

Nikolai Gumilev's Italian poems: The quest for image

OLGA ADELAJDA NOWACZYK

Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu

ORCID: 0000-0002-9722-0805

Abstract: This article analyzes the Italian poems of Nikolai Gumilev, with particular regard to the use of ekphrasis and ekphrastic vision. The poetic cycle in question marks a pivotal stage in author's artistic path, relating to the foundation of Acmeism – a short-lived, yet influential, phenomenon within Russian Modernism. The analysis shows how programmatic quest for spatial and visual poetry grounded in literary tradition relates to the phenomenon of Italian literary travel.

Abstrakt: Niniejszy artykuł analizuje wiersze włoskie Nikołaja Gumilowa, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem wykorzystania ekfrazy i wizji ekfrastycznej. Cykl poetycki, o którym mowa, wyznacza kluczowy etap na drodze twórczej autora, związany z powstaniem akmeizmu – krótkotrwałego, lecz istotnego zjawiska w obrębie modernizmu rosyjskiego. Analiza pokazuje, w jaki sposób programowe poszukiwanie poezji przestrzennej i wizualnej zakorzenionej w tradycji literackiej wiąże się ze zjawiskiem włoskiej podróży literackiej.

Key words: ekphrasis, literary travel, Italianism, Acmeism, Nikolai Gumilev

Słowa kluczowe: ekfrafa, podróż literacka, Italianizm, Akmeizm, Nikołaj Gumilow

1. Literary travel to Italy and artistic path of Nikolai Gumilev

Literary travels tend to be at least as revelatory of their authors as they are of the places they describe. Autobiographism and self-creation demonstrate to varying degree but remain intrinsic to the genre. This aspect of literary travels became evident in Romanticism. Secularizing the tradition of pilgrimage, Romantics established a trope of the quest for personal reinvention. Italian poems authored by Nikolai Gumilev are manifestos of artistic renewal, declarations of spiritual rejuvenation and testimonies of authorial views on philosophy and art. This article demonstrates how ekphrasis is a vehicle of intertextuality, allowing the author to position himself among generations of predecessors.

Nikolai Gumilev (1886–1921), together with Sergei Gorodetsky, was the founding father of Acmeism. Along with Osip Maldelshstam and Anna Akhmatova

(at the time, Gumilev's wife; married in 1910, poets officially divorced in 1918), he was the most eminent member of this transient literary school. While the movement was short-lived, it was a momentous episode for Russian literature, with influence extending to the next generations of writers – notably, Vladimir Nabokov and Iosif Brodski. Composed in spring of 1912, the Gumilev's cycle of Italian poems is thematically and chronologically linked to the origins of Acmeism. Established the same year, the group distanced itself from Symbolism, perceived as impoverished, declining and infatuated with mysticism. Nevertheless, this did not presume a complete rupture. Elaine Rusinko aptly notices that "in spite of their sometimes antagonistic rhetoric, they [Acmeists – O.N.] saw themselves as part of reform and development of main-line Symbolism, rather than a reaction against it" (Rusinko 1982:495). A crucial point of the "Acmeist reform" was the reintroduction of the spatial, the visual, and the image. In the article *Symbolism's legacy and Acmeism* (Наследие символизма и акмеизм), Gumilev discusses "that element of light which distinguishes objects, which sharply outlines" as an alternative to "very Symbolist melding of all forms and things, this inconstancy of their images" (tr. Robert T. Whittaker, Jr; Forrester, 2015: 291). Drawing on Nietzschean concepts of Apollonian and Dionysian, Gumilev positions himself on the side of "that measured restraint, that freedom from the wilder impulses, that calm wisdom of the image-creating god" (tr. Douglas Smith, Nietzsche, 2000: 21). If Symbolists loved music and its ephemerality, Acmeism wanted architectural solidity. Russian Symbolism seemed overly elusive to Gumilev. He explains it in another article (not published in his lifetime):

Symbolists explored all the musical potentialities of the word, showed how the same word in different combinations of sounds can mean different things, but they could not prove that this different meaning is the real meaning, and not just one of the possibilities. (...) In their poems there is no consistent interplay of foreground and background; with an overdeveloped metaphor, hypermetaphor, I would say, a man is all too easily replaced by a star, and the star, in turn, by an idea, and so on. How could they, totally subordinated to the temporal art of music, know about the spatial laws of plastic perception! (Translations are mine unless otherwise stated; Gumilev 1998: VII, 170)¹

In contrast to that, Gumilev was seeking the poetry of the concrete, poetry attentive to the spatiality. *Italian poems* can be seen as the embodiment of this new

¹ "Символисты использовали все музыкальные возможности слова, показали, как одно и то же слово в разных звуковых сочетаниях значит иное, но доказать, что это иное и есть подлинное значение данного слова, а не одна из его возможностей, не смогли. (...) В их стихотворениях отсутствует последовательное смешение планов переднего и заднего; при помощи чрезмерно развитой метафоры, гиперметафоры, сказал бы я, человек с исключительной лёгкостью подменяется звездой, звезда какой-нибудь идеей и т. д. Откуда ж бы им, всецело подчинённым временному искусству музыки, знать о пространственных законах пластического восприятия!" (Gumilev 1998:VII, 170).

ideal. George Nivat aptly noticed that Gumilev's Italy is a response to the Italy of Alexander Blok (Nivat 1982: 706), an alternative to the somber and pessimistic vision of the master of Russian Symbolism. For Blok great culture of the days long gone seemed suppressed by modern civilization, and the contemporary Italy of Garibaldi and Victor Emmanuel seemed unworthy of the nation's past (Nivat 1982:709). Gumilev's Italian poems are devoid of such tones. Past and present are not opposed to each other. For Gumilev, history remains present "in the land, where graves of dead are silent // Yet their will, power and force are alive²" (*Фра Беато Анджелико – Fra Beato Andželiko* – Gumilev, 1998: II, 123). The vehicle of that is the continuity of culture embodied in the artifacts. The poem *Genuya* provides a poignant example of this. Observing merchants depicted on a Renaissance painting, speaker can almost feel their presence in the current moment:

Миг один, и будет чудо;
Вот один из них, смелея,
Опросит: «Вы синьор, откуда,
Из Ливорно иль Пирея? [...]»³ (Gumilev 1998: II, 114)

Images are a source of connection to the past, and a model for Acmeist poetry. Travel in geographical space becomes a quest for spatiality in poetry, for making "poetry as image" – "ut pictura poesis"⁴. Maria Rubins claims that "Gumilev deliberately creates in his Italian cycle an impersonal account of his journey, disposing of any profound extra-aesthetic content" (Rubins, 2000:174). This article demonstrates that such criticism is misguided. The quality of being "descriptive" is closely linked to the quest for spatial and visual poetry and does not undermine the profoundly personal character of those poems.

2. *Paduanskij sobor*

On the surface *Italian poems* may seem to add little to the standard formulas of Italian travelogue (or "Italianism"⁵), established in European literature.

² „В стране, где тихи гробы мертвецов // Но где жива их воля, власть и сила" (Gumilev, 1998: II,123)

³ „One moment, and the miracle will come/One of them, getting bolder/Will ask:"You, signore, where are you from/Livorno or Piraeus?"

⁴ It's worth noting, that this usage of the phrase, while commonly accepted, is not etymologically correct. In the original context of Horace's *Epistole to the Pisos*, famous author is simply suggesting to look at poetry like one looks at a picture (this is to say, looking close, paying attention to the details. However, throughout ages the Latin phrase "ut pictura poesis" was interpreted as a claim that poetry is, or should be, like image, and is widely used in this context until today (Krieger, 1992:78-79)

⁵ Conceptualizing the study of non-Italian literary texts, engaging with Italian culture, and intertextually linked with each other, Polish Italianist and comparativist, Olga Płaszczewska, proposes studying "Italianism" defined not as a mere influence, but rather – as a discourse and field of interest, as well as a mode of expression, entangled in multidirectional relationships with described

Descriptions of the weather and landscape (Неаполь [*Neapol'*], Пиза [*Piza*], Падуанский собор [*Paduanskij sobor*]) echo the traditional motifs of picturesque Italian beauty. In an equally typical manner, the poems are abundant in references to cultural artifacts and historical figures, while saying little about modern Italy and its inhabitants. They interpret contemporary spaces through the lens of the past. This is because in the eyes of many European writers, Italian reality was 'a museum' or even a 'mausoleum' (Luzzi, 2002:50). Such perception is focused on artifacts and landscapes, which serve as a background for cultural showpieces, thus it is visually oriented. It comes as no surprise that literary "Italianism" is typically ekphrastic. Margaret Topping notes how the "frequent presence of quasi-ekphrastic descriptions of the culture visited, which associate it with pre-defined esthetic commodity" (Topping, 2019:80) is a characteristic of traditional travel literature in general. Thus, both ekphrasis *sensu stricto* – verbal representation of a work of visual art – and ekphrasis *sensu largo* – "sought-for equivalent in words of any visual image (...) all word-painting" (Krieger, 1992:9) – are characteristic traits of "Italianism"⁶. In modern critics, "gaze" and "ocularcentrism" are frequently subject to ethical scrutiny, particularly in regard to travel literature. However, the visuality of Gumilev's Italian poems cannot be isolated from the author's broader aesthetic orientation discussed above. Gumilev's ekphrastic visions are projections of the author's theoretical inclinations and his project of poetry, modelled after spatial arts. Poem *Paduanskij sobor* provides a good example of this.

The English title *The Cathedral at Padua*, used in translation by Earl D. Sampson and by Alla Burago and Burton Raffel, creates certain ambiguity regarding the architectural prototype. The Russian word *собор* (*sobor*) could refer to two of the Florentine churches: Basilica Pontificia di Sant'Antonio di Padova and Basilica Cattedrale di Santa Maria Assunta. However, the reference to "Gothic towers" in the final stanza makes clear that the former was the architectural prototype of the poem, which leaves the English title somewhat misleading. With various architectural styles leaving their mark on the basilica, it seems appropriate that

territory and other texts (Płaszczewska, 2010:269). Thus understood "Italianism" is, in many regards, analogous to Saidian definition of Orientalism (Płaszczewska 2010: 262). However, unlike Said, Płaszczewska does not concentrate on discourse criticism; rather, she explores intersections between transnational discursive patterns, individual artistic expression, and context of author's national literature. The article at hand has no theoretical ambitions, however, author finds thus understood "Italianism" an useful tool of analysis.

⁶ Murray Krieger's inclusive definition of ekphrasis, however interesting as a starting point of author's exploration of the visuality of writing, has been frequently criticized, mostly for impracticality (see Heffernan 1993:3). While applying inclusive definition of the term may go against common practice, I find it appropriate due to its historical accuracy, and, most importantly, due to impossibility of "finding the object of ekphrasis". Elusive character of those "objects" will be illustrated in the subsequent part. In subchapter *Fra Beato Angelico* I will return to Krieger's theory of ekphrasis. However, I'm using the term 'ekphrasis' without further classification only in reference to 'verbal representations of the works of visual art' in order to avoid confusion.

the poem is dominated by contrast. The rising and falling sound of the Russian iambic pentameter corresponds to vertical dynamism built by the concentration of opposing kinetic verbs, which matches the juxtaposition of oppositions on a semantical level. The reader can observe the unity of form and content. The aesthetic experience fixated in the poem is characterized by fragmentation. Only the first two verses give a generalized view of the temple, describing it in abstract and intellectualized terms. The visual experience is rendered in rapid succession of isolated images: “windows of confessional booths” with “eyes weary of desire”, metaphorical “blood” and “veins” of “granite walls”, “naked bodies” of the martyrs, “dim vaultings”, altogether creating the sense of heightened carnality. The living people are reified (reduced to “eyes”), while sculpture – a thing – is seen as a “body” (Gumilev 1998: II, 154).

The lyrical hero finds himself on the verge of being consumed by the cathedral. This pushes him to hurdle outside to sit in a tavern with a glass of wine. As the hero leaves the temple, a contrasting image is introduced, providing a counter-balance. The exterior of the basilica, namely – the perpendicularity of the Gothic towers, weakens him, suggesting the victory of the temple.

This paradoxical resolution can be elucidated through juxtaposition with the architectural prototype. As stated before, descriptions of the temple presented in the poem are rather elusive, in contrast with the declarative “concreteness” of Acmeist poetry. Rather than describing a work of visual art, the text reproduces the emotive state produced by it. Though such perception is subjective, and, mediated through other literary texts, the contrasting mood fixated in the final quatrain remains linked with aesthetical ambiguity, characterizing the cathedral itself.

Yuri Zobnin interprets the poem as a refutation of Catholicism by Orthodox conscience (Zobnin, 1999). Like a large part of the interpretations in the monograph *Николай Гумилёв – поэт Православия* (Nikolaj Gumilev – poët Pravoslavija), this one says more about the critic's ideological inclinations than about the text itself⁷. In fact, Gumilev does not condemn the Roman Church. This is visible in the final lines, where “Catholicism” is associated with the Acmeist ideal of paradoxical solidity found in movement:

Готические башни, словно крылья,
Католицизм в лазури распростер. (Gumilev 1998:II, 154)⁸.

More accurate conclusions were drawn by Georges Nivat, who asserts that “Gumilev felt the mixture of strength, health, sensualism and mysticism of Italian Catholicism” (Nivat 1982:706). It is worth noting, however, that those various

⁷ Although this book presents a good overview of Christian motives in Gumilyev's oeuvre, the explicit ideological bias of the “Gumilyev-as-a-poet-of-Orthodoxy” narrative is a source of many misguided interpretations, such as the one discussed here.

⁸ “Gothic towers, like wigs/Catholicism has spread in lazure” (Gumilev 1998:II, 154)

aesthetical categories are put in a logical order. Introducing some additional literary context will help elucidate it.

The peculiar mixture of religious affection and sensuousness, reflected in the poem, was a common trope of European Decadence, a known influence for Gumilev. In the Italian context, the most obvious association would be works of Gabriel d'Annunzio. Gumilev had a profound reverence for this author. The poem *Ода д'Аннунцио* (*Oda d'Annuncio*) testifies that. However, in the context of the discussed poem, other influences, common for D'Annunzio and Gumilev, seem to be more relevant. This includes "decadent Catholicism" of Oscar Wilde and John Gray. We can see it in juxtaposition of *Падуанский собор* (*Paduanskij sobor*) with visions of peculiar intimacy of confession in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* or erotic fascination with suffering and martyrdom in Gray's *Madonna*.

Горят в окошечках исповедален
Желаньем истомленные глаза (Gumilev 1998:II, 154)⁹.

As he passed out, he used to look with wonder at the black confessionals and long to sit in the dim shadow of one of them and listen to men and women whispering through the worn grating the true story of their lives (Wilde, 2008:128)

... от мучеников томных,
От белизны их обнаженных тел (Gumilev 1998:II, 154)¹⁰

O foul voluptuousness! when I have made
Of every deadly sin a deadlier blade,
Torturer filled with pain will I draw near
The target of thy breast, and, sick with fear,
Deliberately plant them all where throbs
Thy bleeding heart, and stifling with its sobs (qd. in Lockerd, 2020:31)

Those common tropes of Decadent Catholicism likely had an impact on imaginary, employed in *Paduanskij sobor*. Even more profound parallels can be traced to Joris-Karl Huysmans's trilogy, culminating in the novel *The Cathedral*. The dynamics of Huysmans's cycle is similar to Gumilev's poem in its passage from frenetic Decadence to religious clarity and a sense of order, with art being a vehicle for that. Litwinowicz observes that:

By combining two different aesthetics, the Issenheim Altarpiece bridges the gap between the macabre vanitas of *Là-bas*, in the spirit of Holbein and Bosch, and the apology of life of *The Cathedral* (Litwinowicz, 2018:135).

⁹ "In the windows of the confessionals burning//eyes, exhausted with desire." (Gumilev 1998:II, 154)

¹⁰ "...from exhausted martyrs, from the whiteness of their naked bodies" (Gumilev 1998:II, 154)

Gothic architecture can symbolize tension between the nature and the artifice, between the senses and the spirit. Organic, arboreal forms, inspired by primordial hierophany of primary forest, are filled with uniquely human meaning. This tension is crucial for the Decadent esthetics.

In *The Cathedral*, art constitutes a part of authentically religious experience of unification of opposite principles. Resolution of the poem *Падуанский собор* (*Paduanskij sobor*), in which the speaker, exhausted by the intensity of the stimuli, attempts to “escape” the temple only to find himself ultimately defeated by its exterior, by the counterbalance provided by perpendicular Gothic towers, is analogous to the case of Huysmans's Durtal:

The Soul, distraught by the joy of union, heartbroken at having still to live, only aspires now to escape forever from the Gehenna of the flesh; thus it beseeches the Bridegroom with the uplifted arms of its towers, to take pity on it, to come to fetch it, to take it by the clasped hands of its spires and snatch it from earth, to carry it up with Him into Heaven (Huysmans, n.d.)

Much like for Huysmans's Durtal, a sense of order reveals itself for Gumilev's speaker through reaching limits of excess. This sudden clarity, achieved through artistic “visions of excess” can be understood both in religious and aesthetical context. Italian poems represent a breakthrough period in Gumilev's oeuvre, marked by re-embrace of Christianity and push towards clarity. In this context, his poem can be read as an Acmeist manifesto, demonstrating the passage from Symbolism towards the Acmeist clarity.

3. *Fra Beato Andželiko*

Programmatic questions are equally important in the poem *Fra Beato Andželiko*, which is considered an Acmeist manifesto. Pondering upon the role of image in this poem, one can notice several layers of ekphrasis. The first layer is evident: “the verbal representation of visual representation” (Heffernan 1993:3) – in the case of the discussed poem, descriptions of Fra Angelico's paintings. The second layer of ekphrasis is less obvious to the extent that I failed to encounter any mention of it in the existing literature. In my assessment, those descriptions are partially derived from Vasari's *Lives of Artists*, which complicates their relationship with the visual source. Third layer of ekphrasis is pictorial character of the poem itself. Descriptions of paintings are inscribed into an imaginative landscape, created with such emphasis on the visual element, that it evokes the primary meaning of the term “ekphrasis”:

The early meaning given “ekphrasis” in Hellenistic rhetoric (...) was totally unrestricted: it referred, most broadly, to a verbal description of something, almost anything, in life or art. (...) Whatever the object was to describe, and whether in rhetoric or

poetry, it consistently carried with it a sense of a set verbal device than encouraged an extravagance in detail and vividness in representation, so that – as it was sometimes put – our ears could serve as our eyes (Krieger 1992:7)

Valetine Cunningham notices that „ekphrasis grants a demonstration of literature’s persistent resurrectionist desires – the craving to have the past return living, to live again, to speak again”¹¹ (Cunningham 2007:63). This tendency is evident in Gumilev’s poem, which explicitly reflects upon history and tradition, affirming their life. This mode of perception, prototyped in Petrarch’s *Famous Letters* by the account of wandering through the ruins of Rome, transgressed linguistic and temporal boundaries to become one of the staple motifs of “Italianist discourse” (see footnote 5) – and, occasionally, an object of understandable ethical scrutiny (Luzzi, 2002 is one example). Trespassing temporal boundaries may be seen as emulation of spatial arts, such as painting. The nature of the visual medium is to present everything at once. This overlaps with a tourist’s experience confronted with remains of different epochs, with different epochs revived in his mind. Knowledge of the space includes literary and mythological sources along with historical ones; for this reason, the mental landscape unfolding in traveler’s mind blurs distinctions between fiction and reality. Such is the fictionalized and aestheticized Italy *painted by* Gumilev in the first two stanzas. Deictic expressions (“In this country where...”) (Gumilev 1998:II, 123), which tend to ground in concrete reality, are paired with mentions of conspicuously fantastic beings: “hippogryph”, this “second generation monster or invention” (Borges & Guerrero, 1974:79), “winged lion”, “crystal nymphs” and “crowned furies”¹². A common, non-capitalized word for “night” is used in a personalization, indicating association with the Roman goddess Nox – mother of the Furies. The effect of pictoriality is achieved through condensation of images and adjectives referencing visual characteristics; among them, „lazure” and „crystal” emphasize the artifice of this landscape. The historicity, on the other hand, is represented by the graves – graves of “the dead” whose “force, power, and will” remain alive¹³ (Gumilev 1998:II, 123).

Subsequent part, enlisting masters of the Italian Renaissance, serves as a starting point for the praise of Fra Angelico. First, the names are enlisted together with positive characteristics, only to be repeated with rejection. In a manner typical for broadly understood ekphrasis, the speaker in the poem acts as a guide, who “not only ‘shows’, but directs his or her audience’s attention, adding order and

¹¹ Cunningham operates on more narrow definition of ekphrasis: “that pausing, in some fashion, for thought before, and/or about, some nonverbal work of art, or craft, a poiema without words, some more or less aestheticized made object, or set of made objects” (Cunningham 2007: 57).

¹² В стране, где гиппогриф весёлый льва//Крылатого зовёт играть в лазури,//Где выпускает ночь из рукава//Хрустальных нимф и венценосных фурий (Gumilev 1998:II, 123)

¹³ “В стране, где тихи гробы мертвецов,//Но где жива их воля, власть и сила” (Gumilev 1998:II, 123)

meaning to the undifferentiated mass of sights which is presented to the visitor” (Webb 2016:54). Having set the scene through painting this *cultural landscape*, the author narrows down the focus to a detail on this map of Italy – the town of Fiesole, the house of Fra Angelico. This, in turn, serves as an introduction to what is normally understood as “ekphrasis” by modern critics – that is, descriptions of particular works of art. Those descriptions are preceded by general praise of the painter, to which I will soon return. For now, it is important to note how this panoramic view effortlessly transcends into a discussion of concrete works.

Critics frequently noticed that the references to particular paintings are vague, making identification of visual “prototypes” problematic (Malyx, 2009). Fra Angelico’s tendency to return to specific subjects and depict them in a similar manner further complicates the task. The critical edition of Gumilev’s complete works quotes two hypotheses. Georges Nivat refers to “altar paintings of St. Mark’s Monastery in Fiesole”, as the “unquestionable prototype”, while Nikolai Bogomolov considers that descriptions refer to depictions of Madonna with the Child and Saints Cosmas and Damian in San Vincenzo d’Annalena in Florence (Gumilev 1998:II, 284). However, neither of the explanations is satisfactory. “St. Mark Monastery in Fiesole” does not exist; there is, St. Mark’s Monastery in Florence and St. Dominic’s Monastery in Fiesole, both decorated by Fra Angelico. While the explanation proposed by Bogomolov is plausible, as the paintings on the altarpiece correspond with details of Gumilev’s description, it ignores the image of the mounted knight described in the seventh stanza. The structure of the poem signals the passage from “general picture” to ekphrasis of particular paintings, which follow after the line “but what he did paint was perfect”¹⁴ (Gumilev 1998:II, 123). Accordingly, the image of the mounted knight portrayed against “rocks” and “groves”, “flocks” walking “through the streets of the suburbs” (Gumilev 1998:II, 124) in the lights of dawn, has to be the first one of them. However, there is no corresponding work not only in San Vincenzo d’Annalena, but anywhere in the oeuvre of John of Fiesole¹⁵. Perhaps the poem alludes to one of depictions of the Three Wise Man, like the *Adoration of the Magi* recorded in 1492 in the Palazzo Medici Riccardi in Florence as work of Fra Angelico¹⁶. However, some elements (“flocks”) are missing, and by the time Gumilev visited Italy, this painting was in a private collection in Britain (Cook et al., 1913).

¹⁴ “Но то, что рисовал он, — совершенно.” (Gumilev 1998:II, 123)

¹⁵ Description in the poem resembles the youngest king depicted in the famous work *Procession of the Magi* authored by Benozzo Gozzoli, the greatest among Fra Angelico’s disciples, in 1459. This painting is a jewel of Chapel of the Magi in Palazzo Medici Riccardi (Florence). Before that, Gozzoli assisted Fra Angelico in painting the *Adoration of the Magi* in Cosimo Medici’s cell in San Marco (Florence).

¹⁶ Today this painting is displayed in National Gallery on Art (Washington) as a work of Fra Angelico and Fra Filippo Lippi (*Fra Angelico, Fra Filippo Lippi, The Adoration of the Magi, c. 1440/1460*, <<https://www.nga.gov/collection/highlights/angelico-lippi-the-adoration-of-the-magi.html>> (last accessed: 15.5.2022)

Palazzo Medici Riccardi features another depiction of the Magi – the famous *Procession of the Magi* by Benozzo Gozzoli, a disciple of Fra Angelico, who also assisted the master in painting the *Adoration of the Magi* in Cosimo Medici's cell in San Marco (Florence). All the elements referenced in the poem can only be found in Gozzoli's *Procession of the youngest king*. If we reject the possibility of such confusion, the seventh stanza of the poem remains a mystery. Regarding the next two stanzas, we can agree with Bogomolov's supposition regarding San Vincenzo d'Annalena altarpiece as the prototype. At the same time, Fra Angelico approached the theme of the martyrdom of St. Cosma and St. Damian twice and authored numerous depictions of Madonna. Descriptions in the poem are vague, thus preventing readers from confidently identifying prototypical paintings.

Discussion of concrete objects transcends effortlessly into general observations again in the tenth stanza, as the speaker characterizes the color palette, linking the purity of colors with the spirit of the painter: "They were born with him and with him died"¹⁷ (Gumilev 1998:II, 124). The final part moves from description towards narration and reflection. The assessment of Fra Angelico's life and art, presented in this part, as well as the preceding descriptions of his paintings, is strikingly similar to the model provided in Vasari's *Lives of Artists*, a classic work which was a common currency among Modernists. To illustrate those affinities, relevant chapter in Vasari's opus magnum needs to be quoted in length:

Brother Giovanni Angelico of Fiesole (known in the world as Guido), was no less an excellent painter and illuminator than a worthy priest, and he deserves for both of these reasons to be greatly honoured by posterity. (...) could have earned whatever he wanted from the arts in which, even as a young man, he was already quite proficient, he nevertheless desired, for his own satisfaction and tranquility (being by nature calm and gentle) and, principally, for the salvation of his soul, to join the Order of the Preaching Friars (...) after Cosimo had built the church and monastery of San Marco, he had Fra Angelico paint the entire Passion of Jesus Christ upon one wall of the chapter house (...) But astonishingly beautiful is the panel on the high altar of the church, for, besides the Madonna whose simplicity inspires devotion in anyone who gazes at Her, as do the saints who resemble and surround Her, there are scenes in the predella from the martyrdoms of Saints Cosmas, Damian, and others which are so well done that it is impossible to imagine seeing anything created with more care, or figures executed with greater delicacy than these. (...) a person who led a most holy life, quiet, and modest (as he actually was) (...) And what more can or should a man desire than to gain the heavenly kingdom by living a holy life and earning eternal fame in this world by working with skill? And in truth, a sublime and exceptional talent such as that Fra Angelico possessed could and should not be bestowed upon anyone but a man leading the most holy of lives; for this reason, those who engage in ecclesiastical and holy works should be ecclesiastics and holy men themselves, for we see that when such things are executed by people who have little faith and hold religion in low esteem, they often fill the mind with impure appetites and lascivious

¹⁷ "Они родились с ним и с ним погасли" (Gumilev 1998:II, 124)

desires, with the result that the work is censured for its impurity but praised for its craftsmanship and skill. But I would not wish anyone to be mistaken and to construe that clumsy and inept works are pious, while beautiful and well-done ones are corrupt, as some people do when they see figures either of women or young boys that are a bit more pleasing, beautiful, and ornate than usual and who immediately seize upon them and judge them as lustful, without realizing that they are very much in the wrong to condemn the good judgement of the painter (...) In short, this friar who could never be sufficiently praised, was in all he did or said most humble and modest, and in his paintings articulate and devout; the saints he painted possess more of the expression and the appearance of saints than those by any other artist (Bondanella et al. 1998:169–177).

Some similarities are apparent on a textual level, but parallels go beyond that. Vasari was an inventor of Renaissance theory of art, uniting the artistic and human ideal. Both for Vasari and Gumilev artistic perfection is related to the individuality of the artist; Gumilev follows Vasari's suit in describing not so much the paintings as Fra Angelico's art in general. This was routine in the Renaissance period; Vasari's novelty, as observes Svetlana Leontief Alpers, lies in linking this optics with his theory of art: "absolute perfection refers not to the general perfection of art, but to the particular perfection of the representational means; the ends are susceptible not to a single perfection, but to infinite variety" (Alpers 1960:204). This helps to explain paradoxical lines:

О да, не все умел он рисовать,
Но то, что рисовал он, – совершенно (Gumilev 1998: II, 123)¹⁸.

Fra Angelico was a perfect artist, even though he could not paint everything, because there are as many *perfections* as artists. Alpers also observes how, when describing paintings, Vasari's focus is psychological, he concentrates on artist's ability to portray internal states authentically. As Gumilev in *Fra Beato Angelico*, he does not indicate the arrangement of the figures depicted, instead concentrating on the unfolding story (Alpers 1960:193). Finally, *Lives of Artists* are a source of moral characteristics of Fra Angelico, the "humble simplicity" praised in the poem. Gumilev follows Vasari's suit in linking those moral values and esthetic qualities.

The article *Symbolism's Legacy and Acmeism* asserts that "ethics becomes esthetics" (tr. Robert T. Whittaker, Jr; Forrester, 2015:292). Accepting Christianity leaves no need for imprudent excursions in the realm of mystics, as poetry does not usurp a religious role (Forrester, 2015:293). Interest in painting and sculpture is linked to this return to concrete reality, hence this "thingly" esthetics. The Christian virtue of modesty transmits into acceptance of the limitations of human knowledge, as well as own talents, requiring continuous development through

¹⁸ "Yes, he could not paint everything/But what he did paint was perfect".

meticulous study of form. Poetry was seen as a particular sort of craftsmanship, hence the humble name of “Guild of Poets”, adopted by Acmeists. It is not difficult to see why Fra Angelico was a suitable role model for Gumilev. Yuri Zobnin summarizes it:

Is it necessary to look for the divine only in the transcendence, given that the whole world is a God’s creation? In order to achieve brightness and purity of color, it is necessary only to “dissolve the flowers in bishops” consecrated oil (Zobnin, 1999).

Here, the critic aptly notices the importance of the earthly aspect, symbolized by “flowers”. Elsewhere, however, he provides a misguided interpretation, in which the Dominican monk becomes a holder and a symbol of “the Orthodox view on religious art”, “abandoning curiosity about the “particulars” of life and pay attention to the values of a different, higher order. The canon of religious painting asserts its spirituality, “humbling” the natural human attraction to the “carnal” principle of existence” (Zobnin, 1999)¹⁹. This reading is puzzling, it is the “particulars of life” that interest Gumilev the most. On the other hand, Oleg Lekmanov notices the “carnality” of Gumilev’s Fra Angelico, but claims that this interpretation is “a glaring contradiction with the traditional, centuries-old perceptions of Fra Beato²⁰”. This statement is extremely inaccurate. In the excerpt quoted above, Vasari himself praises depictions of saints for their similarity to real people. This is because the works of Fra Angelico are not examples of strict adherence to the canon and exclusive focus on spiritual beauty (in a manner expected in Russian Orthodox theology of icon). Instead, they present a unique blend of canonical and individual, traditional and innovatory, earthly and heavenly:

He combined much of traditional Byzantine and Gothic styles with increasingly influential Renaissance techniques, following traditional iconography in many respects, but departing from it in other ways (...) seeking to reconcile apparent tensions between the preaching matter of religious art and the new forms of expression sweeping through the West which would inevitably affect its content. (...) The Dominican Order was founded in direct opposition to the dualist sects. The friars preached that we should not view the material world as evil or manifesting a struggle of uncertain outcome between good and evil. (Fisher 1994:262)

The contingency of this attitude towards the material world with programmatic declarations of Acmeism proves that Gumilev’s view of Italy was highly

¹⁹ „Канон религиозной живописи утверждает ее духовность, “смиряющую” естественное тяготение человека к “плотскому” началу бытия” (Zobnin, 1999)

²⁰ „Автор стихотворения «Фра Беато Анджелико» не мог не понимать, что созданный им образ вступает в кричащее противоречие с традиционными и овечными веками представлениями о Фра Беато” (Lekmanov, n.d.)

individual and marked by significant contextual awareness. One can hardly agree with Rubins when she concludes:

Like most of Gumilev's writing, his ecphrastic verse promotes bright external impressions and visual details over subjective response. In a group of poems about Italy, for example, the speaker presents himself as an enthusiastic traveler, who delights in the aesthetic effects of the places he visits. (Rubins 1998:59).

To perceive Italian poems in such a manner means, in my assessment, to take at face value particular literary masks Gumilev assumes. Indeed, the speaker in the poems of this cycle often takes a stance of a naïve tourist gazing in stupefied astonishment. However, the poet is nowhere as simple-minded as his lyrical hero; he carefully chooses the sights and the images he presents and uses them for his ends. When doing so, he emulates esthetical qualities of the described objects, as if following the advice of ancient masters of rhetoric, instructing to "fit the language to the subject, so that if the subject shown is flowery, the style should also be flowery" (Theon, *Progymnasmata*, ed. M. Patillon, reprinted in Webb 2016:198).

If in *Paduanskij sobor*, opposing esthetical categories create a sense of disorder, mitigated only in the final, in *Fra Beato Angelico* oppositions unite seamlessly. In both, Gumilev uses *enargeia* of visual art to create mood in his poem and comes closer to his ideal of creating "spatial poetry". Finally, in both renderings, the veil of pictoriality conceals complicated semantic operations, reminding us of the fictional character of every representation.

4. Conclusions

Thriving on the interplay between alterity and selfhood, travel literature entails a necessity of othering and a power imbalance in representation, for the other is always constructed according with the author's opinions, prejudices and artistically motivated necessities. Gumilev's Italy is unapologetically subjective, providing a stage for the author's artistic and personal reinvention project. In some respects, this travelogue reproduces tropes of "Italianist discourse", as defined by Olga Płaszczewska. Most notably, Italy is perceived through the lens of art and serves as a stage for aesthetical reflection. Though Gumilev observes Italian art with a keen eye, there is no doubt that this experience is mainly pre-conceptualized, and Italy showed the poet precisely what he anticipated to see. Following the antiquarian view prototyped in Petrarch's *Famous Letters*, Gumilev makes his journey a dispute with the past. The descriptiveness of Italian Poems does not indicate an attempt to present "impersonal account of the journey". Both as a theoretician and as an author Gumilev was concerned with image-making and spatial aspects of poetry. He uses ekphratic descriptions not to represent, but for "clarity (*saphēneia*) and the vividness (*enargeia*)" they provide, as prescribed

by ancient rhetoric (Theon, *Progymnasmata*, ed. M. Patillon, reprinted in Webb 2016:197). The aesthetic objects serve to embody Gumilev's theory; they borrow their palpability, helping to overcome the inherent aspatiality of poetry. Valetine Cunningham says, "making the painting and so forth a subject, or object, of the writing is, in effect, a way of laying claim, by proxy, to the presence, reality, truth of the writing" (Cunningham 2007:62).

Bibliography

- Alpers, S. L. (1960). Ekphrasis and Aesthetic Attitudes in Vasari's Lives. *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 23(3/4), 190–215. <https://doi.org/10.2307/750591>
- Borges, J. L., & Guerrero, M. (1974). *Book of Imaginary Beings*. Penguin.
- Cook, H., Borenius, T., Kronig, J. O., & Brockwell, M. W. (1913). *A catalogue of the paintings at Doughty House, Richmond, & elsewhere in the collection of Sir Frederick Cook, bt., Visconde de Monserrate*. London : W. Heinemann. http://archive.org/details/gri_33125001303847
- Cunningham, V. (2007). Why Ekphrasis? *Classical Philology*, 102(1), 57–71. <https://doi.org/10.1086/521132>
- Fisher, A. (1994). A New Interpretation of Fra Angelico. *New Blackfriars*, 75(882), 255–265. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1994.tb01492.x>
- Forrester, S. E. S. (Ed.). (2015). *Russian Silver Age Poetry: Texts and Contexts*. Academic Studies Press.
- Gumilev, N. (1998). *Polnoe sobranie sočinenij v desjati tomach* (N. N. Skatov, Ed.). Voskresen'e Rossijskaya akademiya nauk. [Гумилев, Н. (1998). *Полное собрание сочинений в десяти томах* (Н. Н. Скатов, Ред.). Воскресенье Российской академия наук]
- Heffernan, J. A. W. (1993). *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery*. University of Chicago Press. <https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/M/bo3684066.html>
- Huysmans, J.-K. (n.d.). *The Cathedral* (C. Bell, Trans.). Wikisource.
- Krieger, M. (1992). *Ekphrasis: The illusion of the natural sign*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Lekmanov, O. (n.d.). *Živopis', memuary i gazetnaja stat'ja kak istočnik*. Retrieved June 22, 2022, from <https://gumilev.ru/about/352/> [Лекманов, О. *Живопись, мемуары и газетная статья как источник*. <https://gumilev.ru/about/352/>]
- Litwinowicz, Z. (2018). Entre la danse macabre et l'apologie de la vie, ou les vanités selon Joris-Karl Huysmans. *Quêtes Littéraires*, 8, 129–139. <https://doi.org/10.31743/ql.3486>
- Lockerd, M. (2020). *Decadent Catholicism and the making of modernism*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Luzzi, J. (2002). Italy without Italians: Literary Origins of a Romantic Myth. *MLN*, 117(1), 48–83.
- Malyx, V. (2009). *Ikoničeskie motivy v tvorčestve N. S. Gumilëva*. <https://gumilev.ru/about/107/> [Малых, В. (2009). *Иконоические мотивы в творчестве Н. С. Гумилёва*. <https://gumilev.ru/about/107/>]
- Nietzsche, F. W. (2000). *The birth of tragedy*. Oxford University Press.
- Nivat, G. (1982). L'Italie de Blok et celle de Gumilev. *Revue des Études Slaves*, 54(4), 697–709. <https://doi.org/10.3406/slave.1982.5279>
- Plaszczewska, O. (2010). *Przestrzenie komparatystyki—Italianizm*. Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego.
- Rubins, M. (1998). The "telling" image: Ecphrasis in Russian acmeist verse. *Mosaic*, 31, 57–76.
- Rubins, M. (2000). *Crossroad of arts, crossroad of cultures: Ecphrasis in Russian and French poetry*. Palgrave.

- Rusinko, E. (1982). Acmeism, Post-Symbolism, and Henri Bergson. *Slavic Review*, 41(3), 494–510. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2497021>
- Topping, M. (2019). Travel Writing and Visual Culture: The Ethics of Viewing. In C. Thompson (Ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Travel Writing* (pp. 78–88). Routledge.
- Webb, R. (2016). *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315578996>
- Wilde, O. (2008). *The picture of Dorian Gray*. Penguin Classics.
- Zobnin, J. (1999). *Nikolaj Gumilëv—Poët Pravoslavija*. <https://gumilev.ru/about/57/> [Зобнин, Ю. (1999). Николай Гумилёв—Поэт Православия].