

A Short History of Ekphrasis and its Demanding Audience

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'Francesco, your hand is big enough
To wreck the sphere'

– John Ashbery, 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror', 1975

Parmigianino's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1524) depicts the painter in a fur jacket and ruffled collar, his hair parted in the middle, his boyish face looking younger than his 21 years. His hand, as John Ashbery notes in his poem of the painting, dominates the work: enlarged, and coming lazily towards the viewer as if to almost geekily show the distorting effects of convex mirrors. The boy looks sanguine and pleased at this visual trickery, with something forceful in his face; his expression a 'combination,' Ashbery writes, 'Of tenderness, amusement and regret, so powerful / In its restraint that one cannot look for long.'¹

There is a term for the verbal representation of a visual object, such as Ashbery's poem: ekphrasis, from the Greek for 'out' and 'speak'. It is generally understood as the visual being translated into verbal form, or the convergence of visual and verbal so that each medium transcends its respective limitations.² Ekphrasis threatens both the verbal and the visual while also promising – delectably, temptingly – the best of both: an unfolding across time and a visual punch; the ability of words to both complicate and clarify an image or object's ability to seduce and represent immediately. W.J.T. Mitchell, in a recent and influential discussion of the subject, identifies three stages of reactions to ekphrasis that reflect this double-edged character of threat and promise: ekphrastic indifference (the recognition that ekphrasis is impossible), fear (the anxiety that it might just be possible, and consequent desire to keep the media separate, or as is) and hope (the final, crucial stage, in which ekphrasis presents a paradigm of overcoming otherness).³

¹ John Ashbery, 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror', in *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, Manchester, UK: Carcanet Press, 1977, p. 69.

² In this sense it is part of a lineage of tropes that attempt to overcome medial barriers: such as visual music, in the films of Mary Ellen Bute or 'Chladni plates' – plates on which acoustic waves cause direct patterns in sand – or the total work of art and abiding modernist project the Gesamtkunstwerk.

³ See W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, especially Chapter Five, 'Ekphrasis and the Other', pp. 151–181.

It is the utopian implications of the last of these that make ekphrasis such a compelling subject and its appearance in literary texts so noteworthy: a stand up and take notice kind of moment.

The best-known example of ekphrasis is the shield of Achilles in the *Iliad*, where the description of the shield's engravings reveals a plethora of tiny worlds within the larger epic – a glimpse into the Mycenaean civilisation that Achilles is defending, and a strange interlude within the text, where representation itself is called into question. Each episode, in a section of the shield, contains a mini-narrative, and Homer's description gives both the temporality of this narrative and the spatial location of the scene – a balance between time and space, text and image that at times tips, so that one displaces the other. Ekphrasis puts into conflict, too, the illusion and metaphors of the writer's art with the impossibility of illusion and metaphor in a material thing. In Virgil's description of the shield of Aeneas in the *Aeneid*, for example, an homage in the later epic to the Achillean shield, the poet notes that the shield's image of the sea is white and dark blue – a detail well within the text's capacity to suggest, but impossible for the bronze shield itself, which, despite perhaps signifying a white and dark blue sea, must ultimately remain the colour of its metal.⁴

Ekphrasis also breaks the gendering that typifies the verbal and the visual arts, where the poem was classically understood to be male, expressive and persuasive, and the painting or sculpture female, mute and a thing of beauty. One of the most straightforward examples of ekphrasis is Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' (1820), centring on the vessel – 'thou still unravish'd bride of quietness' – who breaks the visual object's inherent silence at the end of the poem with her inscription: 'Beauty is truth; truth beauty'. Ekphrasis offers visual objects a chance to speak and in that to break the spell of the male gaze – to quite literally *talk* back.⁵

⁴ See J.A.W. Heffernan, *Museum of Words*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993, pp. 10–21, 32–33.

⁵ About which W.J.T. Mitchell comments that 'If the poet is going to make the mute, feminised art object speak, he could at least give her something interesting to say.' W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, op. cit., p. 171.

In modernism ekphrasis was often used to dislodge authorial certainty and to signify a break in standard representation, or moments of instability within a text. Gustave Flaubert's *A Sentimental Education* (1869) contains a bravura ending that – almost out of nowhere – vertiginously dislodges the veneer of realism that held sway over the novel's preceding pages, and indeed the nineteenth-century novel in general. In these crucial final scenes Flaubert uses the description of a painting to miscigenate the layers of reality and fiction that novels (and genre) attempt to keep separate. Frédéric, the novel's protagonist, has at one point had a portrait painted of his mistress, Rosanette: it showed her 'with her breasts bare, her hair down, and holding a red velvet purse in her hands, while a peacock poked its beak over her shoulder from behind, covering the wall with its great fan-like feathers.'⁶ At the end of the novel, this curious detail of the red velvet purse returns, this time in the story space of the goings-on of the novel itself. Mme. Arnoux, whom Frédéric had been in love with, appears after an absence: 'After placing a little red velvet wallet on the edge of the mantelpiece, she sat down. The two of them sat there, unable to speak, smiling at each other.'⁷ The velvet purse leaves the space of ekphrasis and enters the plot itself.

Indeed, the final few pages of the novel are a remarkable undoing not only of the novel's own fiction but of the premise of fiction itself – it is notable that Flaubert was Kafka's favourite writer, according to Kafka's diaries, and *Sentimental Education* his favourite work. When Mme. Arnoux catches sight of the portrait of Rosanette, Frédéric directs her attention away, and, in the apparently simple sentence that transfixed Kafka, Mme. Arnoux falls for this diversion: 'She confessed that she would like to go for a stroll through the streets on his arm.' The two indeed go for a walk on a 'bed of dead leaves'.⁸ Here, too, this line reaches back to earlier in the novel, when Flaubert

⁶ Gustave Flaubert, *Sentimental Education* (1869; trans. Robert Baldick), Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964, p. 236. These observations on Flaubert's novel were passed on to me by Stanley Corngold.

⁷ Ibid., p. 412.

⁸ Ibid., p. 413.

was building the story of these characters' relations. Mme. Arnoux's desire was precisely Frédéric's when he saw her for the very first time: 'What bliss it would be to climb up there beside her with his arm around her waist, listening to her voice and basking in the radiance of her eyes, while her dress swept the yellow leaves along the ground!'⁹ The detail of this initial impulse (the 'yellow leaves') is here retroactively transformed into the dead yellow leaves, not a pointillistic detail of the French nineteenth-century novel, but an allusion to the pages of romantic novels ('feuilles jaunes') which this scene echoes – and an intrusion, stark like a shaft of light, of self-reflexivity into this formerly contained text.

Sentimental Education closes on Frédéric and his friend Deslauriers, whom he also meets up with in a parody of the closure of this type of novel, in which they reminisce about an event of which the reader has not been told. Almost aggressive in their gaiety, rubbing the reader's nose in it, they call this event, twice, 'the happiest time we ever had'.¹⁰ Here the novel ends, on this concatenation of where fiction lies, and this breakdown of the authority of the conventions that dictate what a reader can trust 'happened' in the novel. The book is revealed as a mockery of the reader's belief in the world created by an author – the 'sentimental' novels one reads – and closes its final page as leaves of text simply written by one man, without magical evocation or mystery.

Such a process of undoing and *uncreating* is particularly enabled by the destabilisation of illusion and representation that ekphrasis often initiates. Flaubert gives us 400 pages of a novel, only to take it all back – and almost programmatically, reaching back into the start of the novel to subvert details and episodes the reader had taken on faith. Thinking back to the different possibilities of the visual and the verbal, this is what text can do that still images can't – and which oral

descriptions of events often unknowingly fold into their own recollections. Speakers often follow long discussions of events with 'perhaps that did not happen that way', 'no, that wasn't right', or 'I can't really remember', suddenly casting doubt over what had been so trustingly accepted, on the side of both narrator and audience. Silvia Kolbowski, in her 'inadequate history of conceptual art', a project she initiated in 1998, asked artists to describe a work they had seen or experienced between 1965 and 1975, at the height of Conceptualism. Their oral responses were recorded and six of them were transcribed, pretty much as is, and included in a text published in *October* two years later.¹¹ The descriptions given by the participants – about the removal of a wall from a house, a performance involving pins, a performance that didn't take off – are tempered by the retrospective remarks that colour the reflections, turning them into considerations of the present as much as of the past: the post-AIDS fear of contagion that would scupper the pins performance; the fact that the artist in the performance that was never completed died soon after, making that event the last time many saw him; the startling admission that though the speaker talks about the work of the wall removal, he or she never actually saw it. While trying to address the events directly, the spoken narration gets inextricably lost in the mediation from past to present, and from event to means of description. The fact that the speakers are discussing events from their own lives gives some urgency to the situation: they have a litmus test of the real to compare their accounts against. Like Virgil's white and blue metallic sea, one can find in their self-corrections and admissions of omission an acknowledgement of the gap between representation and event that necessarily implants itself when one tries to communicate something from one medium within another.

Kafka, in the short story 'The Wish to Be a Red Indian', written sometime between 1904 and 1912, plays with the dynamic of building

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 419.

¹¹ See Silvia Kolbowski, 'An Inadequate History of Conceptual Art', *October*, vol.92, Spring 2000, pp. 52–70.

up a vision for the reader – a tapestry of words – and then quickly unravelling it. (A tapestry, in this context, seems the apposite metaphor – bringing up what might be the great lost ekphrasis of Western literature: what scene was Penelope creating on the tapestry she wove and unwove every night while waiting for Odysseus? I would love to know.) The story's description of a horse galloping across a field conveys the experience of riding a horse at pace, when details blur into one another, appearing faster than the eye can parse them, and almost disappearing in their speed. But the details' shift from existence to non-existence is so radical, in this imagistic short story, that it also becomes about the ability of words to create illusions – and, crucially, about the fact that these illusions created are sheer words. 'The Wish to Be a Red Indian', reproduced in full, reads:

If only one were an Indian, instantly alert, and on a racing horse, leaning against the wind, quivering jerkily again and again over the shaky ground, until one shed one's spurs, for no spurs were needed, threw away the reins, for no reins were needed, and when, hardly seeing that the land under one's feet was smoothly shorn heath, already gone were the horse's neck and horse's head.¹²

The horse and rider, not to mention the spurs and reins, and even the texture of the ground itself, is worn smooth and disappears by the end – how can the horse's neck and horse's head be gone, when they are in front of the rider? Kafka gives us the racing horse and takes it away. This kind of movement through time is a chief facet of the linguistic arts, and particularly in distinction to painting or sculpture. One cannot create and un-create a painting in the space of its diegesis – one can only gesture at or suggest the movement of erasure that has

taken place in the past, but not incorporate it within the experienced narrative of the work itself. In a key text on the relationship between word and image, 'Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Poetry and Painting', the Enlightenment philosopher Gotthold Lessing compares the depiction of the Laocoön episode in a famous sculpture (c. 25 BC) with Virgil's description in the *Aeneid*. (In the episode, during the Trojan War, the priest Laocoön tries to warn his fellow Trojans that the horse sent by the Greeks is a ruse. Poseidon sends serpents to punish him, strangling him and his two sons.) In the text Lessing lays out his claims for the crucial differences between verbal and visual arts – a schemata of medium specificity that Clement Greenberg paid homage to with his 1940 essay 'Towards a Newer Laocoön'. Chief among these was time: sculpture has to encapsulate the very moment of struggle (similar to Cartier-Bresson's 'decisive moment') in its composition, confining itself to one singular moment – in fact when sculpture and painting try to represent more than one moment, which Lessing admits they sometimes do, they dilute their power, and become lesser artworks. Text, by contrast, can avail itself of the different modulations of time to include context and background, reminiscences of the past and suggestions of the future. Lessing's conclusion, with admirable assurance in his own powers of judgement, is that each medium should stick to what it does best.

Kafka, famously, could never read his work aloud to friends because he would break down in fits of laughter. Rather than the fact that he found his stories so funny – which is in itself so suggestive – what is striking about this comment is that the domestic picture it conveys: Kafka inviting a few friends over to hear his latest writings, perhaps over tea and cake, or something stronger. The images of Kafka today – the venerated writer, read in the university library; the subversive thinker, read in the high school bedroom; the exile-within-exile,

¹² Franz Kafka, 'The Wish to Be a Red Indian' (trans. Edwin and Willa Muir), *Kafka: The Complete Stories*, New York: Schocken Books, 1971. Trans. modified by author. The ending is more startling and the disappearance process more complete in the German, which ends with a staccato incantation to the rhythm, such that the consonant-heavy words *Pferdehals* und *Pferdekopf* ('the horse's neck and horse's head') stand in for the clippety-clop of the horse that has disappeared: 'Wenn man doch ein Indianer wäre, gleich bereit, und auf dem rennenden Pferde, schief in der Luft, immer wieder kurz erzitterte über dem zitternden Boden, bis man die Sporen ließ, denn es gab keine Sporen, bis man die Zügel wegwarf, denn es gab keine Zügel, und kaum das Land vor sich als glatt gemähte Heide sah, schon ohne Pferdehals und Pferdekopf.'