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WHY EKPHRASIS?

VALENTINE CUNNINGHAM

IT IS HARD TO IMAGINE western literature, certainly the tradition of Hellenic/Roman/Christian/post-Christian literature, without what we can call ekphrasis—that pausing, in some fashion, for thought before, and/or about, some nonverbal work of art, or craft, a *poiema* without words, some more or less aestheticized made object, or set of made objects. This might be done by the poet, whose name we might or might not know, giving a whole poem over to such consideration, or stopping that action, the narrative flow of a longer work, to direct his gaze, his characters' gaze, our gaze, for a while, at such a thing or things. Or it might be a matter of the novel turning the narrative focus, a character's attention, the reader's focus, for a time, on some such thing: a moment in which “The Story Pauses a Little” (as George Eliot puts it in the title of her chapter 17 of *Adam Bede* [1859]), for an episode of intertextual or intermedial, or even, as one might say, synaesthetic miscegenating, overlapping, blurring—for some words about more or less artistic works not—at least this is the fictional claim of such moments—not made out of words. Just as in chapter 17 of *Adam Bede*, where the text and we are made to pause over the realist content of Dutch paintings, “old women scraping carrots with their work-worn hands . . . those homes with their tin pans, their brown pitchers, their rough curs, and their clusters of onions,” and so on, and we are urged to consider such paintings as models of a realism George Eliot both wants to advocate and also to practice in the novel before us. (No actual paintings are named, but it seems to me likely that she has in mind, not least, Nicolas Maes' *A Woman Scraping Parsnips* [1655], bequeathed to the London's National Gallery in 1838.¹)

The scope for ekphrastic focus is vast: shields, urns, cups, statues, frescoes, tapestries, cartoons, paintings, photographs, movies, bits of buildings, whole buildings, ruins of buildings. These may be real, actual frescoes, statues, paintings, ruins, whatever, or they may be fictional, made-up ones. I don't think that matters all that much, either in theory or in practice. But whether real, historical items, or invented ones, the imperative that literature seems to feel to picture such nonverbal items, to incorporate them into text, to have us picture them along with the writer, the poet, the novelist and their characters, does appear to be simply inescapable. Ekphrasis is certainly one of literature's oldest and longest-lasting effects and practices. From early to late, from

1. See Cunningham 1975, p. 145, n. 2.

the beginning to now, this kind of encounter, stories of this kind of encounter (sometimes even repeats of the very same encounter) keep happening, keep returning, keep being textually renewed.

The Homeric poet gives us Achilles' shield, and Vergil revisits and revises this arresting meeting as the shield of Aeneas, and W. H. Auden returns to both of these shield-meetings, one in his poem "The Shield of Achilles," the other in the poem "Secondary Epic."² Such revisitings not only keep the western *imaginaire*, the western tradition, alive, they are the lifeblood of the ekphrastic mode. In Spenser's *Faerie Queene* Book 3 the good heroine Britomart is shown a set of tapestries depicting Jove's love affairs. These depictions repeat the woven stories of Arachne, woven in her competition with Minerva in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.³ And metamorphosing encounters with Ovid's presentations of metamorphosings keep recurring across the whole tradition—as, not least, in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, where a painting of the Rape of Philomel is displayed over the antique mantelpiece of the room in the poem's part 2, *A Game of Chess*.⁴ In the *Purgatorio*, Dante describes the sculptures he encounters; standing on a Victorian London pavement Dante Gabriel Rossetti describes a great Winged God arriving at the British Museum from Nineveh.⁵ The painter-poet Rossetti of course writes numerous sonnets that are commentaries on pictures, his own—as, for example, "'Found' (For a Picture)," the picture being the one about a countryman finding his lost sweetheart, now a prostitute, on London's Blackfriars Bridge—and other people's, such as "For 'The Wine of Circe,' by Edward Burne-Jones."⁶ Swinburne devotes longer poems to describing and commenting on works of art—for example his "Hermaphroditus," addressed to the statue of that name in the Louvre—the sculpture that also inspired Gautier's "Contralto."⁷ In fact, the poem as description of and commentary on some painting is almost a norm of western poetic production—Auden on Breughel's *Icarus* painting or paintings in the Musée des Beaux Arts in Brussels, it might be, or John Ashbery's poem "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," about and on Francesco Parmigianino's *Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, and so on and on.⁸

For their part, novels, whether classic ones, ones in the great tradition, or not, novels of every sort, simply could not manage at all without the ekphrastic encounter. Wherever you go in the House of Fiction you find yourself in the presence of such meetings. In *Pride and Prejudice*, it might be, in which Elizabeth Bennett has her view of Darcy changed as she stands silent before his portrait in his ancestral home of Pemberley.⁹ Or *Middlemarch*, in which

2. "The Shield of Achilles" (1952), "Secondary Epic" (1959?), in Auden 1976, 454–56.

3. Spenser 1977, Book 3, *The Legend of Britomartis, or Of Chastitie*, canto 11, stanzas 29–46, pp. 407–10.

4. Eliot 1963, 66.

5. "The Burden of Nineveh" (1870) in Rossetti 1961, 14–19.

6. Both poems in Rossetti 1961, 258 and 139.

7. Swinburne, "Hermaphroditus," in Swinburne 1863, 91–93; Gautier, "Contralto," in Gautier 1872, 51–56.

8. Auden, "Musée des Beaux Arts" (December 1938), in Auden 1977, 237; Ashbery "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" (1975), in Ashbery 1994, 188–204.

9. Austen 1813, part 3, chap. 1.

Mrs. Dorothea Casaubon is shown to us in the Vatican Gallery in Rome among the sculptures, the Belvedere Torso, the Ariadne—commented on, for our benefit as much as for the narrative’s own purposes, by her cousin Will Ladislaw and his friend the German painter Naumann.¹⁰ Or Henry James’ *The Wings of The Dove*, in which the dying Milly Theale is induced by Lord Mark to look at, and reflect on, Bronzino’s *Portrait of Lucrezia Panciatichi*.¹¹ Or Huysmans’ *À Rebours (Against Nature)*, in which the decadent connoisseur Des Esseintes is shown sorting his Goyas: Goya’s “etchings and aquatints, his macabre Proverbs, his ferocious war scenes, and finally his *Garotting*, a plate of which he possessed a magnificent trial proof printed on thick, unsized paper, with the wire-marks clearly visible.”¹² Or Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in which we meet Dorian contemplating and enumerating his collections of jewels and exotic musical instruments, his embroideries and ecclesiastical vestments.¹³ Or, again, it might be Claude Simon’s *Les Géorgiques*, that curious revision of the Spanish Civil War narratives of George Orwell, in which a famous photograph of Republican volunteers en route to Spain gesturing through the windows of their railway carriage is painstakingly scrutinized.¹⁴ Or Michael Ondaatje’s *Coming Through Slaughter*, a novel about the famous New Orleans jazz trumpeter Buddy Bolden (who left no recordings), triggered by the only surviving photograph of Bolden’s band; or Julian Barnes’ *A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters*, that record of maritime disasters, whose centerpiece is the chapter on Géricault’s painting *The Raft of the Medusa*—accompanied by a pull-out reproduction of the painting; or the many fictions of W. G. Sebald, whose pages come littered by photographs, picked up randomly in markets and second-hand shops, to illustrate scenes and persons of the narrative; or the novels and fiction-factions of Iain Sinclair, ekphrastic to an almost overpowering degree, and likewise incorporating found photographs that are then described in the writing—like the colonial scenes adorning the endpapers of his *Downriver*, and the South American photos in his *Dining on Stones*.¹⁵

As for Iris Murdoch, doyenne of postwar British fiction, her ekphrastic content may be thought a shade on the excessive side, so repetitive is it, but its excess does bring home the centrality of the procedure in modern fiction. Murdoch’s people are continually mindful of paintings: the art teacher Bledyard, for instance, in *The Sandcastle*, lecturing on Rembrandt and portraits of faces; Moy in *The Green Knight* with a reproduction of Rembrandt’s *The Polish Rider* over her bed, “her beloved, the Polish Rider . . . looking, with his authoritative pensive mouth and his calm wide-apart eyes, past Moy, over her left shoulder and away into some vast distance. He was a knight upon quest. He was brave, innocent, chaste, good . . . her hero”

10. Eliot 1871, chap. 19.

11. James 1902, Book fifth, chap. 2.

12. Huysmans 1959, chap. 9.

13. Wilde 1891, chap. 11.

14. Simon 1981 = Simon 1989, part 4.

15. Ondaatje 1979; Barnes 1989, chap. 5 (“Shipwreck”), sec. 2, pp. 125–39; Sebald 1990, 1996, 1998, and 2001; Sinclair 1991 and 2004.

(he's the pictorial parallel to The Green Knight of the medieval poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, which is the main shaping verbal intertext of this novel). Murdoch's painting obsessives are always popping into London's art galleries, the National, the Tate, the Wallace Collection, to take in a picture, pictures, particular rooms, particular artists; to discuss the art, the artists, the nature of representation; to judge aesthetics in general and in particular, and to be (as it were) judged by the aesthetic—vile Daisy in *Nuns and Soldiers* jeering at the pretty pictures in the National Gallery (she prefers the Goya of Huysmans' *Des Esseintes*); and Morgan and Julius in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* dismissing a sculpture exhibition at the Tate, and going on to the late Turners, which Morgan loves and Julius dismisses as hopelessly derivative; and Charles Arrowby in *The Sea, The Sea*, hallucinating (he's on drugs) in the Wallace Collection and imagining all the portrayed females as women of his; and Paula in *The Nice and the Good* seeking out “the golden company of the Italian primitives” at the National Gallery, pausing (once again) before Bronzino's *Venus, Cupid, Folly and Time*, her man Richard's “special picture” (“pornographic,” he'd said; “There's the only real kiss ever represented in a picture. A kiss and not a kiss. Paula, Paula, give me a Bronzino kiss”); and Dora, especially Dora, in *The Bell*, an art student revisiting her aesthetic “shrines” in the National Gallery, Botticelli, Piero della Francesca, Crivelli, and particularly Gainsborough's picture of his two daughters, and having an experience of aesthetically induced transcendence.¹⁶

And so it goes, on and on; an intertextual, intermedial genre: loose; shifting over time; merging, of course, into the discourses of art history, and the textuality of anthropology and cultural studies. John Ashbery is a professional art critic, and it shows. His “Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror” not only discusses Parmigianino's painting but also delves into the art-historical tradition of discussions of the painting—Vasari's *Lives of the Painters* and the Parmigianino critic Sydney Freedberg. Julian Barnes' chapter on Géricault in *A History of the World* is impossible to distinguish from what Barnes writes in his numerous contributions to the journal *Modern Painters*, is difficult indeed to distinguish from Foucault's opening analysis of Velasquez' *Las Meninas* in his *Les mots et les choses* (which, like Barnes' novel, comes with an inserted copy of the painting under discussion—very stealable from library copies, which is another feature both books share).¹⁷ Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter* or Sebald's *Austerlitz* are close neighbors, in form and procedure, of Roland Barthes' book on photography *Camera Lucida*.¹⁸

But what, we are compelled to wonder, is really going on here? What are all these pausings for thought about, when the poem and the fiction and a character go into the art gallery, into some actual or invented collection of pictures, when a painting or sculpture or some such object is placed before

16. Murdoch 1957, chap. 16; 1993, part 1, “Ideal Children,” 20; 1980, part 2, 129–30; 1970, chap. 19; 1978, “History,” 170–71; 1968, chap. 17; 1958, chap. 14.

17. Foucault 1970.

18. Barthes 1982.

us, and we are placed before it, when (to use Lessing's famous and valuable opposition) the linear flow of narrative slows or even stops, to encounter some spatial form, or at least for the linearity to traverse a spatiality? What are these pausings for thought provoking us really to think about?

Fundamentally, I suggest that *thereness* is what's in question. Writing is always tormented by the question of real presence, by challenges to knowability, by the problematics of truth and validity, the difficulty of being sure about what it might be pointing to outside of itself, by its deictic claims and desires, by what its grammar of pointing, its *this* and *that* and *there* might be indicating, by what if anything is actually made present to the reader when the text says, with Jesus at the Last Supper and the priest at the eucharistic table, *Hoc est . . . , this is. . .* The ekphrastic encounter seeks, I think, to resolve this ancient and continuing doubting by pointing at an allegedly touchable, fingerable, *thisness*. It lays claim to the absolute *thereness* of an aesthetic object, the *thereness* writing is (rightly) so doubtful about, and seeks to corral that evident (or claimed) empirical, real, truthfulness for itself and its own doings. It wants the real presence of the made object to rub off, as it were, on its own proceedings: "That's my last duchess painted on the wall / Looking as if she were alive." This is Browning's Duke in "My Last Duchess": "[T]here she stands. [T]hat pictured countenance"; "There she stands / As if alive."¹⁹

Ah, how the fearefull Ladies tender hart
Did lively seem to tremble, when she saw
The huge sees under her t'obay her servaunts law.

That's the reaction of Europa to bullish Jove in the tapestries depicting stories from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in *The Faerie Queene* Book 3 (canto 11, stanza 30). The pictured scene is *lively*, lifelike, and with the realistic lifelikeness fiction commonly craves for itself. In the given, or claimed, actuality of the shield, or urn, tapestry, sculpture, or painting brought thus into the text, re-represented as text, there is none of that gap between sign and referent that so commonly troubles writing and writers. At least there is no significant gap. This is certainly figuring as metonym rather than metaphor.

And here, as lamps across the bridge turn pale
In London's smokeless resurrection light,
Dark breaks to dawn. But o'er the deadly blight
Of love deflowered and sorrow of none avail
Which makes this man gasp and this woman quail,
Can day from darkness ever again take flight.

That is Dante Gabriel Rossetti's sonnet " 'Found'—For a Picture." It points clamantly to the images in Rossetti's painting. Here they are, *here*, *this* man, *this* woman, in this actual painting, which is the poem's referent. The poem's words touch, they finger, the painting—as paintings can be fingered by flesh-and-blood observers. Which is why, presumably, Browning, the realist, the

19. Browning 1981, 1:349–50.

would-be truth teller, keeps doing ekphrasis, and presenting painters and observers of paintings as exemplary readers, which is to say, touchers of paintings in his painter poems. “How looks my painting, now the scaffold’s down?” Browning’s Fra Lippo Lippi asks a monk. “Hugely” is the reply: the pious have angrily scratched and prodded the faces of a martyr’s torturers so much that they have worn the plaster of the fresco away right through to the bricks beneath.²⁰

The painting or tapestry or whatever aesthetic object is gazed at, described, made present in such texts, offers what Roland Barthes called “the effect of the real,” “l’effet du réel,” the knowable, touchable real, in a more certain style than writing by itself can ever do, and making the painting and so forth a subject, or object, of the writing is, in effect, a way of laying claim, by proxy, to the presence, reality, truth of the writing. (It is not at all by the by that George Eliot should pause over her beloved Dutch paintings in chapter 17 of *Adam Bede* in aid of a discussion of her desired realist programme.)

And, of course, mightily undergirding this claimed effect is the fact that again and again real, actual works are pointed to by these ekphrastic texts. The Bronzinos of Henry James and Iris Murdoch really exist, as does Dora Greenfield’s Gainsborough, Ashbery’s Parmigianino, and so on. Helpfully—and mindfully—Bronzino’s *Portrait of Lucrezia Panciatichi* is reproduced for us on the cover of the Oxford World’s Classics edition of *The Wings of the Dove*, so that we can conveniently see what the fictional Milly Theale is described as seeing.²¹ And this is more, much more, than illustrations commissioned to go with fictions, more than the photos Henry James got the photographer Coburn to take of scenes in Paris to illustrate *The Ambassadors*, more even than the found photographs with which Sebald and Sinclair spatter their pages. Here reproduced as evidence is the Géricault of Julian Barnes, or the Buddy Bolden photograph of Ondaatje. They exist, and they guarantee, as it were, the existence of the writing, of what’s written. We may wonder with theorists of the poetic where a writing, a poem is, what is the mode of existence of a written work of art, but here, for certain, is this ancillary, and symptomatic work of art or craft that this writing is concerned to give us. And if you want to you can go to the Musée des Beaux Arts in Brussels and see the Breughel or Breughels of Auden’s poem, or visit the Tintern Abbey of Wordsworth’s poem,²² or check out the Assyrian Deity of Rossetti’s poem in the British Museum. The poet was really there before the poem, and so was the contemplated object, and it is probably there still. The Victoria and Albert Museum really has the musical instruments, jewellery, and ecclesiastical vestments listed as in the possession of Dorian Gray. Wilde, a passionate visitor to the South Kensington Museums, saw those things for himself—and his narrative copies out its descriptions word for word from the South Kensington catalogues of *Musical Instruments*, *Precious Stones*, and *Textile Fabrics*.²³

20. Browning, “Fra Lippo Lippi” (1855), in Browning 1981, 1:548, lines 325–32.

21. James 1998.

22. Wordsworth 1977, 1:357–62.

23. As identified by Isobel Murray: see Murray 1981, endnotes, pp. 232–33.

A. S. Byatt, devotee of Iris Murdoch, begins her novel *The Virgin in the Garden* with a prologue describing the Darnley Portrait of Elizabeth the First (“There she stood . . .,” and so on). It’s a painting in the National Gallery. Byatt’s critical book *Portraits in Fiction* describes the seed, so to say, of that ekphrastic encounter—Antonia Fraser taking Byatt in 1968 to the National Gallery to hear Flora Robson perform as Elizabeth I in front of that Darnley portrait. There the painting was, and it is still. Byatt tells us all this in a lecture on portraits in fiction, that is, ekphrasis, given in the very same National Gallery. The painting that was there in 1968 and was put into her novel of 1978, is still there; the novelist was there and saw it; she saw it and wrote it once, and she sees it still, and writes it again—the novelist as critical ekphrasist repeating the novelist as fictionalising ekphrasist.²⁴ For her part, George Eliot—another of Byatt’s admirees—will interrupt her narrative’s ekphrastic interruption to give you the art-historical lowdown, remind you of the real reality of the fiction’s ekphrastic moment, as in *Middlemarch*, chapter 19, in which Ladislaw and Naumann see Dorothea in the Vatican Gallery, and go “towards the hall where the reclining Ariadne, then called Cleopatra, lies in the marble voluptuousness of her beauty.” The statue of Ariadne, then labeled as Cleopatra! The novelist turns art historian for this ekphrastic moment within the ekphrastic moment, to refocalize the fictional narrative as art history, the further to enhance this realistic novel’s claim on historical authenticity, the authenticity of real presence. The real presence of the real of the piece of sculpture: really endorsed from outside the time, even, of the novel. Comparable is the description of Hetty Sorrel, on the run in *Adam Bede*, chapter 37: her pretty face drained of “all love and belief,” “the sadder for its beauty, like that Medusa-face, with the passionate, passionless lips.” That Medusa face! Which one, thus almost carelessly deicticized? The one, in fact, in Munich’s Glyptothek Museum, which George Eliot happened to see while she was writing the novel in that city. The reader could—she can—go and inspect for herself; the text invites her to do so, and in so doing find out the reality of what is claimed by the would-be realistic account of Hetty Sorrel. The ekphrastic text really does, like this, purport to convincingly double, repeat, mirror, a real. And, I take it, it is resorted to for that reason.

And any catalogue of other positive ekphrastic effects builds on this desirable foundation. Ekphrasis, for instance, as *prosopopoeia*, putting a face on, granting presence, the presence of the made object, where there was none; *prosopopoeia* as giving a self, too, to the character or the poet—to Milly Theale or Dorothea, to John Ashbery or W. H. Auden—in the mirror of the ekphrased object. Which is to say that ekphrasis grants a demonstration of literature’s persistent resurrectionist desires—the craving to have the past return livingly, to live again, to speak again. Ovid’s narrative weavings, his weavings about weaving women, Arachne, say, or Philomel, live again as they are woven again into the narratives of Dante, or Spenser, or T. S. Eliot. The old texts are made audible again; out of the silence of the historical and textual

24. Byatt 1978, “Prologue”; 2001, 2–4.

past come these voices, heard again, voices granted to the silent, voiceless object, in the act of *ek-phrasis*, literally a speaking-out, an audible *speaking-out* now in the present text, a speaking made *out of* the silence of the past, and of the past and very silent aesthetic object, the painting, the sculpture, whatever. The ekphrastic precisely rejoices in the oxymoronic noisiness it celebrates in its old silent objects:

And he forged on the shield . . .
 . . . weddings and wedding feasts . . .
 . . . marching through the streets
 while choir on choir the wedding song rose high
 and the young men came dancing, whirling round in rings
 and among them the flutes and harps kept up their stirring call.²⁵

Rossetti's sonnet "For 'The Wine of Circe'" becomes exemplarily noisy as it describes the sea in Burne-Jones' painting of Circe putting her potion in a jar as new ships dock in her harbor:

The unchanging roar
 Which sounds forever from the tide-strewn shore
 Where the dishevelled seaweed hates the sea.

And we hear it clearly, a painting's paint made audible, in the noise of the lines, those sibilants, those *sh* sounds.

Above the antique mantel was displayed
 As though a window gave upon a sylvan scene
 The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king
 So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale
 Filled all the desert with inviolable voice
 And still she cried, and still the world pursues,
 "Jug Jug" to dirty ears.
 And other withered stumps of time
 Were told upon the walls. . . .

Thus Ovid, remetamorphosed, rewoven, repictured in the posh dressing room of a smart London Lady in part 2 of Eliot's *The Waste Land*, the old text and story (this "withered stump of time") made to speak; the silent modern repicturing of the Ovidian story that hangs over the antique mantelpiece being made present as in itself an affair of voice, as well as the occasion of the poem's voicings. (No accident that this section of the poem was originally "He Do the Police in Different Voices, Part Two: A Game of Chess"—an allusion to that moment in Book 1, chapter 16 of Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* [1864–65] where the boy Sloppy is praised because "He do the Police in different voices" as he reads out the court reports in the newspaper for the benefit of his benefactor Betty Higden.) Eliot's emphasis is on *yet* and *there* and *still*. *There*, in the picture, which is an object as silent as Philomel, who had her tongue cut out to prevent her telling on her rapist, there the nightingale that Philomel was metamorphosed into sings, filling the desert, the silent emptiness, with a voice that cannot be silenced because

25. Hom. *Il.* 18.572–78 (Fagles 1991, 483).

it is inviolable. “And still she cried”; and still she cries. She, stilled, dead, in a static and silent picture, a still life, as it were, refuses to be stilled, stopped dead, silenced. She sings, though stilled, and sings still, now, a continuing voice, in this poem that has given her voice, and is sustaining that voice, still. Ek-phrasis. Once upon a time, in Ovid’s narrative she, though dumb, her tongue cut out, spoke out, cried out, in her weaving of her awful story. She continued to speak out in the rewavings of the tradition, in the many translations, reworkings, revoicings of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. And now once more in this poetic reworking she speaks again. The pictured voice is indeed inviolable, never to be silenced; it persists. This is, then, a very telling picture, in every sense of telling: potent and effective as well as eloquent, and potent because it is eloquent, telling a story—as the other withered stumps of time, as withered as Philomel’s long ago torn-out tongue and its stump, are pictured, and ekphrasized, which is to say told.²⁶

The ethical note is clear: the voice of the ekphrastic is, often, like the Philomel set, morally weighted, admonitory, instructive; the ekphrastic encounter is commonly for the good of the fictional character, is morally heuristic. Spenser’s halls of infamous narrative, a parade of what are for the Christian narrator the bad amours of lustful false pagan deities, are characteristic of the tradition. Ekphrasis generally announces the proleptic force of the gazed-on object; its voice is made out as projectable, telepathic, its meanings prophetic ones. Achilles’ shield, Aeneas’ shield characteristically announce future truths, speak truth into the future, like Nebuchadnezzar’s writing on the wall as read by the prophet Daniel. And these prophetic noises are, as prophetic voices tend to be, at the very least morally serious.

All in all, then, what ekphrasis registers is the astonishing power of art to tell, convince, persuade, overwhelm, to mean strongly, to *be* with a transcendent force, to be a kind of truth: in other words, ekphrasis celebrates the wonder, the miracle, the shock of art, the *aura* of the art-object (to use Walter Benjamin’s word), its *thauma* (to use the *Iliad*’s word). The prophetic word of the ekphrastic mounts a kind of sermon on the power of art as thaumaturgy. “I call that piece a wonder, now,” as Browning’s Duke puts it of Fra Pandolf’s painting of the Duchess. It’s the commonest call of the ekphrastic moment. Bledyard in Murdoch’s *The Sandcastle* shows a slide of a Rembrandt self-portrait to his class of raucous schoolboys: “Now here . . . if we ask what relates relates [he stutters] the painter to the sitter, if we ask what the painter is after, it is difficult to avoid answering—the truth” (chapter 16). And the classroom mob falls totally silent, awed, *thaumatized*, as one might say, by this recognition. It’s a scene of awing that traverses the whole ekphrastic tradition.

Kings Queens, Lords Ladies, Knights and Damzels gent
Were heap’d together with the vulgar sort,
And mingled with the raskall rablement,
Without respect of person or of port,
To shew Dan *Cupids* powre and great effort:
And round about a border was entrayld,

26. See Eliot 1971, pp. 17, 125, 137.

Of broken bowes and arrowes shivered short,
 And a long bloody river through them rayld,
 So lively and so like, that living sence it fayld.²⁷

That's those Ovidian tapestries again, overwhelming their observers with their illustrations of the awful and deadly democratic power of Cupid. The pictorial can do this for the young as well as the grown-up:

He gazed and gazed and gazed and gazed
 Amazed, amazed, amazed, amazed.

That's the little boy in Browning's "Rhyme for A Child Viewing a Naked Venus in a Painting of 'The Judgement of Paris'"—candidate for the most succinct, and succinctly glorious, ekphrastic poem ever.²⁸

Dora was always moved by the pictures. Today she was moved, but in a new way. She marvelled, with a kind of gratitude, that they were all still here, and her heart was filled with love for the pictures, their authority, their marvellous generosity, their splendour. It occurred to her that here at last was something real and something perfect. Who had said that, about perfection and reality being in the same place? . . . the pictures were something real outside herself, which spoke to her kindly and yet in sovereign tones, something superior and good whose presence destroyed the dreary trance-like solipsism of her earlier mood. . . .

These thoughts, not clearly articulated, flitted through Dora's mind. She had never thought about the pictures in this way before; nor did she draw now any very explicit moral. Yet she felt she had had a revelation. She looked at the radiant, sombre, tender, powerful canvas of Gainsborough and felt a sudden desire to go down on her knees before it, embracing it, shedding tears.

Dora looked anxiously about her, wondering if anyone had noticed her transports. Although she had not actually prostrated herself, her face must have looked unusually ecstatic, and the tears were in fact starting into her eyes. She found that she was alone in the room, and smiled, restored to a more calm enjoyment of her wisdom. She gave a last look at the painting, still smiling, as one might smile in a temple, favoured, encouraged, and loved.

That's Dora in Murdoch's *The Bell* (chap. 14), her experience of painting's *thauma* a most exalted one, but clearly, as writing after writing indicates, by no means excessive and over the top. And the many such cases of the amazing power of the plastic, in fiction, both poetry and prose, read, I think, as more than just an enduring admiration by writers for the astonishing thaumaturgical force of sister arts, but as a kept-up celebration and exemplification of the power of art as such, which writing and writers want to share, and are in fact claiming by proxy, by analogy, by such intermedial intrusions into the text.

But analogies are just that, analogical merely, and, what is more, the ekphrastic example is not all unidirectionally positive in its suggestions. Ekphrastic practice also has large downsides to bring home. All the deconstructive readers of the ekphrastic encounter, and their politicized colleagues, are of course right in their skepticisms, their large quarrel with and

27. Spenser 1977, Book 3, canto 11, stanza 46, p. 410.

28. Browning 1981, 2:958.

around these widespread figurings of the picture in the text. And I would go even further in such negative directions than Murray Krieger or James Heffernan or Gayan Jurkevich.²⁹ Lessing's old contention that the linear and the spatial make a difficult mix is still worth thinking about, afforded, of course, by more recent modernist and postmodernist skepticisms about the aporias of art history and art criticism, the difficulties implicit in the attempt to translate the visual into the verbal, what we see into what we say, all along the lines of Wittgenstein's aphorisms in the *Tractatus* ([1921] 1961):

6.42 Propositions can express nothing that is higher.

6.421 It is clear that ethics cannot be put into words.

Ethics is transcendental.

(Ethics and aesthetics are one and the same.)

Such skepticism is massively present, and naturally enough, in more recent ekphrastic writing—writing done in our modernist, and postmodernist, climate of doubting about the production of meaning. As Julian Barnes' dealing with Géricault in *A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters*, for instance, makes plain. We are confronted with the painting of *The Raft of the Medusa*. The painting is placed before us, in words commenting on a reproduction; it is given a history, and made vividly present in rich detail as to the time of its composition, in, as it were, the time of Barnes' meditation upon it, and the time of the reader, our now. There it was, and here it is. But the text's readings of it dissolve, as does the quest for Flaubert's parrot in Barnes' novel *Flaubert's Parrot*, into unresolved questions, mysteries, silences, negatives, gaps, aporias, disappearances. Géricault's painting of the shipwreck, the disaster of July 1816, begins, we are told, "with truth to life," but as a register of anything like certainty it is a calamity. The painting is, of course, art, artifice. Barnes' reading, the reading of his art-historical narrator, properly emphasizes the paint, the painting as painting, something made in a studio, its use, for example, of small brushes, fast-drying oils, and human models (they included the young Delacroix). The painting is indeed all form and color. History has become artifact. "Time dissolves the story into form." What we are actually reading, and what the narrator is actually reading, is artifice. And that is the truth of the painting. And it is a precarious truth, not closed off, definite, finally defined or definable. The paint is manifestly what is there, but opaquely so. It cries out for reading—and writing—but by its very nature frustrates that hermeneutic activity: "Modern and ignorant, we reimagine the story: do we vote for the optimistic yellowing sky, or for the grieving grey beard? Or do we end up believing both versions? The eye can flick from one mood, and one interpretation, to the other: is this what was intended?" This undoubtedly real pictured presence eludes the keen hermeneutic grasp. Its presences foster a sense of absences. Barnes' analysis dwells a lot on what Géricault did not paint—a list of eight items; and on what his concerns were not—another list of eight. The felt eloquence of the painting is, after all, a debarring mutedness. The painting actually says nothing out loud. And all the hermeneutical panic that Barnes celebrates is built around a painted

29. Krieger 1992; Heffernan 1993; Jurkevich 1999.

narrative scene of disaster, pain, starvation, distress, melancholy, the division of father and son, and all under the shadow of cannibalism and death. In other words, the personal and ethical, the narrative effect and affect of the painting strongly endorse the epistemological distress.

But strikingly, this expectable postmodernist doubting turns out, on inspection, to be rather symptomatic of the genre, the tradition, and the meanings and realizations of the ekphrastic encounter all along, more or less. Look there; touch this shield, this urn, this picture, and the reality you finger is just metal, just paint, and so on. The accounts of the shields of Achilles and Aeneas keep calling attention to the gold and so forth—the mere medium of the object. There are, after all, no natural signs in view. All the objects of the ekphrastic gaze are made ones. Doubly so, in fact, for these made objects are also re-made out of words. And ekphrasis knows that from the start. The portrait looks alive, a record of the living one, a presencing of the living. But everything is, to use Spenser's repeated word, just a seeming. There is my last duchess painted on the wall looking as if alive, but only *as if*. Europa in *The Faerie Queene* (Book 3, canto 11) did only "lively *seem* to tremble." These metonyms are all figural merely.

James Heffernan properly underscores the repeated bad ethnicity in the ekphrastic tradition. He is interested, because he is a critic of now, in stressing the gendered nature of the awful events the ekphrastic tradition keeps on returning to, keeps recycling—the way the woman distresses of Ovid's metamorphoses, Arachne's weave, Philomel's tell-tale loom work keep getting rewoven, retextured. But the agonies of women are only a part—a large part, but still only a part—of what the ekphrastic moment direly confronts us with: pictures of war, death, ruin, the altogether melancholic, killing, garrotting, flaying, bad sex of all sorts, bad desire, the "perverse pleasures" of Huysmans' *Des Esseintes*. "About suffering they were never wrong, the Old Masters," thus Auden in his "Musée des Beaux Arts." He could equally well have said, about suffering they never keep quiet, the Old Masters, at least in their ekphrastic meetings. Bodily suffering is the unifying ekphrastic choice: Icarus falls and drowns; the world is indifferent, turns away. Our gaze is directed to a picture of the world turning its gaze away from human distress. ("Musée des Beaux Arts" is a later-thirties poem, very mindful of the Hitler-period's mounting cruelties to people, and how already the world would rather turn away.) But the painful ethical accusation and case, the painting's truth about physical suffering is also a matter of hermeneutical suffering. We observe this picture to be reminded of suffering, to be pained, to be distressed. And we are affected, as readers, as critics of the painting. But this distress, prompted by an hermeneutical encounter (the reading of the picture), is also part of a large, as it were, purely hermeneutical confusion. (Which Old Masters? Which Breughel painting of Icarus falling? There are at least two candidates. And how do we know the horse in whichever Breughel painting it is, is a torturer's horse, or indeed that its behind is innocent? No behind in Auden's writing is ever truly innocent: Auden is making a gay joke for his gay reader friends.)

Dorothea Casaubon wept in her apartment after her visit to the Vatican Gallery. Is it because a sculpture of Cleopatra, or Ariadne maybe, reminded her of how a beloved can turn nasty, as Antony might do with Cleopatra, or

as Theseus did with Ariadne? We might for our part grieve because George Eliot will not decide whether we should think it is Ariadne or Cleopatra that Dorothea is standing beside (*Middlemarch*, chapters 19 and 20). Dorothea's distress in Rome is certainly moral (this narrowly brought-up Protestant girl shocked in a Roman Catholic city full of pictures of naked bodies, "Corregiosities," and so forth). But her hurt is also, inextricably, hermeneutical. She is upset by ruin and ruinousness, by "deep impressions" of the city and its art as "wreck" and confusion: they're a felt degradation, offer a "glut of confused ideas," "gigantic broken revelations." Dorothea is oppressed by "the weight of unintelligible Rome." Ever after, we're told, her memory was a set of images succeeding each other "like the magic-lantern pictures of a doze," St Peter's, its mosaics, the red drapery hung for Christmas—"spreading itself everywhere like a disease of the retina" (chapter 20). Which is the kind of mixed moral-hermeneutical distress that's oddly akin to what the begrudgers of art keep alleging in Iris Murdoch's novels: art is bad for you, ethically and also epistemologically. "Easy and pretty" (this is terrible Daisy in *Nuns and Soldiers*): "Prettification, that's what your friends Titian and Veronese and Botticelli and Piero and Perugino and Ucello and all that famous old gang are on about. They take what's awful, dreadful, mean, grim, disgusting, vile, evil, nasty, horrid, creepy-crawly in the world and they turn it into something sweet and pretty and pseudo-noble. It's such a lie, or most of it is" (part 2, p. 129).

And, of course, the strictly hermeneutical problem is all over the place in the tradition. How to go about the reading of a painting; how to read this painting now put before us? Who reads? Who reads *this*? The ekphrastic text keeps raising such questions.

Doth Helios here with Hecate combine
 (O Circe, thou their votaress!) to proclaim
 For these thy guests all rapture in Love's name,
 Till pitiless Night give Day the Countersign?

Rossetti's "For 'The Wine of Circe'" has no answer to its own question. And indeed there doesn't seem to be a ready one. The meanings of the painting escape the poem, which yearns so hard for them. The rereadability of the object, the availability of that famous shield, it might be, now to the hermeneutic grasp of Homer, now of Vergil, now of Auden, the interpretative openness that has been the guarantee of its survival across the tradition, is of course a mark of a flexibility, an indeterminacy, that inevitability engenders worry. Any satisfaction about the way Ovid's ekphrastic metamorphosings are repeatable and repeated is surely countermanded by the possibilities for extreme, drastic metamorphosings those stories seem to allow (in Spenser's "Muiopotmos" Arachne is even shown losing to Minerva in their weaving contest).³⁰ And such extreme rewritings, amply revealed in the ekphrastic tradition, are all the worse, when they're shown to come about because of malice or some other low self-interest. Browning's Duke

30. "Muiopotmos, or The Fate of the Butterfly" (1590), stanzas 35–43, in Spenser 1932, 212–14.

is a most troubling example of the reader, the voicer of a painting, with a grudge, interpreting out of malice aforethought, a bad controller of contentious meanings. He sounds the less trustworthy the longer his interpretative focus on “that spot of joy” on his late wife’s cheek in the painting goes on.

Like all ekphrasis, this one of Browning’s “My Last Duchess” stages a reading, and stages it as the occasion of a distressing, power-hungry hermeneutic procedure. But, to stress the point, this distressing heavy-handedness can only come about because of the perennial nature of the usual ekphrastic object. The ekphrastic object actually says nothing. It is the silence of these signs that grants them their ample room for interpretation, enables the apparent plenitudes of their signifieds. Urns and ruins and tapestries and so on are silent places. And the practical and actual silence of these considered objects is all at once their glory, the glory of interpretative opportunity, and also their defect, their bar to outright meaning and certain speaking. “No, Virgil, no,” exclaims Auden, twice, in his poem “Secondary Epic,” demanding to know why the *Aeneid*’s shield should be eloquent but only up to a point, why Aeneas stopped asking questions of it, why there’s a failure of disclosure, of prophetic foreknowing about what would happen after 31 B.C.E.

How was your shield-making god to explain
 Why his masterpiece, his grand panorama
 Of scenes from the coming historical drama
 Of an unborn nation, war after war,
 All the birthdays needed to pre-ordain
 The Octavius the world was waiting for,
 Should so abruptly, mysteriously stop[?]

What in the end is most clamant about the tattered photograph of Buddy Bolden in Michael Ondaatje’s *Coming Through Slaughter* is its silence. The photo is voiced by Ondaatje, as it were, but the voices filling that novel are not Bolden’s. Most of them are invented ones. Buddy Bolden is not on record, in any sense (he left no recordings). The trumpet he holds in his pictured form is, of course, silent. He is said to have been the loudest player in New Orleans, but we cannot actually hear that noise. As A. S. Byatt reminds us in her *Portraits in Fiction*, what is momentous about Roland Barthes’ *Camera Lucida* is the way it endorses the *only as if* factor of the photograph. The photographed person looks *as if alive*. He and she are present, still, resisting death, like a Biblical or Prufrockian Lazarus “come back from the dead”; but the photograph that confirms them in this figurative life, also affirms their death, their real absence and silence. These signs are only a Still Life, a *Nature Morte*. These photographed Lazaruses are certainly in a figurative measure resisting the silence of the tomb, but like the Gospel’s Lazarus, who came forth from his tomb at Jesus’ command (*Lazare, veni foras*), they are terribly silent. A perturbing silence encroaches hard on the ekphrastic moment, however revealing it is made, or claimed, to be. “No one would ever know what she [Dorothea Brooke/Casaubon] thought of a wedding journey to Rome;” she will never tell her sister (chapter 28). What does Elizabeth Bennett think, as she looks at Darcy’s portrait? We are not told; we are left to guess; we will never know for certain.

Milly Theale cries as she looks at Bronzino's *Portrait of Lucrezia Panciatichi* in *The Wings of the Dove*. The picture is *wonderful, splendidly drawn*. But it is the portrait of an emphatically dead person. For all its wondrousness this painting is an emblem of death: "The lady in question, at all events, with her slightly Michael-angelesque squareness, her eyes of other days, her full lips, her long neck, her recorded jewels, her brocaded and wasted reds, was a very great personage—only unaccompanied by a joy. And she was dead, dead, dead." There must, Milly thinks, have been "some family resemblance to her own" (people spot a likeness); but this has "fad[ed] with time." Milly speaks. She responds to the picture. "I shall never be better than this." "Milly recognised her exactly in words that had nothing to do with her"—an exactitude of understanding that is, rather symptomatically, I'd say, of ekphrastic encounters, "nothing to do" with the portrayed woman. And Lord Mark does not at all understand what Milly means. This is a good moment, he thinks, "as good a moment as she should ever have with him." She tries to explain what she meant by her words. He "still didn't understand her."³¹

So "exact" meaning is obtained. But the exactness of this exactitude is almost parodic. The figure of the dead woman does, as it were, speak. But of death, the great silencer. It provokes speech; there is communication between the observer and the picture; the observer speaks, but what speech. Milly's so-called *exact* recognitions, her *exact* words, her exactings of meaning from the painting, are more or less gratuitous ones. This so very real sign system (you can go and see it in Vienna), which is represented so brightly in the text of the novels, is so *there*, this plenitude of presences, is in effect an affair of absences, prompting responses, meanings that flout the exactitudes claimed for them.

Which is a set of paradoxes, of course—eloquent silence, plenitudinous emptiness, exact inexactitudes, present absence. What Heffernan indicates as the *frictions* of representation. Paradoxes, I would say, educed, manifested, in all ekphrasis. The manifestly withered stumps of tongues that still speak, a speaking with disabled tongue. Heffernan celebrates the paragonal energies (writing versus picturing) of ekphrasis. They keep the tradition alive, he says. I would rather say that it's the tension between the realist, presencing, logocentric desire and the counter-pressure of absence—between what Murray Krieger calls miracle and mirage (the tension that is, I'm sure, present in all writing) that is manifested in the repeated moment of ekphrasis, and that keeps that tradition alive. And it is repeated, I suggest, because paintings, and the plastic rest, seem as if they could be the kind of texts to overcome that tension, the aesthetic tension, the tension of art, in the direction of positive presence, realism, truth, thereness, and so might provide proof, an example, or at least a vital analogy of that overcoming. They do not overcome the tension, because what is truly insurmountable can never be surmounted. But ekphrasticists—even the most postmodern ones—keep on trying, because they keep on hankering. And that, I suggest, is why ekphrasis.

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31. James 1998, 156–57.