

Blake Morrison's "Teeth" as Palimpsest*

Blake Morrison'un "Teeth" Adlı Şiirinde Çok Katmanlı Yapı

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Öz

Blake Morrison'un *With a Poet's Eye* (Şairin Gözüyle) adlı Tate Sanat Galerisi tarafından hazırlanan antolojide yayımlanan şiiri "Teeth" (Dişler), çok sayıda görsel ve yazılı metne göndermede bulunduğu için çok katmanlı bir okumayı gerektirmektedir. Gerard Genette'in terminolojisini kullanacak olursak, şiir Robert Browning'in "My Last Duchess" (Benim Son Düşesim) adlı şiirini içerik, dil ve yapı açısından bir alt metin olarak kullanır. Browning'in dramatik monoloğunda olduğu gibi, Morrison'un şiirinde de işadama olan anlatıcı susturulmuş dinleyicisine, bir yandan eski karısının ölümünü anlatırken, diğer yandan sanat koleksiyonunu gösterir. Ancak Dükün anlatımından farklı olarak, bu şiirdeki anlatıcı karısını öldürdüğünü açıkça dile getirmez. Ayrıca Morrison'un şiiri, gerçekte var olmayan sanat yapıtlarını konu edinen Browning'in şiirinin aksine, Francis Bacon'un *Papa* resmine göndermede bulunur. Bu resim Velázquez'in *Pope Innocent X* adlı resminden esinlenerek yapılan resimler dizisinden biridir. Böylece şair, yalnızca daha önce yazılmış bir şiire değil, iki görsel sanat yapıtına da gönderme yaparak şiirini çok katmanlı hale dönüştürür. Bu makalenin amacı da Blake Morrison'un "Teeth" adlı şiirinde şairin anlatma, konuşma ve bakma gibi eylemleri başka görsel ve yazınsal sanat yapıtlarına yaptığı referanslarla nasıl karmaşık hale getirdiğini incelemektir.

Anahtar sözcükler: Blake Morrison, Robert Browning, Dramatik Monolog, Üst-Alt Metin, Görsel Sanat

Abstract

Blake Morrison's poem "Teeth", published in *With a Poet's Eye* which is an illustrated Tate Gallery anthology, is replete with allusions and therefore, requires a palimpsestuous reading. Using Gerard Genette's terminology, this poem is a hypertext, echoing Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess" in content as well as language and structure. Like Browning's dramatic monologue, in Morrison's monologue the unreliable persona, a businessman, talks about the death of his ex-wife to a silent/silenced listener, while he also boasts of his art collection. Unlike Browning's poem, though, the unreliable persona does not openly declare that he is his wife's murderer. Moreover, the Duke refers to imaginary works of art, but Morrison's poem is an ekphrasis on Francis Bacon's painting *Pope*. This is a series of paintings designed by the painter to allude to Velázquez's *Pope Innocent X*. In this way, Morrison further complicates the structure of the poem by referring not only to a previous poem but also to two paintings. The aim of this paper, then, is to discuss the multi-layered structure of Blake Morrison's "Teeth" to show how Morrison complicates the act of telling, speaking and gazing through hypertextual and ekphrastic traits.

Keywords: Blake Morrison, Robert Browning, Dramatic Monologue, Hypertext, Ekphrasis

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Blake Morrison's poem "Teeth", published in *With a Poet's Eye* (1986)—an illustrated anthology which comprises ekphrastic¹ poetry on artworks exhibited at the Tate Gallery — requires a palimpsestuous² reading with its multiple references. To use Gerard Genette's terminology, Morrison's poem is a hypertext, echoing an earlier hypotext³, Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess" in structure, content as well as diction. Like Browning's much acclaimed dramatic monologue, the persona in Morrison's poem, who is a businessman, talks about his ex-wife to a silent/silenced listener, while he also boasts of his art collection. The Duke's implication of the murder of his first wife due to her flirtatious behaviour is one sign of his unreliability as a speaker, whereas in Morrison's poem the persona's unreliability is suggested through allusions. Unlike Browning's poem, though, which refers to imaginary artworks, Morrison's poem involves an ekphrasis on one painting among a series of those done by Francis Bacon, titled *Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Innocent X* (1953)⁴, which apparently reveals the allusion to Velázquez's painting (1650). In this way, Morrison further complicates the structure of the poem by referring not only to a previous poem but also to two paintings. The ambiguities related to the title of the poem, the death of the persona's first wife, and the end could be explained with the complexity of such allusions. My purpose, then, is to discuss the multi-layered structure of Blake Morrison's "Teeth" to illustrate how the poet problematizes the act of telling, or speaking and gazing through hypertextual and ekphrastic traits.

Firstly, in terms of their structure, both poems are written in the form of a dramatic monologue⁵ where the persona gradually discloses his/her psychological state by addressing a silent listener. The structural resemblance corresponds to similarities in content as well. The persona in Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess" is a Renaissance Duke, Duke of Ferrara, negotiating with an agent for a new wife, while the persona in Blake Morrison's "Teeth" is an unnamed twentieth-century businessman talking to a colleague. In both poems, the unreliable speakers are authoritative husbands, who are extremely jealous and skeptical of their wives. The Duke abhors his wife's kind attitude to everyone, as she is "Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er / She looked on, and her looks went everywhere" (Browning, 1994, lines 23-24). Moreover, according to him, she has shown no respect for her aristocratic husband's "nine-hundred-years-old name" (Browning, 1994, line 33). Due to his conceited nature, however, he does not dare to tell his wife his complaint about her behaviour. Consequently,

1 Although ekphrasis is originally used in ancient Greek to mean giving voice to objects, I prefer James Heffernan's narrow definition of the term as "verbal representation of a visual representation" (Heffernan, 1993, pp. 3).

2 The word "palimpsest" is derived from Greek, meaning "scraped again" (*Oxford English Dictionary*). The second definition in the dictionary — "A parchment or writing-material written upon twice, the original writing having been erased or rubbed out to make place for the second; a manuscript in which a later writing is written over an effaced earlier writing" (*Oxford English Dictionary*) — serves in this article as a trope for Blake Morrison's rewriting of Robert Browning's poem as well as Francis Bacon's repainting of Velázquez's *Innocent X*.

3 Gerard Genette in his *Palimpsests* defines these two terms saying, "By hypertextuality I mean any relationship uniting a text B (which I shall call the *hypertext*) to an earlier text A (I shall, of course, call it the *hypotext*), upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary" (Genette, 1997, pp. 5).

4 This poem, placed in the Francis Bacon section in the anthology, is not accompanied by one of the painter's *Pope* series created between the 1950s and the 1960s. The speaker in the poem asserts that the title of the painting is "A Pope" (Morrison, 1986, line7), but does not specify a particular one.

5 Tamar Yacobi in her article "Interart Narratice: (Un)Reliability and Ekphrasis" discusses, in detail, unreliable narration in ekphrastic writing and compares the two poems, "Teeth" and "My Last Duchess", which are the subject of this study as well. Different from Yacobi's article, I will emphasize the differences between these poems and dwell more on their ekphrastic characteristics with respect to the multi-layered structure of Morrison's poem.

he gives orders to prevent her from smiling to everyone, which culminates in her death: “I gave commands; Then all smiles stopped together” (Browning, 1994, lines 45-46). The persona of Morrison’s poem is equally disappointed with his late wife, Janine, as she dislikes Bacon’s painting, which her husband purchases, telling him outright to get rid of it. Even though the persona claims to have “tried to exchange” (Morrison, 1986, line 23) the painting, the unreliability of the speaker, like the Duke, his dominance over his wife, and the investment value of the painting – that it is “worth a fortune” (Morrison, 1986, line 13) – all imply that he has never actually attempted to give it back.

In addition to her disobedience to her husband, Janine, as the persona discloses, has an affair with a diplomat, with whom she dies in a car accident. What is striking here is how vindictive the persona becomes while talking about this incident, saying that his wife was “smashed, on a crossing in the mouth / Of the Glasgow express” (Morrison, 1986, lines 26-27). The way he reveals Janine’s devaluation of Bacon’s painting alongside her alleged infidelity, similar to the Duchess’s flirtatious behaviour, gives clues about the speaker’s murder of his wife, even though he does not openly admit it. Just like the Duke who uses an agent to have his wife killed, the businessman sends his man, Hammond “to identify the bits” (Morrison, 1986, line 28), which further suggests the value he gives to his wife. After her death, the businessman marries Andrea, like the Duke who is planning to marry again. Different from Janine, Andrea, as the persona claims, has “womanly virtues” (Morrison, 1986, line 37), because she pays respect to her husband’s preferences and hangs the painting, despite her distaste for it. Whereas the Duke sends an implicit message to the wife-to-be via the agent that she will be his possession – “my object” (Browning, 1994, line 53) – and that if she does not submit to his orders, her end might be the same as the previous Duchess, the businessman in Morrison’s poem overtly threatens his rivals via the silent colleague, saying “Outside the door my rivals are skulking / With a vengeance: I’ll see their blood pizzle out / Sooner than be mastered, I’ll wipe the lot” (Morrison, 1986, lines 56-58). This severe intimidation of the businessman could be related to the ambiguous title of the poem, as the interlocutor never enunciates the word “teeth” in his monologue. When considered in terms of the information the speaker has so far given, this enigmatic title might signify how the businessman metaphorically shows his teeth to his rivals as well as his listener as a form of threat, because of the information the silenced listener garners about the speaker. Yacobi focuses on the same issue of the persona disclosing his crime through the painting, saying “the painting doubled on the wall bares its ‘teeth’ not only literally, in the Pope’s mouth on the canvas, but also rhetorically, in the exposure of its dramatic re-painter as unconscious re-re-painter and self-painter” (Yacobi, 2000, pp. 745). Such obscurity in the title also arises out of Bacon’s depiction of the Pope with an open mouth exhibiting his teeth to the onlookers and also to the painter’s general obsession with “the shape of the mouth and the teeth” (Bacon, 1966, pp. 4) as he asserts in an interview with the art critic David Sylvester.

Besides the analogy between the structure and the content of these two poems, the businessman in Morrison’s “Teeth” repeats certain expressions that the Duke utters in Browning’s monologue. Both poems start with a similar remark by the speakers demonstrating their possessive nature; in the former the fictional painter Brother Pandolf’s portrait of the Duke’s wife, and in the latter Francis Bacon’s *Pope* are shown to the addressees with the pronoun “my”. The first line of Browning’s poem, “That’s my last Duchess painted on the wall” (Browning, 1994, line 1), underlines not only the Duke’s possession of the painting but also his domination over his wife when she was alive. Morrison’s persona, on the other hand, enjoys the possession of a Bacon painting – “my Francis Bacon” (Morrison, 1986, line 2) – which later becomes the reason for his wife’s death. While the Duke addresses the

agent at the beginning of his speech, saying "Will't please you sit and look at her?" (Browning, 1994, line 5), the persona in Morrison's poem says "But look" (Morrison, 1986, line 11), and because he anticipates his listener's agitation, he offers his associate whisky to relax before disclosing how his wife died. Likewise, both speakers use the verb "read"⁶ to mean the interpretation of the expressions on the faces of the figures in the paintings.

In the final part of the poems, the speakers want the addressees to notice artworks in like manner: while the Duke says "Nay, we'll go / Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though, / Taming a sea horse," (Browning, 1994, lines 53-55), the businessman wants his guest to notice the impression in the eyes of the Pope in the frame, saying

So let's down to business in my study.
But notice, as you pass, how the steady
Eyes of that Pope seem to accuse and track
Us, as if we'd personally stretched him on that rack. (Morrison, 1986, lines 59-62)

As is suggested with the above quotes, Browning's Duke refers to another artwork, a sculpture portraying the Roman god domesticating a sea-horse to evoke the Duke's maltreatment of women, but Morrison's poem ends in a circular manner, pointing again to the incriminating looks of Bacon's Pope, and an ambiguous statement: "We'll see that bastard roasting yet" (Morrison, 1986, line 64). Whether the "bastard" is the Pope or a business rival is left unclear by the speaker on purpose to continue his oppression on his guest.

Despite their authority over their wives as well as their listeners who are never allowed to speak, the Duke and the businessman have verbal incompetence. The Duke uses aporia such as "how shall I say?" (Browning, 1994, line 22), "I know not how" (Browning, 1994, line 32), while telling his views about his wife, and openly declares that he has no skill in speech (Browning, 1994, lines 35-36). On the other hand, the businessman's verbal ineffectiveness is more related to informal expressions and slang, such as "chap," (Morrison, 1986, 15) "I'll wipe the lot," (Morrison, 1986, line 58) and "bastard" (Morrison, 1986, line 64). Additionally, he leaves certain parts of his narrative obscure, as in the case when he finishes talking about his wife's accident with an ellipsis, followed by an expression of insensitivity—"but never mind" (Morrison, 1986, line 28)—towards Janine's death.

The palimpsestuous dialogue between the structure, themes and verbal expressions of both poems is heightened by their ekphrastic nature but with a major difference: in Browning's poem the painting and the sculpture described by the Duke are by a fictional painter, Brother Pandolf and a fictional sculptor, Claus of Innsbruck respectively. Morrison's poem, on the contrary, verbalizes Bacon's work⁷. While Fra Pandolf's portrait of the Duchess is characterized by verisimilitude, "looking as if she were alive" (Browning, 1994, line 2), Bacon prefers a nonfigurative style based on the distortion of figures, which I will discuss with respect to repainting, an aspect of multi-layered structure. Moreover, the painting in the former poem depicts the Duke's wife in a joyful manner, while the Pope in Bacon's painting is tormented as he is screaming in an electric chair. Gilles Deleuze in his book, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* talks about how the painter displays the effects of feeling and movement on the human body and argues:

6 In "My Last Duchess" it is in line 6, and in "Teeth" in line 8.

7 Yacobi draws attention to the alliteration between the names of the painters: "*Fra Pandolf and Francis Bacon*" (2000, pp. 729).

Bacon creates the painting of the scream because he establishes a relationship between the visibility of the scream ... and invisible forces.... Innocent X screams, but he screams behind the curtain, not only as someone who can no longer be seen, but as someone who cannot see, who has nothing left to see, whose only remaining function is to render visible these invisible forces that are making him scream, these powers of the future (Deleuze, 2004, pp. 60-61).

Considered from this angle, Morrison interprets the Pope's painful situation (an "invisible force") "as anyone in pain – / A car-ace, say, burning in his Jaguar / Or a murderer in a high electric chair" (Morrison, 1986, line 8). In this case, the Pope's suffering is resembled to the first wife's scream dying in an accident, or the scream of the speaker resulting from the fear of punishment. By associating a religious figure with a car driver and a murderer, the poet, like the painter, seems to be questioning and undermining divine authority. Also, the mute listener in the poem seems to be in the same distressing state, as he cannot confess the persona's crime, fearing that he might be killed like the speaker's previous wife.

Although both speakers are art connoisseurs, investing on artworks in order to boast about their fortune, they do not seem to regard the value of art. By hiding his wife's portrait behind a curtain because of her passionate look, for instance, the domineering Duke prohibits the onlookers' appreciation of it. The businessman in "Teeth", on the other hand, employs downgrading words, such as "thing" (Morrison, 1986, line 23) or "stuff" (Morrison, 1986, line 41) for the artworks he owns, and instead of spending money on paintings of his preference, he purchases those that would increase his wealth. He admits that if it were only a matter of choice, he would invest on the works of twentieth-century French painter Jean Dubuffet, as his "disfigurings are much more to my taste" (Morrison, 1986, line 52). While talking about another painting by Bacon, depicting "offal / On a mattress, paralysed limbs..." (Morrison, 1986, lines 42-43) he openly declares that he abhors "How his paintings constantly exaggerate" (Morrison, 1986, line 46).

The paragonal relationship in ekphrasis between the so-called sister arts until the twentieth-century, presupposes a dichotomy at the basis of the word and the image, the former appealing to the ear and the latter to the eye⁸. W. J. T. Mitchell in his *Picture Theory* claims that the alterity of one form of representation from the other's stance is actually "a relation of political, disciplinary, or cultural domination in which the 'self' is understood to be an active, speaking, seeing subject, while the 'other' is projected as passive, seen, and (usually) silent object" (Mitchell, 1994, pp. 157). This opposition between the two forms of art is further discussed in terms of gender roles: the male poet gazes and objectifies the mute female image. Mitchell in *Iconology* suggests, "Paintings, like women, are ideally silent, beautiful creatures designed for the gratification of the eye, in contrast to the sublime eloquence proper to the manly art of poetry" (Mitchell, 1986, pp. 110). Browning's poem, in this context, exemplifies the characteristics of traditional ekphrasis, where the male speaker dominates the female image through not only his speech by keeping her silent in the frame but also his gaze and the curtain he draws over it. Even though the Duchess's glances are directed towards the audience, it is the Duke,

8 The paragon between the visual and verbal arts dates back to Simonides's saying that painting is mute poetry and poetry is blind painting (qtd. in da Vinci, 1989, pp. 20). Based on this tenet, Leonardo da Vinci developed his own argument on the privileged position of the eye over the ear, or respectively, "the nobler sense" over "the second, acquiring nobility through the recounting of things which the eye has seen" (da Vinci, 1989, pp. 20). Hence, painting's supremacy over poetry, that it "remakes the forms and figures of nature with greater truth than the poet" (da Vinci, 1989, pp. 20-1). According to da Vinci, appreciation of poetry depends on a span of time, whereas that of painting is instantaneous (da Vinci, 1989, pp. 23).

who has complete control over the painting. In Morrison's case, the speaker is a male gazer describing not a female object of beauty but an authoritative clergyman, whose power is upheld through his victimized depiction. Contrary to Browning's poem, then, in Morrison's "Teeth" gender is not an issue. Rather, gaze is problematized through a reciprocal watch between the speaker and the image in the painting: in the first two lines of the poem, the speaker expects his colleague to "come closer – framed so you can / See yourself in it" (Morrison, 1986, lines 1-2). The gazer/speaker sees his own reflection, his guilt in this context, in the eyes of the Pope looking at the audience. Such exchange of gaze is henceforth underlined by the speaker when he wants his silent listener to notice "how the steady / Eyes of that Pope seem to accuse and track" (Morrison, 1986, lines 60-61) the onlookers. In its circular structure, the speaker cites several nouns and verbs related to sight in the first and last stanzas, namely "eye", "look", "see", "notice" and "track", to imply how his eyes are on his visitor in the same way the Pope looks out of the frame.

Like the hypertextuality of Morrison's poem, Francis Bacon's painting described in the poem is a repainting of Velazquez's *Portrait of Innocent X*, which Bacon considers to be "one of the greatest portraits" ever created (Bacon, 2007, pp. 3). The authoritarian visage of the Pope, sitting comfortably in his throne in the earlier painting is remodelled into Pope screaming in an electric chair behind the bars. As Rina Arya points out, "In Bacon's depiction the Pope's power is undermined by the scream, which shatters any claim to authority" (Arya, 2009, pp. 145). It also parallels the way Morrison associates the Pope with a murderer, discussed earlier in this study. Through the "blurred boundaries" (Arya, 2009, pp. 145) of the figure and the depiction of the body in torture, Bacon complicates the static pose of the Pope in Velazquez's painting (Arya, 2009, pp. 146) and displays the body "in a state of liquefaction" (Arya, 2009, pp. 145). Arya further suggests that Bacon prefers "the actual truth of the living person as a corporeal entity" (Arya, 2009, pp. 147) to the "two-dimensional representation" (Arya, 2009, pp. 147) in Velazquez's art. As Bacon also explains, the reason why an artist ever attempts to repaint an earlier artist's work is "because, from generation to generation, through what the great artists have done, the instincts change. And, as instincts change, so there comes a renewal of the feeling of how can I remake this thing once again more clearly, more exactly, more violently" (Bacon, 1966, pp. 4). This approach of Bacon, thus, highlights Morrison's aim to recontextualize Browning's dramatic monologue to underline the cunning twentieth-century businessman's threats of violence.

To conclude, Genette argues that "in order to imitate a text, it is inevitably necessary to acquire at least a partial mastery of it, a mastery of that specific quality which one has chosen to imitate" (Genette, 1997, pp. 6). In "Teeth", Morrison achieves the so-called mastery over Browning's dramatic monologue by complicating the storytelling with multiple references including ekphrasis. Yacobi in her article on the comparison of these poems, interprets Morrison's allusion to Browning's poem as well as Bacon's painting as an implication of the businessman's murder of his wife. As she posits, the businessman in his monologue gradually "changes images from a contented, heartless ex-widower into a wife-killer in guilty agony akin to the screaming, the burning, the electrocution that he views" (Yacobi, 2000, pp. 742) in Bacon's painting. While the "Duke could both murder and boast of it with impunity" (Yacobi, 2000, pp. 732), the businessman "can arrange a similar termination, but he would know better than to advertise it" (Yacobi, 2000, pp. 732) as he acknowledges and fears his punishment in the eyes of the Pope. In addition, with ekphrastic elements, Morrison asks the reader to revise their view of Francis Bacon's painting, as the aim of the poet in ekphrasis is to serve as a mediator between the work of art and the audience, as Mitchell suggests. He lists the steps in ekphrasis: "(1) the conver-

sion of the visual representation into a verbal representation, either by description or ventriloquism; (2) the reconversion of the verbal representation back into the visual object in the reception of the reader” (Mitchell, 1994, pp. 160). Hence, by making his monologue more intricate with literary and artistic palimpsests (“Teeth” alluding to “My Last Duchess” and Bacon’s work repainting Velazquez’s), and with ekphrastic characteristics (poem alluding to painting), the businessman subdues and silences his listener while keeping a watchful eye on him.

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