

THE MAGIC LANTERN:
MODERN POETRY AND THE VISUAL ARTS

By

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Abstract

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This is essentially a dissertation about the evolution of the relationship between visual and verbal representation. As I see it, this is largely a movement from paragone to symbiosis. Along the way, the relation among these technically divergent forms shows itself to be a very porous border. Through a methodology that incorporates pertinent perspectives from continental philosophies, detailed readings of poetry from several traditions, and a genealogical approach to the history of the idea of the visual and the verbal, this dissertation will show how the deepened complexities that innovations in the visual arts—particularly technological innovations such as photography and film—led to mutually enriching responses in the verbal arts. Not only does the poetics of modernism come to embrace the visual, but it in fact absorbs into itself many of the capacities long held to be the terrain of the visual. Rather than being an appropriative and final paragonal urge, I read this aspect of modernist poetics as one that shows its poetry to be responsive to changes outside of its own medium in remarkably sensitive and complex ways.

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Introduction

Poetry and the Visual Arts

This dissertation seeks to extend the tradition of sister arts scholarship and ekphrastic theory to considerations of poems and poets whose work, although within this lineage, extends or departs from it. In many ways, this movement away from and toward an historically longstanding poetic mode is a key sub-theme of the dissertation, though its overt subject is poems written about a variety of art objects, from traditional descriptions of canonical museum pieces, to poems on personal art objects, photographs, and films. Discussion of these latter iterations, which take into account the influence of technological innovations in the visual arts during the twentieth century, marks the central originality of the work that follows. Through readings of a variety of poets in their interaction with an evolving visual medium, this dissertation explores the ways that evolution in the visual realm over the course of the twentieth century leads to concomitant changes in the verbal realm, poetry in particular, as capacities once ascribed to the realm of the visual are absorbed into the poetics of modernity. One example of this, which I take up in my third and final chapter, is the relationship between film and poetry. More specifically, the ways that the emergence of film as a new visual medium impacted the kind of poetry that was written in America during the first part of the twentieth century. A particularly compelling line of influence exists between Soviet cinema and the poetics of Imagism. This relationship I take up through the focused instance of montage and the parallel and mutually influential ways in which the two media thought about this idea. Montage is a compelling instance of word and image relations during this period for several reasons. First of all, it represents one of the most technically divergent of visual

and verbal influence—the divide between the modes of filmic and poetic production are about as wide as one can imagine—and, yet, the single concept of montage unites this divide. Second, the technological innovations of the twentieth century, in this case of film, well embodies the mechanical modes of production that became so central to visual media – and the surprisingly elegant ways that poetry, undergoing really no technological innovations, adapted to these changes in mass, visual modes. Finally, the connection between montage in film and poetry well articulates an interesting aspect of word and image relations, namely the back-and-forth nature of the influence. This is made quite clear by the remarkable, common root that both Sergei Eisenstein and Ezra Pound found in their own discussion of the capacities of montage: the written Chinese Ideogram. In this sense, the innovation in montage that was spearheaded by Eisenstein in the realm of film actually began, according to his own description of it, within the realm written; and Pound’s adoption of the filmic principles of montage pushed poetry, the verbal, toward the visual realm.

In addition to the relations between poetry and the technologically new forms of visual production—namely, photography and film—this dissertation also examines new ways of seeing that become pronounced in the ekphrastic poems written by American poets of the twentieth century. Where the interaction between the new medium of film and Imagism represents poetry’s fluid way of adapting to innovations in other art forms, I also aim to address how changes in the prominence of traditionally underrepresented groups in the tradition of poems about art objects—and, really, in the poetic tradition in vernal—leaves an important trace in the ekphrastic poems of the past century. In particular, I read the poems of Barbara Guest and Elizabeth Bishop as revolutionary in

their approach to art objects. One possible way of framing this shift is to consider the gender implications of poems written by female poets within a sub-genre of poetry long charged with a host of ‘masculine’ associations – most famously, the paragone or context between the visual and verbal arts. It would, ultimately, be reductionist to merely see the innovations of Guest and Bishop as simply a function of gender—something the poets themselves would wholeheartedly reject—but I do take the occasion of their poems as a useful corrective to the dominantly masculine language so often attached to ekphrastic poetry, in which poets are described as wrestling art works to the ground, or attempting to outdo the visual within the verbal. Such language is largely metaphorical, of course—a masculine poet might have feminine qualities within their poetry, and vice versa—but it is helpful, particularly from a historical perspective, to devote some emphasis to the unique perspective of a female (or feminized) gaze, something quite new in the long tradition of ekphrastic poetry. Beyond these matters, the unique way of seeing that the poetry of Guest and, especially, Bishop exemplifies is a frame that describes anonymous, aesthetically diminished art works—rather than, say, a Grecian urn, or a painting by Brueghel—a tactical maneuver that turns memory and personal implication into the center piece, rather than the art object itself. This transition away from museum pieces and into personal artifacts, I argue, is central to the continued evolution of the relationship between works of the period, and I make the case that a similar emphasis on the memorializing quality of the visual objects represents the dominant strain of the poems devoted to and about photographs that I discuss later in the dissertation. The various relations of word and image taken up in this dissertation seek, then, to trace out

this history, and to also illuminate the implicit relations among tradition and innovation so important to the very evolution of that tradition.

In “The Dialectics of Poetic Tradition,” Harold Bloom describes an essentially antagonistic relationship between tradition and the new, original writer, arguing as follows:

literary tradition begins when a fresh author is simultaneously cognizant not only of his own struggle against the forms and presence of a precursor, but is compelled also to a sense of the Precursor’s place in regard to what came before him (*Critical Theory Since Plato* 1186).

Although similarly interested in the operations of the past upon the present, Bloom’s perspective differs significantly from T.S. Eliot’s seminal formulation in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” which views the relationship between the new writer and the tradition as an essentially symbiotic one. As Eliot writes:

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists ... The necessity that he shall conform, that he shall cohere, is not one-sided; what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it (*Critical Theory Since Plato* 761).

The language of Eliot’s tradition and of Bloom’s concept of belatedness evoke questions of the relationship between tradition and evolution in this dissertation in important ways. Poems about art objects, after all, have been around for a very long time — at least as

early as Homer's much cited description of Achilles' shield. Furthermore, poems about art object continue to be written; indeed, the twentieth-century epoch with which this dissertation is mainly concerned is rife with example. Most every major poet seems to have taken a try at an ekphrastic poem, in one guise or another. What is so intriguing about recent works that are deliberately stepping into a very old poetic tradition is the dialectical relationship between tradition and evolution that these poems embody. The new ekphrastic work, in other words, is indebted to its predecessors even as it outdoes or goes beyond them — surely no poet is interested in repeating work that has already been written by others and, yet, these previous works are required to make the innovations of the new work comprehensible. A clear example of this may be seen in a brief comparison of Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and Wallace Stevens's "Anecdote of the Jar." The Keats poems, so archetypically essential to any discussion of word and image relations is as follows:

Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,

Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,

Sylvan historian, who canst thus express

A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:

What leaf-fring'd legend haunt about thy shape

Of deities or mortals, or of both,

In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?

What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?

What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?

What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard

Are sweeter: therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;

Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,

Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:

Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave

Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;

Bold lover, never, never canst thou kiss,

Though winning near the goal - yet, do not grieve;

She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,

For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed

Your leaves, nor ever bid the spring adieu;

And, happy melodist, unwearied,

For ever piping songs for ever new;
More happy love! more happy, happy love!
For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd,
For ever panting, and for ever young;
All breathing human passion far above,
That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd,
A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,
And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?
What little town by river or sea shore,
Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?
And, little town, thy streets for evermore
Will silent be; and not a soul to tell
Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.

O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede

Of marble men and maidens overwrought,

With forest branches and the trodden weed;

Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought

As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!

When old age shall this generation waste,

Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe

Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty," - that is all

Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

Stevens:

I placed a jar in Tennessee,

And round it was, upon a hill.

It made the slovenly wilderness

Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it,
And sprawled around, no longer wild.
The jar was round upon the ground
And tall and of a port in air.

It took dominion every where.
The jar was gray and bare.
It did not give of bird or bush,
Like nothing else in Tennessee.

Adopting Bloom's terminology, one may usefully begin by saying that the concerns of belatedness and anxiety articulated by Bloom appear in the late style artist as an anxiety before himself: his mortality, that is, the unsatisfactoriness of what his epoch deems possible in art, and (closer to Bloom still) the anxiety the late style artist feels in the present moment as he stands after the great work he has already done. Belated, in other words, but in relation to himself, and anxious before the work he has already done and which he must now, if he is to continue to produce, surpass, move beyond, and answer to in some way. In Eliot's work, on the other hand, tradition is the key term that may help to inform one's thinking about late style. For Eliot, the tradition is both malleable and stable, an assemblage of works that, in their relationship to one another, form the tradition. The tradition acts as a collective utterance of a civilization – a distilled

national (or, in Eliot's case, Western) consciousness that the new writer must not only come to terms with but with which he must also, himself, interact in a comprehensible way. In this paradigm, literature is viewed as perpetuating itself in a Janus-like manner, holding its gaze both forward and backward: "the historical sense," writes Eliot, "involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence"(761). Taking Shakespeare—both what he did in his later period of writing, and what late style discourse has done in absorbing his later works into its own canon—I would like to explore this fundamental tension between looking forward and looking backward as it relates to the discourse of late style, a discourse fundamentally concerned with a writer's ability to look past his own work and past the possibilities and conventions of his time, even as he looks past and into his own mortality.

There are three main streams of research that have helped to shape this dissertation. The first consists in seminal texts from the tradition of sister arts scholarship. This field, which takes the relationship between the visual and verbal to be interconnected—either symbiotically or through contention—may be regarded as opening with Plato's discussion of mimesis and its dangers in the Republic. Plato's well known hierarchical reading of visual and verbal representation remains a constant reference point throughout sister arts scholarship, picked up once more in Horace's similarly influential *ut pictura poesis* statement in his *Ars Poetica*. Leonardo da Vinci's Renaissance codification of perspectives on visual and verbal relations in *Trattato della pittura* offers an essential statement on the privileging of the visual, as well as foundational statements on the *paragone*. The nature of the discussion that exists from

Plato to da Vinci is one that is fundamentally concerned with the end aims of art rather than the formal and practical differences between the mediums.

It is not until Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Laocoon, or On the Limits of Painting and Poetry* that sister arts scholarship becomes fundamentally interested in discussing the formal differences between visual and verbal representations as media. Lessing's statement on these differences, as I have noted above, remains essential to the field. More recent theorizations of sister arts scholarship, such as Jean Hagstrum's seminal *The Sister Arts: The Tradition of Literary Pictorialism and English Poetry from Dryden to Gray*; Richard Wendorf's edited collection *Articulate Imagism: the Sister Arts from Hogarth to Tennyson*; and Mario Praz's *Mnemosyne: The Parallel Between Literature and the Visual Arts* have all provided essential, genealogical readings of the parallels between poetic and visual representation.

Writings specifically on ekphrastic poetry that I have found most beneficial include core texts, like W.J.T. Mitchell's *Iconology*; Grant F. Scott's *The Sculpted Word: Keats, Ekphrasis, and the Visual Arts*; John Heffernan's *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery*; and Murray Krieger's *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign*. Krieger and Mitchell have been especially important. The latter's far reaching claims for the impact of the visual and a structuralist search for the core ways that visuality makes meaning, has been an essential component in my thinking about the allure of the visual, especially to modernist poetics. Mitchell develops this idea over the course of several books, including *Blake's Composite Art: A Study of the Illuminated Poetry*; *The Language of Images*, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*; and *What do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images*. Krieger's

work is much more closely aligned with the world of the literary, especially the poetic, and his claims for the ultimate viscosity of the poetic text—its “still motion,” which freezes the meaning of a poetic text into one totalized impression, as Krieger sees it—is an important claim for the unique viscosity of poetry. Krieger’s statements on this concept are developed in major works such as, *Words about Words about Words: Theory, Criticism & the Literary Text*; *Poetic Presence & Illusion: Essays in Critical History & Theory*; and *The Problems of Aesthetics: A Book of Readings*.

Finally, writings by philosophers on the potentialities of poetry and poetic meaning—including poetry’s relationship to the visual, as well as writings on poetry’s own peculiar modes of representation and thinking—include works by Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Merleau-Ponty, and Derrida. The most important of these have been Heidegger’s *Poetry, Language, Thought*; and, *What is Called Thinking*; Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (especially the picture theory of language); Merleau-Ponty’s *Philosophy of Perception*; and, *The Visible and the Invisible*; and Derrida’s *The Truth in Painting*; *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*; and, *Copy, Archive, Signature: A Conversation on Photography*. These writings have helped to shape my reading of how poetic language works to extend beyond the verbal, sometimes into the terrain of the visual, sometimes into the terrains of thinking and the philosophic. Most profitably for me, this particular strain of philosophic writings makes large and adventurous claims for the way poetic language makes meaning, claims that often rely on analogies between the poetic and the visual. Throughout, this dissertation seeks to present an historical overview of the relations between visual and verbal art forms, grounded strongly in the Renaissance and extending to more recent theorizations. Although I make

reference to a wide range of ekphrastic texts, I narrow my focus to the paragonal nature of these texts and to the ways in which they serve to highlight the entrenched tensions between visual and verbal representation. It is precisely these tensions, as I will later argue, that begin to dissipate as one approaches the modern period.

I begin by outlining the historical transition of ekphrasis from a Sophist, rhetorical exercise of scrupulous, surface description to a poem that, like Keats's "Ode On A Grecian Urn," meditates on an art object and vigorously seeks for its interior significance. In "Ode On A Grecian Urn," Keats clearly wants the urn to 'speak' its interior, mystical significance; its importance is far beyond its phenomenal status. As Helen Vendler notes, the poem's final utterance—"Beauty is truth, truth beauty, '—that is all/Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know"—in fact is "spoken by the urn" (*The Odes of John Keats* 134). "The whole last sentence of the poem is the sentence of the speaker who, in his prophecy, recounts what the urn will say to succeeding generations" (*The Odes of John Keats* 134). This central verbal/visual work by Keats helps me to make several important points about the ekphrastic poems of Elizabeth Bishop in my first chapter. It is not difficult to see a masculinized paradigm in the paragonal gaze. Given the overwhelming predominance of male writers within the tradition of ekphrastic poetry, and the already gendered language of ekphrastic theory itself, there is a clear interest in reading Elizabeth Bishop's poems, in part, in similarly gendered terms – if only to counterbalance an already gendered lexicon of interpretation. As Sara Lundquist writes of Barbara Guest, so too might one write of Bishop:

Because Barbara Guest's work [or Elizabeth Bishop's] offers the rare perspective of a woman in the position of viewer, respondent, "envoicer,"

and maker of the poetic meaning, it offers to complicate and inform theories of gendered art criticism which analyze the male gaze. To look at a painting via a poem by Guest [or, again, Bishop] is to enter the arena of the “female gaze” (265).

Bishop and Guest’s ekphrastic poems afford the opportunity to view a female poet as viewer, and not (as is perhaps more the norm) as viewed; within the long, rich tradition of ekphrasis both poets delineate two very important challenges to tenants which seem to be taken as apodictic within modern ekphrastic theory: that the poet does battle with the object of art, subduing it within language, and that the poet seeks to appreciate and praise, even while outdoing it. It is clear that Guest and Bishop’s ekphrastic poems depart strongly from some central, normative attributes of how critics and poets alike have defined and described ekphrastic poetry. For instance, contrary to the modern ekphrastic poet’s usual choice of identifiable art objects, Bishop (and Guest) choose works that no reader may ever view. In Bishop there is no intertext as there is when W.H. Auden and William Carlos Williams describe the fall of Icarus as it is depicted by a canonical painter. Bishop in poems such as “Large Bad Picture” and “Poem” describes paintings done by a ‘great-uncle’ that, if they exist at all, certainly cannot ever be viewed by the reader. Eliminating the intertext in the poems of Guest and Bishop significantly undercuts any competitive stance between poet and the art object under consideration. In these poems, moreover, these art objects are never museum pieces¹ [8], and none of them are objects of

¹ In chapter one (pp.29-45) of *The Sculpted Word: Keats, Ekphrasis, and the Visual Arts* Grant F. Scott cites this distinction and cites foundational examples of the paragone from antiquity (taken mostly from the 4th-century B.C. *Greek Anthology*.)

aesthetic reverence. Instead, their worth is found in their ability to evoke and emplace memory. This memorial function of the art object is a topic that I continue in the following chapter devoted to poetry and photography.

This chapter begins with Baudelaire's statement on photography in the Salons and extends the terrain of ekphrastic theorization set up in my initial chapters to the subject of poems about photographs. This is both new and exciting terrain. Although most of what has been said about the relationship between visual and verbal representation may be applied to the relationship between poetry and photography, much of the work of this chapter will be aimed at establishing the unique, phenomenological status of the photograph. Leaning heavily on both Benjamin and Barthes, it is my central assertion that the photograph functions largely as a device for involuntary memory within poems that evoke the photographic. There are numerous significant poems from this period that directly engage the photographic; the overwhelming majority of them deal with memory. Moreover, these are not—in contrast to most ekphrastic poems—works that celebrate or describe a canonical, viewable work of art. Rather, the photographs and photographic vision presented in works by Williams, Frost, Guest, Pound, Stevens, Snodgrass, Merwin, and others, are personal objects that stabilize and evoke the mnemonic capacities of the art object.

In my final chapter, I discuss the relationship between poetry and film. This relationship is one of method more than one of content. In this chapter I pursue the connection between Sergei Eisenstein's articulation of montage and the copulative ideogram and H.D. and Ezra Pound's work, including H.D.'s writing on film and Imagism, as well as Pound's manifesto of Imagism. Pound's discussion, like Eisenstein's,

centers on analogies between thought, visuality, and the verbal, with both thinkers using the Chinese written character as an analogy for the simultaneously presented model for thinking that Pound and Eisenstein see as the main aim of their respective arts. By reading Imagism through its debt to and relationship with developments in the filmic arts, this chapter will bring together film, lyric, and ekphrastic theory in an original way; yet my extension of ekphrasis to the filmic will remain carefully grounded in the tradition of sister arts scholarship. In addition to readings in methodological similarities between film and Imagist poetics, I will also present numerous readings of specific poems that directly engage the filmic arts. These truly ekphrastic poems, by poets as diverse as Rene Char, Robert Frost, and W.H Auden, render films, film scenes, the experience of viewing films, and the faces of cinema within poetic form, turning film into the objet d'art of their ekphrases. This chapter will therefore conclude my discussion of the evolving relations between the visual and the verbal with readings in film's complete synthesis of the two media.

This is essentially a dissertation about the evolution of the relationship between visual and verbal representation. As I see it, this is largely a movement from paragone to symbiosis. Along the way, as my conclusion attests, the relation among these technically divergent forms shows itself to be a very porous border. Through a methodology that incorporates pertinent perspectives from continental philosophies, detailed readings of poetry from several traditions, and a genealogical approach to the history of the idea of the visual and the verbal, this dissertation will show how the deepened complexities that innovations in the visual arts led to mutually enriching responses in the verbal arts. As my conclusion will show, not only does the poetics of modernism come to embrace the

visual, but it in fact absorbs into itself many of the capacities long held to be the terrain of the visual. Rather than being an appropriative and final paragonal urge, I read this aspect of modernist poetics as one that shows its poetry to be responsive to changes outside of its own medium in remarkably sensitive and complex ways.

Chapter One

Out of the Museum and into the Attic: Surface and Interior in the Ekphrastic Poems of

Elizabeth Bishop and Barbara Guest

our visions coincided – “visions” is

too series a word – our looks, two looks

-- “Poem”

In her seminal essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” Laura Mulvey speaks of the pleasure of looking, of scopophilia, in gendered terms, describing the “male gaze” as one which is active, possessive, and dominant. As Mulvey argues, “in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female,”(19) a split in which “the determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure”(19). In a subsequent article entitled “Afterthoughts on ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,’” Mulvey adjusts this paradigm slightly, speaking not simply of a male viewer or a female object but of masculinized and feminized viewers/objects: by rendering the distinction as an adjectival one, Mulvey gives her terminology greater flexibility, suggesting, for instance, that a male poet could possess feminized qualities—including a feminized gaze—just as a female poet might possess masculinized attributes.

The notion of feminine qualities—of what Mulvey calls a feminized, non-possessive gaze—seems particularly pertinent to a reading of Bishop’s ekphrastic

poems,² where the poet's pleasure in looking, her scopophilia, becomes central to her poetics, and shows itself to be a looking which is non-possessive and non-competitive. Contrary to the normative, masculinized drift of ekphrastic poetry, Bishop does not write in a competitive manner about well known works of art; nor does she seek to possess these objects by writing them. Rather, she portrays objects of minimal aesthetic worth, often domestic, anonymous pieces which have been found in attics or casually passed down by family members. By doing so, Bishop avoids the tendency toward a masculine (or masculinized) impulse within ekphrastic poetry—possessive, domineering, competitive—in favor of a process which seeks the internal, domestic significance of these art objects. This non-possessive, non-competitive way of looking at and writing an objet d'art into a poem is a remarkable singularity of Bishop's ekphrastic poems, a quality readily identified as what Mulvey and others would call feminized. As such, Bishop's poems are an excellent vehicle by which to reconsider some of the central assumptions of ekphrastic theory itself, particularly those which emphasize the possessive, competitive, masculinized nature of the ekphrastic enterprise.

Ekphrasis (ek-phrassein: to speak out, to tell, to speak the name of) began as a rhetorical exercise within the Progymnasmata, a Sophist manual of style.³ As its root suggests,

² The question as to whether ekphrasis warrants the status of a genre has been widely discussed. Murray Krieger calls it a genre; James Heffernan calls it a mode; some critics warrant it no special literary status at all, since its presence occurs in various genres and because it cannot be distinguished by formal features. Of course, as Heffernan notes, both these objections could be made against Elegy (*Museum of Words* 194n). My own preference is for the term subgenre, which identifies ekphrasis as a type of lyric specifically defined by its taking of an art object as its subject matter.

³ Discussed in "Classical Ekphrasis," from Grant F. Scott's *The Sculpted Word: Keats, Ekphrasis, And The Visual Arts*, (pp. 1-14).

ekphrasis involved scrupulous descriptions of persons, places, or things, a process intended to describe the object so fully that the listener or reader would feel that they were in its presence. Thus, ekphrasis is originally defined by its technique, not by its choice of an objet d'art. It is, however, not surprising that the object of such concentrated, descriptive attention was eventually to focus on art objects, where the concentrating eye is likely to be most rewarded. Although contemporary ekphrastic theorists tend to speak of classical ekphrasis in terms of its focus on utilitarian objects⁴ (the most famous of these being Homer's description of Achilles' shield), it is clear that the utility of the object, for the poet, has always owed a great deal to the object's artistry. For instance, Homer's interest in the bas-relief artistry of Achilles' shield anticipates ekphrastic poetry's own eventual transition to a focus on objects which are nominally works of art. Seminal examples of this transition include Lucian's first century AD depictions of paintings by Zeuxis, Philostratus's *Imagines*, and Callistratus's fourth century AD descriptions of statuary.⁵ These poems differed from their predecessors in making ekphrasis not only an exercise in scrupulously presented description, but also a presentation of the making of verbal art from visual art.

Perhaps the most important theoretical discussion of the making of verbal art from visual art may be found in Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Laocoon, or On the Limits of*

⁴ As Scott writes, "[in classical ekphrasis] the things described – shields, cups, brooches, cloaks, tapestries – are not nominally works of art but utilitarian objects that are personal and portable"(1). James Heffernan's discussion of the genealogy of ekphrasis in *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery*, which focuses on Homer, Virgil, and Dante, provides an excellent overview (pp.9-46).

⁵ *The Sculpted Word: Keats, Ekphrasis, And The Visual Arts* 5.

Painting and Poetry.⁶ Sister arts scholarship owes many of its most enduring precepts to Lessing's assertions in *Laocoon* and contemporary ekphrastic theorists such as Murray Krieger and James Heffernan locate much of their thinking (by extension or difference) within Lessing's paradigm.⁷ It is a paradigm whose first principles are focused on the differing methods of visual and verbal representation. As Lessing writes, "painting and poetry ... make use of entirely different means or symbols – the first, namely, of form and color in space, the second of articulated sounds in time"(91). Above and beyond this spatial/temporal antithesis, "the symbols of poetry are not merely progressive, but [they] are also arbitrary"(Lessing 97). One can hear, in a post-Saussurian theorist such as Krieger, the semiotic and postmodern extension of Lessing's eighteenth-century distinction between the spatial/temporal antithesis stated in terms of a contemporary interest in the problematic of representation.⁸ As Krieger writes in *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign*:

⁶ *Laocoon* was first published in 1766. What I have called the "enduring" power of its precepts may, of course, be formulated less positively, as it is in Joseph Frank's *The Widening Gyre* (1963), which interrogates Lessing's longstanding prescriptive definition of the division between the spatial medium of painting and the temporal medium of poetry. Frank writes of the definition's critical entrenchment: "Lessing's attempt to define the limits of literature and the plastic arts has become a dead issue; it is neither reiterated nor contradicted but simply neglected"(3).

⁷ It may be said that the seminal texts of modern ekphrastic theory answer Frank's 1963 challenge. Krieger's 1967 essays, "Ekphrasis and the Still Movement of Poetry; or *Laocoon* Revisited" provides the sort of revivication and interrogation which Frank saw as absent from the sister arts' critical landscape. Subsequent works, such as W.J.T. Mitchell's "Space and Time: Lessing's *Laocoon* and the Politics of Genre" represent a continuation of ekphrastic theory's effort to address Lessing.

⁸ The consideration of *Laocoon* in David Wellbery's 1984 essay "Lessing's 'Laocoon': Semiotics and Aesthetics in the Age of Reason" brings Lessing into post-Saussurian discussions of sign theory.

how can words try to do the job of the ‘natural sign’ (i.e., a sign that is to be taken as a visual substitute for its referent), when they are, obviously, only arbitrary – though conventionally arbitrary – signs? All the complexities of my subject [ekphrasis], its unanswered questions, follow from the need to sustain the two opposed halves of this puzzle (2).

Ekphrastic theory grows out of a desire to investigate the very antithesis which Lessing formulates between visual and verbal signification. James Heffernan has suggested that all ekphrastic theory is coordinated around the breach (of ekphrastic poems themselves) of “the theoretical barriers that Lessing erected between poetry and the visual arts: between poetry as an art of conventional signs marching along in time and painting as an art of would-be 'natural' signs deployed in space”(Museum of Words 1). Where Lessing describes the antithetical nature of the visual and verbal arts, ekphrasis (in theory and in practice) examines the ways in which this antithesis, this tension, manifests itself within an ekphrastic poem. Lessing declares the antithesis, while ekphrasis challenges and interrogates it.⁹

Central to this tension is the notion of the *paragone*, Leonardo da Vinci’s term for the competitive relationship between the arts, a competitive aspect consistently associated with, and indeed evident in, ekphrastic poetry. The *paragone* is often viewed as the ‘other side’ of Simonides’s more symbiotic formulation that “painting is mute poetry, poetry a

⁹ Grant F. Scott goes so far as to suggest that in the period before Lessing’s prescriptions (figured as almost prelapsarian) the problematics of ekphrasis did not communicably exist: “In Homer’s ekphrastic Eden,” Scott argues, “there are as yet no special rules for describing static objects, no prescriptive Lessingesque categories respecting time and space, succession and simultaneity”(5).

speaking picture.” It is a tension born of what W.J.T. Mitchell has called “ekphrastic anxiety”: the fear that the image’s power will render silent the poet’s attempt to capture and contain it within words (170-76). It is not difficult to see a masculinized paradigm in his paragonic gaze. Given the overwhelming predominance of male writers within the tradition of ekphrastic poetry, and the already gendered language of ekphrastic theory itself, there is a clear interest in reading Bishop’s poems, in part, in similarly gendered terms – if only to counterbalance an already gendered lexicon of interpretation. As Sara Lundquist writes of Barbara Guest so too might one write of Bishop:

Because Barbara Guest’s work [or Elizabeth Bishop’s] offers the rare perspective of a woman in the position of viewer, respondent, “envoicer,” and maker of the poetic meaning, it offers to complicate and inform theories of gendered art criticism which analyze the male gaze. To look at a painting via a poem by Guest [or, again, Bishop] is to enter the arena of the “female gaze” (265).

Bishop’s ekphrastic poems affords the opportunity to view a female poet as viewer, and not (as is perhaps more the norm) as viewed; within the long, rich tradition of ekphrasis she delineates two very important challenges to tenants which seem to be taken as apodictic within modern ekphrastic theory, that the poet does battle with the object of art, subduing it within language, and that the poet seeks to reverence and name the significance of the art object, even while outdoing it. Clearly these suppositions are gendered readings, and there is great merit in countering these implicitly gendered accounts with a careful reading of the productions of a female poet within a tradition that has been gendered in masculine terms. One gendered reading may help to illuminate

another, the implicit presuppositions of one informed by the declared suppositions of another.

To whatever degree one may attribute the difference to gender, it is clear that Bishop's ekphrastic poems depart strongly from some central, normative attributes of how critics and poets alike have defined and described ekphrastic poetry. To begin with, contrary to the modern ekphrastic poet's usual choice of identifiable art objects, Bishop chooses works which no reader may ever view. In Bishop there is no intertext as there is when W.H. Auden and William Carlos Williams describe the fall of Icarus as it is depicted by a canonical painter.¹⁰ Bishop, however, in poems such as "Large Bad Picture" and "Poem," both discussed below, describes paintings done by a 'great-uncle' which, if they exist at all, certainly cannot ever be viewed by the reader. Eliminating the intertext significantly undercuts any competitive stance between poet and the art object under consideration. In Bishop's poems, moreover, these art objects are never museum pieces, and none of them are objects of reverence.¹¹

In removing a knowable intertext, Bishop greatly mollifies the question of the *paragone* in favor of emphasizing the experience of looking at the art object, since this experience is all that the reader can know. Of course, the absence of an identifiable intertext is not entirely unique to Bishop's ekphrases; however, the spirit in which Bishop

¹⁰ Respectively, "Musée des Beaux Arts" and "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus," both after Breughel's canvas.

¹¹ In chapter one (pp.29-45) of *The Sculpted Word: Keats, Ekphrasis, and the Visual Arts* Grant F. Scott cites this distinction and cites foundational examples of the *paragone* from antiquity (taken mostly from the 4th-century B.C. *Greek Anthology*.)

writes about a great-uncle's canvas instead of a canvas by Breughel is amplified by the aesthetic quality of the objects she chooses: they are collectively an unpromising, junky assortment.¹² This arrangement, I would argue—her poems on art objects—brings into relief a central aspect of her poetics:¹³ the play between surface meaning and what I will call interior or ontological meaning.¹⁴ In “Large Bad Picture,” for instance, the title of the poem presents the paradoxes of surface and interior significance in about as condensed a form as one could imagine: the title lets us know about the object's aesthetic value, and yet the existence of the poem suggests a tell-worthiness above and beyond the painting's surface appearance (why, after all, is Bishop writing about this painting if it is “bad”?). What one notices first about the poem is that its organization is spatial and static:

¹² For instance, even though Keats himself in “Ode on a Grecian Urn” has written a notional ekphrasis, where the reader lacks an intertext, the object is clearly revered.

¹³ The general interaction between surface and interior in Bishop's poetry receives various specific manifestations within criticism of her work. For instance, Harold Bloom in his Foreword to *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*, speaks of her “famous eye” as one which looks past “surface” into what is “impossible to see”(x); Helen Vendler writes of the complications of domestic surfaces and the unnerving strangeness beneath such surfaces in “Domestication, Domesticity, and the Otherworldly”(ed. Schwartz 32-48). The commentary of C.K. Doreski in *Elizabeth Bishop: The Restraints of Language*, articulates Bishop's concern with surface and interior significances in terms of the philosophical positions of Idealist and Realist aesthetics (pp. 16-33), while Allan Williamson simply frames his discussion of surface and interior under the rubrics of “inner and outer worlds” in Bishop's poetry (“A Cold Spring: The Poet of Feeling” 99).

¹⁴ In reference to Bishop's poems on art objects, by “surface” I mean the art object's physical, phenomenal status/appearance: the paint on the canvas, the shape and construction of the monument; by “interior” I mean the object's non-physical, ontological significance—the memories which a painting ‘holds,’ the act of commemoration contained within and signified by a monument. By “interaction” I mean to highlight that these realms do not exist in isolation from one another within any given *objet d'art*, although for heuristic reasons Bishop may present them as though they do.

Receding for miles on either side

into a flushed, still sky

are overhanging pale blue cliffs

hundreds of feet high,

their bases fretted by little arches,

the entrances to caves

running in along the level of a bay

masked by perfect waves.

On the middle of that quiet floor

sits a fleet of small black ships,

square-rigged, sails furled, motionless,

their spars like burnt match-sticks.

“On either side,” “hundreds of feet high,” “bases,” and “middle” are all spatial indicators.

There will not be, as in Keats’s “Epistle to John Hamilton Reynolds,” a progress of “white sails” around a point. These sails are furled, and the sea itself is merely a “quiet floor.” The ships “sit” in its “middle,” “motionless.” It would be hard to write a larger

stasis than this.¹⁵ What is being depicted is the speaker's response to a large, bad picture; the stasis of the poem projects the viewer's frozen reaction to the painting.¹⁶ Bishop's static lines produce an image of a painting devoid of what Lessing calls the "pregnant moment," the embedded narrative which a visual representation captures by suggesting, but not depicting, a visual scene's climax.¹⁷

A play between the visual and verbal begins to assert itself more clearly as the poem, still moving spatially, moves up from its description of the ships, toward the sky, beginning to assert an imaginative, vertical movement. This movement culminates in a rupture of the verbal sign within the painting:

And high above them, over the tall cliffs'

¹⁵ As Penelope Laurens notes, however, "if the 'large bad picture' is an example of naive art the poem that describes it displays [...] technical command [as Bishop] makes her poem appear as simplistic as the picture"(83). In fact, as Laurens continues, "Bishop's imitations"(84) of "technical roughness"(84) actually "call attention to [Bishop's] poetic refinement"(84). In a manner similar to the 'clean' diction used to depict the greasy scene of "Filling Station" (where the gentility of "quite thoroughly dirty" amplifies the scene's dirtiness), the excessive anaphora of "Large Bad Picture"'s opening stanza, and the poem's uncertain slipping in and out of ballad stanza, mark Bishop's subtlety of poetic technique.

¹⁶ In some respects the poem is, like Diderot's *Salons*, a piece of art criticism. Its title is the first indication of this, and the subsequent infertile rendering of the painting marks just how unmoving the experience of looking at the painting is. See C.K. Doreski's *Elizabeth Bishop: The Restraints of Language* (pp. 26-28) which explores this point. However, as I will argue, Bishop is ultimately moved by the painting or, at least, by the imagination.

¹⁷ Lessing writes of the 'pregnant moment': "If the artist ... can only make use of a single moment, and if the painter in particular can use this moment only with reference to a single vantage point ... then it is evident that this single moment and the point from which it is viewed cannot be chosen with too great a regard for its effect. But only that which gives free rein to the imagination is effective ... we must be able to imagine"(19). The fertility suggestive "pregnant moment" is that moment which both directs and frees the imagination.

semi-translucent ranks,

are scribbled hundreds of fine black birds

hanging in n's in banks.

The painting's mimetic, representational power fails: the birds are simply "scribbled" n's (figuring the birds as "n's" marks the verbal sign's intrusion, as letters enter into the visual surface of the painting¹⁸); and this mimetic breakage is followed by an imaginative surge. Despite Elizabeth Bishop's acclaimed descriptiveness,¹⁹ her poems on art objects consistently illustrate a process in which surface description ends not in clarity but in a breakdown of the surface, mimetic representational accuracy of the art object.²⁰ Surface fails to be anything but artifice as, again and again, Bishop's description of surface culminates in perplexity. In "Poem," for instance, the speaker says of the landscape painting—"a speck-like bird is flying to the left/Or is it a flyspeck looking like a bird?" In

¹⁸ This process also occurs in "The Map," as "the names of seashore towns run out to sea/the names of cities cross neighboring mountains"(*Complete Poems* 3).

¹⁹ It is an interesting subtext to the current discussion of Bishop's poems on arts object to note that her own poetic technique has often been placed in an analogical relationship to the visual arts, particularly painting. Fundamentally, the various critical manifestations of the analogy all amount to different ways of saying that Elizabeth Bishop's poems are intensely descriptive of surface detail. Critics have long spoken of Bishop's "painterly technique"(Meyer Shapiro 296), describing her poems as reminiscent of "abstract paintings"(Robert Lowell 186) and "little stained glass pieces"(Oscar Williams 185) whose descriptiveness is a verbal "chiseling and decorating"(David Kalstone 10). The examples are numerous, and their persistence is compactly summarized by the "famous eye" epithet which came to be attached to Bishop (Harold Bloom x). The analogy is in fact one which Bishop herself seemed to welcome: "I think I'm more visual than most poets," she once said in an interview. "Meyer Shapiro, the art critic, said about me: 'She writes with a painter's eye.' I was very flattered. All my life I've been interested in painting"(ed. Schwartz 296).

²⁰ I am using "mimetic" in its general sense (i.e. imitation).

turn, this breakdown heralds an imaginative move beyond phenomenal surface toward an effort to access the object's interior, ontological significance. Similarly, in "Large Bad Picture" the painter's 'look' manifests a lifeless objet d'art, an enormous, clichéd depiction of a 'sublime' landscape—enormous cliffs, ocean waves, brilliant sun—which produces bathos in the viewer.

The poet's second 'look' moves toward the interior of the object, avoiding a masculinist impulse in favor of a process which seeks the internal, domestic significance of the object. Contrary to Robert Dale Parker's suggestion that Bishop's choice of a 'bad' picture is an "effort to displace blame"(60) for a "strain[ed]" effort to "poeticize whatever is handy"(60), the 'badness' of the painting is in fact an illumination of the 'goodness' of the imagination and of the commemorative, domestic value of the objet d'art.²¹ This is, I would suggest, why Bishop is writing about a "bad" painting—to showcase the force of the imagination to enter, animate, and become engaged by an imaginative interior. Far from a paragone or a masculinized gaze that challenges and seeks to dominate the painting, Bishop's look, her gaze, improves upon the painting. The combined effect of writing of a "Large Bad Picture" which no reader can view, painted by a great-uncle, is a supreme deflation of the aesthetic object. The result of this deflation—which resists the typical view of ekphrasis as a paragone, a battle between substantial art forms—is a focused concern with the object's interior meaning: Bishop's art objects send—indeed, must send— one racing toward interiors precisely because their aesthetic worth is

²¹ Parker objects to Penelope Lauren's reading of the prosody of "Large Bad Picture" as deliberately rough. For Parker's challenge of the idea of what he calls "ironically bad poetry" see *The Unbeliever: The Poetry of Elizabeth Bishop* (pp. 60-1) where he asserts, essentially, that the distinction is impossible to make.

immediately undercut. The significance becomes one of more domestic qualities such as memory, personal significance, and commemoration. Bishop's modest choices are (as Marianne Moore said of Bishop's poetry) "spectacular in being unspectacular,"(177) since their mediocre appearance and aesthetic value propel the poet (and reader) past surface toward interior.²²

The tension between stasis and motion in "Large Bad Picture" is repeated (rather frightfully) in "Cirque d'Hiver," which describes an ornamental wind-up toy ("a little circus horse ... [who] bears a dancer on his back.") – another decidedly atypical, and definitely domestic, choice for an ekphrasis. The pair are wound-up by a "big tin key" that sets them going. Although at first moving rather festively (like the "Cirque" half of the title) the scene becomes one of a pathetically captive, death-like state (reflected in the title's "d'Hiver). The stasis and motion halves are unnervingly joined within the poem: the horse and dancer "flit" and "spray" and "dance," while all along a "little pole ... pierces [the dancer] body and soul." This pole "goes through" the cantering horse, "and reappears below ... as a big tin key." The governing tension of the poem is clearly between stasis and motion, which even the title of the poem has suggested in joining winter (death; stasis) to the frenetic, carnivalesque landscape of the circus. The figures themselves, by being cruelly granted souls within their mechanical, repetitive bodies also embody this tension:

She stands upon her toes and turns and turns.

A slanting spray of *artificial* roses

²² From Moore's 1946 review of *North & South*, "A Modest Expert: *North & South*"(ed. Schwartz 177).

is stitched across her skirt and tinsel bodice.

Above her head she poses

another spray of *artificial* roses (emphases added).

The structure of the poem repeats the thematic emphasis on stasis/motion and artifice. Where “The Monument” structurally mimics the monument’s stacked, tall, lopsided structure, “Cirque d’Hiver” presents its pierced wind-up toy within five metrically (mechanically) regular stanzas of five-lines each, rhyming perfectly throughout (abcbb defee ghiih ...). The structure itself is mechanistic, and this structural mimicry of the toy’s nature closely binds the poem itself to its subject. The importance of this binding is furthered by the way in which the depicted toy depends so entirely upon the temporal: it is wound up—with a “big, tin key”—and its motion moves down the page. That is, the toy’s life (or duration) is coeval with the life or duration of the poem: it moves (mechanically) through the stanzas of the poem. The duration of each is exactly coterminous. In binding subject and structure (artistic toy and poem) so closely together, “Cirque d’Hiver” may in part suggest, like “12 O’clock News,” a figurative rendering of a (frustrated) compositional process, where a wind-up toy, a “big tin key,” replaces the more violent analogies of “12 O’clock News.”²³ The final stanza suggests just this:

The dancer, by this time, has turned her back.

²³ From the *Geography III* collection (*Complete Poems* 174), “Twelve O’Clock News” portrays the writer’s desk as a terrain of war, landslide, and death. The poem is filled with extraordinarily suggestive images; for instance, Bishop’s interrogative figuring of a “typed sheet” as “An airstrip? A cemetery?” suggests, as Lloyd Schwartz has noted, that the poet either “flies, or dies”(145).

He [the horse] is the more intelligent by far.

Facing each other rather desperately –

his eye is like a star –

we stare and say, “Well, we have come this far.”

The horse’s “eyes” of the first stanza have been transposed into “eye,” a term which more directly suggests “vision” or “perception.” This movement to “eye” (plus its modification by “like a star”) lends the mechanical horse a horrible grandeur, which furthers the effects of the “big tin key” “pierc[ing] his soul.” At this point the poem becomes prosopoeical: like Keats’s *Urn*, the object “speaks”—that is, the look shared between speaker and object says “*well, we have come this far*”—and the poem (conterminous with its object) ends. Again, we have two looks, but they have become frighteningly inverted. From the horse’s perspective (and he clearly is granted one) he is looking at the one who, presumably, wound him in the first place. Since we know that he is “intelligent,” has a “soul,” “real white hair,” and an eye “like a star” it can be assumed that all his mechanically “cantering,” “bowing,” and “clicking” are undesirable. The speaker sympathizes with the horse; this sympathy is clearly derived from all the attributes which the horse is given and their incommensurability with his conditions. Furthermore, the poem and the toy are, as I have said, coexistent and coterminous: each moves as the other moves and, ultimately, dies as the other dies. It would seem that the toy (in dramatizing the repeated, still movement of a “pierced soul” driven by a “big tin-key”) goes a long way to suggest a poet’s struggle to capture the impulse of a poem and

get it onto the page. Indeed, one could hardly find an object more saturated with its viewer's projections: each figure is granted a "soul"; the horse is "melancholy" and "intelligent." By the final stanza the dancer, the horse, and the poem have all "died"; they are released from their captive motion, and the final line of the poem inverts the two looks of the poem as the speaker's identification with the horse (in a rather terrifying moment) turns the observer into the observed.

"The Monument," from *North & South*, dramatizes Bishop's interrogation of surface and interior significance through the device of a conversation poem in which two speakers (a narrator and her companion) discuss an abstract monument. The poem acts as an illuminating (and at times humorous) guide to the reading of Bishop's ekphrastic poems. As C.K. Doreski suggests, the reader as much as the conversant must "make something of [the monument]" (28). When the companion asks,

"Why did you bring me here to see it?

A temple of crates in cramped and crated scenery,

What can it prove?"

the reader of Bishop's ekphrastic poems (which, again, tend to focus on anonymous, aesthetically dubious, and historically unimportant art objects) certainly sympathizes with the question.²⁴ But the object in "The Monument" is only a "temple of crates" to one of its viewers; to the other it is monumental. Bishop's effort to account for an object's

²⁴ This important point will be returned to momentarily. For now it is sufficient to highlight what "The Monument" dramatizes, namely Bishop's use of unpromising art objects to highlight her fascination with the often disparate relationship between surface and interior, or ontological, significance.

ontological interior, for its significance, in spite of an unpromising exterior, is dramatized by the speaker of the poem who is interested in the object's non-physical significance. Her companion, however, cannot overcome the object's unpromising physical exterior. This focus is central to much of Bishop's poetry,²⁵ but "The Monument" is unique in separating the perspectives, the two looks, into the two voices of dialogue.²⁶ Placing the two looks within a dialogic format enforces Bishop's view of the relationship between surface and interior: the physical brings the non-physical into presence, but the beguiling physical appearance of the monument must be passed through if one is to access its interior.

Shaped in two long stanzas of various 'stacked' pieces, like Bishop's description of the monument itself, "The Monument" seems a failed, incommunicative dialogue which simply passes from description to question, with little reciprocity between the speakers. However, the participants of this dialogue communicate to the reader by not being able to communicate with each other. Given the divergent nature of their two looks, they cannot communicate. The monument stands in their way. The first speaker begins:

Now can you see the monument? It is of wood

built somewhat like a box. No. Built

²⁵ Consider "The Fish," "At The Fishhouses," and "The Filling Station" in which, respectively, an ugly fish is described in minutia which ends in a reverie of "rainbow, rainbow, rainbow"; a scene of buckets, fish scales, and worn knives becomes a visionary moment; and a gas station description which ends, "somebody loves us all."

²⁶ The dialogue is essentially Platonic, but with the curious inversion of the unknowing participant providing the questions.

like several boxes in descending size

one above the other.

Following the first speaker's long, opening description (the poem's first forty lines) the companion simply replies by denying that the monument has any value at all.²⁷ The scrupulous surface detailing has done nothing to mitigate the companion's imaginative paralysis, but it has shown us that surface is—initially—important. It provides a locality, a presence, for interior, ontological significance. This relationship is expanded in "Poem," discussed below, in which the same succession of denials which the companion of "The Monument" enacts are again enacted, but with the dialogue of "The Monument" transposed into the single speaker of "Poem" who in fact will answer to all of the denials of artistic 'worth' which the companion of "The Monument" expresses.²⁸ In the dialogue of "The Monument," however, questions do not find answers.

The companion's first denial seems merely senseless; referring to the monument's carved sea she asks,

"Why does that strange sea make no sound?"

²⁷ A monument which makes its signified unclear seems self-contradictory. However, in comparison to some of the major monument poems of the English and American traditions—Coleridge's "Kubla Kahn," Shelley's "Ozymandias," Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium," and Stevens's "Anecdote of the Jar"—Bishop's mysterious monument is not perhaps eccentric, although it is certainly less direct in its signification than the monument poems of her contemporaries John Berryman and Robert Lowell, respectively "Boston Common" and "For the Union Dead."

²⁸ Discussed in detail below in my reading of "Poem."

Is it because we are far away?

Where are we? Are we in Asia Minor,

Or Mongolia?

This is an objection to the work's inability to accurately represent nature (the "sea"). The second speaker desires absolute mimesis, and the monument's inability to deliver it is the grounds for her judging it to be a beguiling failure. This denial is, like all of the second speaker's denials of the monument's worth, based upon its physical, surface appearance. Following each denial, the replies of the first speaker move successively away from physical surface in an intensifying attempt to reveal the imaginative interior of the monument. The first speaker (who is as deaf to her companion's way of seeing as she is of hers) responds to the complaint of mimetic fidelity and the question "where are we?" with more imaginative, expansive description:

An ancient promontory,
an ancient principality whose artist-prince
might have wanted to build a monument
to mark a tomb or boundary ...

Her companion simply reasserts her objection to the object's mimetic accuracy:

"But that queer sea looks made of wood,
half-shining, like a driftwood sea.
And the sky looks wooden, grained with cloud.

It's like a stage-set, it is all so flat!

Those clouds are full of glistening splinters!

What is that?"

The other simply responds, "It is the monument," and the companion interjects, objecting to the monument on aesthetic grounds:

"It's piled up boxes,
outlined with shoddy fret-work, half fallen off,
cracked and unpainted. It looks old."

The other again speaks from the perspective of an imaginative interior or, as Doreski asserts, from the perspective of an "idealist aesthetic"(32), attempting to account for the monument's external, physical condition as in itself ontologically significant, suggesting that "all the conditions of its existence/may have flaked off the paint." Exasperated by the first speaker's imaginative, projective explanations the companion asks:

Why did you bring me here to see it?

A temple of crates in cramped and crated scenery,

What can it prove?

For the companion, the object's representational surface blocks any knowledge of its interior, monumental significance. For the first speaker, however, mimetic failure and surface enigmas actually provide a passageway from surface toward a knowledge of

interior, where the full significance of the monument is actually harbored. As such, the speaker's final response to her companion (the poem's entire second stanza, in which dialogue becomes monologue) detaches from questions of physical surface, and slowly and imaginatively attempts to lift back the monument's veil. This final look ("watch it closely") is actually located within the monument's interior, where its significance—its "beginning"—can be seen:

The monument's an object, yet those decorations,

give it away as having life, and wishing;

...

It may be solid, may be hollow.

The bones of the artist-prince may be inside

...

It is the beginning of a painting,

a piece of sculpture, or poem, or monument,

and all of wood. Watch it closely.

The historical transition of ekphrasis from a Sophist, rhetorical exercise of scrupulous, surface description to a poem which, like John Keats's "Ode On A Grecian Urn," meditates on an art object and vigorously seeks for its interior significance is reflected within the transitions which each of Bishop's ekphrastic poems undergo. They too begin with surface, but seek interior. In "Ode On A Grecian Urn," Keats clearly wants the urn to 'speak' its interior, mystical significance; its importance is far beyond its phenomenal

status. As Helen Vendler notes, the poem's final utterance—"Beauty is truth, truth beauty, – that is all/Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know"—in fact is "spoken by the urn"(The Odes of John Keats 134). "The whole last sentence of the poem is the sentence of the speaker who, in his prophecy, recounts what the urn will say to succeeding generations"(The Odes of John Keats 134). Bishop also wants her art objects to speak, but with one very central difference: she isn't seeking an interior, mystical significance but, rather, a personal, domestic, commemorative one.

In "Poem" Bishop observes a far more tranquil object; in fact, the miniature landscape painting is (on the surface) an utter banality. However, in its encyclopedic rendering of "our looks, two looks" (the poet's and her great-uncle painter) the landscape becomes anything but banal. "Great-uncle" provides an important irony: the pun on "great" is a humorous stand-in for the Great Masters of painting, or the master workman of Achilles' shield, since Bishop's great-uncle, as we are told in "Large Bad Picture," was only a "schoolteacher" who painted some less than masterful canvases. "Poem" (like "The Monument" and "Large Bad Picture") begins by working very hard to deny the surface/aesthetic 'worth' of the objet d'art which the speaker describes. In fact, "Poem" enacts the same succession of denials which the companion of "The Monument" had enacted, objecting to the painting's surface 'worth,' and to the fidelity of its mimetic representation. In "Poem," however, the two speakers of "The Monument" become transposed into one speaker, and every denial of exterior value moves the poem closer and closer into the painting's interior, domestic significance. The tiny landscape becomes a kind of personal monument which, in turn, becomes a monument to memory and the imagination.

The speaker of the poem moves from stanza to stanza along a series of commanding metaphors (each stanza has its own). Each of these metaphors encapsulates the central idea of the stanza and its attempted denial of the painting's value. The organizing metaphor of the first stanza is monetary:

About the size of an old-style dollar bill,

American or Canadian,

Mostly the same whites, gray greens, and steel grays

The worth of the work is immediately centralized, and from this uncertainty the organizing monetary metaphor—the most tangible form of worth that can be ascribed to an object—becomes denser: the painting “has never earned any money in its life”; it is “useless and free”; and (denser still) it has “spent” seventy years as a family relic handed down “collaterally over the years” (emphases added). Bishop begins “Poem” with questions of pragmatic worth, while echoing an ‘art for art’s sake’ notion in her evocative “useless and free.” The poem thrives on this kind of double-vision. Throughout, the two looks—the interaction of surface and interior significance—which have usually come in quite clear formation in Bishop’s earlier ekphrastic poems will blend and expand within “Poem.”

The second stanza, in a fashion similar to “The Monument,” is concerned with the object’s mimetic ‘worth’:

It must be Nova Scotia; only there
does one see gabled wooden houses
painted that awful shade of brown.

But the artifice of the poem is far too overt to allow a directly mimetic relationship:

a thin church steeple

-- that gray-blue wisp – or is it?

...

some tiny cows,

two brushstrokes each

...

a wild iris, white and yellow,

fresh-squiggled from the tube

...

a half inch of blue sky.

The distinction between “Art” and “life itself,” the Platonic notion of “art copying from life” which will dominate the final, stunning stanza of the poem is already everywhere present: the province is found in a color of paint and an architectural style; the rather ironically “wild iris” is “squiggled from the tube”; the “church-steeple” is (“or is it?”) simply “a thin-blue wisp”; and the “cows” fall from the brush, “two brushstrokes each.” All is artifice, as every living thing is given modifiers which highlight artificiality. The houses are the first ‘human’ detail we get of the landscape. The making tangible of a scene through the domestic is a consistent trope within Bishop’s poetry and, although they are not specific houses yet, the color—the “awful shade”—is known, and despite

being awful there is real affection in the recognition.²⁹ Thus far the unsuccessful attempts to attribute monetary or mimetic value to the painting have lent the poem an expository order. As we have seen previously, with the ultimate collapse of mimesis will come an imaginative expansion. The second stanza concludes with just such a collapse, in fact with a total collapse of mimesis depicted through an inversion/questioning of scale:

A specklike bird is flying to the left.

Or is it a flyspeck looking like a bird?

The third proposition of worth, falling quickly on the heels of this failed mimesis, is more complicated. The third stanza begins:

Heavens, I recognize the place, I know it!

It's behind -- I can almost remember the farmer's name.

His barn backed on that meadow. There it is,

titanium white, one dab. The hint of steeple,

filaments of brush-hairs, barely there,

must be the Presbyterian church.

Would that be Miss Gillespie's house?

²⁹ See Helen Vendler's essay, "Domestication, Domesticity, and the Otherworldly" which discusses the "continuing vibration of [Bishop's] work between two frequencies – the domestic and the strange"(ed. Schwartz 32).

The speaker can almost remember a farmer's name, because of a barn, which is there, titanium-white (she is still aware of the artifice, the color-tube name), but, she wonders, "is that Miss Gillespie's house?" Time has moved on, and the speaker's remembered place is in fact far predated by the place that the painter has captured. This growing march of time is pressed against the painting most fully in the final two lines of the stanza,

Those particular geese and cows
are naturally before my time.

Time begins to dominate the poem and it becomes dramatized in the following stanza, which tells the story of how the speaker acquired the painting.

A sketch done in an hour, 'in one breath'
Once taken from a trunk and handed over
Would you like this? I'll probably never
have room to hang these things again.
Your Uncle George, no, mine, my Uncle George,
he'd be your great-uncle, left them all with Mother
when he went back to England.
You know, he was quite famous, an R.A....

The 'life' of the painting is transient, and odd: it is never held onto and, yet, never entirely let go. This domestic detail begins the significant pattern of Bishop's feminized ekphrastic poems, which move away not only from reverence and paragonic battle but,

most fully in “Poem,” toward the personal, commemorative, domestic interior of the object d’art:

We both knew this place,
apparently, this literal small backwater,
looked at it long enough to memorize it,
our years apart. How strange.

The speaker’s “how strange” reminds one of the perplexity of “In the Waiting Room”’s “how unlikely,” but it is not a Cartesian crisis or anxiety before the other which causes confusion in “Poem”; rather, the strangeness is located within one’s solidarity with an other:

Our visions coincided -- “visions” is
too serious a word -- our looks, two looks:

Bishop here flatly renounces any notion of transcendental vision, and instead the emphasis is on the ‘two looks’ themselves:

art “copying from life” and life itself,
life and the memory of it so compressed
they’ve turned into each other. Which is which?
Life and the memory of it cramped,
dim, on a piece of Bristol board,

dim, but how live, how touching in detail

The two looks are many, but they are all pairs:

- his. 2. hers;
- his time. 2. hers;
- painting it 2. looking at the painting;
- looking at the painting of the place. 2. 'looking' at the memory;
- art 'copying from life' and 2. 'life itself';
- life 2. the memory of it
- the painting 2. the poem on the painting
- cause 2. effect ...

In addition, the speaker has her own two looks:

- life as it sits on the Bristol board, copied and
- the memory of life which the copy renders.

The two looks cannot be separated ("Which is which?") and they are not merely indistinguishable, but cyclical. The looker's creative chain is inverse to the painter's: he looked at life, at nature, and copied it, producing art, while she looks at art, the copy, and produces life, in turn producing art in the form of a poem, which communicates the vivid recovery of life which the painting had incepted. Far from a paragonic struggle, what one witnesses is a cooperative existence between painter and poet; and far from a grand

mystical search for the significance of an art object what one witnesses is a (literally) tiny art object being opened to reveal an immense, domestic, commemorative interior.

What is being portrayed is a personal memory of a place, and in Proustian fashion the memory is a kind of recovery. Like the miniature painting itself the past remains not-held, but not entirely let go. The past gets handed-down, commemorated, and held within the artistically domesticated scene. This presents the most richly dense version of the two looks of Bishop's ekphrastic poems and the fullest portrayal of the disparity between surface and interior significance. The two looks becomes in "Poem" a circularity which resist duality by becoming nearly inseparable: "life and the memory of it so compressed they've turned into each other"; "Life and the memory of it cramped, dim, on a piece of Bristol board":

dim, but how live, how touching in detail

-- the little that we get for free,

the little of our earthly trust. Not much.

As this ultimate worth of the painting is given Bishop returns to the original, commanding monetary metaphor, a gesture which makes "Poem" resistant to duality by recycling an earlier denial of worth as, now, an affirmation of it. The return of the monetary metaphor thus becomes an ironic confirmation of the painting's worth.

The stand alone phrase "Not much," although it also plays on notions of quantifiable worth, is decidedly not ironic. It is tragic, and it lets us know that nostalgia always involves pathos. For all the grandeur of the recovery, it still amounts to "Not

much.” It is enormous and tiny, at once, like the miniature landscape painting itself which is,

About the size of our abidance
along with theirs: the munching cows,
the iris, crisp and shivering, the water
still standing from spring freshets,
they yet-to-be-dismantled elms, the geese.

We return to a final rendering of the scene, present participle, on-going—“the munching cows”(trope of life returns); the iris is both crisp and shivering, the water is “still standing from fresh springets” (off the scene entirely) and the future, prophetic “yet-to-be dismantled elms.” The scene is expanded both temporally by “yet-to-be,” and spatially by the fresh (not depicted) springets described as feeding the pools. Surface significance has been entirely superseded by the object’s interior, commemorative significance as the surface miniature manages to hold, within its monumental interior, all “our earthly trust.”

The panoply of two looks manifested within “Poem” contains and expands many of the impulses which the earlier ekphrastic poems I have discussed contain: the two speakers of “The Monument” become the single speaker of “Poem” who much more skillfully and directly addresses the earlier poem’s perplexities; the clunky, clichéd scene of “Large Bad Picture”—painted by the same great-uncle artist who is credited with the landscape in “Poem”—is transposed into an ironically powerful “literal, small backwater” which ends not in static perpetuity but in a commemoration of enormities. Similarly, the

unpromising surface of “The Monument” (at least for the companion) highlights one of the most dominant and clearly gendered aspects of Bishop’s ekphrastic poems: they are focused upon extremely modest art objects. Of course, in “Large Bad Picture” a male family figure, an uncle, has produced a bad painting, but it is the speaker of the poem, whom one tends to equate with Bishop herself, makes it speak. The female voice, via her position as viewer, as female (or feminized) gaze, gives voice to the painting, without dominating, challenging, or falling into any evident ekphrastic anxiety.

In “Poem” what one ultimately comes upon is an ekphrastic poem by a female poet which not only averts all of the prototypically masculine aspects of ekphrases but also creates a deeply feminized vision of a painting, converting the art object into the utmost image of domesticity and commemoration, absent of possession, absent of competitiveness. The gendered attributes which tend to saturate ekphrastic theory seem, in fact, to have almost nothing to do with what actually happens in the ekphrastic poems of Bishop. “Poem,” Bishop’s final ekphrastic work, offers the fullest example in Bishop’s oeuvre of the ways in which her ekphrastic poems provide us with the opportunity to reread our own reading of the ekphrastic tradition, by illuminating the ways in which the gendered language of ekphrastic theory has, at times, exaggerated certain aspects of ekphrasis and obscured others. What, finally, is so remarkable about Bishop’s poems is how quietly they achieve this, and how masterfully they find a way to highlight the central meaning of ekphrasis—to call out, to name—by stripping away intertext and paragone and leaving what is already present in every ekphrastic undertaking: a poet revealing the core meaning of an art object, a meaning which the art object cannot speak on its own but which only the poet can speak for it. In this sense, Bishop stands in her

ekphrastic poetry as the prototypical poet, the prototypical maker, lifting back the veil of the object to name its interior, singular significance. Rather than being simply, or only, or even primarily a function of gender, this act seems to strike to the core of what the term poet itself signifies – a maker.

Chapter Two

Wallace Stevens: Poetry, Painting, Thinking

When General Jackson

Posed for his statue

He knew how one feels.

—From “The American Sublime”

Wallace Stevens’s essay, “On The Relationship Between Poetry and Painting,” delivered in 1954 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, stands out as one of the most overt—if not entirely straightforward—efforts of an American poet to articulate the nature of the word and image relationship at mid-century. Stevens, in many ways, exemplifies the notion that the link between painting and poetry was fundamental to the project of Modernism that it is indeed difficult to separate these two threads — it is arguable after all that Modernism began in 1913, at the Armory show of avant-garde art in New York. Stevens was an avid student of Modern Art, enthusiastically collecting catalogues from exhibits throughout Europe, and purchasing pieces within his financial reach.³⁰ In this chapter I am interested in two kinds of relation: first, in the relationship between the visual and verbal arts as it is expressed by and in the poetry of Stevens, perhaps the key figure of American modernist poetry; and, second, in the way that this relationship gets expressed twice by Stevens, in both his poetry and prose. I am

³⁰ For a sustained discussion of Stevens’s activities as a collector see Glen Macleod’s *Wallace Stevens and Modern Art: From the Armory Show to Abstract Expressionism*.

particularly interested in the double articulation that Stevens's interest in the relationship between poetry and painting gets *directly* in his prose and *indirectly* in his poetry. This double articulation offers a restatement of the question of intra-art relations, since the presentation of the idea of the relationship between poetry and painting is offered, by Stevens, in both poem and prose form. This double offering gives one a unique opportunity to see what the poems do with the relationship, since Stevens's principles are given in the prose, and their activity can be traced out in the poems. It is the activity of Stevens's thought on the question of painting as it influences his writing of poetry that most interests me, since it is clear that he is neither art critic nor art historian, and he is certainly not presenting a comprehensive aesthetics or discourse on sister arts scholarship in the prose. Nor should he need to. Stevens is first and always a poet; the question of what gets said in the prose about painting, and why Stevens's thought it was necessary to say it in this way, as a kind of adjunct to the poetry, is primarily interesting because it should, one hopes, help to illuminate the poetry. I do not mean to extract aphorisms or principles from the prose as a way of explaining the relationship between poetry and painting in Stevens's poems but, rather, to read the prose as a grounding against which can be more clearly witnessed the vibrant ways that the poems, in their turn, think this relation.

Stevens tries on numerous statements on the importance of painting to poetry throughout his essays and poetry. Ekphrasis is, of course, a very old genre, but it is also a malleable one, remade vividly alongside the new technologies of visual representation of the twentieth century—particularly, as this chapter hopes to show—the filmic. Although it may seem a stretch to see Keats's "Ode On A Grecian Urn" and John Berryman's

“Homage to Film” as poems linked by some fundamental concerns, it is my contention that not only are such poems in some measure comparable but that, more to the point, bringing them into contact with one another helps one to read them both more fully. To paraphrase Claudia Guillen’s conception of genre as a problem solving model, one may say that poems like those of Keats and Berryman, and a whole host of others, despite being different and remote from one another in many ways, are united by a common problematic, a common concern: reading them together helps to highlight, and therefore make more comprehensible, and more readily articulated, that problematic. The link is what has always been present in ekphrastic poems, from Homer to Ashbery: the verbal representation of visual representation.

What is so special about ekphrasis, if anything at all? All poems are about something, and poems of the American twentieth century have been nothing if not thing-obsessed. So, the place to begin is to wonder what it is that makes an objet d’art a different sort of thing than, say, a fork.

Fork

This strange thing must have crept

Right out of hell.

It resembles a bird’s foot

Worn around the cannibal’s neck.

As you hold it in your hand,

As you stab with it into a piece of meat,

It is possible to imagine the rest of the bird:

Its head which like your fist

Is large, bald, beakless, and blind.

Simic's poem, following the original dictum on the aims of ekphrastic poetry in the *Progymnastia*, certainly describes the object in close detail, enough as to "bring the object to presence," so it cannot (of course) be detailed description that makes ekphrasis unique. Description is fundamentally what poems do; more and more in the American twentieth century, where one of its great practitioners, Elizabeth Bishop, can sum up her poetics by simply (and probably a bit coyly) saying, "I just describe things in detail. That's all." Simic though here has telescoped the act of description, an act similarly telescoped in most every ekphrasis—since, fundamentally, a poem about an art object has to do something to raise the object before the reader's 'eye'—so I choose this fork poem to get us closer to what seems, in the Aristotelian sense, essential about ekphrasis: the object. Here we have a fork, as opposed to, say, a painting. Or a sculpture. What does Simic do with (or to) this fork, and why isn't it an ekphrasis: to merely say it is not ekphrastic because it does not describe an art object of course gets us nowhere. What we need to ask is, If Simic is doing a lot of the same things that a poem about an art object does in his poem about a fork, what can we say about the difference between forks and paintings that can help us to move to a clearer understanding of the unique work that poems about art objects are able to do?

To begin with, a fork is not a representation. It is a thing. And although one may make a fork stand in for something else—i.e. Civilization, gastronomy, imperialism, et

cetera—that is an intellectual super-addition to an object that has a real, material existence in the world. It does not intrinsically point beyond itself but, in Heideggerian terms, it points to its own purpose. A fork is what its general use is. Stevens, above all else, gives a sense of the suggestive powers of the objet d’art in his prose and poetic tellings of painting and other arts. Stevens was deeply interested in modern art, and like most of his imaginative life, this interest found its way into the poems. A list of poems from Stevens’s *Collected Works* that are *directly* about—or behaving in ways analogous to—the visual arts shows the influence as an important and continuous one throughout the poet’s career. These poems include, from *Harmonium*: “Six significant landscapes” (73), “Anecdote of the Jar” (76), “Tattoo” (81), “Theory” (86), “Thirteen ways of Looking at a Blackbird” (92), “Grapes” (110); from *Ideas of Order*: “American sublime” (), “Man with the Blue Guitar” (165-188); from *Parts of a World*: “Climate” 193, “Prelude” 194, “Pears” 195, “Water” 196, “Rhetoric” 198, “Loaf” 199, “Dump” 201, “Anything” 211, “Girl” 214, “Chaos” 215, “Morning” 219, “Common” 221, “Candle” 223, “Dish of Peaches” 224, “Hartford” 226, “Man and Bottle” 238, “Modern” 239, “Landscape” 241, “Landscape” 243, “Vase” 246, “Beard” 247, “Fine ideas” 252, “Phosphor” 267; from *Transport*: “Crude foyer” 305, “Man” 350, “Supreme” 382; from *Auroras of autumn*: “Large” 423, “Bouquet” 430, “Orb” 440, “Metaphor” 444, “Bouquet” 448, “Images” 463, “Images” 464, “New haven” 465, “Angel” 496; from *The rock*: “Plain” 502, “Green” 506, “Mountain” 512, “Illustrations” 513, “Birds” 517, “Moonlight” 531, “Thing” 534.

Obviously one cannot discuss them all, but it is worthwhile noting that Stevens’s first and final collections are marked by a deep interest in the visual arts, and that the interest abides strongly through his middle period as well. The importance of the visual arts to

Stevens's own poetics is made abundantly and explicitly clear in his essay, "On The Relationship Between Poetry and Painting."

"On The Relationship Between Poetry and Painting" appeared in print as part of Stevens's prose collection of essays, *The Necessary Angel*, a beguiling text that promises (but fails) to clarify the poetics of a poet whose poetics one would most like to see clarified. But one has to admit that such clarity would be at odds with the Stevens project. The essays of *The Necessary Angel* are oddly insistent on being clear about his views of poetry, so much so that his efforts at clarity fail under the weight of that insistence. The essays want so much to explain the largely inexplicable that they mostly occlude it; or, perhaps that is not quite correct. The essays do not entirely succeed as essays but they do, to paraphrase Stevens's contemporary, T.S. Eliot, offer important hints and guess. For a poet for whom "the subject of poetry is always the poem" it should not be surprising that the best statements on the art of poetry come in the poems themselves. What is most invaluable about the essays is their striving toward clarity. Specifically, the effort to make explicit in reflection what is present in practice offers, as I hope to show in this chapter, great insight into the work that the poems do, since it is work that cannot—judging by the ultimately unsuccessful striving of the essays—quite get done anywhere else. Therefore, I utilize *The Necessary Angel*, especially the section "On The Relationship Between Poetry and Painting," first, to illuminate the nature of this relationship, and why certain types of paintings and painters mattered to Stevens, and, second, to think about the ways in which this mattering shows up in the poems in ways helped along by one's reading of Stevens's essays — but also quite distinct from them. In this way, my aim is to get some factual things straight about what it was in the visual arts that Stevens felt was important to the

poetic arts at the middle of the last century, while also aiming to describe the ways in which the wonderful peculiarities of Stevens's poetry may be brought into relief by tracing out his thinking on a common ground—painting as it pertains to poetry—in his poetry and in his prose. This tension between exemplifying and explaining is central to Stevens's arts, and it is hoped that a guided reading of his views on painting in the essays and the poems will illuminate his method as well as the importance of this relation.

Given the apparent impenetrability of *The Necessary Angel*, one must first confront the question, "do Wallace Stevens's essayistic observations of poetry make a significant contribution to modernist poetics?" This question is one that, thus far, the corpus of Stevens criticism has yet to fully address. Only a handful of critical works devoted to Stevens contain a sustained discussion of *The Necessary Angel* and, with the exception of flourishes in 1951 and 1962³¹ (the respective American and British release dates of *The Necessary Angel*) relatively few articles have been published on Stevens's essays.³² The collective text which these critical writings form, when viewed in its totality, delineates two central tendencies: a paradigm in which *The Necessary Angel* is dismissively treated, and a related paradigm in which the critical interest in the prose is only tangential, exposition being centrally concerned with Stevens's prose as a means toward glosses of particular poems. If one traces this bifurcation to its beginning it becomes clear that the fork in the road is almost entirely dependent upon the attitude one

³¹ Representative reviews include "The Critical Angel," Bernard Heringman; "Duologue of Two O'Clock," P. Lebrun; and, "Three Modern Masters: Moore – Stevens – Williams," Byron Vazakas.

³² By "sustained" I mean to imply also "systematic." Each of the following works devote a full chapter to *The Necessary Angel*, treating it as a discrete object of inquiry. Frank Kermode's *Wallace Stevens* (pp.79-92); William Van O'Connor's *The Shaping Spirit: A Study of Wallace Stevens* (pp. 40-59); Joseph Riddel's *The Clairvoyant Eye* (pp. 17-50); and Abbie F. Willard's *Wallace Stevens: The Poet and His Critics* (pp. 236-245).

takes toward Stevens's reliance upon image and metaphor to shape his argument within the essays that constitute *The Necessary Angel*. For instance, the view that Bernard Heringman took in 1952 of *The Necessary Angel*'s opening essay, "The Noble Rider and The Sound of Words," remains paradigmatic of the dismissive view:

[Stevens's] execution is flawed. With a subject that requires explicit definition and logical development as well as simple, expository prose, the poet speaks in mixed metaphors and tangentially undefined constructs (242).

Heringman's reaction is to some degree reasonable. Stevens's presentation throughout *The Necessary Angel* is essentially a dialectical one and his central dialectic relies on the play between the metaphors and images in which he conveys his central assertions.

Despite critical efforts to doctrinize Stevens's essays on the grounds of their paraphraseable content (in an effort to 'apply' the essays as glosses to particular poems) the very structure of the essays is inimical to such a task.³³ Excepting the probing studies of Frank Kermode and Joseph Riddel, the history of critical writing on *The Necessary Angel* that proceed beyond dismissal is, almost without variant, a history of paraphrase.³⁴

For instance, William O' Connor's treatment of Stevens's prose, in *The Shaping Spirit* concludes a long paraphrase of "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" by stating that "the primary point of the essay is that a flight of the imagination in a poem or work of art has strength only in terms of its being related to what we know as real"(50). Helen Vendler's discussion, in "The Qualified Assertions of Wallace Stevens," of the problems

³³ For instance, Theodore Sampson's *A Cure of the Mind* (2000): "What [Stevens] does, if course, by visualizing reality is to create for himself an imaginative construct that allows his [sic] to resolve all his dualities and contraries"(176).

³⁴ Respectively, *Wallace Stevens*, and *The Clairvoyant Eye*.

associated with identifying doctrine so overtly in Stevens's work is pertinent to the current discussion:

Wallace Stevens has often been written about in terms of his doctrine, but his words suffer odd mutations as they are paraphrased, and what was a diffident suggestion ... becomes bold assertion as his 'doctrine' is condensed and solidified in the hands of his critics (163).

This is certainly often the case, and one should also add that the tendency to doctrinize Stevens's poetry is significantly aided by lackadaisical readings of the prose, a fact that becomes clear if one looks at the typical themes along which Stevens's poems are typically doctrinized. Additionally, as Joseph Riddel points out in *The Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens*, "as a gloss on the poems Stevens' essays have had the effect of reducing the earlier eloquence and joie de vivre"(2). Riddel's own exposition of Stevens's prose in the opening chapter of *The Clairvoyant Eye* immediately accepts the notion of the poetic image as a gesture of the self in search for order and, in doing so, is able to proceed to the more interesting task of attempting an exposition of the content of the prose in relation to the form they are given. This reliance upon image is an aspect well worth emphasizing in considering how Steven's prose and, indeed, the poetry as well, plays into and expresses the close relationship between word and image within modern poetry, of which Stevens stands as a great exemplum. Perhaps more than any other critic who has published a prolonged discussion of Stevens's prose, Riddel is very much aware of the careful incongruities of the prose and their manner of subsuming

essence into exemplum and, most essentially, Stevens's reliance upon image to make meaning with his words.

What has not been given full attention, however, is the degree to which the world of visual art and art objects in general dominate and actually provide Stevens with the raw materials of thought throughout the essays of *The Necessary Angel* — and not only in “On the Relationship Between Poetry and Painting.” Speaking, for instance, of the seemingly disordered images and examples which constitute "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," Riddel writes:

Designed for oral delivery at an academic symposium ... it plays brilliantly upon a few aperçus illuminated by a number of casual and often incongruous examples [such that] -.. what Stevens has to say has been said in the play of his mind upon the examples (21).

It is important to emphasize that these ‘examples’ are *all* items from the world of the visual and plastic arts — statuary, public sculpture, drawings, and paintings. Frank Kermode's discussion in *Wallace Stevens* similarly begins with an acceptance of the communicative viability of Stevens's images but extrapolates this view of Stevens's clustering of images into a view of *The Necessary Angel* as a kind of poem, variably defining it as "a collection of orbiter dicta on poetry by a working poet"(80), "topics for meditation"(80), “aphorisms”(80), “chance illustrations”(80), and, "prose-poems of a very curious kind”(83). An effort to define these essays as prose-poems does, it seems to me, effectively dissolve the essays (albeit slightly more politely) into something

‘incomprehensible.’ Riddel and Kermode both emphasize what is the central point of departure for this chapter’s discussion of Stevens's essays, namely that the argumentative logic of Stevens's presentation of a poetics in *The Necessary Angel* is another fold in the word and image relations that so compelled the poet, one that is discernible most clearly within the images of his argument and, more essentially, the metamorphoses that these images undergo throughout the essays, and I would like to extend this discussion to a consideration of the importance that these objects are all materials drawn from the visual arts.³⁵ Overlooking the link between word and image in Stevens’s prose, I would argue, leads Riddel and Kermode to fall short of a real delineation of Stevens's poetics—Riddel instead suggests that “the essays in conjunction with the poems, form a part of Stevens' Grand Poem”(41)—while emphasizing the word and image link throughout, I hope to show, is much more revelatory of why, exactly, Stevens *needs* the visual arts in order to express his ideas in the poems themselves.

Stevens’s most famous poem on an art object is the playful, “Anecdote of the Jar”:

I placed a jar in Tennessee,
And round it was, upon a hill.

³⁵ Although not central to this chapter’s primary concerns, Leonora Woodman’s articulation of Stevens’s association with the Hermetic Tradition in *Stanza My Stone* represents an essential articulation of the need, if Stevens’s poetics is to become more accessible to critical inquiry, of invoking pertinent metalanguages. Woodman writes of the prose: “The Stevens experienced a degree of tension between a felt need for secrecy (traditionally the mode of Hermetic speculation) and an equally insistent need for direct acknowledgement...seems to be implied in “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words.” See, also, James Longenbach’s discussion in “Why It Must Be Abstract”: Stevens’s “anecdotes are hermetic in the most precise sense: designed to conceal and reveal...”(83).

It made the slovenly wilderness
Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it,
And sprawled around, no longer wild.

The jar was round upon the ground
And tall and of a port in air.

It took dominion every where.

The jar was gray and bare.

It did not give of bird or bush,

Like nothing else in Tennessee.

The clear background poem here is quite obviously Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn." As is often the case of ekphrastic poems, it is the calling forth of previous poems within the genre that helps to give the new poem its meaning. In the case of Stevens, Keats's Ur-poem of an objet d'art is required to let in the irony of Stevens's poem. This "jar" is not simply a jar but, more to the point, it is a not-a-Grecian-urn. It is not sacrosanct. It is not ancient. It does not unfold the story of a distant civilization. It does not cause the poet to tremble before it, rapt with its "unheard music." This, after all, is merely an "anecdote"

— and not, certainly, an “ode.” The poem represents Stevens’s movement toward articulating an American sublime by playing off of the sort of heights to which the Romantics were able to at least try to reach. Indeed, in the poem of that name Stevens makes precisely this same point:

The American Sublime

How does one stand
To behold the sublime,
To confront the mockers,
The mickey mockers
And plated pairs.

When General Jackson
Posed for his statue
He knew how one feels.
Shall a man go barefoot
Blinking and blank?

But how does one feel?
One grows used to the weather,
The landscape and that;
And the sublime comes down
To the spirit itself,

The spirit and space,
The empty spirit
In vacant space.
What wine does one drink?
What bread does one eat?

Compellingly, while addressing the “mickey mockers” Stevens makes reference to another art object in this poem, the statue that “General Jackson / Pose for.” It is precisely this same statue that carries much of Stevens’s argument in a key prose passage from *The Necessary Angel*.

"The Nobler Rider and the Sound of Words" is a grand, panoramic presentation of the aesthetic capturing of the thing itself. It is an essay about the finding of words through the finding of images; an essay about the aesthetics of the verbal manifestation of poetry itself. All of this achieved through an important marrying of word and image throughout the entire essay, one exemplary of Stevens’s view of this essential modernist relation. Originally written for a 1941 symposium at Princeton, and first published along with symposium papers by I.A. Richards, Cleanth Brooks, and Philip Wheelright under the title *The Language of Poetry* the essay is (especially when read in its original, New Critical context) more than a little beguiling. The five sections into which the essay is divided seem to be almost entirely discontinuous; the diction and tone are casual and loose while the 'argument' is abstruse; the allusions are diverse and chaotic and they stay, as if forgotten, precisely where Stevens drops them. The moments of clear exposition are, without variant, encapsulated into near tautologies and, most beguiling of all, the

moments of intrigue come in odd surges of comprehension—an image, a tonal shift, a repeated phrase—which, just as they seem to be revealing to the reader an as-yet-unapprehended landscape, Stevens drops them, shifts, and moves on. It may not assuage one's frustrations to realize that Stevens is not blind to any of this:

Unless I had done these things, it might have been thought that I was [being] rhetorical, when I was speaking in the simplest way about things of such importance that nothing is more so (663).

Stevens's teasing admission of his deliberately non-linear style, when combined with an assertion of the essay's need for movement and vitality of argument, begins to clarify a central dialectic of the essay: the tension between that which is static and that which is dynamic. The difficulty of the essay is that the thing of “such importance that nothing is more so” which he is attempting to describe is, despite the philosophical thicket involved, best named “the thing itself” — the idea of the poem, in other words, before any poem has been composed. The list of potential intertexts that the phrase “the thing itself” invokes could scarcely be listed—let alone meaningfully discussed—in a short dissertation chapter; however, the nature of critics' persistent emphasis on Stevens's overt relation to philosophy, particularly to Kant's Ding an sich, warrants some discussion. As Bart Eeckhout points out: “the intellectual antecedents of [Stevens's] involvement [with Kant] are so easily traced that they have been summoned onto the stage time and again in Stevens criticism ...[the approach] is shopworn”(3). Kant is the clear antecedent, but Stevens's presentation is certainly not Kantian; moreover, Stevens's profundity is in his

manner, not in his invocation of a Kantian Ding an sich. To insist on Stevens's philosophical-ness based on the presence of numerous philosophical allusions ignores Stevens's own insistence regarding the relationship between philosophy and poetry, and distracts one's attention from the paramount importance of Stevens's manner of presentation. Indeed, the central critical division when it comes to readings of the essays does essentially depend upon a division between a privileging of form and a privileging of content. Michael Davidson's "Wallace Stevens and Contemporary Poetics" well articulates the division:

Commentators have amply considered [Stevens's] debts ... to Nietzsche, Bergson, Whitehead, Husserl and others. It seems pointless to argue against Stevens as a philosophical poet ... in favor of some inner narrative among the poems (149),

The question of the poet as a philosopher in this particular essay is, in Joseph Riddel's phrase on the same problem, essentially academic.³⁶ To be sure, the movement of Stevens's argument does itself convey content equal to what is said and, moreover, the "thrill in reading Stevens" is, as Jonathan Levin suggests in "Life in the Transitions," found in "[Stevens's] movement in and around and across such intellectual resting places"(78).

³⁶ As Riddel continues, deliberately obfuscating the critical notion of a "philosophical" poet, and the distinction between "philosophical" form and content: "Is T.S. Eliot, reflecting on his formal philosophical training in a poetry stuffed with learned allusions and philosophical echoes, more philosophical than one who plays with ideas by way of exploiting their poetic qualities?" (18).

Stevens's prose, I am arguing, exemplifies another fold in the word and image relations that make up his poetics by exemplifying a process by which the syntax of Stevens's images, and the logic of their metamorphoses, carry the great weight of his argument and meaning. Moreover, these images are consistently figures borrowed from the visual and plastic arts. Stevens's presentation, that is, in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" is constituted of a centrally evolving image — namely, an equestrian one. The sequence of images begins, one might say, in the loftiest of regions, with "Plato's pure poetry" (643). A presentation of Plato's figure of the soul quoted in a full fifteen-line passage from the *Phaedrus* opens the volume, "and it compels Stevens throughout. "Let our figure be of a composite nature - a pair of winged horses and a charioteer"(613). The image's intensity is such that it becomes the thing it names and we, in reading it, are soon "traversing the whole heaven"(643) along with the winged horses themselves. The figure, however, is "antiquated and rustic,"(643) Stevens writes. It is no longer satisfying and since it "adheres to what is unreal"(645) we cannot "yield ourselves"(644) to it. This is the opening image of Stevens's poetics, the apotheosis of height. Everything which follows is a mad decent. As in the contract between "Anecdote of the Jar," "Ode on a Grecian Urn," and "The American Sublime," Stevens cannot quite get off the ground — which is precisely the point.

What is so intriguing in the prose is what Stevens does to this original image, trying on various art objects as he thinks his way through the problem of trying to express "poetry itself" from within a milieu not given to such terrific imaginative flights.³⁷ The

³⁷ See Stevens in the Introduction to *The Necessary Angel*: "The theory of poetry, as a subject of study...seemed to me to be one of the great subjects of study. I do not mean

image turns past Don Quixote (another rider) and lands—having left Plato's ancient Greece—in the Early Italian Renaissance of Andrea del Verrocchio's “form of such nobility,”(646) his statue of Bartolomeo Coleoni in Venice.³⁸ The transition is from the ethereal to the bronze; Verrocchio’s image is adhered to the earth through bronze and the historic personage Bartolommeo Coleoni whom the sculpture embodies. Or, rather. the idea of whom the sculpture embodies:

On the edge of the world in which we live today, [Verrocchio] established a form of such nobility that it has never ceased to magnify us in our own eyes. It is like the form of an invincible man (64).

The insistence nudges the image slightly back toward the ethereal construction of Plato's. The sculpture is "on the edge of the world in which we live" and is, like Plato's noble rider, "a form of and idea." Both images are aesthetic representations, Plato’s poetic and Verrocchio’s bronze, of a form, a thing itself. There is not one single detail of the sculpture itself, no description of its symmetry, its line, its physical form in Stevens: the sculpture exists, as an image, as an idea cast in bronze. The next complete metamorphosis of the equestrian image lands us in America, outside the white House:

There is in Washington ... a statue of Andrew Jackson riding a horse with one of the most beautiful tails in the world. General

one more *Ars Poetica* having to do, say, with the techniques of poetry and perhaps with its history. I mean poetry itself, the naked poem...”(639).

³⁸ See Riddel’s expansion in *The Clairvoyant Eye* (pp. 20-22) of the debt that “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words” owed to Coleridge.

Jackson is raising his hat in a gay gesture, saluting the ladies of his generation (618).

This is precisely the statue described in the second stanza of “The American Sublime”:

When General Jackson
Posed for his statue
He knew how one feels.
Shall a man go barefoot
Blinking and blank?

What Jackson or, rather, what the sculpture of Jackson felt is the same as what Stevens feel — the pressure of the “mickey mockers.” The impossibility of making a Verrocchio in twentieth-century America, much less an ode on a Grecian urn. The dilemma of how to write from within a “dry time” takes a considerable position in Stevens’s poetry and prose. One answer is the kind of ironic gesture made in a poem such as “Anecdote of the Jar,” “The American Sublime,” “Man on the Dump,” and so on (the examples are numerous); another approach is to write the lofty poem, to attempt to “yield” to Plato’s winged chariot, but to witness this yielding as an expressing not simply of but *by* the thing itself—the poem itself—and not the work of the poet from within the “dry time.” Stevens's "The Reader" dramatizes this concept with great force.

Although it is a poem 'about' an abstraction rendered as an image, “The Reader” contains a certain level of narrativity. The poem exists solely in the past tense, a firmly

located past tense, but there is a sequence of events disclosed—a plot, so to speak—that one may follow. Put most simply: the poem's initial voice, written in the conversational tone typical of lyric that, as Paul de Man writes, "is often seen not as an evolved but as an early, and spontaneous form of language"(153), is rendered in the first-person I and relates a recalled event, opening the poem with the recollective "All night I sat reading ... a book." The presentation of a subject, a reading, and an object persists throughout, but the poem's central progression is fastened to a blurring of these components; the poem travels, like so many others, along an expansive ambiguity that amounts to a Stevensian clarity. It is a poem written on the principle of the pendulum, and everything is said in its swinging. The poem's title, the character of its nouns is in terms of the action that it performs —“reader”— signifying "one who reads"—thereby immediately emphasizing the act itself: the title's definite article renders "reader" as, simultaneously the definite “I” voice that first speaks and as a generic form of the definite in which "the reader" signifies a wider concept — the general category, “reader.” The poetic landscape is, however initially tiny.

All night I sat reading
Sat reading as if in a book
Of sombre pages.

One is tempted to tell stories about the poem, about the who, what, and when of its “I,” that, however much one understands the constitutively abstract voice of lyric, tends to promote a localization of the poetic voice in a single figure. But the "I" receives no

expansion, and the incantatory "All night I sat reading / sat reading" holds one's attention just as it holds the stanza's rhythm. Grammatically speaking the repeated "sat reading" is a phasal structure with the main verb followed by a present participle. the effect of which is to mitigate the past-ness of the phrase. "Sat" is rather a delicate way to bring the present participle into the past — compare, for instance "was reading," constructed of two verbs that absorb one another into a single concept of the past continuous. In the phrase "sat reading" each verb maintains a level of solidarity, the present continuous of "reading" somewhat mitigating the simple past of "sat." The construction has an essential thematic result: "sat reading" is the first and immediate opposition of a swerving between the static ("sat") and the dynamic ("reading"), an opposition that persists throughout the poem. The nuances are perhaps slight, but the poem reveals its internal tensions in such nuances as these. The poem's landscape further widens as the stanzas and it becomes rather unclear as to who is reading what. "Sat reading [as if I was in a] ... Sat reading [as if from a] ... Sat reading as if [what I read was a] ... Book of sombre pages":

It was autumn and falling stars

Covered the shriveled forms

Crouched in the moonlight.

No lamp was burning as I read.

A voice was mumbling ...

"It was autumn and falling stars / Covered the shriveled forms / Crouched in the

moonlight,” continues the opposition between the static and the dynamic: “falling” is the only present continuous verb in the stanza, everything else is past. Of course, “was” is the dominant verb that casts the entire image in the past, but the image is of leaves falling not *fallen*. The forms have shriveled (and statically remain so): the leaves are still falling. As an image “It was autumn and falling stars” refers to the leaves, which are figured as falling stars—quite accurate visually—but also echoing as, “since it was autumn the stars like the leaves quite expectantly were falling”: when the leaves come down, the stars follow, as in “The Death of a Soldier,” in which

Life contracts and death is expected,
As in a season of autumn
The soldier falls.

In autumn everything has an autumnal way and nature, as a process, adheres to everything.

In the center of the poem the sense of adherence is augmented as a second voice emerges:

A voice was mumbling, “Everything
Falls back to coldness,
Even the musky muscadines,
The melons, the vermilion pears
Of the leafless garden.”

The voice ‘speaks’—as in the speaking voice of the final line of Keats’s *Urn*—for a stanza and a half and, although it may be said to speak for the first voice, nearly as the first voice, it is, within the lyric landscape, a distinctly manifested voice: as Vendler writes, “voices in lyric are represented not by characters, as in a novel or drama, but by changing registers of diction, contrastive rhythms, and varieties of tone” (*Soul Says* 6). The quoted voice I in these terms traceably distinct from the first. The second voice is the speech of the landscape. The falling stars, leaves, shriveled forms, the moonlight: the universe that the perceiver apprehends. The reader looks upon the universe’s shriveled forms and falling stars and sees, in the natural processes, an utterance: “Everything / Falls back to coldness,” even the things of most vital fruitfulness, “the musky muscadines, the melons, the vermilion pears.” The surface reveals the forces that dictate this happening. In looking at the universe the reader looks upon the thing itself, and in writing this poem the poet gestures toward the poem itself—whose surface too reveals the forces that dictate its happening. The final stanza makes this point through a Stevensian clarity in which all the outlined possibilities converge in a condensation of images:

The sombre pages bore no print
Except the trace of burning stars
In the frosty heaven.

"The sombre pages bore no print" brings, via "sombre pages" one back to the opening stanza, the "trace of burning stars" echoes the second stanza's "falling stars" and "frost"

returns to the "coldness" of the third and fourth stanzas. The final stanza's voice, clearly not the second (but not necessarily the first) is now in a more highly abstracted presentation: the first person "I" is not used and the final stanza speaks the poem's conclusion as a comment upon the previous four stanzas evidently summarizing their significance, much like the conclusive utterance of Keats's 'speaking' urn and its pronouncement of truth and beauty and their entanglements. In one respect, the stanza completes the figuring of the universe as a text whose "pages" speak; in another, the reader is sent back to the page within his hands, the poem just read, whose "sombre pages" too "bear no trace / Except the trace of burning stars."³⁹ The poem itself falls through one's fingers, as leaves do, as stars do and its print is but a trace. The interstices created between the natural landscape and the poetic landscape reveals the essential movements that persist in both, as "The Reader" takes on its two forms: the "book" that is read "at night" but "by no lamp" is the universe. The external landscape of moonlight, burning stars, leaves and muscadines; it is also the poem that has just been read by 'us.' In either case, the reader is a reader of essences. As Stevens writes in "On the Relationship Between Poetry and Painting":

There is a universal poetry that is reflected in everything. This remark approaches the idea of Baudelaire that there exists an unascertained and

³⁹ The concept may clearly be seen to participate in the vast discussion of "Negativity" and the "Unsayable" in Stevens's language and poetics. The size of these terms however obfuscates rather than illuminates Stevens's presentation of what he calls the naked poem. The relationship does warrant identification and could be drawn out further, though the topic is outside the scope of this chapter. Wolfgang Iser's pronouncement, "in its undermined proliferation, negativity speaks for something that is arguably as real as anything else we know, even if it can be located only by carving out a void within what is being said" (xii).

fundamental aesthetic, or order, of which poetry and painting are manifestations, but of which, for that matter, sculpture or music or any other aesthetic realization would equally be a manifestation. ... That there is a universal poetry that is reflected in everything or that there may be a fundamental aesthetic of which poetry and painting are related but dissimilar manifestations (160).

This is a central characteristic of Stevens's poetics, an aspect taken up in the essays of *The Necessary Angel* as well. The poem partakes of the naturalized, the naturalized partakes of the poem. One would almost like to say that the universe copies the poem. On some occasions Stevens simply describes paintings in great detail, having an obvious penchant for Still Life painting, as exemplified in the poem "A Dish of Peaches in Russia"

With my whole body I taste these peaches,
I touch them and smell them. Who speaks?

I absorb them as the Angevine
Absorbs Anjou. I see them as a lover sees,

As a young lover sees the first buds of spring
And as the black Spaniard plays his guitar.

Who speaks? But it must be that I,
That animal, that Russian, that exile, for whom

The bells of the chapel pullulate sounds at

Heart. The peaches are large and round,

Ah! and red; and they have peach fuzz, ah!

They are full of juice and the skin is soft.

They are full of the colors of my village

And of fair weather, summer, dew, peace.

The room is quiet where they are.

The windows are open. The sunlight fills

The curtains. Even the drifting of the curtains,

Slight as it is, disturbs me. I did not know

That such ferocities could tear

One self from another, as these peaches do.

This technique, of absorbing observer into observed, is repeated in the related poem “A Study of Two Pears”:

I

Opusculum paedagogum.

The pears are not viols,

Nudes or bottles.

They resemble nothing else.

II

They are yellow forms

Composed of curves

Bulging toward the base.

They are touched red.

III

They are not flat surfaces

Having curved outlines.

They are round

Tapering toward the top.

IV

In the way they are modeled

There are bits of blue.

A hard dry leaf hangs

From the stem.

V

The yellow glistens.

It glistens with various yellows,

Citrons, oranges and greens

Flowering over the skin.

VI

The shadows of the pears

Are blobs on the green cloth.

The pears are not seen

As the observer wills.

In his chapter that discusses the first American poetic Renaissance⁴⁰—the transition from the “inventive” Puritan poetry of the 17th-century, to the “creative” poetry of the 19th-century—Roy Harvey Pearce elaborates a fundamental transition in

⁴⁰ *The Continuity of American Poetry*, especially chapter four, “American Renaissance 1: The Poet as Simple, Separate Person” (pp. 137-191).

the poet's view of the poet's position in the universe:

American poetry, as it emerged full-bloom in the nineteenth century, is essentially an antinomian poetry: declaring insistently that man too is a creator, that making a poem is an act of creation [and] not merely, as the Puritans had it, of invention (40).

One thinks of Walt Whitman's yawps, of Whitman as a kind of mythic figure who emerged to write a poetry whose affect on the landscape of American poetry behaves as a grand-performative utterance: his act of asserting an American poetry creates an American poetry. To call Stevens a central man immediately calls Whitman and Stevens into a degree of alignment: at the very least, one knows the lineage. Stevens speaks from the center of American modernism with Whitmanian significance, "writing the poems of our climate more definitively than any American since Whitman" (Bloom 1). But Stevens does not yawp and, despite the similarities that both Joseph Riddel and Diane Wood have admirably communicated, the apposition is most illuminating in terms of the differences between the two major men.⁴¹ As Pearce writes, "Stevens's identification of himself with Whitman is in the long run a matter incidental to the range and import of his poetry ... it is yet another means of consolidating gains and formulating losses" (380). Consider the near-dialogue of the following apposition:

Whitman: "America itself is essentially the greatest poem ..."

⁴¹ Respectively, "Walt Whitman and Wallace Stevens: Function of a 'Literatus,'" and *Walt Whitman and Wallace Stevens*.

Stevens. "In America there is not the slightest trace of the imagination ..."

The former statement is from the Preface to *Leaves of Grass*; the latter, written less than a hundred years later, is taken from *The Necessary Angel*. One wonders about the hundred years which passes there between Whitman and Stevens. For the critic engaged with the poem, history itself is engaged with the poetic. Both Whitman and Stevens are speaking at their respective ends of it. To be sure, they are speaking to each other. One may see the lineage even clearer in the following remarks about Emerson that might be illustratively applied to Stevens:

To make bearable the burden of his existence as a man living among men he often insisted, in his poems and out, that he was in fact revealing the unit of poetic and non-poetic reality; that he was registering the correspondence between the artist's mind and that of his world at large, that he was locating his subjects in a closed universe and was discovering the meaning that they at once took from that universe and gave to it (Pearce 190).

Indeed, at various points throughout *The Necessary Angel* Stevens makes just such an Association, often invoking—either through paraphrase or direct quotation—an aspect of Ernst Cassirer's aesthetics: "the true poem is not the work of the individual artist. It is the universe itself, the one work of art which is forever perfecting itself" (726). But what does the analogy reveal? A poem such as "The Reader" centrally deliquesces the poetic

and the natural landscapes together, revealing the essential movements that persist in both. If Stevens's is an antinomian poet, if he is an Adam, he names not by speaking first but by hearing first. A voice mumbles: "everything falls back to coldness," and the reader sees that it is so in the poetic and the natural landscape. It is so in the "burning stars," and it is so in the footfall of the poet's meter. One walks the poem as one would walk the "leafless garden," down each new stanza of the page, along its words "which [are] endlessly coming to be and passing away ... like all else" ("The Climates of Wallace Stevens" 186). Or, to put the matter more vividly, as James Baird via Stevens does in *The Dome And The Rock*, "A poem is 'a meteor,' it is 'a pheasant disappearing in the brush.' These notes from the Adagia qualify the essential character of [Stevens's] total poetry" (265). Both of Stevens's aphorisms present the same concept, that of a central tension between stasis and dynamism residing within the poem, as Adorno's writes in his *Aesthetics*, "Every artwork is an instant: even successful work is a cessation, a suspended moment of the process. As such it reveals itself to the unwavering eye" (6). This is not, as is often suggested, an epistemological problem suggested by Stevens's poetics; it is an aesthetic problem at the center of Stevens's poetics.⁴² As the poet writes in "On the Relationship Between Poetry and Painting":

It [poetry] seems to be a constructive faculty, that derives its energy more from the imagination than from the sensibility. ... The mind retains

⁴² For instance, J. Hillis Miller's "Wallace Stevens' Poetry of Being": [Stevens] comes to write a poetry of flickering mobility, a poetry in which each phrase moves so rapidly it has beginning and ending at once. Instead of being fixed and unyielding, a solid piece of language interacting with other words, each image recapitulates within itself the coming into being of the moment and its disappearance" (153).

experience, so that long after the experience, long after the winter clearness of a January morning, long after the limpid vistas of Corot, that faculty within us of which I have spoken makes its own constructions out of that experience, it if merely reconstructed the experience or repeated for us our sensations in the face of it, it would be the memory. What it really does is to use it as material within which it does whatever it wills. This is the typical function of the imagination which always makes use of the familiar to produce the unfamiliar. What there remakes seem to involve is the substitution for the idea of inspiration of the idea of an effort of the mind not dependent on the vicissitudes of experience (164-5).

Stevens's construction of his final image in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" is built upon a slippery chain of antecedents, pronoun after pronoun, to such a degree that the image washes itself away. We are left only with an utterance that clearly invokes the poem, as the essay ends with this: "and that, no doubt, is why the expression of it, the sound of its words, helps us to live our lives"(663). The Noble rider is poetry itself, and the poem is the sound of its words. The aesthetic capturing of the thing itself within the poem is an attempted binding, is the word-as-statue, as rock, within which poetry itself has its movement. "Poetry," Stevens writes in his introduction to *The Necessary Angel* "is a movement of the self in a rock"(639). But what is poetry itself, in isolation? It is in his final poem, "Of Mere Being"—an oddly mystical ekphrasis that evokes Keats's *Urn* and Yeats's bird of "Sailing to Byzantium"—that Stevens attempts a full presentation of the thing itself. It is perhaps the closest thing we have to a pure

aesthetic object in Stevens's oeuvre. "Of Mere Being" is a poem about which no stories can be told. It is like Flaubert's ideal book about nothing, only better, because it is entirely about itself. Everything about the poem resists thematization and paraphrase and it may only be meaningfully read in terms of movements that occur within the poem, the internal tensions which themselves produce the poem. It is a poem that finally forces one to see the internal tensions on which poetry itself, the naked poem, thrives.

The poem's title, at least initially, suggests exposition (i.e. "A Discussion Of Mere Being") but because the referent has been elided it renders the typical qualifying function of the prepositional phrase—particularly one beginning with 'of'—as strictly uncertain. This uncertainty is the poem's first and immediate expansion of the poetic landscape, referring to various grammatical nuances of possession, belonging, quality, topic, derivation, and relation. The poem's first two stanzas present two images (that are amalgamated into a third) but, more importantly, the stanzas present two initial movements; expansion of the temporal, and expansion of the spatial:

The palm at the end of the mind

Beyond the last thought rises

In the bronze decor.

A gold-feathered bird

Sings in the palm, without human meaning

Without human feeling, a foreign song.

The image is, concretely speaking, simple; there is a palm (not necessarily limited to the tree, but connoting equally the reaching, grasping quality of a hand) in an imaginative landscape, “beyond the last thought” in which a bird—perhaps “an objet d’art, a painting, a sculpture—“gold-feathered,” no less, is singing in an extra-human vernacular. The poetic landscape of the poem is enormous, and immediately so: we begin “Beyond the last thought,” beyond the superlative, in a sense, temporally and spatially and it is here, in this distant nowhere, that the palm rises. The first stanza simply presents its image and stops. The second stanza has immediate continuity, however, since the “gold” of the “gold-feathered bird” refers and articulates itself in terms of the “bronze” of the first stanza’s “bronze decor”: the second stanza’s bird sings in the first stanza’s palm. There is a curious momentum in these two stanza, a process in which the lines read as performative utterances, a momentum conveyed almost entirely by the two verbs—one per stanza—“rises,” and “sings.” Both verbs, like all the verbs in the poem, are in the present simple, a tense that creates a tenselessness by adhering strictly to an endless present. Emphatically expanding the poetic landscape, the palm rises (now and always); the bird sings (now and always). Despite the critical tendency to do so, it is not of central importance to interpret the bird or the palm as conceptually symbolic. Robert Buttel’s suggestion, for instance, In “‘Knowledge on the Edges of Oblivion’: Stevens’ Late Poems,” that the bird is “a kind of Romantic image ... an icon of mystery”(12) and the palm resonant of “biblical associations and connotations of victory”(12) is an interpretation which, valid or otherwise, is essentially unnecessary. The importance of such resonance is their tendency not to isolate but to enlarge meaning (to paraphrase Stevens’s own comments about Marianne Moore’s poem “The Ostridge”: there is a difference between Stevens’s bird and

the bird of the Encyclopedia). The bird may very well be an icon of mystery, but the central thing in terms of its life within the poem is that it initially rises, is distant, is precious, and has its conclusion in an image of descent. The central thing is to record the track the image makes, and to see what it reveals by what it presses against.

In many respects, Stevens's use of art objects—usually more traditional ones than the suggestive one in “On Mere Being”—is precisely employed to show how the looking poet may expand the terrain of the object being looked at. The poet, in writing the object, recomposes it, just as the artist had recomposed nature in his/her creation of the objet d'art. As Stevens notes in “On the Relationship Between Poetry and Painting”:

This is simply the analogy between two different forms of poetry. It might be better to say that it is the identity of poetry revealed as between poetry in words and poetry in paint ... I suppose, therefore, that it would be possible to study poetry by studying painting or that one could become a painter after one had become a poetry ... [and] ... No poet can have failed to recognize how often a detail, a propos or remark, in respect to painting, applies also to poetry. The truth is that there seems to exist a corpus of remarks in respect to painting, most often the remarks of painters themselves, which are as significant to poets as to painters (159-161).

And, later, following the very same thread:

The selection of composition as a common denominator of poetry and

painting is the selection of a technical characteristic by a man whose center was painting, even granting that he was not...poetry and painting alike create through composition (163).

Indeed, numerous poems display precisely this sense of the relationship between painting and poetry in Stevens's oeuvre. "Poem Written at Morning," for instance, recomposes the object of a still life canvas:

Poem Written at Morning

A sunny day's complete Poussiniana
Divide it from itself. It is this or that
And it is not.

By metaphor you paint

A thing. Thus, the pineapple was a leather fruit,
A fruit for pewter, thorned and palmed and blue,
To be served by men of ice.

The senses paint

By metaphor. The juice was fragranter
Than wettest cinnamon. It was cribled pears
Dripping a morning sap.

The truth must be

That you do not see, you experience, you feel,

That the buxom eye brings merely its element
To the total thing, a shapeless giant forced
Upward.

Green were the curls upon that head.

While “Angel Surrounded by Paysans” reproduces Pierre TalCoat’s *Still Life* as a dialogue between the main poles of Stevens’s poetics.

The painting:



Figure 1: Still Life by Pierre Tal-Coat. (Courtesy Peter Hanchak.)

In October 5, 1949, Stevens wrote to Paule Vidal, who had purchased the painting for him:

I have even given it a title of my own: Angel Surrounded By Peasants. The angel is the Venetian glass bowl on the left with the little spray of leaves in it. The peasants are the terrines, bottles and the glasses that surround it. This title alone tames it as a lump of sugar might tame a lion.

This painting inspired the poem "Angel Surrounded by Paysans" that Stevens sent to a literary magazine on October 13, 1949.

Stevens's nuanced and wildly creative ekphrasis of the Tal-Coat:

Angel Surrounded by Paysans

One of the countrymen:

There is

A welcome at the door to which no one comes?

The angel:

I am the angel of reality,

Seen for the moment standing in the door.

I have neither ashen wing nor wear of ore

And live without a tepid aureole,

Or stars that follow me, not to attend,

But, of my being and its knowing, part.

I am one of you and being one of you
Is being and knowing what I am and know.

Yet I am the necessary angel of earth,
Since, in my sight, you see the earth again,

Cleared of its stiff and stubborn, man-locked set,
And, in my hearing, you hear its tragic drone

Rise liquidly in liquid lingerings
Like watery words awash; like meanings said

By repetitions of half meanings. Am I not,
Myself, only half of a figure of a sort,

A figure half seen, or seen for a moment, a man
Of the mind, an apparition appareled in

Apparels of such lightest look that a turn
Of my shoulder and quickly, too quickly, I am gone?

It is, of course, from "Angel Surrounded by Paysans" that Stevens takes the title of his
prose poetics, *The Necessary Angel*.

These themes all rise, quite literally, once more in the final movement of “Of Mere Being.” The third stanza of the poem stanza is a new lyrical voice, the poem's second, speaking in a pseudo-direct address, offering the poem's most graspable moment:

You know then that it is not the reason
That makes us happy or unhappy.
The bird sings. Its feathers shine.

Again we are operating in the present simple of "sings," and "shines" as the stanza, after a brief transition to a relatively personal, conversational tone drops (and drops all the more intensely for the transition) back to an intensely abstracted voice . After an initial upward movement and expansion the poem comes to this, a nearly toneless, declarative stasis: "The bird sings. Its feathers shine." A rather denuded version of the art object in Yeats's “Byzantium,” just as Stevens had denuded Keats. But this taking away is, in Stevens, a remarkable way of adding, for the poem ends on an extraordinary lift, disguised in a curiously downward manner:

The palm stands on the edge of space.
The wind moves slowly in the branches.
The bird's fire-fangled feathers dangle down.

The final stanza's five definite articles, somewhat ironically, universalizes the

concluding image: that is, "the palm," "the edge," "the wind," "the branches," and "the bird" indicate not, as "the" would in reference to more concrete objects a specificity but behave, in relation to the image Stevens has composed, in an essentializing manner. It is *the* palm, *the* wind, and *the* bird that stand. The final *the* is one of the great moments of modern poetry. Everything in the poem has led to it, especially the extraordinarily ordinary diction of the preceding fifteen lines, consisting of (with the exception of two compound adjectives) only monosyllabic and disyllabic vocabulary, with a preponderance of monosyllables. Nothing previous is emphasized, but only presented without elaboration. "The wind moves," "The palm stands" — *but* "The bird's fire-fangled feathers dangle down." In a poem built entirely in the tenseless instant of the simple present one may say of such a line, "the poem happens here." The line's highly alliterative structure renders the line as almost pure music, while at the same time formally drawing attention for the first time in the poem to the presence of a maker, to something other than the mere being of poetry itself. The poem itself is iconic of poetry entering the poem, as it ends both formally and, in the content of its image of a feather dangling down, in an invocation of the act of writing of the quill dangling down. As Stevens writes, in "Man and Bottle," of the quill and its relation to the vital poem:

It is not the storm that is the quill, the page.

The poem lashes more fiercely than the wind.

If the content of the image which we have been following throughout the entirety of this chapter is to be meaningfully marked, the formal, processional movement of its

apotheosis in "Of Mere Being" must be conclusively marked. Here word and image meet, and the idea of the naked poem is, paradoxically, given a shape — briefly. The first stanza is verbally dictated by an upward movement, "rises"; the final stanza by a downward movement, "dangle down." In the distance between, everything has been indicated: the poem is born of its own ashes as poetry itself becomes language—embodied and consumed—in the necessary static-dynamic tensions of poetry. The poem, in its central tensions, speaks most clearly of the naked poem's passing, the breadth of its accelerando as it passes. There is no poem until the bird's fire-fangled feathers dangle down.

Chapter Three

The Uncanny Eye: Intersections of Poetry and Photography

Remarkably little has been written on the relationship between poetry and photography. In many respects, connecting these two mediums is more natural than drawing parallels between painting and poetry. The history of the relationship between painting and poetry is, however, not merely a longer one, but a much more fraught one that has directly engaged and enticed practitioners of both art forms for centuries. Painting and poetry's relationship can succinctly be encapsulated by the idea of the *paragone*, or competition between art forms, a term first coined by Leonardo Da Vinci which has been in circulation ever since. At its most fruitful, this rivalry has centered around the various signifying capacities of the visual and verbal arts, turning seemingly localized interests in the relationship between painting and poetry—or even specific painters and poets—into full-scale theorizations on the nature of visual and verbal signs. The well known arguments stress the contrasts between the spatial, static, natural nature of the visual sign and the temporal, narrative, arbitrary nature of the verbal sign. In this manner, even beginning with Plato, the relationship between painting and poetry has essentially served as a vehicle for discussion of the nature of signification and the possibility of meaning across visual and verbal media.

The relationship between poetry and photography is a far more intimate affair. Its concerns are smaller and more cooperative. It is historically much shorter, too, and the technical nature of the photograph, and its own slow entree into the realm of the

established visual arts, has undercut any paragonal urge that may have latently existed.⁴³ In many cases, poets who have directly discussed this relationship have not only viewed the origin of photography but, in many respects, have helped to articulate the meanings that became attached to the new medium. The sheer proliferation of the photograph—and even of the snapshot—in everyday modern culture has provided a realm of engagement not possible to ekphrastic poets composing poems about sculptures or paintings viewed in museums.⁴⁴ This realm is the realm of the personal, and it is this realm that is the particular provenance of ekphrastic poems focused on the photographic medium.

This chapter articulates the nuanced history of the relationship between poetry and photography, largely by considering poems that expressly engage with photographs and the way personal memory and the uncanny are expressed by poems as they engage the photographic medium.⁴⁵ The kinds of thinking that the visual field of the photograph makes available to the poet and the ways in which the poet's rendering of this field participate in, help to articulate, and diverge from the powers of the photograph is another important aspect of photographic ekphrasis addressed in this chapter. Poems about photographs and photography in general are certainly part of the larger ekphrastic tradition, I argue, though the cognitive space opened up by poems about photographs is not completely analogous to the space opened up by poems about paintings. Most succinctly put, this is because a photograph is not a painting. To help articulate this, much

⁴³ Indeed, as a less established visual art form it is arguable that photography had its own paragonal relationship with painting

⁴⁴ Ekphrastic poems about photographs, interestingly, are usually about personal photographs that serve as catalysts of memory. This is a subject I discuss in detail below.

⁴⁵ Much of what follows aims to trace the ways in which a poem about a photography that captures or catalyzes a memory is imaginatively a much different act than a poem that directly describes a memory, without the insertion of a photograph—a representation—between poem and memory.

of what follows is concerned with establishing how the experience of looking at a photograph diverges from the experience of looking at a painting. My interest in this divergence is primarily on the cognitive plane, though aesthetic concerns are obviously a part of any process of looking. While I do place poems about photographs securely within the ekphrastic tradition, I also suggest that the relation between poetry and photography offers a new way to view sister arts scholarship, one in which the uncanny nature of the photograph and, especially, of personal memory, is made apparent by the remaking of the photographic sign within the verbal terrain of the poem.

In an essay entitled “Fantasia on the Relations between Poetry and Photography,” Mark Strand makes an important distinction between family photos and what he calls “photos of the rest of the world”(98). According to Strand, it is the family photo that holds and expresses the power of the photographic medium most fully. As Strand writes:

Something about family snapshots sets them apart from photographs of the rest of the world. We look at them, feel more passionately about them.

They may be of ourselves, no doubt contributing to our greater absorption, but they don't have to be. They can be of anybody we are close to ... (98).

Strand, utilizing terminology from Roland Barthes's writings on photography, describes the power that these snapshots have over the viewer as a type of bruise, or “punctum.” Barthes, in *Camera Lucida*, describes the punctum as central to any truly arresting photograph, be it of one's family or self or of some aspect of, to borrow Strand's phrase, “the rest of the world.” As Barthes writes, the punctum is “that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me”(27) within the photographic representation. In

Barthes phenomenology of the photograph the punctum is his most fundamental concept: all photos which arrest, which seize the viewer, do so by virtue of the sort of experience the idea of the punctum articulates. The accidental nature is particularly crucial, and Barthes's articulation of the various "wounds" evident in photographs he finds especially moving offers an experiential, viewer-based perspective of the "accidents" that photographers, paradoxically, aim to capture.

What Barthes means by the punctum is partly what Strand means, though for Strand the bruising comes primarily from memory and time and the associations that the viewer has to the depicted subject of the family photo — either oneself or a loved one, almost always at a significant temporal remove. In other words, the punctum is not so much in the photo as it is in the provenance of the photo itself. In this sense, the personal nature of the photograph is essential to Strand's phenomenology of it (much more so than in Barthes's). Strand is well aware of the nuance he is adding to Barthes's terminology. "What we experience looking at family snapshots may not be, strictly speaking, what Barthes meant by punctum, but it is related"(99), he writes. It is related because the "occasions for reverie"(99) instigated by the viewing of a family snapshot call into play the various powers of the photographic medium that Barthes celebrates, including its connection to mortality, the accidental nature of its highest achievements, and the peculiar nearness and distance of subjects depicted in photographs. Perhaps a better word for the phenomenon Strand is describing is the "uncanny," and a more precise understanding of his particular usage of the term "punctum" is as a label for the personal element in the photograph that instigates the experience of the uncanny in the viewer.

Freud has, in his essay *Das Unheimliche*, given the definitive discussion of the uncanny. Most compelling about Freud's treatment is his insistence that the concept be understood as a part of the field of aesthetics, as a kind of dark side of the sublime. Discussing the difficulty of the task of describing just what, precisely, constitutes the uncanny, Freud announces the possibility of two methodologies, an etymological process (which will proceed by deductive means toward a definition) and a phenomenological method (which will move inductively). "I will say at once," Freud writes, "that both courses lead to the same result"(620). The result is that, "the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar"(620). This aspect of the uncanny is nowhere better captured than it is in the German term for it, where *unheimliche* and the *heimlich* possess an etymological relation that repeats and in fact enacts the conceptual meaning of *unheimliche*. Turning to Daniel Sanders's *Worterbuch der Deutschen Sprache* (1860, 1, 729), as does Freud, one sees that *Heimlich* is defined as "not strange," "familiar," "tame," "intimate," "friendly"; "Intimate, friendlily comfortable"; "the enjoyment of quiet content, etc., arousing a sense of agreeable restfulness and security as in one within the four walls of his home." Literary examples include, "When it grows *heimlich* and still, and the evening quiet alone watches over your cell," and "Quiet, lovely and *heimlich*, no place more fitted for their rest." A secondary meaning of *heimlich*, however, reveals a different tone, defining the word as: "Concealed, kept from sight"; "withheld from others." "Behind someone's back"; "to look on with *heimlich* pleasure at someone's discomfiture"; "sin"; "*heimlich* places (which good manners oblige us to conceal)." Examples of usage include, "As secretive,

heimlich, deceitful and malicious to cruel masters”; “Henceforth I desire that there should be nothing *heimlich* any longer between us.”

Continuing in the *Worterbuch der Deutschen Sprache*, the *unheimliche* is defined as “weird”; “eerie”; “arousing gruesome fear.” “The *unheimlich*, fearful hours of night” is given as an example, as is “the *unheimlich* mist” and “*unheimlich* horror” and “pale youths” who are “*unheimlich* and are brewing heaven knows what mischief.” A clue to the very strange (one would almost like to say, the uncanny) relationship between *heimlich* and *unheimlich* is given, as Freud notes, in the Grimm’s dictionary of 1877 (4, Part 2, 873 ff.), which notes the following aspect of the *heimlich*:

[*heimlich*] from the idea of ‘homelike,’ ‘belonging to the house,’ ... [whereby] the further idea is developed of something withdrawn from the eyes of strangers, something concealed, secret.

Thus the homey is also the concealed. The *unheimlich* is not the expected opposite to the *heimlich*; rather, the words seem to become one another, and it is precisely this becoming—this slipping from the homey to the unhomey—which constitutes the experience of the *unheimlich*. It is the *unheimlich* which stands for the experience which Freud is endeavoring to describe, and for which the closest English counterpart is the uncanny, even though it is not that word alone but the slipping that occurs between *heimlich* and its counterpart *unheimliche* that truly constitutes the nature of the experience that is under consideration. As Freud writes, “What interests us most ... is to find that among its different shades of meaning *heimlich* exhibits one which is identical with its opposite *unheimlich*. What is *heimlich* thus comes to be *unheimlich*”(623). The *unheimlich*, the uncanny, is that experience precisely in which the

homey becomes unhomey – not by changing its constituents but, rather, by revealing some hitherto concealed center that, once revealed, shows the homey to be suddenly unhomey. As Schelling writes: *Unheimlich is the name for everything that ought to have remained ... secret and hidden but has come to light.*

It is this play between the familiar and the strange, the *unheimliche*, that photography—particularly the family photograph as Strand sees it—has running through itself. The photograph of the departed one pulls back the veil lain over what ought to have remained safely concealed (though it was always there). This is part of the magical, nearly occult associations present at the very birth of photography. The *occult* is indeed given in the Grimm dictionary as an aspect of *Heimlich* (again, 4, Part 2, 873 ff.)

Heimlich: adj. and adv. *Vernaculus, Occultus.*

And at page 878:

Heimlich: as used of knowledge—mystic; allegorical: a *heimlich* meaning, *mysticus, divinus, occultus, figuratus.*

Or, back to Sanders (1, 729):

The *heimlich* art – Magic.

Compare these associations of the unheimliche, the uncanny, to Barthes's description of the powers of the photograph:

Last thing about the *punctum*: whether or not it is triggered, it is an addition: it is what I add to the photograph and *what is nonetheless already there*. To Lewis Hine's retarded children [sic], I add nothing with

regard to the degenerescence of the profile: the code expresses this before I do, takes my place, does not allow me to speak; what I add ... is already in the image (Barthes's italics; 55).

This may be further connected to Strand's comments on the peculiar effectiveness of the casual family photograph:

When I look at the photograph of my mother and grandmother, I experience a sadness that has to do with my own absence from a period of my mother's life. In other words, I experienced my death in reverse—I was born too late to be there (101).

The tinge of mortality is indeed essential to the uncanny power of the photograph, since what is most striking is the sense of coalesced time and the vertigo that is induced in the viewer of the photograph, an effect Strand holds close to the power of the family photography. This, I would stress, is the key aspect of the uncanny as it arises in the family photo (and which will be essential to readings of the poems that follow). Vladimir Nabokov, in *Speak, Memory*, offers a superb instance of this, closely aligned to Strand's own observations, and further evincing both the punctum as expressed by Barthes and the *unheimliche* as outlined by Freud. Nabokov's text begins with the following description of an uncanny experience of looking at a visual record of the past and the vertigo this induces:

The cradle rocks above an abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness. Although the two are identical twins, man, as a rule, views the prenatal

abyss with more calm than the one he is heading for ... I know, however, of a young chronophobiac who experienced something like panic when looking for the first time at homemade movies that had been taken a few weeks before his birth. He saw a world that was practically unchanged—the same house, the same people—and then realized that he did not exist there at all and that nobody mourned his absence. He caught a glimpse of his mother watching from an upstairs window, and that unfamiliar gesture disturbed him, as if it were some mysterious farewell. But what particularly frightened him was the sight of a brand-new baby carriage standing there on the porch, with the smug, encroaching air of a coffin; even that was empty, as if, in the reverse course of events, his very bones had disintegrated (19).

Like the entire project of Barthes's *Camera Lucida*, Strand's essay is saturated by memento mori, particularly with a fascination with the power that images of a beloved departed one have over a viewer. In Strand's case, as in Barthes's, (and as in Nabokov's), the image of the mother is particularly important. As Strand writes:

I have a photograph of my mother, my sister and myself, taken when I was about four years old and my mother was thirty-two or so ... I have stared and stared at this photograph, and each time I have felt a deep and inexplicable rush of sadness. Is it that my mother, who holds us and one of whose hands I hold, is now dead? Or is it that she is so young, so happy, so proud of her children? (96).

Where Barthes begins by searching backwards for a picture of his departed mother that will bring her essence back to him, Strand here is confronted by a depiction of his departed mother that shows to him the curious “inexplicable sadness” of looking at the presence of someone who is now gone. A key point to be made about the peculiarities of the powers of photographic representation is to note that this would not be true in the case of a painted portrait. In that instance, one looks not at a single moment in time (though the subject may indeed have posed on a specific day, or set of days); instead, one looks at a representation of a subject mediated through a far less transparent medium. Unlike painting, that is, in photography one actually *sees* the depicted person. As Kendall L. Walton writes in “Transparent Pictures,” “we do not see Henry VIII when we look at his portrait; we see only a representation of him”(25). Whether or not a photograph is a representation at all—clearly, it seems to me, a photograph is a representation, and not the thing-itself—is not the argument I am addressing. I merely wish to assert that a photograph is *less* of a representation than a painting is, from the experiential point of the viewer, because the viewer knows that what (or whom) he or she is viewing really existed, really stood before the camera, and was really captured at that precise instant. When holding a photograph one looks at the subject that is depicted, as if looking through or past the medium, while in painted portraiture the intent and craft of the artist is more thoroughly entwined with one’s looking.

W.D. Snodgrass’s poem “Mementos, I” makes the vivid presence of the depicted person in a photograph vitally clear. Indeed, in Snodgrass’s poem it is as though the poem’s speaker actually *faces* the person depicted in the photograph.

Sorting out letters and piles of my old

Canceled checks, old clippings, and yellow note cards

That meant something once, I happened to find

Your picture. *That* picture. I stopped there cold,

Like a man raking piles of dead leaves in his yard

Who has turned up a severed hand.

Still, that first second, I was glad: you stand

Just as you stood—shy, delicate, slender,

In that long gown of green lace netting and daisies

That you wore to our first dance. The sight of you stunned

Us all. Well, our needs were different, then,

And our ideals came easy.

Then through the war and those two long years

Overseas, the Japanese dead in their shacks

Among dishes, dolls, and lost shoes; I carried

This glimpse of you, there, to choke down my fear,

Prove it had been, that it might come back.

That was before we got married.

—Before we drained out one another's force

With lies, self-denial, unspoken regret

And the sick eyes that blame; before the divorce

And the treachery. Say it: before we met. Still,

I put back your picture. Someday, in due course,

I will find that it's still there.

What one notices, first, is the accidental, casual nature of the discovery that will be the main focus of this poem: the photograph of the speaker's ex-wife, shown in a snapshot from a time that predates their life together (a time that is also now "past"). Time, in other words, is thickly layered in this photograph, and it is the poem that manages to excavate its layers. These layers, as the poet makes clear, are—initially at least—buried among the other assorted junk that makes up one's life: "Sorting out letters and piles of my old/Canceled checks... That meant something once..." This is where the Urn, the Breughel's Icarus, the objet d'art of this poem lies: a completely casual, nearly discarded object that very effectively encapsulates how poems about photographs differ from the longer ekphrastic tradition of poems on art objects where, most usually, the work of art has both public and aesthetic significance. Here, the significance—the

signification—is almost entirely private and personal. And, yet, this poem does hold itself within that larger ekphrastic tradition as well, since one of the primary concerns of the poem is to verbally render a visual object. Moreover, this modest object does prove to have resonances beyond itself. Nevertheless, it is important, at least initially, to emphasize that the object is not a museum piece but a personal, half-discarded object.⁴⁶

The snapshot is, initially, just one part of the sort of personal museum of which we are all our own curators, and while unnoticed it holds the worth in the manner of an old, cancelled check — a relic of a value attached to a transaction now complete. But how quickly the worth of the transaction is recalled, once the photograph comes into the hands of the poem’s speaker, “I happened to find/Your picture. *That* picture.” The italicized *that* is probably the most telling moment in the first stanza. Not just the deictic “that”—a pointing so important to the way photographs work—but also how the italicizing lets us know this photo has a history, one the person depicted within the photo—to whom the poem is addressed, after all—would *immediately* know. It is important to point out the difference that would subsist if this were simply a poem about remembering. If, that is, the poet were to describe a moment of a speaker remembering his ex-wife, missing her, recalling the difficulty of their marriage, a difficulty underscored and amplified and made all the more melancholic by being underwritten not

⁴⁶ Roger Scruton’s essential essay, “Photography and Representation,” deals precisely with this question, among others. As Scruton writes: “In order to understand what I mean by saying that photography is not a representational art, it is important to separate painting and photography as much as possible so as to discuss not actual painting and actual photography but an ideal form of each, an ideal which represents the essential differences between them. Ideal photography differs from actual photography as indeed idea painting differs from actual painting. Actual photography is the result of the attempt by photographers to pollute the ideal of their craft with the aims and methods of painting” (578).

just by more pleasant times that they once shared but, more uncannily, the lives they lived separately before coming together (and which they live again after dissolving once again back into). The difference is, in part, in the way in which a photo is come upon, the involuntary manner of the memory associated with it. The difference is in the weightiness of that italicization, and how the object status of a photograph makes such italicizing—in one’s mind; on the page—possible. The sheer uncanniness of being able to hold—in one’s hand—a physicalized instance of the wholly unphysical.

A photograph physicalizes a feeling that would have remained much more amorphous without having the convenience of a photographic location.⁴⁷ This is partly what is meant by the uncanny and its relation to poetry and the powers of photographic representation. As Svetlana Boym has noted in her chapter “On Diasporic Intimacy” in *The Future of Nostalgia*,

Freud examined multiple meanings for the word *homey* (*Heimlich*) from ‘familiar,’ to ‘friendly and ‘intimate’ to ‘secretive’ and ‘allegorical’ ... the word develops greater ambivalence until *homey* (*heimlich*) finally coincides with its opposite, the *uncanny* (*unheimliche*)(251).

I would adjust Boym’s genealogy slightly by suggesting that the uncanny (*unheimliche*) is not truly an opposite of the homey (*heimlich*). The uncanny, instead, may be more clearly seen as a breed of the homey: rather than signifying an opposite of the homey, as noted above, the uncanny actually denotes a type of encounter with home. It is precisely in response to the homey that the uncanny becomes possible — a feeling clearly evident

⁴⁷ See, for example, Stefanie Harris’s discussion of poetry, place, and photography in “Exposures: Rilke, Photography, and the City.”

in the Snodgrass poem. Rainer Maria Rilke captures this sense of the uncanny as an encounter-with-the-strange-within-the-familiar in the following passage, taken from *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. The passage is of a description of the narrator's experience of standing before a demolished apartment building whose partial remains—particularly evidence of its interior walls—remain visible along the exterior walls of the two buildings which still stand on either side of the vacant lot. Rilke writes:

It is [the inside walls of the houses that once stood there] that I am referring to ... One could see the inner surfaces of these walls. On the various stories one could see the walls of the rooms where the wallpaper still clung, with here and there the hint of a floor or a ceiling ... Gray dusty traces marked the paths that gas for the lamps had followed along the edges of the ceilings ... The resilient life of these demolished rooms had not let itself be squashed. It was still there ... it was in every scrap that had been stripped away ... there stood the noondays and the illnesses, the exhalation and the smoke of years ... the ardor of soot, the gray steam from boiled potatoes. ... All hovered in there tattered remnants ... [and] I began to run the moment I recognized it (187).

The force of this image is precisely in the revelation of a domesticated, an *heimlich*, arena that no longer remains, which has been opened up and, in allowing its secret to be seen, has become *unheimliche*. What is utterly uncanny about the vision is that the safe enclosure was always under threat, was always not quite the safe, permanent enclosure it had seemed, though perhaps one has never quite seen this framed so vividly. One would, of course, run from such a vision because of the obvious implication—one

would almost like to say indictment—which it makes about one’s own safe, permanent home. What happens to Brigge when he comes upon that dismantled building is precisely what happens to the speaker of Snodgrass’s poem when he comes upon the photograph, *that* photograph. “I stopped there cold,/Like a man raking piles of dead leaves in his yard/Who has turned up a severed hand.” The uncanniness is precisely that jarring. The speaker continues,

Still that first second, I was glad: you stand
Just as you stood, shy, delicate, slender,
In that long gown of green lace netting and daisies
That you wore to our first dance. The sight of you stunned
Us all.

She stands, “Still,” and the speaker compresses the unique temporal aspect of the photograph by using both the simple (or historical) present tense, “stand” and immediately following this with the past tense, “stood.” She is both, and neither, at once — present and not present, in his hands. Again, just as it is not “a” photograph but “*that*” photograph, so too is it “that long gown of green,” the very gown worn to “our first dance.” In part, the conflict exemplified in this poem is between what Siegfried Kraceur, in *The Mass Ornament*, refers to as “the memory image” and “the photographic image.” Essentially, the photograph depicts a moment in time, “the photographic image,” captured in a single instant by the camera. This image, however, is not all that one views

when observing the photograph. Since the photographic image captures an actual instant in time that occurred once and in an actual place, the tendency in viewing a photographic image to extrapolate—essentially, to narrate—is arguably stronger than in any other visual representation. This urge to articulate and attach other associations to the person, place, time depicted in the photograph becomes, again in Kraceur’s terms, “the memory image” that becomes written onto “the photographic image.” As Stefanie Harris notes in her article, “Rilke, Photography, and the City”:

[Kracauer’s] articulation of this contrast—open to comparison with Benjamin’s distinction between *erfahrung* and *erlebnis*, of experienced and lived present—provides us with a terminology for defining the conflict...the photograph does not preserve the transparent aspects of an object but instead captures it as a spatial continuum from any one of a number of positions. The last memory image outlasts time because it is unforgettable: the photograph, which neither refers to nor encompasses such a memory image, must be essentially associated with the moment in time in which it came into existence”(137).

The tension between the memory images instigated in the Snodgrass poem do, indeed, extend far beyond the photographic image of the speaker’s ex-wife—actually, in that instant, of a woman the speaker does not even yet know—and as the poem progresses the speaker’s memory presses upon the photographic image. In this manner, the tension between what the photo shows and the multifarious associations which this image grows becomes a perfect encapsulation of the strain created by “viewing,” literally, a past that one is both connected to and broken from. The extreme instance of the

widening gulf in the poem between memory image and photographic image comes in the penultimate stanza:

Then through the war and those two long years

Overseas, the Japanese dead in their shacks

Among dishes, dolls, and lost shoes; I carried

This glimpse of you, there, to choke down my fear,

Prove it had been, that it might come back.

That was before we got married.

The space here is huge,⁴⁸ as the photographic image has now come to suggest and even denote an experience of war, of specific images from that war, of the feelings associated with a soldier “overseas” carrying the photographic image with him, an image which, we are told, is of his wife (now ex-wife) “before we got married.”

The poem’s final stanza seeks to resolve the tension between photographic and memory image by returning the photograph to its semi-lost status:

—Before we drained out one another’s force

With lies, self-denial, unspoken regret

And the sick eyes that blame; before the divorce

And the treachery. Say it: before we met. Still,

⁴⁸ For a discussion of the ‘expansive’ imaginative interiors created by the photographic medium see Laura Mandell’s, “Imagining Interiority: Photography, Psychology, and Lyric Poetry.”

I put back your picture. Someday, in due course,

I will find that it's still there.

Here the poem returns, forcefully, to the present, leaving behind the time of the “photographic image,” which was “—Before we drained out one another’s force...” Most striking about the poem is what is also most striking to the speaker: the photographic image that triggers all the memory images that make up the poem is an image from “before we met.” As if to stress this weighty fact, the poem’s speaker even urges his addressee (and himself) to vocalize the fact as he identifies the provenance of the photographic, a time that was, “Say it: before we met.” That single rupture between the instant in which the photo was taken and the entire life it encapsulates—how it becomes *that* photo—is a remarkably concise and direct statement on the uncanny powers of photography.

George Oppen’s poem, “From a Photograph,” already within its title expresses the relationship that the ekphrastic poem has to the photograph: it is a point of departure, particularly in the case of a family photograph—in this instance, of the speaker as a child, and of his young mother—where memory is written across the image. The photograph is remarkably similar to the recalled photo Strand describes in his article on photography’s powers. The first stanza of Oppen’s poem is almost bald description:

Her arms around me—child—

Around my head, hugging with her whole arms,

Whole arms as if I were a loved and native rock,

The apple in her hand—her apple and her father, and my nose pressed

Hugely to the collar of her winter coat. There is the photograph

Once again, the deictic of the stanza's final line—suspended and grammatically separate and ambiguously related to the rest of the poem: "There is the photograph." *It is in my hand. Here it is*, in an evidentiary sense. But, also, *this is all that there is. This is all that remains*. In this way photographs signify the strongest sense of the curious absence implied by mimesis: here the depicted one is, because here she is not. As if to emphasize this, the poem focuses almost entirely upon the act of the embrace, "her arms around me," "hugging with her whole arms,"

"whole arms," "my nose pressed/hugely to the collar of her winter coat," as the desire on the part of the viewer to embrace the absent one who is depicted is transfigured into acute attention to that shown, but ungraspable, embrace. What one looks at in a photograph is the desire to hold; and so, here, Oppen's description is entirely of a held instant.

The poem's second stanza lifts toward a Wordsworthian "the child is father of the man" moment, and it also recalls the ekphrastic urge, presented most emblematically in Keats's *Urn*, to move from the particular art object to a larger statement on art and, by extension, the life which art expresses and ennobles:

It is the child who is the branch

We fall from, where would be bramble,

Brush, bramble in the young Winter

With its blowing snow she must have thought

Was ours to give to her.

Also present here is the kind of musicality—and Wintry landscape—famously depicted in Wallace Stevens’s “The Snowman.” Where for Stevens poetry becomes a kind of music expressing a landscape that shows “the nothing that is not there/and the nothing that is” Oppen’s becomes a storm of *W* and *B* sounds that produce a music that, as in Stevens, hides meaning in plain sight: “It is the child who is the branch/We fall from, where would be bramble,/Brush, bramble in the young Winter/With its blowing snow...” One gets lost in the sonorousness of the lines, which express a stunning shift in the poem. In the first stanza the now-grown child gazes at the remarkably young mother, while in the second stanza the object of the gaze is the child, now-absent, who has become the grown man. The naturalistic image is curious, but it represents a clear progression in terms of fullness: the branch is the fullest growth indicated, bramble presumably referring to twigs, and brush to undergrowth. The child, in other words, provides the growth—is the source—for any fruit that may come. Without that, one is faced with a barren landscape, most obviously since no grown speaker of the poem would have been possible without that depicted child, but more centrally from the perspective of the mother. She, too, fell from that child, since the child articulates the landscape and saves it from being barren (her role in filling the landscape herself is made clear by mentioning that she, too, was someone’s “apple” — “her father’s”).

The poem ends with a guess by the speaker about what his mother must have felt, then, about him — a guess posited now, by the grown man, based presumably in part from his own experiences in adult life and, likely, parenthood since he is careful to note the importance of the father in the poem (even if it is his mother’s father and not his; can

we assume his father is, as in the Strand poem, the one who took the photograph?) so we know he cares about fathers and is linked to their roles. The poem concludes precisely by wrapping back to the figure of the mother who, the onlooker guesses, must have suspected precisely what the viewer of the photo, now outside of its depicted embrace, knows: “in the young Winter/With its blowing snow she must have thought/Was ours to give to her.”

Oppens poem invokes the long tradition of photographic portraiture. Most on display in photographic portraiture is, as Laura Mandell phrases it in “Imagining Interiority: Photography, Psychology, and Lyric Poetry, “self-difference through time”(224). The uncanniness, as Mandell notes, of such photographs is in viewing fixity where so much change has intervened, particularly since the subject of the portrait—if viewed from ten, twenty, or a hundred years hence—seems oddly indifferent to and unaware of the change that has intervened. As Mandell elaborates the point:

Photographic portrait[ure] ... shows us an absence unknown to the portrait’s subject. The gap between what they fail to know now, but will know, opens up pain, sorrow, change—and therefore interior space or “depth.” Those we view are unconscious, but we are hyperconscious, masterful, since we have the knowledge they lack and so know of their lack (224).

Rilke’s poem, “Portrait of my Father as a Young Man,” explores precisely this theme:

In the eyes: dream. The brow as if it could feel

something far off. Around the lips, a great
freshness--seductive, though there is no smile.
Under the rows of ornamental braid
on the slim Imperial officer's uniform:
the saber's basket-hilt. Both hands stay
folded upon it, going nowhere, calm
and now almost invisible, as if they
were the first to grasp the distance and dissolve.
And all the rest so curtained within itself,
so cloudy, that I cannot understand
this figure as it fades into the background--.

Oh quickly disappearing photograph
in my more slowly disappearing hand.

Again, the evocation here is of the tension between the photographic image and the memory image, a conflict from which arises a distinct sense of the uncanniness of portraiture's capacity to both reveal and conceal. As Stefanie Harris writes,

What is at stake in the photograph such that it problematizes poetic writing? What we discover in this brief passage is the positing of a conflict between two types of representation, the once a ceaseless opening to the present and the other atemporal and transcendent

Returning to the traditional discourses of ekphrastic theory, it is possible to see the tension between the photographic image and the memory image as also a conflict between visual and verbal representation. That is to say, the photographic image—which exemplifies the realm of visual representation—is figured primarily as static and spatial. It is the actual image on the page: visual, fixed, atemporal. Contrarily, the memory image is largely verbal, is largely narrative, and is certainly primarily concerned not with matters spatial but with matters temporal. It is to this realm, not perhaps surprisingly, that poems about photographs turn. They narrativize and temporalize the spatial image, releasing its “pregnant moment” into the terrain of the verbal and remaking the image, the visual representation, as primarily a verbal presentation. There are indeed shades of the paragone in such refigurings; though, I would argue, the relationship between photography and poetry simply lacks the historical depth and heated contrasts of the relationship between painting and poetry to truly rise to that relation’s paragonal status.⁴⁹

Another way of seeing the entree of the verbal impulse into the visual in a poem such as Rilke’s description of his father’s photographic portrait is to say that it is an effort

⁴⁹ Scott Hess’s article, “William Wordsworth and Photographic Subjectivity,” takes this idea a step further by arguing that the ways of imagining of poetry and photography are so different as to prevent a contentious relation. As Hess writes, “the fixed surface of the photograph, often identified at the time [early 19th century] with science rather than art and with physical reality as opposed to human consciousness seems directly contrary to Wordsworth’s emphasis on the transforming powers of memory and imagination.

to meld the two media.⁵⁰ Despite homilies of the rate of conversation between a picture and the number of words required to account for it, poems about photographs do not remake or replace the photos they describe. They interpret them. Certainly they verbalize them. But, as Harris notes, even in a poem as intimate and fully descriptive as Rilke's, there is always more than mere description:

The poem that Rilke has written, however, is itself not a photographic image nor is it simply a translation of that medium into another. For the poem includes more than just the daguerreotype of the father—the last line opens up to include the poet within the frame, through his hands that hold the image. The poem is not merely about a photograph but, more important, about a poet looking at a photograph. The poetic medium thus contains and simultaneously differentiates itself from the photographic medium (139).

A central question that has not yet been addressed, and which marks a major difference between photographic ekphrasis and more traditional poems about art objects is, What happens when the reader is able to view the photograph being described? Irene McKinney's "The Only Portrait of Emily Dickinson," though following the descriptive rendering of portraiture of the Rilke poem, differs by describing a well-known photograph. In this sense, it is an excellent example of an ekphrasis of a photograph in the most traditional sense of that term.

⁵⁰ See Angela Cozea's "Proustian Aesthetics: Photography, Engraving, and Historiography" and Alexandra Neel's "'A Something-Nothing of Its Very Contrary': The Photography of Coleridge for further discussion of this aspect of inter-media relations.

The Only Portrait of Emily Dickinson

The straight neck held up out of the lace

is bound with a black velvet band.

She holds her mouth the way she chooses,

the full underlip constrained by a small muscle.

She doesn't blink or look aside,

although her left eye is considering

a slant. She would smile

if she had time, but right now

there is composure to be invented.

She stares at the photographer.

The black crepe settles. Emerging

from the sleeve, a shapely hand

holds out a white, translucent blossom.

“They always say things which embarrass

my dog,” she tells the photographer.

She is amused, but not as much as he’d like.

This is the most classically ekphrastic poem I will discuss in this chapter. Indeed, it is, to invoke WJT Mitchell’s definition of ekphrasis, precisely “a verbal representation of a visual representation.” The poem seeks to bring the photograph to presence by describing its appearance in detail — and since it is a well known photography, the reader may “check” the rendering against the “original.” Spatially, the poem moves from top to bottom, beginning: “The straight neck held up out of the lace/is bound with a black velvet band.” The detail of the velvet band is indeed striking, both in the photograph and in the poem’s attention to detail — “velvet” suggests a nearness approaching touch. The details grow more impressionistic as the poem progresses, “She holds her mouth the way she chooses,/the full underlip constrained by a small muscle,” even including an allusion to the poet’s famous use of slant rhyme, “She doesn’t blink or look aside,/although her left eye is considering/a slant.” Indeed, the eyes are slightly askew. As if often the case in poems describing photographs, the hands play a prominent role and are overtly featured and dwelt upon: “Emerging/from the sleeve, a shapely hand//holds out a white, translucent blossom. The photo, taken by anonymous:



Figure 2: Photographic Portrait of Emily Dickinson

Poems about famous photographs offer the viewer the opportunity to view the photograph under discussion, and also the chance to consider poems about photographs within a more traditionally framed sense of what, precisely, constitutes ekphrastic poetry.⁵¹ I offer two further examples below, which stand as exemplums of the approach. The first concerns photos of Brassai while the second poem considers the photography of Mapplethorpe.

After Three Photographs of Brassai

A whore moves a basin of green antiseptic water

Away from the towels to a clean white shelf.

A Russian sailor rests against the wall smelling

Of tobacco.

The tall narrow mirror has little dark flecks

Within it like the black sinks of a smoky surgical theater

Seen from the balconies: the whore

From above is now below us, in the future, on a table where

⁵¹ For a superb investigation of the history of this important question, see Susan Blood's "Baudelaire Against Photography: An Allegory of Old Age."

Two students in white gowns are struggling to open her:

The ribs cracking back, the pink gill-like trench

Follows the thin hairline down the center

Of her stomach to where the knife shallows on pelvic bone.

A student beside us vomits and his breakfast of warm milk

Falls slowly to the floor passing tier after tier

Of first-year students. The autopsy is over.

The charwoman in a yellow bonnet is mopping up.

Now the same dead girl is, again, moving the green water

Away from the soiled towels. A banker

Smelling of jasmine is dressing himself. The whore straightens

Her shoulders, this girl who is always bent

Over herself. Her fingers which she chews are hurt

By an acid douche. She straightens her shoulders

As she stares into a black speck in the mirror so as

To forget. She begins singing, also, to forget;

The banker stepping into his taxi is trying to remember

If there was a mole on her neck, if this one's name

Was Claudette? And he is stepping into the taxi, he is

Drunk and falling into the blackness of it: his shoe flies

Up into the night as high as the colored numerals and lights.

The door slams shut. The charwoman has finished mopping up,

She turns out the lights. You are now alone in the upper-

Most balcony looking down for a floor through the darkness.

You drop a pencil waiting to hear it strike the boards...

It falls stiff like a drunk, like a drunk falling onto a whore.

This poem makes us guess at what photographs the poet may be referencing. By doing so, the poet creates a narrative from the photographic oeuvre, stringing together several photographs of Brassai, linking them along his well known photos of prostitutes

series, but drawing a kind of narrative from these photos. In this manner, the poet “reads” the photos of Brassai, constructing them as though they were themselves essays upon their subject matter, which of course they in part are. In this sense, the poem is in a position of commentary, linking and arranging various of Brassai’s photos. One thinks of various photos of Brassai, such as figures 3 and 4 which the poem seems to invoke in a general sense, or of figure 3 which seems more directly evoked by the second stanza:

Figure 3: Brassai, “Girl With A Red Umbrella.”





Figure 4: Brassai, “Brothel in Paris.”

Likewise, the following poem dealing with Mapplethorpe, evokes several of the photographer’s polaroids.

Antiquity Calling

Looking at Mapplethorpe’s Polaroids, I learn that he

liked shoes and armpit crotch-shots of men and women,
both shaved and un'—all giving a good whiff to the camera.
But best of all are his pictures of ordinary phones
which convey a palpable sense of expectancy as if
at any moment, one of the fabulous, laconic nude men
strewn about might call. One could pick up the receiver
and hear the garbled sound of ancient Greek and Roman
voices reveling in the background. But even when silent,
the dingy phone is a sex organ—cock asleep in its cradle.

The two most directly evoked photos are given in Figure 3 and Figure 4 below:



Figure 5: Mapplethorpe, "Self-Portrait."



Figure 6: Mapplethorpe, “Telephone.”

Although both painting and photography are clearly representational mediums, it is just as clear that the relative proximity one feels to the depicted subject is greater in photography than in portrait paintings.⁵² Were it somehow possible, a photograph of Shakespeare would cause an enormous stir precisely because it would seem to bring the

⁵² For further discussion of viewable intertext, see “‘A Poet Never Sees a Ghost’: Photography and Trance in Tennyson’s *Enoch Arden* and Julia Margaret Cameron’s Photography,” by Allison Chapman.

bard closer to us than a painting can. In precisely this epistemological sense, Strand argues, photographs bring the lost beloved somehow *to us*. But why do we feel this? Photographs, like paintings, are mere matter — in some sense, photographs are indeed *less* intimate than a painted portrait. Part of the epistemological effect of viewing photos may be attributed simply to convention, and the curious relationship between the nearness one feels when viewing a person depicted in a photography and the mechanical nature of the process that puts that person there, bears emphasis. The account offered in *Latent Image: The discovery of Photography* of the first photographic process is worth quoting at length:

Photography is basically a technique for recording the camera's image by chemical means or, as Daguerre put it, "by the spontaneous action of light" instead of by hand. In retrospect the technique which he worked out seems simple: the silver side of a silver-plated sheet of copper was polished mirror-bright and then placed over the top of a box containing particles of iodine. The iodine fumes, released at room temperature, produced light-sensitive silver iodide when they came in contact with the silver. The plate was then put into a light tight box, which was hastened on the back of the camera in the exact position of the ground glass. There was a system of levels to open to cover of this plate holder inside the camera. A brass flap closed the front of the lens, and this flap could be opened to expose the plate to light for the several minutes necessary for the reactions of light and chemical. After exposure the plate was removed in semi-darkness and placed silver side down over hot mercury. The fumes from the mercury

condensed on those parts of the plate which had received light, forming a whitish amalgam. The silver iodide which had not been exposed to light was washed away with a solution of the chemical we now call sodium thiosulfate, but the was knows as “the hyposulphie of soda.” After a quick rinse in water, the plate was dried over an alcohol lamp (4).

The mechanical nature of the process is an essential point and it is important to recall that a punctum is not a meaning itself but a disruption of the photographic surface. This surface, which Barthes names the studium (“a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment . . . without special acuity”(26), is ruptured by the punctum. The studium holds one’s interest enough to look; the punctum ruptures this looking and causes one to look past surface. What one ultimately looks at is the unique, unsettling—uncanny—nature of photographic representation. This, I have argued, is what poems about photographs truly bring to the fore. As Strand notes of the relationship between a Charles Wright poem, “Bar Giamacia 1959-60” and the photograph the poem—in ekphrastic detail—describes:

The poem constructs a photograph as it proceeds, so that it may affect us as photographs do. It even fades at the end, as if to make way for itself—the poem that it is, and the poem that it will be (107).

Despite the long history of sister arts scholarship and its interest in the relationship between visual and verbal representation, there has been surprisingly little critical discussion of the nature between the photographic and the poetic arts. This obviously has much to do with the relatively brief history of photography, both as phenomenon and as serious art. I have aimed here to connect poems about photographs to the larger

ekphrastic and sister arts traditions, while preserving the originality of this new entree into the mode of ekphrastic poetry. I have also endeavored to show how the ways in which poems are like photographs or, more to the point, the ways in which poems about photographs may provide a very rich account of what it is that photographs—and, by extension, poems—mean to us.

Chapter Four

Looking at the World: Relations Among Poetry and Film

The relationship between poetry and film is the newest among the various ekphrastic relations this dissertation aims to describe, and it is also the most troubling. Relating poetry to painting, and assessing the interactions between these two media, is a historically entrenched—and validated—concern, one which finds much of its meaning from a very real and active paragone between the two media. Even the relationship between poetry and photography seems less of a comparative reach than making a connection between poetry and film. Photography, after all, deals in the concentrated instant, the bearing of maximum significance from a concentrated sign. Film, however, is essentially a narrative medium, closer to the world of the novel than the world of lyric poetry.⁵³ What, if anything, might one say of these two media, separated as they are by vast differences in technological and financial means of production, and by ends that seem not merely unrelated but at odds with one another? Film, after all, is *the* mass medium of the last hundred years, whereas poetry remains a marginal concern. Moreover, film is often associated with the realm of entertainment, and of public consumption, whereas lyric is usually associated with inwardness, difficulty, and the contemplative. Certainly, it has little ties to commerce. As Scott MacDonald writes, however, in “Poetry and Film: Cinema as Publication,” the connection between film and other arts, particularly the literary arts, is actually a deep one:

⁵³ For a compelling discussion and close reading of film in its efforts to overcome narrative and more closely emulate the ‘poetic’ see Neal Oxenhandler’s article, “Poetry in Three Films of Jean Cocteau.”

Cinema has always been an unusually derivative art form. It evolved first as an extension of the still photograph, and soon after as an extension of the magic show; and it was not until D.W. Griffith and others recognized that theater and prose fiction, and especially the novel, offered a model for extending narrative development that the feature film became a possibility. Of course, commercial film has never really left these influences behind. Most screenplays are based on novels or parts of novels, and the screenplay itself is, as the word suggests, a derivation of the theatrical drama. But this dimension of cinema is not confined to the commercial feature. Even those forms of the motion picture that are generally understood as “critical”—that is, as offering critiques of the commercial feature and the audience that has developed for it—are comparably derivative, though the source of these critical forms are different from the sources of the narrative feature (37).

The evolution of the ‘critical film,’ to borrow MacDonald’s term, may be thought of as a continued complication of the relationship of the camera to the world. A well known instance of this is Dziga Vertov’s 1929 film, *The Man With The Movie Camera*, which sends the camera out into the world of Soviet Russia, capturing it.⁵⁴ This mechanical relationship to the surrounding world, itself of course a highly technical and ‘artificial’ one, is, as I hope to show, an important instance of the connection between the world of Soviet experimental film and American Modernist poetics. Although very little discussed, this relationship shows a number of intriguing crosscurrents, both on the more

⁵⁴ Of course, Vertov’s film is every bit a framed and made object, though the philosophical principle of the camera as an eye remains a core innovation of his work.

impressionistic tonal levels, and on the level of specific techne manifested across the differing media, a relationship that I intend to examine, in part, as emblematic of the larger word and image relations with which this chapter is fundamentally concerned.⁵⁵ In essence, this chapter seeks to explore the parallel histories of cinema and poetry in the Modernist epoch, focusing on relations between practitioners of both arts, with particular emphasis on crosscurrents between the work of Sergei Eisenstein and the poets of Imagism, particularly Ezra Pound and Hilda Doolittle (H.D.), as well as more general relations between early ‘critical cinema’ and other currents of modern poetry. By doing so, I wish to establish three main points: that Imagism and montage are mutually influential techniques that emblemize, with force and clarity, how developments in the arts may cross divides of media, even in the case of film and poetry where technical difference would seem to exclude any specific relationship of technique; that the writings of H.D. on Soviet Cinema in the film journal *Close Up*, of which she was a founding contributor, offer key insights into the relationship between Modernism and Soviet Cinema not yet fully discussed by scholars of either domain, and potentially very important in addressing foundational moments in word and image relations during the rise of film; and, finally, that the impact of film upon Modernism may be traced both in terms of subject matter and technique in a diverse range of its poets, to the mutual illumination of both mediums.⁵⁶ As in my previous chapters on painting and photography, I extend these foundational arguments to address the ways in which poems directly about

⁵⁵ It is arguable that film represents a full merging of the visual and verbal, since its visual presentation full absorbs and incorporates—at least in the era following silent film—the verbal into its whole art.

⁵⁶ See “Film’s Poetry and Sub-Poetry,” by Parker Tyle, pp. 359-364.

film from the modern period, and beyond, may be most fruitfully read by placing them within the ekphrastic tradition of which, I argue, they are an important continuation.⁵⁷

Close Up, which described itself as “an international magazine devoted to film art,” was founded by the Pool Group (consisting of Kenneth Macpherson, Hilda Doolittle, and Annie Winifred Ellerman) and was published on a nearly monthly basis from 1927 through 1933. The contributions to this journal by H.D. provide a unique venue for investigating the crosscurrents of thought and method that arose between film and modernism, especially the influence of Soviet cinema upon the latter. The journal in fact devoted an entire issue to Russian film, called simply “The Russian Number,” in which an essay by H.D. appeared entitled “Russian Film.” In this essay, H.D. is clearly uncomfortable with the task of presenting Russian films to her largely English and American readership. As she writes,

Well ... to be practical. Why should English people see these [Russian] films, why should Americans? Let us be practical by all means. Why should the average hard working, straightforward Englishmen or the vibrant go and get ‘em Americans, read the Bible? They shouldn’t ... (18-9).

The connection to the Biblical is essential, for H.D. views Soviet films on a similar scale.⁵⁸ This, too, makes up a part of her reluctance to discuss the Soviet film tradition in

⁵⁷ Aside from the technological innovations of film, a poem about a film (as discussed below) remains largely in line with the tradition of poems about other visual art objects. The curious wrinkle of film is that it offers many images, and continuously moving ones at that, leading many poets to write also about the experience of looking at film – rather than attempt to describe an entire film, as one might describe a painting or photograph.

anything like a comprehensive manner, as she equates it with a film of art rather than one of commerce (obviously, in contrast to Hollywood). It is, in fact, essentially on a Biblical plane that these art films move, she argues, making them rather difficult to address properly:

The Editor of *Close Up* has asked me to write about Russian Films. I say, I want to write about Russian Films, and then I say, But why should I? One does not sit down and write about the Book of Job or about Ruth in the corn, or about the harlot Rahab. The new great outstanding Russian films are in spirit Biblical films, they do not need to be written about (18).

The films she means in particular (her article appeared in 1928) are *The Battleship Potemkin*, *Mother*, *The End of Saint Petersburg*, and *Ten Days That Shook the World*, films that are “not handing out the saccharine opera buffo stuff that Hollywood offers”(25) but, rather, according to H.D., the true artistic possibilities of the relatively new medium of film.⁵⁹

It is worth noting that the battle between the box office and the artistic potentialities of film was probably always something of a straw man, since the two directions have very little in common, and have for the most part led mutually exclusive lives. This leads one to an important insight regarding the term ‘poetic’ as it is applied to film, namely that an essential function of the adjective ‘poetic,’ as it has been applied to

⁵⁸ See Jonathan Foltz’s excellent “The Laws of Comparison: H.D. and Cinematic Formalism.”

⁵⁹ As Leonard Diepeveen writes in “H.D. and the Film Arts”: “In the first place, H.D.’s sense of film as the perfect medium excites her about the possibilities of film art. Film has enough dynamism [according to H.D.] to revive people’s dulled perception of what is good in art; indeed, it can even reinvigorate the other arts”(60).

film, has in fact been to make a distinction between films with commercial ends, and films with primarily aesthetic aims. As Scott MacDonald notes, in “Poetry and Avant-Garde Film: Three Recent Contributions”:

During the 1940s and 1950s, there was a particular strategic value to the use of ‘poetic’ in conjunction with avant-garde film. That filmmakers can be considered creative artists may seem obvious to us, and it was certainly clear to many avant-garde filmmakers, but for most moviegoers during the first five decades of film history, films were mindless distractions, engaging and skillfully made, perhaps, but certainly not ‘artistic’ in any serious sense. Indeed, in the United States, film was not even considered a medium of communication protected by the first amendment until 1952 (6).

This artistic credential, I would argue, continues to be the main function of the term ‘poetic’ as it is applied to cinema. As much as this chapter is centrally concerned with thinking about the way poems interacts with and respond to the reality and pressures of the medium of film, I also would like to address, briefly, what seems to be happening when the interaction runs in the other direction. In other words, the meaning of a film that is said to be ‘poetic.’ Usually, this is a term of praise, and part of the history of this adjective as it is applied to film is, indeed, founded in attempts to hew the newer art form to the more historically validated art of poetry. Still, it is an odd leap to make — since, to begin with, the technical possibilities of the two mediums are so different. As one critic has observed, “the meaning of ‘poetic’ as it is used in application to a film has nothing to do with the act of writing poetry nor to poetic texts themselves, but loosely to a human

sensibility that, presumably, can take a wide variety of forms within a variety of mediums”(MacDonald 179).

While it is one thing to mention ‘poetic’ moments in a particular film, or the ‘poetic’ sensibility of a particular director, there are closer relationships of films trying to approximate, in film, the impact and methods of poetry. Such so-called ‘film poems’ have only ever been a marginal presence within even the art-house world of experimental cinema, but certain canonical examples have clearly had an impact on the medium of film in a wider sense. In his article “Poetry and Avant-Garde Film: Three Recent Contributions,” MacDonald offers a useful account of the complex relationship between poetry and film, from the perspective of the filmmaker and film historian. What is revelatory about MacDonald’s work on early, avant-garde film is how deeply connected the worlds of early cinema and poetry in fact were. As MacDonald notes, discussing the film *Manhatta* (1921):

While the visual arts tended to dominate the first film avant-garde, poetry was an important influence. For *Manhatta* (1921), often considered the first American avant-garde film, the two filmmakers, both of whom had established reputations as visual artists—photographer/painter Charles Sheeler and photographer Paul Strand—intercut between modernist cinematography of Manhattan and intertitles made up of excerpts from several Walt Whitman poems, including “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” (1865) and “Sparkles from the Wheel”(187).

This interaction encapsulates the aesthetically backward and forward looking stance of cinema, since the film is devoted to the industrial metropolis, while also celebrating the

rather romantic vision of Whitman. Furthermore, the film's blending of the visual and verbal is complete, and offers a compelling instance of two mediums merging together in a relatively seamless manner. Text, indeed, was very important to silent films, of course in the form of intertitles but also, as here, in the borrowings of poetic texts to frame and elevate images. This was decidedly not isolated to a single film. As Macdonald continues:

Some avant-garde films, widely seen on the cine-club circuit, followed *Manhatta's* lead in combining imagery with visual text. For example, *L'etoile de mer* (Starfish [1928]), a collaboration of Man Ray and surrealist poet Robert Desnos (who wrote film criticism during the 1920s), uses phrases from Desnos's poetry as visual texts. And Marcel Duchamp's *Anemic Cinema* (1926) ... *Night Mail* (1936), by John Grierson and Basil Wright, ends with a poem by W.H. Auden, read by Auden ... Pare Lorens's *The River* (1937) is narrated by Thomas Calmers, who reads a poetic text written by Lorzens...(5).

These early examples represent a cooperative interest between the mediums of film and poetry, as filmmakers attempt to link the new medium to the established art form of poetry. In most of these instances, poetry seems if not the more important of the two mediums then, certainly, the elevated ideal to which the new medium is attempting to ascend. Indeed, *Night Mail* may be understood as a kind of reverse ekphrasis, in which a film is made to illustrate the Auden poem, "Night Mail." This relationship had a great deal to do with the establishment of film as a legitimate art, and of filmmakers themselves as artists, serious artists, indeed, artists on the level of the great poets. As

MacDonald explains, “that filmmakers can be considered creative artists may seem obvious to us, and it was certainly clear to many avant-garde filmmakers,” and yet, “for most moviegoers during the first five decades of film history, films were [considered] mindless distractions, engaging and skillfully made, perhaps, but certainly not ‘artistic’ in any serious sense”(6). The linking of cinema to poetry was an overt attempt to dispel the notion of film-as-frivolous and link cinema to the ethereal and elevated art of poetry. No one, interestingly, was particularly bothered by any tensions or supposed paragonal rift between the visual and verbal: rather, the elevated status of the one art was ‘borrowed’ to help elevate the status of the new one, as the new one made contemporary the established form.

In the more recent history of avant-garde cinema, the relationship between poetry and film has shown itself to be a deepening one. No longer is film attempting to merely place itself alongside poetry but, rather, filmmakers utilize poetry and the poetic within the very aesthetic of their films. As I will show in my discussion of the Imagists, the same may be said of the ‘uses’ to which poets have put film. For the moment, it is worth noting that filmmakers, too, have found the ostensibly divergent mediums to be mutually illuminating. Part of the deepening of this relationship has had to do with coming to a clearer sense about what we might mean by calling a film ‘poetic,’ and how a film can and cannot behave as a poem does.⁶⁰ Paradoxically, that is, discovering the limits of the relationship between the two mediums has allowed for a deepened sophistication in those instances where the two mediums can enhance and propel one another forward. As MacDonald writes, “while ‘poetic’ remained relatively amorphous when used in

⁶⁰ See David Trotter’s “T.S. Eliot and Cinema” for a compelling discussion of the impact and importance of the technological gap between film’s mode of production and poetry’s.

connection with cinema, by the 1940s there were avant-garde films that revealed a more particular connection with poetry”(8). Illustrative of this evolution is the symposium entitled “Poetry and Film,” which was held on October 28, 1953, and attended by figures such as Dylan Thomas, Arthur Miller, Maya Deren, and Willard Maas, in an effort to further discuss the relationship between poetry and film. As the critic Parker Tyler observed in opening remarks given to the participants: “On the one hand, there’s the theory of poetry, its possibilities as such in the film medium, and on the other hand the practice of poetry, as concentrated in the avant-garde film”(8). As P. Adams Sitney notes in his seminal work *Visionary Film* (1974):

The earliest American films discussed [at the “Film and Poetry” symposium] were called ‘film poems’ or ‘experimental films’ when they were first seen. Both names, like all the subsequent ones, are inaccurate and limiting. Of the two, the term ‘film poem’ has the advantage of underlining a useful analogy: the relationship of the type of film discussed to the commercial narrative cinema is in many ways like that of poetry to fiction in our times (ix).

It is precisely this aspect of word/image relations that the Imagist poets begin, nearly contemporaneously with the filmmakers above, to consider carefully in their work and its reactions and responses to film, particularly avant-garde and ‘foreign’ films. At the time of H.D.’s writing, the rise of the commercial film can already be easily predicted not, according to H.D., because it is what the public wants, but because the public does not know what an art film is, having never seen one. “How do we know what the people want until the people have seen what they may or might want,”(21) H.D asks, continuing her

line of argument by concluding, “the people do not know what film art is, so how can the people demand film art?”(21). This is a salient position, of course, but more to the point is what H.D. meant by “film art” and the specific ways in which this coheres with analogous sentiments about American poetry current at the time, particularly to emerge in the theory and practice of Imagist poetics.⁶¹ The clearest intersection between the kind of poetry H.D. and others of the Modernist moment saw as the future direction for poetry in America, and the kinds of artistic innovation she and other poets saw as abiding within ‘film art,’ is seen in montage — exemplified, of course, by the works of Sergei Eisenstein. Indeed, a remarkable confluence exists between Imagism and the filmic technique of montage.

In his text, *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium For Poetry*, a work picked up by Ezra Pound and made directly applicable to Imagism, Ernest Fenollosa makes the following foundational statement:

One superiority of verbal poetry as an art rests in its getting back to the fundamental reality of time. Chinese poetry has the unique advantage of combining both elements. It speaks at once with the vividness of painting, and with the mobility of sounds. It is, in some sense, more objective than either, more dramatic. In reading Chinese we do not seem to be juggling mental counters, but to be watching things work out their own fate (9).

The esteeming of the ‘combining’ of the elements of painting and ‘sound’ clearly evokes a latent reverence for the possibilities of film in its evocation of image, and the roots of

⁶¹ Discussed in depth by Laura Marcus in “‘A New Form of True Beauty’: Aesthetics and Early Film Cinema.”

Imagist technique in a language system that presumably combines elements of the visual and the verbal is a salient one.⁶² This leads on back to foundational questions about the language-status of the image and, more to the point, of film's own status as a kind of language or system of signs, especially as these questions pertain to notions of the inter-influence between the poetic and filmic mediums.⁶³ Perhaps the first question regarding film's status as a language is as follows: Does calling film a language represent merely a colorful metaphor of the ways that film instantiates, suggests, and makes meaning, or is the analogy actually pointing to key common ground between the visual and verbal media? The main approaches of film theory have indeed focused on the technical moves of cinema, calling them a language largely in the first metaphorical sense, but holding to the second sense so that the vocabulary and rigor of language-centered approaches such as linguistics and, also, semiotics and structuralism might be employed. By language-centered I mean "language" as a system of conveying meaning that can be read and systematically understood and categorized. This can involve communication beyond language—music, billboards, whole cultures—but the main factor seems to be that it be possible to be *understood as a system*. If something like cinema is a language this does not mean it behaves exactly like language but that we should be able to say *how* it behaves, how it makes meaning. In this sense it is impossible to say that film is not a language, since it clearly makes meaning, and it clearly does so in deliberate and traceable ways.

⁶² See Michael North, "Words in Motion: The Movies, the Readies, and 'the Revolution of the Word.'"

⁶³ See Tyrus Miller, "Avant-Garde and Theory: A Misunderstood Relation," especially pp. 272-280.

This is connected to the workings of montage and, ultimately, Imagist poetry, in the following important manner: If film is a language then each shot is a word — *but* strings of words don't make meaning, their *arrangement* does. Hence the arrangement of scenes and, especially montage, casts itself as a valid way into the 'language' of film. In many respects, montage after all ushers in the invention of what we largely understand a film to be and do, and the language of discussing film's way of making meaning is consistently tied to notions of language and, especially, of the poetic. Certainly the clearest historical connection between the arts of film and poetry is the technique of montage, itself a remarkable instance of a technique crossing over from visual to verbal mediums without losing the core aesthetic aims it held in each respective medium. As Parker Tyler notes in "Film's Poetry and Sub-Poetry,"

If we consider the poetic validity of Mr. Eisenstein's theory of *montage* (incontestably *the* theory of cinema) it is easy to see how his films have always risen higher as art than the scenario on which they were based. It is as though a master poet were to show how much he could improve on the 'first' draft of a novice's poem (360-1).

Indeed, before montage, films such as those of the Lumiere brothers essentially rolled on as one long shot, cut with black screen, followed by subsequent long shots. The camera did not really move, and there was nothing like editing in the modern sense. Montage, which simply means assembly, jumps around, juxtaposes, and takes advantage of the full range of possible shots. D.W. Griffith does this fluidly in films as early as *Birth of a Nation* (1917), where shots build to scenes that build to sequences that build to the film

as a whole, but the true bloom of montage comes with Eisenstein.⁶⁴ This, I will argue, is why he so captivated the interest of H.D. and other Imagist poets.

Susan McCabe argues in her seminal work *Cinematic Modernism: Modernist Poetry and Film*, that the link between Imagism, Soviet film, and montage is indeed an essential one:

Pound derived Imagism from Ernest Fenollosa's 1901 draft manuscript on the Chinese Ideogram (which included a list of lantern slides Fenollosa planned to use to illustrate visual compression). As I have suggested, the renovation of the lyric coincided with the beginning of experimental montage. Imagism with its ideographic roots anticipated Eisenstein's theory of montage as 'copulation (perhaps we'd better say, combination) of two hieroglyphs.' Eisenstein, like Pound, turned to the lyric forms of haiku and tanka as 'montage phrases' or as 'shot forms' (32). Indeed, Eisenstein's admiration for, and description of, the virtues of the 'copulative ideogram' is remarkably parallel to Pound's own (via Fenollosa).

Witness the following from Eisenstein:

The film-frame can never be an inflexible letter of the alphabet, but must always remain a multiple-meaning. And it can be read only in juxtaposition, just as an ideogram acquires its specific significance,

⁶⁴ David Kadlec's "Early Soviet Cinema and American Poetry" offers a widened view of the relationship – extending beyond H.D. and Imagism into wider currents of influence between American poetry and early Soviet cinema.

meaning, and even pronunciation only when combined with a separately indicated reading or tiny meaning, an indicator for the exact reading, placed alongside the basic hieroglyph. From our point of view, [haiku] are montage phrases. Shot lists.

The poet Chen-ou Liu makes the following observations in an article entitled, “Haiku as Ideogrammatic Montage: A Linguistic-Cinematic Perspective,” which are pertinent to the current discussion:

Like Pound who was enamored with the poetic aesthetics of China and Japan, Sergei Eisenstein, often hailed as the foremost film theorist and director in the history of cinema, had tried to develop his own brand of montage as an organic tool to design a new film language whose cinematographic principle operates according to those similar to Poundian ideogrammatic method. More importantly, in order to counter the conception of montage as a means of linkage and transition, one that is advocated by the ‘old school of film-making,’ he appropriated and later expanded the notion of literary montage that he found in Japanese haiku as his theoretical foundation for montage as collision and progression (or progression through collision) (11).

The following excerpt from Eisenstein’s essay, “The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram,” offers an excellent encapsulation of his own theory of montage as it was derived from and made analogous to his understanding of the workings of the ‘copulative’ Chinese ideogram. Similarly, as shown below, Ezra Pound, via Fenollosa’s text, seems to move in precisely the same analogous ways in working out his principles

of Imagism. Where Eisenstein is looking for a way to create various forms of associative meaning and feeling content via his use of ideogram, Pound is attempting to create a form of poetry that juxtaposes surprising images and leaves the reader to create associative meaning between the images that are provided by the poet. In this manner, words dissolve and images become the coinage of meaning in the poem, particularly surprisingly juxtaposed images which, Pound will argue, surprise the reader into meaning: the 'image' that arises, and which truly matters, is a third possibility born of the reader's response to the interaction—the collision—of the two images provided by the poet. This is clearly analogous to Eisenstein's own way of thinking about montage, where conflicting, or surprising images, take precedent over merely logically related or plot-centric choices of montage images. As Eisenstein explains it, likewise carving out his analogy with the Chinese ideogram:

For example: the picture for water and the picture of an eye signifies "to weep"; the picture of an ear nearing the drawing of

a dog = "to listen";

a dog + a mouth = "to bark";

a mouth + a child = "to scream";

a mouth + a bird = "to sing";

a knife + a heart = "sorrow," and so on.

But this is—montage!

Yes. It is exactly what we do in the cinema, combining shots that are depicted, single in meaning, neutral in content—into intellectual contexts and series.

This is a means and method inevitable in any cinematographic exposition. And, a condensed and purified form, the starting point for the ‘intellectual cinema.’ For a cinema seeking a maximum laconism for the visual representation of abstract concepts.

This is remarkably similar to Pound’s own thinking:

This essay was practically finished by the late Ernest Fenollosa; I have done little more than remove a few repetitions and shape a few sentences. We have here not a bare philological discussion, but a study of the fundamentals of all esthetics. In his search through unknown art Fenollosa, coming upon unknown motives and principles unrecognized in the West, was already led into many modes of thought since fruitful in ‘new’ western painting and poetry. He was a forerunner without knowing it and without being known as such (1).

For Pound, at issue is rescuing the clean, image-centered core of poetry, a language beneath the clutter that strikes more directly within the reader’s (and poet’s) mind. It is, indeed, the more ethereal aspects of Fenollosa’s thinking about the Chinese ideogram that clearly held the largest appeal for Pound, and which made the deepest impact in his own poetics as they evolved within his own work. The following, for instance, speaks to the

revolutionary nature of what was to become Imagism, and further underscores its connection to cinematic montage and the rise of the film arts in the last century:

The poet can never see too much or feel too much. His metaphors are only ways of getting rid of the dead white plaster of the copula. He resolves its indifference into a thousand tints of verb. His figures flood things with jets of various light, like the sudden up-blaze of fountains. The prehistoric poets who created language discovered the whole harmonious framework of nature, they sang out her processes in their hymns. And this diffused poetry which they created, Shakespeare has condensed into a more tangible substance. Thus in all poetry a word is like a sun, with its corona and chromosphere; words crowd upon words, and enwrap each other in their luminous envelopes until sentences become clear, continuous light-bands (18).

Perhaps the most well-known Imagist poem is Pound's "In a Station of the Metro,"

In a Station of the Metro

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;

Petals on a wet, black bough.

This juxtaposition of images, first of the faces in the metro station (given away by the poem's title which, following Pound's dictum of maximum verbal efficiency, certainly is made to count as part of the poem) then of "petals on a wet, black bough" is something that can readily be called 'filmic.' Indeed, the image of a peasant revolt in a film by Eisenstein smash-cut up against an image of animals being slaughtered makes precisely

the same aesthetic and cognitive gesture: two seemingly unrelated images show themselves to be closely related figuratively, and the strength of the relationship is precisely built upon the *omission* of connectives on the part of the poet or filmmaker. Famously, Pound's poem was originally much longer, but it was in winnowing it down to this core, surprising connection among seemingly disparate images that Pound felt he was able to trigger an emotional response in the reader that would approximate the very emotional response that had triggered him to wish to compose the poem in the first place.

For Eisenstein, conflict is king; montage is used to juxtapose conflicting images (including conflicts of emotion, tone, meaning, lighting, proportion, and so on) to create tension and power as one shot conflicts with another. For Eisenstein, even synchronous dialogue was at odds with the asynchronous effects he sought from montage, thus his dislike of synchronized sound. Not all the early Soviet filmmaker employed montage to this same effect. Pudovkin, for instance, used montage to create fluid, realistic narratives. Here, already, the governing literal vs. poetic approaches to the cinematic art is evident. Andre Bazin, for his part, agreed that dialogue was at odds with montage but thought that film should reveal "the whole of reality"(2) and not "cut it into bits"(2). In fact, he saw in early silent films a premonition of this and an alternative to montage in the *mise en scene*. It is ultimately, however, montage that is to provide the most fruitful terrain for visual-verbal mutual influence. As Taylor outlines the linkage:

Mr. Eisenstein not only adduces a verse passage from Pushkin's works to show that it is a perfect shooting script, line for line (minus dialogue) but also to demonstrate with quotations from Keats, Musset, Milton, and others the enjambment he identifies with the lineage-principle of montage.

But perhaps an element of more general enjambment should be evoked to show that the shooting script, while it may correspond to the ‘scenario’ of a poem is not after all the poetic essence of the film any more than the ‘scenario’ is the poem’s essence. The ‘poetic essence’ must inhere in the empiric manipulation of photographic image on one side and verbal image on the other (361).

The *image* is what makes the connection between the poetic and filmic media sensible, and the point that is essential to make is that the relationship between poetry and film is one of method rather than of content. The connection between Eisenstein’s articulation of montage and the copulative ideogram and H.D. and Pound’s work, including H.D.’s writing on film and Imagism, as well as Pound’s manifesto of Imagism, expresses the relationship on precisely these grounds.⁶⁵ Pound’s discussion, like Eisenstein’s, centers on analogies between thought, visuality, and the verbal, with both thinkers using the Chinese written character as an analogy for the simultaneously presented model for thinking that Pound and Eisenstein see as the main aim of their respective arts:

Literary history perceive Hilda Doolittle (H.D.) primarily as a poet and novelist. But this view is somewhat incomplete, for her creative activities ranged farther than this. From 1927 to 1930, h.d. Was devoting much of her energy to film—criticizing, acting in, and writing poems about this twentieth-century art form. Moreover for H.D. this work in film seemed to serve as a catalyst for an aesthetic theory that referred not only to film, but

⁶⁵ See Elizabeth Bermann’s chapter on Imagism in *Twentieth-Century Poetry and the Visual Arts*.

could, at the same time, encompass the various art forms in which she participated (57).

As noted, one of the chief ways in which this crosscurrent of relations is especially well marked in the work of H.D is through her involvement in the journal *Close Up*, as emphasized by McCabe:

Along with her performance in several silent films, H.D. was one of the founders of *Close Up* (1927-33), the first film journal in English to treat cinema exclusively, and she contributed eleven reviews. Dorothy Richardson, Gertrude Stein, and Marianne Moore were among its other literary contributors. Prominently, the journal translated Sergei Eisenstein, featured work by the psychoanalyst Hanns Sachs, and articulated a progressive politics that overlapped with its fostering of an avant-garde aesthetic (1).

PROJECTOR

(A poem by H.D. from the first issue of *Close Up*)

Light takes new attribute

and yet his old

glory

enchants;

not this,
not this, they say,
lord as he was of the hieratic dance,
of poetry
and majesty
and pomp,
master of shrines and gateways and of doors,
of markets
and the cross-road
and the street;
not this,
they say;
but we say otherwise
and greet
light
in new attribute,
insidious fire;
light reasserts

his power
reclaims the lost;
in a new blaze of splendour
calls the host
to reassemble
and to readjust
all severings
and differings of thought,
all strife and strident bickering
and rest;
O fair and blest,
he strides forth young and pitiful and strong,
a king of blazing splendour and of gold, and all the evil
and the tyrannous wrong
that beauty suffered
finds its champion,
light
who is god

and song.

He left the place they built him and the halls,

he strode so simply forth,

they knew him not;

no man deceived him,

no,

nor ever will,

with meagre counterfeit

of ancient rite,

he knows all hearts

and all imagining

of plot

and counterplot

and mimicry,

this measuring of beauty with a rod,

no formula

could hold him

and no threat

recall him

who is god.

Yet he returns,

O unrecorded grace,

over

and under

and through us

and about;

the stage is set now

for his mighty rays;

light,

light that batters gloom,

the Pythian

lifts up a fair head

in a lowly place,

he shows his splendour

in a little room;

he says to us,
be glad
and laugh,
be gay;
I have returned
though in an evil day
you crouched despairingly
who had no shrine;
we had no temple and no temple fire
for all these said
and mouthed
and said again;
beauty is an endighter
and is power
of city
and of soldier"
and might,
beauty is city

and the state
and dour duty,
beauty is this and this and this dull thing,
forgetting who was king.

Yet still he moves
alert,
invidious,
this serpent creeping
and this shaft of light,
his arrows slay
and still his foot-steps
dart
gold
in the market-place;
vision returns
and with new vision
fresh

hope
to the impotent;
tired feet that never knew a hill-slope
tread
fabulous mountain sides;
worn
dusty feet
sink in soft drift of pine
needles
and anodyne
of balm and fir and myrtle-trees
and cones
drift across weary brows
and the sea-foam
marks the sea-path
where no sea ever comes;
islands arise where never islands were,
crowned with the sacred palm

or odorous cedar;
waves sparkle and delight
the weary eyes
that never saw the sun fall in the sea
nor the bright Pleiads rise.

Here H.D. is grappling with a central question of film: Is the world represented by film natural or artificial? And Is film a kind of language? These two questions are obviously related, and can be thought of in the form/content dyad terms. The form of film, how it presents, the unique questions of the medium, its cost, its mass appeal, its collective making, all has to do with the question of whether or not it is a language. And if it is, what kind of language? What is even meant by this question? Is it a language like words are, or is it comprehensible in some kind of analogical relationship with language? One sees that film makes meaning, then that language is our main vehicle of meaning, so one wants to bring the two together. The analogy basically means, is film comprehensible—does it have a ‘syntax,’ et cetera—and if so, what is this made of. Another reason for the analogy is that a great deal of thinking about film has been done by or started by literary critics/theorists. So, the question Is film a language means — Is film something that makes meaning in a measurable way that participates in the larger systems of meaning as we know them. Semiotics is inevitably joined to structuralism and linguistics.

The first question regarding film’s status as a language is, Is this a colorful metaphor of the ways that film instantiates, suggests, and makes meaning, or Is this something systematically verifiable and discussable? If the first, then there is little to add.

If the second: The main approaches have focused on the technical moves of cinema, calling them a language largely in the first metaphorical sense, but holding to the second sense so that the vocabulary and rigor of language-centered approaches such as linguistics and, also, semiotics and structuralism might be employed. By language-centered I mean as “language” a system of conveying meaning that can be read and systematically understood and categorized. This can involve communication beyond language—music, billboards, whole cultures—but the main thing seems to be that it is systemizable. If something like cinema is a language this does not mean it behaves exactly like language but that we should be able to say how it behaves, how it makes meaning. In this sense it is impossible to say that film is not a language, since it clearly makes meaning, and it clearly does so in deliberate and traceable ways. Still, the metaphor is troubling since it asks for more: linguistically language is a set of arbitrary signs connected within a system of difference to make meaning. Why read film this way at all?

Christopher Metz is the first critic to take seriously the idea the film is a language. He shoots for a firm semiotic basis, making a distinction between film as a langue (“strict sense of constituting a language system”) and a langage (“looser sense of being a signifying practice characterized by recognizable ordering procedures—a cinematographic grammar”). Film is the latter largely because it lacks the double articulation of a langue: “the phonemes of natural languages are basic, distinctive units of sound which do not themselves signify. It is only when they are articulated at the second level by combining them into monemes (morphemes) or words that they signify. By contrast, the basic unit of cinema, the shot, conveys meaning only because of the iconic

or isomorphic relation it bears to the world it photographs. The shot is motivated, and is unlike the basic units of language, which are arbitrary, conventional and unmotivated”(3). This means that film constructs meaning out of objects that already mean, while language makes meaning from sounds that lack a meaning outside of its system.⁶⁶ Film is not a language in this full sense, partly because it is not natural, and partly because at its core a language is a system whose parts cannot mean without its whole; film’s parts still mean, still show, even if not ordered within a whole. The net of the whole in language is what makes it language; film lacks and does not need this. What I am getting at is the play between the visual and verbal, between word and image, so much exemplified by ekphrastic filmic works—poems which, in other words, describe or investigate the filmic—are intensely connected to this core question of the language-status of film. Indeed, as I would argue, the ekphrastic poem about film actually *enacts* this collision. As H.D. writes in “Projector”:

Yet he returns,
0 unrecorded grace,

over

and under

and through us

and about;

the stage is set now

⁶⁶ Discussed by Russell A. Berman in “The Recipient as Spectator: West German Film and Poetry of the Seventies” pp. 505-508.

for his mighty rays;
light,
light that batters gloom,
the Pythian
lifts up a fair head
in a lowly place,
he shows his splendour
in a little room;
he says to us,
be glad
and laugh,
be gay;
I have returned
though in an evil day
you crouched despairingly
who had no shrine;
we had no temple and no temple fire
for all these said

and mouthed

and said again

From a direct, cultural perspective, finally, film quickly became a part of the poetic landscape, and it continues to be so. This ekphrasis of film has differences yet may be said to participate in that tradition. Essentially two kinds, direct and technical; the technical above, now the direct.

Homage to Film

This night I have seen a film

That might have startled Henry James

From his massive calm

Of discipline, or sent Donne

Into passion, perhaps all names

Of crafty men delighted as the sun.

Berryman is directly discussing the eruption of film within the arts, and its unsettling impact on the literary tradition, choosing the example of James and metaphysical poet Donne. The poem opens with a nearly confessional statement, strictly located in the present, “This night I have seen a film,” then moves on to say that it would have “startled” James and thrown Donne “into passion.” Presumably they would both have been

unprepared to understand the medium, though James would perhaps have seen a film; obviously Donne would not have.

The sun of another medium
Comes up the East, mechanical
As any art, slow, but it will come
Faster and at last find
Its noon an Argus brain that shall
Center all complexities in mind.

Berryman predicts the ascent of film as the dominant medium, figuring its course as natural and intractable as the movement of the sun: “The sun of another medium/Comes up the East,” continuing to note that though film seems more mechanical than other arts, it is merely as mechanical as any of them.⁶⁷ The predicted speed of its ascendancy picks up pace: “Fast and at last find/Its noon an Argus brain that shall/Center all complexities in mind.”

Naturally enough, the question of film’s language-status leads one to consider the kinds of languages film is or is not able to ‘speak.’ Christian Metz argues that cinema is primarily a narrative form. This role has shaped many—or all—its techne. Even supposed non-narrative forms like documentary and avant-garde films employ much of the same moves as narrative films. What distinguishes these films from narrative

⁶⁷ See the first chapter of Daniel Kane’s *We Saw the Light: Conversations Between The New American Cinema and Poetry*.

works is social purpose or function, not method. Denotation and Connotation in the semiotics of the cinema comes down to the question of, first, whether or not film is a language. In the sense that Latin and French are languages, film is not. Denotative semiotics of film has to do with the literal: canon denotes canon; boom sound of canon denotes canon going off. Connotative semiotics of film addresses the style achieved, the various associations of the images and sounds and so on, on the screen. One distinction is that different presentations of the same denotative image may manifest a variety of connotative meanings. Film differs from photography centrally because of the infinite number of images a film manifests. It isn't just lots and lots of photographs but an unstable, ever-shifting presentation of images. The method is totally different. As Metz notes, "[Film] can however be considered a language, to the extent that it orders signifying elements within ordered arrangements different from those of spoken idioms—and to the extent that these elements are not traced on the perceptual configurations of reality itself (which does not tell stories)"(70). Alternatively, Gilbert Harman argues intriguingly that film is not literal but poetic. From his perspective the literal/semiotic approach to film is severely limited, required only to decode the basic level, but useless when it comes to the largely poetic function of film which is not amenable to scientific/semiotic inquiry.

For the poet film is, clearly, a poetic medium — at least, that is, those films (and those experiences of films) that are adaptable to the poetic medium, are 'poetic.' As in H.D.'s example above, numerous poets have taken to an investigation not simply of the medium of film but, rather, of the experience that the viewer undergoes while viewing a film. These sorts of poems, similar, I would argue, to Keats's experiential treatment of

what it means to look at the urn, seek to poetically render—and evaluate—the experience of viewing a film. One recent example is a poem entitled, simply, “The Movie,” by John Hollander:

The Movie

The old picture plays
Lights across the screen.
Overhead, the beam
From the thoughtful booth
Flickers in a kind
Of code that only
The screen can read out.

Lights like memories
Flicker on the screen
Of your deep gazing.
My eyes and my hand
Are like some part of

The surrounding dark.

Here Hollander is making the important point that the viewer of the film, the trance-like state in which “memories/Flicker on the screen,” renders the viewer a part of the apparatus of film itself.⁶⁸ The experience of watching a film, the darkness, the soporific calm, is a part of the medium itself. Indeed, in Hollander’s reading, the viewer actually turns into a portion of the viewing experiencing, melding with the cinema, “My eyes and my hand/Are like some part of/The surrounding dark.” Charles Simic picks up precisely this theme in his poem “Position without a Magnitude”:

Position without a Magnitude

As when someone

You haven’t noticed before

Gets up in an empty theater

And projects his shadow

Among the fabulous horsemen

On the screen

And you shudder

As you realize it’s only you

⁶⁸ For a more contemporary example see Daniel Kane, “‘Not to Creation or Destruction but to Truth’: Robert Duncan, Kenneth Anger, and the Conversation between Film and Poetry.”

On your way
To the blinding sunlight
Of the street.

The viewer is so much a part of the experience and method of film that s/he is actually startled, in the second stanza, to find him/herself released from the grasp of the film.

These poems, interestingly, may be related to an essential concept of recent film theory, The Apparatus, articulated most fully by Jean-Louis Baudry, who argues precisely that films are viewed in darkness and a suspended pseudo-immobility. This, Baudry asserts, is part of the primal urge satisfied by cinema, something he likens to Plato's parable of the cave. "What desire was aroused, more than two thousand years before the actual invention of cinema, what urge in need of fulfillment would be satisfied by a montage, rationalized into an idealist perspective precisely in order to show that it rests primarily on an impression of reality?"(177). Film shows us the fake as real so we can see the underpinnings of the real as fake.⁶⁹ Evocatively, Linda Pastan's poem, "Popcorn," makes precisely the point of the hypnotic and primordial nature of the film apparatus, even evoking Plato's cave:

Popcorn

When Plato said

⁶⁹ This is precisely Slavoj Žižek's theoretical ground concerning film in his *Pervert's Guide to the Cinema*.

That what we see are shadows
Flickering on a cave wall,
He must have meant
The movies.
You let a cigarette lean
From your mouth precisely
As Bogart did.
Because of this reel, later,
We say of your life
That it is B-grade;
That it opened and will close
In a dusty place where
Things move always
In slow motion;
That what is real
Is the popcorn
Jammed between our teeth.

The relationship between film and poetry presents an inter-medial cooperation not achieved in any other historical moment. Conveniently, film is a very new medium, so

the time period under consideration is relatively short, roughly the first half century of the emergence of film both as a new art form and as a cultural institution of mass appeal. In the nascent years of cinema, film was taken by poets not as threat but as promise, and poetry was taken by many pioneers of cinema as an object of aspiration. Both mediums, in short, required one another to understand themselves. Imagism (technique/complete art Pound and H.D.), Appreciation culturally (Eliot and Williams), Subject (whoever) Focus on three film makers; the poets... Many poets thought of film as a complete art that promised not merely its own hitherto unavailable forms of representation but one whose powers, though of enormously different technical means than that of poetry, could also help the poet to find new modes of meaning. Filmmakers likewise saw the impressionistic powers of poetry as an object of aspiration. As I have shown, many modern poets had something to say about film, whether as an art in its own right, a new cultural institution, or as a harbinger and promise of what poetry may yet learn to do. The vast majority of these commentaries were positive, hopeful ones. This overt interest expressed in letters as well as essays and reviews of films also found its way into the poetry, again either in direct terms of content or, more obliquely, in the way that poetry began to be written. Scholars who have dealt with the relationship between film and poetry have tended to not consider the lineage between this relationship and the larger ekphrastic tradition of which it is clearly a part. At its most basic, the ekphrastic poem offers a verbal representation of a visual representation, something clearly in evidence in poems that directly engage the cinematic realm, either through description of specific films, or aspects of film technique or, indeed, in poems devoted to actresses, actors, directors, or other aspects of the world represented by film. In this respect, poems about

films (in the largest sense) are simply another evolution in the ekphrastic mode, one that seems to be faced by an enormously deepened representational gulf, since the space delineated by Lessing and others as existing between the representational capacities of painting and poetry is even wider with respect to film and poetry. Technically speaking, the two media are about as wide apart as could be imagined. In spirit, however, film and twentieth century poetry bear a remarkable kinship.

One of the governing questions of film theory is concerned with whether the world represented by film is a natural or an artificial one. This question, which began as a way of challenging the artistry of film, may in fact be seen as a continuation of the basic questions of semiotics as they pertain to the naturalness or artificiality of the visual sign. Indeed, much subsequent discussion of film theorists—including whether or not film may be thought of as a kind of language; the role of sound in film; the role of narrative; and, the impact of movie stars upon the viewer—may be tied back to this fundamental question of the naturalness or artificiality of the visual, filmic sign.⁷⁰ Film, among the visual arts, does come closest to offering an unmediated representation of the world, since it is a mechanical gathering of the world, and one that offers perhaps the most abundant such gathering. I close with Barbara Guest's remarkable poetic statement on the lovely artifice of the entire affair:

Motion Pictures: 5

It was the scene where the toothy actress takes a glass of water and places it on a table next to a bouquet of flowers; the glass of water was merely a

⁷⁰ For a detailed discussion see Scott Macdonald's "Poetry and Film: Cinema as Publication" pp. 51-54.

prop intended to remove the camera from her ambitious arrangement of flowers; the camera following the rhythm of the water picked up the shine of her molars as she brought the water to her face disrupting the planned lighting of a fade-out to a mansion where the star of the picture under a canopy of ice green purple red lay chained to an enormous burlap bag with “TROUSERS FOR EXTRAS” written on it; and there were many people in the chamber all dressed in trousers with “grips” handling extra lights and extra food and extra “quiet” cards for the extra stages in what was to be one of the most gigantic productions of the studio.

Conclusion:

From Paragone to Symbiosis: Poetry and the Allure of the Visual

This dissertation has aimed to trace out the ways in which poetry of the twentieth century has been in dialogue with the visual arts. In particular, I have sought to frame how new innovations in the visual arts have come to manifest changes in the poetics arts. These changes have been both in formal innovations, such as Imagism, and in terms of content – from poems dealing with the uncanny effects of photography, to poets discussing the effect of seeing a film. All along, I have argued, the long tradition of ekphrastic poetry has shown itself to be a far more supple way of creating verbal imaginings of visual art objects than the initially antagonistic relations between this media first seemed. Indeed, there is little left of the so-called paragone in the poets I have discussed here. If anything, the line between the visual and the verbal is blurred to a mutually beneficial, fluid border. Both sides have benefited enormously from innovations in the other and, as I have argued, many of these innovations have been arrived at in tandem by the respective art forms. It may indeed be the case that the rather outmoded sounding term “ekphrasis” is better left off in favor of more expansive notions about the relations among word and image, the visual and the verbal, in the last century of poetry. Certainly this manner of thinking comes closer to the way that poets have come to think of the ways in which their art is in conversation with the various visual arts. That conversation, I have aimed to show, is one that no longer traffics in antagonisms but, rather, has become a more and more synergistic one.

Ekphrasis (ek-phrassein: to speak out, to tell, to speak the name of) began as a rhetorical exercise within the Progymnasmata, a Sophist manual of style.⁷¹ [1] As its root suggests, ekphrasis involved scrupulous descriptions of persons, places, or things, a process intended to bring the object to presence. Ekphrasis is thus originally defined by its technique, not by its choice of an objet d'art, though as a literary mode or subgenre "description of an art object" is now the fundamental characteristic of ekphrasis. It is perhaps not surprising that a descriptive process should have evolved in this direction, since it is arguable that the concentrating eye is likely to be most rewarded by looking at an objet d'art. Although contemporary ekphrastic theorists tend to speak of classical ekphrasis in terms of its focus on utilitarian objects⁷² [2] (the most famous of these being Homer's description of Achilles' shield), it is clear that the utility of the object, for the poet, has always owed a great deal to the object's artistry. Homer's interest in the bas-relief of Achilles' shield anticipates ekphrastic poetry's own eventual transition to a focus on objects that are nominally works of art. Seminal examples of this transition include Lucian's first century AD depictions of paintings by Zeuxis, Philostratus's *Imagines*, and Callistratus's fourth century AD descriptions of statuary.⁷³ [3] These works differed from their predecessors in making ekphrasis not only an exercise in scrupulously presented description, but also a presentation of the making of verbal art from visual art.

⁷¹ Discussed in "Classical Ekphrasis," from Grant F. Scott's *The Sculpted Word: Keats, Ekphrasis, And The Visual Arts*, (pp. 1-14).

⁷² As Scott writes, "[in classical ekphrasis] the things described – shields, cups, brooches, cloaks, tapestries – are not nominally works of art but utilitarian objects that are personal and portable"(1). James Heffernan's discussion of the genealogy of ekphrasis in *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery*, which focuses on Homer, Virgil, and Dante, provides an excellent overview (pp.9-46).

⁷³ *The Sculpted Word: Keats, Ekphrasis, And The Visual Arts* 5.

Perhaps the most important theoretical discussion of the making of verbal art from visual art is Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Laocoon, or On the Limits of Painting and Poetry*.⁷⁴ [4] Sister arts scholarship owes many of its most enduring precepts to Lessing's assertions, and contemporary ekphrastic theorists such as Murray Krieger and James Heffernan locate much of their thinking (by extension or difference) within Lessing's paradigm.⁷⁵ [5] It is a paradigm whose first principles are focused on the different capacities of visual and verbal representation. As Lessing writes, "painting and poetry ... make use of entirely different means or symbols – the first, namely, of form and color in space, the second of articulated sounds in time"(91). Above and beyond this spatial/temporal antithesis, "the symbols of poetry are not merely progressive, but [they] are also arbitrary"(Lessing 97). Finally, one can hear in a post-Saussurian theorist such as Krieger the semiotic extension of Lessing's eighteenth-century distinction between the spatial/temporal antitheses stated in terms of a contemporary interest in the problematic of representation.⁷⁶ [6] As Krieger writes in *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign*:

⁷⁴ *Laocoon* was first published in 1766. What I call the "enduring" power of its precepts may, of course, be formulated less positively, as it is in Joseph Frank's *The Widening Gyre* (1963), which interrogates Lessing's longstanding prescriptive definition of the division between the spatial medium of painting and the temporal medium of poetry. Frank writes of the definition's critical entrenchment: "Lessing's attempt to define the limits of literature and the plastic arts has become a dead issue; it is neither reiterated nor contradicted but simply neglected"(3).

⁷⁵ It may be said that the seminal texts of modern ekphrastic theory answer Frank's 1963 challenge. Krieger's 1967 essays, "Ekphrasis and the Still Movement of Poetry; or Laocoon Revisited" provides the sort of revivication and interrogation which Frank saw as absent from the sister arts' critical landscape. Subsequent works, such as W.J.T. Mitchell's "Space and Time: Lessing's *Laocoon* and the Politics of Genre" represent a continuation of ekphrastic theory's effort to address Lessing.

⁷⁶ The consideration of *Laocoon* in David Wellbery's 1984 essay "Lessing's 'Laocoon': Semiotics and Aesthetics in the Age of Reason" brings Lessing into post-Saussurian discussions of sign theory.

how can words try to do the job of the ‘natural sign’ (i.e., a sign that is to be taken as a visual substitute for its referent), when they are, obviously, only arbitrary – though conventionally arbitrary – signs? All the complexities of my subject [ekphrasis], its unanswered questions, follow from the need to sustain the two opposed halves of this puzzle (2).

Ekphrastic theory grows out of a desire to investigate the very antithesis that Lessing formulates between visual and verbal signification. James Heffernan has suggested that all ekphrastic theory is coordinated around the breach (by ekphrastic poems themselves) of “the theoretical barriers that Lessing erected between poetry and the visual arts: between poetry as an art of conventional signs marching along in time and painting as an art of would-be ‘natural’ signs deployed in space” (*Museum of Words* 1). Where Lessing describes the antithetical nature of the visual and verbal arts, ekphrasis (in theory and in practice) examines the ways in which this antithesis, this tension, manifests itself within an ekphrastic poem. Lessing declares the antithesis, while ekphrasis challenges and interrogates it.⁷⁷ [7]

Central to this tension is the notion of the *paragone*, Leonardo da Vinci’s term for the competitive relationship between the arts evident in ekphrastic poetry. The *paragone* is often viewed as the ‘other side’ of Simonides’s more symbiotic formulation that “painting is mute poetry, poetry a speaking picture.” It is a tension born of what W.J.T.

⁷⁷ Grant F. Scott goes so far as to suggest that in the period before Lessing’s prescriptions (figured as almost prelapsarian) the problematics of ekphrasis did not communicably exist: “In Homer’s ekphrastic Eden,” Scott argues, “there are as yet no special rules for describing static objects, no prescriptive Lessingesque categories respecting time and space, succession and simultaneity”(5).

Mitchell has called “ekphrastic anxiety”: the fear that the image’s power will render silent the poet’s attempt to capture and contain it within words (*Picture Theory* 170-76). This dissertation endeavors to trace the ways in which the paragonal relationship between the visual and verbal arts evolves and becomes, in the modern period, a system of affiliation and symbiosis. While solidly grounded in the tradition of Renaissance ekphrasis and central instances of the paragonal from this period, my focus is on the ways in which the rift between the visual and the verbal is closed in the modern period as capacities once ascribed to the realm of the visual are absorbed into the poetics of modernity.

It should really be no surprise to notice how receptive poets of the last century have been in their response to innovations in the visual arts. I have been especially interested here in the ways that technological innovations in the visual arts—namely, photograph and film—have found their way into the poetics of twentieth-century poetry. It is especially intriguing to consider how, despite wide gulfs in terms of modes of production, a thing such as a lyric poem may evolve and begin to see differently as it comes into contact with, and is influenced by, the mergence of new realms of representation, such as photography and film. As I have argued, the influence has run in both directions – and often most powerfully among the avant-garde figures of the visual arts, who have consistently sought to learn from and align themselves with work being done in the poetic realm. This arc of mutual influence, and mutual enhancement, has been the central focus of this dissertation. The poems about privately-held paintings, photographs, and the experiences of watching films that have been discussed here have been offered as one more layer in the continually evolving relation among the visual and

verbal, among word and image that, as I have argued, has been along nearly since the beginning of lyric poetry itself. Technological innovation, it would seem, has merely served to enhance these porousness of any presumed border between these art forms, as visual innovation seeks to attach itself to the traditions of the poetic, and as the poetic seeks to surge forward by attaching itself to innovations in the visual arts. Perhaps these seeds of mutual innovation were always inherent within the sister arts, and the extension of the technological possibilities of one medium has simply served to further illuminate the malleability of the other. Beside the technological complexities of filmic representation, lyric is remarkably simple, and yet this very simplicity and singularity of its mode of production has served only to highlight the complex renderings possible within the realm of the verbal. Each new innovation in the visual arts reveals new characteristics of the possibilities of the poetic, which, as I have aimed to show, continues to be a remarkably malleable, endlessly innovative form for representing the world.

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