



## ***Writing and Seeing***

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Internationale Forschungen zur  
Allgemeinen und  
Vergleichenden Literaturwissenschaft

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In Verbindung mit

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***Writing and Seeing***  
***Essays on Word and Image***

*Edited by*  
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## Contents

Introduction	11
1. Setting the Tone: The Challenges of Representation I:	
<i>James A. W. Heffernan</i> Speaking for Pictures: Language and Abstract Art	25
2. Early Modern to Modern: representations, appropriations	
<i>Derek Brewer</i> Seeing and Writing Venus in Spenser, Shakespeare, Titian	47
<i>Jesús Cora</i> John Donne's Arcimboldeque Wit in "To Sir Edward Herbert. At Julyers": A Partial Reading	61
<i>Silvia Quinteiro</i> Perspective and Framing in Ann Radcliffe's <i>The Mysteries of Udolpho</i> and in the Work of Caspar David Friedrich	79
<i>Gabriela Gândara Terenas</i> William Hogarth seen by Pinheiro Chagas: looking at Britain and writing about Portugal	89
<i>Vita Fortunati</i> Visual Portraits and Literary Portraits: the Intertextual Dialogue between Holbein and Ford Madox Ford	97
3. Crossing Images, Changing Places	
<i>Charlotte Schoell-Glass</i> Fictions of the Art World: Art, Art History and the Art Historian in Literary Space	107
<i>Sonia Lagerwall</i> A Reading of Michel Butor's <i>La Modification</i> as an Emblematic Iconotext	119
<i>Gabriel Insausti</i> The Making of The Eiffel Tower as a Modern Icon	131

<i>Lauren S. Weingarden</i> Reflections on Baudelaire's Paris: Photography, Modernity and Memory	145
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#### 4. Women and the Intermedium

##### 4.1. Portraits and Causes

<i>Elizabeth K. Menon</i> <i>Les Filles d'Ève</i> in Word and Image	157
--	-----

<i>Maria Aline Seabra Ferreira</i> Paula Rego's Painterly Narratives: <i>Jane Eyre</i> and <i>Wide Sargasso Sea</i> – A Dictionary of Images	175
--	-----

<i>Rui Carvalho Homem</i> Looking for Clues: McGuckian, poems and portraits	187
--	-----

##### 4.2. Ambivalent Narratives: A.S. Byatt

<i>Isabel Fernandes</i> Matisse and Women: Portraits by A.S. Byatt	201
---	-----

<i>Margarida Esteves Pereira</i> More than Words: the Elusive Language of A.S. Byatt's Visual Fiction	211
--	-----

<i>Paola Spinozzi</i> Ekphrasis as Portrait: A.S. Byatt's Fictional and Visual <i>Doppelgänger</i>	223
---	-----

#### 5. The Lens and the Print: text, photo, semiotics

<i>Caroline Blinder</i> "A Kind of Patriotism": Jack Kerouac's Introduction to Robert Frank's <i>The Americans</i> (1959)	235
---	-----

<i>Maria de Fátima Lambert</i> 3 (Ultimate) Journeys: Fulton, Weiner & Kiefer	245
--	-----

<i>Adriana Baptista</i> Karen Knorr and Tracey Moffat: When the photographer chooses the words in order to photograph the images	257
--	-----

<i>Peter ED Muir</i> An Act of Erasure: <i>October</i> and the <i>Index</i>	267
--	-----

## 6. Stage and Screen, East and West

<i>Rosa Branca Figueiredo</i> The Semiotics of the Body: Ritual and Dance in Soyinka's Drama	281
---	-----

<i>Maria Sofia Pimentel Biscaia</i> An Inheritance of Horror: the Shadow of <i>Das Kabinett des Doktor Caligari</i> in Salman Rushdie's <i>Shame</i>	291
--	-----

<i>Michaela Schäuble</i> The Ethnographer's Eye: Vision, Narration, and Poetic Imagery in Contemporary Anthropological Film	301
---	-----

## 7. High and Low, Learned and Popular: straying narratives

<i>Laura Fernanda Bulger</i> Looking at the Written Text on Television	315
---	-----

<i>Yoko Ono</i> Listen to Me: Influence of <i>Shojo manga</i> on contemporary Japanese women's writing	323
---	-----

<i>Marie-Manuelle Silva</i> The Link Between Text and Image in <i>Voyage au bout de la nuit</i> de Céline by Tardi	331
---	-----

## 8. Arts and Crafts: composite skills

<i>Anabela Mendes</i> Pulsating Visions – Idioms Incarnate: Wassily Kandinsky Amidst Stage, Pen and Brush	345
---	-----

<i>Anne Price-Owen</i> From Medieval Manuscripts to Postmodern Hypertexts in the Art of David Jones	355
--	-----

<i>Dominique Costa</i> Visual and Verbal Representations in the Scottish Novel: The Artistry of Alasdair Gray	369
---	-----

10

*Gil Maia*

When what you see is what you read

377

9. Postscript: the Long Perspective, or, The Challenges of Representation II

*José Jiménez*

The Root of Forms

389

Index

399

Paola Spinozzi

## Ekphrasis as Portrait: A.S. Byatt's Fictional and Visual *Doppelgänger*

In *Portraits in Fiction* (2001) A.S. Byatt further develops her meta-literary enquiry into the creative sources of writing by diachronically re-tracing what can be defined as "portraiture with ekphrasis." Painterly and fictional portraits confront each other in a "paragone" of the arts in which verbal language stands out as a more challenging mode of expression. According to Byatt, a portrait *by* a painter primarily discloses a portrait *of* the painter to the beholder; instead, a portrait by a novelist is a *doppelgänger* which disfigures, and refigures, the *other*, real self. While choosing not to delve into the complex cultural processes involved in the iconography of portraits on canvas, the author highlights the hermeneutic tools needed by the reader who peruses ekphrastic portraits in search of the unsaid.

Byatt's conception of ekphrasis as portraiture raises, once again, crucial arguments about the predominance of verbal representation in rendering the world. Her logocentric conceptualisation of "material" painting and "cerebral" literature prompts deeper enquiries because, if *Portraits in Fiction* emphasises that the verbal system of representation expresses a form of knowledge more composite and layered than the visual one, it discloses that the genesis of writing is most frequently to be found in the visual arts.

your pen will be worn out before you can fully describe what the painter can represent forthwith by the aid of his science. And your tongue will be parched with thirst, and your body will be overcome by sleep and hunger before you can show with words what a painter can show you in an instant.<sup>1</sup>

### I. Re-framing ekphrasis in postmodernity

Ekphrasis is a highly codified conceptual site which hosts inquiries into logocentrism, aesthetic autonomy, and the interplay of description and narration. Postmodern ekphrasis reveals mutations of the structural and thematic constants which have been constitutive of that site since antiquity. With A.S. Byatt ekphrasis challenges the tradition of the painterly and of the literary portrait. She recuperates the rhetorical and literary ekphrastic tradition in order to shift the emphasis from the "content of ekphrasis" to "ekphrasis as container." *Portraits in Fiction*<sup>2</sup> bears witness to my contention that the question postmodern writers pose is no longer *what can be in ekphrasis?*, but rather *what can ekphrasis be?* The critical discourse on visual and verbal modes of portraying developed in *Portraits in Fiction* demonstrates that ekphrasis *is* both a container and a maker of visual images, meta-artistic inquiry, logocentrism and, more intriguingly, narration.

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1 Leonardo, 'Paragone delle Arti' (Comparison between Poetry and Painting), in *Trattato della pittura* (Treatise on Painting), Part I (circa 1500) (Catania: Brancato, 1990), p.13; my translation.

2 A.S. Byatt, *Portraits in Fiction* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2001). Henceforward referred to in the text as *PF*, followed by page numbers.

## II. Maker/container of images, maker/container of meta-artistic questions

Ekphrasis is constituted by hermeneutic acts which transpose the visual into the verbal and decode the verbal/visual nexus. *The Matisse Stories* and *Babel Tower*<sup>3</sup> testify to Byatt's conception of ekphrasis as both maker and container of visual images but also, in a meta-artistic perspective, as maker and container of questions on the ontological status of representation.

In *Babel Tower* the poet Hugh Pink highlights the bifurcation between poems *on* painting and poems *like* painting.

All these floating discs and brilliant fields of saturated colour. It's like seeing the elements of creation, it's like seeing angels, except you shouldn't use analogies for it, it simply *is*. It makes me feel ill. [...] Because it makes me want to write, as though that was the only sensible thing to do. But I hate poems about paintings, I hate the second-hand. I want to do *something like* that with words, and there isn't anything, or if there is, I don't have access to it. (BT 340)

Visual images on a canvas are made of pigments and colours, painted and solid; verbal images in a poem are typographical signs apprehended as images in the reader's mind. The underlying aesthetic question is whether there may exist forms of verbal creativity which use words on the page like paintings use colours on the canvas. The inquiry into specifically verbal modes of expressing visual imagination opens up a new perspective on *ekphrasis*, no longer regarded as a recipient of images drawn from a visual artwork, but as a producer of "other" images.

With images ekphrasis produces meta-artistic questions, as the ones raised in "Artwork," included in *The Matisse Stories*, by Debbie's synthetic ekphrastic description of her husband's paintings: "a serious attempt at a serious and terrible problem, an attempt to answer the question every artist must ask him or herself, at some time, why bother, why make representations of anything at all?" (MS 52). Ontologically, ekphrasis is constituted by verbal elucidation of the image. However, while representing visual art, postmodern ekphrasis *represents and questions* the representational skills of the verbal art.

In the very last passage of *Portraits in Fiction* Byatt points out that images and their verbal descriptions originate in a proliferation of acts of seeing, reading and figuring. "Writers rely on the endlessly varying visual images of individual readers and on the constructive visualising work those readers do" (PF 2). While further speculating on topics tackled in *Babel Tower* and *The Matisse Stories*, in *Portraits in Fiction* she opens up a more controversial ground for discussion on logocentric, meta-artistic issues and, more intriguingly, on the sources of narrativity.

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<sup>3</sup> A.S. Byatt, *The Matisse Stories* (London: Vintage, 1994); A.S. Byatt, *Babel Tower* (London: Vintage, 1996). Henceforward referred to in the text respectively as *MS* and *BT*, followed by page numbers.

### III. Logocentric ekphrasis

The circulation of visual artefacts made intelligible by massive outputs of verbal aid presupposes that visual art has an enigmatic core that is verbally explainable. Michel Butor's remarks on the pervasiveness of "pictorial pedagogy" sound as cogent now as they did more than three decades ago.

Toute notre expérience de la peinture comporte en fait une considération partie verbale. Nous ne voyons jamais les tableaux seuls, notre vision n'est jamais pure vision. Nous entendons parler des œuvres, nous lisons de la critique d'art, notre regard est tout entouré, tout préparé par un halo de commentaires [...] De tels procédés de pédagogie picturale se répandent de plus en plus, et aucun musée aujourd'hui ne peut se considérer comme moderne, s'il ne propose à ses clients des audio-guides.<sup>4</sup>

(Actually, our experience of painting always involves a partly verbal thought. We never see just paintings, our vision is never a pure vision. We hear about artworks, we read art criticism, our eyes are surrounded, trained by a halo of commentaries [...] Such pictorial pedagogy is becoming more and more current, and nowadays no museum would be considered modern if it did not offer audio-guides to its visitors.)

Reading visual artefacts is a cultural practice deeply embedded in the logocentric view that images engender a hermeneutic impasse which words can overcome, because the meta-artistic potentialities of writing are to be found in no other art. Only the verbal code can speak of itself by means of itself, because it is vehicular; the visual code cannot, as W.J.T. Mitchell points out: "visual representation cannot represent itself; it must be represented by discourse."<sup>5</sup> Verbal meaning attributed to the image is founded on the bias that the image cannot be wholly comprehended without verbal interpretations.

Byatt's ekphrastic descriptions of portraits from the Renaissance to the contemporary age sustain the logocentric conception that visual art is a powerful source of inspiration for verbal art. Portraiture with words competes with and even surpasses portraiture with the brush: the representational power of the visual image is overcome by the evocative power of the image verbalised which, functioning as the verbal substitute for something absent, stimulates acts of figuration by the reader. Byatt's conceptualisation of ekphrasis as portraiture revolves around a hierarchical view of relations between word and image: visual representation lacks the epistemological multi-layered-ness and depth that verbal representation can achieve. What a novelist can do, which is difficult for a painter, is convey what is not, and cannot, be known about a human being" (*PF* 91-92). In Byatt's distinction between portraits in painting and in fiction one can but hear the echoes of the conception, formulated in Victorian culture, which classified the exteriority of painting as inferior to the moral, intellectual depth of literature. In Pre-Raphaelite paintings like *The Awakening Conscience* (1853) by William Holman Hunt and *The Huguenot* (1852) by John Everett Millais, John Ruskin saluted the expression of a visual art that goes beyond mimesis because, although it represents subjects whose outward appearance on the canvas is

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4 Michel Butor, *Les mots dans la peinture* (Geneve: Skira, 1969), pp.8, 9; my translation.

5 W.J.T. Mitchell, 'Ekphrasis and the Other', in *Picture Theory* (Chicago, Ill: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp.151-81 (p.157).

realistic, it yet endows representation with a poetical quality originating in the artist's personal view of the world:

a certain distinction must generally exist between men who, like Horace Vernet, David, or Domenico Tintoret, would employ themselves in painting, more or less, graphically, the outward verities of passing events — battles councils, etc. — of their day ([...] properly so called, historical or narrative painters); and men who sought, in scenes of perhaps less outward importance, “noble grounds for noble emotions”; — who would be, in a separate sense, *poetical* painters, some of them taking for subjects events which had actually happened, and others themes from the poets; or, better still, becoming poets themselves in the entire sense, and inventing the story as they painted it. Painting seems to me only just to be beginning, in this sense also, to take its proper position beside literature, and the pictures of the *Awakening Conscience*, *Huguenot* and such others, to be the first fruits of its new effort.<sup>6</sup>

The antithesis between the mere representational faculty of the outward visual medium and the mythopoetic potentialities of the inward verbal one was made explicit by Wilde in the argument sustaining his preference for ekphrastic depictions of *La Gioconda* (1503-1506):

Prose appreciations of Ruskin and Pater are [...] greater, I always think, even as Literature is the greater art. Who, again, cares whether Mr Pater has put into the portrait of Monna Lisa something that Lionardo never dreamed of? [...] And so the picture becomes more wonderful to us than it really is, and reveals to us a secret of which, in truth, it knows nothing, and the music of the mystical prose is as sweet in our ears as was the flute-player's music that lent the lips of La Gioconda those subtle and poisonous curves.<sup>7</sup>

Wilde responds to the supremacy Leonardo attributes to painting in his “paragone” by contending that portraits in fiction possess an epiphanic quality which painterly portraits lack altogether. Furthermore, the portrait is



William Holman Hunt, *The Awakening Conscience*, 1853  
(Tate Gallery, London)

6 John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, Book III, Part IV, Chapter VII, *Of the True Ideal:— Secondly, Naturalist*, in *The Works of John Ruskin*, 39 vols., edited by E.T. Cook and A. Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1903-1912), pp.126-127.

7 Oscar Wilde, ‘The Critic as Artist’ (1891), *Intentions* (London: Methuen & Co., 1913), pp.93-217 (p.144).

there to be verbally interpreted, to be deconstructed and reconstructed in endless images, to be un-veiled, metamorphosed, and charged with “other,” symbolic meanings by means of verbalisation.<sup>8</sup>

Byatt, in whose gallery of ekphrastic portraits the ones Wilde made of Dorian Gray come into prominence, further emphasises the concept that reading a verbal image is a more challenging and creative act than decoding a visual image. Readers need subtle, ingenious hermeneutic tools while perusing a fictional portrait of what cannot be seen and is verbally made visible, “the visualised unseen”:

But readers will see as many Manets, as many Watts, as many imaginary photographs as there are readers, all connected, all different [...] For this reason – the energy which is generated by the visualised unseen, and the further energy that springs from trying to bridge gaps and reconcile or connect discrepancies in limited descriptions – a novelist, particularly a visually minded novelist, will always feel anxious, even afraid, about the portrayal of their characters by actors. [...] Visual images are stronger than verbal half images, and a good novel exploits the richness of the imprecision, of the hinted. Painting [...] is a materialist art, about the material world. The novel [...] works inside the head (PF 92-93).

A logocentric bias impinges on the distinctions Byatt draws between a visual and a verbal portrait. The former unfolds one, and one only, representation and constrains the observer’s apprehension within a surface – canvas or screen –, while reception of the latter expands in unconfined cognitive spaces. The emphasis on the verbal system of representation as more cerebral, composite and layered reveals that visual art appeals to Byatt not *per se*, but because it nourishes verbal art; it is a source of creativity for writing. Moreover, when she declares that seeing a portrait on a canvas mainly involves seeing the painter incorporated in it, she restricts her assessment to a highly personal plane of interaction between painter and sitter and disregards the social and cultural implications connected with the iconographic construction of a portrait:

every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not the sitter. The sitter is merely the accident, the occasion. It is not he who is revealed by the painter: it is rather the painter who, on the coloured canvas, reveals himself. The reason that I will not exhibit this picture I that I am afraid I have shown in it the secret of my own soul. [...]

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* is of course also a Portrait of the Artist, who was Oscar Wilde. All three main characters have large elements of Wilde in them, Dorian’s aesthetic detachment, Lord Henry’s cynicism, Basil Hallward’s gentle love for the younger man. [...]

My imaginary Manet, my imaginary Watts, my imaginary poets, are part of Roland, and they are all of course part of me. (PF 56, 64, 93)

While she undervalues the signifying processes involved in portraiture by sustaining that a portrait by a painter discloses a portrait of the painter to the beholder, she magnifies the uncanny evocative power of a portrait in fiction; indeed, reading such a verbal artefact

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<sup>8</sup> I have explored Victorian *mises en abyme* produced by verbal artworks that originate in the envisioning of a figurative artwork in ‘Pittura in poesia. Metamorfosi interartistiche nei poemi iconici di William Morris’, *Il Lettore di provincia*, anno XXVIII, fasc. 98 (aprile 1997), 55-80; and in ‘As Yet Untitled. A Sonnet by Walter Crane for a Painting by G.F. Watts: Ekphrasis as Nomination’, in *Literature and the Arts*, ed. Stephen Bann and Vita Fortunati, *Textus: English Studies in Italy*, vol. XII:1 (January-June 1999), 114-34.

means encountering a *Doppelgänger*, whose figuration conflates with the *other*, real self, disfigures it and prompts endless acts of re-figuring:

those who find themselves “in” people’s novels [...] know that they will be haunted thereafter by an almost certainly unwanted doppelgänger, a public image or simulacrum whose sayings, feelings, and even life history, will be confounded with their own. Portraits in novels feel to the portrayed most often like attacks. (PF 41)

Conceptual ambiguity can be detected by comparing her critical evaluation of Ford Madox Ford’s and Wilde’s use of portraits in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) and *The Fifth Queen* (1906). Byatt’s interest in uncanny, entangling psychological components involved in the artist-sitter-observer relationship as dramatised by Wilde contrasts with her critical assessment of Ford as a historical novelist. Wilde speculated on the Art/Life nexus, while Ford developed his theories of fictionalised history in critical response to Pre-Raphaelite hyper-realistic detail, to Ford Madox Brown’s historical painting and to portraits by Holbein and Dürer, who bore witness to two distinct phases of European history. Wilde’s self-reflexivity and Ford’s rendering of a historical atmosphere constitute polarities between which Byatt oscillates. On the one hand, she highly appreciates Ford’s ability to empower his own craft by appropriating the painter’s capacity to make events visible as well as to render them evocative. On the other hand, Wilde’s apprehension of the world through and within art elicits Byatt’s propensity to self-reflexivity and meta-narrativity.

#### IV. Postmodern Appropriations of Ekphrasis: Narration/Narrativity

Byatt’s arguments about fictional and painterly portraits constitute the conceptual framework for subtler inquiries into the nexus between ekphrasis and narration. Her wide-ranging diachronic, comparative study of portraiture on canvas and with words interlaces ekphrasis and narrativity and provides an insight into the creative sources of postmodern verbal artworks.

After modernists became aware that cognitive gaps and referential hiatus affect the subject’s apprehension of the world and its verbal rendering, after they proved that “real life cannot be truthfully represented as having the kind of coherence met with the conventional, well-made or fabulistic story,”<sup>9</sup> postmodern writers have employed ekphrasis as a response to the de-narrativisation of the novel. Modernist description thematised the narrator’s need to expose cognitive faculties affected by epistemological fissures: rather than disclosing knowledge and substantiating narration, descriptions of characters and events un-ground verbalisation by making it the object of unremitting revisions. Instead, the *mise en scène* of ekphrasis shows that verbal representations of visual representations are potentials for narrative. Canonical and fictional masterpieces of painting appear as *objets d’art*, which the

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<sup>9</sup> Hayden White, ‘The Ironic Poetics of late Modernity’, interview to Angelica Koufou & M. Miliari, *Historein. A Review of the Past and Other Stories*, vol. 2 (Athens 2000), [http://www.historein.gr/vol2\\_interview.htm](http://www.historein.gr/vol2_interview.htm)

writer metamorphoses into stories and introduces as threads of narration while weaving the plot.

Postmodern ekphrasis calls for a thorough revision of theories which have opposed spatial, located, stabilised painting to temporal, mobile, dynamic literature and have regarded descriptions of visual artworks as “foreign bodies” able to turn verbal representation into formal works for aesthetic contemplation:

The spatial work freezes the temporal work even as the latter seeks to free it from space [...] I see [ekphrasis] introduced in order to use a plastic object as a symbol of the frozen, stilled world of plastic relationships which must be superimposed upon literature’s turning world to “still” it.<sup>10</sup>

Krieger’s contention that the ekphrastic piece slows down, even paralyses the flux of the narrated events by describing a static artwork has been further expanded by Grant F. Scott’s definition of ekphrasis as “all that is ‘other’ to the central elucidating narrative and all that subverts an overriding telos.”<sup>11</sup> Krieger’s and Scott’s fear of the neutralising power of ekphrasis has been counter-weighted by James Heffernan’s view of ekphrastic description as a polarity which attracts the reader with its *energeia*:

Krieger stretches ekphrasis to the point where it no longer serves to contain any particular kind of literature and merely becomes a new name for formalism [...] Traditionally ekphrasis is narrational and prosopopoeial, it releases the narrative impulse that graphic art typically checks, and it enables the silent figures of graphic art to speak.<sup>12</sup>

More recently, Mieke Bal has enunciated the theoretical basis of “descriptive narratology” by contending that description is a “natural” rhetorical form of narration and of the novel.<sup>13</sup> Description, redefined as that which gives motion to narration and related to ekphrastic portraiture, opens up new grounds for discussion. While being introduced into another *logos*, ekphrasis presupposes its own *logos*. It is autonomous because as a description it suffices for comprehension even when extracted from its verbal context; to that very context, nonetheless, it belongs and refers. Ekphrasis marks a change in the narrative rhythm; indeed, it introduces a rhythm into the narration, it creates a deviation/deviance from what has been narrated before and what will be narrated thereafter. Ekphrasis acts as an interruption and a source of narrativity, it exists in symbiosis with narration.

Ekphrastic portraiture as conceptualised and expressed by Byatt demonstrates that ekphrasis is a driving force, because the subject portrayed with vividness empowers the rhythm of narration. Why and how narrative and descriptive ekphrasis are interlaced can be elucidated by examining the majestic *Elizabeth I* (1575) which opens *Portraits in Fiction*:

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10 Murray Krieger, ‘The Ekphrastic Principle and the Still Movement of Poetry; or Laokoön Revisited’, in *The Poet as Critic*, ed. F.P.W. McDowell (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1967), p.5.

11 Grant F. Scott, ‘The Rhetoric of Dilation: Ekphrasis and Ideology’, *Word & Image: A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry* 7: 4 (October-December 1991), 301-10 (p.306).

12 J.A.W. Heffernan, ‘Ekphrasis and Representation’, *New Literary History* 22: 2 (Spring 1991), 297-316 (p. 304).

13 Mieke Bal, ‘Descrizioni, costruzione di mondi e tempo della narrazione’, in *Il romanzo II. Le forme*, ed. Franco Moretti (Torino: Einaudi, 2002), pp.189-224.

There she stood, a clear, powerful image, in her airy dress of creamy stiff silk, embroidered with golden fronds, laced with coral tassels, lightly looped with pearls. She stood and stared with the stillness and energy of a young girl. The frozen lassitude of the long white hands exhibited their fineness; they dangled or gripped, it was hard to tell which, a circular feathery fan, whose harsh whirls of darker colours suggested a passion, a fury of movement suppressed in the figure. There were other ambiguities in the portrait, the longer one stared, doublenesses that went beyond the obvious one of woman and ruler. The bright-blanchéd face was young and arrogant. Or it was chalky, bleak, bony, any age at all, the black eyes under heavy lids knowing and distant. [...]

I had been obsessed since childhood with the figure of the solitary clever woman (PF 3-4)

Byatt corresponds to the varieties of hues, the richness of detail and the preciousness of ornament, through which the painter renders the supreme polish of the queenly figure, with an ekphrasis made of overabundant adjectives and symmetrical verbal constructions. “*Embroidered* with golden fronds, *laced* with coral tassels, lightly *looped* with pearls”: in the description of the dress, three past participles bring specific details into iconic prominence.

Postmodern ekphrasis “makes sense” not as a verbal translation of images, but as a spacioc archive of images turned into narration. Ekphrastic portraits are poetic ganglia which thrive on iconic material and from which endless narrative routes depart. Conceived as the site of narrativity from which a multiplicity of narrations may begin, ekphrasis answers urging postmodern questions such as, “How to begin narration?,” “Where does narration begin?” Ekphrasis is a mode for initiating narration as well as a mode of narration, it gives rise to the construction of a plot but also implements it. Indeed, “a fury of movement suppressed in the figure” (a phrase in the passage above) sounds like a metaphor for the narrative tension aroused by Byatt’s ekphrasis.

In *Portraits in Fiction* the proliferation of ekphrastic portraiture, juxtaposed with colour reproductions of portraits exhibits Byatt’s ability to create narrations. Her descriptions of paintings generate narration. The dislocation of portraits and their relocation in her writing exhibits that they have another existence, in written form, through ekphrasis. Each ekphrastic portrait *is* “other” from the one on canvas, it *is* its ekphrasis. Ultimately, ekphrastic portraiture as container and maker of narrativity stands out more prominently than its content, namely the subject of the painting. The metonymic shift between “what is in ekphrasis?” and “what is ekphrasis?,” as developed by Byatt, reveals that ekphrastic portraiture is a source of narrativity.



(unknown artist), *Elizabeth I*, c.1575  
(National Portrait Gallery, London)

When she appropriates the legacy of nineteenth-century French writers and painters by presenting Zola's account of Manet's *Emile Zola* (1868), she discloses ekphrastic portraiture in its most cerebral form:

In 1868 Zola was challenged by a friend to include Manet's portrait of himself in his account of the Salon. It is one of the most interesting records of the thoughts of a man who works with words, watching himself appear on the canvas of a man who worked with colour and light. The thoughts he records look forward to *L'Œuvre* twenty years later.

I remember the long hours of posing. My limbs grew tired with staring into bright light, and the same thoughts floated perpetually in my head, with a soft, interior sound. The stupidities out in the streets, lies and platitudes, all this human noise that runs away uselessly like dirty water, water far away, very far away. It seemed to me that I was outside the earth, in an air of truth and full of disdainful pity for the poor creatures who floundered about below. (PF 45-46)

Ekphrastic portraiture endows the writer with the unique gift of turning the subject of the portrait into a narrational core. Byatt's fascination with Zola's ekphrastic portrait arises from her awareness that it is much more than a description of a painting, it is the germ of a story. A story so powerful as to be able to engender a *mise en abyme* of narrativity.

Zola writes his own portrait of the artist as portrait-maker.

From time to time, out of the half-sleep of the pose, I watched the artist, standing in front of the canvas, his face tense, his eye clear, intent on his work. He had forgotten me, he no longer knew I was there, he was making a copy of me, as he would have made a copy of any other human animal, with an attention, an artistic awareness, that I've never seen anywhere else. (PF 46-47)

Ekphrastic portraiture not only writes its own portrait of the artist as portrait-maker but also of the writer as a subject for a portrait. Images cannot be kept enclosed within ekphrastic description: from ekphrasis "other" images proliferate and spread.