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## The Poetics of the Interpretative Ecphrasis in Valentin Rasputin's Story "Izba"

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The article discusses the peculiarities of the interpretative ecphrasis in V. Rasputin's story "Izba<sup>1</sup>". The particular interest of contemporary literature studies to the problem of the intermedial poetics is associated with the replacement of the cultural paradigm: moving from literocentrism to art-centrism. The poetics of the interpretative ecphrasis allows us to consider the text in a metatextual way.

In the story, many plot-forming constructs typical for the traditional prose are generally transformed: coming out to war, continuing the traditions, getting ready to die or inter oneself, destructing and reconstructing cosmogonia. The space of the izba in the story is described as "other place" (heterotopia). The surrounding world in the exegesis is chaotic and, moreover, eschatological.

The analysis of the ecphrasis allows us to understand and determine all these meaningful constructs. Thus, the izba remains to be heterotopia based on its own axis mundi, and consequently able to stand against the chaos of the "worn-out" world.

Agafya's izba itself, which has become a spiritual shelter in heterotopia, is a tree of life, some place for the righteous and sinful people to meet. Such transformations show the loss of previous utopian ideals and the attempt to find alternatives to being inside the space of chaos, which in turn is a sign of moving from traditionalism.

Keywords: V. Rasputin, story "Izba", interpretative ecphrasis, heterotopia.

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# Introduction into the research problem

The interest of the contemporary literary studies to the intermedial poetics of the contemporary prose is associated with the next change of the cultural paradigm, moving from literature-centrism to art-centrism, expansion of the boundaries of art, which leads to the genre synthesis as an expression of artistic freedom of the author at philological level (see Mitchell, 1994, 146). It is important to follow the peculiarities of these trends' reflection in the art of the artisttraditionalist. In Rasputin's story "Izba" notable for the literature of the end of the century (1999), the basic motifs and images inherent both for the creativity of the author and the traditionalist prose in general are significantly redefined. The poetics of the ecphrasis allows not only to see the transformations at the level of exegesis, but to reveal the symbolic, even archetypal strata.

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#### Theoretical basis

In this analysis, we rely on the interpretive type of ecphrasis, i.e. "interpretation aimed at identifying the deep figurative and symbolic content of the work" (Yatsenko, 2011, 48). Undoubtedly, in the interpretive ecphrasis there may be elements of visual description, but they do not design the text. The problem of separating the narration and the description is connected with the theory of narratology. G. Genette notes that the description, as a kind of literary depiction, cannot be clearly distinguished from the narration, therefore, there is "no need for separation of the descriptive-narrative unity (with the narrative dominant), which Plato and Aristotle called the narration" (Genette, 1998, 292). Vladimir Milovidov also believes that "the initial pulse that creates the text will be <...> the narrative intention" (Milovidov, 2001). The following boundaries specify the term "ecphrasis": the boundary of the text (ecphrasis, in a way, is implemented in exegesis, and not in the phenomenal space), the boundary of the sphere (we are only talking about the literary ecphrasis), the boundary of the "kind" (the interpretive kind of ecphrasis will be analyzed), the boundary of the "event" (not each description can be subjected to the ecphrastic analysis).

### **Problem statement**

In this research work, we will mainly focus on the problem of the ecphrasis' implementation in V. Rasputin's novel "Izba", which is essential for the late prose.

## The ecphrastic intention as a philological transformation of visual images

The writer traditionally imposes the main storyline of the text in the title – indeed, the izba is a plot-forming element of the story. The house is a model of the universe, an analogue of the space.

The narration begins with the description: "Izba was small, old, blackened, with cracks along thin pine  $\log < ... >$  standing at the intersection of a large street and an alley" (Rasputin, 2007, 356). For the "village inhabitants" topos is one of the fundamental constructs of the text (the island in the "Farewell to Matyora", the river in the story "Live and Remember", the space of the field in Solzhenitsyn's story "Zakhar-Kalita") (Anisimov, 2012, 396-419). It is no coincidence the izba is located at the crossroads: according to the beliefs of the Slavs, here the boundary between the worlds of the living and the dead is located. Herewith, the motif of otherness, heterotopia as "another place" is introduced ecphrastically (Foucault, 2006, 191-204). It is noteworthy that the alley leads to water. Water is a symbol of cosmogony, and it is one more boundary, recurring as a leitmotif in Rasputin's works. The semantics of separation is increased with the references to a dug ditch, a fence.

The izba is built of pine logs. Pine is a sacred tree mentioned in other works of the writer: Nastyona saws pine in the story "Live and Remember"; Lusya in the story "The Last Term" goes to the pine forest, where she discovers the possibility of repentance; Pashuta buries his mother among pines and in the pine coffin in the story "In the Same Ground". In many cultures, pine personifies the "tree of life". In addition, it is a symbol of immortality (no wonder it is often used for landscaping cemeteries). Thus, the izba, and the space around it, at the very beginning of the story is placed in the heterotopia: "old women had a seat on a low and wide chock buried in the ground and immediately found themselves in another world" (Rasputin, 2007, 357). The yard space is "transitional": here the living people can come, but only old women: children "did not crowd in Agafya's yard" (Rasputin, 2007, 357). To enter the yard means to visit Agafya: "All the rest of the village dead people should be visited at the cemetery < ... > and only the old woman Agafya was visited at the same place as when she was alive" (Rasputin , 2007, 357). Here once again, in the context, the connection of the izba with the world of the dead is emphasized.

The izba is not only a kind of a boundary, it crosses the boundary in the space of exegesis. Krivolutskaya village, where Agafya's house was originally located, was subject to flooding, houses were moved to the other bank. Krivolutskaya, despite its name, is presented as a protected place: "in a small village on the right bank, the sand is clean and tidy" (Rasputin, 2007, 357). The writer emphasizes the opposition of the right and the left banks in the story "Live and Remember": the river does not just divide the space, it brings out the traditional national oppositions: friend or foe, left or right, good or evil.

The village is described as a utopian space in a way. The past attracts writers-"villagers" while life then was evolving cyclically and was harmonized, proportionate to the human (it is significant as a valuable reference for the traditionalist literary criticism, which is ideologically close to the village prose" (Govorukhina, 2012; Parthé, 1992, 156). Living in Krivolutskaya, on the right bank, is inextricably linked with memories: the space is filled with fairy tales, songs, living light (candles, splinter), the land is fertile, "golden play of barley with potbelly tight heads" (Rasputin, 2007, 361). The village is inscribed in the traditional paradigm of the writer "Rus-Belovodye" (Kovtun, 2009, 366).

The story also is in line with the story "Farewell to Matyora". Krivolutskaya village is subject to flooding, it is not just one village that is moving, but the whole district. The tragedy of flooding itself is put in a presupposition, nevertheless the chaos of moving is lexically expressed in the text: "all villages < ... > were dumped into one heap before flooding" (Rasputin, 2007, 359). The street where Agafya

places her house is called "Sbrodnava"<sup>2</sup>. The situation of changing the place of living, moving to another space is marked by chaos, illness, the motifs are introduced ecphrastically. Illness and moving become contextual synonyms: "Agafya was identified as being ill. And all summer, she struggled against the hospital walls in the district like a fly against the glass" (Rasputin, 2007, 360). In the story, there is a transformation of the traditional opposition of the city and the village, when the center of the district appears as a "transitional" point where the sacred is not yet lost, but the house, fate has been already abandoned. In "Izba", the district center is indued with a negative connotation, it actually gets negative aspects of the city.

The image of Agafya, at first glance, is written with a focus on the spirit, in full compliance with the images of the famous "Rasputin's old women": "She was tall, withy, with a narrow face and large inquisitive eyes. She wore dark clothes < ... > learned to walk quickly, almost run" (Rasputin, 2007, 358). Austerity, a narrow face, large eyes, dark clothing are emphasized referring to the canonical icon images. However, Agafya's haste is marked by belonging to the earthly world. Thus, there is a dichotomy in the description of Agafya already: both spiritual and worldly, vain beginnings are emphasized.

Masculine traits are also essential in the image, moreover, there is a conscious rejection of the female traits: "She started to care not a snap about a woman inside herself too soon" (Rasputin, 2007, 358), "she was able to do any man's work" (Rasputin, 2007, 359). In exegesis, Agafya's loneliness is explained: her husband "was taken for the army service, where he died long before the war, perhaps, it was a brave death, but stupid" (Rasputin, 2007, 358). War is one of the leitmotifs of the traditionalist prose. Going beyond the boundaries of its space in Rasputin's classical texts is tragic, entails the destruction of cosmogony, death. But going to war is directly related with the messianic function of care, respectively, the world remains holistic ("Usvyatskie shlemonostsy" by B. Ekimov, "Komissiya" by S. Zalygin).

In the story, Agafya's husband disappears "long before the war", he "was taken" for the army service. However, regardless the traditional model, the cosmogony is not destroyed, Agafya becomes a guardian and assumes the male function. When a man goes away from the sacred topos, it leads to the destruction of the space, but in case with a woman, it is dangerous for herself: Agafya's daughter Olga "has come under relentless millstones of the urban mill" (Rasputin, 2007, 358). Adult children in the works of "villagers" are often antagonists of the protagonists: children of Anna in the story "Last Term" are alienated from the family, are taken out of the village space, cannot understand and accept death; in "Farewell to Matyora" Pavel is a median protagonistwanderer; tricksters, rogues and firebugs appear among the "adult children" who have lost their connection with the past. Before the story "Izba", the story "Ivan's Daughter, Ivan's Mother", the rejection of fate leads to chaos, inability to accept death, and therefore impossibility of resurrection for the protagonist who has chosen such a path (in Rasputin's works, the right to prepare for death is given only to righteous men, and the rest are doomed).

It was in the hospital when Agafya had "a dream that has hit her for the rest of her life: that she is buried in her own izba" (Rasputin, 2007, 360). In art works, the intersection of phenomenal and noumenal often generates a special chronotope. It is this chronotope E. Farino refers the oneiric space – "the field of dreaming, dreams and mirages" – to. (Farino, 2004, 376). In Rasputin's works, a dream appears as a special metaworld, space of otherness, the boundaries of which are defined by the spiritual status of the

visionary. Oneiric sphere is characterized not only by specific, "imaginary" space, but also by the "reversed" time, double causality (Anisimov, 2012, 169). It is no coincidence that Agafya sees her death in her own dream, thereby surpassing the reality.

In the story "Izba", death appears in the oneiric sphere not as a transition, which is typical for the early works of the master, but as a burial, burying in the ground. It is noteworthy that a similar burial rite – in the izba – can be met among Tofalars. The creative path of the writer has begun with the sketches about them: "In the summer a grave about 1.5 m deep was dug. A small shell of two to three wreaths (kolgo) was put inside. In winter, the deceased was laid directly on the ground. A small log box of planks with a cover was made around, or a log construction was put on two or four pillars" (Funeral Ritualism, 2005, 2010). Of course, this parallel is not quite accurate, but such a funeral is clearly marked with pagan beliefs. The location of the izba in the oneiric space – under the ground, but on the surface, "the pipe should be under the sky" - duplicates the model of the Universe. Smoke coming out of the chimney can mean an ascending soul, the world axis (axis mundi). In her dream, Agafya thinks: "Over there one would also like to get warm", i.e. the existence in the other world has physical properties that correlate with pagan beliefs.

In fact, Agafya's izba exists in three dimensions: in a new village, in Krivolutskaya village and in the oneiric sphere. The contact of Agafya with the house is introduced by means of ecphrasis and is repeatedly emphasized in the text. Moving the izba to a new space – a new village – is associated with a dream coming true: "In rough tractor sleigh exactly like in the one she saw in her dream, < ... > she drove the disassembled izba to the new settlement" (Rasputin, 2007, 360). Busting of the old home, moving introduce eschatological motifs. It is noteworthy that the old house is

being "ruined", i.e. disassembled and moved, leaving the most significant part - the stove. If in the story "Farewell to Matyora" old women try to preserve and safeguard the protected space, in this story there are no such attempts, as well as in the presupposition. Protective functions, at first sight, are lost; Agafya is building her house from scratch, after death she herself becomes a domovoy: "It's ok, I will be a domovoy myself" (Rasputin, 2007, 385). The space of the new settlement is emphasized chaotically. "To move the whole village is like get burnt without fire" (Rasputin, 2007, 367) - the element of the fire is repeatedly found in the novels and short stories of the writer. Fire is usually associated with an arson, hence madness.

Moving to another place, moving of the izba happens in another text of the "village prose" in Solzhenitsyn's story "Matryona's Place" (as a prototext). The vard space is described with idyllic elements (which took place in the past); the attempt to move the ben leads to the death of the mistress. It is noteworthy that death occurs during moving, which is a boundary topos. Therefore, for traditionalists the relationship between a man and a home is undeniable, moving of the house to another place entails death, complete destruction of cosmogony (similar to the "House" by Fyodor Abramov). However, in the story "Izba" main motifs of the direction are significantly transformed. The construction of an izba itself is associated with the birth of a new life, a new space: "it was conceived, our darling, now we have to bear and give birth to it" (Rasputin, 2007, 373). The foundation of the house is made of "larch logs". It is the analogy with the royal larch on the island of Matyora. In addition to the analogy with the Tree of Life, larch is also the analogue of the cross: a beheaded tree presents a broken vertical.

In the pagan discourse, the creation of the world always involves sacrifice: "countless

forms of sacrifices < ... > imitation < ... > of the first sacrifice, which gave birth to the world" (Eliade, 1994). Agafya's work is dualistic: it is both sacrifice and initiation. N. Kovtun notes: "Feverish, heavy work of Agafya on the construction of the house is bordered on suicide, but it is death that promises enlightenment. < ... > The way back of the heroine does not lead to the hearth, on the contrary, it marks overcoming of the empirical, the izba is built from the inside, by the will of the soul and therefore is timeless" (Kovtun, 2013, 23). Self-sacrifice is similar to the act of Christ, nevertheless, the messianic function in the text is lost, sacrifice makes it possible to create a new space.

It would be wrong to interpret Agafva's image through the prism of the Christian worldview. The heroine, like Pashuta in the story "In the Same Ground ..." acts in spite of the traditions and rites, both family and religious. In his later works, the author tries to create a new system of beliefs. Agafya compares herself with a mermaid: "I am like this ... drowned mermaid, I am wandering here and still calling for someone ..." (Rasputin, 2007, 392) - the allusive connection between the mermaid and the flooded village / island is certain. Agafya's self-identity with a mermaid and a domovov is connected with the loss of the Christian baselines. In fact, the old woman associates herself with pagan, folkloric beings labeled as the undead. Similar identification is found in B. Ekimov's story "Kholyusha's Farmstead". The protagonist also reminds a domovoy. Moreover, the "basis of the 'internal plot' is a myth about the original creation" (Kovtun , 2013, 412). B. Ekimov's text though is correlated with the eschatological discourse: after the death of Kholyusha the household is ruined, but in general there is a possibility to save cosmogony at least during the life of the custodian. In "Izba", the apotropic functions are strengthened by Agafya's death. If during her life she was not able to protect the house in Krivolutskaya, after her death, the newly built izba is endowed with selfstanding against the chaos of the world.

It is noteworthy to consider the transformation of the motif of death in this paradigm. Agafya sees a prophetic dream about death typical for V. Rasputin's prose. However, the dream itself is absolutely peculiar: she sees the dead, but not the ancestors; there is no conductor as the old woman Anna sees in the story "Last Term". And the old woman herself resists death: "Have you laid down, Agafya? -No, still sitting" (Rasputin, 2007, 393). Old women, who have been living too long, occur in many works of the author. In the story, the heroine explains her long life with the fact that she "is out of a rusty human kind, there is no demand for her there", thereby placing herself in the other place. In the mature works by Rasputin two basic models of death are implemented -Ascension (dving saint) and Resurrection (repentance opens the possibility of the Exodus). In the story, another model appears: death as a transition into a metaphysical space that is somewhere close to the present. This motif is brilliantly embodied in the text "Vision".

The izba notifies the village about the death of the mistress. Agafya dies on the Pokrov (Holy Protection) day, which can be considered a metaphor – protection-shroud-snow. The cross over the grave is made from larch, which once again introduces the semantics of otherness. Larch, which partly symbolizes the cross, appears in the "Farewell to Matyora", in "Izba" occurs over the grave of Agafya, ecphrastically combining Christian and pagan discourses. In fact, the Tree of Life and the Cross appear to be fused together. Nevertheless, based on the semantic story lines, the symbols *axis mundi* are the most significant ones.

After Agafya's death the izba got "orphaned" and as if repeated the fate of its

mistress. Alienation, different fate of the house in comparison with the village life are emphasized throughout the story. The izba is inscribed not only in the chronotop of the exegesis, but mainly in the eonotopos (from Greek 'aion' - eternity, century and 'topos' - place, locality, region, country, space) (Lepakhin, 2007, 149). The existence of the izba's own time is indicated by the mismatch in the spring coming: in the village, spring comes according to the calendar, and in Agafya's yard - after opening the windowseyes. The return to life is associated with the symbolic return of the mistress. The smell in the izba is "ancient, as if not human" (Rasputin, 2007, 395); the izba repairs itself, extinguishes the fire that starts in it (the symbolism of fire was mentioned above), and unwelcome tenants found after the fire "laid outstretched, as if someone had dragged them" (Rasputin, 2007, 397). In the description of Agafya's izba the presence of the mistress as the domovoy is emphasized: "izba is tidy, it is being looked after" (Rasputin, 2007, 398).

At the end of the story, the spatial point of view of the author has changed: throughout the text he was looking inside the izba from the outside, and in conclusion, the narrator describes the world from the inside of the other space.

#### Conclusion

Therefore, the izba remains to be heterotopia based on its own *axis mundi*, and consequently it is able to stand in the midst of the chaos of the "worn-out" world. The house of the heroine has become a kind of a tree of life itself, a spiritual shelter in heterotopia, a kind of a place for the righteous and sinful people, friends and foes to meet. The analysis of the interpretative ecphrasis allows to speak about a gradual denial of the Orthodox discourse by the author- the cross remains only a sign and loses its symbolic meaning. Actually, *axis mundi* is replaced in the text. Such transformations show the loss of previous utopian ideals and the attempt to find alternatives to being

inside the space of chaos, which in turn is a sign of moving from traditionalism.

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Translator's note: An izba (Russian: изба, IPA: [TzTba]) is a traditional Russian countryside dwelling (peasant's hut). Often a log house, it forms the living quarters of a conventional Russian farmstead.

Translator's note: Sbrodnaya is a derivative from "sbrod": ragtag., rabble.

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# Поэтика толковательного экфрасиса в рассказе В. Распутина "Изба"

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Статья посвящена анализу особенностей реализации толковательного экфрасиса в рассказе В. Распутина "Изба". Особый интерес современного литературоведения к интермедиальной поэтике современной прозы связан с очередной сменой культурной парадигмы, отходом от литературоцентризма в сторону "искусствоцентризма". Поэтика толковательного экфрасиса позволяет рассматривать текст на метатекстуальном уровне.

В рассказе трансформированы многие сюжетообразующие конструкты, свойственные традиционалистской прозе в целом: уход на войну, продолжение или прерывание традиций, подготовка к смерти и погребению, разрушение и воссоздание космогонии. Пространство избы в рассказе описано как "другое место" (гетеротопия). Мир окрест в экзегезисе явлен как хаотичный и, более того, эсхатологический.

Анализ экфрасиса позволяет выявить смыслообразующие конструкты. Таким образом, изба остается инопространством, основанным на своей собственной axis mundi, и поэтому способным выстоять посреди xaoca "износившегося" мира. Своеобразным древом жизни становится сам дом Агафьи, ставший духовным пристанищем в инобытии, некой точкой встречи для праведных и грешных, своих и чужих. Подобные трансформации свидетельствуют об утрате прежних, утопических, идеалов и о попытке поиска альтернативы бытия внутри пространства xaoca, что, в свою очередь, является признаком отхода от традиционализма.

Ключевые слова: В. Распутин, рассказ "Изба", толковательный экфрасис, гетеротопия.

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