Ut Musica Poesis: An Approach to the Dialogue between Literature and Music

Carmen Lara Rallo
Universidad de Málaga

Abstract

The pervasive presence of music in contemporary fiction parallels the crucial role played by painting in novels and short stories since the late 1990s. Such a parallel, however, has not had a correspondence in the field of interart poetics, since the growing interest in the critical assessment of the literature-painting interface cannot be matched by the scarce attention paid to the dialogue between literature and music nowadays. This unequal reception of the interaction of the sister arts emerges as the area of enquiry of the present paper, which examines the appraisal of the relationship of literature and music in comparison with that of literature and painting. Moreover, and in an attempt to sketch a theoretical framework reflecting the current relevance of the musico-literary conversation, the paper explores a revised version of the classical strategy of ekphrasis, and suggests a new variant of the traditional *ut pictura poesis* maxim.

Since the last decades of the twentieth century, Anglo-American fiction has shown an increasing interest in the arts of painting and music. As Mark Wormald suggests in his contribution to *Contemporary British Fiction*, there is a "recent fascination […] with aesthetics that resist or complicate reading" which has led writers to turn to literature's sister arts (Wormald, 2003: 227). This has resulted in the composition of novels and short stories that verbalise the visual processes associated to painting —as in Michael Frayn's *Headlong* (1998), Tracy Chevalier's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (1999), and Will Davenport's *The Painter* (2003)—, or which explore the relationship between verbal and musical modes of expression: Bernard MacLaverty's *Grace Notes* (1997), Vikram Seth's *An Equal Music* (1999), and Rose Tremain's *Music and Silence* (1999).

Nevertheless, the similar significance attached to the interactions literature-painting and literature-music in contemporary fiction has not had a parallel in the context of critical theory. While the proliferation of fictional works opening up the dialogue of literature and painting has been matched by the centrality of studies on word and image in the field of comparative literature, the theoretical investigation of the literature-music interface has been neglected precisely when a growing number of literary works are profiting from the inspiring influence of music. In contrast with the scant attention paid to that interface in recent years, the cross-fertilisation existing between the verbal and the visual has become the major focus of an increasing amount of specialised publications like the *Word & Image* journal or the "Word and Image Interactions" series, among many others.

Significantly, the introduction to the 2006 issue of one of such publications, *Writing and Seeing. Essays on Word and Image*, includes a remark on the prevalence of a relational nexus among the arts (Carvalho Homem and Lambert, 2006: 13) that points to how contemporary interart studies should not be restricted to the dominant field of the relationships between literature and painting. Instead, the scope of those studies should reflect the current interconnectivity of the arts by integrating the investigation of areas that have been less thoroughly examined of late, like the dialogue of literature with sculpture, architecture, or music.

In this context, the present paper focuses on the musico-literary interaction with the final goal of outlining a suitable background to address the issue of the pervasive presence of music in contemporary fiction. In order to do so, the paper traces the uneven reception of the interrelationship of literature and music, in comparison with that of the literature-painting interface, and deals with one of the central notions of this interface: the strategy of ekphrasis.

The reappraisal of the ekphrastic device aims at widening its scope as to include music among the possible referents of the classical practice. This revised version of musical ekphrasis will be illustrated with a brief analysis of one short story from the collection *Fanfare. Fourteen Stories on a Musical Theme* (1999), which epitomises the centrality of the literature-music association since the last years of the twentieth century. Ultimately, the approach to a redefined genre of ekphrasis

offers the possibility of rephrasing the dictum traditionally encapsulating the dialogue between word and image, *ut pictura poesis*.

The *ut pictura poesis* maxim had its origins in the misinterpretation of a passage from Horace's *Ars Poetica*. In lines II. 361–365, Horace compares two styles of poetry in terms of correspondences with two types of pictures—one to be seen close up and the other from a distance—, but with no explicit reference to the existence of a close analogy between the arts. However, the phrase opening the section ("Ut pictura poesis: erit quae, si propius stes, / te capiat magis, et quaedam, si longius abstes") was read as meaning "as painting poetry shall be", and coupled with other classical quotations associated to the alleged similarity of the arts: Aristotle's claim in his *Poetics* that both poets and painters imitate human nature in motion, and the aphorism attributed to Simonides of Ceos by Plutarch in which painting is described as silent poetry, and poetry as a speaking picture.

In this way, from the Renaissance onwards, *ut pictura poesis* came to signify the interaction of verbal and visual expression, especially in those cases when poets / writers try to imbue their works with pictorial qualities. This dialogue between literature and painting has been seen as a fruitful and influential source of creativity, and although it has met a few objections to its feasibility in the course of history —like the division of the arts posited by Gotthold E. Lessing in *Laokoön –oder über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie* (1766), or the narrow view of intertextuality as a strategy restricted to purely verbal connections—, the conversation of word and image has always occupied a privileged position in the field of interart poetics, enjoying an almost unbroken continuity as a fascinating object of critical debate.

Conversely, the literature-music dyad has had an uneven reception, with moments when it has attracted a great deal of attention, and other periods in which it has been ignored or despised as an elusive —and even suspect— field of study. In this way, the eighteenth century witnessed the awakening of a deep interest in the affinities of music and verbal arts like rhetoric or poetry, but the comparisons were aimed at exposing the inferiority of musical expression. If music was considered a debtor to oratory due to its borrowing of rhetorical terminology and figures (Vickers, 1984: 23), eighteenth-century songs and opera, according to Herbert Schueller (1947: 203), were assessed in terms of the subservience of music to poetry and drama. More recently, that

interest in the musico-literary dialogue has recurred at certain points of the twentieth century, as when E. M. Forster claimed in *Aspects of the Novel* that "in music fiction is likely to find its nearest parallel" (1990: 149), or with the appearance of several studies on the topic between the 1970s and the mid-eighties, which witnessed the publication of a special issue of *Mosaic: a Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* (18.4; Fall 1985) devoted to the association between music and literature.

In general, as W. J. T. Mitchell has pointed out in an essay on the controversial question of the "sister arts" (1987: 1), music has tended to be regarded as an outsider to the discussions on the interactions of the arts, which have been dominated by the interconnections of literature and painting. This state of affairs springs to a great extent from the complex nature of music in its relationship with literature. On the one hand, music is closer to literature because, unlike painting, it is an event in time, a performing art, and accordingly the verbal and the musical modes share structuring principles since both use pause and need punctuation. On the other hand, however, music poses the problem of meaning: despite the effort of composers of program music like Debussy, music has been generally considered to be devoid of denotation and mimetic possibilities; it is an art of expression but not of representation.

This lack of semantic referentiality has had two main consequences for music. First, in the field of comparative studies, the examination of the presence of music in literature has displayed a tendency to transpose aspects of content to form, substituting formal analyses for semantic ones. As a result, most enquiries into the correspondences of literary and musical works have focused on the comparison of structural principles, as exemplified in Helmy Giacoman's joint exploration of Carpentier's "El Acoso" and Beethoven's *Third Symphony*, or in John Joyce's argument for the existence of a musical pattern behind the configuration of Browning's *Men and Women*.

Secondly, in the wider context of the aesthetic reception of the arts, music's supposed inability to imitate nature left it out of the group of the *Beaux Arts* when this was created in the eighteenth century. Since then, and until the reassessment of such a categorisation in the Romantic period, hierarchies of the arts always relegated music to the lowest level, as a meaningless art without any mimetic potential. Thus,

in a taxonomy that echoes Leonardo da Vinci's comparison (or *paragone*) of the arts in his *Trattato della Pittura* —where he posits that sight is a nobler sense than hearing—, Joseph Addison established a classification of the arts in 1712 that moved from sculpture and painting as the most natural means of expression, down to verbal description, and finally to music, which was seen as an unreliable and arbitrary sign system.

The traditional pre-eminence of painting —and of the literature-painting dyad— accounts for the centrality of the concept of *ekphrasis* in interart studies. Since classical times, the ekphrastic device has enjoyed a dominant position among the verbal figures communicating visual impressions —*illustratio*, *evidentia*, *demonstratio*, *descriptio*, and *hypotyposis*—, and from the 1990s onwards it has been revitalised by a large number of publications on the issue. One of such works is Murray Krieger's *Ekphrasis. The Illusion of the Natural Sign*, where this scholar starts from his earlier definition of ekphrasis as "the imitation in literature of a work of plastic art" (1992: 265), to argue that the ekphrastic principle "may operate not only on those occasions on which the verbal seeks in its own more limited way to represent the visual but also when the verbal object would emulate the spatial character of the painting or sculpture" (Krieger, 1992: 9).

The characterisation offered by Krieger ought to be analysed from several points of view. On the one hand, and like James A.W. Heffernan's description of ekphrasis as "the verbal representation of visual representation" (1993: 3), it does not explicitly acknowledge the possibility of having a fictitious work of art as the object of the ekphrastic practice. This is a crucial question because many of the artistic creations evoked in ekphrasis do not exist except in their verbal depictions, as in the prototypical examples of this device both in classical and English literature: Homer's representation of the shield of Achilles in book 18 of the *Iliad*, and Keats' verbalisation of the urn in "Ode on a Grecian Urn". Both objects are mentioned in the course of Krieger's and Heffernan's studies, but their fictitious nature is not as overtly taken into account as in Amy Golahny's definition of ekphrasis as a "text that expresses the poet-reader-viewer reaction to actual or *imagined* works of art" (1996: 13; emphasis added).

On the other hand, another striking aspect of Krieger's characterisation is that, although it is aimed at widening the applicability

of the ekphrastic concept, in effect it limits the range of objects of ekphrasis to visual works of art. In this sense, Krieger's emphasis on the distinction between the verbal and the spatial —like his earlier use of the expression "plastic arts"— asserts the supremacy of the literature-painting association over the literature-music one, by presupposing that arts in time have no ekphrastic potential. This assumption, which underlies Heffernan's and Golahny's definitions as well, has been challenged by some recent attempts at broadening the narrow conception of ekphrasis as a device restricted to the dialogue between word and image.

Thus, Claus Clüver has reformulated the second clause of Heffernan's description —"[e]kphrasis is the verbal representation of a real or fictitious text composed in a non-verbal sign system" (Clüver, 1997: 26)—, and so he has managed to provide a definition covering all kinds of ekphrastic objects: actual or invented, visual or auditory, artistic or ordinary. More specifically, and in line with Clüver's claim that his inclusion of the non-visual arts of music and dance constitutes the real break with tradition (1997: 26), Rodney S. Edgcombe has tried to sketch an autonomous genre of musical ekphrasis, to which he gives the name of melophrasis. His concept of melophrasis, which is described as "any verbal effort to evoke the experience of externally apprehended music" (Edgecombe, 1993: 2), comprises the representations of both imaginary, abstract music —the Pythagorean "music of the spheres"— and actual, heard music. From these two main classes, roughly corresponding to the ekphrasis of invented and real objects, Edgcombe develops a systematic typology that emerges as the focus of attention of his study.

Despite its interest, some aspects of this study —like the strict limits imposed on melophrastic categories, the primary connection of melophrasis with poetry, or the contention that the uses of melophrasis in fiction are short and self-contained— deserve to be reassessed in the light of a narrative reflecting the centrality of the dialogue between literature and music in contemporary literature. Carol Shields's "New Music", published in a BBC collection of stories exploring the musical medium, signals how musical ekphrasis is not restricted to poems or short passages of fiction, but can operate throughout a whole narrative work.

Indeed, the story revolves around a musician's fascination for the Tudor composer Thomas Tallis (c. 1505–1585), and by so doing Tallis's music comes to pervade simultaneously different levels of the narrative. Such a simultaneity blurs Edgcombe's clear-cut distinctions of melophrastic categories, as it brings together characterising melophrasis —when the protagonist's thoughts on her fondness for Tallis identify her as a character preferring second best people and things (Shields, 1999: 19, 20, 24)—, and a variant of the melophrasis of abstract music, in a reflection on the intellectual perception of music while reading a score: "[t]he notes looked cramped and fussy and insistent, but she took in every one, […] her head was filled with a swirl of musical lint, […] she was actually 'hearing' a tiny concert inside that casually combed head of hers" (Shields, 1999: 17) .

Above all, the dominant type of musical ekphrasis in the story is the structural one, since the arrangement of "New Music" parallels the musical patterns informing Tallis's most significant compositions. In this sense, like his earliest masterpieces —the votive antiphons—, the story is divided in two main parts: the narrative of the music student who meets a student of architecture while reading a score by Tallis on the underground, and the narrative of the middle-aged musician married to an architect, who is writing a study on Tallis.

The identification of both musicians as the younger and older selves of the same character reveals the existence of a cyclic pattern that is closely linked to retrograde motion in music; the effect of such a device is the perception of a melody created out of already used materials as if it were a new one, and significantly this is the effect achieved in Shields's tale when the story of the married couple is not identified at first as made up of the story of the young people who meet on the underground. Furthermore, the configuration of "New Music" in a series of short, imitative sections —all of them beginning with a direct address to the reader, "Imagine"— echoes the iterated short phrases of the structure of the motet, Tallis's favourite musical form and the genre of his famous forty-part composition *Spem in alium*.

In this way, "New Music" engages in a fruitful conversation with Tallis's music that attests to the centrality of musical ekphrasis in contemporary literature. Indeed, and contrary to Edgcombe's fears about the extinction of the "melophrastic genus" (1993: 19), such a distinctive genre has not only survived, but even flourished in recent

years. This situation —and in general, the current prevalence of the musico-literary dialogue— opens the way to formulate the new motto *ut musica poesis*, signalling how the critical reception of the literature-music interface needs to share nowadays the privileged position traditionally occupied by the study of the interaction between literature and painting.

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