

SUMMARY OF “*THE BRONZE HORSEMAN* AND THE TRADITION OF EKPHRASIS” BY

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Tatiana Smoliarova's "*The Bronze Horseman and the Tradition of Ekphrasis*" delves into discussion of a device unknown by many and its relevance to human interaction: ekphrasis. Smoliarova contextualizes Pushkin's "The Bronze Horseman" in relation to the wider discussion of the Russian national identity today. She does so by referring to Roman Jakobson's "The Statue in Pushkin's Poetic Mythology" and Lev Pumpianskii's "The Bronze Horseman and the Poetic Tradition of the eighteenth century," and by discussing the importance of discourse between objects, the language used to describe them, and its impact on Russian culture.

To begin this exploration, Smoliarova defines "ekphrasis" as "...the Greek verb *ekfrazien* which means to 'describe in detail'"<sup>1</sup> (104). It is further defined by Jakobson's view of a poem as "a verbal representation of a visual representation" (104). Thus, ekphrasis is the verbal reflection of art and Smoliarova uses Jakobson and Pompianskii's articles to exhibit ekphrasis.

By telling the history of ekphrasis, Smoliarova demonstrates the culture surrounding fine art and its rebirth during the late French Renaissance (105). Applying the example of Catherine de' Medici's order for Vigenere to implement Italian visual culture in France, she emphasizes the heavy presence of ekphrasis in Vigenere's mission by concluding, "Descriptions of imaginary paintings were thus transformed into programmes for the real ones" (106). Finally, Smoliarova acknowledges the infiltration of ekphrasis into Russian culture during Peter the Great's reign via Pushkin's literature, French culture, and even by adopting the Byzantine Empire's architectural ekphrasis (107).

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<sup>1</sup> Tatiana Smoliarova, "*The Bronze Horseman and the Tradition of Ekphrasis*," in *200 Years of Pushkin: Alexander Pushkin: myth and monument, Volume 2*, ed. Robert Reid and Joe Andrew (Rodopi, 2003) 104

Once establishing Pushkin as a national Russian figurehead, Smoliarova claims Derzhavin to have inspired him:

The great influence exerted by Derzhavin upon Pushkin is an axiom: this fact is so well known and widely studied that it does not require any further explanations.

Pumpianskii speaks of architectural inspiration and vocabulary as the ‘Derzhavin layer’ of Russian poetry: ‘It is the origin of the statuary theme in *The Bronze Horseman*’, writes Pumpianskii, ‘(the very title of the poem belongs to Derzhavin’s poetic language)’ (108).

As a result of ekphrasis, Russian identity has been constructed upon Pushkin and in turn, Derzhavin. She establishes a pattern of connectedness through the various European influences Russia obtained.

Smoliarova’s commentary also emphasizes ekphrasis’ partiality. “According to the Neo-Sophist theory and practice, ekphrasis never presupposes a neutral description; it is inevitably complimentary. To describe an object *in detail* (that is, to consider it to be worth describing), already means to valorize it” (105). Underneath this claim, we can assume responses to “The Bronze Horseman,” such as Jakobson’s and Pumpianshii’s articles, are implicitly adulatory because they demonstrate ekphrasis. If the work is described *in detail*, it must be regarded as valuable and worthy of description.

As Smoliarova reflects, descriptions of Étienne Maurice Falconet’s sculpture of Peter the Great contribute to it and “The Bronze Horseman’s” cultural significance. Within the discourse Smoliarova prompts, writers such as Jakobson and Pumpianskii, possess the power to mold opinions of large masses, contributing to the cultural relevance and popularity of Pushkin’s “The

Bronze Horseman” and Falconet’s statue of Peter the Great. Smoliarova works towards distinguishing a national Russian identity by the prideful claiming and admiration of Pushkin and Peter the Great’s statue. Ekphrases of the statue further fosters an appreciation for Pushkin’s “The Bronze Horseman,” elevating its relevance in Russian culture even today.

## Bibliography

Smoliarova, Tatiana. “*The Bronze Horseman* and the Tradition of Ekphrasis.” In *200 Years of Pushkin: Alexander Pushkin: myth and monument, Volume 2*, Edited by Robert Reid and Joe Andrew. Rodopi, 2003.