

Nataliya Gorbina

# The Ekphrastic Gaze in British Postmodern Fiction

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## 1. A Postmodern *Déjà Vu*

... I must say that I have often wondered whether, just as Turner invented sunsets, T. S. Eliot may have invented the seasonal surge in the incidence of people attempting to do away with themselves ... (Lanchester, *The Debt to Pleasure* 63)

As part of his musings about food and art, the hedonistic and snobbish narrator of John Lanchester's postmodern culinary-narrative *The Debt to Pleasure*, a self-proclaimed genius Tarquin Winot, appropriates Oscar Wilde's semi-ironic idea of looking at sunsets as J. M. W. Turner's inventions (Wilde, "Decay" 28-29)<sup>1</sup> to suggest that T. S. Eliot may be similarly regarded as an inventor of the spring upsurge of suicide attempts. Ironically enough, in accordance with Tarquin Winot's pretentious display of what John Banville calls "cod scholarship" (x) in the introduction to Lanchester's novel, this appeal to the now iconic – if not paradigmatic – standpoint that "Life imitates Art" (Wilde, "Decay" 26) simultaneously masks and unmasks the unreliability of his postmodern narrative. After all, he only makes this appeal in order to explain the death of his nanny – one of the many deaths the narrator himself is, in fact, responsible for. This blatant hint at *The Debt to Pleasure's* protagonist as a postmodern Dorian Gray is accentuated by his cheeky indication of the juxtaposition between modernism and postmodernism: "Modernism is about finding out how much you could get away with leaving out. Post-modernism is about how much you can get away with putting in" (159).

Whether or not Tarquin Winot actually succeeds at "gett[ing] away with putting in" (159) his philosophy of murder as artistic activity and getting away with murder itself, such an instance epitomises a parodic return to the existing ekphrastic discourse. It is a return to the whole sociocultural and interdisciplinary – rather than exclusively literary – metanarrative of ekphrastically formulated ways of seeing. At the same time, it is a turn towards postmodern (de-/re-) construction of meaning(s) through a postmodern subject's ekphrastic gaze. And whether or not Lanchester's recycled ekphrastic image of a simultaneously Turneresque and Wildean sunset epitomises specifically British postmodern ekphrasis, this reference to an aesthetic and sociocultural milestone in the British and Irish tradition essential to the formation of a postmodern ekphrastic way of seeing surely illustrates the postmodern poetics and politics of the ekphrastic gaze.

The more we read – or should we say, *look at* – various ekphrastic visions presented to us through the gaze of a fictional character in a postmodern narra-

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1 See, for example, J. M. W. Turner's painting *The Scarlet Sunset* painted in c. 1830-40 and located at Tate Britain in London.

tive, the more we begin to recognise that these visions appear, time and again, as ironically persistent and almost pervasive constructs of something that has already been seen both by the character and by the reader. Moreover, the feeling of a *déjà vu* is accompanied by the feeling of a *déjà écrit*: an intertextual feeling that something has already been written, a feeling that evokes the entire multi-layered Western ekphrastic tradition and the sociocultural ways of seeing (and the ways of writing about seeing) that have been formulated within it and have become embedded in the Western consciousness. A feeling that inspires us to embark on a scholarly quest for meaning(s) that we can expect to be explicit and implicit, (pseudo-)innovative and parodic, (self-)contradictory, (self-)subversive, aesthetic, historical, ideological, inherently socioculturally specific, and vividly postmodern.

On the meta-level, curiously enough, ekphrasis in British postmodern fiction cannot be described as an equally pervasive topic in academic research. However, recent scholarship on ekphrasis in general has certainly been following a particular trajectory: a literary-historical approach that has gained popularity after the publication of James A. W. Heffernan's influential study on the history of ekphrastic poetry *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (1993). Since then, ekphrasis criticism has been enriched by Michael Benton's historical survey of the role of the spectator in ekphrastic poetry from Homer's shield of Achilles as "[t]he classical paradigm" (Benton 40) of ekphrasis to W. H. Auden's poem "Musée des Beaux Arts" as "[t]he doyen of ekphrastic poems of the twentieth century" (40); Michael Hattaway's analysis of ekphrastic representations of houses in English fiction as descendants of Homer's shield of Achilles and Virgil's shield of Aeneas (6); Rebecca Warburton Boylan's treatment of the history of ekphrasis from Homer's shield to Oscar Wilde's fan (Warburton Boylan ix); Valentine Cunningham's overview of the ekphrastic tradition from Homer's *The Iliad* to Julian Barnes's *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* (Cunningham 67).

As we can see, one aspect receives particular attention in the scholarly works on the history of ekphrasis: the perceptual dimension of this phenomenon. Thus, in his 2007 article "Why Ekphrasis?", Cunningham looks at the tradition of Western literature as a tradition guided by the "ekphrastic[']s" (63) determination "to direct his gaze, his characters' gaze, our [readers' – N. G.] gaze" (57) towards an ekphrastic object. In doing so, the scholar establishes that "the western *imaginaire*"<sup>2</sup> (58) pivots on such a perceptually motivated "ekphrastic encounter" (58) and particularly on so-called textual revivals and revisions of pre-

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2 Emphasis in the original. Unless otherwise indicated, all emphasis in quotations is original.