



A Historiographical Study of Ekphrastic Poetry: A Rendezvous of Minds

Un estudio historiográfico de la poesía efrástica: un encuentro de mentes

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Resumen

El presente trabajo pretende explorar las raíces de la poesía efrástica: la convergencia del arte gráfico y la representación verbal de éste. A la luz de esta tradición, esta ambiciosa tarea histórica recorre centurias desde la descripción homérica de la forja del escudo de Aquiles en la *Iliada* hasta la poesía efrástica moderna, para entender mejor esta práctica tan antigua, pero a su vez, tan poco versada. Hace hincapié en la costumbre efrástica de la prosopopeya como un medio que da voz al observado, en el cual su propia narratividad expresa y vierte la verbalidad del poeta. El poema efrástico se convierte en una intersección del pintor, el poeta, el lector y la obra de arte para dar vida al significante en un encuentro de mentes.

Palabras claves: écfrasis, poesía, retórica, *enargeia*, prosopopeya, arte visual



Abstract

The present work aims at exploring the roots of ekphrastic poetry: the convergence of graphic art and its verbal representation. In the light of this tradition, this ambitious historical endeavor prances through centuries, from Homer’s description of the making of the shield of Achilles in the *Iliad* to modern ekphrastic poetry in order to have a better understanding of this practice, so old yet so unconversant. It will focus on the ekphrastic custom of prosopopoeia as a means of unsilencing the gaze and in which its narrativity will both speak out and pour the poet’s verballity. The ekphrastic poem becomes a junction of painter, poet, reader, and work of art in order to bring the signifier into being in this rendezvous of minds.

Keywords: ekphrasis, poetry, rhetoric, *enargeia*, prosopopoeia, visual art

Ut pictura poesis -a poem is like a picture.
(Horace’s *Ars Poetica*)

A painting is a silent poem; a poem is a silent picture.
(Plutarch)

Literature and art are inherent to human endeavor; their concatenation of activities may be well described employing the famous simile of the Roman poet Quintus Horatius Flaccus (Horace 65-8 BCE)—*Ut pictura poesis*. Both sister arts, as they have been nominated, converge into a profusion of encounters enriching and molding each other at their play. Aristotle also pointed out the affinity of both arts when asserted that “some artists, whether by theoretical knowledge or by long practice, can represent things by imitating their shapes and colours, and others do so by the use of the voice” (Aristotle, 384-322 BC, as cited in [Verdonk, 2005, p. 234](#)). Ekphrastic poetry is a term commonly

used in modern times to describe a visual work of art. But, its history can be traced back to the Greco-Roman or Classic Antiquity Period. The purpose of this endeavor consists not in providing a pretentious, exhaustive study of this term but more in tracing specific spatio-temporal features along its path to witness the birth of a literary genre from its very swaddlings and to recognize the intertwined and various facets of the ekphrastic tradition, whose dynamism is a constant. The fusion or osmotic relationship of mimetic representations is a reversal of the classic thought *oculis mentis* or the mind’s eye, for “the language of ekphrastic poetry is expected to call the image to mind, to conjure it up,

as it were” (Verdonk, 2005, p. 235); in other words, it is “an attempt to capture the visual in words” (Verdonk, 2005, p. 235).

Based on the premise that ekphrastic poetry captures the pictorial representations in words, it can be affirmed that ekphrasis is imbued in the art of rhetoricians. Simon Goldhill’s “What is Ekphrasis For?” (2007) alludes to a first century description of ekphrasis by Theon, who defines it as “a descriptive speech that brings the thing shown vividly before the eyes” (p. 3). Goldhill (2007) argues that this definition “utilizes a key rhetorical idea that goes back to Aristotle, the notion of *enargeia*—the ability to make visible” (p. 3) or vividness. This assertion invokes the power of the word in making the receptor viewers and listeners, which may, in Goldhill’s words (2007), “emasculate, defeat, humble its audience” (p. 4). The power *enargeia* exerts on the listeners who become viewers through the impression or *phantasia*, in Quintilian terms, allows it to enter their minds (Goldhill, 2007, p.4) manipulating their thoughts and imagination at its play. Ekphrasis turns into a weapon of power discourse, whose gaze can turn the listener or viewer into stone. This relationship of slaver vs. slave opens up a myriad of possibilities which transform this into a powerfully gendered and class phenomenon, envoicing a silent object.

This ekphrastic dynamism allows, for instance, the story of Arachne in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses Chapter VI (43 B.C.-17 A.D. or 18 A.D.)* to provide an impression—a *phantasia* in which the female gazee—Arachne—recovers her voice through the weaving contest against Minerva (Athena)

and wins the audience that is her gazer, empowering her. The power relationships between slave and slaver/gazer and gazee are inverted. Through her tapestry, which is a female tradition, the gazee undermines the status quo of society by defying ultimate authority—the goddess Minerva, recuperating her speech in the eyes of her oppressor (Minerva) and in the eyes of her gazer, at the same time giving the victimized women portrayed in her tapestry: Europa, Leda, Antiope, Danae, Aegina, Proserpine and Mnemosyne the opportunity to tell their horror, atrocious stories of rape by immortals:

Arachne, of Maeonia, wove, at first the story of Europa, as the bull deceived her, and so perfect was her art, it seemed a real bull in real waves. Europa seemed to look back towards the land which she had left; and call in her alarm to her companions—and as if she feared the touch of dashing waters, to draw up her timid feet, while she was sitting on the bull’s back. And she wove Asteria seized by the assaulting eagle; and beneath the swan’s white wings showed Leda lying by the stream: and showed Jove dancing as a Satyr, when he sought the beautiful Antiope, to whom was given twins; and how he seemed Amphitryon when he deceived Alcmena; and how he courted lovely Danae luring her as a gleaming shower of gold; and poor Aegina, hidden in his flame, Jove as a shepherd with Mnemosyne; and beautiful Proserpina, involved by him, apparent as a spotted snake. (Ovid, 43 B.C.-17 A.D. or 18 A.D. Book VI)

In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses (43 B.C.-17 A.D. or 18 A.D.)*, Arachne vindicates herself in the eyes of society by denouncing mistreatment and oppression by immortal

beings. Pride is no longer justification for the horrific acts of gods and goddesses. Her woven images portray brutality against female mortals. Her narrative panels are no longer silent. Metamorphoses become the vehicle of sordid violence against female mortals. Arachne, indeed, wove all around the web a pattern of interlaced savage acts against mortal women who did not deserve their fate in the hands of bestial gods and goddesses. At the end, she succumbs to the envy of Minerva, but her story and that of many women outlive the woven panels defying the gender politics of Rome. Her sin and that of many women was to have the courage to defend themselves, thus not subduing the self to the desire and willful, fickle nature of immortals. This gendered political issue turns even more significant in *Metamorphoses* when this frame story provides an analogy for Ovid's banishment by Augustus for supposedly opposing the moral rules of his empire in the poem, the *Ars Amatoria* (The Art of Love). The en-voicing of these women becomes his own way of protesting against his being silenced by Augustus. This dystopic society conveyed in the poem and in the tapestries parallels his chaotic ancient Roman society. In the same way that Minerva could not find a fleck or flaw in Arachne's art, Augustus may have unjustly punished Ovid for seeing amorality where there was not, for revenge or for wanting to get rid of a subversive poet. Is this a matter of censoring perfect art? Rage ripped these webby and wicked power relationships:

Arachne's spirit, deigning not to brook such insult [her being struck with a weaving shuttle on her head], brooded on it, till she tied a cord around her neck, and

hung herself. Minerva, moved to pity at the sight, sustained and saved her from that bitter death; but, angry still, pronounced another doom: "Although I grant you life, most wicked one, your fate shall be to dangle on a cord, and your posterity forever shall take your example, that your punishment may last forever!" Even as she spoke, before withdrawing from her victim's sight, she sprinkled her with juice—extract of herbs of Hecate. At once all hair fell off, her nose and ears remained not, and her head shrunk rapidly in size, as well as all her body, leaving her diminutive.—Her slender fingers gathered to her sides as long thin legs; and all her other parts were fast absorbed in her abdomen—whence she vented a fine thread;—and ever since, Arachne, as a spider, weaves her web. (Ovid, 43 B.C.-17 A.D. or 18 A.D. Book VI)

These are the stories of Greek female mortals having been metamorphosed into monsters for alleged disobedience, pride, and some other reasons or being raped by powerful immortals. But Ovid skillfully denounced the atrocities committed against these female mortals in order to expose the hideous abuse of power. As it can be seen, the ekphrastic tradition is political and gendered.

In the light of this tradition, this ambitious historical endeavor prances through centuries, from Homer's description of the making of the shield of Achilles in the *Iliad* to modern ekphrastic poetry in order to have a better understanding of this practice, so old yet so unconversant. It focuses on the steady, ekphrastic practice of prosopopoeia as a means of unsilencing the gazee and in which its narrativity both speaks out and pours the poet's verballity, which is the origin of the word.

I will defy the rules of chronology by starting with the end—what ekphrasis signifies in contemporary times: “the verbal representation of visual representation” (Heffernan, 1991, p. 3). The unostentatiousness of this term paradoxically both facilitates and deters the understanding of the range of scope of this phenomenon. This plain definition carries a heavy load of thousands of years on its back; its invisible, massive weight has been put to oblivion to the modern eye. Even if this meaning is expanded to specify its taxonomy—poetry “addressing not only works of visual art, such as paintings, tapestries and sculpture, but also architectural art, and functional artefacts such as goblets, vases, and weaponry like swords, shields and suits of armor” (Verdonk, 2005, p. 233), it is an unbearable task to imagine what carries on its back. This customary manner can be traced back to the 8th century BCE, “about the time that writing originates in Greece, it is hardly an exaggeration to say that ekphrasis is as old as writing itself in the western world” (Heffernan, 1991, p. 9). In spite of this, this practice is not well-versed in Costa Rica. Internationally, publications have flourished among classical literature scholars in terms of the etymology, taxonomy and narratology of ekphrastic poetry. It has suffered even variations in its spelling—“ecphrasis” or “ekphrasis.” As Hollander (1995) has indicated in his book *The Gazer’s Spirit: Poems Speaking to Silent Works of Art*, “ecphrasis” is “frequently spelled in the directly transliterated form, ekphrasis” (p. 5). The latter spelling will pervade this text as a reminder of the origin of this vocable, ἐκ ek and φράσις phrasis, ἐκ meaning “out” and φράσις speech or way of uttering vocally. Nonetheless, confusion and debate

remain in terms of what characterizes this “sub-genre” of poetry and what differentiates it from pictorialism and iconicity. Heffernan’s “Ekphrasis and Representation” (1991) mainly differentiates ekphrasis from these two forms in that the former focuses on representational art whereas pictorialism and iconicity aim at the representations of natural objects and artifacts” (p. 299) Likewise, there is no agreement between what a narratized description is vs. a descriptized narration. Indisputably, this contention of ideas originates in the old rivalry where the ekphrastic practice becomes a battle field between “the rival modes of representation: between the driving force of the narrating word and the stubborn resistance of the fixed image” (Heffernan, 1991, p. 6).

This territory that becomes more mysterious the more it is explored is exuberant and rich for the seed of research—a land where different literary discourses emerge and where communication turns into an encounter of minds. The relevance of the reconnaissance of this area goes beyond the incursion into a tradition, for it has become “a literary mode” (Heffernan, 1991, p. 298). This was not the case in late antiquity where ekphrasis was not a genre per se but part of the Greek rhetorical tradition. The earliest definitions of this term can be found in rhetorical treatises like the *Progymnasmata*—basic exercises in rhetoric, “which offer the definitions of ekphrasis as ‘speech that brings the subject matter vividly before the eyes’ belong to the first centuries CE” (Webb, 2009, p. 15). To bring the vividness of the subject matter before the eyes assumed relevance in a culture of orality and aurality. Its virtues; therefore, according to Chapters on

Ekphrasis in the Theon's *Progymnasmata* (118.6-120.11) are

clarity (*saphēneia*) and the vividness (*enargeia*) which makes one almost see what is being spoken about (*ta apangellomena*); then one should avoid speaking at great length about useless things (*achrēsta*); in general one should fit the language (*apangelia*) to the subject (*ta hupokeimena*), so that if the subject shown (*to dēloumenon*) is flowery, the style (*phrasis*) should also be flowery, but if it is harsh or frightening or anything else, the qualities of the language (*hermēneia*) should not be inappropriate to the nature of the subject." (Patillon (Ed.), 1997, as cited in Webb, 2009, p. 198)

The above quotation evidences the importance on the effect of ekphrasis when presenting a subject so vividly as if the audience were there. Certainly, ekphrasis is

rooted in this tradition but not exclusive to it. In the myriad versions of the *Progymnasmata* from the 1st to 5th centuries CE, several authors devoted to the discussion of the subjects for ekphrasis, as can be observed in the table below presented by Ruth Webb (2009) in her book, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice* (p. 64).

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From this table, it can be observed that the subjects for ekphrasis were numerous and that Nikolaos is the only one who included paintings and statues within the subjects, which is significant because this indicates that ekphrasis was not reduced to visual art like modern usage stipulates, but it is a practice that involved a greater scope. According

Table 1.

Comparison of the subjects for ekphrasis with the parts of narration and the subjects for enkōmion in the surviving Progymnasmata

<i>Author</i>	<i>Subjects for ekphrasis</i>	<i>Parts of narration</i>	<i>Subjects for enkōmion</i>
Theon	Events, persons, places, times, <i>tropoi</i>	Person, event, place, time, manner (<i>tropos</i>), cause	[Persons and inanimate objects/abstracts]
ps.-Hermogenes	Persons, events, places, states of affairs (<i>kairoi</i>), times	_____	Persons, abstract entity (<i>pragmata</i>), mute animals, plants, mountains and rivers
Aphthonios	Persons, events, seasons, places, mute animals and plants	Person, event, place, time, manner (<i>tropos</i>), cause	Persons, events, seasons, places, mute animals and plants
Nikolaos	Places, seasons, persons, festivals, events, paintings and statues	Person, event, place, time, manner (<i>tropos</i>), cause	Persons, abstract or concrete entities <i>pragmata</i>

to the table above, rhetoricians could compose *ekphrases* of events, places, people, times, seasons, festivals, animals, and art. In a translation of the *Progymnasmata*, Chapters on Ekphrasis, Nikolaos asserts that ekphrasis differs from *diegesis* (narration) in that the former goes into details (Leipzig, 1913, as cited in Webb, 2009, p. 203). He makes his point with the following illustration: “it is characteristic of *diēgēsis* [69] to say ‘the Athenians and the Peloponnesians went to war’, but it is characteristic of an ekphrasis to say that each side made this or that type of preparation and used this or that manner (*tropos*) of equipment” (Leipzig, 1913, as cited in Webb, 2009, p. 203). He further explains ekphrases of works of art and how they should

add reasons (*logismoi*) why the painter or sculptor depicted things in certain ways, such as, for example, that he depicted the character as angry from such and such a cause (*aitia*) or happy, or ... some other emotion resulting from the story about the person being described. Reasons contribute greatly to *enargeia* in other types of ekphrasis too. (Leipzig, 1913, as cited in Webb, 2009, p. 203)

As it can be seen, ekphrasis is a detailed description so vivid to the eye that makes listeners spectators: “ekphrasis will prepare us for the narrative section except in that it does not give a plain exposition (*psilē aphēgēsis*) but makes use of those elements that create *enargeia* and bring the subjects of the speech before the eyes and almost make the audience into spectators” (Leipzig, 1913, as cited in Webb, 2009, p. 203). It is precisely the epideictic and *enargeic* nature of ekphrasis that flourishes and prevails during antiquity.

Theoreticians like James A. W. Heffernan (1991) and John Hollander (1995) have focused on tracing a taxonomy and a time line of this phenomenon. Hollander (1995) coined the terms notional and actual ekphrasis. “Notional ekphrasis—or the description, often elaborately detailed, of purely fictional painting or sculpture that is indeed brought into being by the poetic language itself—abounds in antiquity and after” (Hollander, 1995, p. 4). Examples of notional ekphrasis pervade in ancient times such as Homer’s Shield of Achilles, Hesiod’s shield of Herakles, and Greek epigrams among others (Hollander, 1995, p. 4). Actual ekphrasis, contrariwise, “entail engagements with particular and identifiable works of art” (Hollander, 1995, p. 4). Actual ekphrastic poems abound like street vendors on a spring day “particularly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries” (Hollander, 1995, p. 4). Heffernan (1991) ascertains the line of development of this tradition beginning with the epic poem and ground rock of the ekphrastic tradition as it is conceived today, the Homeric episode of the forging of Achilles’s shield and ending with modern and postmodern ekphrasis with Ashbery’s “Self-Portrait.” More naïve than pretentious, my research, as stated before, pretends to map this antique practice through the centuries to elucidate its major traits that led this tradition into a literary genre.

Prosopopoeia and *enargeia*, constant characteristics of ekphrastic descriptions, buck and bound throughout time. In Achilles’s shield (Homer’s *The Iliad*, 8th BC), the vivid description of its forging and how this piece of art envoices the silent object entice the spectator by bringing the subject matter before the eyes:

And he [Hephaestus, a smithing god], forged on the shield two noble cities filled
 with mortal men. With weddings and wedding feasts in one
 and under glowing torches they brought forth the brides
 from the women's chambers, marching through the streets
 while choir on choir the wedding song rose high
 and the young men came dancing, whirling round in rings
 and among them flutes and harps kept up their stirring call—
 women rushed to the doors and each stood moved with wonder.
 And the people massed, streaming into the marketplace 580
 where a quarrel had broken out and two men struggled
 over the blood-price for a kinsman just murdered.
 One declaimed in public, vowing payment in full—
 The other spurned him, he would not take a thing so
 both men pressed for a judge to cut the knot.
 The crowd cheered on both, they took both sides,
 but heralds held them back as the city elders sat
 on polished stone benches, forming the sacred circle,
 grasping in hand the staffs of dear-voiced heralds,
 and each leapt to his feet to plead the case in turn, 590
 Two bars of solid gold shone on the ground before them,
 A prize for the judge who'd speak the straightest verdict. (18.472-501)

This excerpt seduces the spectator to see, hear, smell, and touch what the persona does. The spectator becomes a witness in this whirling motion of dances, flutes, harps, songs, and murder. The gazer loses his or her capacity to elucidate what is real or unreal and enters the work of art. It is at this precise moment that the *enargeia* of a text proves so strong that the reader is lulled into *apatê* [illusion and/or deception], made incapable of distinguishing reality from representation” (Walker, 1993, p. 369). The language is so powerful that it paralyzes the gazer's ability to discern dimensions. “The shield is shielded by the very language that purports to reveal it to us” (Heffernan, 1991, p. 14). The onlooker is spellbound taking sides and becoming a participant. The spectator succumbs to the epideictic nature of the persona.

In the Byzantine period (late Antiquity and Middle Ages 1453), these distinguishing features—*prosopopoia*, *enargeia*, and *phantasia*—impression remain. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (43 B.C.-17 A.D. or 18 A.D.), aforementioned, excels in unsilencing the female depicted in the tapestry--object of the gazer and in converting the object into subject. Another literary form of the ekphrastic tradition that flourished in the Hellenistic Period (328 BCE-31BCE or 330 CE) is the epigram. “There is a highly developed *discourse of viewing* in Hellenistic culture, for which the notion of *phantasia-impression* is crucial” (Goldhill, 2007, p. 2), which becomes very significant for this form for its brevity. Scholars have debated about if the epigram belongs to the ekphrastic practice; notwithstanding, Heffernan (1991) points out that if one considers the prosopopoic nature of ekphrasis of envoicing a silent

object, the genealogical link of ekphrasis and sepulchral epigrams like “I am the column of Xenares, son of Meixis, upon his grave” (600 B.C.) remarked by academics such as Leo Spitzer and Jean Hagstrum makes sense (p. 302). This condensed mode may even be gendered. Female epigramists like Nossis, Erinna, Anyte entered the hegemonic intellectual group thorough their writing. “For the degree to which male and female *sophoi* [wise] actually share the authoritative language and rhetoric of ekphrastic viewing is in itself significant” (Goldhill, 2007, p. 14). I accord with his view in the sense that even though it is hard to deviate from the power discourse, at least they could speak from it. To illustrate this form, I will refer to two of the most anthologized epigrams about Myron’s bronze sculpture of a cow, which apart from the ekphrastic features mentioned, they contain a lot of realism. Indeed, epigramists try to prove its verisimilitude: “If a calf sees me, it will low; a bull will mount me, and the herdsman will drive me to the herd” or “If Myron had not fixed my feet to this stone, I would have gone to pasture with the other cows” (Demetrius of Bithynia, *Anth. Pal.* 9.720, as cited in Goldhill, 2007, p. 16). From these epigrams, one can elucidate how prosopopoeia is inherent to ekphrasis.

This peculiarity of ekphrasis continues through Medieval Period. Dante Alighieri, in his 14th century epic poem *Divine Comedy Purgatorio Canto X*, executes with care and exactness the description of the marble sculptures Dante and Virgil marvel at in this journey through the First Terrace: The Proudful. Just after their expedition through *inferno*,

they discern a cliff-ring “which rose so steep there was no way to scale it,/was pure white marble, and so decorated/with carvings that they would have put to shame/not only Polycletus but nature too” (10.30-35). The allusion to this great Greek sculptor of 412 B.C.E. hyperbolizes the magnificence and beauty of the carvings to the point they compete with God’s creation, exemplifying the deadly sin of pride, which is the deadliest of all seeing as all sins arise from this. Paradoxically, the scenes of the sculpted wall depict unpretentiousness and diffidence: The Annunciation to Virgin Mary (Luke 1:26-38), King David dancing before the Ark of the Covenant, and the story of Emperor Trajan’s dismounting to administer justice to a poor widow on his way to battle. The poet provides a voice to the sculptures, mastering the art of envoicing the silent object. The sculpted Angel Gabriel came down to earth to decree the birth of Jesus to Mary and “appeared before [them]. . . so faithfully /chiseled out in his soft-spoken bearing/that he did not seem to be a silent image:/ [they] would have sworn that he was saying” “Ave” (10.34-40). Representational art being the epitome of verisimilitude stands out in this terrace. Dante is lulled into *apatê* or illusion and is incapable of distinguishing reality from representation. For Dante, Angel Gabriel, who decreed the peace, which opened heaven from its interdict, hailed Virgin Mary with the word “Ave.” The whiteness of the sculpted Mary evokes her purity as well as her iconic image to be venerated in temples:

Since she who turned the key to open up
Love on high was also imaged there,
And her attitude appeared stamped with the words:
“Behold the handmaid of the Lord,” as sharply
As a figure is engraved on sealing wax. (10.40-45)

Mary’s submissive attitude sets the tone in this terrace that is about pride, for even when she has been endowed with a voice, she uses it to effacingly accept the mandates of the Lord: “Behold the handmaid of the Lord,” these words being a moral teaching against this sin. Her eloquent attitude will be sharply stamped “as a figure is engraved on sealing wax,” in this way immortalizing her modesty in the eyes of the impious, vain, and lofty transgressors or heresies. Word and image become transposable, which gives this scene an uncanny aura.

Dante’s ekphrasis brings the incarnation full circle. The Word is made flesh, which in turn is made stone, which in turn is made to speak, to become Word again: *Ecce ancilla Dei*, behold the handmaid of God...the very word “impressa,” which here denotes the graphic stamping of a figure on wax, adumbrates the meaning it would come to have as soon as printing made possible the stamping of words on paper. (Hefernan, 1991, p. 38)

This osmotic effect of word and image, to become incarnated through the sculpted Mary, profusely impresses the onlooker. The pillars of the ekphrastic tradition *prosopopoeia*, *phantasia* and *enargeia* entice the gazer, depriving him or her of his or her capacity to discern what is real or not.

Similarly, when Dante and Virgil shifted their “sight and gazed further/ Past Mary, in the same right-hand direction” (10.50-55), the carved figures lured them blurring their dexterity to behold the true nature of objects. They looked at

.... cart and oxen pulling the holy ark,
 To warn men not to overreach their charge.
 At the lead, seven choirs in separate files
 Appeared: one of [Dante's]senses argued, "No,"
 The other answered, "Yes, they really sing!"
 In the same way, the smoking from the incense
 Pictured there made [his] two eyes and nose
 Disagree between a yes and no.
 There in the vanguard of the sacred coffer,
 Dancing with robes hitched up, the humble psalmist
 So proved himself both more and less than king. (10.50-65)

The blurring of the senses is the power of *enargeia* giving the silenced object such vividness that the object becomes a *vérité* subject. All, the singing of the choirs, the incense, and King David's dancing before the Ark of the Covenant, beguile the senses of the gazers to the point they embrace their representational world.

The third scene of *Purgatorio Canto X* unveils the sculpted Emperor Trajan and at his bridle a poor widow who "seemed to cry, "Oh lord, take vengeance for my son/whose slaying has pierced my heart with sorrow" (10.81-84). The envoicing of this woman empowers her to claim immediate justice and to stand before Emperor Trajan, who moved by her grieving and vehement cry, decides to fulfill his duty before leaving to war. Dante Alighieri's ekphrastic scenes illustrate how powerful and iconic individuals are capable of modest acts. They, above all, represent a synesthetic art "of visible speaking" (10.95), in which the gazer lasciviously embraces the object that becomes subject through the word, indulging in the pleasurable act of looking: Dante genuinely "enjoyed [himself] with gazing on/these images of high humility,/precious to look at for their Maker's sake" (10.97-99). The sculpted

figures provoke an osmotic relationship of image and word that colludes to impress the onlooker, creating a dramatic narrative.

This diffusion of image and word continues through the Modern Period (late 16th century up to early 20th century). Probably the greatest shift in terms of definition and practice is in the 19th century, with the onset of the museum age and the emergence of the public art museum, and with this, the hegemonic culture of collecting and displaying. "This growing institutionalization and democratization of visual culture" (Loizeaux, 2008, p. 19) narrow down the scope of the definition of ekphrasis provided in the rhetorical treatises like the *Progymnasmata* as 'speech that brings the subject matter vividly before the eyes.' With the birth of the public art museum, modern ekphrasis became arrested in time as "the poetic description of a pictorial or sculptural work of art, which description implies, in the words of Theophile Gautier, "*une transposition d'art*," the reproduction through the medium of words of sensuously perceptible *objets d'art (ut picture poesi)*" (Spitzer, 1955, p. 207). Museums started to hire poets transforming them into curators and art

critics (Loizeaux, 2008, pp. 31-32). This is perhaps the moment when modern ekphrasis rises “as a prevalent poetic genre” (Loizeaux, 2008, p. 32)—the moment in which, the ekphrastic poem becomes a junction of painter, poet, reader, and work of art in order to bring the signifier into being in this rendezvous of minds.

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