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Ekphrastic Encounters in Bo Carpelan's *Urwind* and "Den skadskjutna ängeln"

The Finland-Swedish poet Bo Carpelan (born in 1926) can be classified as a modernist writer.¹ Like many other modernists, Carpelan is a successor of the *ut pictura poesis* tradition. His poetry and fiction, as well as his essays, are rich with allusions to the visual arts. In this article, I plan to study the relation between literature and the visual arts in Carpelan's novel *Urwind* (1993) and his poem "Den skadskjutna ängeln" (1983, The wounded angel), focusing on the rhetorical device of ekphrasis. Referring to W. J. T. Mitchell's (1994, 151–181) ideas about the relationship between word and image in ekphrasis, I will examine whether those ideas hold true for Carpelan's ekphrastic texts.

Ekphrasis has a long tradition which hails back to ancient Greek rhetoric. In ancient rhetoric ekphrasis was a rhetorical figure that the orators used to describe an object as vividly as possible in order to bring it before the eyes of the listener or the reader. (Krieger 1992, 68; Webb 1999, 13–15.) In contemporary criticism there are various definitions of ekphrasis. However, almost all modern definitions differ from the ancient one by limiting the object of description to works of visual art.² For instance, James A. W. Heffernan (1993, 3) and W. J. T. Mitchell (1994, 152) have defined ekphrasis as the verbal representation of visual representation.

Although the above definition has been frequently cited, it has also been criticised for being too narrow. Obviously, there are a great number of texts that do not represent a work of art, but merely allude to a painter or a certain style or genre of the visual arts. Hence, ekphrasis can also be understood as an intertextual construct, as Valerie Robillard (1998, 53–72) has proposed. Referring to Robillard's intertextual approach, I do not confine ekphrasis to representations of works of art. Instead, I also include other kinds of allusions to the visual arts in the category of ekphrasis.³

Metapoetics and Visual Otherness

In his research on ekphrasis Mitchell (1994, 151–181) has emphasised the aspect of competition, as the history of the relationship between words and images is above all a history of competition.⁴ In short, each art or type of medium has laid claim to certain things that it is best equipped to mediate (Mitchell 1986, 47). In encounters between words and images there is ongoing competition between the verbal and the visual me-

dium. In that competition, the verbal medium tends to dominate, because visual representation is usually voiceless and cannot represent itself; it must be represented by verbal discourse (Mitchell 1994, 157).

Accordingly, Mitchell (1994, 157) compares the relationship between words and images with the relationship between the “self” and the “other” and speaks about the otherness of visual representation: “the ‘self’ is understood to be an active, speaking, seeing subject, while the ‘other’ is projected as a passive, seen and (usually) silent object.” Also in ekphrases, the image is often the other in relation to language. The reason is that the image is only figurally present in an ekphrastic text. The image cannot literally come into view but must always be represented by language. (Mitchell 1994, 158.)

In Carpelan’s case, the question of otherness is crucial, especially when ekphrasis is used as a metapoetical device. The very structure of ekphrasis carries a high self-reflexive potential. By alluding to or verbally describing a work of visual art, ekphrasis evokes questions pertaining to the limits between word and image and those between art and nature. (Klarer 1999, 1–2.)

The novel *Urwind* is an excellent example of how ekphrasis is linked to Carpelan’s metapoetical engagement. This novel is laden with intertextual allusions to literature, music and the visual arts. As the protagonist and narrator, Daniel Urwind, is an amateur writer and an antiquarian bookseller, one of the main themes of the novel concerns writing and art. So the allusions serve as a device to express the metapoetical themes of the novel.

Urwind has very little storyline. The narration is slowed down by sudden memories or by detailed descriptions. And here, ekphrasis plays an important part. For instance, five of the chapters in the novel are named after works of art depicted in those chapters. The chapter called “The Arnolfini Couple” includes a description of Jan van Eyck’s famous double-portrait; “The Mount of Victory” alludes to Paul Cézanne’s late watercolours; “The Full Moon” and “The Messenger of Autumn” to Klee; and “Viktoria’s Blue Cathedral” depicts an enormous collage built by Daniel’s aunt, Viktoria.

When it comes to Cézanne and Klee, Carpelan not only refers to their works of art but also alludes to their ideas about art and the artist’s creative process. The depiction of Cézanne’s watercolour *Mont Saint-Victoire*, for instance, is framed by quotations from Cézanne’s letters (Carpelan 1996/1993, 67–69). Likewise, the chapter entitled “The Messenger of Autumn” includes allusions to Klee’s essay “Über der Moderne Kunst” (1945). This chapter begins with a description of Klee’s watercolour *Der Bote des Herbsts* and continues with a sequence in which Klee is represented as a fictive character introducing ideas borrowed from his essay. The tree depicted in the watercolour refers metonymically to the analogy that Klee draws between the artist and a growing tree:

The ambassador of autumn is here. Klee painted *Der Bote des Herbsts* in that rich year of 1922, you remember the reproduction I have pinned to the wall in front of the writing desk. The colours from a clear, calm day come into the room and wait to position themselves round the gently glowing tree. Nuances of blue, violet, six vertical fields striving for light, step by step, the autumn landscape I recognize within myself. [- -]

The light falls over the old buildings, it also reaches my room, I walk with Klee, with Herr Formmeister, he talks of the subconscious, leaves are falling, the day is high. I do not form the autumn, he says, I make forms rise, a tree, a room for the clear days where they can rest, a quiet for myself. [- -] I gather what rises out of the earth, I am the trunk, I go onward to the radiant crown. I am not the beauty of the crown, the beauty has merely flowed through me. I do not reproduce the visible, I make visible. (Carpelan 1996/1993, 154–155)

The framing illustrated by the examples above emphasises the metapoetical function of the ekphrasis in *Urwind*. Additionally, they underline the otherness of the visual arts in relation to literature, as the depictions of Cézanne's and Klee's watercolours have to be framed by the painters' theoretical writings about art.

To exemplify the metapoetical function of the ekphrases in *Urwind* more thoroughly, I will analyse in detail the depiction of Viktoria's collage. The depiction begins with Viktoria's invitation to come and look at her work of art. Daniel goes immediately to his aunt's place and when he comes in, he sees a cathedral built of innumerable objects:

True to habit, she [Viktoria] has left the door ajar. She studies me as usual, her complexion is full of liver-spots, her eyes covered by a light film, but in her room she has built the blue cathedral of her dreams, from cardboard boxes, shoe-boxes, wooden boxes, matchboxes, a transverse section through the world of the lonely. And inside these countless rooms: floating spheres, pyramids, stones, shells, fossils, here and there a glowing immortelle. Her room is very light, the cathedral stands in the corner by the window, a geometry in the air. (Carpelan 1996/1993, 137)

The cathedral is an example of notional ekphrasis. However, the depiction alludes to actual works of art, to Vermeer and to the Danish *fin de siècle* painter Hammershøi. Viktoria also compares her piece of art to Kurt Schwitters' *Merzbau*, a huge collage, or more exactly a constructed interior, which was destroyed and which therefore is nearly as virtual as Viktoria's cathedral:⁵

Perhaps you [Daniel] are thinking of Schwitters' Merz, she [Viktoria] says, he had opportunities to continue his life in other rooms, he built out through the window, down on to the street, so great was his longing, mine is less but just as mysterious and dignified, don't you think? When one grows old one must become one's own heaven and church. You see, I have taken down the book-case in order to make room for the miracle. Isn't it quiet? As quiet as a room by Vermeer? When the light falls from the window it creates shadows, you see, there are stairs leading down and up, there is the hovering sphere, there is

the cone, there is your mother's beloved mountain, small, of course, there is a woman sitting with her back to us, do you see, there are lots of rooms in a row as in Hammershøi [- -]. (Carpelan 1996/1993, 137)

The depiction of the cathedral is metapoetical in several ways. First and foremost it mirrors the comparison Carpelan has drawn between architecture and literature. Following the convention extending from Plato to contemporary literature, Carpelan has seen an analogy between architecture and poetry.⁶ For instance, in one of his articles he compares the poem to a room: "The poem is built, pulled down, rebuilt, refurbished, extended, shortened" (Carpelan 1981, 26; translation mine). When speaking about his poetry, Carpelan often quotes a short, metalyrical poem from 1966:

No walls.
No ceiling.
The accurately
measured floor
(Carpelan 1966, 20; translation mine)

Inget tak.
Inga väggar.
Det noga
uppmätta golvet
(Carpelan 1966, 20)

According to Carpelan's own interpretation⁷, the floor alludes to craftsmanship. Craftsmanship is the basis of poetry, which means that the poet has to master certain tools and techniques in order to create poetry. But craftsmanship is not enough – the poet also needs visions and freedom from rules. This freedom is one aspect of what is called "openness" (*öppenhet*), a notion recurring in Carpelan's critical essays. In the poem above it is illustrated in the lines "No walls. / No ceiling". According to the poetics of openness, the poem is never finished, but remains dynamic. Hence, it is unlimited and constantly growing (Hollsten 2004, 118–123, 132–133).

Viktoria's cathedral in *Urwind* can be interpreted as an example of openness: it is a hovering building with countless rooms and a door that is always open. At the end of the chapter, Viktoria says to her nephew: "Here is a door that is always open. Here is a house, it hovers in space." (Carpelan 1996/1993, 139.) The open and unbounded character of the cathedral is additionally emphasised by the allusion to Schwitters' *Merzbau*. Schwitters' Dadaistic art seems to be of great importance to Carpelan, as he has written a radio play broadcast in the early 1980s called *Schwitters – den sista dadaisten – ett konstnärsöde* (Schwitters – the last Dadaist – an artist's destiny). This radio play, which deals mostly with Schwitters' destiny as a refugee of the Nazi regime, devotes a great deal of attention to *Merzbau*, which is described in detail in the text. Schwitters emphasises that his *Merzbau* is never finished but growing and changing all the time;

he compares it to a city, saying that “my cathedral grows like a city” (Carpelan 1982, 16; translation mine).

Although Schwitters’ Dadaism seems to be miles away from Romanticism, the idea of the work of art as an open, constantly growing entity has its roots in the organic philosophy of Romanticism. Carpelan’s own attitude to Romanticism is very complex. In the 1950s and 1960s, he was influenced by New Criticism (Westö 1998, 251). Hence, his dissertation on Gunnar Björling’s poetry, published in 1960, is based on the method of close reading and is faithful to the doctrines of New Criticism. Also in his critical texts from the early 1960s, Carpelan speaks of objectivity and impersonalism and mocks the Romantic idea of the artist as a genius. He, for instance, praises Classicism, but unlike T. E. Hulme and T. S. Eliot, Carpelan’s ideal is to combine Classicism with Romanticism, to abandon the border between the two categories. Additionally he has very Romantic ideas of art and nature as a unity, and although he criticises the idea of inspiration as the spirit of creativity, he alludes to John Keats, who felt that a poem should be born as naturally as a tree produces leaves. (Carpelan 1960a.)⁸

The depiction of Viktoria’s cathedral encompasses some of Carpelan’s Romantic ideas. For instance, the cathedral is a holy building linked to purity and stillness. Thus it differs remarkably from Schwitters’ *Merzbau*, which was also a kind of cathedral, as Schwitters’ friends called his collage “Kathedrale des erotischen Elends” (The Cathedral of Erotic Misery), a name that refers to coarse and grotesque elements characteristic of Schwitters’ work of art (Elderfield, John 1985, 147).

The holiness of the cathedral in *Urwind* is partly produced by the allusions to the art of Vermeer and Hammershøi. Carpelan mentions these very artists in his article “I poesins rum” (In the room of poetry), which was published in 1991. In this article, the paintings of Vermeer and Hammershøi are associated with a stillness which is enigmatic and which cannot be analysed. This stillness has a metaphysical character and the paintings themselves take on an air of holiness. In fact, stillness and holiness are recurrent aspects of *Urwind*. We hear Viktoria speak of heaven and church (“When one grows old one must become one’s own heaven and church.”) and she compares the quietness of the cathedral to the quietness in Vermeer’s paintings: “Isn’t it quiet? As quiet as a room by Vermeer?” (Carpelan 1996/1993, 137.)

Furthermore, the enigmatic character of the stillness is alluded to at the end of the chapter “Viktoria’s Blue Cathedral” where Daniel tells her that he is building his own cathedral in his mind: a chapel where a woman is sitting. This vision or fantasy can be interpreted as an ekphrasis, because the sitting woman recalls the woman in Hammershøi’s painting alluded to earlier in the chapter:

I only have the beginnings of a pure, white chapel. There a woman sits on a chair with her back to me, she is awake, or, if she is asleep, her sleep is light

and bright. She is alone and present, the waiting and open one, the receptive one, you pass through her as if you passed through yourself, she is the enigmatic and wondrous one. The distance in space we call blue is mirrored in her eyes. She is invisible, and does not answer questions, the limitless that we shrink away from. (Carpelan 1996/1993, 138–139)

This depiction creates a remarkable tension. The enigmatic and wondrous woman is at the same time both present and invisible, both someone who is receptive and reminds you of yourself and someone who is a total stranger, “the limitless that we shrink away from”. The ambiguous woman illustrates a tension characteristic of Carpelan’s poetics. Although Carpelan speaks on behalf of concreteness in his critical articles, at the same time he emphasises that poetry deals with metaphysical elements. Thus the ideal of concreteness does not, for instance, exclude the invisible, which plays an important part in Carpelan’s poetry.⁹ Accordingly, the woman who sits in the chapel that Daniel dreams about is at once present and invisible.

Ekphrastic Hope, Ekphrastic Fear and Ekphrastic Indifference

In the history of ekphrasis, gender is perhaps one of the most frequently employed figures of the difference related to the dialectic between word and image. The typical case is an ekphrastic poem written by a male poet and representing a female image. (Heffernan 1993, 1, 7.) A well-known example of this is “Portrait of a Lady” by William Carlos Williams.¹⁰

Carpelan does not address gender in his critical texts. However, I think it is significant that Daniel puts a woman in his chapel in the example above: Daniel is a male writer who desires a woman in a painting. He expresses the hope of merging with her, and yet he is afraid of her otherness. The woman is not only a highly idealised madonna but also a total stranger one shrinks away from. As Daniel is an artist, a writer, the woman he fantasises about can be interpreted as his muse.

Another example of interest in this connection is the poem “Den skadskjutna ängeln”. Carpelan’s poem is a pure example of ekphrastic poetry illustrating wonderfully Heffernan’s and Mitchell’s definition mentioned above. The poem depicts the famous Finnish painting *Haavoittunut enkeli* (*The wounded angel*) from 1903 painted by the symbolist Hugo Simberg:

They are carrying the angel
with a bandage covering her eyes:
only a girl
and two peasant boys
regretting

her wings
vulnerable shoulder blades

how light she is
 can be seen by the boys' hands
 holding the bars of the bier
 how heavy
 this grey dream
 this cloudy landscape
 (Carpelan 1983, 61; translation mine).

De bär ängeln
 med hennes förbundna ögon:
 bara en flicka
 och två bondpojkar
 ångerköpta

hennes vingar
 sårbara skulderblad

hur lätt hon är
 ser man på pojkarnas händer
 runt bårens stavar
 hur tung
 denna grå dröm
 detta mulna landskap.
 (Carpelan 1983, 61)

The painting depicted in the poem is very enigmatic and so is the poem. The angel and the boys carrying her are silent and do not tell us what has happened. When reading the poem, you get the feeling that the speaker would like to tell his or her own story of what has happened, but he or she is only able to report what is visible. The speaker seems to be astonished by the enigmatic, dreamlike vision. Although the angel appears quite human since she looks like an adolescent girl, she is a figure of radical otherness.¹¹ Encountering this otherness the speaker turns almost silent.

It is possible to read the poem as an example of verbal dominance, as the painting of Simberg is only present in a figurative sense. The fact that the wounded angel is not able to see, because her eyes are covered with a bandage, supports this interpretation. Thus the speaker can see the angel and look at her but the angel cannot look back.

However, the domination of the verbal medium or the speaking subject is not overwhelming. The poem is very faithful to its visual source, which means that the poem includes few elements that are not visual and therefore not present in the painting. As a result, the impression is that the speaker does not control the visual otherness. On the contrary, the otherness in a sense controls the speaker by astonishing the speaker and by making him or her fall silent.

Mitchell (1994, 154–163) has spoken about ekphrastic indifference, ekphrastic hope and ekphrastic fear when dealing with the question of otherness attributed to text-image relationships. By ekphrastic indifference, he means the common sense perception

that ekphrasis is impossible, because the verbal media cannot make its object present in the same way a visual presentation can. Ekphrastic hope refers to the aim of overcoming the impossibility of ekphrasis, that is, to overcome the border between text and image. This happens when we read a text and we can imagine the work of art that has been described in full detail. The third category, ekphrastic fear, tries to regulate the borders between different modes of representation and keep the distinctions firm. A classic example of ekphrastic fear is Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's normative essay "Laocoon" (1766): Lessing's opinion was that whereas literature is an art in time, painting is an art in space, and that the generic boundaries of the arts should not be overlapped.

Let us return to the poem "Den skadskjutna ängeln" and Daniel's fantasy in *Urwind*. The very accurate description of the well marked visual source makes "Den skadskjutna ängeln" a good example of ekphrastic hope. The goal of the poem is to make the reader see the painting. As the painting is so well known to Finnish readers, this goal is realised without difficulties, at least in Finland. Additionally, the poem contains verbal details which help to create the impression of vision. The word *this*, repeated twice in the poem, emphasises the presence of the painting: "this grey dream,/ this cloudy landscape." The word *this* also gives a hint of the position of the speaker in relation to the painting. As a consequence, the distance between speaker and painting is small. In fact, he or she can almost touch the painting.

The truthfulness of the description of Simberg's painting also brings into focus the relation between the poet and the audience of the ekphrasis. As Mitchell (1994, 164) has pointed out, ekphrasis is not only "an affair between a speaking/seeing subject and a seen object", but also an encounter between the speaking subject and the addressee. Thus there are two forms of translation or exchange in ekphrasis. First, "the conversion of the visual representation into a verbal representation", and second, "the reconversion of the verbal representation back into the visual object in the reception of the reader". The relationship between text and image or self and other is therefore more like a triangular relationship than a binary one – Mitchell (1994, 164) speaks about "the ekphrastic triangle" and pictures this relation as a *ménage à trois*. In this triangular exchange "ekphrasis typically expresses a desire for a visual object", and this expression is offered as a gift to the reader (Mitchell 1994, 164). In "Den skadskjutna ängeln" the truthfulness of the description and the accurate marking of the visual source make the reconversion of the verbal representation into the painting possible for the reader. The ekphrasis can thus be understood as a gift that the poet gives to the reader.

The ekphrasis depicting Daniel's fantasy of the sitting woman alluding to Hammershøi's painting (Carpelan 1996/1993, 138–139) is more complex than "Den skadskjutna ängeln" when it comes to Mitchell's notions of ekphrastic hope, ekphrastic fear and ekphrastic indifference. It is remarkable that there is no explicit marking of the

visual source in the description of Daniel's fantasy. Hence, it is the reader's task to find out that the description alludes to Hammershøi's painting. Furthermore, it is difficult for the reader to translate the verbal representation to a visual object, as it is impossible to make a verbal image of someone who is invisible and limitless. It is therefore obvious that the depiction of Daniel's fantasy is not a case of ekphrastic hope. I think, however, that neither is it a case of pure ekphrastic fear nor of ekphrastic indifference. Rather, it thematises an ambiguity or tension between ekphrastic hope and ekphrastic fear. As we have seen, Daniel expresses the hope of merging with the enigmatic woman, and yet he is afraid of her. As I see it, the desire to merge with the woman illustrates ekphrastic hope whereas Daniel's fear for her otherness is an expression of ekphrastic fear.

To sum up: my purpose has been to analyse text-image relationships in Carpelan's novel *Urwind* and his poem "Den skadskjutna ängeln" focusing on the device of ekphrasis. In Carpelan's literary production, ekphrasis often has a metapoetical function. Accordingly, when the narrator or some of the other characters in *Urwind* speak about painters and painting, they are simultaneously speaking about literature. The metapoetical function in *Urwind* is emphasised by framing the ekphrastic description with allusions to texts written by those artists that are alluded to in the ekphrases.

The use of ekphrasis as a device of metapoetics, brings up the question of visual otherness. As allusions to the visual arts speak "on behalf" of literature, the visual arts tend to appear as "others" in relation to literature. On the other hand, the visual arts are represented as models for literature, which can be interpreted in terms of ekphrastic hope. Although the depiction of Daniel's fantasy in *Urwind* thematises an ambivalence between ekphrastic hope and ekphrastic fear, this kind of ambiguity is not typical of Carpelan's ekphrastic texts. On the contrary, in his ekphrases Carpelan first and foremost praises the visual and aims to overcome the border between word and image. Hence, Carpelan's ekphrastic texts often function according to Mitchell's idea of the ekphrastic triangle: in the ekphrastic encounter the writer gives the work of art he desires as a gift to the reader.

Notes

¹ Carpelan, who began his literary career in 1946, continues the tradition of the Finland-Swedish modernist poetics of the 1920s and the 1930s. In addition, he has drawn influence from the leading Swedish poets of the 1940s, the modernists Max Jacob, T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, the Austrian poet Georg Trakl and above all Wallace Stevens (Carpelan 1979, 25–26; Westö 1998, 248–249).

² Although most modern definitions of ekphrasis are restricted to the visual arts, there are exceptions. Claus Clüver (1998, 49), for example, includes all non-verbal forms of art in his definition of ekphrasis: it means that music can also be included in the category: "ekphrasis is the verbalization of real or fictitious texts composed in a non-verbal sign system".

³ Robillard (1998, 61–62) has designed a typology with three different categories in order to help differentiate the strong and explicitly marked ekphrastic texts from those that signal weaker relationships with their pictorial sources. The first category in Robillard's typology is called "Depictive" and it includes texts which come closest to the truthful representation of the pictorial source. Robillard's second category, "Attributive", functions as a "palace guard", making certain that all texts entering the domain of ekphrasis in some way mark their sources. In the attributive category, the source can be marked by direct naming in the title or by alluding to painter, style or genre. The weakest form of marking the source in the Attributive category is through what is called "indeterminate marking". In this last case the reader has to belong to a particular interpretive community in order to recognise the visual source. The third category in Robillard's intertextual model is the Associative Category, which is much more loosely structured than the first two. This category accounts for texts that refer to conventions or ideas associated with the plastic arts, whether they be structural, thematic or theoretical.

⁴ On competition in the history of ekphrasis, see also Heffernan 1993.

⁵ Schwitters built three *Merzbaus* in total. Victoria's cathedral is primarily reminiscent of the first *Merzbau*, which Schwitters built in his Hannover home and which preoccupied him from 1923 until 1937 when he was forced to leave Germany. In exile he constructed two more *Merzbaus*: one in Lysaker, Norway, and the other in Elterwater, England. For more on Schwitters' *Merzbaus*, see Elderfield 1985.

⁶ On the relationship between literature and architecture or the *ut architectura poesis* tradition, see Frank 1979.

⁷ See for example Carpelan 1979, 29 and 1981, 26.

⁸ For further discussion of Carpelan's relationship to Classicism and Romanticism, see Hollsten 2004, 19–20, 92–93.

⁹ See for example Carpelan 1964, 12–13, 48–49.

¹⁰ Mitchell (1994, 169–170) has analysed "Portrait of a Lady" as an example of voyeuristic ambivalence toward a female image.

¹¹ See also Holmström 1998, 76. According to Holmström, the poem discusses the tension between human and divine. This theme can also be found in *Urwind*.

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