

The Possibilities and Perils of Writing Poems about Visual Art

The act of scribbling passionately while standing in front of a painting or sculpture attracts some poets and puts others off. Many, of course, don't give much thought to ekphrastic writing, which the critic James Heffernan defines as "the verbal representation of visual representation."¹ Occasionally, however, a poet expresses an intriguing ambivalence on the subject.

In a *Writer's Chronicle* interview Larry Levis, speaking of his "Caravaggio: Swirl & Vortex,"² said, "I doubt that the world is in any desperate need of another poem about a painting, and mine, I am glad to say, isn't one."³ It is, though. Levis's poem gives close attention to a painting and to the painter's life.

In the Borghese, Caravaggio, painter of boy whores, street punk, exile & murderer,
Left behind his own face in the decapitated, swollen, leaden-eyed head of Goliath,
And left the eyelids slightly open, & left on the face of David a look of pity

Mingling with disgust. A peach face; a death mask. If you look closely you can see
It is the same face, & the boy, murdering the man, is murdering his own boyhood,
His robe open & exposing a bare left shoulder. In 1603, it meant he was available,

For sale on the street where Ranuccio Tomassoni is falling, & Caravaggio,

Puzzled that a man would die so easily, turns & runs.

The poem then moves into associations that Caravaggio's painting stirs up for the speaker; in particular, memories of a high-school friend named Zamora, who was killed in Viet Nam. "I stood there looking at it a long time," the speaker says. "A man whose only politics was rage." Whose rage? That of Goliath-as-Caravaggio, the killer who dies by violence, as the painter ultimately did? That of David-as-Caravaggio, the killer-initiate, who destroys his own innocence as well? Or is the rage that of the older speaker and his younger self—both angry at being caught up, like Caravaggio and Zamora, in the "wide swirl & vortex of history"? Or, again, does the fury belong to Zamora, who, on his own killing mission, "thinking he heard someone call his name, . . . strolled three yards / Off a path & stepped on a land mine"? Throughout the poem, these people get all tangled up. The speaker admits, "When I think of [Zamora], I get confused. Someone is calling to him, & then / I'm actually thinking of Caravaggio . . . in his painting. I want to go up to it / And close both the eyelids."

Although in his interview Levis first deems ekphrastic poetry unnecessary (defining his own expansive version of it as something else), he then concedes, "that is no reason at all not to go and write a poem about a painting if you need to, or even desire to."⁴ Levis understands that the project can arise from a profound urge, a matter of need or desire, and he respects that pull—having acted on it himself.

Ekphrasis, when it's compelling, opens out. It responds, from the writer's experience, to what a work of art seems to say. The artwork confronts you, if you're that sort of writer, and begins a conversation that you can't resist continuing. This can happen out of the

blue, as the novelist Jeanette Winterson recounts in her book of essays called *Art [Objects]*. Although Winterson had never much cared for art, one day she was captivated by a painting, and irrevocably changed. She writes,

I passed a little gallery and in the moment of passing saw a painting that had more power to stop me than I had power to walk on. . . .

What was I to do, standing hesitant, my heart flooded away? . . .

I had intended to leave Amsterdam the next day. I changed my plans, and sleeping fitfully, rising early, queued to get into the Rijksmuseum, into the Van Gogh Museum, spending every afternoon at any private galleries I could find, and every evening, reading, reading, reading. My turmoil of mind was such that I could only find a kind of peace by attempting to determine the size of the problem. My problem. The paintings were perfectly at ease. I had fallen in love and I had no language. I was dog-dumb. The usual response of ‘This painting has nothing to say to me’ had become ‘I have nothing to say to this painting’. And I desperately wanted to speak.⁵

That painting, and then others, became lively presences in her creative life. Now, Winterson says,

I move gingerly around the paintings I own because I know they are looking at me as closely as I am looking at them. There is a constant exchange of emotion between us, between the three of us; the artist I need never meet, the painting in its own right, and me, the one who loves it and can no longer live independent of it. The triangle of exchange alters, is fluid, is subtle, is profound and is one of those unverifiable facts that anyone who cares for painting soon discovers. The picture on my wall, art object and art process, is a living line of movement, a wave of colour that repercussions in my body, colouring it, colouring the new present, the future, and even the past, which cannot now be considered outside of the light of the painting. I think of something I did, the picture catches me, adds to the thought, changes the meaning of thought and past. The totality of the picture comments on the totality of what I am. The greater the picture the more complete this process is.⁶

It is not necessarily a stretch to refer to such a process as interchange—whether it takes place only in the mind, as Winterson describes it, or also on the page. The picture or sculpture communicates initially; you meditate on it; your meditation, in revealing what the artwork seems further to imply, gives it more to say; and so on.

One of my favorite examples of this kind of interchange is Mark Doty’s poem “Lilies in New York.”⁷ In it, the speaker contemplates a pencil drawing in which a flowerpot, stalks, and leaves are very densely rendered while the lily blossoms themselves are barely suggested. The poem conveys the intensity of his engagement with almost breathless momentum, which is propelled by enjambment and by surprising shifts in images and association. The issue, for Doty, is what the incompleteness of the drawing can reveal

about the relation of art to life. His speaker comes up with a series of hypotheses in the form of questions.

What's this about? Why,

up here where trumpeting
crowns all this darkness,
has the artist given up?

....

Is it that
he wants us to think, *This is a drawing,*
not a flower and so reminds us

that the power of his illusion,
alive below the lily's neck,
is trickery? A formal joke,

....

Or is it
too much for him, to render that delicacy,

to bring the white throat out
of white paper, no hope of accuracy,
and so he makes this humble gesture

to acknowledge his limitations . . . ?

Or "Would he rather remain with the push / of areas of darkness . . . ?" At this point, halfway along, the poem turns, reminding us that it concerns a drawing that hangs in New York. The "cacophony of pot/and stem" become the sounds and emotions of the city,

As if the frame
were filled with colliding expanses
of noise (traffic, sirens, some engine

hammering into the street below,
barking, air brakes expelling their huge
mechanical tribute to longing. . . .

Further on, the blossoms too become the city: "Trumpet, trumpet, and trumpet: / now New York's a smear / and chaos of lilies." I especially enjoy how in the line "Trumpet, trumpet, and trumpet" the same word, repeated, takes on different meanings—honking horns, trumpet-shaped blossoms, joy in the midst of "chaos." And then the lilies undergo another metamorphosis. They become the human part of the city, all bound up with, and resisting, the mechanistic part. Doty describes these inextricable parts as

snowy throat and black crosshatched

field of atmosphere, scent

and explosion, tenderness
and history, all that's leaning

down into the delicate, nearly human skin,
pressing with its impossible weight. . . .

By the end of his inquiry, the speaker ultimately focuses on the fact that the blossoms appear

open as if
about to speak. Open—
is that it? Out of these negotiations

arises a sketchy, possible
bloom, about to, going to,
going to be, becoming

open.

“And who,” he says, “could hope to draw that?”

Thus Doty's ekphrastic poem, which has itself opened out from the visual plant, to the aural city, to the tactilely imaged vulnerability of the human condition, concludes by praising openness itself.

In spite of such vivid examples, some writers still deprecate ekphrastic poetry as a genre that operates at an extra remove from “reality.” In contrast, those who are excited by the genre can't separate “life” and “art” so easily. Although it's true that the ekphrastic poet stands at an additional remove from, say, the scene represented by a painting, this distance enables other kinds of immediacy, such as the “triangle of exchange” among writer, picture, and painter that Winterson describes. In fact, ekphrasis enables various kinds of *ménages à trois*—indeed, *ménages à plusieurs*—among the poet, the painting, its subject, the painter, the model, the picture's audiences, the reader, and so forth.

Successful ekphrastic poems vary widely, but generally the writers move beyond the artwork they see before them, to associations that arise from it. A poem may expand the moment a painting or sculpture represents into a narrative. Another may speculate about the work of art itself, its creation and reception. A poem may elaborate a painting's take on the world, or argue with it. Others, like Levis's, move into memories the artwork recalls. Some ekphrastic poems regard the visual work as an object of meditation, ranging beyond it to explore a complex philosophical or social problem, or the action of art itself on the viewer and the world.

Despite the multiple possibilities of ekphrasis, one thing it cannot do well is make the reader see what the poet sees. Yet poets are continually tempted to try. I certainly have been, and often still am. Many failures of ekphrasis come from the writer's urge to recreate, and share with readers, a particular aesthetic blessing. When I am enchanted by, and writing about, a picture, it's hard to believe that the reader can't see what it looks

like. But paintings, like poems, are “unparaphrasable,” as Doty writes.⁸ Even attempting to detail in words a picture that the viewer takes in immediately would require a boring quantity of prepositional phrases and such. (“Beyond the church, next to the man in a top hat, in front of the garden fence. . . .”) And in any case, the reader would still imagine something other than what the poet sees, or remembers seeing.

Nonetheless, description, despite its uncertain reception in the reader’s mind, is usually an element of ekphrastic poetry. In a successful poem, however, description is not exhaustive but selective. And it is connected to the poet’s own associations.

Using the encounter with a work of art as a springboard to a wider world of association isn’t always easy, though. One problem is that when we’re standing in front of a painting or sculpture, caught by its timelessness, it’s hard also to participate in the realm of words deeply enough to recall its possibilities of narration, self-revision, and other sorts of movement *through* time. One way to reduce the temptation simply to describe what takes our breath away is to look thoroughly at the artwork and then go away to write elsewhere.

While ekphrastic poetry, in a sense, deprives the reader of the full visual experience of the artwork—and cannot do otherwise—many exciting poems more than make up for this deprivation. They offer, instead, metaphorical images, and often invoke sensuous experiences other than the visual: sound, touch, smell, taste, and visceral and kinetic sensation. Doty, for instance, enlivens his meditative poem with images of New York’s street noises.

Another issue is that of whether an ekphrastic poem, after it’s finished, remains dependent on the work of visual art from which it sprang. Generally, it seems to me, mature ekphrastic poems are those which have let go the hand of their parent sculpture or picture, to live in the world on their own terms. Many writers and critics share this opinion; readers, however, often say they’d prefer to see the literary and visual works side by side. From my point of view as an art-loving poet, I’m happy if an ekphrastic poem I’ve written makes a reader want to go and see the artwork that stimulated it. But that is not my primary aim. What I want is to produce a full-fledged piece that contains whatever the reader needs in order to find it moving. I believe that seeing the artwork should be no more vital to the poem’s reception than reading its intertextual sources—a matter of interest, but not essential. Others disagree with this ideal of the poem’s autonomy. For instance, the poet John Hollander, in his scholarly book on ekphrasis called *The Gazer’s Spirit*, considers poems about actual but “lost or untraceable” works of art to be “unassessable.”⁹ For Hollander, assessing the poem involves evaluating the writer’s interpretation of the artwork. The critic Michael Benton concurs, and goes further, writing that “the poem is always dependent” on its visual source.¹⁰ In Benton’s model, ekphrastic poems mainly “read” the artwork. In mine, the poems I value *engage* it, opening out into their own vision and making a separate aesthetic contribution to the world of the arts.

I’d like now to consider several more, quite variegated examples of such engagement. Anne Carson’s poem “Hokusai,”¹¹ on the famous Japanese painter, treats the issue of anger at one’s imminent mortality, and how a person can transmute that anger and pain into art. The poem opens out right at the beginning, by starting with a general aphorism:

“Anger is a bitter lock. / But you can turn it.” Then it turns to a particular instance:
 “Hokusai aged 83 / said, / Time to do my lions.”

This sinewy, graceful poem both speaks and arranges itself in print in ways that recall the deft, clean motion of Hokusai’s pictures. Michael Davidson calls this kind of ekphrasis *painterly*, meaning that it employs strategies analogous to those of the visual work.¹²

Wind came gusting from the northwest.

Lions swayed
 and leapt
 from the crests

of the pine trees
 onto

the snowy road
 or crashed
 together

over his hut,
 their white paws

mauling stars
 on the way down.

Carson depicts the work of Hokusai’s art as both a struggle for well-being and an endeavor of living to the last:

Every morning
 until he died

219 days later
 he made
 a lion.

The poem ends,

I continue to draw
 hoping for
 a peaceful day,

said Hokusai
 as they thudded past.

With her verbal image of a storm of thudding lions whose paws thrash at the stars, Carson portrays the violence of that struggle for peace, and its cosmic import for the person who undergoes it.

In his essay *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon*, Doty observes that “we always seem to be looking through” an evocative representational painting or “into it, rather than at it.”¹³ Another poem that enacts this sort of looking is Rilke’s “The Donor.” The translation I’m using is by Edward Snow.¹⁴ The poem focuses on, and through, a minor figure in a religious painting, a donor whose gift of artwork to a church is rewarded by his inclusion in that picture. As is often the case, this person looks quite out of place among the holy figures. Rilke writes,

Perhaps the Saviour never appeared to him,
perhaps even no holy bishop stepped
gently to his side as in this painting
and lightly placed his hand on him.

Contemplating the man’s demeanor leads Rilke’s speaker to imagine the donor’s spiritual state as his own.

Perhaps this was everything: *thus* to kneel
...
to kneel: and thereby hold one’s own
outward-willing contours tightly reined
in one’s heart, like horses in one’s hand.

The nature of this spiritual tension grows clearer in the last stanza, as does the implication that most of us share that state.

If something enormous should happen,
something unpromised and never-written,
we could hope that it wouldn’t see us
and would come closer, all the way up to us,
deep in itself and self-occupied.

Looking into the painting, and through it at himself, the speaker discovers longing for contact with the sacred and miraculous, a longing outstripped only by the all too human fear that such an encounter would require too much of him.

These days, poetic meditations on visual art often move into political, as well as psychological and spiritual, territory. A notable example is “The Field” by Jorie Graham. The poem appears in Edward Hirsch’s anthology of literature inspired by works in Chicago’s Art Institute.¹⁵ Though each poem is accompanied by a reproduction of the artwork, Graham’s piece does not refer explicitly to its source. The painting, entitled *The Order of the Angels*, depicts a ravaged field, upon which the speaker meditates. I’m sure Graham was aware that the artist, Anselm Kiefer, was concerned with state-sponsored

else, one wonders? Then the speaker returns, in essence, to his original estimation of the painter: “art / such as his goes far enough for spying.” Moreover, it appears that the painter is not merely prurient, but lofty: “there’s always / a roof higher than the one you’re on, / a man looking down” judgmentally. “He takes it all in as if / life were *the scene of the crime*, even / the pair of *us*, harmless enough.”

Further, the poem suggests that, by choosing Tangier as the setting for a homoerotic encounter, Delacroix diminishes his subjects as both sexual and racial exotics. In the his eyes, says the speaker, “we incarnate / your typical Tangerine / dalliance.” Thus, even as the peeping painter thinks he’s catching two men in the act, so to speak, the speaker catches him in the act of sexually othering and Orientalizing them. In fact, Edward Said, in his well-known critical work *Orientalism*, singles Delacroix out as an Orientalist of note. “Later in the nineteenth century, in the works of Delacroix and literally dozens of other French and British painters,” he writes, “the Oriental genre tableau carried representation into visual expression and a life of its own,” in which the fictive Orient came to symbolize such dark forces as “Sensuality, promise, terror, sublimity, idyllic pleasure, [and] intense energy.”¹⁸

In response, Howard’s monologue cunningly reverses the usual point of view that a figurative painting implies. The object of the gaze looks back critically at the subject who gazes. In this “ekphrastic encounter,”¹⁹ Howard takes the part of the “other” who stares back, and challenges the reader to forgo the painter’s othering stance.

A similar sort of critique takes place in Barbara Guest’s “The Nude,”²⁰ a poem whose inscrutable air reflects that of a nude female model before a male painter. In this multipart work, Guest often recalls Wallace Stevens with her calm, distanced assertions in which the concrete and the abstract converge. “Studios are stations of reminiscence,” Guest writes, where “his model / rephrases the shadow.”

She reminds him of attitudes
beyond the mere appraisal of subject,

A peace without clothes
with its bestowal of light and volume

Where nudism is born.

And indeed, as the poet-critic Rachel Blau DuPlessis notes,²¹ the poem largely concerns Stevens’s major subject, the way in which the imagination continually translates, and has its translations undermined by, reality. “A severe distance is established between her realism / and his anxious attempt to define it.”

It’s interesting the way Guest attributes to the model both nudism and realism, instead of simply nudity and reality. The suffix *ism* implies a belief and a practice—in this case, the belief in and practice of openly acknowledging what one is. Hence, at the end of the poem, it is the model who “reaches for ombre, noir” in regretful acceptance of aging, “the narrowness of time,” whereas the painter touches up “the sallow on her throat” with “sunset tint.”

The model resists translation. When the artist is inspired to paint her as a melancholy landscape in which “the sheen of her body only survives,” she looks at the canvas and “asks, where am I?”

In his attempts to represent her, the painter “confides [to us], / Each day I define myself.” He “escapes into a body / that defines his emotions, / An interior where his own contour is less misty.” He makes of her what he wants. “Lonely himself he has admired the glance / of kimonos, mirrors, fans and bestowed them on her.” While “she is thinking of nudism, / He draws an odalisque.”

The speaker continues obliquely, “it is love they are asking for,” an assertion that can be read two ways. On the one hand, the artist fantasizes that concubines fulfill their role out of desire for romantic gratification. On the other hand, *they* can refer to the painter and the model, although it seems they would seek different sorts of love—hers real, his ideal.

The need of the artist to draw the body
is like the love for three oranges,

He searches the world to find those spheres
that will confine the fluid nude.

The painter is undeniably in a position of power, the godlike power to make use of the model’s body: “As the swan entered Leda / so the actual timing of an artist’s abrupt gesture. . . .”

Nonetheless, the model resists being possessed: “It is arguable whether he shall ever see the face, / her back was turned from him like a goddess.” The painter is left feeling that he has missed something. “At times a silence overcomes the artist, / a fog at the base of columns”—a fog that recalls the antique sorties of gods to overtake women like Leda—and

He explains he is thinking of the body.

Its behavior is strange, hiding behind leaves
he can never trap or bribe it.

So deep is the body’s memory of self.

The artist in the poem assumes a viewer who is an extension of himself, and who therefore continues the process of projecting his own situation into the picture and then finding that projection frustrated by something about the woman’s figure.

The viewer inherits this nude
as a reminder of his own weightlessness

In a natural world
made winsome, or tense or aggravated

By the requests of an unclad body
with its announcement of dimension and clarity.

All these dynamics are further complicated by the dual perspective of the poet, as an artist and a woman. Guest acknowledges this duality, in one section, by portraying her speaker as a friend or date of the painter, one, I think, both interested in and disconcerted by his off-hand objectification of her.

You are with an artist who notices everything
which concerns color and shape.

In the restaurant the artist says a blouse
you are wearing goes with the decor.

The blouse is a watery blue like somewhere
off the coast of Greece.

Then the speaker goes on to reveal herself as one who, like the painter, appropriates and transforms, in her case by wielding the power of metaphor, which can both personify the nonhuman and objectify the human. “A wave rushes over the sand denuding it,” she says. “You share the classical nude landscape of sand.”

As an ekphrastic poem, “The Nude” alludes to various types of figure paintings — geometric treatments, odalisques, those in which the subject is “either admiring herself or bathing”—and employs very little description. Ultimately, the most powerful effect of the work, it seems to me, occurs some time after reading it. As DuPlessis observes, “Rather than seeing only the nude via the painter’s eye,” the poem “gives us another place from which to see.”²² On our next walk through a museum full of female nudes painted by men, we are better equipped to consider what a particular painting suggests about the artist as well as the model, and about the distance and interchange between them.

Altogether, the seven poems this essay has considered suggest not only the range of possibilities that ekphrasis offers, but also the challenge it poses. For despite the wide variety of these responses to paintings, their authors have something other than the ekphrastic urge in common. They share a willingness to leap beyond their initial aesthetic encounter. They make something of it: a poem that revels in its movement through time, opening out into a world of its own.

Notes

- ¹ James A. W. Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 3.
- ² Larry Levis, *The Widening Spell of Leaves* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1991), 34-37.
- ³ Larry Levis, Interview with Michael White, *The Writer's Chronicle* 36, no. 2 (2003): 41.
- ⁴ Leavis interview, 41-42.
- ⁵ Jeanette Winterson, *Art [Objects]: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery* (New York: Knopf, 1996), 3-4.
- ⁶ Winterson, 19.
- ⁷ Mark Doty, *Sweet Machine* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), 16-20.
- ⁸ Mark Doty, *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon* (Boston: Beacon, 2001), 70.
- ⁹ John Hollander, *The Gazer's Spirit: Poems Speaking to Silent Works of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 34.
- ¹⁰ Michael Benton, "Anyone for Ekphrasis?", *British Journal of Aesthetics* 37, no. 4 (1997): 368.
- ¹¹ Anne Carson, *Men in the Off Hours* (New York: Random-Vintage, 2000), 15-16.
- ¹² Michael Davidson, "Ekphrasis and the Postmodern Painter Poem," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 42, no. 1 (1983): 72.
- ¹³ Doty, *Still Life*, 59.
- ¹⁴ Rainer Maria Rilke, *New Poems [1907]*, trans. by Edward Snow (New York: Farrar-North Point, 1984, 1998), 81.
- ¹⁵ Jorie Graham, "The Field," in Edward Hirsch (ed.), *Transforming Vision: Writers on Art* (Boston: Bulfinch-Little Brown, 1994), 126-31.
- ¹⁶ Lydia Csato Gasman, "Artist Statement," *Les Yeux du Monde*, November 29, 2003, http://www.artline.com/galleries/LesYeux/artists/gassman/Gassman_Statement.html; Ronald Goetz, "Anselm Kiefer: Art as Atonement," *Christian Century*, March 23-30, 1988: 314.

¹⁷ Richard Howard, *Trappings* (New York: Turtle Point, 1999), 70-72.

¹⁸ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random-Vintage, 1994), 118.

¹⁹ W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 164; Hollander, 43.

²⁰ Barbara Guest, *Fair Realism* (Los Angeles: Sun and Moon, 1989), 57-64.

²¹ Rachel Blau DuPlessis, "'All My Vast / Journeying Sensibility': Barbara Guest's Recent Work," *Sulfur* 39 (1996): 44-45.

²² DuPlessis, 45.