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Ecphrasies of the Petersburg Buddhist Temple in the Poetry of Elena Schwartz

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Abstract. The purpose is to analyse the features and functions of temple ecphrasies in the poetry of E.A. Schwartz. The poems *The Seven Faces of the Buddhist Temple* and *The Buddhist Temple* are used as material, both based on the image of the St. Petersburg Buddhist religious building Datsan Gunzechoinei. This topic has not previously been at the centre of Russian literary criticism, which highlights the novelty of the presented article. Separately, it should be noted that the analysis of temple ecphrasies in the poetry of E.A. Schwartz is undertaken as part of a large-scale study devoted to the *Buddhist text* of modern Russian literature. As a result of the analysis, the author of the article arrives at the following conclusions. The ecphrasies of the Petersburg Buddhist Temple in Schwartz's poetry are based on descriptions of the datsan's exterior and interior, which are transformed into philosophical and religious works. The poetic ecumenism in Schwartz's work shapes the image of a Buddhist temple as a sacred space – in a city marked by infernal apocalyptic desolation, flooding, and the overshadowing of everyday care. The Buddhist temple, unusual in the Northern capital and yet similar to it – externally and essentially – acts as a centre of attraction for different cultures, gods, and both living and dead creatures within a confined and diverse city. The Petersburg/Leningrad Buddhist temple, like the religious buildings of other religions, provides individuals with the opportunity to encounter the transcendent – an image embodied by Schwartz in the heavenly heights or the bottomless depths of the river.

Keywords: Elena Schwartz, ecphrasis, religion, Buddhism, ecumenism, temple, Datsan Gunzechoinei, transcendental.

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Экфрасисы петербургского буддийского храма в поэзии Елены Шварц

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Аннотация. Цель исследования — проанализировать особенности и функции храмовых экфрасисов в поэзии Е.А. Шварц. В качестве материала используются стихотворения «Семь ликов буддийского храма» и «Буддийский храм», в основе которых лежит образ петербургского буддийского культового сооружения «Дацан Гунзэчойнэй». Указанная тема ранее не попадала в центр внимания отечественного литературоведения, что определяет новизну представленной статьи. Отдельно нужно отметить, что анализ храмовых экфрасисов в поэзии Е.А. Шварц осуществляется в рамках большого исследования, посвященного изучению «буддийского текста» современной русской литературы. В результате проведенного анализа автор приходит к следующим выводам. Экфрасисы петербургского буддийского храма в поэзии Е.А. Шварц отталкиваются от описания экстерьера и интерьера дацана и трансформируются в философские и религиозные произведения. Поэтический экуменизм шварцевского творчества обуславливает изображение буддийского храма в виде священного пространства — в городе, переживающем инфернальное апокалиптическое запустение, затопление, омрачение житейским попечением. Буддийский храм, который необычен для Северной столицы и в то же время схож с ней — внешне и сущностно, выступает у поэта в качестве одного из центров притяжения для разных культур, богов, живых и мертвых существ, обитающих в тесном и многоликом городе. Петербургский/ленинградский буддийский храм, как и культовые сооружения других религий, дает человеку возможность соприкосновения с трансцендентным, образ которого воплощен у Шварц в занебесной выси или в бездонной речной глубине.

Ключевые слова: экфрасис, религия, буддизм, экуменизм, храм, дацан Гунзэчойнэй, трансцендентное

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Introduction

In modern literary studies, various definitions of ekphrasis exist in an article by L.M. Geller, it is mentioned that in antiquity, ekphrasis was understood both as “a genre of verbal representation of individual or collected

works of fine art in galleries” (Geller, 2013, p. 45) and as “a rhetorical and narratological technique of detaining action, digression, which consists in the living representation of some object” (Geller, 2013, p. 45). The same researcher also highlights the possibility of a broad and narrow understanding of ekphrasis: ekphrasis as “any reproduction of one art by means of another” (Geller, 2002) and as “the transposition of the language of visual art into the language of literature” (Geller, 2013, p. 54). In the presented article, ekphrasis is understood as “a literary description of a visual work of art” (Constantini, 2013, p. 29).

The concept of “religious ekphrasis” was introduced into literary studies by L.M. Geller in his article *Resurrection of the Concept, or a Word about Ekphrasis*. He defined the essence of religious ekphrasis as “an invitation-incitement to spiritual vision as the highest perception of the world, and at the same time – the principle of sacralisation of artistry as a guarantee of holistic perception” (Geller, 2002, p. 19). Following this, A.O. Seredina, referring to the above article, outlined the external contours of this concept as a “literary description of artistic images and constructions that have sacral significance” (Seredina, 2018, p. 122). In her article *Religious Ekphrasis in Russian Literature*, N.E. Mednis identifies a broad field for possible research while confining her analysis to ekphrastic prose and poetic representations of Madonna’s image in Russian literature – specifically “Theotokos ekphrasis” (Mednis, 2006, p. 58). However, it is evident that the concept of “religious ekphrasis” can be applied not only to the Christian tradition but also to ‘artistic images and constructions with sacred significance’ in other religions.

Elena Schwartz’s work extensively addresses the artistic understanding of religious reality (Zitzewitz von, 2016). One of the key features of this understanding is the ecumenical perspective (Anpilov, 1999; Dubakova, 2009; Shubinsky, 2001; Trubikhina, 2009; Vorontsova, 2013) embodied in the lyrical heroine of her poetry towards religions rooted in Russian cultural space. Schwartz’s Russia, in the image of the city of Petersburg – acts as a geographical space whose purpose is to reconcile and synthesise the various religious and cultural currents of humanity (Schmitt, 2019, p. 104). This article examines only one aspect of Schwartz’s diverse “ecumenical” work, namely the image of the Buddhist religion created by the poet in its connection with other cultural traditions of Russia. It may be said that Elena Schwartz’s work, being in many respects part of the “Petersburg text” (Shubinsky, 2022; Toporov, 1995; Uspenski, 1992) of Russian literature, is simultaneously part of the “Buddhist text”, which is gradually beginning to be explored by contemporary literary studies (Bekmetov, 2019).

The poem *Seven Faces of the Buddhist Temple*: ecumenism in stone and the buddhist version of finding the transcendent

A full-fledged image of a Buddhist temple appears at least twice in Elena Schwartz's poetry. These are the poems *Seven Faces of a Buddhist Temple* (1971) and *Buddhist Temple* from the 'little poem' *Evil Treasure (Spiders and Twigs)* (1994). In both cases, it seems to refer to the same structure – the Petersburg Buddhist temple, which today is called *Datsan Gunzechoinei*.

In her poem *Seven Faces of a Buddhist Temple*, Schwartz describes a Buddhist temple and brings together motifs from various cultural and religious traditions – Buddhist, Hindu, Christian, and even Scandinavian. God constantly changes forms and guises in her poems (Shubinsky, 2001, p. 209). For the poet, the deities of these traditions are twins: Odin, Yahweh, and Indra are similar in that they are the thunderers of their religions, and so perhaps the temple seen through the rain brings each of them to mind. After asserting the “mysterious similarity of the gods” (Schwartz, 2015) in the first line, Schwartz reinforces this idea in the second and third lines by saying that these deities are “The very fathers / Of the sacred sagas, the Vedas” (Schwartz, 2015). This phrase can be understood in various ways: the gods are the source of the sacred scriptures of their own religions, and perhaps of all religions, with specific gods being fathers to themselves and, simultaneously, to all other gods (although presented in two lines, the rhythmic pause after the second line allows it to be read separately as well). It is intriguing that after the word “twins”, which implies two or more beings, the name “One” appears, which can be read as a homograph representing unity: the deities are many, but they are one. Note also that Indra and Ganesha are Hindu deities, later assimilated by Buddhism.

The Hindu gods Indra and Shiva, and possibly Ganesha, appear in the text: the temple is compared to a black elephant, with black being one of the colours of the five faces of the god of wisdom and prosperity. Earlier in the poem, an elephant – living or ghostly – passes by the rostral columns on the Strelka of Vasilyevsky Island and “silently carried his body” (Schwartz, 2015). He walks from the zoo towards the Bolshaya Nevka River, near which the datsan stands. It is interesting that, at the time, the datsan building housed the laboratories of the Zoological Institute. Thus, the elephant moves from one domain of animals, where they live, to another, where animals are dead: “...in the late 1960s in the basement of the temple – where once the monks cooked their food – zoologists dissected the corpse of an African elephant brought from the Riga Zoo” (Andreev, 2012, p. 170). The fallow deer standing on either side of the Wheel of Learning are seen

by the poet as “golden heifers” (Schwartz, 2015), an image referring to the cow, an animal revered in India.

At the same time, the temple is compared to an ark. The Buddhist temple is a ship of salvation that, escaping from “storms and troubles”, will sail “to its place there, to its native Tibet” (Schwartz, 2015). The ship of the Buddhist temple has a “divine wheel” (the Wheel of Teaching) as a steering wheel, and its columns remind the poet of rostral columns (with the bows of ships) “the colour of roasted roses” (Schwartz, 2015). The point here is not the reduction of the romantic image (Bobyshev, 1987, p. 418) but rather the combination of the motifs of water and fire, symbolising light in the midst of a sea of darkness or the darkness of the sea. Schwartz views the Buddhist temple through the prism of Christian symbolism and soteriology. As in *The Monastery on Kazbek*, the datsan “draws the soul to the threshold, / Up to the heavenly attic” (Schwartz, 2015), as if to Pushkin’s “clouded cell” (Pushkin, 1959, p. 269). The same perspective appears in the poem *To me the wind spoke so clearly, strictly...* (1996), where God hears scraps of prayers – “only ‘...am’ and ‘om’” (Schwartz, 1997) – in which one can perceive both the endings of Christian prayers and the Buddhist mantra ‘om’. Prayers of people in different languages to various divine images are equally perceived by the transcendent God.

In the poem *Seven Faces of the Buddhist Temple*, Leningrad becomes a mystical space where India and Russia, along with their religions, converge near the “ring of ringing” trams (on the “bed of reclining”, Schwartz, 2015) close to the railway station Staraya Derevnnya, which evokes an association with the “India of the Spirit” from Gumilev’s *The Lost Tram*. Leningrad was built by “our formidable Tsar” (Schwartz, 2015), i.e., Peter the Great. The term “formidable” here not only reflects his severity but also connects him to the divine thunderers – Odin, Yahweh, and Indra. Moreover, since the gods are “fathers to themselves”, Indra, mysteriously linked to Peter the Great, “adopted Petersburg” (Schwartz, 2015). Thus, Leningrad/Petersburg has a divine origin or patronage.

The “thunderstorm” in Schwartz’s poetry is one of the key images associated with the merging of the earthly and the heavenly and with creativity and creation: “The thunderstorm is the revelation (scene, scenery, lighting, characters). The “poetic thunderstorm” is creativity, reflects the celestial in itself” (Dark, 2004, p. 152).

In the poem *The Bridge in a Dream* (2004), the image of Peter the Great differs. Here, the figure of the Tsar, or rather a variant of the Bronze Horseman – the frozen (dead) “green Istukan” (Schwartz, 2007, p. 15) of Andreev’s infra-Petersburg (Andreev, 1998, p. 433) – observes how the inhabitants of his city, both people and birds, Cross the bridge: “Crows walked across the bridge in a torn formation, / And people went to eight different

countries” (Schwartz, 2007, p. 15). Some go to the Buddha, others to the mosque, and the Suvorovs to the sea and the underwater God. Peter I, who laid out the imperial city, made it a place for all those who accept Russia as their homeland and their state.

The poem *Seven Faces of the Buddhist Temple* contains the dominant motif of the vertical: rostral columns or “towers”; the “macaroni” of rain; the temple “blacker than autumn branches” (Schwartz, 2015) (i.e., resembling a tree); Tibet; the image of a stack; and finally, the Buddhist temple itself, where Schwartz focuses on the upper part of the facade. The datsan points toward the sky, seemingly pushing away from the earth and water of the city. The Buddhist temple elephant, which earlier “quietly carried its body”, finally loses its materiality in the final scene: at its entrance, there is a “corporeal courtyard” (Schwartz, 2015).

Thus, the image of the Buddhist temple in this poem by Elena Schwartz emerges at the intersection of several cultural and religious traditions. The Buddhist temple in Leningrad is connected primarily with Hindu and Christian motifs. The poet perceives the temple through Christian symbolism and concept of finding the transcendent – a movement through divine grace toward heaven. Important motifs in *The Seven Faces of the Buddhist Temple* include the temple’s integration into the space of Christian Russia and Petersburg, where it is seen as “Like a filling in the mouth of the city” (Schwartz, 2015), i.e., as one of the avenues for healing or salvation.

The poem *Buddhist Temple*: experiencing the apocalypse and the underwater underground

The poem *Buddhist Temple* is the second chapter of Schwartz’s apocalyptic poem *Evil Treasure (Spiders and Twigs)*. Petersburg is overrun by infernal spiders, entangled in their web and plunged into darkness. The Buddhist temple, although abandoned and favoured by “night spirits” (Schwartz, 1997), remains a sacred space. “Onion icons” (thangkas) still hang on the walls, and a statue of Buddha is still present. Even the Spiderwoman has adapted to life in the temple, sleeping behind the thangka and eating crumbs of bread behind the Possessed, the fool, and perhaps praying to the Buddha along with the Possessed. The Buddha in the poem has a diamond eye, which is not only an allusion to a precious stone but also to the Buddhist symbol of the vajra, or diamond, or “lightning strike”, symbolising the indestructibility of the spirit of a living being. However, in apocalyptic Petersburg, where people’s spirits have been exhausted (as with Dava-Dorchzhi scraping gold from the Buddha statue in the story *The Return of Buddha* by V.S. Ivanov), they come to pluck out the Buddha’s eye.

Separately, it may be noted that the image of the diamond appeared earlier with Schwartz also in the poem *The March Dead* (1980), where the heroine was looked at by the “Diamond Eyes of Icons” (Schwartz, 1993). Buddhist and Christian shrines appear to be brought closer together through this similar image. In the poem itself, *Evil Treasure (Spiders and Twigs)*, in Part 6, this image also manifests in connection with Petersburg, consecrated by the Alexandrian Pillar: “the hail of diamond and granite” (Schwartz, 1997) will be smothered by a “featherbed” of cobwebs, dust, and twigs. In the poem *Gusinozyorsky Datsan* (1996), the heroine’s simple speech, full of repetitions (“I will go”, “I will come”, “I will throw rice”, “I will throw myself down”, “Are you a kid?”, Schwartz, 1997), visibly distances her from the author. However, the author’s ironic view of the youthful dream of spiritual daring does not cancel the height of this dream of feat in the poem: the heroine is going to oppose the dark forces “like a cruel lightning” (the image of a vajra, a diamond, Schwartz, 1997), to run through a hundred worlds, and throw herself down.

The leitmotif of the poem *Buddhist Temple* is water. Water is an image of the flowing evil and vanity of life: “life poured”, “people flowed in” (Schwartz, 1997). People plucked out the Buddha’s eye and threw him to the bottom of the river – the Bolshaya Nevka, which is seen by the poet as the Lethe – the river of oblivion. According to one version, “the Buddha was simply broken, and the ‘remains’ were thrown into the Bolshaya Nevka opposite the temple and into one of the neighbouring ponds” (Andreev, 2012, p. 162). The Buddha has a “sparkling” eye – this is how the people who burst into the temple see his diamond: for them, it is not a sign of an indestructible spirit but an opportunity for a fun game, an earthly froth.

The last stanza of *The Buddhist Temple* is saturated with repetitions of the syllable “li” (*poured, if, stayed, licked, poured, flowed, flowed in, flowed out, threw, murky*, Schwartz, 1997), which support the water motif (the verb *to pour*) and are connected with the *wilika* – another infernal agent of Schwartz’s poem. The Buddha finds himself at the bottom of the river, where, although he has “fallen asleep”, he is preserved (at least in spirit), as are the diaries of the poem’s lyrical heroine. Interestingly, the compound rhyme ‘at the bottom of the river – diaries’ emphasises the syllable “bottom” within “diaries”, referring not only to days but also to the depths. We can assume that the literary projection of the poet is in the poem in connection with the Buddha.

Conclusion

In general, it should be noted that Elena Schwartz’s ekphrasis (*Seven Faces of the Buddhist Temple, Buddhist Temple*), which describe the same cultic structure, the Petersburg Buddhist temple *Datsan Gunzechoinei* –

begins with external and internal descriptions and transforms into philosophical and religious reflections. The Buddhist temple appears as a sacred space in a city experiencing apocalyptic desolation, inundation, and preoccupation with worldly cares. The infernality that pervades this temple does not affect its sacredness. In both poems, the Buddhist temple, despite the universal catastrophe, remains alive – one of the points of attraction for different cultures, gods, and living beings in the cramped and diverse “fictional” city, where “like neighbours” also live “together Orthodox temples, church, mosque, synagogue”, “borrowing from each other in case of need” (Schwartz, 1997). In spite of everything, the Petersburg/Leningrad Buddhist temple provides an opportunity to come into contact with the transcendent, which Schwartz embodies in either the heavenly heights or the bottomless river depths.

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