



EMILY BILMAN

MODERN EKPHRASIS

Modern Ekphrasis explores the analogical relations between modern poetry and painting in ekphrasis from Horace's mimetic "ut pictura poesis" tradition to Lessing's temporal/spatial antithesis, and the analogy's post-modern deconstruction with Derrida. The genesis of ekphrasis is demonstrated by close analytical readings of modern poems by Howard Nemerov, W.C. Williams, Sylvia Plath, and John Ashbery, mostly written on modern paintings by Paul Klee, Charles Demuth, Giorgio de Chirico, and Frank Stella. In an innovative approach, the author applies Anton Ehrenzweig's concept of "unconscious scanning" to a syncretic visualisation of Klee's Mountain Flora. Viewed with an undifferentiated depth vision that can fix the figure and background in a single glance, Mountain Flora acquires deeper verisimilitude.

The self-reflexivity of the poems which comments on their creative processes and the interrelations of ekphrasis with cognition are analysed after the critical writings of Freud, Panowsky, Gombrich, Hagstrum, Arnheim, Steiner, Ehrenzweig, Derrida, and in the light of the latest neuroscientific discoveries. Homer's shield, Swift's tree, W.C. Williams' pot of flowers, and Ashbery's canvas create a suture within the ekphrastic poem in our imagination. This book demonstrates the evolution of literature and the humanities in our society from classicism to post-modernism which counteracted the self-alienation caused by our modern communication technology by inventing new socio-artistic circuits and new social identities.

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PREFACE

The ekphrastic exploration of poetry and painting is based on cognitive research and is closely related with theories of creativity. This study explores the foundations and the development of the interartistic analogy between poetry and painting in ekphrasis, defined in this research, as the verbal representation of a visual work of art. In ekphrasis, poems and paintings mediate between objective reality and the subjective worlds of the artist and the reader-perceiver. Both poems and paintings translate private emotions and/or ideas evoked by the perceptual realm into the cognitive and emotional plane. As works of art, they explore the relations of percepts to objects and/or percepts to emotions; thus, they stimulate the perceiver's cognitive reactions.

In *The Sister Arts*, Jean Hagstrum refers to the etymology of the Greek word, *ekphrazein* ('ek' out; 'phrasis' to speak), meaning "to speak out" or "to tell in full" or to proclaim:

The *OED* defines "ecphrasis" by citing an example from 1715: "a plain declaration or interpretation of a thing." The *Oxford Classical Dictionary* defines it as "the rhetorical description of a work of art." Saintsbury says it is "a set description intended to bring person, place, picture &c., vividly before the mind's eye" (*A History of Criticism and Literary Taste in Europe*, New York, 1902, I, 491).¹

It has been important for me to trace the development of ekphrasis from Horace's concept of classical mimesis and Lessing's paradigm from the 18th century to modern iconology and the beginning of post-modernism with Derrida's deconstruction. Since poetry and painting belong to the humanities, it has also been significant to point out the

1 Jean H. Hagstrum, *The Sister Arts: The Tradition of Literary Pictorialism and English Poetry from Dryden to Gray* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 18.

role of ekphrasis as the reflection of our changing social interactions.

Although there are distinctions between the two arts, due to the particularities of their media, it is relevant to note that, beyond their differences, there exists an analogical relationship between them in which their differences become relative. The analogy between their media could be summed up by the following proposition: poetry, as word-music, is to art what sound is to nature; and painting, as coloured shape, is to art what form is to nature.

Poems use words, paintings are made with brush strokes on a canvas. Their media of expression differ. The combination of sounds in a poem, like the arrangement of colours upon a canvas, evokes a unity that stirs our aesthetic feeling. Poetic words do not simply denote, but connote reality and carry a symbolic value. Paintings represent “things” through colours and shapes. The dialogue between painting and poetry is situated in artistic imagery, which is shaped differently, in each media.

Most of the ekphrastic poems analyzed in this study are both referential and self-referential, because they comment on the process of their own creation and that of the paintings to which they refer. The artist’s imagination and interiorised perceptions must meet the viewer’s inner world for communicative interchange to occur. To explore this exchange and expand it to artistic self-referentiality, I had to deal with the complex topic of artistic creation which required the presentation of the psychological theories, underlying the genesis of a work of art in the individual poems, by referring to Paul Klee’s writings, and the works of Panowsky, Jacobson, Gombrich, Hagstrum, Arnheim, Freud, Green, and Ehrenzweig.

Paul Klee’s “Mountain Flora”, painted in 1937, is reproduced from the the catalogue (98: 120) of a public auction that took place in Geneva, on December 13, 1989. Charles Demuth’s “Tuberoses” is reproduced from a photograph. De Chirico’s “The Disquieting Muses” is reproduced from *Eye Rhymes: Sylvia Plath’s Art of the Visual*, edited by Connors and Bayley, and published by Oxford University Press. Frank Stella’s irregular polygons are reproduced from *De-*

construction and the Visual Arts: Art, Media, Architecture, edited by Brunette and Wills, and published by Cambridge University Press.

A few of the poems analysed in this study, namely X.J. Kennedy's poem, "Nude Descending A Staircase", written after Marcel Duchamp's painting by the same name, Anthony Cronin's poem, "Lines for a Painter" upon Patrick Swift's "Tree in Camden Town", and Michael Hamburger's "A Painter Painted" upon Lucien Freud's "Francis Bacon" are commissioned poems, the latter by the Tate Gallery in London. These poems and the corresponding paintings are contained in the Tate publication, *Voices from the Gallery*. As commissioned poems, they fit Derrida's concept of the parergon which, contrary to Kant's claim that the frame delineates a boundary between the inside and outside of a work of art, blurs this distinction; so that the outside always slips into the inside and the reverse. In contrast to the "ergon" or "the work", Derrida considers the parergon as an addition to the work that reinforces its presence. The poem's self-referentiality, analysing the processes of creative genesis, contains the principles of deconstruction, the polysemy of poetic meaning and syntactic flexibility, and emphasises the poetic meta-language in the transition from the mimetic to the non-mimetic evolution in poetry, made evident in the ekphrastic relation between Williams and Demuth.

Furthermore, the perceiver, by adding his own interpretation to the artwork, expands the significance according to his subjectivity. Thus, by re-creating its meanings, he creates a surplus to the artwork. In Derrida's paradigm, the commissioned poems can be assimilated to the poet's signature which supplements the painter's signature. These double signatures create the ekphrastic work's identity, and transcend it by adding the poet's and the painter's signatures to its presence, thus, augmenting the reader-perceiver's aesthetic appreciation.

The ekphrastic poem presents an artistic comment on a visual artwork which becomes the poet's objectivized reference. The level of metaphor which corresponds to the transformed painted unit, in the painting, defines the artwork as an entity, standing in a tense delicate balance between the reality it refers to and its capacity to *re-*

present. The reader-perceiver's pleasure in ekphrasis is derived from his consent to follow the poet's discovery of the painting's energy as it is transferred to the poem, at a level, deeper than that of indirect representation. By transcribing the painting into a poem, the ekphrastic poet adds a human dimension to the painting. The ekphrastic synergy between the painting and the poem augments the reader-perceiver's aesthetic appreciation and may stimulate his creativity. Ekphrastic poems are like the reflections of natural forms on a river, oscillated by a breeze, whose study explores the ekphrastic relation as a dynamic and evolving process between the poet, the painter, and the reader-perceiver.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to explore the evolution of the analogical relation existing between painting and poetry in the ekphrastic relation established between the modern paintings, the modern poet, and the reader-perceiver. In order to specify the analogical relationship existing between the two arts, it has been important to trace the historical development of the analogy as it was treated by the classical authors. After the classical tradition, in the present study, too, imagery, is considered to be one of the common denominators between the two arts. In this study, the Aristotelian concept of mimesis is traced in the ekphrastic relation of the works of art and in their relation to external reality. The evolution of mimesis, up to its post-modern deconstructive development, is analysed in different poems and paintings. The ekphrastic dimension of the poems is particularly emphasized in the the close readings of the poems and description of the painting's impact on the poet.

Whereas for Plato (ca. 428–348 B.C.), who based his philosophy on logical thinking stimulated by dialectics, imitation signified the imitation of an ideal metaphysical form; for Aristotle, imitation meant the creation of new artworks in different domains, and mainly, in the dramatic arts. In *The Poetics*, Aristotle traces the genesis of poetry to imitation, music and rhythm. Contrary to Plato, Aristotle (384–322 B.C.) considered the tragic poet to be a writer of fables that imitated man's actions according to current contingencies. For Aristotle, both poetry and painting imitate nature by their own distinctive media, and achieve their particular unified shape and purpose which, when completed, generate and obey their own rules. Yet, contrary to Plato, Aristotle thought that everyone could learn by studying the precise representations of animals or the human body because, for him, imitation had scientific value.

Unlike Aristotle, Horace (65–8 B.C.), in his *Ars Poetica*, thought that mimesis signified the imitation of the literary model of *other*

authors. But, like Aristotle, he gave a great importance to the imitation of life's circumstances and the imitation of natural objects objectively. Plutarch (ca. 46–120 A.D.), had the same concept of *mimesis* as Horace, and expanded the implications of Simonides of Ceos' (ca. 556–467 B.C.) axiom that painting is mute poetry and poetry a speaking picture.

Like Horace, Plutarch thought that imitation should be based on reality. Plutarch, who was a biographer, compared biography to painting; since both arts, by describing the person's disposition as it is, reveal his psychological character. He named his concept *enargeia*, or pictorial vividness. For Aristotle, who emphasised *energeia* or the energy underlying all works of art, the painting-poetry analogy is less significant than for Plutarch, who emphasised *enargeia* or verisimilitude, as the most important quality in poetry, because the truth reflected in the imitation was of prime importance for him.

The eighteenth-century dramatist and essayist G.E. Lessing maintained that the subject matter of painting are objects or bodies, juxtaposed in space, while the subject of poetry is actions succeeding each other in time. According to Lessing, the arts should contain verisimilitude and should choose subjects whose properties are reflected by their media. Lessing, thus, argued that the subjects of painting and poetry depended upon the spatiality of the former, and the temporality of the latter, qualities that, he thought, were inherent in the respective media.

Like his predecessors, Lessing concluded that poetry, like painting, was based on imitation and should use verisimilitude. In his theory, Lessing, noticed that objects or bodies continue in time, may form different relations in their progression, and may become the center of an actual action. Therefore, the spatial art of painting, becomes temporal indirectly, by suggestion or implication through forms or bodies, whereas, actions which are the subject matter of poetry, are connected to bodies; so that poetry also describes bodies, but indirectly, through actions.

According to W.J.T. Mitchell, the difference between the temporal and spatial arts, is effective at a primary level of the relation

between the sign and the signified. At a second level in which representation occurs indirectly, the borders between the two arts are lessened and a dialogue between life and art can be established. Painting represents temporal actions indirectly, through bodies, and poetry talks about bodily forms indirectly, through actions.

The chapter on “Artistic Perception, Cognition and Memory” demonstrates that the simple act of seeing includes a temporal dimension inscribed in the act of visual perception. Mnemonic functions are also based on a multiple code whose verbal and pictorial characteristics are interconnected. Although seeing is more direct than writing, both the artist and the poet, transform their perceptions, which have previously been recorded and regulated in acts of recognition, into works of art.

After Lessing’s second level of analysis, in this study, I demonstrated that, since the notions of spatiality and temporality are interdependent, they are developed both, by each respective medium, by different means, whose specificity is rooted in the nature of the media themselves. In X.J. Kennedy’s “Nude Descending A Staircase”, and Michael Hamburger’s, “A Painter Painted”, and the corresponding paintings, the painting-poetry analogy is shown to be mimetically established by artistic tools proper to each media. In the former poem, Duchamp’s technique of suggesting movement by multiplying the nearly identical outlines of the nude’s figure finds its mimetic complement in the poem’s regular rhyme scheme.

As in A. Cronin’s “Lines for A Painter”, Kennedy’s implication is that words, by comparison with painted units, have a much more indirect relation to external reality, which confirms Lessing’s argument that a poetic text represents bodily forms, indirectly, through actions that unfold in time. With the introduction of an anecdote into his poem, Cronin surpasses Lessing’s argument by showing how, through a narrative context, that relates the dialogue of the two friends indirectly, a poetic text can represent temporality which implies change.

In “The Disquieting Muses”, both Sylvia Plath and de Chirico, revert to the symbolism of shadows to describe the anxiety behind the Freudian uncanniness depicted by the painting and conveyed by

the poem. Plath establishes an ekphrastic relation of reciprocity with de Chirico's metaphysical painting, corroborating Lessing's premise that both painting and poetry use mimesis for their verisimilitude. Both also unfold an oneiric temporality that deforms, compresses and transcends our quotidian time and space, thus destabilising us.

Modern ekphrasis combines verbal and pictorial elements through imagery. In ekphrastic poems, the painting's *enargeia* or its verisimilitude, is created by the poet's images and his personal projections. For Erwin Panowsky, the history of art is a humanistic discipline based on the contextual values of respect, compassion, and tolerance valid in every epoch. In *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, he maintains that "Only he who simply and wholly abandons himself to the object of his perception will experience it aesthetically".² Panowsky recognises that works of art have communicative and functional purposes, which have been the case of the commissioned works in this study, but he also stresses the importance of the viewer's freedom of perception in appraising a poem or a painting.

Defining a work of art as a "a man-made object demanding to be experienced aesthetically"³, Panowky maintains that, as a humanist, the art historian, has to commit himself to the synthesis of re-creating his perception of a work of art subjectively, and to investigate its history archeologically, to endow it with meaning, and appreciate it as he should. The perception of work of art depends both our re-creation of it according to the artist's intention and the viewer's aesthetic values.

However, when speaking of 're-creation' it is important to emphasise the prefix 're'. Works of art are both manifestations of artistic 'intentions' and natural objects, sometimes difficult to isolate from their physical surroundings and always subject to ... ageing. Thus, in experiencing a work of art aesthetically ... we build up our aesthetic object both by re-creating the work of art according to the 'intention' of its maker, and by freely creating a set of aesthetic values comparable to those with which we endow a tree or a sunset.⁴

2 Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), p. 34.

3 Ibid., p. 37.

4 Panowsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, p. 38.

Thus, in modern ekphrastic poems, the viewer assumes the position of an art historian who re-constitutes the work of art through an organic synthesis of his subjective and intuitive aesthetic re-creation based on his perception and his evaluation of the art work's quality according to the artist's original intention. The reader's and the viewer's re-creation of an ekphrastic art work depends upon his subjective perception and his historical interpretation based on his cultural education. As such, the ekphrastic experience has the value of an educational experience.

Yet, according to E.H. Gombrich, the painter projects and transforms his knowledge of the paintings he has seen into his canvas, whereas the viewer tests those contents against his perceptions and his cognition of the visible world. The poet, writing about pictorial reality, is confronted with a multi-layered reality. The painting represents a reality which has been filtered through the painter's sensitivity, and transformed by this projections which the poet, then, elaborates with his idiosyncratic symbolic vision. In an ekphrastic poem, the reader tries to discover the mimetic relation that links the poem to the painting, the ekphrastic dimension that evokes the painting's impact on the poet, and the divergences that result in the painting's transcription into the poem. Like a movie watcher, the reader also tries to fill in the gaps, left open by the transcription of the painting into a poem.

Due to the linear nature of language, each poem includes a temporal dimension inherent in the nature of the medium itself. Reading occurs in time. Throughout this study, a particular attention has been given to the various manners, in which temporality co-determines the poems, or is developed in them, as a fundamental problem of literary and artistic representation.

In "A Painter Painted" based upon Lucian Freud's painting, "Francis Bacon", Michael Hamburger defines ekphrasis in the arts as a complex reality captured in a single still moment in time. In order to evoke the complexity of Bacon's facial expression, as it is caught on Freud's canvas, Hamburger has to resort to metaphors, and to an entire sequence of moments and actions, during his meeting with

both painters, and to paradoxes that condense literal and symbolic significances into poetical units. Like Plutarch stated, Freud painted the model's countenance as it was.

By linking different domains such as the natural elements, and the agricultural usage of land, with the creation of Bacon's portrait, and the poem, Michael Hamburger, through symbols, metaphors, and allusions, turns the poem into an entity that both refers and creates. The poem is self-reflexive because, through its own creative language that is idiosyncratic to Michael Hamburger, it refers to the creation of the portrait which inspired it, initially. The poem is, thus, transformed into an artifact whose status is close, if not identical, to that of the painting.

W.C. Williams' "The Pot of Flowers" illustrates a certain correspondence between the shape of the poem on the page as an icon, and the spatial-temporal dimension contained in the reader's downward eye movement as it follows the successive parts of the plant. In Williams' ekphrasis, the eye's movement is re-presented iconically, by the typographical position of the words on the page, leading the reader's eye, from words and stanzas about the flowers and the petals, towards those about the leaves and the pot.

The poem is subject to the linear sequence of words and includes the eye's downward movement incorporated in the poetic icon; thus re-presenting the temporal dimension by the succession of images, observed by the reader. The mimetic dimension that links up the poem to Demuth's painting, *Tuberoses*, is established by the transcription of the colours; by the interplay of colour and light; by the shape and position of the plant's parts; and by Williams' creative use of iconicity, which turns the poem into a spatial-temporal entity.

In this study, painted units and words are compared as sign systems. Language is a system of conventional signs dependent upon the acquisition and the recognition of a linguistic code. Painting is closer to the objects of the exterior world and represents them with iconic signs. Due to the properties inherent in each medium, and to the nature of their respective codes, the way pictorial and linguistic signs are used, and their decoding differ.