



TEXT

Journal of writing and writing courses

ISSN: 1327-9556 | <https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/>

University of Canberra and Deakin University

Paul Hetherington and Cassandra Atherton

The Starry Night: *Ekphrastic inheritance and enchainment*

Abstract:

This article explores connections between discrete ekphrastic poems that address the same work of visual art: Vincent van Gogh's *The Starry Night* (1889). Contemporary poems about this painting continue to proliferate and new works are often influenced by previously published poems on the artwork, elaborating on or modifying content in the previous poems. In such cases, the earlier poems may be understood as part of the new poem's ekphrastic inheritance. We explore how such poems, when considered together, constitute a form of enchainment, linking related poetic ideas and tropes. In particular, we discuss Anne Sexton's "The Starry Night" (1961), W. D. Snodgrass's "Van Gogh: 'The Starry Night'" (1968), Robert Fagles's "The Starry Night" (1979), William Virgil Davis's "Starry Night" (2007) and Elizabeth Spires's "Starry Night" (2017). Various ekphrastic poems about van Gogh's painting appear to write back to one another and these ekphrastic connections demonstrate that contemporary poetic ekphrases may be a product of multivalent literary influences as well as being direct responses to an artwork. In such cases, poetic ekphrasis moves well beyond James A. W. Heffernan's often cited definition of ekphrasis as "the verbal representation of visual representation". This article introduces the terms *ekphrastic inheritance* and *enchainment*.

Biographical notes:

Paul Hetherington is a distinguished Australian scholar and poet, co-author with Cassandra Atherton of *Prose Poetry: An Introduction* (Princeton University Press, 2020) and co-editor with her of both the *Anthology of Australian Prose Poetry* (Melbourne University Press, 2020) and *The Language in My Tongue* (Madhat Press, 2021). He has published numerous scholarly articles and 19 full-length poetry and prose poetry collections, a verse novel and 14 chapbooks. His writing has won or been nominated for more than fifty national and international awards and competitions. He founded International Poetry Studies at the University of Canberra.

Cassandra Atherton is an international expert on prose poetry and a widely anthologised prose poet. She is a Distinguished Professor of Writing and Literature at Deakin University, Australia, and co-wrote *Prose Poetry: An Introduction* (Princeton University Press, 2020) and co-edited both the *Anthology of Australian Prose Poetry*

(Melbourne University Press, 2020) and *The Language in My Tongue* (Madhat Press, 2021) with Paul Hetherington. Together they are writing a scholarly monograph on ekphrastic poetry. Cassandra is a commissioning editor of *Westerly Magazine* and a dispatches editor at *The Fortnightly Review*.

Keywords:

Ekphrasis, *The Starry Night*, poetry, enchainment, ekphrastic inheritance

The Starry Night: a constellation of influences and implications

If a single painting were ever chosen to epitomise post-Impressionism, it is likely to be Vincent van Gogh's *The Starry Night* (1889). Held in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, it is one of the world's best-known artworks. The painting has an ineffable quality and conveys a cosmic and spiritual vision. Indeed, Lauren Soth (1986) argues that, in this work, "van Gogh projected emotional content onto nature and created a sublimated image of his deepest religious feelings" (p. 312). Certainly, the painting is connected to metaphysics and mortality in its composition, and this article will analyse various ekphrastic poems that explore these preoccupations and which are also connected to one another, constituting instances of what we term *ekphrastic inheritance*. These poems include Anne Sexton's "The Starry Night" (1961), W. D. Snodgrass's "Van Gogh: 'The Starry Night'" (1968), Robert Fagles's "The Starry Night" (1979), William Virgil Davis's "Starry Night" (2007) and Elizabeth Spires's "Starry Night" (2017).

These ekphrastic poems are usually read in isolation from one another and are often interpreted as being single, discrete responses to, or in a one-on-one dialogue with, the artist's work. Indeed, this is how ekphrastic poems are typically understood, and a great deal of conventional theorisation of ekphrasis primarily concerns itself with the direct relationship between a single literary work and a work of visual art. The ekphrastic literary works are frequently interpreted as engaging in what James A. W. Heffernan (1993) influentially calls "the verbal representation of visual representation" (p. 3), as if ekphrastic works emerge directly, and with relatively few mediating influences, from addressing an artwork's visual imagery. Indeed, referencing W. J. T. Mitchell, Heffernan also favours the idea that there is an inherently combative relationship between poetry and the visual arts, where "the relation between literature and the visual arts [i]s essentially paragonal, a struggle for dominance between the image and the word" (p. 1).

This notion of a one-on-one, antagonistic – or paragonal – relationship between visual art and ekphrastic poetry has an extended lineage. As Peter Hecht (1984) writes, in 16th century Italy "the *cognoscenti* argued the relative merits of painting and sculpture" (p. 125) and Anthony Blunt (1939) points to how "the dialogue between the poet and the painter in the first scene of [Shakespeare's early 17th-century play] *Timon of Athens* is ... an allusion to the 'Paragone'" (p. 260). Mitchell quotes Leonardo da Vinci's *Paragone*, written in the 15th and 16th centuries, in which da Vinci claims, "[t]he imagination does not see as well as does the eye" (1651/1956, p. xx), and which Mitchell claims is "a debate between poetry and painting in which the visual art takes all the prizes" (1986, p. 119). Heffernan characterises the ekphrastic relationship as somewhat like an intense and fractious marriage that:

[t]urns on the antagonism – the commonly gendered antagonism – between verbal and visual representation. Since this contest is fought on the field of language itself, it would be grossly unequal but for one thing; ekphrasis commonly reveals a profound ambivalence toward visual art, a fusion of iconophilia and iconophobia, of veneration and anxiety. To represent a painting or sculpted figure in words is to evoke its power ... even as language tries to keep that power under control. (1993, p. 7)

However, in recent decades various scholars have critiqued the narrowness of this understanding of ekphrasis. For example, David Kennedy (2017) writes that “we should be cautious about the idea that ... ekphrasis is inherently paragonal” (p. 22) and prefers to conceive of ekphrasis as “a complicated, many-layered encounter” (p. 22). Kennedy and Richard Meek (2019) reiterate this characterisation when they call ekphrasis “a variety of encounters: not only between word and image, but also *between literary texts*” (pp. 14–15; our emphasis). Furthermore, Gabriele Rippl (2019) contends that “instead of competing with one another, ekphrastic word-image configurations are more adequately described as intermedial constellations and collaborations” (n.p.), and Maria-Eirini Panagiotidou (2022) argues that “[e]kphrasis provides the opportunity to explore questions of ownership, creation and re-creation, freedom, and suppression, leading us to a new thematic consideration of ekphrastic poems ... ekphrasis is now changing focus to move beyond the paragone” (p. 239).

We would supplement these observations with the suggestion that poetic ekphrasis has the capacity to create fresh and often turbulent ekphrastic spaces allowing more or less simultaneous interart exchanges and reflections, and that these exchanges tend to be dialogic in suggesting, at least implicitly, a to-and-fro relationship, or conduit, between an ekphrastic poem, the artwork(s) it specifically addresses and other literary or artistic influences – and, here, we use the term “artworks” to include aesthetic objects and performances. In this respect, we have written elsewhere that ekphrasis has many of the qualities of the liminal and is “characterised by collisions and mergings of sense and meaning” (Atherton & Hetherington, 2022, p. 95).

Furthermore, we identify the dynamic movement that occurs in ekphrastic spaces as a form of creative entanglement, understanding entanglement as a constructive set of relationships broadly aligned to Tim Ingold’s (2010) definition of entanglement as “a meshwork of interwoven lines of growth and movement” (p. 3). The term entanglement has previously been applied to ekphrastic relationships by a variety of writers and scholars, including Rosemary C. Reilly. She responds creatively to a piece of writing by Belinda MacGill on craft and relational aesthetics. Importantly, the concept of entanglement is central to Reilly’s work and she uses the term ‘entanglement’ a number of times, including in the following quotation which foregrounds entangled connections: “Sea balls wash up on intertidal shores,/ crafted by the oceans, compressed/ shore in another hemisphere,/ entangled masses of relations” (2019, p. 437).

Significantly, some ekphrastic creative entanglements partly involve a poem addressing another poem. For instance, William Carlos Williams’s poem “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus” (1960) may be read both as a response to the famous copy of Pieter Bruegel’s lost painting *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (c. 1560) in the collection of the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, and as a response to W. H. Auden’s ekphrastic poem “Musée des Beaux Arts” (1938). Whereas Auden writes that “In Brueghel’s Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away/ Quite leisurely from the disaster” (1945, p. 3), Williams’s poem interprets Icarus’s famous fall as “unsignificant” (1962, p. 4) – a restatement and

recontextualisation of Auden's comment that, for the ploughman in the painting, "it was not an important failure" (p. 3). In this way, Williams invites the reader not only to reconsider the artwork but also to reassess Auden's poem in the light of his own pared back ekphrastic statements. In other words, Williams's work is both a homage to Auden's poem and a way of modifying the ekphrastic space which it inhabits.

Although interconnections of this kind are often hard to pin down precisely, the recognition of these relationships adds considerable complexity to how ekphrasis may be understood. If many ekphrastic poems are partly responding to preexisting ekphrastic poems – and, in some cases, other texts as well – then ekphrasis may be conceived of as a form of multivalency, inhabiting and never resolving a space where various images and textual works agitate and combine. In such a view, ekphrasis may be understood as considerably more complex than simply being "the verbal representation of visual representation" or as "paragonal". For instance, Marcelle Freiman (2017) characterises one of her ekphrastic poems as engaging with "feeling, memory, history, lived experience, my reading history and perceptions, multiple displacements, and the need for narrative" (n.p.).

Van Gogh's painting, *The Starry Night*, is especially well-suited to an examination of the literary underpinnings of ekphrastic poetry, not only because innumerable ekphrastic poems have been written about the painting but, as scholars have demonstrated, it was partly engendered by various texts which fed the imaginative processes that created the painting. For instance, Ronald Pickvance (1986) comments that "[s]uggested sources [for *The Starry Night*] range from the Bible (Genesis or Revelations) to [Walt] Whitman and [Henry Wadsworth] Longfellow, from [Émile] Zola and [Alphonse] Daudet to [Charles] Dickens and [Thomas] Carlyle" (p. 103). The connection to Whitman is explicitly addressed by van Gogh's declarations in letters he wrote during the period he painted the work – for instance, in an 1888 letter to his sister, Willemien van Gogh, he writes, "Have you read Whitman's American poems yet? Theo should have them, and I really urge you to read them" (1888(b), n.p.). Albert Boime quotes from the same letter in contending that:

Whitman especially came to mind when Van Gogh was preoccupied with his night scenes in September–October 1888: he lauded the American poet as one who "sees in the future, and even in the present, a world of healthy, carnal love, strong and frank – of friendship – of work – under the great starlit vault of heaven a something which after all one can only call God – and eternity in its place above the world. (2008, p. 23)

Despite van Gogh's epistolary comments on Whitman's work, no-one is sure which Whitman poems van Gogh read in the late 1880s, although Jean Schwind (1985) posits "that he was most profoundly moved by the Columbus poems in *Leaves of Grass*" (p. 1) on the basis of his comment in an 1888 letter to Willemien that "[t]he prayer of Christopher Columbus is particularly beautiful" (quoted in Schwind, 1985, p. 1; also translated in van Gogh 1888b, n.p.). Hope B. Werness (1985) observes that "[l]ike van Gogh, Whitman linked the stars, death and immortality. The most famous instance of this occurs in [the Whitman poem] 'When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd'" (p. 38). She also quotes from other works by Whitman,

including “Song of Myself”. This poem contains images strikingly akin to key visual images in van Gogh’s *The Starry Night*, especially: “Speeding with tail’d meteors, throwing fire-balls like the rest,/ Carrying the crescent child that carries its own full mother in its belly” (Whitman, 1965, pp. 64–65).

Overall, there is strong evidence that the imagery in van Gogh’s *The Starry Night* was influenced partly by his reading of various Whitman poems and, also, by his consideration of other written works. Indeed, to a significant extent, the painting may be understood as an artistic response to literary influences, notwithstanding its great originality in visual terms. Furthermore, these literary influences may be identified as the beginning of a series of fluid and shifting exchanges between poems and this painting that have continued for nearly one hundred and fifty years. *The Starry Night* provides an example of how traces or fragments of images and ideas from particular literary texts may be intertextually incorporated within a visual work of art – and also subsequent ekphrastic poems – as engendering influences. These influences may even be relayed from one ekphrastic poem to another, or from a literary text to artwork to literary text, and so on. In fact, poetic ekphrasis may result from a complex and productive set of creative entanglements rather than a paragonal or contested one-on-one relationship between a work of verbal art and a work of visual art. In other words, painting and poetry are often moving in and out of each other’s discursive fields in a fluid, evolving way, in enchainments of influence, association and inspiration.

Thus, in this context, we understand enchainment as the presence in multiple literary/visual works of shared material that links different poems and/or artworks addressing the same subject. These enchainments move beyond mere allusion because their shared material is embedded deeply into their own expression and, although some enchained material may include deliberate references to another work or works – in order, as it were, to speak with and through them – the work emerges partly from unconscious influences. It is also interesting to consider that, in terms of the enchainment associated with van Gogh’s *The Starry Night*, the poems constellating around the painting have nearly as much influence on each other – a kind of gravitational pull – as the painting itself.

Flow and exchange between text and imagery

Drawing broadly on and developing ideas advanced by theorists such as Mikhail Bakhtin, Julia Kristeva and Roland Barthes, Harold Bloom’s *The Anxiety of Influence* focuses in part on the relationships of poets to their precursors, and to each other. For the purposes of this paper, it is most relevant to quote his remark that “[w]e need to stop thinking of any poet as an autonomous ego, however solipsistic the strongest of poets may be. Every poet is a being caught up in a dialectical relationship (transference, repetition, error, communication) with another poet or poets” (1979, p. 91). This statement develops and modifies various of Julia Kristeva’s influential insights in her 1966 essay, “Word, Dialogue and Novel,” in which she argues that “any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of *intertextuality* replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least *double*” (1986, p. 85; emphasis original).

The notions of intertextuality and transtextuality, and the related term “influence,” have been discussed and debated by numerous writers, including Roland Barthes, Susan Stanford Friedman, Jonathan Culler, Linda Hutcheon and Gérard Genette – and all of them point, in one way or another, to the complex connections between different texts. For example, Culler comments that intertextuality:

leads one to think of a text as a dialogue with other texts, an act of absorption, parody, and criticism, rather than as autonomous artifact which harmoniously reconciles the possible attitudes towards a given problem; it alerts one to the artifice of literature, the special conventions and interpretive operations on which it is based; and it makes one particularly sensitive to the special referentiality of literary works: whenever a work seems to be referring to the world one can argue that this supposed reference is in fact a comment on other texts. (1976, p. 1383)

Given this, we further suggest that poetic ekphrases of van Gogh’s *The Starry Night* provide a way to modify or inflect the prevalent idea of the artist as a lone genius because, as Bruce Ellis Benson (2016) remarks, “[i]f artists are indebted to one another, there can be no ‘lone’ genius, disconnected from the community. Instead, we are all improvisers together, quoting one another, saying the same thing in different ways, and giving different perspectives on the same things” (p. 163). Significantly, Ning Luo (2023) adds that the conceptualisation of the lone genius “is fraught with narrowness. It subtly entrenches and reinforces patriarchal notions of creativity, framing it within a gendered, often male-centric context” (p. 2). Such comments draw attention to the importance of considering the numerous influences, including literary and artistic precedents, that contribute to our understanding of ekphrastic inheritance. As poets engage with, and often write back to or transform, the words and perceptions of their predecessors, they maintain and refresh the dynamism of a set of open and evolving ekphrastic spaces.

Various ekphrastic poems about van Gogh’s *The Starry Night* employ similar – in some cases nearly identical – preoccupations, images and tropes. These extend beyond what one would expect if each writer had merely referred in isolation to the painting’s imagery to generate their ekphrastic works. Instead, these connections indicate the extent to which the poets have engaged with aspects of poems already written about the painting, along with related texts – such as well-publicised biographical narratives relating to van Gogh’s life. Furthermore, a number of poets quote directly from van Gogh’s letters, thus drawing on some of the same textual source material. In exploring the interrelationships between ekphrastic poems about van Gogh’s *The Starry Night*, we will explicate the poems chronologically because the ekphrastic inheritance that passes from one work, or set of works, to a later work depends on the later work engaging with what has gone before.

The term ekphrastic inheritance has not previously been closely defined, nor used extensively in scholarship. A chapter on “The Ekphrastic Inheritance” in Berkan Ulu’s PhD thesis is one of the first uses of the term and, in his case, it is deployed to indicate how literary ekphrasis is influenced by the ancient Greek literary tradition. Ulu (2010) contends that “[t]he primary

function of ekphrasis inherited from the ancients is to depict or describe the image in order to provide an accurate representation in the minds of its audience” (pp. 118–19). One of the examples he explicates is William Shakespeare’s “The Rape of Lucrece”. Similarly, Maya Sibul (2021) uses the term “inheritance” to discuss the “survival of certain traits” (p. 8) in Kazuo Ishiguro’s 1986 novel, *An Artist of the Floating World*, extending this usage to describe a “collective” where, “[t]hrough art-making acts of inheritance and reminiscence, the individual cannot be completely discerned from the collective” (p. 5). This argument is pertinent to our own use of the term “inheritance” because Sibul’s notion of a “collective” is, in some respects, conceptually related to our discussion of the enchainment of poetic responses to an artwork.

However, we would like to note that the idea of ekphrastic inheritance can be problematic because it reaches beyond explicitly acknowledged sources for, or influences on, ekphrastic poems. While some ekphrastic poets identify specific textual influences in their poems in interviews and comments, or use quotations from readily recognisable sources, the concept of ekphrastic inheritance also relates to literary works that resonate with authors in liminal spaces and, as we have indicated, may include images or text that a poet has unconsciously recalled. Culler (1976) notes that elusiveness is characteristic of intertextuality in general, asking if “it is already difficult to describe the intertextuality of an article about literary criticism ... then what will one be able to say of the more radical and complex acts of that exceedingly evasive institution, literature?” (p. 1384). This suggests that where a painting has been the subject of repeated poetic ekphrases – as has *The Starry Night* – a poet who writes a further ekphrasis on the painting may well incorporate references to, and be influenced by, previous ekphrases without necessarily being aware of the extent of these influences. The ekphrastic space in which that painting is present is, as it were, already crowded with poetic ekphrases and their language and ideas have a tendency to flow unevenly, and sometimes obscurely, toward new ekphrastic poems.

A painter’s biography and ekphrastic inheritance

Various features of van Gogh’s biography are nearly as well-known as his most famous paintings. Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux comments that van Gogh was “the prototypical ‘mad genius’ and ‘paradigm of the “modern artist”’ that Griselda Pollock mentions in her 1980 analysis of the construction of Van Gogh’s reputation” (Loizeaux, 2010, p. 118). Anne Sexton’s poem, “The Starry Night” (1962, p. 9) not only takes van Gogh’s painting as its putative subject but, as Loizeaux demonstrates (pp. 117–21), it also makes use of popular biographical notions about van Gogh prevalent in the mid-twentieth century. This was a period when madness, suicide and creativity were frequently linked, perhaps most conspicuously in Al Alvarez’s influential book, *The Savage God*, first published in 1971. Alvarez includes late 19th century writers and artists in his sweeping contention that:

one of the most remarkable features of the arts in [the twentieth] century has been the sudden, sharp rise in the casualty-rate among the artists. Of the great pre-Modernists, Rimbaud abandoned poetry at the age of twenty, Van Gogh killed himself, Strindberg went mad. Since then the toll has mounted steadily. (2002, p. 258)

In this context, which closely informed the initial reception of Sexton's poem "The Starry Night," it has often been connected to Sexton's suicide in 1974. For instance, Lawrence Jay Dessner (1988) writes that the poem "announces its narrator's passionate and almost overwhelming obsession with suicide ... It is as if Sexton ... were taking on as her mortal opponent the paradoxical limits of language" (p. 145). Yet, Claus Clüver and Burton Watson, along with Loizeaux, demonstrate that although the poem speaks in a direct and apparently urgent way, "some of its language derive from Meyer Schapiro's 1950 [publication] *Vincent Van Gogh*" (Loizeaux 2010, pp. 119–20) – or, as Clüver and Watson (1989) put it, "Sexton's reading of the painting was obviously deeply affected by Meyer Schapiro's ... discussion of the work" (p. 64, n. 6). Additionally, Clüver and Watson observe that the poem's voice is double: "Whose voice do we hear? ... Someone very much like the poet herself, who finally succeeded in taking her life? But then, so did the painter, soon after he completed *The Starry Night*. If we are to read the poem as a translation of the painting, we must be able to hear the voice also as van Gogh's" (p. 66).

In other words, the poem's voice may be understood as attempting to project Sexton's and van Gogh's preoccupations simultaneously. It is as if its persona may represent what the poet imagines the painting is communicating – which she, in turn, closely identifies with – imagining it might speak for her in a kind of ventriloquism – a paradoxical idea given that, more obviously, the poem attempts ekphrastically to speak for the painting. In this way, Clüver and Watson understand Sexton's contemplation of suicide to be twinned with van Gogh's, including the "the death wish motif" (1989, p. 66). Certainly, the notion of the night sky as a passageway or wormhole to death and, perhaps, also to the divine – Schapiro (1978) calls this "the exaltation of ... [van Gogh's] desire for a mystical union and release" (p. 95) – derives not only from a close "reading" of the painting but also draws some of its material from van Gogh's letters. For instance, in his letter to his brother Theo on 9 or 10 July 1888, van Gogh writes: "Why, I say to myself, should the spots of light in the firmament be less accessible to us than the black spots on the map of France. [paragraph break] Just as we take the train to go to Tarascon or Rouen, we take death to go to a star" (van Gogh 1888a, n.p.).

The epigraph to Sexton's poem is also taken from one of van Gogh's letters to his brother Theo, on or about 29 September 1888: "That does not keep me from having a terrible need of – shall I say the word – religion. Then I go out at night to paint the stars" (Sexton, 1962, p. 9). Interestingly, a number of ekphrastic poems related to van Gogh's *The Starry Night* use epigraphs or quotations from his letters in a similar way, suggesting that poets have wanted to connect their writing to the artist's life circumstances and to biographical notions of his "genius" – what Pollock (2003) calls one of the "myths" produced "in ideologies of art history" (p. 29). As mentioned, it is chiefly through his biography that van Gogh has become a metonym for the mad, inspired artist, and Sexton's poem is the first significant ekphrastic poem connected to his painting to exploit and promote this trope.

In another example of ekphrastic inheritance that demonstrates the complexity of interconnected relationships, Sexton employs imagery closely aligned to the imagery used by

Whitman in his poetry – which, as we discussed above, is one of the likely catalysts for van Gogh’s work. For instance, she appears to recast Whitman’s description of the moon “that carries its own full mother in its belly” (1965, p. 64) in her line, “Even the moon bulges in its orange irons/ to push children, like a god, from its eye” (Sexton, 1962, p. 9). Gay W. Allen, among others, has identified numerous “biblical echoes” (1934, p. 302) and paraphrases in Whitman’s poetry and it is also possible that Whitman’s poetic image of the “full mother” may have had its origins in his reading of the Book of Revelation. If so, it may be that a particular constellation of influences and intertexts that originally fed into van Gogh’s painting via literary and biblical sources subsequently reappeared in both Meyer Schapiro’s art criticism (broadly speaking, also a form of ekphrasis) and Sexton’s poetry. Indeed, Schapiro speculates that *The Starry Night* may contain an “unconscious reminiscence of the apocalyptic theme of the woman in pain of birth, girded with the sun and moon and crowned with the stars, whose newborn child is threatened by the dragon (Revelation 12,1 ff.)” (1978, p. 95).

Yet, when Sexton follows Schapiro in describing the sky as “sucked up by that great dragon,” she adds her own emphasis to the way in which van Gogh’s hypnotic night sky seems to drag at the viewer’s gaze in a plume, like smoke from a dragon’s nostrils. In this way, she modifies and transforms Schapiro’s image – and also van Gogh’s painting – even as she makes ekphrastic use of them, emphasising the sky’s fearsomeness. Indeed, Katherine Frances McSpadden (1984) argues that Sexton’s “vision expresses a desire for a complete loss of her own identity ... where she wants to be swallowed up in a fiery death” (p. 19), and while this notion is broadly in keeping with, and partly derives from, van Gogh’s idea of taking “death to go to a star,” by the time Sexton writes her poem, she has made it as much her idea as his:

Oh starry starry night! This is how
I want to die:

into that rushing beast of the night,
sucked up by that great dragon, to split
from my life with no flag,
no belly,
no cry. (1962, p. 9)

W. D. Snodgrass’s ekphrastic ruminations

As with Sexton, Snodgrass draws on aspects of preexisting texts in his ekphrastic poem, “Van Gogh: ‘The Starry Night’”, as well as on aspects of van Gogh’s painting technique. He attempts to adapt his poetic technique to match van Gogh’s use of a palette knife:

Apparently ... [van Gogh] was using a palette knife instead of a brush, and if you look at the original canvas you see that the paint is just slashed on, as though he were trying to cut the thing to ribbons ... You have to get a kind of verbal violence to match the violent technique in the painting. (Dillon & Snodgrass, 1975, p. 287)

Snodgrass indicates that he also read a great deal about van Gogh, including van Gogh’s biography, and studied the “the great collection of his letters which was just then becoming

available in English” (Snodgrass, 1975, p. 89). Jan Schreiber (2010) states that Snodgrass’s poem “is daubed with quotations from the painter’s letters and diaries, and it builds from a restrained description of the sleeping village below to the mad ecstasies of the cartwheeling galaxies overhead” (n.p.). Snodgrass confirms his poem’s use of “many quotations from Van Gogh’s letters ... [as well as] his last words” (1968, p. 69), and many are used as “found” biographical moments.

An example is where the image of the chapel is miniaturised into a “child’s toy,” provoking the biographical miniature beginning “*There is something about Father,*” adapted from a van Gogh letter of 1883 (for a translation of the letter, see van Gogh 1883, n.p.):

Edge over edge, slate roofs ascending
 Like the planes of a determined head,
 Like stone stairs converging, step by step,
 To its still dead-center, hurricane’s eye,
 This village chapel tiny as a child’s toy
 And as far
 There is something about Father
 Narrow-minded, icy-cold, like iron
 Face by face, its quartz blue
 Salients upholding that slim spire into
 The sky’s rush, keen as your mother’s needle (1968, p. 64)

His poem is also directly influenced by Whitman, as evidenced by Snodgrass himself:

Before I wrote “Old Apple Trees,” I had been studying a lot of Whitman’s free verse poems, how he takes a rhythm and plays with it and sophisticates it and lengthens the line ... I started doing that, first with my poem “VAN GOGH: The Starry Night.” I didn’t take the rhythm, though. I took the sound of Van Gogh’s last words, “Zóó heen kan gaan,” and tried to build the poem out of variations on that sound pattern. (Snodgrass & Spires, 1990, p. 40)

As Loizeaux observes, if we look at Sexton’s and Snodgrass’s poems together, “they stage a conversation over the work of art” (2010, p. 110). Loizeaux adds that in the case of different ekphrases of the same work of art, there are “at least three conversations – with the reader/hearer, with other writers and with the painter/painting” (p. 114). In this case, there are multifarious conversations taking place. In addition to the conversation with the “reader/hearer” and the engagement with van Gogh’s painting, Sexton and Snodgrass are also both in conversation with Whitman, van Gogh’s letters, and with other works that influenced van Gogh as a painter.

Furthermore, and perhaps of even greater relevance to the notion of ekphrastic inheritance, Snodgrass was closely acquainted with Anne Sexton, having corresponded with her, shared poems with her and taught her. In their poems about *The Starry Night*, their conversation with each other is fairly intimate, sometimes traversing the same literary space in a productive form of creative entanglement. For example, Snodgrass’s use of the simile, “icy cold, like iron,” the

image of a “hurricane’s eye” and his invocation of “a child’s toy,” hearken back to Sexton’s powerful lines, “Even the moon bulges in its orange irons/ to push children, like a god, from its eye,” demonstrating through its similarities and transformations a set of linked ideas. Indeed, even the opening of his work responds directly to Sexton’s opening line. She writes, “The town does not exist” (1962, p. 9). He responds, as if debating the point, “Only the little/ town/ remains” (1968, p. 64). The words are his own, but the driving force behind them is his sense of his place in a literary and artistic lineage, connecting back through an ekphrastic enchainment to Sexton, to Whitman’s poetry, to van Gogh’s painting, to Whitman’s generative influence on the painter, and so on.

Robert Fagles’s electricity

Robert Fagles’s poem “The Starry Night”, from his book *I, Vincent* (1978), is part of what Joyce Carol Oates (1980) describes as a “biography in small,” commenting that – like Sexton’s and Snodgrass’s poems – it “arises out of both Van Gogh’s letters and his paintings, as Fagles interprets them” (p. 100). Interestingly, Oates argues that “Fagles recreates a Van Gogh who possesses more consciousness of self and destiny than the Van Gogh of the renowned (and biographically misleading) letters” (p. 101), and certainly this poem celebrates van Gogh’s creativity as akin to an electric current – and a dangerously ungrounded one – that expresses his embrace of madness even as he makes his art. This is somewhat akin to Sexton’s envisioning of van Gogh as “want[ing] to die:/ into that rushing beast of the night” (1962, p. 9). Both poems posit that the poet – and, by extension, the inspired creative artist more generally – may be viewed in terms that M. L. Rosenthal (1967) characterises as “the continuing power of the Romantic tradition” with “the specific modern turn being [a] ... strongly confessional, literally self-exposing vulnerability” (p. 15). Fagles writes:

Long as I paint
I feel myself
less mad
the brush in my hand
a lightning rod to madness

But never ground that madness (1978, p. 81)

The poem is expressed in the first person and takes the step of invoking the painter’s thoughts as analogous to the poet’s own. This immediately connects to the twinned voices in Sexton’s poem, which is also written in first-person. Sexton’s image of the dragon returns here, too, in Fagles’s line about “the cloudrack coiling like a dragon’s flanks” (p. 81). We also find the emphasis on van Gogh’s brushstrokes that so preoccupied Snodgrass – especially in Fagles’s phrase, “sweep of the brush”, in his lines, “the brush in my hand/ a lightning rod to madness” and in the poem’s conclusion, “our brushstrokes burning clearer into dawn” (p. 81).

Like Sexton, Fagles invokes an image of mother and son, while the “forest sword” from Snodgrass’s work is transmuted into “Michael’s sword,” as Fagles imagines “cut[ting] the life out of the beast” (p. 81). This connects, too, to Sexton’s image of the “rushing beast of night”

(1962, p. 9). While, unlike Sexton and Snodgrass, Fagles does not make explicit use of van Gogh's last words, his poem as a whole is preoccupied with the idea of death as the conclusion to a period of electric and ungrounded artistic creation. The stars in van Gogh's painting are both specifically referred to by Sexton and Snodgrass – indeed, Snodgrass doubles down on his wish to count them by also making them into a metaphor in the line, “Eleven windows and one open door – crystals” (1968, p. 67) – while Fagles refers to them as “a third of the stars of heaven” and “these whirling eternal stars” (p. 81).

In Snodgrass's poem the town is “calm”, in Sexton's poem it is “silent” and in Fagles's poem it is situated in “claustrophobic valleys”. Snodgrass's moon is “one sunburst” (p. 65) and, later, “a spume of ancient/ vacuum shuddering to reclaim/ its child” (p. 67), and both images loop back to Sexton's lines, already quoted, of a “moon bulg[ing] in its orange irons/ to push children, like a god, from its eye” (1962, p. 9). There are too many connections between Sexton's, Snodgrass's and Fagles's poems for all of these similarities to be mere coincidences. It indicates an enchainment of ideas emerging consciously or unconsciously from poets engaging with a well-known artwork, while also reading the most prominent of the existing poetry, and various other texts, about that artwork. This ekphrastic enchainment becomes increasingly evident as an increasing number of poets enter the ekphrastic space connected to van Gogh's painting.

Davis, Spires and eleven stars

William Virgil Davis begins his poem “Starry Night” with the same epigraph Sexton uses in her influential poem – even the translation he uses is identical. Like Snodgrass, he emphasises a sense of calmness in evoking “the small sleeping village and church” (2007, p. 64) that “almost hide”. Snodgrass's lines are: “Only the little/ town/ remains beyond/ all shock and dazzle/ only this little/ still/ stands calm (1968, p. 64). Where Snodgrass writes of a “Fierce heaven” (p. 68) and a town in a “hurricane's eye” (p. 64), Davis evokes a hurricane-like “whirlpool of light,/ like a head thrown loose through dream” (2007, p. 64). Like Sexton and Snodgrass, he counts what he calls “the bleary blind eyes” (p. 64) of eleven stars and, indeed, his poem ends the image of these stars as they “boil and burn” (p. 64). The poem concludes:

The drunken face of the moon
whirls alone
and the bleary blind eyes of eleven
stars
boil and burn
in thick liquid light.
(2007, p. 64)

Sexton and Snodgrass have already used the idea of boiling and blindness, with Sexton writing of how “the night boils with eleven stars” (1962, p. 9) and Snodgrass evoking an image of “suns; stars; blind/ tracers bursting”. As we have argued, this is not to suggest that Davis deliberately borrows from Sexton or Snodgrass, but that, as Bloom phrases it, “[e]very poet is ... caught up in a dialectical relationship (transference, repetition, error, communication) with

another poet or poets” (1979, p. 91) – even when this relationship is an unconscious and creatively transformative one.

In an interview, A. V. Christie suggests to Elizabeth Spires, author of another poem on van Gogh’s painting – and interviewer of Snodgrass in 1990 – that “Snodgrass talks about the ‘Van Gogh: “The Starry Night”” poem as really a fugue on a certain sequence of sounds” (1995, p. 53). Christie continues by linking this to Spire’s practice, asking: “I wonder how early on as you’re writing a poem you become aware of a certain repetition of sound that’s weaving the poem together” (p. 53). Spires responds, “Often I won’t have a word, but I’ll know I need a specific vowel sound even though I’m not working with any sort of fixed rhyme scheme” (p. 53). In her poem “Starry Night” she presents a haunting series of broken, partly repeating lines focused on the stars in van Gogh’s painting – and the poem is even composed of eleven lines, one for each of these stars. Spires’s use of fragmented lines is broadly similar to Snodgrass’s in parts of his work, although Spires takes her fragmentation further. Indeed, the layout of her poem’s title, with a space between each letter of the title – “S t a r r y N i g h t” – provides an early signal of the importance of gaps and lacunae in her poem, where significant spaces break up the lines and words, perhaps even enabling them to be imagined as analogues for the stars themselves. The poem begins:

their light keeps traveling on. it will never darken
 forever will it travel. into far reaches. cold corners
 farther than light has ever gone all the stars that have ever
 shone are shining still their light doesn’t die
(2017, p. 405)

The poem’s final line further emphasises its preoccupation with van Gogh’s stars: “as we stumble & shine & remember looking up” (p. 405).

Spires twice deploys the image of a lighthouse, that Snodgrass also uses before her, in lines five and six of her poem – “the stars assure/ like lighthouses no longer there” – and in lines eight and nine – “as we hold on/ to ones who have gone on like lighthouses no longer there” (p. 405). In Snodgrass’s poem, the image refers to the chapel’s spire, that is as “keen as your mother’s needle/ Pricking the horizon, mast firm in breaking/ Waters, some lighthouse” (1968, 64). Furthermore, the idea of upholding and holding is foregrounded by Snodgrass, who employs it three times – “Salients upholding” (p. 64), “Metaphysics/ cannot hold” (p. 65) and “holding/ Some pious, worn book” (p. 67) – and this notion is also central to Spires poem, who uses it three times in line eight: “where their light travels on/ something to hold & keep holding as we hold on” (p. 405). Snodgrass utilises the word “shines” twice and Spires employs “shines” or “shining” on three occasions. Indeed, Tara Hart states, “in Elizabeth Spires’ poem “Starry Night” she gives us faith that the light of artists keeps travelling like stars, never darkening, never dying. As we stumble, they still shine, so we should keep looking up to them, working wonders” (2018, n.p.).

Once again, we would emphasise that we are not suggesting that Spires deliberately borrows from Snodgrass. Rather, we read her poem as another example of the way many poems about the van Gogh painting continue to be written in a form of enchainment, providing a rich ekphrastic inheritance for writers. The painting itself remains the primary source for most ekphrastic poems about the work, but simultaneously ekphrastic writers are in a kind of dialogue with each other – sometimes unconsciously – about how the work may be interpreted and what its visual imagery may be understood to signify.

Conclusion

Van Gogh's painting, *The Starry Night*, continues to be popular as a subject of ekphrastic poetry and recently an online journal *The Ekphrastic Review* published an anthology entirely devoted to ekphrastic poems on this work (Luzajic, 2022). Given that so many poems about this painting have been, and continue to be, written, composing an ekphrastic poem on the artwork involves writing into a heavily populated ekphrastic space where it is hard to avoid being creatively entangled in one or more of the texts that constitute the painting's ekphrastic inheritance. Given this, traditional understandings of poetic ekphrasis – such as James A. W. Heffernan's (1993) notion that it "turns on ... antagonism" (p. 7) and is "the verbal representation of visual representation" (p. 3) – may not take sufficient account of the sometimes lateral, intertwined and intertextually rich relationships that influence many ekphrastic poems.

These poems exemplify how – just as van Gogh's painting was partly conceived through ideas he encountered in his reading, including of poetry – images and ideas carried by particular ekphrastic poems may reinhabit, sometimes in transformed states, subsequent ekphrastic poems. The most significant of these engendering influences, even as it is re-inflected or transformed, may be passed from one ekphrastic poem to another over an extended period of time and across numerous, otherwise apparently divergent ekphrastic works, forming an artistic enchainment. In this light, poetic ekphrasis may frequently be understood as the product of various creative and cooperative responses, interactions, conversations, echoings and borrowings rather than as an antagonistic form of verbal-visual interaction. The associative enchainments are multivalent and intricate, swirling together in ways analogous to van Gogh's starry night sky. Indeed, the epigraph to Brittney Corrigan's haibun about van Gogh's painting, "All Your Stars Are Out," reaffirms such connections. She writes that her poem is "After a line by J.D. Salinger &/ after Robert Procter's 'Starry Starry Night'/ after Anne Sexton's 'The Starry Night'/ after Van Gogh's 'The Starry Night' (2025, n.p.).

References

- Allen, G. W. (1934). Biblical echoes in Whitman's works. *American Literature* 6(3), 302–15.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/2919546>
- Alvarez, A. (2002). *The savage God: A study of suicide*. Bloomsbury.
- Atherton, C. & Hetherington, P. (2022). Ekphrastic spaces: The tug, pull, collision and merging of the in-between. *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice*

and Theory of Creative Writing 20(1), 83–98.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14790726.2022.2025850>

Auden, W. H. (1945). *The collected poetry of W.H. Auden*. Random House.

Benson, B. E. (2016). In the beginning, there was improvisation. In G. E. Lewis & B. Piekut (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of critical improvisation studies* (vol. 2, pp. 153–66). Oxford University Press.

Bloom, H. (1979). *The anxiety of influence: A theory of poetry*. Oxford University Press.

Blunt, A. (1939). An echo of the “paragone” in Shakespeare. *Journal of the Warburg Institute* 2(3), 260–62. <https://doi.org/10.2307/750102>

Boime, A. (2008). *Revelation of Modernism: Responses to cultural crises in fin-de-siècle painting*. University of Missouri Press.

Christie, A.V. & Spires, E. (1995). “The power of the visible is the invisible”: An interview with Elizabeth Spires. *Southwest Review* 80(1), 35–57.

Clüver, C. & Watson, B. (1989). On intersemiotic transposition. *Poetics Today* 10(1), 55–90. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1772555>

Corrigan, B. (2025). All your stars are out. [Unpublished poem].

Culler, J. (1976). Presupposition and intertextuality. *MLN* 91(6) (December 1976), 1380–396. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2907142>

Da Vinci, L. (1956). *Treatise on painting* (A. P. McMahon, Ed. & Trans.). Princeton University Press. (Original work published 1651)

Davis, W. V. (2007). Starry night. *Christianity and literature* 57(1), 64.

Dessner, L. J. (1988). Anne Sexton’s “The Abortion” and confessional poetry. In S. E. Colburn (Ed.), *Anne Sexton: Telling the tale* (pp. 135–47). University of Michigan Press.

Dillon, D. & Snodgrass, W. D. (1975). Toward passionate utterance: An interview with W. D. Snodgrass. *Southwest Review* 60(3), 278–90.

Fagles, R. (1978). *I, Vincent: Poems from the pictures of van Gogh*. Princeton University Press.

Freiman, M. (2017). Ekphrasis as enactment: Towards a poetics of contemporary diaspora practice. *Axon: Creative Explorations* 7(2), n.p. <https://axonjournal.com.au/issues/7-2/ekphrasis-enactment/>

Hart, T. (2018, 26 November). Poets traveling like stars: Michael Collier, Elizabeth Spires, and David Yezzi. *Hocopolitso*, n.p. <https://hocopolitso.org/2018/11/26/79832/>

- Hecht, P. (1984). The paragone debate: Ten illustrations and a comment. *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*, 14(2), 125–36.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/3780590>
- Heffernan, J. A. W. (1993). *Museum of words: The poetics of ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery*. Chicago University Press.
- Ingold, T. (2020, July). *Bringing things to life: Creative entanglements in a world of materials* [Working paper]. Realities Working Papers #15, ESRC National Centre for Research Methods.
https://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/id/eprint/1306/1/0510_creative_entanglements.pdf
- Kennedy, D. (2017). *The ekphrastic encounter in contemporary British poetry and elsewhere*. Routledge.
- Kennedy, D. & Meek, R. (2019). Introduction: From paragone to encounter. In D. Kennedy & R. Meek (Eds.), *Ekphrastic Encounters: New Interdisciplinary Essays on Literature and the Visual Arts* (pp. 1–24). Manchester University Press.
- Kristeva, J. (1986). Word, dialogue and novel. In T. Moi (Ed.), *The Kristeva reader: Julia Kristeva* (pp. 34–61). Columbia University Press.
- Luzajic, L. C. (Ed.) (2022). Starry, starry night: An ekphrastic anthology inspired by Van Gogh's masterpiece. *The Ekphrastic Review*.
https://www.ekphrastic.net/uploads/1/4/0/7/14070919/starry_starry_night_anthology_2022.pdf
- Loizeaux, E. B. (2010). *Twentieth-century poetry and the visual arts*. Cambridge University Press.
- Luo, N. (2023). Disrupting a gendered mythos of artistic creativity: A critique of the “lone genius” narrative. *Journal of Artistic and Creative Education* 16(1) (2023), 1–16.
<https://jace.online/index.php/jace/article/view/8555/6960>
- McSpadden, K. F. (1984). The self in the poetry of Anne Sexton (Publication no. 2327) [Doctoral dissertation]. Loyola University Chicago eCommons.
https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_diss/2327
- Mitchell, W. J. T. (1986). *Iconology: Image, text, ideology*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Oates, J. C. (1980). The authority of timelessness (Robert Fagles, Tess Gallagher, Artur Lundqvist, David R. Slavitt). *Ontario Review* 12, Article 21, 100–05.
<https://repository.usfca.edu/ontarioreview/vol12/iss1/21/>
- Panagiotidou, M. E. (2022). *The poetics of ekphrasis: A stylistic approach*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Pickvance, R. (1986). *Van Gogh in Saint-Rémy and Auvers*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Harry N. Abrams.

- Pollock, G. (2003). *Vision and difference: Feminism, femininity and the histories of art*. Routledge.
- Reilly, R. C. (2019). Entanglements across time-space: An ekphrastic poetic response to “Craft, relational aesthetics, and ethics of care” by Belinda MacGill. *Art/Research International: A Transdisciplinary Journal* 4(1), 436–38.
- Rippl, G. (2019). Ekphrasis. In *The Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.1057>
- Rosenthal, M. L. (1967). *The new poets: American and British poetry since World War II*. Oxford University Press.
- Schapiro, M. (1978). *Modern art: 19th and 20th centuries*. George Braziller.
- Schreiber, J. (2010, 21 July). Unguided and apart: The achievement of W.D. *Contemporary Poetry Review*. <https://www.cprw.com/unguided-and-apart-the-achievement-of-w-d>
- Schwind, J. (1985). Van Gogh’s “Starry Night” and Whitman: A study in source. *Walt Whitman Quarterly* 3(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.13008/2153-3695.1098>
- Sexton, A. (1962). *All my pretty ones*. Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Sibul, M. (2021). Ekphrastic self and the dream house of (re)collection: Ishiguro’s ‘artist’ in a ‘floating world’. *Meliora*, 1(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.52214/meliora.v1i1.7938>
- Soth, L. (1986). Van Gogh’s agony. *The Art Bulletin* 68(2), 301–13. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3050939>
- Snodgrass, W. D. (1968). *After experience: Poems and translations*. Harper & Row.
- Snodgrass, W. D. (1975). Poems about paintings. In *Radical pursuit: Critical essays and lectures* (pp. 63–97). Harper & Row.
- Snodgrass, W. D. & Spires, E. (1990). W. D. Snodgrass: An interview by Elizabeth Spires. *The American Poetry Review* 19(4), 38–46.
- Spires, E. (2017). Starry Night. *The Hudson Review* 70(3), 405.
- Ulu, B. (2010). *A stylistic analysis of ekphrastic poetry in English*. [Doctoral dissertation, Ankara University]. <https://dspace.ankara.edu.tr/xmlui/bitstream/handle/20.500.12575/35025/BerkanUlu.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.
- Van Gogh, V. (1883). To Theo van Gogh. Nuenen, on or about Tuesday, 18 December 1883. *Vincent van Gogh: The letters*. Van Gogh Museum. <https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let415/letter.html>

- Van Gogh, V. (1888a). To Theo van Gogh. Arles, Monday, 9 or Tuesday, 10 July 1888.
Vincent van Gogh: The letters. Van Gogh Museum.
<https://www.vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let638/letter.html#translation>
- Van Gogh, V. (1888b). To Willemien van Gogh. Arles, on or about Sunday, 26 August 1888.
Vincent van Gogh: The letters. Van Gogh Museum.
<https://www.vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let670/letter.html>
- Werness, H. B. (1985). Whitman and van Gogh: Starry nights and other similarities. *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 2(4), 35–41. <https://doi.org/10.13008/2153-3695.1091>
- Whitman, W. (1965). *Leaves of grass* (H. W. Blodgett & S. Bradley, Eds.). W.W. Norton.
- Williams, W. C. (1962). *Pictures from Brueghel and other poems: Collected poems 1950–1962*. New Directions.