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MODERN EKPHRASIS

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-*