

Description and its subject: through the eyes of the observer*

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“We depend on the ‘eyes’ we are seeing with – narrator, character, implied author,” writes Seymour Chatman in his analysis of the narrative space (1980: 102). If we think his hypothesis through to the end then we clearly ought to introduce the category of the descriptor, i.e. the one who watches, or from whose point of view the description is presented. This way the description might rise in the esteem of narratologists... But let us admit straight away that a category of this kind, ranging from the perspective of an omniscient narrator to that of a psychophysical character in a fictional world, would inevitably have such fuzzy outlines that it would ultimately not help us too much. However, what clearly does make sense is to distinguish between the “manner of seeing” and the extent to which these “eyes” are deployed, including the subtler distinctions between full utilization of the character’s point of view and its seepage into the predominating voice of the omniscient narrator, together with the processes whereby these perspectives alternate. The subsequent text will analyse cases involving the differentiation of the observing instance and the strengthening of the role of the observer / perceiver’s character, resulting in the subjectivization of the act of perception.

The very words observation and seeing or mental visualization refer to the predominating (although certainly not the only) sensory feature of description, and the visual characteristics in particular will also be the subject

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of subsequent analyses. Nevertheless, seeing and the observation method are definitely not just something “innocent” or “natural”, as they are influenced, or directly determined, by cultural codes, period fashion, philosophical roots (we will observe a case like that using the example of a text by Josef Čapek) or the ideology and changes in the techniques and technologies of seeing as well. We must always keep this aspect in mind.

If the matter is considered from a narratological basis this usually leads to a truncated view of description: in an attempt to define description on the basis of opposition to the chronological order of narrative, Ruth Ronen excludes the observer’s standpoint from it (Ronen 1977: 277). On the other hand, Werner Wolf and Marie-Laure Ryan, who focus more on the effects of description in the process of mental visualization of the world being depicted, admit the institution of the observer or even understand it as a possible procedure that leads to the enhancement of the experiential qualities of description. *Experientiality*¹ as an evocation of our experience of perception from the actual world (in the words of Wolf) evokes an *aesthetic illusion*, i.e. the impression that the perceiver is experiencing the object or world described as credible (Wolf 2013: 32), both in a sensory and an emotional way. Both lead to successful mental visualization of that which is described, which was considered to be a basic function of description even by ancient theoreticians of rhetoric and ekphrasis.² Ryan shifts this “quasi-experience” to different forms of *immersion* in a fictional world experienced by a reader. She believes that spatial immersion is enhanced by inter alia the fluid blending of perspectives, e.g. the sense perception of the observer on the scene with the reflections presented by the narrator (Ryan 2001: 132).

Additionally, Wolf refers to the relationship between the observer’s perspective and the motivation behind placing the description in the text and the linking of “descriptions to the internal perspective of ‘focalizers’ or ‘reception figures’”. Characters looking out of a window, men gazing at themselves while shaving in front of a mirror, tourists admiring a scenic landscape,

1 This subject is dealt with in detail by Alice Jedličková’s study on pp. 154–172 of this publication.

2 For more details cf. the study by Heidrun Führer – Bernadette Banaszekiewicz on pp. 45–75 of this publication.

all of this can serve as a justification for a plausible insertion of a description into a narrative whole” (Wolf 2013: 93).

Taking the observer’s instance as her nodal point, Ellen Esrock then proceeds furthest from the aesthetic illusion and immersion towards cognitive exploration in her monograph *The Reader’s Eye: Visual Imagining as Reader Response* (1994). She bases her research on a combination of empirical research involving cognitive psychology and neurology together with readers’ introspective testimonies. Esrock believes that the visual effectiveness of the text and the visualization effect in the reader’s mind is not so much encouraged by the frequency or by the extent of individual descriptions of landscapes or characters, as by much subtler detail, including an emphasis on *acts of visual perception* and the associated words (e.g. look, observe, follow, glimpse) expressing the fact that something is to be seen. She says that if we translate the “seeing is believing” rule into the act of reading then the reader’s mental visualization of what the character sees is realized, not because the reader identifies with the character, but because displaying the process of seeing and that which is seen in the fictional world help to individualize the fictional world (Esrock 1994: 184).

The observer and the simultaneity of perception

In this excerpt from “Procházka” (“The Walk”) by Josef Čapek, published in *Almanach na rok 1914* (Almanach for 1914, 1913), we can point to the accumulation of several processes expressing the observer’s perspective and leading to an enhancement in the experiential nature of the description. The plot component in this short fiction is limited to a kind of synecdoche of love: the character “taking the walk” meets a girl, they exchange a couple of comments, for a while they continue together and then go their separate ways. The dominant feature in the text structure is its descriptive function, the description of the *process of perception* of the landscape.

Along the bright way, place after place, moving forward on the dusty road
I proceed on my walk:
the ditches of dirty water run alongside the road, while further along to
the side there are daisies, swaying white flowers in the grass, and in the
ditches and round the receding telegraph poles the sparrows cry, under

the metal arch of the sky a great bird traces its path as it sets down its raucous call;

Bearing down on each point with each ray, and on each atom with all its rays, the sun warms the entire space until it is filled up to the very last place –

To right and to left I leave things behind: hillocks, houses, a speeding train, one glance, one gesture and on again and then here they are again, trees with gushing leaves, quiet greenery in shuddery motion, as a gentle wind moves across it, sharply serrated leaves with subtly cut indentations, as if made of paper, while everyone recognizes one tree by its lack of motion – the linden,

and then again greenery merging into the distance –

(Čapek 1913: 39)

At first glance two techniques for expressing the immediate experience are revealed: the first-person narration, by using which the narrator identifies with the individualized and subjective perspective of the observer-character, and present-tense narration, which Ryan classifies among the procedures that enhance the effect of immersion (Ryan 2001: 135–137). In the context of prewar modernism the present form is not yet hackneyed, and may also be associated with Henri Bergson's philosophy, which was very fashionable at that time,³ inspiring not only the Čapek brothers, but also other authors involved in the loose grouping around *Almanach*. We can interpret the meaning of this fiction by Čapek by using Bergson's concept of time as duration, a continuous flow which bears previous instants within itself, on the basis of the "event of love" at the end and the leave-taking of both characters. The event is a instant on the way and the walk-way continues, it goes on. "This is the present which endures" (Bergson 2003: 165).

But what are the other, subtler nuances in the formation of the observer's perspective? One basic aspect here is the inclusion of several senses in the act of perception. Visual stimuli certainly predominate, but in addition the

3 In a review of the Czech translation of Bergson's *Creative Evolution*, accompanying an analysis of this work to mark the philosopher's birthday (1920), Karel Čapek recalls the crowds that thronged Bergson's lectures at Collège de France, when he and his brother were staying in Paris (Čapek 1985: 186).

auditory (the sparrows, the large bird, by implication a train) is also stressed and besides the traditional five basic senses there is also perception of heat (the sun) and the movement of the air (or its effect on the movement of flowers and leaves). The inclusion of the last two in particular leads to the realization of experientiality as a quasi-mimetic evocation of our experience of perception from the actual world. The landscape description in this excerpt is clearly formed through the *optics of the observer* in motion, i.e. the experience of the walker, who is not engaged in any other mental activity, but simply fully perceiving the space around himself. This dynamized perception involves ditches that “run”, and “receding” telegraph poles, which is a metaphorical expression for the convergence of perspective lines, which change in line with the moving observer’s viewpoint. It is also matched by the rapid shift of attention between the individual sections of the route and the phenomena that attract the observer’s eye. The walker’s gaze does not omit highly detailed observation, e.g. of the tiny indentations on the linden leaves, which is then immediately followed by a view of the distance, in which the green tree shadows merge together – i.e. the change of focus that is associated with distance. Even, or especially, within this descriptive passage, we are following a literary reference to the Bergsonian concept of time as the simultaneity of instants. For movement and perception of change in general, Bergson stresses the division of this process into states, as only this “enables us to act on things. In practice it is useful to be more interested in states than in change itself” (Bergson 2003: 158). Representation of the perception of the act of walking in Čapek’s prose is determined by the depiction of the simultaneity of states, which only form change – perception of space in motion, and thus in Bergson’s words, in duration. This text construction technique evokes an experience in the reader’s mind and aims to make him share this way of perceiving.

It should be added that the previous example shows the perspective of an observer as it were “in full regalia” and at many levels. Hence it would be useful to follow individual literary devices even in cases where they are not so evident, and in their more subtle hues. Čapek’s later fiction *Stín kapradiny* (Shadow of the Bracken, 1930) is always referred to in the same breath as the most epic, the most eventful of his often meditative texts. Without wishing to cast any doubt on this, I would add that the quantity, the important role and the impressiveness of the descriptive passages cannot be denied.

This clearly follows from the role of the forest area in the storyworld – for the couple of poachers fleeing from the justice of the human world it is first of all a refuge and a safe place, subsequently turning into a labyrinth and a prison from which they cannot escape, a source of fear and punishment. In the narrator’s basic diction in the text, he is clearly defined as an omniscient and all-seeing instance. The descriptive passages thus seemingly do not have their observer within the fictional world and are presented from the point of view of the narrator. However, this technique is systematically disrupted. At the first level by the active perception of the characters, particularly their perception of space. It is these references to the characters’ standpoints that are frequently framed by the descriptive passages, as the narrator’s voice depicts their perception of the surroundings. “Exhilarated by the beauty and the power of the forest, Ruda looks for ways to show his blood-deep understanding” (Čapek 2005: 107); “The forest they had entered struck Vašek as somehow strange. What do I find so strange about this forest? Something – but what is it? Why, it’s as if I’ve already been here” (ibid.: 197). The boundary between the character and the narrator is actually breached by the dialogue (cf. Opelík 1980: 195–199), which pervades the entire text – what this means regarding the shift of perspective towards the character is evident in the second excerpt quoted. Besides, the actual distribution of descriptive passages is determined by the movement and action of both characters.

Ruda and Vašek *run up* to the skirts of the forest [...] and hop, they *put* the forest *behind them*.

These forest skirts are often curious and pleasing in their own way. On the one side you have open landscape, while the forest looms up on the other [...]. Beneath the bushy border the yellow primrose and liverwort blooms in spring, and then in summer the bluebell, briza and dianthus. Here and further down among the festuca and thrift, the two wild runners came rushing at a rough gallop like a wild wind, like stampeded cattle, like two rolling stones. Look out! *hisses* Ruda and they *are already there*, where the cornflower, tares and field scabious begin; watch out! You poor world of mine! Oh, we have taken on more than we could chew: hey, why don’t you look round better! Old Čepelkû comes *shuffling along here* after all with his little hoe under his arm.

(Čapek 2005: 100; highlighted by SF)

This passage indeed leaves a dynamic or even dramatic impression (as shown by the presence of plot elements highlighted in the excerpt), but its basic gesture is descriptive (while the descriptive passage has been abbreviated in the excerpt). It might even be said with only some exaggeration that here it is more a case of the narrative “cutting into” the description rather than the other way round, i.e. that the description halts the narrative flow or slows down the tempo of the narrative, as is suggested by the narratological simplification based on Genette’s classification of narrative tempi (cf. the fifth chapter of his *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, 1988). We can easily see the boundary between the description and the narration, but of course this does not mean it would be possible to remove it without doing harm to the development of the plot. And who is “observing” in this descriptive passage? It is clearly constructed within the narrator’s mode: the time of the narration does not match the time of the narrated, and the focus on the details of the plants and the transition between the forest and the sunbathed meadows resists the speed of movement of the potential observers. And ultimately the narrator here is not just all-seeing, but also all-knowing. He does not only present the text from the standpoint of the present moment of observation, i.e. what grows in that environment at that moment, but he distinguishes the plants that bloom in different seasons. Nevertheless, the inclusion of a descriptive passage here is motivated by the plot development – in simple terms, the description of the skirts of the forest is not inserted directly into the character’s speech,⁴ but definitely in the passage where the character is depicted running up to the forest skirts in the story. Together with the aforementioned dialogue form of the text in the speech between the characters, or just in the character’s reflective monologue, emphasis is placed on the observer’s standpoint and the motivation behind the inclusion of the description in the text.

The excerpt also makes another narrative device clear that holds the reader’s interest with the effect of “immersion”, as depicted by Ryan: “For immersion to retain its intensity, it needs a contrast of narrative modes,

4 This is clearly evident for the first descriptive passage, while in the case of the second, shorter one (“where the cornflower, tares and field scabious begin”) the mode of dialogue between the characters is only separated by a semicolon.

a constantly renegotiated distance from narrative scene, a profile made of peaks and valleys” (Ryan 2001: 137). In the text as a whole present-tense narrative indeed predominates and there are significantly fewer verbs in the past tense, but change is always very dynamic, often with the seam between the two narrative tenses located in one sentence. Alternation of time levels from the past to the present draws the reader from the *now* moment of the narration to the *now* of the storyworld, thus again restoring the aesthetic illusion of present perception.

**Between the perspective of the narrator and the character, or:
Who is actually doing the seeing here?**

We can often follow the onset of perspectivized observation even where an omniscient third-person narrator clearly plays the leading role in traditional realist prose. Even here the perspective of the (potential) observer’s character seeps in subtle hints into the narrator’s discourse. One example of this can be found in Jirásek’s *Chronicle F. L. Věk* (1890–1897): the second chapter of the second volume (1895) is an open scene set in Příkopy in Prague; the all-seeing narrator has a panoramic view of the muddy snow-spattered street. Eventually a man enters his field of vision, whose age and social background are identified in the thorough description of his rustic garb, his lined face and hunched figure. Contrasting with this figure there are subsequently some fleeting glimpses of other figures in the street, but only selected items of their clothing, i.e. those meant to represent the characteristics of “town dwellers”.

The farmer did not notice them so much as the horses and carriages, particularly a noble, glazed, yellow one with a black roof and a crimson-be-decked, golden-tasselled coach-box, behind which two servants in gallooned hats and fine long fur coats stood on a board between the rear wheels, holding onto shiny rings on the carriage roof. At this moment a man about town also crossed the street, holding an extended umbrella above his hat, which was obviously new and in the fashionable “en pain de sucre” style, and above his double-collared overcoat. (Jirásek 1951: 27)

Thus the observation implicitly and by suggestion shifts to the horizon of the character – the change in perspective is justified by the character’s inter-

est both in the horse and carriage, and in the umbrella, a thing that was “still quite rare at that time” (ibid.), as the narrator immediately adds, indicating the distance in time between his discourse and the character’s standpoint. The very choice of objects to be described is in some sense “directed” by the character’s point of view – the farmer is naturally interested in horses and carriages, and he sees an umbrella for the first time. Moreover, the farmer’s interest becomes a source for the transformation from mere ongoing action to an event: he fastens his gaze to such an extent that he does not notice the traffic on the street and almost has an accident with a passing hackney carriage.

Besides the hidden perspectivization and the description brought about by the subjective choice of objects observed, the character’s horizon also emerges in the depiction of his mood, his personal assessment and the involvement of the circumstances of his perception. It is in this way that the first, or rather the first more perceptive, meeting between Věk and his future bride Mária is presented at a Sunday mass in the gallery:

There was the sopranoist now, a slim girl, as handsome as could be, barely sixteen years old, with slender shoulders and in a bright, new dress with ribbons on the shoulders, a fresh-faced doll, groomed in a way that her fine, still almost childish forehead could be fully seen. Holding a small bunch of southernwood, reseda and opening roses in her left hand, *she proceeded a little on tiptoes, to see over the lectern* on the loft balustrade down into the church, on the baroque altars of which the abundant linden branches shone green, while vases of live flowers stood out simply, most of them with roses, peonies and golden lilies. And *down there on the pews* and amongst them it was like a poppy field full of coats of various colours.

Above at the main altar on reserved benches the Sunday best cloaks of the councillors and foremost neighbours shone white, while below the local women’s golden caps glittered with their broad starched ribbons, while among them the rustic pinners, decorative kerchiefs, motley scarves and vivid tones of the young town and country women’s clothes stood out white. *The echo of steps of people continually arriving, the coughing of the old, the hum of the dense crowd, as well as the sounds from the instruments being tuned in the gallery* carried through the empty space of the church, which was lit up

mostly in the chancel by the long bundles of spring rays, which fell on it through the old Gothic windows.

Because of this hum and the mix of voices, old Snížková's granddaughter, standing by the soprano, did not immediately hear that somebody next to her by the tenor had stood up. Věk's gaze fixed on her. Her appearance pleased him, and then, having turned round, she pointedly stopped still, a sudden flush spilling over her young face, as he greeted her affably without meaning to do so, and then continued to pay her attention and address her, which he would hardly have been likely to do any other time.

(ibid.: 199–200; highlighted by SF)

The perspective of the omniscient narrator is disrupted here not only by the repeated references to the observation itself, but also to the emphasis on the horizon of both characters. The introductory careful description of the girl's appearance is justified by the man's liking for her, and the passage otherwise concludes with an indication of the subsequent plot development in the awakening feelings between both protagonists. The presence of the two characters in the scene makes one of them, i.e. Věk, who arrives later, the implicit observer.⁵ However, the steadfastness of his gaze is also justified by his own actual mood – in the previous scene he is excited by the observation (and description) of awakening nature in springtime and so arrives at the gallery in a joyous, festive mood, even though originally he “very much did not want to” (ibid.: 199). The shift towards the other observer is also impressive: after she has been described, she herself becomes an observer and it is from her viewpoint on tiptoes “to see over the lectern”, that the atmosphere of the holy mass in the church is evoked. Characteristically, we are not provided with a full description of the persons, but together with Mária we only get to see their headwear, which viewed from above forms something like colourful smudges. This description from the girl's viewpoint is also affected by the circumstances and conditions of perception, her mood and concentration: both her preoccupation itself and the hum in the church mean that at first she does not even notice the new arrival. The visual sphere is again affected by the sunrays, thanks to which attention is focused primar-

5 For other examples of this technique, which is typical of Jirásek see the article by Alice Jedličková in this volume, pp. 154–172.

ily on the illuminated areas – thus, mainly white pieces of clothing (e.g. the cloaks, pinnars, ribbons and kerchiefs) and golden ones (the caps) are paid attention, and the “vivid” nature of the colours of the young girls’ clothes is highlighted.

Another nuance of detail which highlights the role of the character as an observer might be the alternation of perspectives. In Rais’s *Západ* (Sunset, 1899) many of the descriptive passages are “seen” from a panoramic narrator’s overview (cf. Fedrová – Jedličková 2011: 36–37). In places, however, a character’s viewpoint intervenes, particularly in observations of the landscape – whether it is perceived during movement through the terrain, or in views from a window. Towards the end of the text the number of these situations increases, due to the increasingly weakened health of the old parish priest, whose contact with the region he loves thus remains limited to a slice seen through his window (e.g. Rais 2004: 168, 180, 237–238). And this slice or observer’s viewpoint, not the overview of an omniscient “all-seeing” narrator, truly determines what is to be seen. From the bed the priest sees through the window “the school walls, the skeletons of trees in the garden and at the back a part of the forest, all in the jolliest sunlight” (ibid.: 168), and it is only when he limps with assistance to a chair by the window that the view opens out wide and in contrast to the previous uniform sunshine, the details now emerge, with colours and their hues and changes (“he looked out onto the forest, whose green played out into yellow”, ibid.). The aforementioned alternation of perspectives within a short section, an important element of narrative dramatization, is evident, for example, in the scene where the old priest and his young relative, a theology student who has come to visit, bask in the morning sunlight on a bench. Again the framework for the scene is provided by an omniscient narrator, with a truly panoramic view from the church tower across the crowns of the trees to the detail of the wagtail that “flew into the garden, scurried closer and closer up the trampled path and lowering its little grey-white head, eyed both of them blackly” (ibid.: 208). This focus on detail within the characters’ field of view changes the perspective, as is confirmed in any case by the dialogue of both characters based on their observation:

The priest looked at the wagtail and laughed drily.

"It's a pleasure to behold," the theologian continued. "In our part of the country almost everything would have withered by now – here I see a new spring and I rejoice."

The old man made a more energetic motion and clasped his arm. "But then everything here is poorer than over there, isn't it? Oh, I remember how the blossoming trees covered all the roofs and the slopes were just a mass of white. [...]" (ibid.)

The description temporarily settles in the character's mode of speech, and the priest continues to describe the springtime landscape both as a whole and in detail. The character moves from the detail currently being observed to a description of the landscape in his memory, i.e. the description of a kind of "mental landscape", formed by his experience and his capacities of recall. As a result not only the spatial, but also the chronological element of his perspective is altered.

Ekphrasis: between the observer and the interpreter

The following focus on ekphrastic texts and ekphrastic passages in modern fiction will enable us to comprehend another aspect associated with the deployment of an observer character as a mediator of experientiality and the creator of the potential for reader's immersion, i.e. with a distinction between the *mode of observation* and the *mode of interpretation*. The main task of the observer in the ekphrastic text is to provide the reader with a world of visual representation. However this vision is not objective or mediated by an "innocent eye": it is always necessary to ask regarding the intention of the ekphrasis.

There may be a dual reason for the more subtle distinction in perspective between the observer characters in the ekphrastic texts. In the first place the texts themselves in my view give rise to a need to follow the angles of observation associated with the way the nature of the character is presented or the interpretation of the text as a whole comes across. This distinction also appears to be of fundamental importance from the standpoint of the more general literary theory discussion on the opposition of description and interpretation. The sharp distinction between the mode of observation versus interpretation is typical of arts history discourse, simply because ekphrastic

texts are found in the very origins of that discipline. Of course, here ekphrasis is understood to be “pure” uninterpretative description. Art historian and theoretician David Carrier even postulates a possible line of development in discipline *from ekphrasis*, which evokes a work (Giorgio Vasari), *to description* associated with the analysis of a style (Heinrich Wölflin) and *interpretation* (modern art history). He associates ekphrasis primarily with subjects that have a verbal pre-text, which ekphrasis of a work of art basically just re-narrate (ekphrasis as “verbal recreation of a painting” – Carrier 1987: 20), while interpretation also deals with the composition, visual sources and symbolic meaning of the work. However, the following examples will show that ekphrasis need not at all relate to a verbal pre-text of a visual work of art, and may deal in detail with composition and semantic issues resulting from visual representation. And from the standpoint of the area of interest of this study it can be confirmed that a dividing line cannot be drawn between ekphrasis and interpretation, because ekphrasis has or can have a strongly interpretative nature closely bound to the viewpoint of the mediating character, i.e. the person who is describing the visual work in the text.

In his monograph *Patterns of Intention* (1985), focusing on historical changes in the way pictures are interpreted, Michael Baxandall writes that “description [of a picture] is a representation of thinking about a picture more than a representation of a picture” (Baxandall 1985: 5), thus reacting *inter alia* to the broader discussion on the relationship between description and interpretation, which is also recapitulated by Werner Wolf, who notes that in the humanities (apart from philosophy), description is more frequently placed in opposition to interpretation than to exposition (Wolf 2007: 12). Out of Wolf’s distinction between three basic functions of descriptivity what is of primary importance for us here is the third, description as a procedure mediating objective information rather than interpretation or exposition. Hence literary description not only strengthens the aesthetic illusion, but it also gives the impression that “the possible world in question refers to *the* reality as we believe to know it” (*ibid.*: 17; highlighted by WW). However, by introducing this pseudo-objective function, Wolf is also reacting to the previous discussion, in which one extreme position entails a requirement for descriptive objectivity, which excludes any interpretation. The opposite extreme position is taken by Michael Riffaterre, who says that the main function of literary description “is not to make the reader see

something [...], and it is not [an attempt] to present an external reality [...], but to dictate interpretation" (Riffaterre 1981: 125). Wolf takes issue with Riffaterre's denial of the experiential function of descriptivity, but basically agrees that in view of the nature of the text as an intentional construct, descriptive representation is not an "innocent matter", but serves some objective and is thus incorporated into the text structure.

Ekphrasis as a verbalization of the perceptive act is thus always a description with a certain intention, and as such it clearly cannot be purely uninterpretative. However, the question arises as to when its diction is explicitly interpretative and when it merely "programs" the reader's interpretation – even though here we should obviously speak of points on an imaginary scale rather than of clear opposites.

The pole of "pure observation", in which the character of the observer in an ekphrastic passage withdraws to a maximum extent from the interpretative mode, can be followed in an example taken from Hrabal's novel *Harlekýnovy miliony* (Harlequin's Millions, 1981). The situation is determined by the environment of an old people's home, which is located in the baroque building of a one-time chateau. "I have been in this old folk's home for a week now and I never stop being amazed" (Hrabal 1994: 197). The chief protagonist Maryška, who provides her voice for the first-person narration, is a character in a permanent state of astonishment. Her position as a newcomer is of course predisposed for the role of an enchanted observer: "Everybody who comes to the chateau as a pensioner has to see everything and go round everything in the first days," (ibid.: 227). With excited absorption she discovers the allegorical statues of the months and the seasons amongst others in the garden and likewise she refers to the frescoes on the chateau ceilings. The ekphrastic passages associated with the frescoes are distributed throughout the text – not, of course, at random, but in places where they serve as a foil for "mundane" events or situations, i.e. for events and happenings of the "actual fictional" world, or their interpretation in the mind of the protagonist.

We can describe *Harlekýnovy miliony* – at least from that viewpoint – as an *observation novel*. All the occupants of the home follow one another, and there are repeated scenes in which characters lean out of their windows, so as not to miss what is taking place in the courtyard, while those lying enviously follow those walking and the like. It is basically not possible to avoid the mutual surveillance. However, this many-sidedness of the observation relates

exclusively to the human world, whereas the inhabitants of the home are entirely indifferent to the space in which they live. To be more precise, that is the way they are perceived by the narrator, making her peculiarity stand out all the more. In relation to the frescoes the Maryška character is their only observer, or the only one who really perceives them. She herself repeatedly points out her privileged and isolated position: “nobody looks up, not even Francin. I am the only one who looks and marvels at what I see, what I witness” (ibid.: 266). For example, this is the way of introducing the ekphrasis of one of the frescoes depicting a group of naked women surrounded by flying cupids (ibid.: 262–263) and located on the ceiling of the room for the elderly who cannot walk any more. For women who are much closer to death than she is, the picture above their heads does not break through into other time levels as it does for Maryška. They simply do not notice it. The difference in their vision is determined by the absence of preoccupation or involvement: the elderly see, but they do not observe, they are not involved – in contrast to Maryška’s steadfast, enchanted, compassionate observation.

The role of the observing character in Hrabal’s novel is associated with her physical affectivity, for Maryška’s observation and description of the frescoes is almost always associated with physical movement, in which the individual details of the picture only gradually emerge, or the observer only gradually notices them. I believe it is this *power of the affectivity of the body in association with an emphasis on the observer character and the act of observation, as well as the multifaceted sensory nature of the description stimulating the reader’s imagination*. The reader is confronted with a situation involving sensory perception just as the observer is, thus becoming a second-degree observer.

The observer in Hrabal’s novel describes the visual representations and experiences his observation, *but does not interpret it, does not explain and no longer allegorizes what is seen in her report on what she sees*. The represented fresco scenes are rather unclear from the iconographic viewpoint: some raise questions regarding what they might be about (“above them there were dozens of naked women floating and drifting in pure sensuality” – ibid.: 261), while in others such as the dances of fauns and nymphs it can be assumed that a scene of this kind might have a mythological pre-text, but need not necessarily. The fresco descriptions are really detailed, including colour, expression and interrelations of the characters, composition of scenes and spatial arrangements – the mental visualization of the picture

represented in the reader's mind, i.e. the basic requirement from the old rhetorical tradition of the genre is easily fulfilled in this case, but the observer protagonist is not in the least interested in the story that is the mythological or literary pre-text for the scene, which would be a fairly common ekphrastic gesture, as well as a didactic and semiotic one, i.e. programming culturally conventional meanings, whereas Maryška employs a projection of her life experience.

The reason behind the lack of interpretative bias in Hrabal's descriptions lies in the fact that the primary foil, which determines the visual representation, is the either contrasting or in some way harmonizing action going on beneath the fresco, in the "mundane sphere", or in another, at the level of the story, in the "actual" fictional world; another alternative foil is an opening onto the past of the storyworld. For example, arching above the reclining women who are now close to death, there is a fresco depicting nymphs who are looking out for their groom. Such scenes observed in parallel, are just added next to the ekphrases of the frescoes, like any other observed scene. From the standpoint of the main observer character, this connection or possible allegorization is not in any way postulated. Hence it is left to the reader to interpret and link up the two levels.

In opposition to the example of Hrabal's non-interpreting observer there are ekphrastic texts where the role is highlighted of the observer character as interpreter, gradually building up and layering an interpretation of the picture. This position is decidedly more frequent and certainly comes closer to the tradition of the ekphrasis genre – as not even Philostratus was concerned with a thorough and vivid description, but ultimately also with an interpretation and exposition of the picture. In the novel by Jaroslav Maria *Svěťice, dámy a děvky* (Saints, Ladies and Girls, 1927) Giorgione's famous painting *The Tempest* is the focus of the plot – as the observer and mediator of the ekphrasis is a psychophysical character of the story, the chief protagonist Antonie, whose gradually forming interpretation of the picture reflects back on her own conduct and self-perception, with the story developing and unfolding from her interpretation of the relation between the two figures in the picture. This interpretation of a real work of art is offered to the reader as the key to interpreting the psychology of the characters and the story as a whole. (For more details see the interpretation in Fedrová – Jedličková 2010: 45–53.)

In Maria's novel we may – if only allusively – follow the subtle shift in the description of the visual work associated with an interpretation involving the characters of three different observers of the painting. The possibilities of this technique are in a way taken to the limit in a short story by František Langer “Muzeum tety Laury” (Aunt Laura's Museum), which comes at the end of the posthumously published *Malířské povídky* (Painter's Stories, 1966). Here, too, the observer's interpretative viewpoint is not only given an important place, but there is also a confrontation between the perception and interpretation of one and the same work of art in the minds and expositions of several observers. Langer's story is a rather exceptional example of an ekphrastic relationship towards abstract art;⁶ much more frequently ekphrastic texts present the representation of the art of mimetic, traditional figurative painting, whether relating to scenes, landscapes or still-lives. This very fact is the basis for highlighting the role of various interpretations: e.g. of a painter who is to assess the work of a dilettante abstract painter, and the children from the neighbourhood, who liked to look in at Aunt Laura's pictures and listen to the life stories that she told as she painted. It is only thanks to their observation and exposition that the painter begins to consider the pictures differently. (For more details see the interpretation in Fedrová 2010: 253–256.) All the characters in the story are modelled in such a way as to tell in some way of their subjective observing experience of abstract art, and to present alternatives for interpretation. Langer's story – and here he moves the function of the character observing and interpreting the visual representation in an ekphrastic text a step further in comparison with the previous example from Maria's novel – and presents three different approaches. Basically, these correspond more generally to the fundamental options whereby an observer forms an ekphrastic text (in other words, whereby we too as onlookers in our general human experience relate to visual representations): the correlation with another visual representation or pictorial model, the underpinning of the narrative foil and the associative play with the form of the seen. The choice of any one of these options basically depends on the intention of the specific ekphrasis within its context, as well as on the observer's general proclivities.

6 Another example of this limited set of texts might be the poem by Nancy Sullivan “Number 1 by Jackson Pollock” (1965).

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