LUMEA ŞI IMAGINEA ÎN PORTRETUL SAREI DIN OPERA LUI JOHN FOWLES „ LOGODNICA LOCOTENENTULUI FRANCEZ”

WORD AND IMAGE IN SARAH’S PORTRAIT FROM “THE FRENCH LIEUTENANT’S WOMAN” BY JOHN FOWLES

Marinela NICOARĂ
Liceul Pedagogic „Dimitrie Ţichindeal”

Abstract

This article focuses on Fowles’s use of implied ekphrasis in constructing Sarah’s portrait and her relation to nature. Two scenes from the novel are analysed as alluding to Rossetti’s ”Proserpine”, Burne-Jones’s “The Sleeping Beauty,” and to The Pre-Raphaelite gaze. The associations of Ernestina’s and Sarah’s portraits with visual works of art are interpreted as building on the tradition of men’s view of women as objects of art and implicitly, of desire. The analysis reveals Fowles’s ambivalence over the visual art of The Pre-Raphaelites, and the way he challenges the oppositions culture/nature and man/woman within the contest between the verbal and the visual.

Cuvinte cheie: *ekphrasis, vizual, natură, Pre-Rafaeliţi, opoziţie, verbal.*
Key words: *ekphrasis, visual, nature, Pre-Raphaelites, opposition, verbal.*

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The numerous critical interpretations of Fowles’s protagonist of his famous novel “The French Lieutenant’s Woman” seem to prove that the questions the narrator asks himself-”Who is Sarah? Out of what shadows does she come?”- are meant not to be answered. One recurrent interest for critics has been Sarah’s potential for feminist interpretation. Deborah Byrd, for instance, discusses Sarah as “a positive role model” who “develops a feminine consciousness.” [1], while for Foster it might be fruitful “to understand Sarah herself as a text to be read.” [2] Aubrey writes that being an embodiment of mystery she is almost impossible to be understood in terms of labels. ”To label Sarah is to confine her, just as to write a conventional novel is confining in a way that the narrator will not accept.” [3]

When Fowles published “The French Lieutenant’s Woman” in 1969, the feminists had already begun to consider the liberation of woman from nature. But Fowles builds on Sarah’s relation to nature and he describes the Undercliff as a perfect place for “self-liberation.” Sarah’s relation to nature may be inscribed in the traditional way in which women are viewed as being linked more to nature than to culture. However, the distortions and limitations of this cultural tradition involved in the novel could be interpreted as Fowles’s way of undermining it.

Entering the Undercliff and meeting Sarah there, Charles gradually moves away from the Victorian society. Out into the wild, Charles experiences a reality that makes the stable and rational order he believes he knows become questionable. After Charles’s first visit to the Undercliff when he discovers both nature and Sarah, the narrator comments that “the whole Victorian Age was lost.”[4] His growth to self-liberation is necessarily linked to nature and Sarah. Ross considers that this particular image of Sarah, which she sees as influenced by the narrator’s late 1960s perspective on women and nature, “has power and appeal.”[5] She claims that “Sarah is indeed Charles’s means to salvation, his link to the nonhuman world, the door to which he merely needs to be.”[6] She understands it not through the traditional role of the mediator for man to connect him to the natural world from which he is exiled by his own link with culture, but through the wiser lesson of “the parity of existence” which is explained by Fowles as the priority of ecology over classification. [7]

In Sarah's escapes in the Undercliff, Fowles shows her connection to the natural world through descriptive elements which make her appear fitting the place, being part of it. She has "a genius" to discover secluded wild places, and an uncanny talent for finding fossils in the area for Charles. In his first visit to the Undercliff he comes across Sarah lying asleep in the grass. She has chosen "the strangest position, a broad, sloping ledge of grass some five feet beneath the level of the plateau. But it was not a place many would have chosen because "its outer edge gave onto a sheer drop of some thirty or forty feet into an ugly tangle of brambles. A little beyond them the real cliff plunged down to the beach."[8]Charles hesitates, he is about to withdraw but his curiosity draws him forward again.

Fowles describes the scene as a painting. Not only does he uses painterly language but also changes the perspective by making Charles moving round to see the face of the sleeping woman better. Sarah is described as lying "in the complete abandonment of the sleep", with her right arm bent in a childlike way, her coat fallen open over an indigo dress with a small white collar."[9] The image becomes even more painterly with the "scattered handful of anemones" lying on the grass around her. The way she lies in the grass is sensed by Charles as "intensely tender, yet sexual," reminding him of another girl in Paris sleeping one dawn in a bedroom. Examining her face, he discovers the girl in the grass is Sarah and everything about her physiognomy induces naturalness, matching the wild landscape: her hair has become loose half covering her cheek. It has red tints, a rich warmth, and without the indispensable gloss of feminine hair oil. Charles realizes that in her sleep her face is gentle and it has a "ghost of a smile." "[T]ranced by this unexpected encounter" he is overcome by "an equally strange feeling-not sexual, but fraternal, perhaps paternal, a certainty of the innocence of this creature"[10]. Her image seems to be frozen in time as in a visual piece of art.

Sarah's physical appearance as natural and matching the nature around is re-created when Charles meets her to hear the story of her lieutenant, Vargueness. She appears suddenly at the end of a dark tunnel of ivy through which he must pass to reach her. Later Charles notices again her loose, dark, sun-glistened hair and her light and sure walking. The place Sarah chooses for their conversation amazes Charles. It is a little dell, surrounded by thickets of brambles and dogwood "a kind of minute green amphitheatre " where "someone had once heaved a great flat-topped block of flint against the tree's stem making a rustic throne that commanded a magnificent view of the tree-tops below the sea beyond them". The charm of the place is emphasized by the vivid colors of the flowers: "prime roses and violets, and the white stars of wild strawberry."[11]

Her description in harmony with the surrounded natural landscapes alludes to the Pre-Raphaelite paintings in which women very often appear against a background of luxurious vegetation. Their influence is also obvious in Sarah's physiognomy which was inspired by the paintings for which Elizabeth Siddal and Jane Morris were models. While in other ekphrastic descriptions Fowles both builds and undermines the representation of visual art, in these descriptions he seems to emphasize the pictorial aspects of the scenes alluding through his painterly language to this type of representation. He uses such a strategy to set the particular aspect of Sarah's appearance in contrast to the fashion of the Victorian Age, as a new type of femininity in the Pre-Raphaelite paintings.

Discussing the opposition between Sarah and Ernestina, Ross observes the writer's way to take Sarah's part along with the wild nature. Her ability to find and spend time in wild places in the Undercliff, her seriousness, her physiognomy distinguish Sarah from Ernestina with her fashionable clothing, her frailty and pallor, her headaches, her triviality. [12] She claims that their opposition in relation to nature reflect the patriarchal tradition of linking women with nature and devaluing them. While Ernestina appears as the hothouse plant, Sarah- as Charles flippantly puts it in a conversation with Dr. Grogan- is "a specimen of local flora." [13]

I consider the opposition between Sarah and Ernestina gets more strength through the way Fowles associates them with representations of visual arts. Ernestina's "small-chinned, oval delicate as a violet" face, with gray eyes which she casts down "as if she might faint" and her tilts at the corner of her eyelids and lips" "as the fragrance of the February violets" may be still seen, Fowles writes, "in the drawings of the great illustrators of the time in Phiz's work, in John Leech's." [14] Sarah's strong dark eyebrows, the "suppressed intensity of her eyes" matching the "suppressed sensuality of her mouth," her well modeled and completely feminine face" found inspiration in the Pre-Raphaelite paintings.

That Fowles was inspired by the 19th century painting is obvious not only in the physiognomy of Sarah but also in her attitudes and the natural scenes. She is always described in association with vivid and colourful, sensuous natural scenes and each time something new about her is revealed, as if inviting to search for "the shadows" from which she comes. Rossetti's "Proserpine" can be related with the scene in which Charles passes through the tunnel of ivy at the end of which he sees Sarah. In Rossetti's painting there is a branch of ivy close to Proserpine's head and part of the background is luminous, in contrast with her dark hair. In Fowles's scene Sarah is described at the end of the ivy tunnel with her dark figure and a luminous clearing behind. But in Fowles's description the two elements from Rossetti's painting are recreated in a more intensified way and the presence of a butterfly close to her figure adds energy to the scene. A feeling of magic is induced through the contrast between the dark figure and the luminous clearing. On his first visit to the Undercliff when Charles finds Sarah sleeping in the grass Fowles's "painting" of the scene alludes to Burne-Jones's "Sleeping Beauty." The young woman in Burne-Jones's painting has the right arm bent and her head is turned to the right as Sarah's in Fowles's description. The flowers in the painting have their correlative in the scattered handful of anemones lying in the grass.

Fowles's associations of Ernestina and Sarah with visual works of art could be interpreted along the tradition of the men's view of women as objects of art and, implicitly, of desire. A certain degree of voyeurism is obvious in Charles's way of examining Sarah while she lies asleep in the grass. Charles insists in his examination, moving around to see better, making comparisons. He stares down "tranced" by the view, and overcome by an ambiguous feeling. He comes even closer, "directly over her face."[15] This strategy has a double aim: it both helps the writer focus on some key details and include Charles's gaze into his "verbal painting," thus, alluding to the Pre-Raphaelite gaze. According to Sawhney the Pre-Raphaelites were "immensely fond of using asymmetrical gazes when depicting interactions between men and women, making them more complex than a first glance would suggest."[16] Fowles catches such a gaze with Charles who is looking at Sarah from the distance, then from a certain angle, and especially directly at her face, closer and closer. Being asleep Sarah has her eyes shut. Among the gazes Sawhney identifies in the Pre-Raphaelite paintings he observes that " men and women are looking in different directions, most often the man *gazing directly at a woman* who coyly has *her eyes turned down* or cast off in the distance.“ (my emphasis) [17]

Fowles uses the verbal and the visual in constructing Sarah's relation to nature as a contest in the field of the verbal, which reveals an ambivalence towards visual art. Since the contest between the verbal and the visual, as Heffernan claims, is powerfully gendered, "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."[18], the ekphrastic strategy Fowles uses builds on the antagonisms culture/nature, man/woman, re-creating their patriarchal significance.

Conclusion

In Fowles's use of Rossetti's paintings as the origin of his verbal portrait of Sarah, we may recognize a typical attitude of many of the Victorian novelists. Discussing the 19th century literary artists' fascination with the visual arts Byerly writes that by alluding to works of art the novelists established an imaginative space where the fictional world and the real world came together. [19] The way the Pre-Raphaelite art captivated and inspired literary artists was recreated in Fowles's reconfiguration of Rossetti's paintings into narrative images of intense emotions and significance. In this case, the subverting function of this intertextuality is suspended.

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