University of Southern California

Genevieve Kaplan

Ekphrasis for writers: John Ashbery's 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror'

As teachers of creative writing, we strive to 'open up the field' for our students, to 'broaden their horizons', to show them that poetry doesn't need to be a narrow thing. As many students, especially in introductory courses, come to class assuming that poems must rhyme, that stories must be told chronologically, that all diction must be well-mannered, one of our jobs as educators is to show them other possibilities. In poetry writing, models and exercises can be particularly helpful, especially in dealing with preconceived notions of form and language. But we must also encourage students to move beyond exercise and towards a legitimate creative product. Ekphrastic writing can be particularly useful here. Rather than focusing on technique or surface issues, as exercises frequently do, ekphrasis is essentially a mode of content - relating a poem (or other piece of writing) to a painting (or other artwork), often beginning through the act of description.

In his article 'Contemporary Poetry about Painting' (1992), Carl RV Brown argues that ekphrasis should be more widely taught in the English literature curriculum. He explains, 'the teaching of ekphrastic poetry promises many pedagogical advantages, especially in those cases in which the painting enhances students' accessibility to and enjoyment of poetry' (Brown 1992: 41). In the decade and a half since Brown's article appeared, courses like Harry Rusche's 'The Poet Speaks of Art' at Emory University have been developed. Rusche's course asks students relevant questions about the ekphrastic product: 'Is the poem simply an objective verbal description of the work of art, or does the poet make conclusions about what the painting means? Could you reconstruct the painting from the poem without actually seeing it? Why does the poet dwell on some features of the the [*sic*] painting and ignore other aspects of the picture?' (Rusche 2000). While both Rusche and Brown focus on ekphrasis from a reader's perspective, the same basic argument is easily applied in creative writing classrooms - considering a painting or other artwork might enhance students' opportunities for and variety of creative response. Brown, for example, does suggest that English literature students try their hand at writing:

> Teachers may encourage students to write their own interpretations of the paintings, in poetry or prose; or to compose reactions to the poetry, explaining in poem or statement why they agree or disagree with the poet's rendering. (Brown 1992: 44)

Further, some resources do specifically focus on a creative writing (rather than English literature) audience. Such sources, often available on the internet, mention ekphrasis as a useful classroom exercise, include helpful links (to poems and images), or provide examples and suggestions for classroom activities. Writing-focused sources like Ann Kelly Cox's 'Ekphrasis: Using Art to Inspire Poetry' lesson plan (Cox 2009) for high school students can be

legitimate and helpful, but a void ultimately remains between academic discussions of literary ekphrasis and truly valuable discussions of craft. While there are ample resources available for those who want to understand, analyse, or otherwise respond to ekphrastic texts, there are relatively few craft-centred discussions of ekphrastic poems for those who want to *write* (or teach the writing of) them. In addition, predominantly cited ekphrastic examples do not always exemplify creative or interesting ekphrastic techniques. It is rare that ekphrasis is discussed in its complexity in most readily available creative writing anthologies or other classroom texts. We are continually pointed towards the same tired examples of ekphrastic writing, of ekphrasis as a limited, narrow field.

Ekphrasis is most commonly defined, in such wide-ranging sources as the scholarly *New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (1993) and the less-precise *Wikipedia.com* (2006), as a description of a work of art, thus limiting the poetic act to one of description. James A Heffernan, author of *Museum of Words* (1993), extends these definitions slightly by explaining ekphrasis as 'a verbal representation of a visual representation' (1993: 3). Heffernan suggests that the ekphrastic poem's job is to represent a piece of (already representative) pictorial art. This enlarges the definition, and Heffernan proposes that there is an often overlooked narrative quality that exists in many ekphrastic poems: the poet may invent or retell the story implied by the picture in addition to describing what the artwork looks like (1993: 5). However, even Heffernan's definition focuses on the surface of the thing.

In the last decade, we have seen an opening up of the ekphrastic field and a larger acceptance of the mode. In her recent book *Museum Mediations*, Barbara K Fischer describes 'ekphrasis [as] an interpretive occasion and a critical tool - a mode that involves description, enumeration, analysis, comparison, citation, questioning, critique, assessment, summation, and judgment' (Fischer 2006: 2). Fischer explains that we can best understand 'ekphrasis as a form of critical mediation' (2006: 3). Even more recently, the Academy of American Poets cites John Hollander's expansive understanding of ekphrastic writing: 'Some of the ways modern poets have faced works of art, Hollander wrote, "include addressing the image, making it speak, speaking of it interpretively, meditating upon the moment of viewing it, and so forth"' (Academy of American Poets 2009). The Academy further clarifies its stance that ekphrasis is about more than description: 'Poetry Confronting Art' (rather than 'Poetry Describing Art' or even 'Poetry Responding to Art') is emphasized as the subtitle of the Academy's Ekphrasis web page (2009). It is becoming clear that contemporary ekphrastic poems do not set out to be solely descriptions or representations of the artwork they respond to, as was most often understood, and they do not always exist within the outdated or limiting parameters implied by its original definition. Rather, ekphrastic writing may easily include elements of interpretation, meditation, interrogation, comparison, criticism, and praise as well as the more traditional description and narrative. While a key element of ekphrastic writing is description, description may no longer be the only element or even the defining element of an ekphrastic poem.

Academic sources, including those mentioned above, often helpfully refer readers to sample poems that exhibit the ekphrastic mode of writing. Most commonly, we are directed to the classic description of Achilles' shield in Homer's *Iliad*, Keats' 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', Rilke's 'Archaic Torso of Apollo', and occasionally more modern examples such as William Carlos Williams' series 'Pictures from Breughel' or WH Auden's 'Musée des Beaux Arts'. Alfred Corn's 'Notes on Ekphrasis' provides a list of ekphrastic poems (Corn 2008) that can be of use to creative writers as well as to literature readers. Corn includes quite a few links to ekphrastic poems, including many rarely cited

examples; however, his emphasis remains on sharing traditional examples of the genre. Similarly, while Rusche's Emory University site offers excellent links to a variety of poems and their corresponding paintings, only a few examples that challenge the traditional mode of ekphrasis are included. Though helpful in providing a basic idea of and background for the ekphrastic gesture, overall definitions and suggested examples such as these can't entirely help writers (or readers) understand what ekphrasis truly is. Ekphrastic models that students see are almost always limited in scope. While ekphrastic poems, by definition, do include a description of the artwork, many contemporary ekphrastic poems go beyond basic description and respond to art in new ways that are not always acknowledged or encouraged by scholars. According to the accepted popular definition, ekphrastic poems mostly provide complex descriptions of the work, including the scene, figures, style, and even the medium - how thick the paint is or what the brushstrokes look like. However, these definitions don't take into account poems that purposefully move beyond description.

As shown in more contemporary discussions of the mode, ekphrastic poems may share how the artwork makes the speaker feel or what it reminds the speaker of; imagine and/or compare the poetic composition process to the painterly one; question the painting or painter; praise the painter and/or his artwork; or consider the literal or figurative relationship between the viewer and the painting. It is a mistake not to view these now common gestures as part of the ekphrastic mode. Scholar and critic Willard Spiegelman, in his recent book *How Poets See the World*, agrees that the available definitions need to be modified when speaking about more contemporary examples of ekphrasis (Spiegelman 2005: 12). Similarly, Corn notes that many contemporary examples of ekphrasis are broader and 'tend to unite ekphrasis with the autobiographical tradition' (2008).[note 1] Fischer observes a rise in the popularity of ekphrastic writing in the last decade and, though she does not discuss recent ekphrastic poems in depth, includes a more expansive list of contemporary ekphrastic poems that almost explodes our apparently outdated understanding of the genre. Citing more 'experimental' poems by poets such as Mary Jo Bang, Matthea Harvey, Claudia Rankine and Brenda Shaughnessy (2006: 187), Fischer demonstrates not only the booming interest in ekphrastic writing but also the wider acceptance of ekphrastic exploration and even experimentation.

John Ashbery's long poem, based on and sharing the same title as Parmigianino's painting *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, serves as a helpful aide in re-defining the mode of ekphrasis. The poem, first published in 1972, is an important example of the contemporary ekphrastic mode because it exhibits so many distinctive ekphrastic opportunities. Fischer characterizes the poem as toeing the line between tradition and innovation (2006: 92); rather than reducing a piece of artwork or distilling it into a poem, she explains that Ashbery 'persist[s] in an "inexhaustible" ekphrasis that allows for its own ambiguity and ruminative elaboration' (2006: 92) and ultimately models a re-visioning of the mode. I choose to discuss 'Self-Portrait' here in depth, as it represents a shift away from a traditional interpretation of ekphrasis and also exemplifies an almost boundless variety of ways to respond to an artwork. Ashbery's poem is also unique as it foregrounds artistic decision-making, inspiring the reader in turn to consider and explore technique. 'Self-Portrait' describes and models a wide variety of ekphrastic responses, both implicit and explicit.

In addition to Fischer's recent characterization of the poem as 'ruminating' and 'exhaustive' (2006: 92), Ashbery's 'Self-Portrait' has long been classified in a variety of ways. Heffernan refers to the poem an ekphrastic 'meditation' (1993:

175), implying that it is both less focused and more thoughtful than the average example of ekphrasis. Michael Davidson uses Ashbery's poem as an example of the 'postmodern painterly poem' (1983: 72) [note 2] due to its embodiment of painterly strategies, meaning that 'the poet reads the painting as a text, rather than as a static object' (1983: 72). Davidson views the painterly poem as a step above the more 'static ekphrasis' of the limited definitions previously discussed (1983: 72), but I believe this use of painterly strategies is just one more element of the ekphrastic method - there is no need to distinguish between an ekphrastic poem and a painterly one in the way defined by Davidson. However, these scholars read Ashbery's poem mainly for its content. I want to focus on its process as well, to read the poem as a writer and not merely as a reader.

While Ashbery's poem is not a typical ekphrastic response, it does consistently refer and return to the artwork that triggers the writing. 'Self-Portrait' is distinctive in that it exemplifies almost every technique or sub-mode that I, and other scholars, have identified. This achievement may be due to the poem's length of over 500 lines, long by contemporary standards - Ashbery has more time and space than poets writing shorter one- or two-page poems, resulting in more opportunities to explore the possibilities of ekphrastic response.[note 3] By considering the ways Ashbery's poem reacts to Parmigianino's painting, we begin to get a clearer understanding of what ekphrastic writing can be. In Ashbery's world, the ekphrastic poem is not limited to description but is instead expanded by its relationship to (and by the poet's viewing of) the painting. As readers, Ashbery's poem can help us understand the composition process and locate key elements that contribute to an ekphrastic response, opening up a new way of looking at poems that respond to art; as writers it may help us to expand the ways we can approach our own ekphrastic writing. We can correctly and accurately define ekphrasis in a more useful manner by looking at Ashbery's poem not in terms of ekphrasis, but by looking at ekphrasis in terms of Ashbery's poem.

The poem is based on Parmigianino's artwork, painted on a wooden three-dimensional representation of a convex mirror, which displays a self-portrait of the artist. At the beginning of the poem, Ashbery describes what the painting depicts. The painter is shown with his

> … right hand
> Bigger than the head, thrust at the viewer
> And swerving easily away …
> … A few leaded panes, old beams,
> Fur, pleated muslin, a coral ring run together
> In a movement supporting the face … (1-7)

Unlike other ekphrastic poems whose main emphasis is on description of an artwork, Ashbery's includes description of the portrait in some level of detail only twice. The other time the surface of the painting is mentioned is much later in the poem, when Ashbery points out, 'What is novel is the extreme care in rendering / The velleities of the rounded reflecting surface' (230-31). Clearly Ashbery is considering the appearance of the painting with great precision, but his ekphrastic response is not focused only on description, and the author does not need more than a brief sketch of the painting. Here, the poet moves beyond the overly simplified definition of ekphrasis as description of art. Ashbery *does* consider the appearance of Parmigianino's art, but that is not his only concern in 'Self-Portrait'. He moves his poem forward and expands its scope by bringing in more varied ekphrastic techniques.

Ashbery jumps to the effect the painting has on him (the viewer), and how the art is urging him to respond. Pointedly taking into account the appearance of Parmigianino's painted face, the poet wonders, 'How far can [the soul] swim out from the eyes / and still safely return to its nest?' (25-26). Part of art's purpose is to make viewers question and think, and Ashbery begins this process as he looks at Parmigianino's painting.[note 4] However, ruminating on the painting, like describing its surface, is still not enough. The writer, the speaker of the poem, the viewer of the portrait, tires of watching the static work of art. He tells readers, 'The balloon pops, the attention / Turns dully away … I think of the friends / Who came to see me, of what yesterday / Was like' (100-105). The surface of the painting itself cannot hold Ashbery's entire attention. In an ekphrastic poem of such length, it is ultimately unsustainable to describe only the painting and one's immediate response to it. While the author continually returns to the experience of viewing the painting throughout his poem, focusing his entire poem on it would place an artificial and arbitrary limitation on his self-expression. By moving beyond traditional ekphrastic method, Ashbery implicitly argues that choosing to write about a piece of art should expand, not limit, the poet's opportunity for discourse.

Like the surface of the painting, the boundaries of typical ekphrastic writing cannot hold this author's attention for long. Writing a 'description of a work of art' does not leave an author much creative freedom. To avoid repetition or ceaseless description, Ashbery tries a new tack. Surprisingly, the poet puts himself in the painted Parmigianino's place by musing that 'One would like to stick one's hand / Out of the globe' of the painting (56-57) and considers the artwork 'a globe like *ours*' (89; emphasis added). Similarly, Ashbery's own internal interruptions, the friends who came to see him, become Parmigianino the painter's interruptions in an imagined dreamscape. Ashbery describes a fictionalized version of the painter '… as he considers / Lifting the pencil to the self-portrait. / How many people came and stayed a certain time' (108-109). In order to take the painting more fully into account, Ashbery enters into a kinship with the painter. He emphasizes that the painting and the poem exist in 'two adjacent moments' (349), further showing a connection between the artist and the writer. It is not only the product (the painting or the poem) that connects the two; it is also a sharing of process, an acknowledged, imaginary similarity in temperament.

Ashbery consistently draws attention to Parmigianino's process as a painter - a move that inevitably encourages readers to consider art-making as well as the resulting product. Too, the emphasis on Parmigianino's process invites a reading of Ashbery's method as well. In fact, the first line of the poem, 'As Parmigianino did it' (1) emphasizes the 'doing' - the making of the painting - and also implies a second clause: 'so do I, Ashbery, do it'. Parmigianino's artistic procedure is foregrounded as Ashbery describes the construction of the self-portrait: '[Parmigianino] … caused a ball of wood to be made / By a turner, and having divided it in half and / Brought it to the size of the mirror …' (12-14). Lest readers are tempted to believe that 'everything is surface' (80), Ashbery has already clarified that work beyond the applying paint has taken place, and that *Self Portrait* is a made object as much as it is a painting. Even beyond considering the painter's process, Ashbery contemplates what 'your look [does] as it intercepts the picture' (31), beginning to describe the potential development of the poet's or viewer's response. Too, he enjoys the element of surprise in the processes of creating the painting and the poem. He writes, 'We have surprised him / At work, but no, he has surprised us / As he works' (241-42). We find surprise and excitement in the process of creation, perhaps more than in the product.[note 5] He clarifies this: 'The picture is almost finished, / The surprise almost over' (242-43).

As a result of Ashbery's emphasis on procedure, 'Self-Portrait' becomes no longer just a text to analyse in English literature courses but a text that can be instructive in creative writing classes. Commonly, poems that respond to art establish a general, idealized connection between the writer and the painter. Idealization, as it does not invite an analytical or thoughtful response, can create a problem when it is emphasized as a model for creative writing. One can only go so far with awe. And Ashbery idealizes the painter in 'Self-Portrait' as well; we see it when he describes how looking at the painting '… you could be fooled for a moment / Before you realize the reflection / Isn't yours' (233-35). The artist is depicted as fully in charge of how a viewer approaches and responds to his work; Parmigianino 'fools' us. Even further, Ashbery uses a respectful tone towards the painter when he identifies that 'My guide in these matters is your self' (132), speaking directly to Parmigianino. There is clearly a kind of praise taking place. However, Ashbery then surprises readers and subverts ekphrastic expectation - a strategy creative writing teachers and students might note. The author concedes, '… it seems likely that each of us / Knows what is and is capable of / Communicating it to the other' (353-55). Here Ashbery does not formally praise the painter or painting; instead, he puts himself and his poem on the same level as the painter and his work. Ashbery's position ultimately is one of collegial respect. While he uses modes like praise and admiration, Ashbery tempers them with questioning and criticism.

As an ekphrastic poem, Ashbery's is also bold in terms of address. Many ekphrastic poems emphasize a spirit of awe or reverence, but Ashbery does not dwell on such a connection. After establishing the beginnings of a relationship with the artwork, Ashbery speaks directly to and questions the painter, even frequently invoking his first name, perhaps again to call attention to their equal relationship. The poet wonders:

> Whose curved hand controls,
> Francesco, the turning seasons and the thoughts
> That peel off and fly away at breathless speeds
> Like the last stubborn leaves ripped
> From wet branches? (116-20)

Here Ashbery is not necessarily admiring. He's pointing out to readers that the painter may not be in control. Though Parmigianino's 'curved hand' is depicted in his *Self Portrait*, there is also Ashbery's own implied curved hand involved in the moment of writing the poem. Artistic control here is ambiguous and could belong to either Ashbery or Parmigianino. The author addresses the painter as a close friend (and sometimes enemy) instead of an unknowable historical figure. Ashbery notes that '… something new is on the way, a new preciosity / In the wind' and presses, 'Can you stand it, / Francesco? Are you strong enough for it?' (268-70). These questions directly challenge the painter and represent an affront rather than an instance of praise. The constructed intimacy between the author and the painter makes this possible. But Ashbery shifts to a more formal tone near the end of the poem. The relationship is re-assessed as 'Parmigianino / Must have realized [we don't accomplish quite what we set out to] as he worked at his / Life-obstructing task' (462-64), and it finally breaks down when Ashbery desires the painter to 'withdraw that hand / Offer it no longer …' (525-26).

Unlike many traditional ekphrastic poems in which the painting or painter ultimately shows or teaches the poet something new, Ashbery's shows the painter does not necessarily triumph over the poet. He presses the boundaries of ekphrastic writing by challenging the artist - in 'Self-Portrait' Parmigianino is seen as a real human being, not an idealized one. Ultimately, Ashbery's creation

of a more nuanced relationship with the artist should be identified as a relevant and exciting (and often undeveloped) element of ekphrastic writing.

Ashbery's depiction of an overly intimate relationship between the poet and the painter ultimately allows his ekphrasis to go beyond description, interpretation, or adoration. In 'Self-Portrait' Ashbery makes the painting and the painter live with equal vitality as the poet and his poem. Parmigianino and his *Self-Portrait* exist with the same intensity as Ashbery and his; and, most importantly, they exist on the same level. Even outside the body of the poem, Ashbery stresses the equality by choosing the same title for his work that Parmigianino uses for his painting. Neither the painting nor the poem is better - more sophisticated, more interesting, more creative - than the other.

Consistently, Ashbery rejects traditional modes in favour of a more rambling, meditative, open poem. Referring to the artefact of the painting, he empathizes with its creator: 'I cannot explain the action of leveling, / Why it should all boil down to one / Uniform surface ...' (129-31). Like the painter, Ashbery does not desire a 'level' product. Just as Parmigianino chose not to contain his painting on a one-dimensional surface, Ashbery doesn't confine his poem within the traditional boundaries of ekphrasis. Even further, it is possible to read the poem as containing ekphrastic self-reflection on the part of the poet. 'This new mode …' (283), Ashbery writes, possibly referencing his own writing style, is one that 'questions' (283) and makes everything else 'Look willful and tired, [like] the games of an old man' (288). The new ekphrastic mode, perhaps, 'accommodates everything. The sample / One sees is not to be taken as / Merely that, but as everything as it / May be imagined outside time - not as a gesture / But as all' (337-41). Ashbery's emphasis on 'everything' and 'all' again calls attention to his expansive mode of writing. Though referring to a museum when he writes, 'You can't live there' in 'The gray glaze of the past' (398-99) where everything is 'reduced' (401), it's easy to apply these words to the traditional ekphrastic mode. Ashbery wants the poem to accommodate more content, more varied approaches; ekphrasis is about more, not less. More explicitly referencing ekphrasis, Ashbery returns to 'the painter's / Reflected face, in which we linger, receiving / Dreams and inspirations on an unassigned / Frequency' (495-97). Here, the poet's understanding of ekphrasis is most clearly explained - he is receiving a 'frequency' and responding to the painting in an 'unassigned' way. For the poet, ekphrastic writing is instinctual, not limited by definition or assignment.

While one might argue that the ekphrastic mode works to restrain Ashbery's expansive style, making him more accessible and readable than usual, that is not particularly relevant to this essay. The more important element here is that Ashbery's open poetics work as a clear illustration of how to expand a potentially broken form of writing. Ashbery's 'Self-Portrait' reveals much about the writing process, and the poem emphasizes that the notion of process is as important as content, even in ekphrastic writing. Further, reading Ashbery's poem helps us to realize that understanding and questioning process can help us to create *better* content. In the creative writing classroom, this is an invaluable lesson.

After looking closely at Ashbery's 'Self-Portrait' it is clear that the ekphrastic mode can (and often does) move beyond traditional limitations; ekphrasis can be vivid and alive. Some contemporary ekphrastic poems, like those cited by Fischer, reflect how Ashbery has opened up the field of ekphrastic writing. In addition to looking at poetic examples, we may also consult poets themselves for their views about and experiences with the mode. Poet Edward Hirsch writes ekphrastic poems that, by his own admission, 'think about poetry that encountered painting as painting … that in particular focused on the gaze, on

the actual moment of encountering a work of art or even being encountered by a work of art, the work of art finding you even as you think you're finding it' (cited Fleury 2003: 48-49). Hirsch's understanding of ekphrasis is certainly modified and expanded from a definition that focuses on description; he is openly interested in 'a more imaginative use of the genre' (cited Fleury 2003: 48).

Jorie Graham, a poet fascinated by the problems posed by representation, also eschews ekphrastic convention in poems such as 'For Mark Rothko' (1980) where she 'makes an homage to [the artist] by proceeding deductively from the idea of a color in Rothko to the specific scene she observes from her window' (cited Heffernan 1993: 179). Similarly, poet John Yau writes that viewing 'painting, abstract painting in particular, made me think about how to get writing to move toward abstraction, or … "music"' (Yau 2005: 183). Ekphrastic writing is no longer merely an exercise, but a way to develop and expand a poem, or even create a poetics. Ekphrasis is not just descriptive; it is the poetic expression of the deep experience of art. Done well, it can capture the complex relationship between art, artist, and active viewer, and it can express the sum of the artistic experience, not just the parts.

Ashbery's 'Self-Portrait' remains 'new' in many ways because, other than the referential title, it does not explicitly serve as an example of ekphrasis. We may look to the poem as a model if we like, but it is most useful in revealing the myriad of possible ways to respond within a genre. It exhibits the ekphrastic mode but, more importantly, it demonstrates how to move beyond the obvious, how to open up one's ideas, and how to make something that may have begun as an exercise into a wonderful, unique poem. As teachers of creative writing, we should encourage the same enthusiasm and freedom in our students, no matter their level. Now that there are more expansive examples of ekphrastic writing, we should take advantage of them. There is no reason to ignore these newer works in favour of traditional ekphrastic poems; we should strive fully to recognize their worth and include them in the classroom.

Notes

1. Unfortunately, he does not include links to examples of such poems. return to text

2. The '"painterly poem" … activates strategies of composition equivalent to but not dependant on the painting' in which the poet 'reads the painting as a text, rather than a static object, or else reads the larger painterly aesthetic generated by the painting' (Davidson 1983: 72). return to text

3. While The Iliad is longer, the ekphrastic movement in it is not sustained throughout. We clearly couldn't consider the epic ultimately ekphrastic - it's not about art. In contrast, Ashbery's wandering poem consistently refers to and returns to the art. return to text

4. These first two gestures, description and response, are elements most commonly found in ekphrastic poems. return to text

5. After all, 'The surprise, the tension are in the concept / Rather than its realization' (226-227). return to text

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Genevieve Kaplan is a doctoral candidate at the University of Southern California. Her poems and reviews have recently appeared in Gulf Coast*,* the Hat*,* jubilat*, and* American Book Review.

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Editors: Nigel Krauth & Jen Webb
Text@griffith.edu.au