

## Capturing the Ekphrastic Gaze: An Analysis of Visual Perception in Jose Saramago's *Manual of Painting and Calligraphy*

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### Abstract:

*This research investigates the nuanced narrative structure of José Saramago's "Manual of Painting and Calligraphy," centering on the novel's pervasive use of the ekphrastic gaze. The protagonist and narrator, H., employs a first-person perspective through autobiographical exercises, travel diaries, and essayistic reflections, offering readers a multifaceted exploration of themes and experiences within the novel. The primary focus of the analysis is the strategic deployment of the ekphrastic gaze by Saramago, threading together diverse narrative elements and thematic threads to present a nuanced examination of human history, personal experiences, and the artistic journey of self-discovery. The narrative's hybrid nature, incorporating various forms of writing, enriches the novel's texture, providing readers with a kaleidoscopic view of the intricate relationship between art and life. The ekphrastic gaze takes center stage as H., a struggling artist, embarks on a quest to defy established norms in academic art and forge unconventional modes of representation. This narrative choice becomes a poignant exploration of the complexities inherent in the quest for a genuine and personal representation of reality. The ekphrastic core is further emphasized by H.'s dual creative pursuits in painting and writing. The act of writing, portrayed as a journey of self-discovery, mirrors the intricate relationship between artistic expression and personal awareness, characterized by hesitations, uncertainties, and experimental endeavors. Additionally, the socio-political climate is seamlessly integrated into the narrative, allowing the ekphrastic gaze to juxtapose artistic contemplation with real-world events, providing readers with a multi-dimensional perspective on the intersection of art and life.*

**Keywords:** Ekphrasis, hybrid narrative, Saramago, human history and art,

Published in 1977, Jose Saramago's novel *Manual of Painting and Calligraphy* constitutes one of his initial literary endeavors predating the acclaim he got through more prominent works such as *Baltasar and Blimunda* or *Raised from the Ground*. Notably, the inaugural edition of this novel included the subtitle 'Essay on the Novel' which was later dropped. Saramago's unconventional narrative style is marked by an essayistic quality, facilitating philosophical diversions and narrative reflections concurrent with plot development. This distinctive attribute is particularly discernible in his later works, including *Blindness* and *Seeing*, the Portuguese titles of which translate to 'An Essay on Blindness' and 'An Essay on Lucidity,' respectively.

According to Saramago, "...designating it as 'Essay on a Novel,' I consciously recognized a distinctive quality in my work, a reflective exploration of the very nature of the novel itself. 'The Manual of Painting and Calligraphy' constitutes a perpetually contemplative narrative, a trial novel aligned with a specific literary classification distinguished by its reflective attributes. The notion of labeling it an 'essay novel' initially struck me as pretentious, especially considering my novice status in the literary realm. Rejecting this suggestion, I engaged in a linguistic maneuver, naming it an 'essay on a novel,' a decision that yielded a measure of satisfaction, encapsulating the novel's essence as an attempt, an inquiry into its potential outcomes." (Saramago & Reis, 1998, pp. 103-104)

In addition to the essayistic discourse, it is imperative to underscore the diverse manifestations of Saramago's literature, ranging from manuals and memoirs to histories, biographical annals, notebooks, gospels, and the aforementioned essay. Primarily, this highlights an emphasis on the act of writing itself, positioned as both a performative endeavor and a repository of myriad forms. The protagonist in Saramago's narrative emerges as a mediocre artist endeavoring to rediscover the art of painting while concurrently embarking on a journaling initiative. The act of writing, stemming from a crisis wherein the protagonist, H., refuses adherence to prescribed manual rules, becomes a quest for a novel mode of expression. H., depicted as a disillusioned academic portraitist catering to a bourgeois clientele, no longer adheres to his erstwhile principles, negating the artistic essence of his painting. Confronted with the futility of his artistic pursuits, H. opts to portray the authentic S., initiating a diary as a vehicle for self-awareness. This act of writing serves as a pretext for H. to delve into ethical and aesthetic quandaries surrounding the nature and function of artistic creation. The narrative assumes the form of an endeavor, a learning process, and a meta-literary reflection on storytelling as a mode of representation.

The concluding passage elucidates H.'s acknowledgment of the futility of his artistic endeavor, symbolized by the transition from canvas to written expression. This introspective exploration underscores the perpetual tension between varied forms of creative expression and serves as a platform for evaluating the worthiness of succumbing to the temptation of alternative modes of

expression. The passage further posits that adherence to a specific form of expression implies a departure from personal ownership, akin to adhering to rigid rules outlined in a manual.

Saramago's *Manual* unfolds as a tale of self-discovery within the backdrop of Portugal during the waning years of Antonio Salazar's dictatorship. At its core, the narrative revolves around a struggling artist commissioned to depict a portrait of a powerful industrialist. Encumbered by a sense of unfulfilled potential, the artist experiences a transformative and politically charged awakening when he stumbles upon the possibilities inherent in writing. A pivotal juncture in the story emerges from a crisis, triggered by the protagonist H.'s inability to fulfill the client's order. Frustrated by the constraints of conventional artistic manuals, H. rejects prescribed norms, embarking on a quest for a novel mode of expression. H., initially depicted as a lackluster academic portraitist subservient to a bourgeois clientele, undergoes a profound shift in perspective. Disenchanted with the principles guiding his artistic endeavors, he no longer views his painting as a genuine artistic pursuit. This disillusionment prompts H. to deviate from portraying commissioned subjects and instead focus on depicting the authentic essence of individuals, as exemplified in his portrayal of the true S. Concurrently, the narrative takes a literary turn as H. initiates the practice of maintaining a diary, utilizing it as a medium for self-awareness. The act of writing serves as a pretext for H. to engage with ethical and aesthetic dilemmas inherent in the creation of art. This narrative evolution reflects an intricate interplay of personal and artistic introspection. The broader narrative unfolds as a multifaceted endeavor, constituting an exploration, a learning process, and a meta-literary reflection on the nature of storytelling as a mode of representation. Saramago, through the character H., invites readers into a realm where the boundaries between artistic forms blur, intertwining the visual and the written in a compelling exploration of artistic identity, ethical considerations, and the essence of creative expression.

“The completion of the second canvas remains an ongoing endeavor for me, although a realization of its inevitable unfinished state permeates my artistic pursuits. The failure of this undertaking finds tangible evidence in the sheet of paper upon which I embark on a parallel act of writing. In due course, my artistic progression oscillates between the canvases, with the potential for a return to the written expression or the occasional interjection of a brushstroke on the portrait canvas commissioned by S. or its parallel counterpart unseen by S. On that eventual day, while confronted with the knowledge that both portraits are inherently futile, I will deliberate upon the worthiness of succumbing to the allure of an expressive form foreign to my essence. Paradoxically, this temptation signifies a deviation from the ownership of my chosen form of expression, akin to adhering to the rigid constraints delineated in any prescribed manual” (Saramago, 1992, p. 5).

The current literary work by Saramago demonstrates an essayistic quality, particularly in its utilization of an ekphrastic lens that intricately examines the interplay between literature and the visual arts. Ekphrastic writing, a mode of literary expression employed herein, entails the writer's response to a visual artwork, be it a painting, sculpture, photograph, or other visual creation, articulated through the medium of language. This form of writing is characterized by the author's use of descriptive and imaginative language to convey their interpretation or emotional reaction to the artwork. The objective is to bring the visual art to life through verbal representation, offering a distinct perspective or insight into the artwork's themes, details, or emotional resonance. Although ekphrastic poetry is a prevalent form, the concept extends to prose and diverse literary forms, encapsulating "the verbal representation of visual representation" (Heffernan, 1993, p.305). Ekphrasis has a historical lineage, with roots traceable to Homer's depiction of the Shield of Achilles in *The Iliad*. Its prominence in the Romantic period is exemplified by Keats' seminal "Ode on a Grecian Urn," while 20th-century instances include Auden's "Musee des Beaux Arts" inspired by Breughel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* and Sexton's "The Starry Night", drawing inspiration from Van Gogh's eponymous painting (Moorman, 2006, p. 46). Homer presented Achilles' shield, and Vergil revisited this theme through Aeneas' shield. In a similar vein, W. H. Auden engages with both shield encounters in his poems "The Shield of Achilles" and "Secondary Epic." As Valentine Cunningham observes, "Such revisitings not only keep the western imaginaire, the western tradition, alive, they are the lifeblood of the ekphrastic mode" (Cunningham, 2007 p.57)

This study scrutinizes the application of ekphrasis and its nuances within the context of Saramago's *Manual of Painting and Calligraphy*. The origin of Ekphrasis in Saramago's narrative finds its roots in a connection to autobiographical narrative and travel experiences. At a certain juncture in the narrative, the protagonist and homodiegetic narrator (H., a mediocre painter serving as the author's alter ego) initiates a written account of his journey to Italy. These fragmented recollections, notably termed "exercises in autobiography," capture his encounters with monuments and perusal of museums in various Italian cities such as Milan, Venice, Florence, and Rome. Seeking to elucidate his purpose to the reader in the first "exercise," the narrator clarifies:

"Surely you are not expecting a guide or an itinerary of works of art from me, and even less a beneficial contribution to confirm or dispute preconceived ideas, direct or by second hand. But a man advances through spaces that architecture has organized, through rooms populated with faces and figures - and certainly he is not becoming what he was when he entered, or it would have been better for him to have passed by." (Saramago, 1983p p 138-39)

According to the narrator, these texts deviate from the impressionistic qualities of conventional travel writing and lack the attributes of aesthetic criticism. Instead, they manifest a distinctly

autobiographical nature, chronicling the transformative impact of contemplating the monuments and artworks within these cities and their museums.

The described aesthetic appreciation by the Saramagan narrator in this excerpt conveys a metamorphosis. Saramago's ekphrastic prose within the "exercises in autobiography" amalgamates descriptive passages with meditative reflections on or inspired by the artworks under consideration. The term "exercises" underscores their function as essays, both in the etymological sense of attempts (reflecting the narrator's endeavor to write his autobiography) and as texts that articulate the narrator's perspective. Each exercise is succeeded by a meta-textual reflection, either expanding on topics explored in a more personal account, often invoking biographical episodes, or contemplating the process of autobiographical writing itself. In this context, the ekphrastic practice of the autobiographical exercises serves as a strategic response to the narrator-painter's identity crisis and creative block, allowing him (and, by extension, the author) to regain control over his life and art. This excerpt, part of a more extensive passage referencing Rousseau's *Confessions*, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, and Marguerite Yourcenar's *Memoirs of Hadrian*, illustrates the narrator's preoccupation with biography and his expressed aspiration to find a fitting approach for composing his autobiography.

In another instance within Saramago's novel, the narrator engages in a contemplation of a mummy exhibited in a Vatican museum after the culmination of the autobiographical exercises. The meditation unfolds as follows:

"It is, in flesh preserved beyond putrefaction, a closeness. Only one hundredth of a second separates us, which I insist on believing. If the official museum guide comes to tell me that between this body and my body are two or three thousand years, I will not doubt it, since it is the duty of guides to know these matters. But I cannot represent what three thousand years are if the body is here, the question of the ignorance of language resolved by silence, and another dialogue is established. The hands, with their long and thin bones covered with flesh that is only fiber and black skin, without sweat, that solicits the touch of other hands, they are only a little way from moving, already half out of the mortuary box, but not yet out of the glass case enclosing the body. The nails, very much alive, will not be slow to humbly, humanly, pick the dandruff of the living." (Saramago 1983, p. 237)

Saramago's contemplation of the mummy introduces unique elements not commonly found in similar works. Notably, he places significant emphasis on physical and human proximity, suggesting potential for communicative and affective expression between the mummy and the narrator, as indicated by the underlined expressions. The meditation delves into the dialectical interplay between the enduring materiality achieved through the process of mummification and the disquieting acknowledgment of human mortality symbolized by mummies. This exploration underscores a shared preoccupation with the theme of death, a recurring motif in Saramago's

extensive body of work. Expanding on this, Saramago's distinctive approach to the portrayal of the mummy sets his work apart from conventional treatments of similar subjects. By highlighting the physical closeness and potential emotional connection between the narrator and the mummy, he injects a nuanced and human dimension into the contemplation of death. This departure from the norm allows Saramago to navigate the complex terrain between the preserved materiality of the mummy and the profound existential contemplation of mortality. Moreover, the dialectical interplay described in the meditation draws attention to the tension between the preserved permanence achieved through mummification and the unsettling reminder of human finitude that mummies represent. This thematic duality aligns with a broader exploration of mortality that permeates Saramago's literary corpus. His treatment of death goes beyond a mere narrative device, becoming a rich tapestry woven into the fabric of his storytelling. In essence, Saramago's meditation on the mummy serves as a microcosm of his larger thematic concerns. It reflects his distinctive narrative approach, which intertwines the tangible and the existential, and adds depth to the exploration of death, a subject that consistently occupies a central place in his literary world.

The paragraph concludes with Saramago's reflection on the mummy:

"This is the long history (not prehistory) of the material continuity of men. For millions of years, millions of millions of men were born from the earth and returned to it. The terrestrial humus is already much more human dust than original crust, and the houses we live in, made from what came out of the earth, are human constructions, in the strictest sense of human, made of men." (Saramago 1983: 238)

As previously highlighted, the ekphrastic perspective in Saramago's novel primarily unfolds through the autobiographical narratives of the narrator and protagonist. This ekphrastic lens serves as a channel for profound personal reflections on human suffering, injustice, and sentiments like heroic resistance against oppressive power. Following a detailed exploration of artworks in Castello Sforzesco, Pinacotecas di Brera and Ambrosiana, and "The Last Supper" at Santa Maria delle Grazie, the narrator of Saramago's novel concludes the initial autobiographical exercise with a vivid portrayal of a scene witnessed on the streets of Milan:

"To me, Milan encapsulates this essence. Additionally, during the night, gatherings of people in the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele, witnessing heated debates between the youth and adults, while carabinieri observe, capturing a palpable restlessness. The walls of buildings along Via Brera tell a different story, adorned with slogans such as 'Lotta Continua' and 'Potere Operaio.' A few days later, as I wander through Tuscany, the Milanese police will intervene at the University of Studies, leading to violence, injuries, arrests, and the deployment of tear gas. Meanwhile, the right-wing, conservative, fascist, or fascist-leaning press will revel in the events." (Saramago 1983: 141-2)

This passage not only encapsulates the narrator's immediate observations but also sets the stage for a broader narrative exploration of the socio-political climate. The juxtaposition of artistic contemplation with real-world events becomes a powerful means through which Saramago intertwines aesthetic experiences with the harsh realities of political turmoil, offering readers a multi-dimensional perspective on the intersection of art and life.

Consequently, the focus shifts from the artworks displayed within the Pinacoteca to the communist graffiti adorning the walls of buildings in Via Brera, becoming the subject of the narrator's meditation. This reinterpreted form of ekphrasis aligns with the narrator's stated intent to describe autobiographical experiences and draw comparisons between the past and the present. The narrator recalls this episode of modern Italian history in the subsequent meditation, drawing parallels with the contemporary political climate in Portugal during that time under the authoritarian regime of Marcelo Caetano: "In Milan, some walls spoke, they said words that were unusual and forbidden to me in my country of grief and fear: 'the struggle continues,' 'worker power'" (Saramago 1983: 148). The narrative then proceeds to recount the narrator's personal encounter with political injustice, briefly narrating his unjust arrest by PIDE due to some incendiary 'papers,' which he claims to have stumbled upon (likely an autobiographical allusion to the author's personal experience).

Saramago's humanistic background injects an ethical dimension into the ekphrastic practice, giving rise to a desire for "heteropathic identification" with the aesthetic objects under contemplation. This concept embraces the other's difference without negating it, fostering a subjectivity capable of approaching the other without appropriating its position. The outcome is akin to Marianne Hirsch's concept of 'projected heteropathic memory,' wherein the imaginative overcoming of temporal, spatial, and cultural distances enables a universal empathy with individuals from other eras, locations, and cultures (Hirsch 1999: 9).

The autobiographical exercises in *Manual of Painting and Calligraphy* draw inspiration from monuments or artworks in the museums of diverse European cities. These exercises function as records of the writer's journeys and, significantly, as personal reflections on the philosophy that history must be present to comprehend one's own humanity, thereby facilitating an understanding of others'. This contemplation on the human condition unfolds in the midst of aesthetic objects.

"One advances through dozens of enormous rooms and galleries, of rotundas, of stanze, and always with the remorse of leaving behind, perhaps forever, the painting, the fresco, the sculpture, the illuminated book that would probably help us, in peace, to better understand this world and the life we make in it." (Saramago 1983: 228)

Saramago's observations manifest an intent to document fragments of human societal history encapsulated within artifacts, simultaneously establishing meaningful parallels between the past

and the present. These parallels extend beyond collective history to encompass testimonies of personal experiences, as vividly portrayed in the autobiographical passages within the "Manual."

The presence of first-person narration in the novel is emphasized and the narrative unfolds from the perspective of the protagonist or narrator. Additionally, the text showcases a notable hybrid nature, incorporating various forms of writing such as autobiographical exercises, travel diaries, chronicles, and the earlier-discussed essayistic exercise. This textual diversity enhances the richness and complexity of the narrative structure, allowing for a multifaceted exploration of themes and experiences within the novel. Saramago's manual delves into the intricacies of representing reality. The protagonist and narrator, H., grapples with a compelling urge to defy and expose himself in both the realms of painting and writing, challenging the established norms of academic art by forging unconventional modes of representation. Notably, H.'s occupation as a portraitist adds an intriguing layer to the narrative. The act of writing becomes a journey of self-discovery, giving rise to a self-awareness teeming with hesitations, uncertainties, and a series of experimental endeavors. In this narrative context, the narrator's dual creative pursuits serve as a rich terrain for exploring the complexities of artistic expression and the quest for a genuine and personal representation of reality.

In conclusion, the ekphrastic gaze emerges as the central technique in José Saramago's *Manual of Painting and Calligraphy*, weaving together diverse narrative elements and thematic threads that present a nuanced exploration of human history, personal experiences, and the artistic journey of self-discovery. The novel's unique amalgamation of autobiographical exercises, travel diaries, and essayistic reflections is primarily structured around the protagonist and narrator, H., employing a first-person perspective to delve into intricate thought processes and introspections. The novel's hybrid nature, encompassing various forms of writing, serves to enhance the richness of the narrative, providing a multifaceted exploration of themes and experiences. This literary diversity is orchestrated to facilitate an ekphrastic gaze, where Saramago skillfully employs art and aesthetics as a lens through which the protagonist observes and interprets the world. Central to this thematic exploration is H.'s dual creative pursuits in painting and writing, each serving as a distinct ekphrastic exercise. H.'s quest to defy established norms in academic art and forge unconventional modes of representation becomes the novel's ekphrastic core. The act of writing, portrayed as a journey of self-discovery, reflects the intricate relationship between artistic expression and the quest for a genuine and personal representation of reality. Through the protagonist's observations in Milan and beyond, Saramago employs the ekphrastic gaze to emphasize the significance of art as a mirror reflecting societal upheavals, offering readers a poignant glimpse into the intricate interplay between creativity and the socio-political landscape. Saramago's *Manual* stands as a testament to Saramago's mastery in utilizing the ekphrastic gaze as the primary lens for exploring the complexities of human existence, artistic expression, and the dynamic interrelationships between past and present. The novel unfolds as a carefully crafted

ekphrastic narrative, inviting readers to witness the world through the eyes of an artist grappling with the challenge of representing reality in its myriad forms.

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