

## Ekphrasis in Shawna Lemay: "To make something mythical of my life"

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### Abstract

The object of analysis of this paper concerns the majority of the poems from *All the God-Sized Fruit*, written by the Canadian poet Shawna Lemay. The poems were built following five ekphrastic frameworks: appropriation of artistic style, process of creation, critical analysis, narrative, and dialogue. The intertwining of these frameworks with discussions about the processes of writing and painting helps the poet to build up her identity as woman, poet and woman-poet.

Key words: Ekphrasis. Intersemiotic transposition. Visual art. Canadian poetry. Power feminism.

In the beginning of the first part of *All the God-Sized Fruit*, an epigraph by the Indian writer Sunetra Gupta says, "it is only in telling another's story that one can see into oneself" (Lemay, God-sized 1). This epigraph contains the nucleus of Lemay's strategy, suggesting that it is through the act of looking at visual works and their creators' lives that the poet can understand her own process of creation. This is what occurs in most of the poems in the first part and in all of these in the third part of Lemay's book.

Shawna Lemay was born in Alberta, Canada, in 1966. She is married to the still life painter Robert Lemay, and has published four books: *Against Paradise*, *All the God-Sized Fruit*, *Still* and *The Blue Feast*. Her books contain a common feature: the relationship between literature and visual works.

I have chosen to analyze the first book, *All the God-Sized Fruit*, published in 1999, which has won two Canadian awards. The reason for my choice is that this book is composed by poems that relate intersemiotic studies to the issue of the role of women in the contemporary world.

The book is divided into three parts. The subject matter of the poems consists of the investigation of art and creative process, and the poet's process of building identity. My analysis investigates the way the personae mirror the other in visual works—paintings, frescos, and advertisements. It also deals with the way the act of mirroring helps the poet simultaneously understand her own process of creation and trace her identity as woman, poet, and woman-poet.

Throughout the first poem of the book, "Self-Portrait: Threads from an Art Forger's Diary", there is a description of a three-folded process of creation of a poem: the poet is mirroring and appropriating the visual representations, dismantling them, and recreating them. This process is similar to what Lemay has done in most of the poems present in *All the God-Sized Fruit*. However, I have chosen to focus only on the poems that have clear visual referents, the only exception being the first poem.

"Self-Portrait: Threads from an Art Forger's Diary" contains three voices: a neutral one; the art forger's one; and the metapoetic consciousness's voice, marked by italics. Right at the outset, the art forger alludes to the mythological character Penelope and to her activity of weaving the shroud. The persona declares in line 19 its interest in the process undertaken by Penelope.

The art forger believes that Penelope's freedom in building and dismantling her work is similar to the art forger's ability to scrutinize original works. Both have the power to manipulate history and time. The speaker implies that only with this freedom and power it is possible to achieve the ideal forgery: the exact reproduction of the original work of art.

However, the metapoetic consciousness interferes in line 40 and asks the art forger, "*Is there such a thing as self-effacement?*" This observation warns about the danger of incorporating personal details to the forgery, from now on understood as reconstructed images of the original, not aiming at reproducing it exactly. In fact, the work of art has become more accessible to the audience in the age of mechanical reproduction, a fact that has affected the aura of the original work, as Benjamin proposes in the essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936).

Contemporary artists are encouraged, as Hutcheon's claims in *The Politics of Postmodernism*, to appropriate and re-create works of art as part of a political agenda. Thus, the meaning of a forgery is once more changed, and now it is related to the way the artist appropriates the work of art and uses it to contest or vindicate an issue. This new meaning makes forgery something "allowed" in postmodernism.

The art forger believes that this new meaning of forgery can be extended to all forms of art. In line 48, it is declared that "an art forger is like a novelist." In fact, literature appropriates old plots and recycles them in a process of re-creation. Consequently, poets and writers in general can be understood not as forgers anymore, but as "creators."

"The Captives Remain Serene," another poem in this part, expands the understanding of the role of poets. In this poem, there are two voices: the one that observes Vermeer's *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter* and the metapoetic consciousness. The observer attempts to recreate Vermeer's painting through words.

This poem also contains two relevant metaphors: the one of imprisonment and the one of creation. The metaphor of imprisonment implies that the signs of the visual representation are all restricted to the apparent image on the canvas. It says, "It is a painting about boundaries... / The frame separates the painting / from the wall on which it hangs" (l. 29/36-37). This metaphor is counter-balanced by the metaphor of creation, indicated by some signs in the painting: the color blue, the pregnant woman and the pearls on the table. However, the speaker observes that the woman is reading a piece of paper, whose reading is not accessible to the viewer of the painting. Immediately, the speaker finds an alternative way to overcome this apparent barrier. The declaration that "[i]t is a painting brimming with words / though no place names are distinguishable on the map" (l. 54-55) represents the observer's discovery that the use of imagination makes it possible to read the image as a text, full of meanings

("brimming") that are all conciliated by the reader — the viewer, or the speaker of the poem. This theory about "text" and "the role of readers" was first proposed by Roland Barthes, in the essays "From Work to Text" and "The Death of the Author".

The poet therefore moves from a mere observer of the painting to one that reads it, conciliating words and images. The tool for such conciliation is enunciated by the metapoetic consciousness in lines 24 and 25: "*ekphrasis*." As an ancient form of literary genre, it takes place, basically, when a writer attempts to re-create, in the verbal system, a work originally composed in another semiotic system. Indeed, as the roots of the word ekphrasis show, indeed, it was used to refer to direct verbal descriptions of visual representations. In Latin, it means "description" and is related to a rhetorical exercise that aimed at describing an object (referent) in a way that it should seem "alive" before the eyes (Ekphrasis 64). At first, the objects used as models (2 A.D.) were people, places, and scenes of festivals. Only later (5 A.D.), ekphrasis turned out to be descriptions of works of art.

It was Homer, in the *Iliad*, who improved the ekphrastic exercise, incorporating it in his epic. The most famous ekphrastic passage in literature (Book 18 of the *Iliad*) consists of the description of the shield wrought by Hephaestus for Achilles. This is also the longest ekphrastic passage in Homer's work — about 130 lines — containing some characteristics that reflect the world of the *Iliad* itself, besides pointing out some of the "possible" features of *post-Homer* ekphrasis.

James Heffernan attempts to investigate ekphrasis and elucidate the permanent struggle between the "image" and the "word" — the *paragonal* relation between visual arts and literature. In his "Introduction," he proposes a definition for ekphrasis: "the verbal representation of a visual representation" (Heffernan 3). This definition excludes a number of literary works that have been called ekphrasis. He argues that concrete poems may "remind" the viewer of graphic images, but do not aim at reproducing a particular visual work, and claims that ekphrasis is a verbal representation of *visual works* that are essentially *representational*. According to him, representational works are the ones that have *aesthetic* values above all. The critic, thereby, excludes poems about visual works, which have an immediate utilitarian function (Heffernan 193). He gives as an example of a non-representational work the Brooklyn Bridge, which was the source of inspiration for Hart Crane's poem "The Bridge." According to Heffernan, this poem is not ekphrastic because even though Crane describes the bridge using pictorial terms, it is still a bridge, not an aesthetic object.

Although some scholars, such as W.J.T. Mitchell, adopt Heffernan's definition, Claus Clüver disagrees in part. He revisits Heffernan's explanation of ekphrasis, and decides to modify it, claiming that the author does not explain well or give clear reasons for restricting ekphrasis to representational works, believing that the insistence on the subjectivity of the term "representational" causes difficulties for criticism. While preserving the first part of Heffernan's definition ("Ekphrasis is a verbal representation"), he proposes a radical change for the second part. According to him, ekphrasis is "the verbal representation of a real or fictitious text composed in a non-verbal sign system" (26).

The main difference in relation to Heffernan's is the referent object of the ekphrasis. While Heffernan excludes objects that are not *essentially* representational, such as the Brooklyn Bridge, for instance, which was built for an immediate practical purpose, Clüver's definition "does not restrict the objects of ekphrasis to representational texts: it covers architecture, as well as absolute music and non-narrative dance" (26). Indeed, Clüver chooses not to classify the referent objects as

"representational" or "works of art." According to him, what matters is whether the referent can be verbally represented as a "text" or simply as an "object."

Another change introduced by Clüver consists of the use of the term "transposition" in the place of "translation." According to the critic, the term transposition allows the poet's free interpretation of the text, while the term translation restricts the reading to a straightforward change from visual to verbal sign system. This form of transposition can be attested in the end of the poem "The Captives Remain Serene," when the speaker guesses the nature of the piece of paper held by the woman, wondering if it is a letter from her husband, or from a friend, or even from her lover.

This freedom of transposing the visual into the verbal system happens because the reading is affected by the cultural background of its translator. As Diniz affirms, though using the term translation in another context, "every translation is [...] a cultural translation." Indeed, the speakers in Lemay's poems depart from the inspiration of women subjects represented on the visual works by four women artists to trace the poet's identity.

The poet's readings of the paintings depart from mere descriptions and extend to imaginative wonderings about the artists' processes of creation. These wonderings have led to subject matters related to gender issues, such as the conflict of choosing between marriage and professional career faced by Paula Modersohn Becker. Other topics related to the creative process also appear in the poems. This is the case of the speaker's calling attention to the process of three painters: Rachel Ruysch's creativity behind the painting of apparent simple subjects, and Rosa Bonheur's and Artemisia Gentileschi's boldness and courage to deal with personal matters.

The fact that the poet has sought inspiration in other women artists' experience has led Lemay to understand her own process of creation. When analyzing her poems, it is possible to see that kitchen and food are recurrent themes. Food appears with three basic meanings: as "raw material" for still life paintings; as celebration, feast and pleasure; and as a metaphor for income, salary, an allusion to Virginia Woolf's wondering "now what food do we feed women as artists upon?" These current themes reflect the way the poet considers the connection between these two activities, cooking and art. The poems also show that art is present in Lemay's everyday life, and poetry emerges out of prosaic moments.

Besides, Lemay has been in permanent contact with art through her husband. This contact has favored Lemay's close observation of details and she could understand the whole process of painting. This is illustrated in the poems "By the Still Life Painter's Wife" and "Aftermath of the Still Life."

This contact with art at home as part of the domestic routine has affected Lemay's positioning concerning gender issues. It is possible to recognize some resemblance between her attitude and the one proposed by Naomi Wolf, in the book *Fire with Fire*. According to this critic, there was a time when women considered themselves victims of society, and for that reason, they delayed their rights to equality. However, contemporary times have brought women the chance to make decisions and confront possible prejudices, favoring the learning of how to deal with such power and maintain it. This is named by Wolf as "Power Feminism." Although it is somehow an optimistic message, Wolf's "Power Feminism" translates Lemay's potential as a woman who writes poetry and is at the same time a homemaker.

The understanding of her role as a poet is complemented by the idea that "meaning is lurking, hidden" ("Still Life with Greasy Noodles: A Travelogue, a Work

Poem," l. 54). The poet is the one in charge of translating the image, as an active observer, and constructs meaning out of them.

This task is possible when the poet frees imagination, conciliating the old paragonal struggle of representation between words and images. In the poem "All the God-Sized Fruit," the speaker, observing Robert Lemay's painting *Pomegranates and Geraniums*, describes the role of the poet as this conciliator:

I can set my pen down, reach my hand up  
and into the picture.  
This fruit is a symbol of my own power  
to make something happen, to make a small choice.  
To make something mythical of my life  
in my own way. (l. 39-44)

The poet understands that the ekphrastic impulse allows her to write poetry, conceiving her role as a translator, the one able to conciliate image and words, to extract meanings from images and to put that into verbal expression. Only through the ekphrastic impulse is the poet able to describe the paintings and, at the same time, to add her extra knowledge about them according to her own purposes.

The close analysis of Lemay's poems reveals that her poetics is also innovative because there are five ekphrastic frameworks that intrinsically permeate the structure of the poems and are directly connected to their subject matter. By "ekphrastic framework," it is meant that the structure of the poem excels the mere description or reference to the visual work. This particular way in which Shawna Lemay has used ekphrasis can be grouped and classified as appropriation of artistic style, process of creation, critical analysis, narrative, and dialogue. The denomination "ekphrastic framework" and the terminology used in the classification of the five categories were all proposed by the author of this paper, based on the reading of several theoretical texts.

In conclusion, as the title of the book suggests, the search for the hidden meaning ended up in the (autobiographical?) search for "all the god-sized fruit." Lemay's adventure in deciphering the meaning of the images created the conditions for the development of her own process of building identities, conciliating her roles as woman, poet, and woman-poet.

#### Resumo

O presente artigo trata da íntima relação entre obras visuais e verbais. Para tanto, foram escolhidos, como objeto de análise, a maioria dos poemas do livro *All the God-Sized Fruit*, da canadense Shawna Lemay. Os poemas analisados possuem uma estrutura ekphrástica que assume basicamente cinco formas: apropriação de estilo artístico, processo criativo, análise crítica, narrativa e diálogo. O entrelaçamento dessa estrutura ekphrástica com as discussões sobre o processo da escrita sustenta a tentativa da poeta de modelar sua identidade como mulher, poeta e mulher-poeta.

Palavras-chave: ekphrasis, transposição intersemiótica, arte visual, poesia canadense, "Power Feminism".

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