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## Changing Humanities: At the Crossroads of History, Poetics and Art

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# Changing Humanities: At the Crossroads of History, Poetics and Art

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**Keywords:** *ekphrasis, semiotic difference, integrity of image, visual perception, instant immersion, notional perception, visualization.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

This article was written on the eve of one hundred forty five anniversary since the date of the birth of the well-known Russian painter: Nikolay Roerih (1874). The present article studied the interface of one of the best Roerih's pictures: 'Bede, the Preacher' (created in 1945) and one of Yakov Polonsky's poems. The poem had the identical title and was written in the century preceding the origin of the picture (1845). The evident connection of these two events ('strange coincidences', in Alexander Pushkin's more general opinion) was also intensified by one more fact. The prototype of both artifacts was a real well- distinguished man who lived long ago (born in the seventh century). He became known in history as Saint Bede. These three facts, important for the subject matter of this article, demanded a short preliminary commentary. In 673, in

Anglo-Saxon province a boy was born called Baede (Latin: Bede Venerabilis; or Bede, in more contemporary transcript). At the age of seven the boy was sent to the local monastery to study. From the start he showed promise, turning out to be hard-working, clever. He had many gifts, a good voice, he sang prayers during services, loved poetry, recited it and wrote poems himself. Monasteries at that time were centers of good education, with excellent libraries. Teaching programs in early middle ages included seven disciplines: among them were three starting ones: grammar, rhetoric and formal logic (dialectic reasoning), and four, of the highest level: mathematics, geometry, astronomy and music. All Bede's life was devoted to church service. But he became known not only in theology, but also as an author, teacher (called even one of the greatest teachers and also the most learned man and writer of that time), historian, linguist, translator and also scholar. (Bede 2019, Bede 2019: 2). His most known work was: 'Ecclesiastical History of the English People' (Bede 2019) which was later translated into many languages. In his own opinion, he loved, most of all, three things: to study, to teach and to write. He died in 735, and later on was canonized. In life he himself believed in supernatural and miracles. After his death many legends about his life appeared. Even his undecayed relics after his death were known to work wonders. One of the stories about him was closely connected with the subject-matter of the present article. It narrated that during the last years of his life Bede became blind, but he continued preaching. Once, in some deserted forest, led by one of his disciples, Bede, unaware that no people came to listen, unconsciously, addressed his passionate sermon to the waves of the river. And yet, after he finished the miracle happened: the waves following God's will loudly answered, by the loud 'AMEN'.

Centuries went by, and it happened so that at the place which was very far from England the well-known Russian poet: Yakov Polonsky (1819-1898), inspired by this legend, wrote the poem, under the title: 'Bede, the preacher'.(Polonsky 1981). The historical content was slightly changed. In Polonsky's version the blind Bede was preaching not to the waves, but to the mountains. Yakov Polonsky was known to be the author of about three hundred of poems, also stories. Many songs were created on the words of his

poems. The attempts to find the English version of this poem devoted to Bede were not successful. So I had to render its basic content myself. It would be given in the part: Results of Research.

One more century went by, and almost exactly after one hundred years passed another masterpiece of art, this time a picture, under the same title as Polonsky's poem: 'Bede, the Preacher' came to life, a masterpiece of the famous Russian painter Nikolay Roerih. He lived at that time in India. At present, this picture, with 300 Roerih's other drawings is exhibited at Novosibirsk State Art Museum. Nikolay Roerih (1874 – 1947) was known all over the world, as not only the Russian painter, but also as an academic, philosopher, mystic, writer, traveller, social representative, specialist in archeology, the founder of the center 'The World of Art'. The number of his paintings exceeds seven thousand. He was also the author of thirty volumes of literary publications, and also as the author of the special philosophical doctrine: 'Living Ethics' (Roerih 1991; 1931; 1919; Belikov 2001) He lived for many years in India and is even recognized there, as India's national painter. His contribution to culture is very specific, and deserves every appreciation.

To emphasize the above given information, it should be mentioned that the subject-matter of the present article is not ordinary, very specific, even rare and unusual. It reported that three different people separated by time (even centuries), by space (they lived in different countries: Bede was from Anglo-Saxon Province (7-8 centuries); Polonskyi was from Russia, of the nineteenth century; and Roerih was in India, at the twentieth century) became intellectually connected and inspired by the same theme; were, somehow, united by the common humanitarian ideas: faith, belief in good-will and justice, spirituality and also by talent, inspiration and creativity.

THE AIM OF THE PRESENT ARTICLE WAS to identify elements of ISOMORPHISM of the generalized SEMANTICS, at the same time, asymmetric elements of SPECIAL FORMS (allomorphs) of the poem and the picture, based on the study of the interface of the two texts presented by two differing media semiotic systems: LITERATURE and PAINTING.

The IMPORTANCE and NOVELTY of this study was intensified by the REGISTERED CASES of SIMILAR, INSTANT IMMERSION OF RECIPIENTS into BOTH TEXTS. Also, SIMILAR EMOTIONS WERE EXPERIENCED AND REGISTERED. Naturally, this created a certain RESEARCH GAP for explanation in this special study.

Complex methodology uniting more traditional and new technologies was employed for the empirical analysis. As such studies started in linguistics only not long ago, also some new data appeared in closely correlated disciplines (psychology, brain studies), also new notions were applied (Clement 2013; Unique

Explorations 2015). Yet, many more similar studies were urgently needed to support research of this kind. Empirical part was based (as was stated above) on the contrastive analysis of two artifacts representing examples of differing media systems: literature and painting. The poem by Yakov Polonsky 'Bede, the Preacher' was compared with the picture painted by Nikolay Roerih, with the same title. In this study this special case was identified as notional ekphrasis. Although the phenomenon itself was known much earlier (which became a special stylistic term, as well, centuries ago), methodology of its linguistic interpretation is yet only in the process of its exploration.

## II. METHODOLOGY

The choice of selecting objective methodology for the analysis of artifacts belonging to differing semiotic systems presented special difficulties (Jacobson 1975; Stepanov 1998; Lotman 2010). One condition was implied, as obligatory one, for providing the stable ground of comparative research. That was the presence of similar (or identical) content. It was ensured already by the coincidence of the titles of two artifacts. Further on, more corresponding similar tools for analysis were to be found. Adequate analysis always depends on the results of the latest scientific achievements. At present it was urgent to follow innovative analysis based on new notions and results of closely correlated scientific disciplines. In this study they were cognitive science, psychology, partly, even brain studies. First, the notions chosen for the analysis were to be outlined. More basic ones were Information, with its types and functions. The next ones were Visualization, Perception, Immersion, Point of View, Voice (Andreeva 2019). But the first one, most important, was Ekphrasis. (Andreeva 2016, Geller 2002, Shatin 2004). The definition from Wikipedia would be relevant in this case. According to it, 'EKPHRASIS or ecphrasis, from the Greek description or a work of art, possibly imaginary, produced as a rhetorical exercise, is a graphic, often dramatic, description of a visual work of art.'. And it was added: 'a painting may represent a sculpture and vice versa; a poem portrays a picture; a sculpture depict a heroine of a novel...any art may describe any other art'. (Wikipedia 2020). This definition fits our situation: Roerih's picture transmits the main content of Polonsky's poem. In the analysis of generalized meaning the approach of the Russian scholar, professor Galperin, I.R. was accepted. He chose the term "information" for actualization of the content of literary text dividing the latter into factual, conceptual and hidden, underlying types of information (Galperin 1981).

*The notions:* Voice, Point of View, also Perspective tend to be associated nowadays, mainly, with text linguistics, functional stylistics, and, even more, with cognitive poetics. Voice is actualized via text-centric and

cognitive poetics' approaches, as instances of direct and indirect speech of textual discourse participants. The notion of Point of View is also acknowledged by cognitive poetics to be a special textual category rendering various opinions expressed by text participants; their attitude to events; opinions of other participants (sort of polyphony in Bahtin's approach). Actually, it also comes close to textual modality, in its broadened treatment. All the above given notions and categories were recognized as relevant for both examined artifacts: literary text of Polonsky's poem and the text, via asymmetric form, of Roerih's picture.

*Lately the notions and terms:* Perception, Visualization, Immersion substantially broadened their application, understood as methodological keys of transmitting text semantics. (Groyecka, Witzel 2019; Abdul-Rahman, in print; Andreeva 2019) The motion of Perception, traditionally defined in psychology as the initial processes of person's ability to interpret reality with the help of five sensorial organs of visual ability, hearing, feeling, and the abilities to smell and to taste, was broadened nowadays by the addition of the ability of people's comprehending, and social keys, as well: such as: faces' expressions, speech. Visualisation was broadened, as well, by the addition of the notion of integrity of global images, due to viewers' creativity, broadening physical perception, also notions of their previous experience and knowledge (the so called 'eye of the mind', 'the window of the mind'). Thus, the application in this research of semantically enlarged notions, joined with the usage of innovative methodological tools from interdisciplinary approaches contributed substantially to the success of the result.

### III. RESULTS OF EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

As was stated above, the material of the empirical analysis was based on the study of the interface of the two texts of asymmetric media forms: the poem: 'Bede, the Preacher' written by the Russian poet Yakov Polonsky and the picture by Roerih having the same title with the poem. The aim was to detect features of isomorphic general content of two artifacts and, at the same time, to state asymmetric differences of the compared art media genres, with individual allomorphic qualities of the two masterpieces.

First, the analysis of Polonsky's poem was to be adduced. Unfortunately, all attempts of finding the translation of this Russian artifact into English did not come to any results. So I had to render its basic content myself, closely keeping to the original, trying to concentrate mainly on integrity of images, general atmosphere of the poem, its emotional empathy, without taking any responsibility to transfer completely Polonsky's general artistic, poetic and genre qualities.

Yakov Polonsky (1841, 1845)

BEDE, THE PREACHER (Translated into English by K.A.)

An old man went through the forest, called by all people Bede, the Blind.

Cold, wind-bitten and poorly dressed, in half-torn clothes like rags.

Stumbling, with bare-foot, over stones in the coming dark.

The boy tightly holding his hand went, not happily, just slightly behind.

All nature looked so gloomy, deserted, across, Around old pines were rising.

Rocks, big damp, stood up to the very horizon.

All covered with shaggy and icy grey moss.

The guide-boy, bored, tired, decided Blind Bede to deceive,

Decided to quit him, sweet berries to eat.

'Old man, he addressed Bede, if you don't mind, I guess it's time! Start your sermon, proceed!

The land, and all people, God's mercy, creation, From over the hills came to hear you, all.

All people, with children, all ready, to answer your call: God, merciful, gave his beloved son for salvation!...

And Bede's face, at once, shone up with inspiration,

Like stony earth breaks up in early spring.

Enlightening speech poured out, like the bell ring.

All listeners seemed joining spell, filled with agitation.

SINCERE FAITH COULD ONLY LEAD TO SUCH OUTBURST!

Blind man seemed almost rise to the very horizon

Slight tremor of Bede's hands, directed to the sky, Exalted Bede could witness God, in heavens,

As tears dropped, slowly, from his poor blinded eyes.

But soon the golden sunset almost burnt the canyon out.

And moon's, pale, as ever, light came out instead.

The cold damp air quickly filled the canyon.

And preaching Bede anticipated sadly the coming end.

The boy came, rudely pushing, in a hurry, and shouting on and on:

'Well, that's enough! It's late! It's time to go! All people are, by now, gone!'

And Blind Bede crying sadly, for his silent answer, Could only bend his head, in sad return

But unexpected answer came to greet him. Who could expect such miracle to be? Quite suddenly all rocks in silent canyon, to thank him in a form of reverie, Roared, thunder-like, their praise; with final blessing, addressing him by last: 'AMEN!'

Actually, it should be mentioned that the empirical part examined not only the interface of this poem and Roerih's picture but the semiotic correlation between three texts: first, the mentioned above legend of one episode from St Bede's life, then Polonsky's poem and thirdly, the pictorial text of Roerih. All of them were separated by time and space but still mysteriously connected by the common generalized content, and still had something else which was hard to formulate, at first glance. The given offered analysis was qualitative, soft and close.

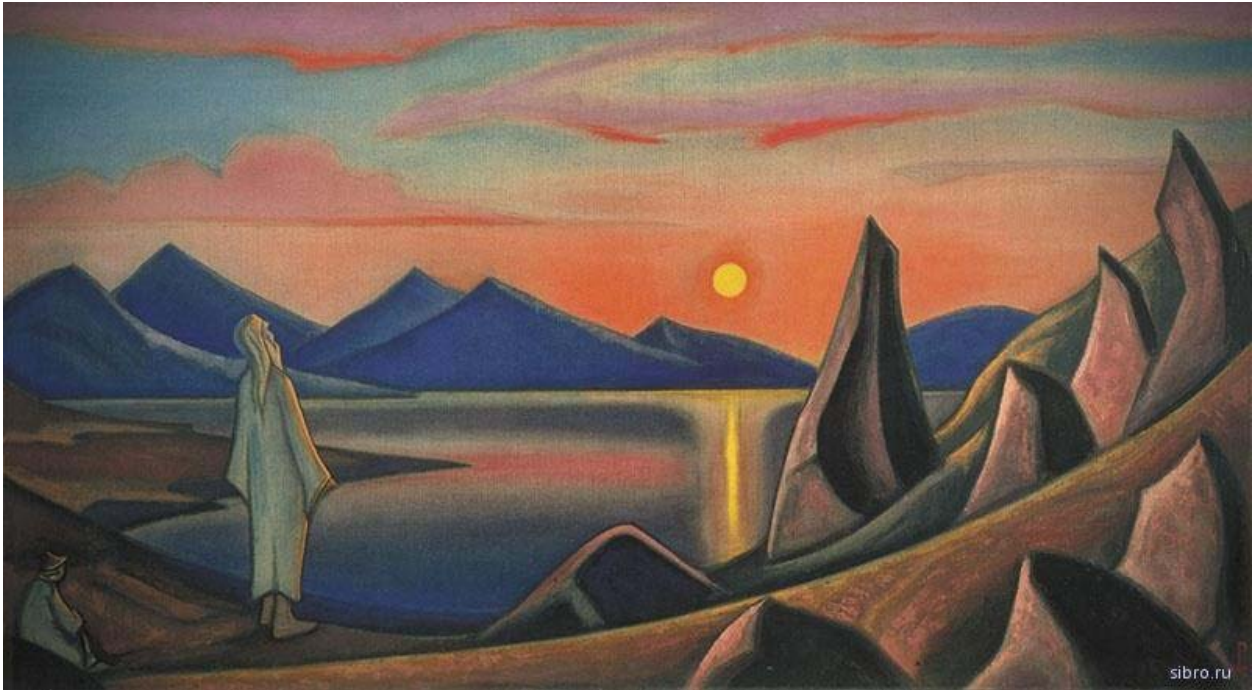
First, the correlation of the ancient legend narrating about the miracle with the presented above Yakov Polonsky's poem was considered. Starting from the usual (by now) "keys" of entering the text-worlds (in this case, they were the separate situations or episodes) the following referential codes should be stated. 1) The time of the narrated happening. It was the same in both episodes (past, in the poem, specified, as late evening); 2). The place of the event. It also was the same, from broader perspective: outside, in the country, but with some differences (in the legend it was at the sea shore; while in the poem it happened in the forest); 3). The characters were the same: the blind man and the boy; 4). Social status of participants in the legend and the poem was identical (the preacher and the boy accompanying him); 5). Empathy also coincided in both cases (although, by and by, changing from the possible text recipients" from big sympathy addressed to blind Bede - to surprise and revelation at the final miracle. Yet, the coincidence of the general content was already provided by the title of Polonsky's poem nominating the general theme of the legend: "Bede, the Preacher". The climax also coincided principally. In both cases it was the loud answer of nature to the sermon (although with some difference. In the legend it was the loud answer of the waves; whereas in the poem mountains answered Bede's sermon by the loud 'Amen!' Thus, the most evident facts of coincidence were proved.

Returning to the analysis, it was important to underline that the notion of global mental image of the two artifacts contributed much to the better understanding of the quick participants' immersion, due to their instant mental construal. In the poem by Polonky there were three images: the image of Bede, the image of nature, partly, the image of the boy. And also mountains and cliffs were important. Mental perception of images was based on mental visualization. It got actualization in the poem via lexical ways of expression. Thus, mainly adjectives were most important: used as attributes, epithets portraying physical state of Bede, his age: old, trembling (hand), blind (eyes), was bare-footed (stepping on stones). Yet, Bede was presented, as a very religious man, wholly devoted to his faith, sincerely inspired by the content of his sermon, able to influence his audience by

his devotion. Even his physical image changed, it was verbalized by adjectives: enlightening (speech), exalted (Bede), emotional (outburst), sincere (faith). Also comparisons (similies) and metaphors were used to support the impression: Bede's face shone in inspiration; blind man seemed to rise to horizon; as stony earth broke up in early spring, his speech sounded, like bell ring. Exaggeration intensified Bede's emotions and enthusiasm: exalted Bede could witness God in heavens.

From the beginning of the poem the image of nature was visualized as wholly corresponding to Bede's initial state. Actualization was achieved also, mainly, by the presence of epithets, adjectives: (nature) gloomy, deserted; (pines) old, big; (rocks) big, damp; {moth} shaggy, icy. The image of the boy-guide did not appeal to any sympathy. He was shown as caring only about his own needs, but not about the blind man. He even tried to deceive him. In this case auditory perception is actualized by the use of his very loud, rude direct speech. Also his portrait was visualized with the help of special vocabulary: pushing roughly, shouting. The climax of the poem's narrative came at the very end when the rocks, all of a sudden, loudly thanked blind Bede's sermon, by thunder-like: 'AMEN!' Thus, notional visualization was effective enough to portray all images of Polonsky's poem.

The most important part of this empirical study would be presented next: the analysis of Roerih's picture: "Bede, the Preacher", in its interface with the poem by Polonsky. The effect and importance of ekphrasis was evidently revealed in the process of their comparison.



Roerih's Picture "BEDE, THE PREACHER". Novosybirsk Art Museum.

The picture was created by Roerih in 1945, in India (one century passed since the publication of Yakov Polonsky's poem, with the same title). Many people who visited Novosybirsk Art Museum, (the place where the picture was exhibited) expressed their sincere admiration at this sight. The situation could be called unique for close analysis: due to the opportunity of considering it from picture-centered approach - to the higher step of discourse analysis. The fact was that, first of all, special information was found concerning Roerih's own approach and opinion about his stimulus for creating this picture, and its humanitarian importance. Also many opinions of people expressing their personal attitude concerning 'reading' of the picture were also discovered (some of the reviews were officially published).

Taking into consideration the specificity of perception of pictures (as visual art) it seemed proper to consider the analysis of the content in terms of visualized images. In Roerih's picture the general image of the picture could be outlined first, due to its undeniable integrity providing the proved instant immersion of recipients. Yet, the fact could not be missed that two different individuals who came at the same time to contemplate Roerih's picture could, probably, get similar emotional impact, due to physical visual perception of its integrity, harmony, positive static atmosphere coming from the picture. Much of the impression would be provided by the picture's soft warm colours chosen by Roerih. After the same first impression separate individual opinions of the picture would come to more attentive view. At this stage visual

perception would be combined with notional perception providing the so called "mining" information (mind's eye). The results of this entry into the picture's content could be radically different depending much on the known before (or missing) picture's background and general cultural information. The person who knew nothing about Bede's legend story, neither about Polonsky's poem, nor about the painter, would witness in the picture only an old man, the boy and surrounding nature. The viewers' next step could be looking at the title of the picture, or listening to the museum guide's information or to a brief commentary which could broaden the view (or not).

At this stage we could pass over to the more specific integrated analysis. It could be stated that the deictic-referential signals providing instant immersion into the world of the picture coincided with the text of Polonsky's poem. Of course, in examining the picture they would be visual, due to the eye perception, and at the same time, notional ones, due to the participant's background information. They would include identical information:

- 1) Time? evening, the time when the sun was slowly setting;
- 2) Place? The lake (or river) side, mountains;
- 3) Who? The main characters: the old man, Bede; the boy (sleeping in the left-side corner, at the bottom of the picture); the mountains;
- 4) Social status? The old man: Bede, the preacher; the boy as the preacher's guide;
- 5) Empathy? Peace, harmony; inspiration from Bede's sight.

To provide more factual information from the picture, the spectator could view the image of the landscape with big mountains, as if forming a circle around Bede, an old preacher, grey-haired, dressed in old half torn, white clothes, bare-footed, standing close to water, with his back to the picture's recipients. His head and neck were raised to the sky, the state of exaltation could be evident to the viewers. In Roerih's pictures colour always played the most essential part. It could render different emotions, ideas and tonality, be even symbolic. The white colour, the color of Bede's clothes, according to Christian traditions, symbolized the innocence, purity, holiness, which corresponded to in this case to Bede's church status, and his look.

The image of nature included the descriptions of the sky, the evening setting sun, the stillness of water, surrounding mountains. Roerih applied the so-called frame organization in the picture: mountains looked, as if they surrounded and included all the scene into a circle. The impression of stillness, perfect harmony, experienced by the viewers of the picture, was achieved with the help of illusion of absolute immobility of everything in the picture, especially of water. The reflection of the sun in the water was even and clearly static. All the lines were clearly direct, linear, with no curves. Yet, only the sky produced the impression of constant changes and moving of colours at the time of the evening setting sun. Interchange of colours in the picture corresponded to natural quick changes of the sky in the evening, and it produced the impression of beauty. The colours were presented as changing various shades and tints: from dark blue, then clear blue, coming to violet, crimson, dark red and rosy.

The image of mountains reflecting the sun contained golden, light brown shades which were clearly outlined. More detailed information concerning picture viewers' impressions would be presented in the next part.

#### IV. BRIEF DISCUSSION

Two problems, special for this article, and general, at the same time, were calling for discussion at this step of presenting analysis. The first one was connected with the importance of additional arguments revealing the notional core of the examined ekphrasis even more transparently. The fact was that the examined situation provided unique opportunity to broaden the analysis with the help of transferring it from basically text-centered approach (in Polonsky's poem) to the discourse paradigm. It was a happy chance to add two more statements concerning the basic message of the picture: 'Bede, the Preacher' concerning this study. One sincere belief was expressed by Roerih, himself, the creator of the picture. As was mentioned above, Roerih was not only an outstanding painter, but also a philosopher, social-cultural scientist, writer. Being

a very creative man in different spheres, he even worked out a special philosophical doctrine: 'Ethics Alive' which was followed by many disciples. There was no doubt that he knew Polonsky's poem well since his childhood, and, hence, the legend about Saint Bede It went deep into his heart, but he painted the picture much later, in 1945, two years before his death. His urgent conviction, concerning the end of the poem, was also known and quoted by people who shared it, with all their hearts. Roerih's direct quotation was: 'Everybody remembers the wonderful poem 'Bede, the Preacher' when stones roared, in chorus, the answer to his calling words. If even stones can agree to them, and all together state something, if people could be lower than stones?' (Roerih 1931, 199; P.60). No better words could express the basic subject matter of the poem.

To add to this, at present, many people can attend Novosibirsk Art Museum and also many of them had a chance to view and enjoy the beautiful picture by Roerih. Their opinions absolutely coincided with Roerih's judgement. Some of the references were published, and many of them sounded even poetical, opening new features of the discussed masterpiece. Some small parts of reviews about the picture could be adduced. Almost all reviewers were informed before that Roerih's picture was created under the strong impact of Polonsky's poem", and of the legend about Saint Bede, as well. It influenced deeply their notional and emotional impact, perception and instant immersion. Writing about the picture they mentioned specially the art of presenting the main image of Bede, noticing other important details. The most essential, and discovered anew, qualities were the impression of the Light coming from the picture, like 'the reflection of the sun on the earth', Bede's figure itself looked as if 'emanating the light'; Roerih himself was identified as 'the passionate preacher of the Light'. It was mentioned that, for Roerih, 'Light was not only physical substance but creative fire, beauty and the symbol of everything, the highest'. Bede's calling words from his sermon were compared with the shining of the sun. The white colour of Bede's clothes turned out to be a symbol of his calling for the Light, for the eternal values. 'Bede was standing, but the sleeves of his poor clothes seemed to open, like the wings of the bird getting ready for the flight'. (Florendky 1990; Belikov 2001; Urikova 2020).

The picture itself appealed to all viewers' perceptual codes, due to the fact that in the picture everything was alive, presenting the 'living Universe' where 'everything hears, comprehends, feels and gives response'. Evident perception of Beauty was underlined in reviews specially. The use of special amazing colours representing Beauty, used by Roerih, were mentioned specially. The references stated that Roerih's picture portrayed the following landscape: 'the mirror of the lake surrounded by blue low mountains. Evening, the

sun is setting. The scarlet sunset sky is all in flames; red, pink, lilac ribbons of clouds, with smooth curves slowly moving along the greenish dome of the sky' (Belikov 2001, Rudzitis 2009, Urikova 2020). The picture's perception of the nature's image itself in participants' reviews looked poetical and beautiful. 'All nature, as if stood still listening to the preacher. The sun, the cliffs and water are attentively following his fiery words coming from the bottom of his heart. The sun is still, water stopped running, the cliffs seemed to bend forward listening to Bede. All space around has been filled with noble blissful vibrations.' (Florensky 1990, Matochkin 1994, Urikova 2020). Still the most important Roerih's contribution to his time, and even to the future, which was connected with his creative activity, contained his ideas of ethical mission of man in life, his spiritual rise to the Light, to the unity of all people connected by universal ethical values. This call, via his pictures, books, his theory of 'Living Ethics' was clearly understood by the recipients of his picture: Bede, the Preacher" and retains its importance up till now.

Surely, references connected with the process and results of the participants' visual and notional perception added much to the global enriching of the understanding of the nature of ekphrasis based on the interplay of the poem and the picture by adding most sincere emotional-aesthetic tonality to the notional information.

The second problem, more general for the discussion in this article, but vital for the choice of effective tools of analysis for any researcher, was the problem of methodology. The undertaken analysis proved the validity of application of integrated and interdisciplinary ways of research. Texts, especially in their multimedia forms are even more complicated for analysis, as their semiotic nature determines, in many cases, more general notional meanings correlated with various forms of their media expression. In our case the notion of ekphrasis received more competent and valid understanding, due to the broadening of the research beyond the limits of text analysis up to the discourse level. The latter included the notional and emotional, aesthetic types of the recipients' immersion into the notional visualization of Roerih's picture, with the help of using important keys given by the author of the picture himself and from different viewers of this masterpiece. The previous level of analysis (from Results) was based also on the application of more traditional (for instance, linguistic) ways of analysis, but also on more recent innovative in linguistics notions and tools. The results of more efficient analysis of the ekphrasis, as the unity and interface of two artifacts of different media systems: the art of painting and the art of poetry were encouraging and are calling for new investigations. Due to the use of different tools, the facts proving their semiotic nature received more valid confirmation. Elements of

isomorphism and asymmetric allomorphic art media artifacts' meaning and forms also received convincing proof.

## V. CONCLUSION

Confirms previously established results presented earlier. It invites scholars interested in these problems for the continuation of similar explorations, and also calls them for the further discussion of the outlined information.

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