Afterword

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This volume freshly demonstrates that ekphrasis is probably the most Protean of all critical terms we have. Some years ago, I argued that for the sake of critical utility, it should be used to denote a particular kind of writing: poetry or prose about works of visual art, or the verbal representation of visual representation. But I must admit that visual art has nothing directly to do with the earliest known definition of ekphrasis, which comes to us from Ailius Theon of Alexandria, generally assigned to the first century of our era, who defined ekphrasis simply as a way of describing just about anything visible. Since Theon's definition is quoted nowhere in this volume (though Richard Meek refers to Theon in his essay on Kyd), I quote it here, transliterated from the Greek:

Ekphrasis esti logos periegematikos, enargos hup' upsin agon to deloumenon.
(Ekphrasis is exhibitionistic [literally 'leading around'] speech, vividly leading the subject before the eyes.)¹

By this definition, the Spanish General's vivid description of two armies in Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* is indeed 'a notable example of ekphrasis', as Meek calls it.

On the other hand, as this volume repeatedly shows, nearly all critical discussions of ekphrasis—or critical applications of the term—situate it in the inexhaustibly fertile borderlands between literature and visual art. Here it embraces far more than the particular kind of prosopopeia that Jean Hagstrum once assigned to it when, tracing the word to its Greek roots *ek* (out) and *phrazein* (tell, declare, pronounce), he argued that it should be used to denote poetry that makes the silent work of visual art 'speak out'.² To launch her essay on Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece*, Rachel Eisendrath cites a perfect example of such envoicing in Pietro Aretino's description of Titian's lost painting of the Annunciation, where the mouth of the angel Gabriel is said to be uttering 'Ave'—presumably without the aid of an inscribed scroll or banderole such as Richard Meek considers in his essay on Kyd (and is also shown here in the *Roundel with Annunciation to the Virgin*

(Figure 5)). But this volume, which considers ekphrasis as above all a moment of fruitful *encounter* between word and image, stretches the term to include almost any kind of interaction between the two, including (for instance) ‘postmodern works of art that combine words and images’, as the editors say in the introduction, or paintings inspired by the reading of texts, as Liliane Louvel’s essay on Stanley Spencer explains. The latter category, one of seven that Louvel enumerates, comes very close to making ekphrasis include illustration, which is of course not a kind of writing but a kind of depiction: visual representation of verbal representation. Yet in explaining how Matthew Arnold’s elegy ‘Thyrsis’ (1866) inspired Hamo Thornycroft’s sculpture of *The Mower* (1884), Jane Thomas finds this process exemplifying ‘reverse ekphrasis’. What then should we make of the Proteus that ekphrasis seems to have become? Though my own approach to ekphrasis has been faulted for its overemphasis on antagonism between image and word, these essays demonstrate that the concept of ekphrasis as encounter opens it up to a stimulatingly wide range of approaches. Nevertheless, it is not clear that *all* encounters must be harmonious, for like the biblical Jacob, the writer engaged in ekphrastic encounter may now and then, at least, end up wrestling with the angel of visual art. A further problem is that when ekphrasis is made to include not just various kinds of writing but also various kinds of visual art, it may lose some of its edge as an instrument of critical analysis.

Some twenty-five years after defining ekphrasis as the verbal representation of visual representation, I have come to see the limits of this definition. Putting his finger on one of them, Claus Clüver plausibly argues that ekphrasis should be made to include writing about non-representational painting and sculpture as well as architecture. But he unwittingly alludes to another arbitrary restriction when he defines ekphrasis as ‘the verbal representation of real or fictive configurations composed in a non-kinetic visual medium’. Must that visual medium be non-kinetic, as I myself presumed in my original definition? Must visual art always be ‘still’ in both senses – silent and unmoving – as Keats famously wrote of his unravished urn? Unfortunately, or rather fortunately, the history of art never stands still, and a few years ago in my own native city of Boston, Massachusetts, USA, the Museum of Fine Arts exhibited a would-be ‘still life’ called *Pomegranate* by the Israeli artist Ori Gersht (Figure 31).³ When examined for more than a few seconds, this digital picture of a pomegranate, a cabbage, and pumpkin turns out to be a high-definition film of the pomegranate struck by a bullet and then exploding its seeds in slow motion. As this picture shows, art endlessly challenges our capacity to define it, to systematize it, to theorize about it. Soon after encountering Gersht’s kinetic painting, I was asked to participate in a conference on fictional cinema: descriptions of imaginary films in novels such as Manuel Puig’s *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, wherein one prisoner diverts another by reciting the plots of invented films. Until this conference came along, I had never thought that films could be objects of ekphrastic representation, but since films are plainly works of visual representation, I see no reason to exclude them, and I have since published an essay on what I call ‘cinematic ekphrasis’,⁴

31. Ori Gersht, digital film still from *Pomegranate* (2006)

which might be added to the seven types of ekphrasis enumerated by Louvel or the nineteen types that Jerzy Jarniewicz finds in the poetry of Derek Mahon. Who's counting, after all? Or do we even need to count?

Rather than counting, it might be helpful to consider the usefulness of one basic critical distinction in the history of ekphrasis. On one hand, as I noted above, ekphrasis was originally defined as writing – or rather speech – that is vividly descriptive, that makes no reference to visual art but nonetheless aims to help us visualize an object as clearly as possible. By the fifth century of our era, ekphrasis had come to signify the description of visual art, but the original meaning never died. The best evidence for its survival is the work of the late Murray Krieger, who published the first notable book on it – *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign* – in 1992. Since Kennedy and Meek have much to say about Krieger in their immensely informative Introduction, I will confine myself to one simple point. Though Krieger approvingly cites Leo Spitzer's definition of ekphrasis as 'the poetic description of a pictorial or sculptural work of art',⁵ Krieger's book has very little to say about poetry that *represents* such works. Instead, he treats ekphrasis chiefly as the verbal *counterpart* of visual art: 'word-painting'. As 'the sought-for equivalent in words of any visual image, *in or out of art*', it 'include[s] every attempt, within an art of words, to work toward the illusion that it is performing a task we usually associate with an art

of natural signs'.⁶ Ekphrasis thus gratifies our lust for natural signs – for the immediate presence of the object signified – by defying the 'arbitrary character and ... temporality' of language (p. 10). It offers us a verbal icon, 'the verbal equivalent of an art object sensed in space' (p. 9).

For Krieger, then, visual art remains a part of ekphrasis, but rather than serving as an *object* of representation, visual art may be simply a *model* of representation. In the latter case, the ekphrastic writer aims to do with words something very like what the visual artist does with images. But the writer's chief object is just what it was for Theon's budding rhetorician: to represent visual objects as vividly as if they were 'objects sensed in space' that we could walk around and see from all sides. Though Krieger's definition of ekphrasis is thus inflected by the example of visual art, he conceives of ekphrasis as essentially *word-painting*: writing that aims to depict – figuratively – anything visible and still, 'in or out of art'.

This kind of writing is essentially what G. E. Lessing defined as pictorialism, which he strongly distinguished from the verbal representation of visual art. When a poet imitates an artist, writes Lessing, he either 'takes the other's *work* as his model' (my emphasis) or 'borrows [the artist's] manner of presentation' to describe something else.⁷ In the *Aeneid*, for instance, if Virgil had based his account of the death of Laocöon and his sons (*Aeneid*, 2.212–24) on the ancient Rhodian statue of Laocöon that is now in the Vatican Museum, he would have imitated not the statue itself, but rather the death of Laocöon in a manner 'borrowed from the statue'; he would have lifelessly copied the sculptor's *way* of representing Laocöon's death. But Virgil, Lessing insists, conceived his Laocöon without recourse to any work of art. Furthermore, Lessing argues, when Virgil describes the shield of Aeneas in Book 8 of the *Aeneid*, he takes as his model 'the work of art, not what is represented in it'. His own work, therefore, is 'original', and 'he creates as a genius' (p. 45). In other words, while Lessing deplores pictorialism (verbally imitating an object *in the manner* of a painter or sculptor), he admires the verbal imitation of a work of art, which is what I have previously defined as ekphrasis.

Reconsidering this fundamental distinction in light of the present volume, I must admit that all such distinctions – all theoretical formulations – must be regularly tested against particular examples, which of course tend to complicate them. When, for instance, the eponymous heroine of Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece* describes a painting of the fall of Troy, the editors aptly note (in their introduction) that her words recall not only Aeneas' description of the fall of Troy but also Philostratus' descriptions of paintings in the *Imagines*, so that ekphrasis becomes intertextual as well as intermedial, weaving the description of a visible event into the description of a painting. Likewise, in comparing the frontispiece of the 1615 edition of Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* to Hieronimo's description of – or rather *prescription* for – a painting ('Draw me like old Priam ...'), Richard Meek finds the frontispiece 'inspired' by Hieronimo's ekphrastic words, especially since the cry made by the figure he prescribes ('The house is

a-fire ...') is echoed – so to speak – by the banderole of words ('Alas it is my son Horatio') fluttering from the mouth of the Hieronimo illustrated in the frontispiece. While 'both play and frontispiece create distinct ... pictures', as Meek notes, the lines between ekphrasis and illustration, as well as between ekphrasis and words displayed within a picture, are suggestively crossed.

Should they be erased altogether? I don't think Meek is suggesting that, for he clearly distinguishes between ekphrasis and illustration, between writing about pictures and pictures themselves. But what is the relation between words *about* a picture and words displayed *within* one? When René Magritte calligraphically depicts the words 'This is not a pipe' beneath the image of a pipe in a painting titled *Trahison des Images*, are the painted words ekphrastic? Do they even qualify as a description of the image? Or do they exemplify the sort of antagonism between word and image that this volume seeks to transcend? Whether or not they do, it seems to me useful to distinguish between *writing about art* on the one hand and *words within pictures* on the other – whether in composite art (such as that of Magritte or, for that matter, William Blake) or in pictures made of words alone, such as those of the contemporary American artist Christopher Wool.⁸

For Tilo Reifenstein, such pictures demonstrate that written language shares 'visibility and visuality' with pictures. By combining pictures and words, Reifenstein argues, the work of Raymond Pettibon contests the concept of writing as 'transcendent logos' and displays instead its graphic qualities, the 'pictorial characteristics of writing itself'. To buttress his argument, Reifenstein might well have noted that the very word *graphic* springs from a polysemous Greek verb (*graphein*) that could mean either 'write' or 'depict': even now, we use 'biography' to mean 'life-writing' and 'graphic' to mean 'pictorial'. Yet, in spite of that teasing slippage, picture-making and writing (in alphabetic, non-ideogrammatic languages) remain fundamentally different systems of representation. For that reason I still believe that writing about visual art should not be classified with visual art itself, including even art that showcases the visuality of words. If we wholly erase the line between visual art and the written word, can they any longer have the kinds of encounter explored by this volume?

Leaving that question open, and leaving open too the question of just what ekphrasis is, I am happy to consider what various contributors have discovered from probing specific encounters between pictures and written words, including, of course (to be absolutely unambiguous), printed words. Since the essays are chronologically ordered, they range from studies of Renaissance works through the long nineteenth century to our own time. In their introduction, the editors briefly identify three phases of what might be called the history of ekphrastic or what I am tempted to call simply *intermedial* encounters: early modern (late sixteenth to early eighteenth centuries), nineteenth century, and twentieth and twenty-first. As examined here, early modern works feature encounters that might be construed as paragonal but turn out, it is argued, to exemplify the interdependence of pictures and words – their symbiosis. In the

long nineteenth century, we are informed, the relation between literature and visual art reflects the impact of Lessing's *Laocoön* by accenting the competition between the two even as it displays their interaction. And in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, works such as Pettibon's combine image and text so intimately that they become intermedial hybrids, irreducible to the straightforward categories of visual or verbal.

As laid out here, then, the history of ekphrastic or intermedial encounters is a story of gradual integration, a story in which the paragonal competition between image and word gradually gives way to full co-operation. To show, for instance, that Andrew Marvell contests the paragonal competition between painting and poetry, Keith McDonald suggestively argues that, instead of 'upstaging the visual' in Marvell's Latin poems on Robert Walker's portrait of Oliver Cromwell, 'language ... becomes part of a heuristic enquiry that exposes the potency and limitations of both forms'. McDonald may be right, but I wonder if Marvell's language forecloses all competition. According to McDonald's description of a copy of the now lost portrait, which was sent to Queen Christina of Sweden, it depicts Cromwell 'opulently dressed as a private dignitary rather than his customary armour', wearing a chain given to him by the queen and a medalion featuring the three crowns of Sweden. In Marvell's prospopoeial Latin poem ('In eandem Reginae Sueciae transmittam') the painted figure is made to speak far more than the 'Ave' that Aretino plausibly extracts from the mouth of Titian's angel. Addressing the queen, he defines his wrinkles (presumably visible in the portrait) as the sign of long warfare that he continues to wage even while insisting that this shadowy image ('umbra') submits its brow to you ('tibi submittit frontem') and will not be forever savage to kings ('regibus usque truces'). As represented by Marvell, then, the portrait itself stages a competition between Cromwell's stubbornly regicidal bellicosity and his belated deference to royalty, which is shrewdly hedged by 'usque truces': this tireless fighter sets no deadline on just *when* he will cease to be savage (perhaps when he's dead?). The competition thus imputed to the portrait prompts me to wonder just how much of the almost self-contradictory mindset expressed by Marvell's speaker is independently signified by the painting. Are they shown in this instance to be equal in both 'potency and limitations'?

Moving from the Renaissance to the nineteenth century, Part II of this collection includes Stephen Cheeke's study of the way various writers, especially Hawthorne, represented a supposed portrait of Beatrice Cenci. Cheeke has distinct advantages here. Besides being unequivocally ekphrastic in representing a work of visual art, his examples range generically from what might be called art criticism, as in Shelley's description of the portrait, to the readings of it made by various characters in Hawthorne's novel, *The Marble Faun*. Yet Cheeke's argument is complicated by two problems. First, he says himself that the painting described in all his examples 'is not by Guido Reni, and does not represent Beatrice Cenci'.⁹ This means that her gruesome history is not 'written in the painting, written in the dying girl's face', as Dickens asserted, but rather

32. Guido Reni, *Saint Cecilia* (1606)

projected onto the painting by those who bring that history to it. Without such knowledge, would the chiaroscuro in this portrait – a radiant countenance set off by a dark background – by itself signify the intersection of good and evil that all these writers find in it, as Cheeke suggests? If anything, the background in Reni's portrait of Saint Cecilia (Figure 32) is much darker than that of the would-be Cenci portrait. But could anyone construe the chiaroscuro of *Saint*

Cecilia as a sign that Cecilia herself – a Christian martyred in ancient Rome – was somehow tainted with evil?

A further problem is that in Hawthorne's novel, some of the characters are so much caught up in the history of Beatrice that they are not even describing her portrait at all. As a copyist, Hilda knows the painting intimately and is clearly describing its effect upon her when she says that Beatrice was 'trying to escape from my gaze' all the while she copied the portrait. But in weighing her guilt and innocence, in arguing by turns that Beatrice is conscience-racked and guilty 'of no sin at all', Miriam refers only to the indeterminacy of her historical character, not to the equivocal significance of her expression in the portrait or the complexity of its *chiaroscuro*.

Nevertheless, these objections are largely marginalized if not totally vanquished by Cheeke's analysis of Hawthorne's exquisitely calibrated response to the portrait of Beatrice. Reminding us that 'Hawthorne's novels and stories are haunted by faces that are dark, indistinct, unfathomable, misidentified, sometimes veiled or absolutely withheld from view', he aptly observes that 'Anxiety over their true nature reveals the grip they have upon an imagination which worried about the effect of bringing knowledge of Beatrice's story to the image'. Given Hawthorne's own consciousness of what he projects on to the painting, his response is fictively mediated through Hilda and Miriam, whose contrasting responses constitute what might be called a Blakean dialogue of innocence and experience. In the portrait, Cheeke argues, Hawthorne 'wants to read ... both an original innocence, *and* an innocence regained or redeemed. The first kind has never known sin, while the second seems to know some mysterious secret about the meaning of sin that cannot easily be grasped or told, one in which sin has been transfigured – the final effect of the Guido Reni portrait.' Essential to this argument is the provocative but also, I think, persuasive claim that in the eyes of Hawthorne, the portrait subordinates morality to aesthetics, 'neutralising [Beatrice's] participation in evil' and shining 'with the light of this transmutation'. Since the *chiaroscuro* of the portrait speaks profoundly to Hawthorne's fascination with all the moral meanings of light and dark, it may well constitute, as Cheeke suggests, a pictorial alternative to Milton's famous argument about the providential rationale for the fall. In Hawthorne's reading of the picture, Cheeke writes, its *chiaroscuro* 'has been "exchanged" for the radiance of the celestial life'.

Turning from nineteenth-century encounters with a celebrated portrait to contemporary theorizing about language and art, Johanna Malt sets W. J. T. Mitchell's theory of ekphrasis against the aesthetics of Jean-Luc Nancy, who 'makes little explicit reference to ekphrasis as such' but whose theory of signification posits that language always leaves something out – just as, for Mitchell, the ekphrastic image is the unrepresentable (or unrepresentable) 'black hole' in the universe of language: 'entirely absent from it, but shaping it and affecting it in fundamental ways'. By means of what Nancy calls 'ex-scription', Malt explains, all writing draws 'a boundary between two systems: one in which

being signifies and one in which it simply *is* and “makes sense” as such. What is “outside” the text is not its referent, since the referent is itself a category belonging to the order of signification.’

If this paraphrase of Nancy’s words is accurate, the boundary he defines is something less than crystal clear. If ex-scripted or excluded ‘being’ ‘simply *is*’, does it simply amount to what Archibald MacLeish famously wrote about a poem – that it ‘should not mean / But be’?¹⁰ Except in deictic discourse, which refers to a specific material object ready to hand (‘Pass me that book, please’), the nouns and verbs of language signify only conceptual objects ‘belonging to the order of signification’, as the above paraphrase says. Since the gerund ‘being’ is itself paradigmatically conceptual, accessible not phenomenally but only by means of noumenal intuition, how can ‘being’ stand outside or ‘make sense’ (itself a profoundly ambiguous phrase) outside the boundary of linguistic signification?

Fortunately, however, the strength of Malt’s essay does not stand or fall on the answer to this question, let alone on the strength of Nancy’s other distinctions, for she adroitly distils from his theory of signification a potent way of defining ekphrasis: it represents not a simulacrum of the visible world but an indexical trace of it, a *vestige* of it. With the aid of this concept, and also of Nancy’s fascinating analysis of the relation between touching and letting go of the risen Christ, Malt finely glosses the divine footprints in Juan de Flandes’s painting of Christ’s ascension as well as the pair of hands – one actual and the other vestigial, ‘a resemblance that touches the body’ – in Giuseppe Penone’s late twentieth-century *Gloves*.

In my own encounter with this collection of essays, I have raised a number of questions and am thereby liable, I suppose, to the charge that I have read them in a spirit of paragonal resistance. To this charge I plead guilty, since I have never learned how to read with my critical intelligence turned off. But I must also salute the great strengths of this volume. Besides fundamentally rethinking the concept of ekphrasis, besides resituating it in the capacious embrace of encounter, every contributor to this project has shed fresh light on one or more particular examples of this encounter. The result is a resoundingly rich contribution to the unending history of ekphrasis as both a Protean concept and a specific set of practices: of encounters between language and visual art that may range from the paragonal (I gently maintain) to the symbiotic.

Notes

- 1 Quoted in R. H. Webb, ‘The Transmission of the Eikones of Philostratus and the Development of Ekphrasis from Antiquity to the Renaissance’ (PhD Dissertation, Warburg Institute, University of London, 1992), p. 35. My translation.
- 2 Jean H. Hagstrum, *The Sister Arts: The Tradition of Literary Pictorialism From Dryden to Gray* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 18n.
- 3 *Pomegranate* can be viewed at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=ci2AA_5Yg7E.

- 4 'Notes Toward a Theory of Cinematic Ekphrasis', in *Fictional Cinema: How Literature Describes Imaginary Films*, ed. Stefano Ercolino, Massimo Fusillo, Mirko Lino, and Luca Zenobi (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht Unipress, 2015), pp. 3–17.
- 5 Leo Spitzer, 'The "Ode on a Grecian Urn", or Content vs. MetaGrammar' (1955), rpt. in *Essays on English and American Literature*, ed. Anna Hatcher (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1962), p. 72.
- 6 Murray Krieger, *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press), p. 9, my emphasis.
- 7 Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, trans. Edward Allen McCormick (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), p. 45.
- 8 Some examples of Wool's work can be viewed at: www.wool735.com.
- 9 Cheeke slightly overstates the present state of expert opinion. Though still identified as Reni's portrait of Beatrice on the website of the Palazzo Barberini, where it hangs (www.barberinicorsini.org/en/opera/portrait-of-beatrice-cenci), the attribution has been questioned (rather than simply denied) by art historians such as Jutta Gisela Sperling, who writes that 'Reni might not have authored the painting, nor does it necessarily represent Beatrice' (*Roman Charity: Queer Lactations in Early Modern Visual Culture* (Bielefeld: Transcript-Verlag, 2016), p. 127). The misattribution probably arose from the fact that Guido was deeply interested in portraits of turbaned young women and depicted St Cecilia that way in 1606. See Richard Spear, *The 'Divine' Guido: Religion, Sex, Money and Art in the World of Guido Reni* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), pp. 54–6.
- 10 Archibald MacLeish, 'Ars Poetica', in Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter, and Jon Stallworthy (eds), *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* (New York: Norton, 2004), p. 1381.