, but one filtered through the personality and language of the poet: an observer sensitive to art, who remains the main element focusing the description. Only at the beginning is his other face revealed: in the perspective of a distanced traveller, a critic and an amateur fascinated with art (and pointedly commenting upon the work of the specialist).

Herbert presents neither the intellectual reaction of the speculative eye, nor the emotional reaction of the sensual eye. As Wiegandt notes, “works of art are, for Herbert, their own distinctive objective being. Evidence of this is the anti-psychological manner of their reception – having nothing in common with the theory of empathy – whose effect is a phenomenological description” (Wiegandt 1995: 218). The essayist remains abstemious (the “impersonality of the narration” and also its “emotional and stylistic reticence” have been indicated by, among others, Fiut 2001: 144); despite his praise for the fresco, he does not fall into a torrent of epithets full of rapture and of exclamations, nor does he flaunt his person. He demands that one focus on the work. Fundamentally, he describes rather than interpreting; he does not touch on problems passing beyond the material representation; which means that he stops at the artistic layer of the painting. Herbert does not attempt, under the influence of the fresco’s effect, reflections on such themes as: the nature of the human being, changeable and unjust fate, the unexpected and brutal course of history, the inevitability of death, the insipidity of human life deprived of the divine perspective; instead, he

⁶ Yet we know that the poet worked differently. In conversations, he betrayed his own “method of observing a picture” and of describing it: “for me the fundamental thing is a conversation with the picture, a waiting to hear what it wants to say; a good picture can never become dull through over-familiarity, one can never say: ‘I know this picture’. Then, when one writes about paintings – one does not write in front of paintings, only at home, with the aid of a reproduction – that is the whole drudgery, needed in order to reproduce that first, fresh impression” (*Herbert nieznaný* 2008: 204).

chooses to enumerate only a few themes that strike him and are embodied in the painting, especially when these are brought into a confrontation with the monumental representation of the Mother of God, located *vis-à-vis* the equestrian portrait. Herbert is an observer conveying in words the look of a work of visual art – indicating, even if briefly, all of the most important constituent elements of the representational surface. In this sense, he gives a complete description of the fresco; though he presents in more detail only the appearance of the condottiere. He does not devote attention to formal questions tied up with the work – its large, horizontally-extended format, composition or colour – and he informs us only marginally about the hues of the man’s robes. He also does not refer to any other voices besides his own – neither to the research of specialists, nor to the explanations of historians.⁷ The description is marked by traces of emotion, which the artefact has evoked – yet these are still only traces; it is, thus, a description focused on the object being described, and not on the subject describing. In light of the above remarks, I propose to call this description of a work of art a *denotative* ekphrasis – devoted to the description of the representational layer, and far removed from sharing more or less subjective or speculative interpretations of the content of the work.

Herling-Grudziński’s Seeing

Herling-Grudziński writes about Martini’s frescoes in the essay, *Siena i okolice* [“Siena and its Surrounds”], which originally constituted a fragment of his *Dziennik pisany nocą* [“Journal Written at Night”].⁸ His sight-seeing visit

⁷ I analyse here a concrete description, with which not all the opinions expressed by scholars – dealing with the theme of the description of works of art in this creator – comply (cf. Fiut 2001: 130, 137). One does not see here a presentation of the “personal likings and preferences” of the writer. There is no embarking upon “professional polemics with specialists” (there is only a general sarcastic comment suggesting the distinctive incompetence of historians of art). There is no particular flaunting of knowledge, or evidence of a specialist familiarity with literature. We also do not find in this concrete example a “many-sidedness of observation”, to which would correspond “a manifoldness of discourse” (travel note, anecdote, erudite interjections, the form of a scholarly dissertation, lyrical fragments, elements of literary fiction, as the scholar enumerates) – this is conveyed rather by an analysis of the essay as a whole, and not by the fragment that describes the artefact.

⁸ Many scholars have written about the place of art in the creative output of Herling-Grudziński, including, among others, Zieliński 1991, and Kudelska 1997 and 2013. Ryszard Przybylski devoted an article to the author’s interest in ancient art, which he connects with

to the city makes very probable a meeting with the artefacts, and also makes more precise the context of their viewing: again, we have here a travelling literary figure admiring Italian culture, if not, in general, the *stile di vita* of that place. To the representation of the condottiere alone, the essayist devotes one longer paragraph:

But I have no doubt that Martini's mild *Maestà* also owes its beauty and its expression to the contrast offered by the opposite wall. The same Simone Martini painted, upon that wall, the equestrian portrait of the condottiere Guido Riccio (or Guidoriccio) da Fogliano. A portrait of power, naked and lonely power. On the left – a city with towers; on the right – a fortified castle. The rider travels on a horse like a living battering-ram. "The landscape is dry like a threshing floor" writes Herbert, aptly. The sky above him is heavy and thick, billowing with black, dun and blue patches, portending storm. Landscape and sky together form a picture of an emptiness, at times almost metaphysical. Is the rider between them a conqueror or a prisoner? Gazing, now at the sweet *Maestà*, now at the martial and no doubt cruel condottiere, one drinks in a vision of a world cut in half: an image of the wavering balance between Spirit and Sword. The *Sala del Mappamondo* should perhaps change its traditional name to *Sala dello Spirito e della Spada*. (Herling-Grudziński 1994: 25)

Like Herbert, Herling-Grudziński introduces the fresco, depicting the warrior, by bringing it into a confrontation with the *Maestà* placed opposite. The viewer uses here the eloquent expression "sharp contrast": on the one side, the "mild" and "beautiful" Madonna, on the other, "the equestrian portrait of the Sienese condottiere". He adds the man's name to the information about his function and, in a separate sentence, brings out the essence of the work: "a portrait of power, naked and lonely power". The image of the commander on a horse becomes, here, an allegory of power, which is emphasised through the repetition of the word "power", together with animating epithets – "naked and lonely" – which indicate the place of the condottiere in the landscape, which is empty and inhuman in a double sense, since it is both devoid of people (hence Guidoriccio's loneliness) and inhospitable for living entities (the description "naked" is transferred here also to the landscape). At the same time, "naked power" can be read as a metaphor indicating pure power, the complete readiness and determination of the condottiere, especially in

the biography of the author. As he argues: "the fine arts constituted, in the life of Herling-Grudziński, a natural entourage, which demanded in many instances a specific commentary" (Przybylski 2013: 22).

the face of the later comparison of the movement of the horse to that of a “living battering-ram”.

Looking further, he points schematically at the surroundings and also quotes Herbert. Herling-Grudziński thinks, it seems, that the Herbertian sentence (“The landscape is dry like a threshing floor”) brilliantly captures the essence of the landscape (he, in any case, dedicates his essay to the poet). Yet he adds something here; namely, he enjoins the viewer to look at the sky, which he describes with a few qualifiers and prepositional expressions indicating gloom and malevolence. As we recall, the sky in this fresco was painted over, originally it was brighter; Herling-Grudziński’s description captures, penetratingly, the heaviness of the sky above the desert-like world, which suggests a vision of a world without God, an image – completely unchristian – of a lonely, and at the same time brutal, human being, conquering other people. Perhaps “portending storm” serves here as a metaphor, suggesting the thought that the commander brings death. Such an interpretative path is further supported by the next sentence of the description, in which the “emptiness” – which characterizes the dead landscape and the dark sky – accrues a metaphorical meaning; it is a matter, thus, of the condition of the human being, of questions about value and religion (the emptiness becomes “almost metaphysical”). And here the writer poses a question about the status of the human being: “is the rider between them [the sky and the emptiness of the landscape] a conqueror or a prisoner?” He transfers the theme of the painting to a higher interpretative level: it has to do with the warrior-as-conqueror; or with the human being who is a prisoner in a barren, desolate landscape; or, perhaps, with someone who is a prisoner of his own faults, of his worldliness and secularity; or, finally, with the individual imprisoned in his own solitude.

At the end of the description, the commentator again juxtaposes those two stylistically and thematically different works: the “sweet *Maestà*” and “the martial and no doubt cruel condottiere”.⁹ There imposes itself upon him a “vision of a world cut in half,” confirming him in his conviction that

⁹ Joanna Bielska-Krawczyk points to the differences between the descriptions of Martini’s fresco composed by Herbert and Herling-Grudziński. The scholar thinks that “in Herbert these paintings appear because they are interesting and beautiful. In Grudziński, on the other hand, they appear in connection with a certain conception which is considered superior to that of painting. Herbert describes what he sees. Grudziński discerns (makes visible) that which represents his vision of the essence of the world” (Bielska-Krawczyk 2004: 313). Though such a juxtaposition of descriptions involves a somewhat simplifying

the painting constitutes an image of a world deprived of the perspective of faith, a world inhuman, or perhaps precisely human par excellence – in this sense that it lacks God, that it is a world governed solely by the human being and his desires. In the last sentence, the author proposes – somewhat provocatively, but also with reference to the meanings of the paintings – changing the name of the space to the Hall of the Spirit and the Sword (as he writes, though making use of the Italian nomenclature – which reminds us that these works belong to the Italian cultural heritage, and conveys us directly to the Sienese Palazzo Pubblico).

In his description of the fresco, Herling-Grudziński does not focus on a faithful and complete verbal evocation of the artefact, on a transmission of knowledge about it; his description is abbreviated and selective; it is a static recounting of the work (the writer sees a closed and fixed scene). Paradoxically, what is revealed in the most detail here is the sky, which does not represent anything, while the rest of the constituent elements of the painting have merely been sketched. Thus, Martini's work seized this viewer, first, as an artistic work representing – in its painterly formation and theme – the opposite of the *Maestà*; secondly, as a work rich with meaning, which submits to an exegesis passing beyond the literal semantic plan of the painterly representation. The attention of this observer is riveted precisely by the following: not by the painting as an object in itself – an artistic artefact offering innovative formal solutions in the domain of composition or technique of execution, fixing certain historical events and the figure bound up with them – but rather as a carrier of broader meanings. The authorial “I” is present, in this ekphrasis, only at first (“But I have no doubts...”), and this in a moment when the author is still referring to the *Maestà*. Thus, the real presence of the writer (the empirical subject) before the fresco is delineated, but he immediately disappears and enjoins us to draw meanings from the painted work, while, at the same time, not demanding that we examine it in careful detail. There is, here, more interpretation – making use of the semantic fertility of the artistic work and its amenability to private exegesis – than description. The author does not show the artistic character of the work, but also does not show himself (he does not reveal his presence through the forms of pronouns and verbs), he does not flaunt his erudition with regard to the history of art, nor the emotions of a lover of art. Yet, the engagement

schema, it does underline the difference between the ways of seeing of Hebert and Herling-Grudziński.

of the writer does break through in the second part of his account, in which he speaks about a metaphysical void, and about the questions generated by the artistic form and theme of the work. Therefore, the one determining the focus here is the man who is an essayist-philosopher by vocation, penetrating the most essential questions, finding stimuli for his reflections in the creations of human culture, especially of painting.¹⁰ His statement, on the subject of the work in question – conveying a description that is outstandingly subjective – itself inclines one to reflection and interpretation, as if one were beside the painting, whose half-literary and half-philosophical clarification the statement offers to the recipient. Thus, Herling-Grudziński's ekphrasis is fundamentally connotative, but not elaborated; it bears only in a fragmentary manner the characteristics of a denotative ekphrasis (being reduced and visibly pruned in contrast to Herbert's offering).

On the basis of the examples provided by the two essayists' accounts of the same artistic model, we can see how non-homogenous ekphrases are, how variously modes of description are intertwined within them; this includes not only the relation of the denotative to the connotative and their mutual proportions, but also, among others, the relation of knowledge to seeing, description to interpretation, intellectual reasoning to emotional narration, impersonal expression to one displaying the authorial "I". Each realization of an ekphrasis demands an inspection with regard to these aspects, while a confrontation reveals the multiplicity of ways of describing artistic creations. This is not a matter of making value judgements, of the qualitative gradation of specific offerings; rather, it is a matter of becoming conscious of their non-uniformity, their difference – which derives not only from a difference in the style of writing, but also from a difference in the manner of looking at the work, from different sensitivities and interests, from a different

¹⁰ This theme is addressed by, among others, Bielska-Krawczyk, who explicitly argues that, in relation to works of art, the essayist is interested in "anthropological motifs", in "questions having to do with the human condition" (Bielska-Krawczyk 2013: 97, 102), and in relations between opposing spheres: light/darkness, life/death, the human dimension/the divine dimension, cognition/mystery. Other authors have also drawn attention to this, formulating such conclusions as the following: "Herling perceives painting not in a painterly way, but precisely in a literary way, directing his attention to what the work says" (Dębska-Kossakowska 2009: 108). Herling's writing is supposedly characterized by: "a search for the essence of things", an interest "of a rather literary or philosophical character" in the meaning content of a given artefact (Bielska-Krawczyk 2004: 319, 323), and also "a going-beyond that which is visible in the painting" (Rodziński 1998: 428).

cultural baggage and, finally, from the different goal that is aimed at by those authors who bring a work of art closer to us by means of words.

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