

MEDIEVAL PASTICHE AND INTERMEDIALITY IN GREGORY NORMINTON'S NOVEL "THE SHIP OF FOOLS"

СЕРЕДНЬОВІЧНИЙ ПАСТИШ ТА ІНТЕРМЕДІАЛЬНІСТЬ У РОМАНІ ГРЕГОРІ НОРМІНТОНА «КОРАБЕЛЬ ДУРНІВ»

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The paper examines intermedial and intertextual references in Gregory Norminton's novel *The Ship of Fools* and their significance in reconstructing medieval storytelling. The research is done within the framework of an interdisciplinary approach, integrating literature, linguistics, cultural and art studies. It provides a detailed analysis of ekphrastic descriptions and intertextual references using the methods of contextual, interpretive and semiotic analysis.

Being based on the painting of Hieronymus Bosch, Gregory Norminton's version of *The Ship of Fools* reconstructs the tradition of allegorical and satirical critique of society, prominent in medieval literature. In this paper, it is viewed as a medieval pastiche, that draws inspiration from the narrative model of the late Middle Ages author Geoffrey Chaucer. *The Ship of Fools* alludes to the fictional and artistic achievements of European culture and establishes multiple intertextual links to mythology, legends, and works of early European writers, as well as bridges the gap between different forms of artistic expression. Norminton skillfully uses the potential of the language to evoke vivid imagery reminiscent of visual representations. By masterfully weaving together the denotative and connotative meanings of words, as well as employing their associative power and using various stylistic devices, phonetic properties of language, specific punctuation, and structural elements of the text, the novel enriches the reader's experience with layers of depth and complexity. Although Gregory Norminton reconstructs medieval storytelling model, the interaction between the present and the past goes far beyond mere imitation and stylistic experimentation, creating an ironic and humorous effect. The novel *The Ship of Fools* can be seen as a critique of modern society, life values and priorities.

Key words: intermediality, intertextuality, ekphrasis, allegory, medieval literature.

У статті досліджуються інтермедіальні й інтертекстуальні зв'язки у романі сучасного англійського письменника Грегорі Нормінтона *Корабель дурнів* та їх роль у реконструкції середньовічного оповідання. Дослідження здійснюється в рамках міждисциплінарного підходу. Аналіз екфрастичних описів та інтертекстуальних посилань проводиться із використанням методів контекстуального, інтерпретаційного та семіотичного аналізу.

Роман Нормінтона, побудований на алюзії до картини Ієроніма Босха *Корабель дурнів*, розглядається як середньовічний пастиш, що наслідуює наративну модель *Кентерберійських оповідань* автора пізнього середньовіччя Джеффри Чосера. Роман містить загальний пролог та окремі історії персонажів, які різняться за характером від лицарського оповідання та алегоричної богословської притчі, до фавлю – середньовічного жанру, що характеризується непристойними жартами та низькою лексикою. Грегорі Нормінтон відроджує сатиричну й алегоричну літературну традицію, яка використовувалась з часів середньовіччя для критики соціальних, політичних і релігійних аспектів суспільства.

У романі наявна велика кількість відсилань до літературних текстів, а також картин відомих мистців середньовіччя й раннього Відродження. Численні інтертекстуальні алюзії та інтеграція у літературний твір елементів семіотичної системи живопису допомагають відтворити атмосферу того часу. Нормінтон вміло використовує потенціал мови – фоносемантичні властивості слів, взаємодію денотативних і конотативних значень та асоціативні можливості лексики, різноманітні стилістичні прийоми, специфічну пунктуацію, щоб викликати яскраві образи, подібні до візуальних образів живопису.

Не дивлячись на те, що Грегорі Нормінтон реконструює середньовічну наративну модель, взаємодія між сучасністю і минулим виходить далеко за межі простого наслідування та стилістичного експериментування, створюючи іронічний та гумористичний ефект. Роман *Корабель дурнів* можна розглядати як критику сучасного суспільства, сучасних життєвих цінностей й пріоритетів.

Ключові слова: інтермедіальність, інтертекстуальність, екфразис, алегорія, середньовічна література.

Introduction. Contemporary reading public's interest in Medieval and early Renaissance cultures has been significantly enhanced in the late XX – early XXI century by a number of bestsellers in which

historical accuracy is blended with imaginative narration. Fascination with the past was particularly stimulated by postmodernists' attempt to reevaluate 'Dark ages' and revise traditional narratives and genres. Among the authors who played homage "to the original, but with an irreverence born of the desire to find the new story within the old" [7, p. 393], is the British writer Gregory Norminton. His 2002 novel *The Ship of Fools*, which alludes to the famous picture of the XV century Netherlandish painter Hieronymus Bosch, received immediate recognition for its erudition, wit, "wickedly Rabelaisian" voice and "Chaucerian" construction [10].

Review of Publications. Norminton's novel has been discussed in a number of research publications most of which define it in terms of ekphrasis [1; 3; 4].

Ekphrasis, "virtuosic description of physical reality <...> in order to evoke an image in the mind's eye as intense as if the described object were actually before the reader" [6, p. 252], in contemporary philological science is usually regarded as a kind of transformation of visual imagery into verbal representation. It is studied in connection with the theory of intermediality, where focus is given to the interaction between a literary work and works of visual art within a polysemiotic text. Although the interest to such technique originated in the Greek antiquity [11, p. 320], now, in words of L. Generaliuk, it reached the level of "ekphrastic explosion" (екфразисний бум) [2, p. 52] and by many authors is seen as the most developed aspect of intermedial research today [3, p. 9].

The novel *The Ship of Fools* abounds in artistic references and thus deserves the name of ekphrasis. As T.V. Bovsuniv'ska says, all the characters of the novel were 'copied' from paintings by either Bruegel, Bosch, Kustodiev or Dirk Bouts [1, p. 325].

A wider outlook on Norminton's text allowed scholars to examine this novel as a postmodernist fiction based on a well-developed in European culture metaphor of 'a fools ship' [4]. The idea of a ship representing human vices, disastrous and ruinous forces that manipulate people's lives, was first introduced in Sebastian Brand's allegorical poem *The Ship of Fools* (1497), served as an inspiration in Bosch's painting of the same title (1500) and has been further developed in novels of K.A. Porter, W. Golding, C. Yardley and others. Recently, the expression acquired a more general meaning of 'foolishness' as seen in Dr. Hallpike's critical studies *Ship of Fools: An Anthology of Learned Nonsense about Primitive Society* where the scholar examines some of the most popular of these speculations and evaluates their scientific merit.

Still another ongoing discussion of Norminton's version of '*The Ship*' touches upon an issue whether the author revives medieval or early Renaissance storytelling. Scholars, on the one hand, pay attention to the medieval symbols and the carnivalesque and ambivalent nature of folk culture poetics typical of the Middle Ages [1, p. 328–329], but also notice that Norminton alludes to fictional and artistic works of Renaissance culture [4]. Basically, the writer reconstructs medieval storytelling of Geoffrey Chaucer, whom Philip Gooden calls "a Renaissance man who lived in Middle Ages" [8]. Being written in the style and manner of *Canterbury Tales*, the novel is a "kind of imitation", "an elaborate form of pastiche" [6, p. 644] that follows Chaucer's frame narration, featuring General Prologue with character introduction and their individual stories – medieval literary tradition, recognized also in a famous collection *The Decameron* by an early Renaissance author Giovanni Boccaccio.

The aim of the article. In this paper, we take a new approach and look at the intermedial and intertextual references in Norminton's novel which, in our opinion, play a crucial role in reconstructing and revitalizing the medieval storytelling. We aim to examine them within the framework of an interdisciplinary approach (incorporating literature, linguistics, cultural and art studies).

The following **research methods** were used: 1) contextual and interpretive analysis helped to study the ways of implementing the author's ideas and to understand the overall content of the work, as well as its possible interpretation by readers; 2) the method of semiotic analysis facilitated the comparison of symbols conveyed through verbal signs with objects depicted in paintings; 3) intertextual and intermedial analyses were used to integrate data from various sciences (literature, art, linguistics, etc.) and reconstruct a polymodal and polyphonic dialogue created by the author of the novel.

Results and Discussion. People, isolated aboard a ship – which is a multifaceted symbol on its own, ranging from Noah's Ark to a contemporary society, often reveal their true selves, and thus become intriguing subjects for artistic and philosophical observation.

Bosch's picture *The Ship of Fools* is featured on the cover of Norminton's book, and the first impression the reader gets is visual: caricature images of open-mouthed people, naked humans hanging in greenish water, a jester on the mast, which is actually a tree – the picture immediately produces an impression akin to a satirical and allegorical text.

The novel itself starts with a very close description of the ship, thus launching an ekphrastic technique

and responding to visual art through the medium of words:

“Laden like a bowl of cherries, the ship of fools sits on the lawn of the sea. Although the breeze frets the ship’s banner, the sea is green and calm as a garden. The ship is rather a boat, is truly neither, for the mast has yet to renounce its life as a tree” [10, p. 1]. Just like the prevailing colors in Bosch’s picture, which are of the earthly palette, different shades of green and brown with a few spots of dirty red – the colors that have nothing to do with the traditional blueness of the sea and sky, Norminton, in the same way, fills his description with ‘earthly’ components: *lawn, garden, cherries, tree*. There seems to be no need to mention the colors explicitly as the greenish-brownish palette is implied in the objects enumerated and is specifically mentioned only when used atypically – *the sea is green*.

Although visual image on the cover helps to see the entire picture immediately, the verbal text with its slower and sequentially perceived details adds semantic richness of associations to the visual presentation, both forming a cohesive unity.

Further descriptions adopt a style reminiscent of still-life paintings, featuring a meticulous enumeration of routine artifacts from Bosch’s picture: *“flagon of ale or wine, a glass, a begging-bowl, a barrel of booze, a knife, a roast chicken, a dead fish, a ball of dough and a bowl of (you guessed it) cherries”* [10, p. 1]. This detailed inventory ends with a ‘wink’ from the author: cherries, which used to have pure and positive symbolism in the early Christian times, later acquired sexual connotations [9, p. 188]. *“Laden like a bowl of cherries,”* ship inspires a social commentary from the author who sees it as *“betokening the sin of lust, or the lust for sin – the two are almost interchangeable”* [10, p. 1], thus supporting the impression of a satire, produced but the picture on the cover.

Similar approach is taken to introduce the characters aboard, some of whom are ‘fixed’ at the moment of going through certain actions: *“They are (in disorder) three choristers, an immodest bather, a drunkard vomiting, a drunkard snoring, a glutton, a fool, a monk, a woman drinking and a nun, in voice, strumming a lute”* [10, p. 1]. Norminton rather enumerates than presents them, neglecting their appearance, and the reader is probably encouraged to refer back to Bosch’s painting to enhance the mental image. Interestingly though, the characters are presented, in Norminton’s words, ‘in disorder’ – the expression that not so much suggests randomness of introduction as implies the idea of lack of organization, order, illness and inefficiency on the ship itself.

The ship doesn’t move, and the description is given in present tenses, creating an illusion of suspended time, later confirmed explicitly: *“All the usual pointers to Time are lacking”*. Norminton closely follows the static tradition and the model of artistic semiotic system and enhances the verbal nature of the narrative by creating the impression that we are not merely reading his novel but standing in front of the canvas, observing the images in the picture. Even the answer to the question *“What are they doing there?”* is another enumeration of activities expressed in words which have semantic minimum of actual action: *“Sitting, standing, lying, crouching, straining on tiptoe, floating in the water”* [10, p. 2].

This translation of visual signs into linguistic ones seriously effects overall interpretation of the text. As these two semiotic systems have a different arsenal of tools for their artistic expression, the resulting clash of linguistic signs and artistic ones not only enriches author’s narration and broadens the potential of the language, but also leads to the deepening of the reader’s perception or cognition of the created world.

The text, for example, can direct the reader’s specific attention to something that can be easily overlooked in the painting, like a ‘curious owl’ on the crest, which is *“curious because it possesses both mouth and beak”*. Probably the only image in the picture which has a ‘smiley face’ and human characteristic of curiosity.

The words with their powerful layers of denotative meanings and connotative associations draw greater attention to every detail. For example, the word combinations like *dead fish, immodest bather, motley crew, bibulous pleasures*, all of them being of pejorative connotation, add negative shades of perception to the imagery on the canvas.

Words can also add a vocal accompaniment to each detail, like the repetition of fricatives in *“This stasis, this sempiternal sameness...”* [10, p. 2] which not only create a sleepy, hushing, or whispering effect but also ‘mirror’ the meaning of the words and contribute to the feeling of monotony or stagnation: *“is it not tremendously dull?”* [10, p. 2] – the author asks.

Another technique – capitalization helps to emphasize certain ideas, like, for example, in *“pointers to Time are lacking”*, which extends the notion of ordinary time-perception, adding a conceptual level to the saying. Capitalization also serves to change the meaning of everyday words into metaphorical/symbolical ones, like in *“Beyond the clement weather, there is no Weather”* [10, p. 1]. The capitalized *“Weather”* might imply that apart from the surface-level aspects of life, *“clement weather”*, there are deeper unpredictable forces that shape and direct

human life, which are absent in this ‘picture of enduring immutability’.

Unlike Chaucer’s pilgrims, traveling to Canterbury to visit the shrine of the saint, Norminton’s characters are simply stuck in the picture: “*These stationary travellers, pilgrims without a destination, are simply passing the time. At least, they are filling the moment. That is, they are trying to. If one focuses on the present, there are pleasures – bibulous, conversational – to be had*” [10, p. 2]. They tell the stories to distract from their boredom, they do their best to ignore futility of their lives.

Painting of Bosch serves as a setting for a story and functions as a kind of a stage from which all its occupants will tell their tales. Each narration starts with a short prologue written in a form of a theatrical text with the words for different players and author’s remarks on how they have to be said. While this approach could be seen as a postmodernist play with genres or styles, it may also serve as a central idea or concept, almost reminiscent of Shakespearean *All the world’s a stage*. In this particular novel, this technique unites all the stories into a single cohesive text.

Each individual prologue is followed by the story proper. The tales of the characters are rich in intermedial references to the works of another XVI century painter, Pieter Bruegel, famous for his phantasmagorias in the style of Bosch. His painting of *Mad Greta* depicts a woman in full armor, with a sword in one hand and stolen booty in another. She’s the central figure in the atmosphere of chaos, death, and self-inflicted hell.

Mad Greta comes alive on *Drinking Woman*’s story of the milkmaid *Bercula* and her encounters with the fierce and belligerent ‘heroine’, *Dulle Griet*: “*In the street stands Dulle Griet like a hunched, ill-omened bird. Aproned and armoured, she is followed by a mob of housewives. <...> Dulle Griet herself stands eight feet tall: a dry, pinched, thin-lipped harridan*” [10, p. 56]. Reference to Bruegel’s canvas helps Norminton to animate the image of Dulle Griet with her army of “*desperate housewives*”, who engage in brutal robbery and bring destruction everywhere they go. Norminton, in a way, ‘recreates the story’ of Bruegel’s Greta: “*But walls alone cannot slake Dulle Griet’s rage. With a scream like the rush of air from a furnace, she summons her followers*” [10, p. 64]. Coming from the canvas, she lives for the sake of the constant fights, and her image in the novel becomes even more grotesque and absurd thanks to the multiple use of metaphors, unexpected similes and semantically incompatible expressions: “*Then she hits the city with her sword whooping: parts peo-*

ple from their jawbones, lops heads as though they were daisies” [10, p. 64].

Among the other recognizable images are Bruegel’s paintings *Haystack* and *Harvest in Nun’s story*, Bruegel’s *Tower of Babel* in *The Penitent Drunkard Tale*. The tale of the Drunkard also bears resemblance to the engraving *Melencolia* by the XVI century German artist Albrecht Dürer, from which, as the author himself acknowledged in the footnotes, he copied some of the images.

Thus, through layers of intermediality, employing images from famous paintings of the XV–XVI centuries as prototypes for the characters, Norminton vividly recreates the atmosphere of that time on the pages of his novel and offers the reader a game of recognition. The characters resonate with the iconic figures from the artworks, creating a rich tapestry of connections between literature and visual art.

Similar purpose of enriching the narration is served by multiple literary allusions and intertextual elements. The most prominent ones are to Francois Rabelais’s novel *Gargantua and Pantagruel* which inspired many stories centered around the themes of eating and drinking. Norminton’s feminine prototypes of Rabelais’s famous giants devour all types of food: “*Dull Griet herself, snapping the spine of kraken, sucks the eggy goo from its eyes <...> the Frisian Sea is almost cleared of monsters. They become Behemoth pie and sea-slug stew, owl-shark paste and giant-squid soup*” [10, p. 70–71].

Other intertextual elements involve mythological references and allusions to different legends. The story of *Belcula*, for instance, alludes to the legend of the founders of Rome, Romulus and Remus, who were nursed by a she-wolf. Norminton adapts the same plot in *Belcula*’s story, but replaces the she-wolf, one of the sacred symbols for the ancient city of Rome, a symbol of military prowess, with a female boar, a symbol of impure desires, “*Christian symbol for tyranny and lust*” [11, p. 464].

Belcula is further compared to *Bayard*, a legendary horse known for possessing a human mind and fantastic speed whose image comes from the chivalric poems of the Italian Renaissance poet Matteo Boiardo *Roland in Love*, *Rinaldo* and *Roland the Crazy*. *Bayard* is a giant horse, a participant in the carnival procession in Aalst. This use of allusion coupled with hyperbolization and the phonetic phenomenon of homophony creates a vivid ironic effect: “*She is to whores what Bayard is to horses: a sexual giantess*” [10, p. 53].

Allusions to saints and their depictions in paintings provide a special stylistic color to many stories. A theological allusion is clearly traced in the story of

two brothers, Pierre and Moritz, who, falling in love with Belcula, forgot about their blood ties and were ready to kill each other: “*The curse of Cain is in his blood, and Pierre, seeing his death in his brother’s eyes, shrinks back defenseless*” [10, p. 40]. In *The Monk’s Tale*, the reader’s attention is drawn to the figure of the protagonist and Minstrel is compared to St. Erasmus, whose image is known not only from theological literature, but also from the French artist Nicolas Poussin’s painting *The Martyrdom of St. Erasmus* (1600): “*Nonetheless, the face was strong still, reminding me of Saint Erasmus when he spooled his innards on a windlass*” [10, p. 222]. This allusion is immediately followed by the one to St. Catherine, who refused to marry the emperor Maxentius and was beheaded: “*We must be steadfast like St. Catherine*” [10, p. 222]. To achieve economy of expression and to some extent for the sake of ironic effect, the author compares the monk and the minstrel to Saint Sebastian, using allusion: “*Immediately, the vegetable pelting began. As St Sebastian suffered for his faith, so we endured many hateful projectiles*” [10, p. 222].

The novel makes the most notable references to multiple texts, both literary and artistic, of the medieval time and early Renaissance. The resulting interplay between the present and the past goes far beyond mere imitation and stylistic experimentation providing ironic and humorous effect. The novel reads like an allegory and offers insights into our historic past, as well as better understanding of the present.

The story, which starts with the description of a static picture, gradually comes to life, and each char-

acter appears one by one, with their lifestyles, features of character, and their individual stories, gradually drawing the reader into the narrative, offering personal acquaintance with each of them.

Much like with Chaucer, the stories told by the characters vary in nature, spanning from the chivalric romance (as seen in the first tale of the Swimmer, written in a high style, using sophisticated metaphors, similes, and Latin words for the greater effect) and an allegorical theological parable (The Nun’s Tale) to the fabliau – a medieval genre characterized by obscene jokes and low vocabulary, as seen in the story of “*the most magnificent and desirable woman in the world*” Belcula, depicting her quest for her biological mother, almost reminiscent of the epic journeys of Odysseus.

Conclusions. By multiple intertextual allusions and by integrating symbolic systems from other arts into his literary work, Norminton ‘unleashed’ a powerful instrument for creating startling new images and incorporating unexpected ideas, at the same time exploring and broadening the expressive possibilities of the language. Readers, in their turn, by deciphering the inter-semiotic codes in the text, get access to references, important for interpretation of the story.

The Ship of Fools reads as a medieval pastiche, but is it?

Continuing the work of his predecessors, the author uses allegorical tradition and archetypical characters prominent in medieval literature to make fun of modern society, offering examples of phantasmagoria, sharp satire on people, on our life values and priorities, on our faults and sins.

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