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Ut pictura poesis: Ekphrasis, Genre Painting and Still Life in Virginia Woolf, Margaret Atwood and Alice Thompson

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Abstract
This article examines descriptions of persons, objects or scenes in three novels, Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Alice Thompson's *The Book Collector,* which either straightforwardly or obliquely evoke various painting genres. I argue that although ekphrasis typically names nowadays "the verbal representation of visual representation" (James Heffernan), certain descriptions beg for a revision of the modern category of ekphrasis. My present corpus includes both ekphrases 'proper' and descriptions which evoke, without referring to, portraits, still lifes or genre paintings. I call the latter category *readerly reverse ekphrasis*, to emphasise the reader's co-operation with the author – during the reading process – to determine, beyond the painterly affinities of the description, its *structural* makeup as ekphrasis.

Keywords: ekphrasis, reverse ekphrasis, genre painting, still life, portrait, *To the Lighthouse* (Virginia Woolf), *The Handmaid's Tale* (Margaret Atwood), *The Book Collector* (Alice Thompson)

Introduction: Who Is Afraid of Ekphrasis?

A rhetorical and poetical device as old as *The Illiad* and a literary subgenre too, *ekphrasis* "has been variously defined and variously used" – in fact, its "definition ultimately depends on the particular argument to be deployed" (Wagner 11).[i] In 1955, Leo Spitzer interpreted Keats's "Ode on

a Grecian Urn" by recourse to his now famous coinage, *ekphrasis*, defined as "the poetic description of a pictorial or sculptural work of art" (207). Such description, Spitzer continues, "implies, in the words of Théophile Gautier, 'une transposition d'art,'[ii] the reproduction through the medium of words of sensuously perceptible *objets d'art* (*ut pictura poesis*)" (207; see also 218). Nonetheless, as Stephen Bann contends, ekphrasis thus understood depends "on the risky presumption that the visual work of art can be translated into terms of verbal discourse" (qtd. in Webb 7). For other theorists, "ekphrasis includes descriptions of non-representational arts" (Webb 7). Mieke Bal defines ekphrasis, in *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History*, as an "evocation of absent images" (qtd. in Vågnes 31, n. 2); James Heffernan, as "the verbal representation of visual representation" (3).

Spitzer's definition notwithstanding, this representational device did not originally evoke artworks or even objects (Webb 14). *Scholia Graeca in Homeri Iliadem* and various *Progymnasmata* suggest a large range of topics – in Ruth Webb's summary of Theon (first century CE), "persons (*prosopa*), places (*topoi*), times (*chronoi*) and events (*pragmata*)" (11), e.g. battles. Artworks "as a category are of no particular importance" in the historical definition of ekphrasis, but only marginal additions, as in Nikolaos's fifth-century CE *Progymnasmata* (Webb 11). Rather, all *Progymnasmata* authors regard ekphrasis as "a type of speech (*logos*) that has a certain effect upon an audience" (Webb 11): "it appeals to the mind's eye of the listener, making him or her 'see' the subject-matter, whatever it may be" (Webb 11-12), due to the vividness of description, *enargeia* (13). To this day, ekphrasis aims to create the *illusion* of the object's physical presence in the text (Cunningham 61), in fiction as much as in art criticism (Wagner 14).

By re-encoding as verbal what exists (or is claimed to exist) visually, modern ekphrasis also *remediates* – as both renewal and reformation (Bolter and Grusin 45-61) of – the visual. Thus, ekphrasis establishes what Roland Barthes calls "the reality effect" (*l'effet du réel*), viz., the *present*ation of "the knowable, touchable real" (Cunningham 62) as mere verbal illusion which signifies the category (rather than the content) of the real (Barthes 148).

This article examines three novels – Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927), Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and Alice Thompson's *The Book Collector* (2015) – to identify whether certain descriptive scenes may (or may not) qualify as ekphrases of still lifes, genre paintings and portraits. Part of this corpus does include the description of art objects; I use such instances of ekphrasis as a foil to argue my case about the usefulness of pushing the *modern* concept beyond its current limits. I contend that certain texts may elicit an ekphrastic reading of a description that in itself has no explicit (or implicit) artistic referent. Rather, it is the alert reader who may regard certain descriptions as verbal remediations of painting genres thanks to *structural* affinities which, as Irina Rajewsky argues in a slightly different context, "cue" the reader "to apply painting-bound schemata" (57).[iii] I call such cases *readerly reverse ekphrasis* and regard the category as different from *hypotyposis* (the ancients' *enargeia*; see Wagner 20 and Cuddon, s.v. "Hypotyposis"); *intermediality* (the often overlapping subcategories of (a) medial transposition, e.g. film adaptations, (b) media combination, e.g. theatre, opera, film or installations, and (c) intermedial references, e.g. ekphrasis (Rajewsky 51-3)); *ekphrastic inversion* (Langås's coinage: the fictional text's references to an art object "to make a vivid portrait of character that is dense with art history and other connotations" (76)); *speculative ekphrasis* (Vågnes's coinage: "evocations of visual events that resonate with distinct, speculative aesthetic imaginaries" (29)); or *interart dialogue* (Yacobi's term for alluding to "a pictorial model, a common denominator, a generalized visual image," e.g. the Last Supper (601)). My iconological proposition does not draw on, although it virtually pushes to its logical end, Rajewsky's contention about the "illusion of another medium's specific practices" generated by an intermedial reference, which "potentially solicits in the recipient of a literary text, say, a sense of filmic, painterly, or musical qualities, or – more generally speaking – a sense of a visual or acoustic presence" (55). Furthermore, although not drawing on Barthes, my concept resonates with his contention that Gustave Flaubert's description of Rouen, in *Madame Bovary*, is "*constructed* so as to connect Rouen to a painting" (Barthes 144). That

reverse ekphrasis needs theorising is also intimated by Tamar Yacobi's critique of ekphrasis theorisation (603-10).

My notion of reverse ekphrasis may recall the "iconic projection" proposed by Hans Lund, an aspect of literary pictorialism which tackles the human disposition to perceive reality – here, the text's world – as if it were a picture:

> Description proper is less important than the method to use *markers* in order *to appeal to and mobilise a reader's pictorial knowledge, visual thinking and eidetic ability*. The pictorial quality is not primarily manifested by means of a sum of single elements of visual motifs but by emphasising the field of vision as unity structured as a picture . . . the observer in the text examines reality from some distance *through a screening frame* which, to him [*sic*], seems to change the world of objects into a visually aesthetic structure. (Lund 197-8, emphasis added)

For Lund, the text signposts its pictorial visuality through framing devices and through the in-text observer's peculiar positioning enabled by the former. By contrast, I am interested in the pictorial potential of texts which often do little to frame such pictoriality. David Kennedy too points in this direction when he argues that "the spatialization of the text produces a visual text for which each reader has to make his or her own ekphrasis" (10).

If "the psychological impact of the word and the imaginative contribution of the listener" (Webb 18) posited by ancient rhetoricians are undeniable, then my contention about reverse ekphrasis is not unwarranted. If, moreover, "the very basis on which the definition is built distinguishes *ekphrasis* [defined in terms of its impact on an audience] from the concept of description familiar from modern narratology" (Webb 12), then reverse ekphrasis simply regards such vivid descriptions from the perspective of the reader.

To understand how the reader can 'reconstruct' a description as ekphrastic, we may appeal to a gestalt theory adopted by cognitive linguistics, indeed crucial to the prominence view of language: the theory of figure–ground organisation. This theory points to how the human attentional system works (Verdonk 240-1): "our attention is captured by the figure or, the other way round, *we create a figure precisely because*

we concentrate our attention on it" (Verdonk 241, emphasis added). Accordingly, reverse ekphrasis may be regarded as the reader's projection of a painterly figure on a description not earmarked as ekphrastic.

My iconological hypothesis may arouse manifold objections. It may appear to disregard René Wellek's warning, in "The Parallelism between Literature and the Visual Arts" (1941), "against going too far with analogies between the arts and against the confusion of the arts by a simple transference of terms from one art to another" (qtd. in Eidt 13). It ignores Heffernan's distinction between ekphrasis, on the one hand, and pictorialism, which "generates in language effects similar to those created by pictures" such as "focusing, framing, and scanning," and iconicity, e.g. "the visual iconicity of the pattern poem" (3), on the other. Both literary modes also "*remind* us of graphic representation" (Heffernan 3). Heffernan insists on the second-degree representationality of ekphrasis: "ekphrasis differs from both iconicity and pictorialism because it explicitly represents representation itself"; "ekphrasis uses one medium of representation to represent another" (4). Yet, by 'enlivening' the static painting (Heffernan 4), ekphrasis may yield, I argue, to application in reverse: to condense in/as a static verbal picture a scene whose framing and focus recall painting genres. Furthermore, my proposal might suggest that any description could conceivably be regarded as the textual analogon of a portrait, still life, genre painting or historical painting.

To pre-empt the latter pitfall, I would tentatively propose one criterion for singling out genuine cases of reverse ekphrasis from the pool of descriptions: the symbolic or emotional relevance of the vivid description as a turning point in the text. Nor is the latter criterion foolproof, though. A further criterion might concern the highlighting of the described object/activity/scene in the title (overtly or more covertly) and/or the text's insistence on this object/activity/scene at various points.

My criteria court the danger of still regarding readers as apprentices who dutifully follow the blueprint: the reader can only identify cases of reverse ekphrasis – depending on her/his familiarity with the visual arts – because the author "has somehow devised a machinery in which the receiver is not [*sic*] more than a cog" (Wagner 38, n. 103). Such, at least, is the impression left on Wagner (n. 103) by Wolfgang Iser's *The Implied*

Reader and *The Act of Reading* and even by Umberto Eco's *The Role of the Reader*, at odds with Michael Riffaterre's reader-response analysis of the readers' image processing (4-5). On the other hand, the reader becomes the actual ekphrastic 'agent' by virtue of her/his recollection of artworks, triggered by the description in the text. Memory can retrieve those relevant 'images' as a function of the vividness of the text's descriptive passages. Indeed, ever since Quintilian, *enargeia*/vividness of description became enmeshed in discussions not only of oratory (and generally speech) and imagination, but also of *ars memorativa* (Webb 13).

In order to shed some light on the issue of relevance in distinguishing between reader-inferred reverse ekphrasis (the opposite of textual ekphrastic reference to artworks) and run-of-the-mill descriptions, I will examine selected descriptive passages from Thompson and Woolf which present cases of modern ekphrasis to compare and contrast them with cases in Woolf and Atwood which elicit the reader's apperception of the descriptions as ekphrastic. Reverse ekphrasis could be regarded as "happening" or perhaps also as "a happening." In stating this, I have taken my cue from Bal: "What happens when people look, and what emerges from that act? The verb 'happens' entails the visual event as object, and 'emerges' the visual image, but as a fleeting, fugitive, subjective image accrued to the subject" (9). As "a happening" which often works as "an intensification of the narrative, introducing a degree of detail which would involve the audience both imaginatively and emotionally" (Webb 14), reverse ekphrasis assumes the reader's active participation in meaning-making.

Textual Ekphrasis in Thompson and Woolf

Thompson's *The Book Collector* may conceivably be less familiar than the other novels in my corpus, which is why a plot overview seems advisable. This Gothic novel set in Edwardian England builds its plot on the hallucinations of its protagonist, Violet, now Lady Murray, juxtaposed with the story of the three dead or missing women from the local mental asylum and the description of the arcane bibliophile ways and nightly

disappearances of Violet's husband, Lord Archie (*sic*!) Murray. Archie is a strange book collector: unlike his wife, he cherishes first edition books as worthy of extravagantly expensive binding, but hardly of reading. Though discredited as insane, and accordingly institutionalised in the local asylum and eventually brainwashed with electroshocks, Violet manages to unravel the mystery of the female body which she discovers accidentally, but which vanishes once she has mentioned the event to her baby boy's nanny, Clara (Clara is, unbeknownst to Violet, Archie's accomplice and mistress.) A gifted con man, Archie never ceases to befuddle his naïve wife, whom he nearly turns into a feeble-minded, self-doubting wreck. Violet's only reward for her ingenuity *despite* brainwashing is avoiding being murdered through bloody integration into one of Andersen's fairy tales, unlike the other three women, paralysed by the surprise attack. It is precisely her avidity for reading which enables Violet to come to grips with the uncanny posture – indeed, studied display – of the murdered woman (Betsy, a fellow asylum inmate, meanwhile released) and also to trace the befuddling 'circuit' of the rare first edition of Andersen's fairy tales, the book that she must not touch.

Thompson's novel evolves as an exquisite *noir* remediation of selected Andersen episodes à la Angela Carter. It also unfolds as a masterful collection of brief ekphrastic scenes, all seen through Violet's eyes, with one exception: the third-person partial description of the untouchable Andersen book. Untouchable for Violet (Thompson 23-4), though not for Archie, the book fetishist (11-12), or for Lavinia Dryden (145), the taxidermist bookbinder entrusted with the binding and decoration of this special book. On retrieving the Andersen volume from Lavinia for the fourth time, Archie praises it, to Lavinia's delight and proud demonstration of the precious copy's quality binding: *"'Look how smooth it is.' She drew a finger over the cover and caressed the insert of the almost-but-not-quite-full moon*" (Thompson 145).[iv] The briefly noted gesture of the book's co-creators – caressing the forbidden book – during their short dialogue cannot, arguably, elicit the reader's identification of the scene, through reverse ekphrasis, as either a still life or a genre painting. (The metaphorical allusion to the forbidden fruit of the knowledge of good and evil central to Genesis 2 is, arguably, immaterial

to an ekphrastic reading). Too meagre to qualify as genuinely ekphrastic, the above description nonetheless points in the ekphrastic direction.

One "week after coming back from the asylum" (Thompson 145) for the second time, freshly brainwashed, Violet receives a surprise present from Archie. It is the much-coveted Andersen fairy-tale book, with which Archie cannot truly part, but which here becomes the decoy:

> He traced over the cover with his hand and then bent down and kissed it.[v] . . . The cover was of green vellum. A circle had been cut out of the calfskin on the front cover, the hole partially filled in with crescent-shaped segments in different shades of white and off-white, inserted one after another like a waxing moon. One of these slivers bore the remnant of a snakeskin scar.[vi] (Thompson 145)

This (in Chapter 34) is the fullest description of the Andersen book cover, exquisitely bound and decorated – a genuine objet d'art worthy of the Murray collection. To Violet's observation about the yet incomplete moon, Archie responds with "a light smile" and a vague promise to remedy that soon (Thompson 145). He actually intends to complete the moon design with a strip from Violet's skin, he warns/threatens her right after confessing having flayed both his beloved Rose and the unloved/ unwanted "mad" women (Thompson 152).

The cover decoration will be described anew in Chapter 37, on the final page of the novel, as the unmaking of the book alongside the undoing of the two criminal minds, Archie and Clara, in the purifying fire set by Violet to the library. Placing the fairy-tale book on the top of the book pile and lighting its cover, Violet

> watched as the circular moon of the pale skin inserts turned black and shrivelled, as the gilt-edged pages of the book then also caught fire. Soon the green dye began to run, revealing the pale skin of the binding. The colours of the illustrations melted into one another. (Thompson 159)

The description of the volume fallen prey to the flames reconstructs, in reverse, the very process of book making from the original nineteenth-century printing to the recent human-skin decoration.

Early in the novel (before her first institutionalisation and partly responsible for it), dismayed by Archie's irrational prohibition that she never enter the library again, Violet re-opens the safe. She peruses the forbidden book in the hope it will yield clues about its mystery-shrouded preservation therein (Thompson 42). Unsuccessful in decoding hidden messages, if any, in the various first and final letters (and combinations thereof) of the chapters, Violet also examines the illustrations for patterns. Perusing the illustrations ("The mermaid in the sea. The girl dancing in the red shoes. The wild swans flying in formation") yields no result; yet, she notices that "the cream circle on the green cover had been filled in a little to look like a waxing moon" (Thompson 42) – unbeknownst to her, with a strip coming from Amy's back (Thompson 32).

These very images, albeit much more gory, inform the jigsaw puzzle that Violet's boy, Felix, plays with on the floor, to his mother's horror (Thompson 100-101). The jigsaw depicts three Andersen scenes: "Elise throwing her eleven nettle shirts over her eleven brothers in 'The Wild Swans,'" where the incomplete eleventh shirt leaves the youngest brother with "one wing for an arm"; the now legged mermaid dancing with the prince as if "on the sharp edge of swords"; and the executioner "cutting off the dancer's feet imprisoned in the red shoes, so that she could finally stop her relentless dancing" (Thompson 101). The strong aversion that the graphic jigsaw puzzle provokes in Violet owes as much to its gore – inappropriate for her child – as to the nightmarish resemblance between the swan-human represented in the jigsaw (Chapter 24) and the like 'composition' of Betsy's dead body, which Violet had seen shortly before (Chapter 22).

The descriptions analysed so far easily qualify as ekphrastic. Let us examine whether the minute description of Betsy's corpse (Thompson 93) also does. Approaching the unseemly sight, Violet notices that the woman's body – tethered to the ground by iron rings – is "posed in a shape of a star," with her right arm "cut off below the socket" and replaced by "a large swan's wing," itself outlined by "intricate rivulets" of blood. Not only is Betsy's body metamorphosised into Elise's eleventh brother ("It looked as if the swan's wing was sprouting naturally from the empty arm socket"), but it is disfigured beyond human recognition.

Completely skinned and also "eviscerated, turned inside out," with the entrails "spilling out like so many question marks," dead Betsy "did not look like a human being now" (93). The vivid description of the cadaver – as *enargeia*/*hypotyposis* – may be regarded as ekphrastic in a broad (modern) sense. However, insofar as Archie's 'composition' draws upon *illustrations* in two books, which it entwines palimpsestically, the scene becomes a two-layered ekphrasis. One reference is Andersen's book: Violet sees the illustration of "The Wild Swans" both in the first-edition volume, however understated, and in her son's jigsaw puzzle. The other concerns anatomy book illustrations of skinning such as that in the book which Violet browses in her husband's library (in Chapter 6), and which Archie has likely consulted for his anatomical work:

> The picture of a body being flayed caught her eye. Hanging upside down, by chains, by his feet. It was a cadaver in an anatomy class . . . hanged upside down on a star-shaped board. His arms and legs outstretched like a four-pronged star. (Thompson 23)

So tremendous is the impact of the book's illustration that, after perusing the forbidden Andersen book for tell-tale clues, Violet will dream a gory écorché – a psychic re-presentation recollected as ekphrasis (in Chapter 11):

> That night she *dreamt* of a naked corpse hanging in a room of dark rock, arms and legs pulled apart in a triangle, *an image from the anatomy book she had been reading*. The skin had been peeled off to reveal the bloodied flesh of the body, the veins, the muscles. . . . Discarded strips of skin lay around on the floor. (Thompson 42, emphasis added)

The dream strangely adumbrates the display of Betsy's dead body. Can Violet's unconscious mind – (in)formed by anatomical drawings – uncover Archie's conscious-mind violence?

To conclude, the vivid description of the skinned Betsy, an ekphrasis in the original sense (*enargeia*), evokes both the anatomical book's écorché illustration and the Andersen fairy-tale image/text – a case of modern ekphrasis. Likewise, the description of the book cover not only

is a modern ekphrasis, but, through the book's pivotal role in the novel, becomes symptomatic of the novel's Gothic ambit.

Another interesting case of modern ekphrasis occurs in *To the Lighthouse*, where the dialogue occasioned by Lily Briscoe's portrait of Mrs Ramsay reading to James unfolds as an ekphrasis of the art critical type. First mentioned in Part I (Woolf 217, 297), the abstract portrait is analogised topically to the religious iconography of the Madonna and Child. Lily – who jealously guards her work in progress against being gazed upon – nevertheless allows William Bankes to see her canvas and ask for explanations:

> What did she wish to indicate by *the triangular purple shape*, "just there?" he asked. It was Mrs. Ramsay reading to James, she said. . . .
>
> But the picture was not of them, she said. Or, not in his sense. There were other senses, too, in which one might reverence them. By a shadow here and a light there, for instance. Her tribute took that form, if, as she vaguely supposed, a picture must be a tribute. A mother and child might be reduced to a shadow without irreverence. *A light here required a shadow there*. . . . But now – he turned, with his glasses raised to the *scientific examination of her canvas*. The question being one of *the relations of masses, of lights and shadows*, which, to be honest, he had never considered before, he would like to have it explained. . . . It was a question, she remembered, how to connect this mass on the right hand with that on the left. . . . But the danger was that by doing that the unity of the whole might be broken. (Woolf 217-18, emphasis added)

The artist–beholder dialogue unfolds as the ekphrastic presencing of the non-figurative portrait of "universal motherhood" (Woolf 217) through art critical description and explanation of Lily's composition. The *abstract* painting comes into view as the botanist puzzles over and appraises scientifically the *abstract* "relations of masses, of lights and shadows." Unsurprisingly, the very description is fragmentary and hesitant, an elicitation of meaning through an elicitation of the very words for what can be seen on the canvas.

In what follows I examine whether or not other descriptions in my corpus qualify as modern ekphrasis.

Readerly Reverse Ekphrasis in Woolf and Atwood

I have demonstrated elsewhere (Ciobanu 147-55) that the scene of Mrs Ramsay's art-informed appreciation of her daughter's dish of fruit for the dinner party, in *To the Lighthouse*, renders the composition akin to Dutch still life paintings. The passage (Woolf 259) is far from simple in its ekphrastic suggestions. Mrs Ramsay – here, the reader's proxy – couches the fruit dish qua unacknowledged *still life* composition in terms of picturesque shapes of a natural landscape turned into a *landscape painting* – a trifold remediation:

> Her eyes had been going in and out among the curves and shadows of the fruit, among the rich purples of the lowland grapes, then over the horny ridge of the shell, putting a yellow against a purple, a curved shape against a round shape, without knowing why she did it, or why, every time she did it, she felt more and more serene; until, oh, what a pity that they should do it – a hand reached out, took a pear, and spoilt the whole thing. (Woolf 259)

Mrs Ramsay's sensuous description of the fruit *shapes* ("lowland grapes"; "horny ridge of the shell") and their juxtapositions, as well as of *colours* and *shadows*, evokes the picturesqueness sought in landscape in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century.[vii] "Picturesque" named at the time an aesthetic attitude of appraising natural scenery by recourse to art, thus enabling – yet also constraining – the onlooker to enjoy beauty in nature as a function of "how closely it approximated to the paintings of favoured artists" (Chilvers 357; see also Chilvers 357-8 and Murray and Murray 314-15). However, Mrs Ramsay's lingering gaze – alongside her disapproval of Augustus Carmichael, who voraciously plunders the fruit dish – in this scene that aestheticises everyday life also indicates the likeliness of appraising the lush forms of the fruit composition in terms informed by – indeed, recalling – *the female nude genre*.

The framing and focus of another, brief, scene evokes *genre painting* – a case of Lund's *iconic projection*:

> Now all the candles were lit, and the faces on both sides of the table were brought nearer by the candle-light, and *composed*, as they had not been in the twilight, *into a party round a table*. . . .
>
> Some change at once went through them all . . . and they were all conscious of making a party together in a hollow, on an island; had their common cause against that fluidity out there. (Woolf 250-1, emphasis added)

The light and shade contrasts describing the dinner guests seated around the table in this composition ("composed") may evoke the chiaroscuro of Caravaggio's *The Supper at Emmaus* (1601),[viii] if a less densely populated religious genre painting that includes a realistic still life, with a foregrounded fruit dish.

Arguably, in the first scene, readers may notice Mrs Ramsay's art critical – and indirectly Woolf's feminist – engagement with ways of looking: Mrs Ramsay virtually evokes the still life cum landscape painting cum female nude. In the second scene, however, readers actively engage in construing the description, if at all, as the ekphrastic evocation of a genre painting featuring a genteel dinner party or a religious genre painting like Caravaggio's *Emmaus*. The two scenes might seem relatively insignificant both quantitatively and qualitatively in the economy of *To the Lighthouse*, considering the novel's focus – already announced in the title – on the Ramsays' voyage to the lighthouse to humour James. However, Part I, to which the two scenes belong, centres on the dinner party as the canvas on which the participants' idiosyncratic interests and mannerisms are depicted. Accordingly, the two scenes as fragments of the dinner party description cannot be ignored qualitatively and may qualify as reverse ekphrasis.

Another noteworthy case occurs in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, in the scene of the Commander inviting Offred, his procreation-bound sexual slave, into his office for a Scrabble game, then a forbidden pastime. First reminisced in Chapter 23 and then briefly alluded to in Chapter 24, the clandestine Scrabble game is focused upon in Chapter 25, albeit set squarely under the cautionary sign of *reconstruction* (Atwood 140), with further details in Chapter 32. Fragmented as it is both diachronically, as a series of games played on different nights, and

textually, as the subject matter of several chapters, the Scrabble scene begs for an investigation in terms of reverse ekphrasis.

On the first night, the Commander's invitation-request sounds surprising. Scrabble "was once the game of old women, old men, in the summers or in retirement villas, to be played when there was nothing good on television. Or of adolescents, once, long long ago" (Atwood 144). Offred describes the contents of the Scrabble box – "the plasticized wooden counters I remember, the board divided into squares, the little holders for setting the letters in" (145) – which the Commander "dumps . . . out on the top of his desk" and turns over (145). She "join[s] in":

> I hold the glossy counters with their smooth edges, finger the letters. The feeling is voluptuous. This is freedom, an eyeblink of it. . . . What a luxury. The counters are like candies, made of peppermint, cool like that. . . . I would like to put them into my mouth. They would taste also of lime. The letter C. Crisp, slightly acid on the tongue, delicious. (Atwood 145)

Beyond its *still life* feel, is the scene the reverse ekphrasis of a *genre painting* featuring an ordinary pastime? For the latter, think of, say, Frans van Mieris the Elder's *Lady at the Virginal* (1658) or Johannes Vermeer's *Lady at the Virginal with a Gentleman* (*c*. 1662-1665), from the golden age of Dutch painting, or of Robert Braithwaite Martineau's *The Last Day in the Old Home* (1862) and Paul Cézanne's *The Card Player*s series (which depicts peasant game players). Offred's early remark that the now forbidden game used to be played by the elderly and by adolescents evokes the 'good old days' obliterated by the dystopian present. For all its air of unrealness, under the circumstances, the scene nevertheless feels like the Barthesian "l'effet du réel" which Cunningham associates with (realistic) art trans-mediated verbally through ekphrasis.

In Chapter 32, the description of the Scrabble follow-up evolves into a tableau vivant: "Sometimes, after the games, he sits on the floor beside my chair, holding my hand. His head is a little below mine, so that when he looks up at me it's at a juvenile angle. It must amuse him, this fake subservience" (Atwood 217). The angle indicates the protagonist's awareness of the Commander's pose, a Venus and Adonis cliché such as

Joos de Pape's in his *Venus and Adonis* (1629), which conceivably enables the man to cope with the evolution of their relationship or furnishes him with a mental prop in the schizophrenic unlearning process of Gilead totalitarianism.

Offred demonstrates her ekphrastic awareness in an early description of the Handmaids, processing by twos, on their way to the Women's Prayvaganza venue (Chapter 33):

> I glide with Ofglen along the sidewalk; the pair of us, and in front of us another pair, and across the street another. We must look good from a distance: picturesque, like Dutch milkmaids on a wallpaper frieze, like a shelf full of period-costume ceramic salt and pepper shakers, like a flotilla of swans or anything that repeats itself with at least minimum grace and without variation. (Atwood 220)

The "wallpaper frieze" simile indicates the ekphrastic scope of the description of the interchangeable Handmaids' picturesqueness; "picturesque" itself is symptomatic of Offred's artistically savvy gaze.

Considering that Offred regards the Scrabble game, already at an early moment, as pivotal to her escape from the prison of handmaid-ness, virtually to her flight from Gilead,[ix] I would suggest that the scene indeed represents a turning point in the novel. In the Prayvaganza scene, the Handmaids' procession is emblematic of the dystopic novel's dehumanisation of women as either cooks or surrogate mothers-to-be.[x]

Conclusion

When readers enter the intermedial game of 'seeing' a painting where none is referred to, through reverse ekphrasis, they experience a complex remediation of one genre (painting) through the other (novelistic discourse) which evokes it. The former comes to life as a tableau vivant[xi] (the genre paintings in Woolf and Atwood), as still lifes pulsing with luscious colour (in Woolf) or uncanny beauty (in Thompson) or as gory portraits within reach (in Thompson). Whilst the abstract portrait (in Woolf) sets in motion abstract thought rather than palpable movement, the quiet painting does come to life.

However, in ekphrasis as elsewhere, not all that glitters is gold. Drawing on W. J. T. Mitchell's notion of a historically paragonal relation between pictorial and verbal signs (and representations), circumscribed by the paragonal nature/culture dichotomy (Mitchell 77-9), Heffernan "seeks to elucidate this struggle by investigating ekphrasis, the literary representation of visual art" (1). Heffernan's second reason for his interest in ekphrasis (in the modern sense) is congenial to my argument: the contest between the evoked image and the language which does so (reason number one) "is often powerfully gendered" (1). Ekphrasis is typically "the expression of a duel between male and female gazes, the voice of male speech striving to control a female image that is both alluring and threatening, of male narrative striving to overcome the fixating impact of beauty poised in space" (Heffernan 1; see also 6-7). In *To the Lighthouse* and *The Book Collector*, I suggest, this struggle is *en-gendered* – i.e., generated along gender lines (de Lauretis 38) – atypically. What the two novels share in common, which, moreover, sets them apart from the ekphrastic 'norm,' is a female author; what differentiates them from each other is the differently gendered control of the gaze which produces the ekphrasis. In Woolf, the 'artwork' thus inferred by readers – the fruit dish – is composed by a young woman, Rose, and implicitly likened to still life, landscape painting and the female nude by her mother. Confronted with the competing gaze of Carmichael, a poet blind to the aesthetics of the fruit arrangement and heedful only of his appetite, Mrs Ramsay becomes the jealous guardian of her daughter's composition. The very co-existence of gazes – which Mrs Ramsay is fully aware of (Woolf 250) – is not just gendered, but also paragonal, for it implicitly likens Mrs Ramsay to a painter or an art critic and Carmichael to a coarse beholder. In Thompson, the objet d'art is denied to the female gaze by its male co-creator.[xii] Furthermore, the ekphrasis is fragmentary in time, in space (across several chapters) and also in gaze (as a description shared between characters) – quite appositely, considering the stages of realising the cover decoration and the many (unwilling) skin donors. Ironically, when Violet eventually sees the book, her gaze is controlled – she is permitted to look at it by her husband – and hardly powered by her reason and keen curiosity, brainwashed as she is – also courtesy of her husband. What

Violet now registers visually is voiced by an omniscient narrator who – for all the congeniality manifested throughout the novel through free indirect thought as a 'pictogram' of Violet's perception of the world within and without – betrays the woman and sounds rather like the 'classical' narrator penned by male authors.

The Handmaid's Tale offers yet another configuration of the power relations underpinning ekphrasis: the genre painting suggested by the Scrabble scene depends on the protagonist's recollection of a seemingly distant past to furnish the admittedly faint painterly background. Nonetheless, the recollective distance measures here not in years, but in degree of totalitarian repression in the dystopic rewriting of the past. More visibly than in the other novels, in Atwood the female protagonist is permitted or not to see and/or participate in ordinary everyday life – on a discretionary basis – by the Commander, the hypocritical anonymous representative of the repressive regime and at one remove of patriarchy.

However, unlike the other two novels discussed here, *The Book Collector* also poses an intriguing ethico-hermeneutic challenge. This challenge concerns how the readers are to appraise – indeed, to respond to – the objets d'art (Thompson 25) which grace both Lord Murray's house (or, extra-fictionally, actual residences and various public places) and indirectly fiction (through ekphrasis). At one remove, it concerns how fiction can be appraised as itself a self-standing objet d'art, or "well-wrought urn." The point is how the readers are to appraise objets d'art, including their ekphrastic version, which dabble in violence such as the many re-presentations of Ovid's Marsyas,[xiii] or texts – often beautifully written – that derive their aesthetic energies from the death/murder or torture of their fictional or historic characters. The list of fictional/dramatic texts alone would be endless, from mythology (*The Bible* included), Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Seneca's *Thyestes*, medieval Christian drama and martyrology, Elizabethan revenge tragedy and the Marquis de Sade, to Edgar Allen Poe's tales, John Fowles's *The Collector* and Alice Thompson's *The Book Collector*. Sometimes, as in Poe's "The Oval Portrait," artistic creation itself seems to occur only through the immolation of the sitter, so that the "well-wrought urn" is first and foremost an *urn*.

Such historical ubiquity of representations of violence has concerned many before me. To mention but a few: Cunningham (65-9); W. H. Auden in "Musée des Beaux Arts": "About suffering they were never wrong, / The Old Masters" (79); Angela Leighton on Auden's poem: "it is in front of art that 'the ethical imagination is most severely exercised'" (qtd. in Kennedy 3); Daisy Barrett in Iris Murdoch's *Nuns and Soldiers* (qtd. in Cunningham 69); or the narrator of the ekphrastic Chapter 5 of *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*: "How do you turn catastrophe into art?" (Barnes 125). It is hard to decide whether "aestheticiz[ing] violence" (Berberich 177) – or rather "the anesthetization of violence" (180) – merely "tap[s] into contemporary society's fascination with violence and spectacle" (178), albeit the legacy of the past in modern garb. Actually, graphic descriptions might "get the reader to ask uncomfortable questions about their own readiness to confront traumatic images" (178) and about their own motives (179) – perhaps even morbid fascination – for reading texts that dabble in violence. Charlotte Lacoste argued in 2010 that texts which rely on graphic representations of violence "force us [readers] to identify with the perpetrators and even exonerate them" (qtd. in Berberich 178). I sometimes wonder about myself: Why am I reading or seeing – and writing about – aestheticised representations of violence?

Notes:

[i] See Webb's and Yacobi's historicisation of the uses of the term *ekphrasis*, and Henryk Markiewicz and Uliana Gabara's of *ut pictura poesis*.

[ii] Actually, the phrase is Huysmans's in *L'Art moderne* (1883) (Webb 16).

[iii] My identification of reverse ekphrasis as grounded structurally tallies with Rajewsky's contention that "a literary text can evoke or imitate specific elements or *structures* of film, music, theatre, etc." (57). See also Wellek's recommendation that "critics should look for *structural* relationships . . . in inter-art comparisons" (qtd in Eidt 13).

Similarities in focus notwithstanding, my proposal of reverse ekphrasis parts with Rajewsky's discussion of intermedial reference, of which ekphrasis is a case. Rajewsky focuses on remediation – as defined by Bolter and Grusin – as encompassing two different kinds of intermedial reference: one simply remediates prior media, whilst the other "*makes reference*, and thus constitutes itself in relation," to such other media (Rajewsky 61): "Only in the latter case a

meaning-constitutional strategy is at issue, relevant for the overall signification" of the text that remediates prior media by resorting to intermedial reference (61).

[iv] Thompson uses block italics in three other instances, all prior to this one, to distinguish the perspective, as if the novel had two separate omniscient narrators, one somewhat complicit in crime: in the respective 'stories' of the capture, murder and skinning of the missing women, Amy Louden (Thompson 31-2), Donna Wakefield (72-5) and Betsy Moore (86-7).

[v] Archie's worshipping of the book might seem excessive, if not downright insane. Yet, the book is bound in the skin of Archie's deceased first wife, Rose (Thompson 130). His *exegi monumentum* gesture intends to enshrine at home both the book – generically dear to Rose – and her preserved skin as a "keepsake" (129): "I wanted to create a token of my love for her" (152), as many other people also did with Lavinia's aid (Chapter 30).

[vi] The strip comes from Donna's leg: Donna got the scar in the wake of falling off the stage (Thompson 65). Archie has appositely chosen "The Red Shoes" as a blueprint for the professional dancer's death (74-5).

[vii] The "sweeping picturesque movement" (Wall 1) comprised, according to Sir Uvedale Price (in 1810), "all that the painter admires – [. . .] all intricacies, [. . .] all the beautiful varieties of form, tint, and light and shade; every deep recess – every bold projection – the fantastic roots of trees – the winding paths of sheep" (qtd. in Wall 1).

[viii] Woolf must have been familiar with *The Supper at Emmaus*, acquired by the National Gallery in 1839, for in the early twentieth century all acquisitions were on display.

[ix] "I know I need to take it seriously, this desire of his. It could be important, it could be a passport, it could be my downfall" (Atwood 150).

[x] Nonetheless, such reductionism tallies with the Bible: Martha (Mary and Lazarus's sister) is but the food provider (Luke 10.38-42) and the Virgin Mary is the meek "handmaid" chosen by God (Luke 1.38).

[xi] See Rajewsky on how intermedial references expand "the representational modes of the medium being referred to," for instance by "supplement[ing] the stasis of painting" such that the readers might feel they can see "a painting put into motion, turned to life – a *tableau vivant* in the truest sense of the term" (57).

[xii] Archie considered preserving his wife's skin, and, accordingly, harvested all the skin necessary for the book binding and cover decoration, which then Lavinia took up and wrought to aesthetic perfection.

[xiii] Violet ponders the immense suffering of the Marsyas-like live flaying represented in the anatomy book she browses (Thompson 23), an at least second-degree representation (in the anatomy book – on the Ovidian model, if itself 'inspired' from Greek sources).

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